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Eighteenth-century Jamaica, Britain's largest and most valuable slave-owning colony, relied on a brutal system of slave management to maintain its tenuous social order. Trevor Burnard provides unparalleled insight into Jamaica's vibrant but harsh African and European cultures with a comprehensive examination of the extraordinary diary of plantation owner Thomas Thistlewood.

Thistlewood's diary, kept over the course of forty years, describes in graphic detail how white rule over slaves was predicated on the infliction of terror on the bodies and minds of slaves. Thistlewood treated his slaves cruelly even while he relied on them for his livelihood. Along with careful notes on sugar production, Thistlewood maintained detailed records of a sexual life that fully expressed the society's rampant sexual exploitation of slaves. In Burnard's hands, Thistlewood's diary reveals a great deal not only about the man and his slaves but also about the structure and enforcement of power, changing understandings of human rights and freedom, and connections among social class, race, and gender, as well as sex and sexuality, in the plantation system.

Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World Details

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From Reader Review Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World for online ebook

Sam Newton says

This is a book you can't put down because it's so disturbing. I have a hard time believing that Thistlewood is your "typical" Jamaican white male, as Burnard claims. Sex with slaves 3,852 times, rape, torture (quite sadistic actually). However, I agree with Burnard that through Thistlewood's "distorted" lens, we get a glimpse of the horrific lives slaves, in particular suffered through. We also see the rise of white egalitarianism (if whites are only 9% of the population, it's pretty hard to have a class structure). I think Burnard's probably a bit over-exaggerating that Thistlewood represents other white male colonists. He admits that we can only get a sense of their lives through Thistlewood's messed-up lens.

Joshua says

Fascinating. The argument about customary rights and proto-peasant accumulation is provocative.

Justin Smith says

"It is only by leaving to the masters a power that is nearly absolute, that it will be possible to keep so large a number of men in that state of submission which is made necessary by their numerical superiority over the whites."

Like many non-academic readers of Burnard's treatment of Thomas Thistlewood's diaries, I became aware of them after the blowout between Martin Beshir and Sarah Palin leading to the former's resignation from MSNBC.

This account of Thistlewood's life and those of his slaves is heartbreakingly sickening, enlightening, and maddening. This text is written in a scholarly manner and not intended for casual consumption. It suffers somewhat from repeated anecdotes around specific events, but perhaps this was Burnard's intention.

I would have appreciated more direct passages from Thistlewood as opposed to the author's interpretation thereof. Perhaps the idioms of 18th century English make that a problematic endeavor.

Overall recommended for those interested in learning more about Jamaica as a slave society and about the role of slavery in the 18th century British West Indies.

Ramsey says

Fascinating academic study of slavery in 18th century Jamaica. Burnard brings this mercifully bygone world

to life through careful analysis of the diaries, diligently kept for over thirty years, of middling landowner Thomas Thistlewood. Widely regarded by historians as an unusually brutal slave system, even by the deplorable standards of West Indian slavery, 18th century Jamaica emerges as a society governed by fear and greed. Opportunistic whites willing to risk premature death by disease could acquire significant wealth in Jamaica: in 1774, average wealth per white was 2,201 pounds sterling in Jamaica as compared to 42.1 pounds in England and Wales. Thistlewood, a second son with no inheritance to speak of and few prospects in his native England, reaped great economic benefit in migrating to the tropics. Such material rewards were founded on the backbreaking labor of African slaves, who came to outnumber whites far in excess of 10 to 1 for much of the 18th century. Thus outnumbered, whites lived in fear of slave insurrection and sought to maintain dominance with unspeakable physical brutality and routine sexual exploitation of female slaves. The demographic disparity also led to a unique egalitarianism, marked by a cult of hospitality, among whites of all socioeconomic levels, a byproduct of the implicit recognition that all whites would have to band together to survive should the slaves revolt. Burnard provides a fascinating analysis of this morally bankrupt social system.

Gary says

As the other readers may have agreed that it was difficult to put down. I found this book about Thistlewood a true history of the horrible life of a slave in Jamaica, before England freed them. A must read if one is interested in a past about slavery. It was such a different time that made it possible to do as one wished with slaves. Only the mind imagined such tortures as "Derby's dose", as a form of punishment for disobedience.

Michelle says

I took a break from this book and then came back to it, and it really was a fascinating study of plantation life in 18th century Jamaica. It didn't tell me much I didn't already know about slavery in the 18th century Caribbean (it was brutal, it was inhumane, it was slavery), but what made this interesting is that it was all told from the perspective of one small time Jamaican slave owner who worked his way up in the Jamaican world on the backs of his slaves. I did feel like Burnard repeated himself a lot and the book could probably have been half as long as it needed to be with the telling and retelling and retelling of the same stories he did.

Sara-Maria Sorentino says

This Thomas Thistlewood guy was basically a nobody in England. After continual failures in business and lady endeavors, he moved to Jamaica, where it seems all the whities found perverse success and comfort. Enthusiastic fondness for principles of equality among whites of different classes served to perpetually bond them in unity unparalleled in England, as this interdependence stemmed from fear of revolution on an island populated 90 percent by slaves. As Burnard says, Thistlewood and his brethren lived their lives as 'egalitarian tyrants'--slavery created conditions of relative equality between whites. Ouch.

