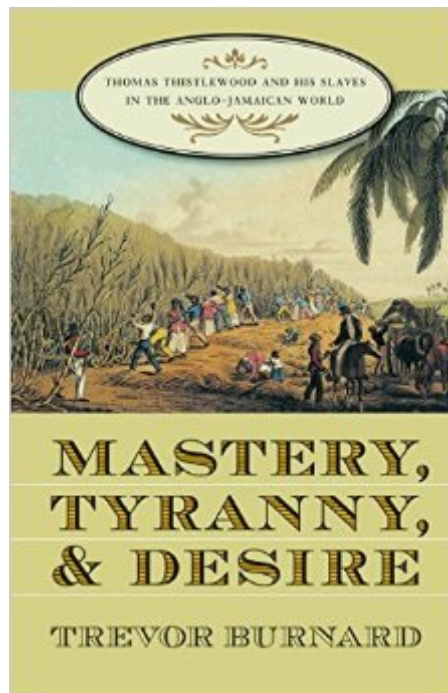


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Mastery, Tyranny, And Desire: Thomas Thistlewood And His Slaves In The Anglo-Jamaican World



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

This fascinating book is scrupulously researched and very well-written. It is also, in its fine-grained

portrayal of the slave-holder Thomas Thistlewood, deeply disturbing. The paradox that Burnard explores is how Thistlewood, an amateur botanist and would-be student of the enlightenment, could also be a sadistic slave-holder in a viciously degrading society. It's extremely thought-provoking, and Burnard's own careful judgments seem consistently on the money. For me, this is an ideal work of academic history.

Martin Bashir said a stupid thing and paid the price. I thank him for making me aware of this book. It documents, in a dispassionate way, the cruelty of slavery. Thistlewood saw nothing wrong with his actions, because at that time they were the norm. Bashir's point that slavery should not be trivialized by comparison to conditions today, is well taken. Too bad he could not have made the point in a less explosive way.

I vacillated between giving this book 3 stars or 4 stars, but finally decided that despite the flaws, the events described in Thistlewood's diary need to be as widely read as possible; so I gave it 4 stars. I think the principle flaws are the author's (Burnard) sometimes uncritical acceptance of Thistlewood's diary entries. Clearly, relations between people, social customs, and life has changed considerably since the 18th century and the author acknowledges that early in the narrative. Despite this disclaimer I am still taken aback by the lack of skepticism or critical analysis from the author concerning a fair number of Thistlewood's diary entries that simply do not pass the "smell test". In fact, some entries seem to be written rationalizations for what even Thistlewood recognized as amoral, brutish behavior. Some of this non-criticality is evident in the narrative about Thistlewood's relations with his slaves. The author accepts Thistlewood's account of slave motivations and behavior without any disclaimers that the motivations and behavior Thistlewood described may not have been objective and were written to satisfy Thistlewood's preconceived notions. Finally, I think that this book needs to be read along with other works such as "Saltwater Slavery...." by Stephanie Smallwood and "The Bondwoman's Narrative" by Hannah Crafts for a more complete picture of slavery. The Crafts work, while fictional, provides a written historical view of slavery written by an (escaped) slave prior to 1861.

May the world be ever thankful for those who, like the author of this book, can dedicate their effort to enlightening us with such brilliant insight into a relatively small, but not insignificant, part of our past. This is an experience, not quite removed from that revealed in "King Leopold's Ghost", from which those of us with a sense of responsibility can all benefit, and be encouraged to strive to make

this world a better habitat for all of us who happen to share it.

Burnard does an excellent job of analyzing the life of Thomas Thistlewood from his diaries, which are long on facts but scant on any analysis. Thistlewood was your sort of typical Jamaican slave overseer and owner, though he may have been overeager to "rape" the slaves under his charge. That and, unlike white Jamaicans of his time and station, he was attuned to the Enlightenment and a voracious reader for a colonial backwater (though Burnard makes clear that Jamaica was, with the possible exception of India, the jewel in the Crown of the British Empire). Why would a man in touch with Enlightenment ideals on one hand, a fierce proponent of Jamaica's white egalitarianism, hold countless black slaves "in miserable slavery"? Burnard believes that Thistlewood quickly bought into the idea that blacks were of a race different than whites, and thus deserving of slavery. Burnard writes well, and the subject matter is interesting enough to keep the reader's attention, though he repeats himself a bit too much. The parts about Thistlewood's intellectual and gentlemanly pursuits was very interesting to me. A good book, get it.

The author too liberally injects his opinion into this book. Often Mr. Burnard attempts to humanize the subject, Thistlewood, when his diary should be allowed to speak for itself. This book could have been a more significant published work if it were merely a translation of the contents and contexts and remained more objective. But instead of allowing the readers to make their own judgements, much of the material is painted over with bias, perhaps in an attempt to obscure. Within the book, the Author claims he will not make excuses for Thistlewood, only to do so seemingly, at every turn. This has also affected the pacing and ease of reading. Of course, I expected a somewhat Western European interpretation, as it was written in the west. However, the writing lacks restraint. That is my opinion. The book was not at all what i expected. I almost feel as though i got to know the Author of the book better than Thistlewood.

This is an absolutely brilliant book, and I do not use that word lightly. It is must reading for anyone interested (even tangentially) in Caribbean history or indeed in fascinating history in general.

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