

“the whole St. Croix has been walking”

Introduction to the Fireburn Interrogation Records

5/11/1878 - 24/12 1879

On the 25th of October 1878, only some three weeks after the *Fireburn*, the Government of the Danish West Indian Islands appointed a “Commission of Inquiry”. The aim was, as is written in the preface of the records, to “examine and determine actions in the cases emerged and the crimes committed during the revolt of October 1878 on St. Croix, with participation of the insurgents, the troublemakers and all the participants in the revolt and the destruction of the same”. At the outset of the Commission’s inquiries, more than 100 people were under arrest.

The Commission systematically carried out interrogations, more or less daily, for two full years. The Commission consisted of members of the Danish Colonial administration: Supreme Judge Rosenstand, Judge Counsellor Sarauw and Police Chief Counsellor Forsberg. In the courtroom in St Croix Arrest was also a Danish Police Officer and a keeper of the records, Police Principal B. Dendtler. During the interrogations, Dendtler sat, writing down what was said by the detainees and the witnesses. The interrogations were carried out in English, but the records were written in Danish, presumably translated by Dendtler on the spot. The handwritten records were collected in a number of books, which are now situated in the Danish National Archives. The handwritten documents are virtually unintelligible to a contemporary person, even a Danish speaker. However, through the transcription, they become accessible, and through the translation into English, they are now available to all.

The Commission of Inquiry was set up shortly after the Court Martial, where 12 men were shot: This has most certainly been a reality of which all detainees were painfully aware. Also, it is clear that the conditions in which the detainees were held in the duration of the Inquiry were such that illnesses were rampant – in May, 1879, for example, an outbreak of scurvy is mentioned, and throughout the records, there are intermittent declarations of the hospitalization and death of detainees.

Each question and each testimony is heavily influenced by the persuasion of the colonial system, but the interrogation records are also incredibly vivid. The language is mostly descriptive with a prevailing imposition of the values of the Danish Colonial administration and its legal language and intricacies. However, the records give an insight into not only into the details of the actual Fireburn, but also, perhaps most importantly, of the people - “the detainees” - their personalities, their everyday lives, their thoughts, their families and relations and not least, their defiance in the face of a merciless system. It is their testimonies which make up the vast bulk of the records. The 150 years of languishing in the Archives has not affected the poignancy and vitality of the voices, and in reading, sometimes between the lines, their strength.

During the course of the Inquiries, hundreds of labourers from St Croix were directly involved in the Commission’s unravelling of events and punishment of individuals, and it must have had a great impact on the lives of virtually all Crucians at the time. As it is remarked in the beginning of the Inquiries: “the prevailing part of the country population, particularly in the western areas of the island, must be presumed to be more or less implicated in the occurred excesses” - and as detainee Richard Lewis states in his interrogation of the 7th of November 1878, “the whole St. Croix has been walking”.

The Commission has multiple objects during the interrogations. Who were the ringleaders? Who started the fires? Was the uprising planned beforehand? But also: who stole things from the

greathouses and the allowance cellars? Even the smallest issue of theft is brought up: Cornmeal. Bits of cloth. A bit of starch. Cigars. Rum. And, very importantly regarding the threat to Colonial rule: Who yelled “our side” - and who blew a conch?

Despite the painstaking focus on even the most minute details, the Commission appears to be at a loss as to *why* the riots broke out. Throughout the reading of the records, it becomes clear that virtually no one mentions the rigid, racist hierarchy which was the backbone of the Danish West Indies in 1878, still some 30 years after emancipation, a hierarchy which was held firmly in place by the constraining so-called “provisional” Labour Act of 1849. Though it seems crystal clear that an uprising on the massive scale of the 1878 *Fireburn* was rooted in deep defiance of the racist system and the subjugation of the majority of the population, there is no insight or self-evaluation on the side of the Danish administration on this issue.

One should think that the battlecry “our side” should be obvious. In the records of the colonial judicial commission, there is, of course, mentioning of *sides* – white and black, “masters and servants”, those who are considered being of value and those who are considered to have little value except for their labor. Once in a while, however, individual detainees point out the fact of the matter, for example when detainee Joseph Parris in the Court Martial states that “the negroes should unify and fight for liberty and that all whites should be killed” and when it is noted that detainee Christopher Samuel, in the interrogation of the 30th of November 1878 declared that “there would be a reckoning, because he [Samuel] has never seen a negro rule in any country”. These statements not only indicate but show very clearly that the detainees knew exactly why they were fighting, and what they were up against. The *Fireburn* was not just an inexplicable incident of “troublemaking”, as the Danish rule seems to conclude, but an actual attack on the fundamentally unjust rule of the white, colonial power.

The detainees and witnesses on the list are those who appear in our first release of translated records: Those individuals who appeared before the Commission during the first 2 months of interrogations (between the 5th of November 1878 and the 24th of December 1878). Some of the people on the list are interrogated extensively, whilst others make only brief appearances. However, many other individuals are mentioned by name, many of whom come to appear before the Commission later on during the course of the inquiry.