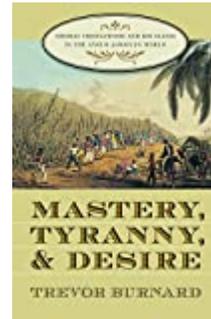


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Trevor Burnard. *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xii + 336 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5525-6; \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2856-4.



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.

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Most historians of slavery are familiar with Thomas Thistlewood, the young man from Lincolnshire who settled in Westmoreland Parish, Jamaica in 1750, where he lived and worked in various capacities until his death in 1786. Much of the historical literature on slavery in the British West Indies is seasoned with material from Thistlewood's extensive diaries, which are among the richest surviving documents for the period. Thistlewood himself has been the subject of one book-length study by Douglas Hall; but, whereas, Hall's book reads almost like an annotated abridgement of the diaries, Trevor Burnard's work is a finely crafted microhistory of Thistlewood's life and world, brimming over with fascinating detail.[1] If (as is almost certain) it was one of Burnard's goals to transport the reader to a distant time and explore Jamaican plantation society in fine-grained detail, the book succeeds admirably. Along the way, Burnard uses the diaries as a springboard to discuss the workings of power in a mature (and still ascendant) plantation colony, emphasizing throughout the overwhelming dominance of the planter class.

Thomas Thistlewood was born in Tupholme, Lin-

colnshire in 1721, the son of a tenant. Apparently lacking in other opportunities, he sought his fortune abroad, first as a supercargo on an East Indiaman, then in 1750 as a migrant to the prosperous colony of Jamaica. Settling outside of Savanna-la-Mar, Thistlewood worked as an overseer for two different planters. In 1756 he purchased his first slave, and in 1767 he managed to purchase his own land, which he operated as a livestock pen and horticultural establishment. At the time of his death in 1786 he was the owner of thirty-four bondspople, enough to garner respectability but far too few to place him in the ranks of the colonial elite. Thistlewood never married, although he did maintain a long-term relationship with a slave woman named Phibbah, who belonged to a neighbor and former employer. Thistlewood and Phibbah had a son, Mulatto John, who died in 1780 at the age of twenty. By most standards, Thistlewood was a colonial success story, leaving behind an estate worth over £2,000. In his will he directed that a portion of his estate be used for the purchase and manumission of Phibbah, which occurred in 1792. Other than the diaries, Thistlewood left little mark on his home of over thirty

years.

Perhaps the most striking theme in the diaries, at least for the modern reader, is Thistlewood's sheer brutality. On numerous occasions he recorded punishments meted out to slaves, never expressing remorse or second thoughts. At times these punishments were exotic in their cruelty. One practice, which he nicknamed "Derby's dose," involved forcing one slave to defecate into the mouth of another. On another occasion, he placed a bondsman in stocks, rubbed molasses on him, and allowed insects to swarm over him during the night. There is no reason to believe that Thistlewood was uniquely violent or sadistic by Jamaican standards. In fact, Thistlewood and his neighbors actually judged some white newcomers to be too violent. For Burnard, violence and brutality were far from incidental to Jamaican slavery—they were its very heart. In a colony with such a large enslaved majority, whites quickly learned that instilling terror, or what Burnard refers to as "tyranny," was the surest way to maintain dominance.

Thistlewood's diary, like that of the Virginia planter William Byrd, is famous for its meticulous chronicling of the author's sexual activities. Thistlewood adopted a standard form for recording his encounters, listing his partner's name, the time of day, the location (on the bed, in the fields), the amount of money paid (if any), and occasionally a small assessment of his pleasure, for a total of 3,852 acts with 138 women. Although Thistlewood's sex life before coming to the colony clearly shows him to have been a lusty fellow by nature, Burnard argues convincingly that his activities in Jamaica were about far more than satisfying bodily urges. For Thistlewood, as well as for many other white men in Jamaica, sex with enslaved women was an important strategy for realizing the dominance of master over slave, or as Burnard puts it, "the institutional dominance of white men had to be translated into personal dominance" (p. 160). Most of Thistlewood's partners did not welcome his advances and likely viewed him as a sexual predator. He did not always physically force himself on women, but there can be no doubt that he leveraged all of the power of the slave system to his advantage. For the unfortunate targets of his attentions, sex with Thistlewood not only dramatized the dominance of master over slave, white over black and male over female, it also served as a form of punishment. In addition, argues Burnard, Thistlewood's and others' sexual activities were one of several factors that destabilized the communities and families of the enslaved.