This is almost all drawn from Thislewood's diaries, in which any recognition of the contradictions of his life is predictably and tellingly absent. Thistlewood's chronicling was meticulous-- he would record his appalling daily routine with seeming ease, down to his torture techniques and the time and date of rapes. Total sexual encounters number some 3,000 and this was quite regular in comparison to other slave owners. The specifics

give a startling sense of both the intensity and regularity of these sexual exploits which I hadn't, still haven't, really begun to grasp. Sends one off on imaginative flights of thought as to what sort of lives are led in this intimate brutality. What was almost unimaginable (not sure why this feels inconceivable, probably something of an unconscious desire for displacement--if brutality was absolute then and there, ambiguity here and now can seem like progress) was his long-standing quasi-romantic relationship with his slave Phibbah, of whom he was particularly fond, and she apparently with him. Burnard obviously doesn't have as direct access to these particular slave's lives, and he is quite insistent on speculating on the felt experiences of slaves only in so far as was consistent with other accounts from the time.

Burnard operates from a James C. Scott framework--readily pointing out that collaboration with the masters was sustained out of necessity, but within these negotiations, slaves were particularly adept at sharpening day to day weapons to perpetually undermine master's claims to omnipotence. He tied all this briefly, although somewhat clumsily, with Hegel's lordship-bondage dialectic.

I found that Burnard's attempts at theoretical analysis often fell short of executing the necessary punches, but Burnard has most probably been tempered over the years by, among other things, training in historian's detachment. Really, within a presentational strategy coming from a discipline whose prime goal is authenticity to the facts, the archives provide detail into this time and place that is as good as it can ever get.

Courtney Homer says

Sometimes graphic and hard to read, it's an incredible look into slavery in Jamaica through the eyes of a white slave-owner. It's well-written, thorough, and very accessible. Burnard attempts to be objective with difficult material, and is sometimes a little overly sympathetic. But it's an incredible look into the brutal and dehumanizing life of slavery in Jamaica.

Naeem says

I could not put this book down and I did not want it to end -- but this does not mean you should read it.

Since Sara-Maria Sorentino has already done a precise review of this book [could someone teach me how to create a link to her review, please] and since I agree with most of her review, I will only add a few things where my impressions differed.

I agree that Burnard stumbles theoretically but I feel for him. I think he is under great pressure neither to claim that the slaves had room to operate or to claim that they didn't. If he overstates the slaves' latitude to reshape slavery, he can seem the apologist; if he overstates that they were utterly shut down, he can seem to refuse their agency, creativity, and humanity.

The chapters on the individual slaves were mesmerizing in their details. I have never read anything that so starkly laws down how slavery is a form of sexual terror.

Chapter 4 is about Thistlewood's (whose diaries this book is based upon) pretensions to be part of the English Enlightenment. Burnard lists the books he reads and his dabbling in the various sciences. As chance would have it, some of the books he owned and read are the books I am currently writing about!

Two themes whistled through my ears as I read this book: (1) Many of the analogies in 18th century slavery locked Jamaica still apply today. For example, I understood the difference between field and house slaves as one where the house slaves benefit from closeness to the master's power and wealth. It never occurred to me that the house slaves also suffer from the psychological and physical punishment of the master to a greater degree than the field slaves. As a house slave type person myself, I wonder what this means about my psychic health.

(2) The contradiction at the heart of Thistlewood's life -- he aspired to be an Enlightenment Gentleman, while acting as a torturer -- was the actual expression of the theoretical contradiction within the mainstreams of Western Thought. Locke, Smith, Kant, Hegel, and Marx (although Marx's theory changed late in his life) built textual monuments to equality, liberty, freedom while simultaneously giving the Thistlewoods of the world the conceptual tools to perform slavery. Hegel, for example, argued for how slavery generally improves the lives of those who come into contact with Europeans.

This book took me away to 18th century and returned me to the present with this question: am I still there?

Jack says

From the back cover:

"Eighteenth-century Jamaica, Britain's largest and most valuable slave-owning colony, relied on a brutal system of slave management to maintain its tenuous social order. Trevor Burnard provides unparalleled insight into Jamaica's vibrant but harsh African and European cultures with a comprehensive examination of the extraordinary diary of plantation owner Thomas Thistlewood.

Thistlewood's diary, kept over the course of forty years, describes in graphic detail how white rule over slaves was predicated on the infliction of terror on the bodies and minds of slaves. Thistlewood treated his slaves cruelly even while he relied on them for his livelihood. Along with careful notes on sugar production, Thistlewood maintained detailed records of a sexual life that fully expressed the society's rampant sexual exploitation of slaves. In Burnard's hands, Thistlewood's diary reveals a great deal not only about the man and his slaves but also about the structure and enforcement of power, changing understandings of human rights and freedom, and connections among social class, race, and gender, as well as sex and sexuality, in the plantation system."

