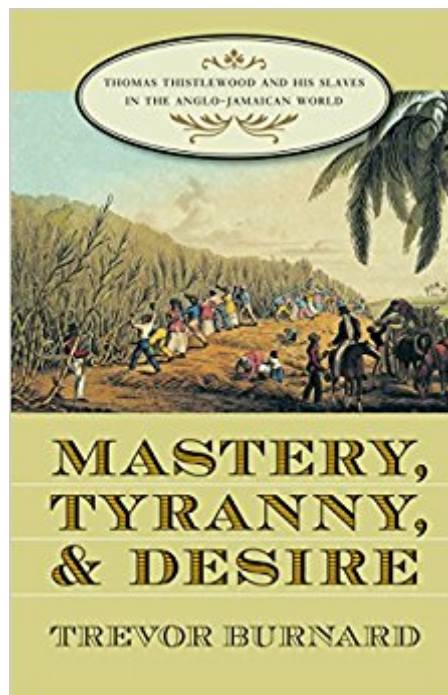




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# Mastery, Tyranny, And Desire: Thomas Thistlewood And His Slaves In The Anglo-Jamaican World



## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A chilling and fascinating picture of the richest British colony in the New World. . . . Essential reading for anyone interested in early American history and culture.--Early American Literature

[Thistlewood's] diary may be the most thorough surviving documentation of the relentless violence permeating slave society in the colonial Anglo-American world. Burnard's study of the life and times

of one perpetrator in this assault helps readers understand how such apparently exceptional cruelty could become so ordinary. . . . Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire remains a remorseless reminder of the savagery needed to maintain the unholy alliance of slavery and empire, and of the horrific human costs that combination exacted.--William and Mary Quarterly

A careful study of the social, intellectual, and cultural worlds of a brutal slave owner. . . . A vivid and penetrating portrait of late eighteenth-century Jamaica.--American Historical Review

Trevor Burnard's *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* is a detailed study based on a rather unusual and exhaustive diary of an English migrant who becomes a small slaveholder in eighteenth-century Jamaica. It probably contains more information than any single source on Jamaican society and on slaves and slavery, and provides many important insights into the lives of slaves and of whites. Given the subject and the materials, this book will be of interest to all concerned with the study of slavery as well as scholars of the Caribbean and of British Caribbean history.--Stanley L. Engerman, University of Rochester

Lest scholars grow too complacent about what slavery entailed, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* remains a remorseless reminder of the savagery needed to maintain the unholy alliance of slavery and empire.--William and Mary Quarterly

As intimate a picture of African slavery in British America as we are ever likely to get. . . . An important moment in our efforts to understand the character of slavery in the British colonial world. . . . A remarkably rich and full picture of white-slave relations.--New York Review of Books

Thomas Thistlewood's diaries provide one of the most detailed accounts of an individual's life in eighteenth-century British America. . . . Indeed, the remarkable source material in the Thistlewood diaries and Burnard's skillful analysis combine to make *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* a landmark in the historiography of the British Caribbean and a useful book for anyone interested in plantation societies in the early modern Atlantic World.--NC Historical Review

Morbidly fascinating and compelling. . . . Enable[s] us to understand more clearly the limited range of choices left for [people] of African descent to make under the tyranny of Thistlewood and his ilk.--Itinerario

A finely crafted microhistory of Thistlewood's life and world, brimming over with fascinating detail. . . . Succeeds admirably. . . . A finely executed treatment of a fascinating and significant subject.--H-Atlantic

A subtle, compelling, and beautifully written study of the racial, social, and gendered power systems that characterized eighteenth-century Jamaica.--Betty Wood, Cambridge University

Compelling. . . . Burnard skillfully explores Jamaican slave society at its zenith.--Caribbean Studies

[An] engaging and welcome addition to the literature on eighteenth-century Jamaica. . . . Sheds light not only on Thistlewood the man, but on the culture that developed among the white population of Jamaica during the peak of the sugar plantation economy.--The Americas

Clear insight into how the plantation system transformed societies so that

slavery formed the core of all social, economic and political relationships.--British Bulletin of Publications on Latin America, the Caribbean, Portugal, and SpainA fascinating study of white Jamaican society through the eyes of Thomas Thistlewood: Englishman, overseer, and slave owner. . . . By getting at the motivations behind how and why white Jamaicans such as Thistlewood treated their slaves in the manner in which they did, Burnard offers new insight into eighteenth-century Jamaican society. . . . A well rounded discussion that portrays whites as more than slave owners, and slaves as more than laborers.--Florida Historical QuarterlyOffers fresh insights into the character of the plantocracy and its evolution. . . . Burnard's extraordinarily thoughtful rendering of Thomas Thistlewood suggest[s] how much more is to be learned about those who ruled the universe in the age of the plantation.--The NationManages to paint an utterly convincing mental and physical portrait of [Thistlewood's] life and times by careful anthropology, imaginative reading and, not least, really good writing.--History Today

good book

Great

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.

Item arrived on time and as described, excellent book

The horror of slavery.

It was a great purchase. It took me back in history to understand what the Africans endured for centuries at the hands of brutal suppressors.

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.

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.

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.

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