A few slave women had very different relationships

with Thistlewood. Thistlewood's pattern for most of his time in Jamaica was to maintain a long-term relationship with a favorite while enjoying frequent dalliances with many others. The most important woman in his life, by far, was Phibbah, a creole slave who belonged to a neighboring planter. In one of the book's highlights, Burnard chronicles their complex relationship in great detail, arguing that "by the end of her thirty-three-year relationship with Thistlewood, Phibbah was attached to her lover and longtime partner by bonds of affection and possibly love" (p. 228). To be sure, whatever affection Phibbah may have had for Thistlewood never transcended its context—slavery in one of the world's most brutal plantation colonies. Notably, Phibbah gained a great deal from her relationship. For much of the time, Thistlewood was able to keep her with him by hiring her from her master (an arrangement largely engineered by Phibbah), which allowed her to enjoy more creature comforts than might otherwise have been possible. Phibbah also "owned" and routinely sold livestock, as well as other goods, and was allowed to retain the proceeds. The promise of manumission was another benefit, although it would have to wait until six years after Thistlewood's death. These matters aside, Burnard is able to marshal evidence to support his argument that the affection between Thistlewood and Phibbah was sincere. Thistlewood's occasional departures from his usual unrevealing diary style are significant here. At one point, for example, while the couple was living apart, Phibbah brought Thistlewood small gifts on a daily basis. "So good a girl she is" (p. 239), he wrote in a rare expression of emotion, albeit in his typically sparse prose. Their sex life appears to have been both vigorous and consensual—Burnard identifies at least ten occasions on which Phibbah successfully turned Thistlewood down for sex. Phibbah also nursed Thistlewood on several occasions. The diary, of course, cannot reveal Phibbah's true feelings, but Burnard makes a case that is more than plausible.

In addition to providing a window into slave life, the diary gives us a glimpse into the lives of non-elite whites in Jamaica, always an elusive topic. Analyzing Thistlewood's social life, Burnard reveals a culture of hospitality that entailed a surprising level of cross-class sociability. From the moment of his arrival, Thistlewood dined and drank frequently with the neighborhood planters, along with other non-elite whites. Conviviality of this sort was rare in most of the British Atlantic world, where rank and deference were of paramount importance. Casual associations between the better and meaner sort were common in Jamaica, argues Burnard, because white unity

was essential in a colony overwhelmingly populated by slaves. In addition, Burnard argues that whites of temperate habit (which included Thistlewood, his sexual escapades notwithstanding) and who did not succumb to disease had ample opportunity for economic advancement.

Burnard's study yields a number of provocative conclusions, several of which are likely to raise eyebrows among scholars in the field. For example, his argument that white Jamaican society was characterized by "herrenvolk egalitarianism" (p. 84) runs counter to prevailing interpretations that emphasize rank and deference.[2] More controversially, most readers will probably find that Burnard underplays slave resistance. Deeming the whole concept of resistance problematic (he prefers the term "opposition"), he winds up resurrecting the "Damage School" interpretations of the 1960s, arguing that enslaved Jamaicans were too psychologically "bruised" (p. 178) to challenge white authority—this despite the fact that Thistlewood's own Westmoreland Parish was one of the areas most affected by Tacky's Revolt of 1760, in which at least one thousand local slaves took part. Burnard's decision to devote fewer than four pages to analysis of the revolt represents a missed opportunity, not only because it might complicate his discussion of resistance, but also because the diary is the only surviving contemporary account of this very significant event.[3] The reintroduction of the damage thesis is also frequently contradicted by Burnard's own more nuanced analysis of the diary itself. For example, after stating that true "resistance" was nearly impossible in Jamaica, due to the planters' monopoly on force, he profiles a Thistlewood slave named Coobah, whom he labels a "rebel" (p. 217), as well as Phibbah, who, he argues, managed to "transcend [slavery's] limitations" (p. 228). And, after arguing that the master-slave relationship was "subject to continual negotiation" (p. 177) and was a "long term battle" (p. 155) in an "undeclared war" (p. 138), the assertion that slave "agency was very difficult" (p. 212) in the face of planter power is simply confusing. How exactly did negotiation occur if slaves possessed agency only seldomly

or not at all? Lastly, he offers a problematic reinterpretation of Jamaica's provision ground system, suggesting that slave producers were "wedded to an ideology of protopeasant capitalist accumulation" (p. 153), that "slaves were capitalists" (p. 154) animated by "acquisitive individualism" (p. 178), and that they engaged in "capitalist market-oriented activity" (p. 169). There is no need to rehearse the slavery-capitalism debates of past decades to suggest that the notion of slaves as acquisitive individualist capitalists runs counter to most historians' understanding of capitalism and proto-peasantries.

These issues aside, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* is a valuable book, virtually required reading for students of slavery and Caribbean history. Many readers will likely disagree with some of the more controversial interpretations, but all will appreciate Burnard's painstakingly detailed reconstruction of Thistlewood's life and world. Apart from Douglas Hall, whose approach was very different, no author had attempted to present Thistlewood's extremely illuminating history; the diary has been used more often to support other narratives. Burnard has given us a finely executed treatment of a fascinating and significant subject.

Notes

[1]. Douglas Hall, *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750-1786* (Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 1989).

[2]. For a recent example, see Verene A. Shepherd and Kathleen E. A. Monteith, "Pen-Keepers and Coffee Farmers in a Sugar-Plantation Society," in *Slavery without Sugar: Diversity in Caribbean Economy and Society Since the Seventeenth Century* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), pp. 81-101.

[3]. Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 133. Most accounts depend on sources written well after the fact, such as Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 3 vols. (London: T. Lowndes, 1774).

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