



Reflections

Personal Reflection:
History, Identity, and National Reform

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The recent gathering of the Transatlantic Writing Programme in Jamaica brought together Christian academics from West Africa, Jamaica/Caribbean, and Euro-America to delve into the complexities of writing from an African and Afro-Caribbean perspective. At the start of the workshop, we had a presentation and discussion led by Deacon Ronnie Thwaites,² which centred on the importance of reshaping the meaning of the Middle Passage and reclaiming Jamaica's story from a largely Eurocentric theological viewpoint. That reclaiming entails stronger and deeper connections with our African heritage.

One of the thought-provoking presentations was delivered by Anglican priest Fr Garfield Campbell, a doctoral researcher, who shared his poignant experiences of navigating the British and Caribbean historical archives. He likened his archival journey to an “Anamnesis: Wading into Imperial Archives,” drawing parallels to the liturgical expression of recalling and re-enacting the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. His emotional and spiritual journey through the imperial archives unearthed the harrowing accounts of three enslaved women subjected to sexual, physical, and emotional abuse by plantation oppressors. One of those abusers was Governor Sligo, from which the name Sligoville originated.³ However, the accounts of these women, whose names are little known, challenge the prevailing narrative of enslaved women's

¹ Father Donald Chambers, S.T.D. (Doctor of Sacred Theology), a Catholic priest and theological educator, was a participant in the TWP. Father Don is a Diocesan Priest from the Archdiocese of Kingston, Jamaica and currently is the General Secretary for the Antilles Episcopal Conference.

² *Editorial note:* Reverend Deacon Ronald Thwaites is the Principal and Lecturer in Church History at St Michael's College and Seminary, one of the TWP's Jamaican institutional host partners.

³ Sligoville is a community in the Jamaican Parish of St Catherine, approximately ten miles from Spanish Town.

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fight against oppression and their resilience.

In subsequent discussion, one of the project mentors, Prof. Anna Kasafi Perkins, echoed the need for Jamaicans to confront our history by re-educating ourselves about the names given to places and streets. She shed light on the origin of the name Sabina Park, which traces back to the tragic sacrifice by Sabina (a woman enslaved by George William Gordon's father⁴) of her child because she refused to allow the child to grow up in slavery. Perkins asked, "Will Fr Campbell's research unearth further details of her story and others like it?"

In light of National Heritage Week, these profound insights raise pertinent questions about Jamaica's approach to constitutional reform and its relationship to stories like these. Should the discourse on constitutional reform not be rooted in a deeper understanding of Jamaica's history? Can meaningful constitutional reform be achieved without addressing the enduring legacy of oppression embedded in the names of streets, civil parishes, and towns?

It is evident that National Heritage Week and constitutional reform can only be truly transformative if accompanied by a deliberate effort to reassess the historical narratives embedded in the names of places and streets and educate Jamaicans about their origins. The act of naming is intrinsically linked to identity. As the nation undergoes a constitutional transformation process, it must be accompanied by acknowledging and reassessing the narratives that shape our identity, which, in turn, shape our behaviour and our notion of God.

In essence, the ongoing conversation about constitutional reform in Jamaica must be complemented by an earnest endeavour to confront the historical implications of names. To do otherwise is to risk trimming the constitutional reform tree. At the same time, its roots remain grounded in ignorance of our history of enslavement and oppression that marks the very landscape we traverse daily.

⁴ Jamaican businessman and politician George William Gordon (1820–1865) was born to a white planter and an enslaved mother; he was known as a critic of the colonial government and more latterly seen as a precursor to Jamaican nationalism. For a brief biography, see "George William Gordon," *The British Museum*, n.d., <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG185540>. For further discussion, see, for example, "Jamaica Papers, No. 1: Facts and Documents Relating to the Alleged Rebellion in Jamaica and the Measures of Repression (London: Jamaica Committee, 1866), archived at Jamaica Family Search Genealogy Research Library, n.d., <https://www.jamaicanfamilysearch.com/Members/breb05.htm>