Andee Nero says

While I respect Burnard's work in examining Thistlewood, a white Jamaican slave owner, as a human being, he is still a person whose dehumanizing actions toward others which made the book incredibly difficult to read. At time the author, as he admits, stretches his evidence as far as speculation will take it and I have to wonder if he does so because, in getting so involved in Thistlewood's story through the reading of his extensive diaries, he has come to form an emotional attachment to him to some degree. Still, these sorts of questions spur deeper philosophical thought in the reader, which itself is redemptive. Further, if taken together with Ira Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone*, one gains a much more personal perspective of racial slavery. Burnard's case studies also provide some of the most detailed descriptions of enslaved Africans before the American Revolution that I have ever read. The book's dry tone toward horrific events makes me nauseous, but I also have to appreciate someone who can write things like this. I know I certainly could not.

Josh Maddox says

Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire is a biography, a horror story, a true story, a micro-history, a social history, a travelogue, a psychological evaluation, a cultural assessment, and an expertly produced work. The author, Trevor Burnard, uses the diaries of the English-born Thomas Thistlewood to examine colonial Jamaican life. Burnard guides his readers through the diaries of Thistlewood, and using this lens he attempts to view the whole of Jamaican culture at the time. Though explaining the entirety of Jamaican culture during the colonial period with only one diary as a guide is quite a difficult task, Burnard manages it convincingly.

Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire tells the story of Thomas Thistlewood, a middle-class Englishman who sought fortune and found it in Jamaica. He was the younger son and did not have much money, but managed to make up for it later in life. Although he did not travel to Jamaica immediately after reaching the age of majority, (he spent some time on a trading ship first), Thistlewood was still a young man when he arrived in the Caribbean. After working as an overseer, Thistlewood managed to gather enough slaves of his own to work an estate which belonged to him. Throughout his life, Thistlewood rigorously kept a daily diary, and it is from this diary that Burnard gleans most of his information.

This leads to the one major problem with the book. Burnard tries to paint a picture of all of Jamaican life using one man's life as his source. The audacious attempt is imperfect, but for the most part, well done. Burnard explains that sources on Jamaican life at the time are few and far between, and that Thistlewood's diary is the most complete. In other words, it is not the best way imaginable to write a history of the time, but it is the only way possible. Added to that, Burnard demonstrates that Thistlewood was mostly accepted as part of his society, leading to the conclusion that Thistlewood's behavior is reasonably representative of the mores of the time.

Given that caveat, the book is an excellent description of Jamaican colonial life. Thistlewood was a fascinating man and Burnard is a fascinating writer, and the combination of the two creates a piece of excellent history. Burnard uses the evidence at hand to assert several separate theses about existing, living, and dying in Jamaica. Relying on thematic rather than chronological organization, Burnard tells the events in the order which serves his purpose as a presenter of ideas and arguments instead of events. Primarily, Burnard covers how Thistlewood thought of himself, the results of slavery in white society, the war between the enslaved and the enslavers, and the effect of slavery on gender relations. In all of these, Burnard writes convincingly and uses his evidence persuasively.

Burnard argues that the best way to describe the relations between whites and slaves on the islands is war. He proves his point quite well; his recounting of Thistlewood's most trusted slave nearly allowing the murder of his master demonstrates the ever present conflict between the owned and the owner. Burnard's discussion of some of the methods of warfare makes difficult reading. The horrifying punishments invented by managers and overseers for slaves are sadistically depraved. Thistlewood and his companions contrived a multitude of barbarous tortures to use on men deemed worthy of correction.

While these descriptions are difficult to read, they are necessary to understand the warfare between blacks and whites, which Burnard proves by countless anecdotes, along with some outside evidence from contemporary histories. The war was not only between whites and blacks as a class, but between white men and the slave women they chose. Over and over again, Burnard reveals the sexual escapades Thistlewood recorded in his diary, and while we cannot be certain any of them were forcible rape, it is certain that

episodes of sexual intercourse between a master and his slave were not all consensual

Despite its many deleterious results for individuals in Jamaica, Burnard argues that slavery did create a culture of egalitarianism for whites, since they were united by their common fear of the angry slaves. In a bizarre way, the utter paucity of black freedom led to near equality for whites. In addition, Thistlewood thought of himself as an enlightenment man. He dabbled in many different areas, and likely thought of himself more as a man of learning than a man of slavery.

Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire is an excellent image of a horrible man in a demented society. Despite the ever present temptation to vilify Thistlewood and glorify the slave, Burnard shows restraint and presents his subjects with commendable nuance. His main character is a barbaric torturer, rapist, slaver, and possibly a murderer, but he is also a man of learning, letters, botany, science, and for other white men, justice.

Burnard does not shy away from presenting the inhumane tortures forced upon the slaves, but neither does he seek to glorify them as perfect humans trapped in wicked conditions. He resists the temptations on both fronts which is both unusual and commendable, and each of his theses is well argued. In short, Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire is a reserved, logical and nuanced representation of a place which was bold, dangerous, and savage.
