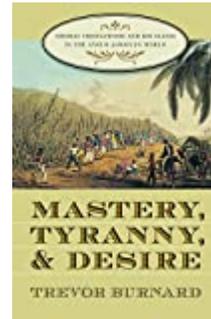




Trevor Burnard. *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo Jamaican World.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xii + 336 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5525-6; \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2856-4.



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The Jamaican Simon Legree

There are numerous works on the brutalities of slavery particularly in the cauldron of sugar cultivation in the West Indies. There are also accounts of Jamaica planter Thomas Thistlewood, notably Douglas Hall's *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750-1786* (1989). Yet, no single work captures the sadistic quality of the master/slave relationship as well as this powerful study by Trevor Burnard.

In the past decade, Burnard has published a series of important articles on various aspects of life on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jamaica: economic development, the slave trade, European immigrants, mortality, and family life. This considerable expertise enables him to offer a remarkably thorough analysis of a middling planter on this important eighteenth-century British colony.

The son of a Lincolnshire tenant farmer, Thistlewood sought to exploit the opportunities on Jamaica after little success in agriculture in England or on a commercial voyage to India. From his arrival in 1750, Thistlewood found lucrative employment on England's most important sugar island. In his nearly four decades on Jamaica,

Thistlewood was an overseer, a slave owner who made tidy profits by hiring out his possessions, and, eventually, the owner of a livestock pen. While he never became fabulously wealthy, Thistlewood lived a comfortable life, one that permitted him to pursue his lifelong interests in reading, science, and horticulture. Indeed, he gained local renown for his gardens. He also earned the regard of his planter neighbors through service as a justice of the peace and as an officer in the militia.

Yet, Burnard is careful to admit that "Thistlewood was not an important man" (p. 9). He argues that the primary "value of this book is to introduce to a modern reader the world of an ordinary white Englishman living in a historically interesting society" (p. 259). If that were so, there would be little reason to devote an entire volume to his life. What captures the historian's interest in Thistlewood's time on Jamaica was his commitment to maintain detailed diaries. He made almost daily entries for nearly forty years. In all, there are over 10,000 pages and Burnard estimates that there likely are nearly two million words about Thistlewood's experiences on Jamaica. While he often noted curiosities and included

lists of books that he had read, the reader is most drawn to his entries on his slaves. These provide a unique opportunity to view the relationship between master and slave in the eighteenth-century Caribbean.

The picture of Thistlewood that emerges is one of a brutal sadist. Thistlewood routinely employed the lash. Most of the slaves he owned or who were under his charge faced at least one flogging a year and one hundred lashes were common. He chained slaves in stocks, had some mutilated, and others branded. He had some run-aways restrained, stripped, and covered with molasses and then exposed to flies and mosquitoes. He ordered some of the flogged slaves to have pepper and lime juice applied to their open wounds. Thistlewood became particularly inventive in his brutality. In doing so, he sought to humiliate as well as to punish. He ordered some slaves to be punished by having other slaves urinate into their eyes and mouth. His favorite technique appears to have been one he called "Derby's dose" (p. 104) which involved having a slave defecate into the mouth of the slave facing punishment and then having that slave gagged four to five hours.

Burnard seeks to explain this horrific treatment by noting that slaves made up more than 90 percent of the population and that the white settlers thus felt compelled to use raw power to maintain control. Their fears of rebellion were finally realized with the 1760 outbreak known as Tacky's revolt which Burnard describes as a well-organized effort "to create a West African state in the Caribbean" (p. 171). Burnard also reminds the reader that men like Thistlewood lived in a particularly brutal age when it was not uncommon to see soldiers in the British army receive over one hundred lashes and when thousands were publicly hanged back in England. While those reasons help explain the general atmosphere that contributed to the brutal treatment meted out by planters and overseers on Jamaica, Thistlewood's diaries offer almost no insight into his sadistic treatment of slaves. "He tells us little," Burnard writes, "about his views on Africans, slavery, and the morality or immorality of what he did to his slaves" (p. 255).

The diaries, however, reveal another dimension to this sickening treatment of slaves. Thistlewood apparently recorded every sexual encounter he had with slaves. During his thirty-seven years on the island, he noted 3,852 sexual acts with 138 different women, almost all of whom were slaves. A true sexual predator, Thistlewood saw all but the very young and the aged as fair game. While modern eyes see this behavior as raw ex-

ploitation and a way to demonstrate dominance, Burnard points out that Thistlewood failed to record any thoughts about the trauma suffered by these women, let alone the morality of his actions. Explaining this remarkable indifference is a real challenge to the author. While he saw himself as an Enlightenment man, Burnard speculates, Thistlewood simply believed it natural for Africans to be slaves. They were a people who "fell outside the social contract that secured individual rights" (p. 130).

Still, Burnard is able to show that Thistlewood, like other slave owners, could not absolutely control his slaves. There were examples of accommodation and some instances of special relationships. Thistlewood, for example, came to rely upon a slave named Lincoln who served as his slave driver. While he often punished him, Thistlewood nonetheless gave preferential treatment to this valuable slave. The most important relationship he had with a slave was with Phibbah, his mistress of thirty-three years. Unlike virtually all the other women in his life, Thistlewood had an abiding affection for Phibbah, who served as his chief housekeeper. She, as few female slaves were able to do, used her relationship with him to gain ownership of land and livestock and to develop a profitable business selling agricultural products and clothing that she made.

Burnard deals with many other important developments on Jamaica: opportunities for whites, the growing sense of egalitarianism among the settlers, political and intellectual trends, and the extraordinary wealth and importance of Jamaica in the British empire. He also demonstrates how Jamaica differed markedly from Barbados where settlers consciously sought to recreate much of English country life.

A well-organized study with a compelling story based upon solid research, Burnard nonetheless faces the challenge of any biographer. How representative of his place and time was Thistlewood? Was his treatment of slaves common or the most extreme? Slavery invited the exploitation of women, but as frequently as Thistlewood's example? While he does draw upon the experiences of other planters and upon comments by contemporary observers, it remains unclear if Thistlewood represented the norm or the extreme. The answer is most likely the former, not the latter, but the case is not compelling.

In the end, this study is a vivid reminder of how brutal a regime racial slavery was in the eighteenth-century English Caribbean. As for Thomas Thistlewood, Burnard concludes that he likely would have preferred to be remembered as "a cultivated Enlightenment man, accom-

plished gardener, and amateur scientist.” Yet, his legacy “traumatized slaves” (p. 243).
will be that of “a brutal, sexually voracious master of

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