Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World. By TREVOR BURNARD. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 320 pages. $39.95 (cloth), $19.95 (paper).

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Thomas Thistlewood: plantation manager and stockyard owner in eighteenth-century Jamaica, horticulturist, botanist, collector of scientific books—pleasant enough fellow, if a bit crotchety. He was also, according to Trevor Burnard, "a brutal slave owner, an occasional rapist and torturer, and a believer in the inherent inferiority of Africans" (7). Change occasional to serial, and the description is about right. How to evaluate the life of a man whose favorite form of punishment was to force one slave to defecate in the mouth of another, then fasten it shut for five hours?

Burnard does his best to explain and humanize, though not to excuse, the monstrous. Working primarily from the thirty-seven volumes of a diary Thistlewood kept from 1750 to 1786, which Burnard estimates totals 2 million words, offers a fascinating, if often gruesome, portrait of a Jamaican society held together by the small white population's tyranny over the enslaved majority. Thistlewood was no more or less sadistic than other managers and owners of slaves, yet he wrote it all down. Every punishment and torture he ever administered, every sexual conquest he forced on captive women, every outrage committed in the name of white security and self-gratification, he recorded in excruciating detail. His 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.

Master, Tyranny, and Desire seeks to "explore what it meant to be a white immigrant in a land characterized by extreme differences of wealth between the richest and the poorest members" (7). Though Thistlewood's diary is filled with information about black Jamaicans, Burnard unapologetically fixes his gaze on the author because readers "need to know more about the foot soldiers of imperialism, especially the men involved at the most intimate level with slaves and slavery in the eighteenth-century British Empire" (7). Did any foot soldier implicate himself in the grisly machinery of empire more thoroughly than Thistlewood?

Jamaica was easily Britain's most profitable colony in the eighteenth century, and some of the wealthiest citizens of the empire belonged to its upper tier of sugar planters. Thistlewood was not of that class. Born in Lincolnshire in 1721, the son of a tenant farmer, he realized his prospects were scant, emigrated to Jamaica in 1750, and found work as manager of a cattle ranch, or pen, in Westmoreland Parish, in the southwestern corner of the island. Immersed in a black world, often going months without seeing a white face, Thistlewood concluded that he could survive only through fear and violence. He gained a reputation among planters as a tough and efficient manager, a rarity in that setting. As they competed for his services, Thistlewood switched managerial jobs several times before finally acquiring his own stockyard and slave workforce years later. He never owned more than thirty-four slaves and at his death in 1786 he had achieved a so-called competency, but not wealth.

In that respect he was more representative of Anglo-Jamaica than the elite planters who commanded the social hierarchy as they have the attention of historians. A shared commitment to black subordination created a kind of negotiated social leveling among whites: an "egalitarian tyranny" (75), a more felicitous phrase than the unfortunate "democratic slave societies" (84). Feisty and temperamental, Thistlewood was not afraid to challenge (verbally, at least) a perceived slight from a social better. The imperatives of white supremacy inflected his entire worldview. He gained local renown as a kind of renaissance man: a bibliophile who bought, borrowed, and lent hundreds

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of volumes on science (especially botany), history, and philosophy; a gardener who collected plants from around the world; an eager, if amateur, participant in the learned discourses of his day. It was his scientific bent, apparently, that led him to keep a diary in the first place. Unreflective and uninterested in selfpresentation, he seems to have considered it a duty to record his activities "because he was an inveterate list maker and collector of facts" (26). And yet, "How could an Enlightenment man be a cruel tyrant" (104)? Burnard's answer is unsurprising: Thistlewood saw no such contradiction, believed slavery and black inferiority to be part of the natural order, and considered any amount of violence justified to maintain white control.

The heart of the book is necessarily its unsparing focus on the "weapons of the strong" (137): Thistlewood's techniques for maintaining power over slaves he managed or owned. Thistlewood invites comparison with his contemporary, planter Landon Carter of Virginia, who in his famous diary writes of pleading with slaves to obey him, imploring them on bended knee to follow his advice. Thistlewood would have regarded such behavior as unmanly. In 1760, during his ninth year on the island, Tacky's Revolt—the largest slave rebellion in eighteenthcentury Jamaica—broke out, resulting in the deaths of some fifty whites and five hundred blacks. That example reinforced in Thistlewood's mind that only the most dehumanizing punishments could contain slave resistance. He used his whip almost every day; so much, at one point, that it broke. Unpredictably moody, he might let some minor infraction pass one day and violently beat a slave the next. An African who refused to work was "Whipp'd, gagg'd, & his hands tied behind him so that the Mosskitoes and Sand flies might torment him to some Purpose" (178).

A lifelong assertion of power, which he chronicled in his diaries, was his sexual dominance over enslaved women, to whom he had "virtually free access" (156). Tallying the statistics of conquest like a box score, Burnard computes that Thistlewood had sex 3,852 times with 138 women in thirty-seven years. More than half his trysts were with his favorite mistress for thirty-five years, Phibbah, a domestic slave who parlayed her sexual hold over him to personal advantage. In Burnard's extended sketch of their relationship, she occupied such a central place in Thistlewood's life and his diaries that brief flashes of affection amid the violence reveal, however fleetingly, a human side to him.

Burnard does not ignore the black Jamaicans whom Thistlewood worked and slept with, and whom he tortured, defiled, and wrote so copiously about for nearly forty years. Focusing on several case studies of Thistlewood's complicated relationships with individual slaves, he reveals a multisided pattern of accommodation and negotiation between master and workers, punctuated by periodic efforts at resistance by the enslaved. But Burnard is not sanguine about the extent of that resistance. He emphasizes that the incentive to attempt escape or revolt was undermined by the system of provision grounds, by which slaves were allotted garden patches where they were required to raise their own food. Though gaining a measure of autonomy, workers became so vested in their plots of land that they were reluctant to risk losing them. The overwhelming narrative of brutality in Thistlewood's diaries, moreover, gives Burnard a bleak view of enslaved Jamaicans' ability to maintain stable families or develop cathartic forms of cultural expression. Knowing only terror, violence, death, and dislocation, he argues, they were ultimately defenseless against the appalling physical and psychic bludgeoning they absorbed.

The argument is a valuable counterpoint to scholarship emphasizing the resilience of slave culture. Still, though Burnard cannot be faulted for his focus on the man who dealt so much misery to black Jamaica, a different book could be written from the diaries, and may one day be written: one that would extend the analysis by placing Thistlewood's victims at the center. Given the vast amount of information about enslaved Jamaicans they contain, the diaries present an excellent opportunity to profile a Caribbean slave community in greater depth, augmented by creative reading of other sources to fill in the silences about aspects such as religion and lingering African cultural

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practices. Then a fuller understanding of the slaves' attempts to survive the war against them might emerge. Until then, 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, and of the horrific human costs that combination exacted.

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