



Michael Chenoweth. *The Eighteenth-Century Climate of Jamaica Derived from the Journals of Thomas Thistlewood, 1750-1786.* Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2003. ix + 153 pp. \$24.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-87169-932-9.

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One of the never-ending truisms in history, that keeps on being confirmed as true, is that sources that do not seem to be at all interesting can, in the right hands, be made to yield all sorts of riches. I spent many years transcribing and analyzing thirty-seven volumes of daily journal entries made by a Jamaican overseer and small planter named Thomas Thistlewood in order to write a book about his life and times as a slave-owner, white man of property and exemplar of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth-century tropics. That book was published as *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (2004). What interested me was his daily diary entries that gave enormous amounts of information about what it was like to be a white man in a mature New World slave society and provided more evidence than any other source I have come across about the lives of slaves unfortunate enough to be under Thistlewood's often brutal care. What seemed especially unusual about Thistlewood was that he retailed in a matter-of-fact, scientifically dispassionate way his numerous sexual encounters with black women and described equally numerous examples of brutality towards his slave charges. It is certainly the graphic descriptions of sex and violence that Thistlewood provides in his journals that in my experience have been of most interest to readers.

But Thistlewood was more than a sadistic if effective manager of slaves. He was also a man of the petit Enlightenment. He was a devoted reader who listed his impressively up-to-date book purchases and book borrowing in his journals and in several associated commonplace books. He was also a talented horticulturalist and amateur botanist whose garden and scientific knowledge gave him an entrée into the leading families of Westmoreland and a reputation throughout the western half of the island as a man of considerable attainments. These attainments could be traced in his journals but also in some of the other manuscript sources that he left in the ninety-volume deposit of his records now residing at the Lincolnshire Record Office. Nevertheless, I did not examine one very large source within that ninety-volume deposit that Chenoweth shows was a body of records of significant importance. I did not look at the thirty-four brown paper-covered books that Thistlewood used to describe, in meticulous detail, the weather that he experienced in southwestern Jamaica between 1752 and his death in November 1786. Indeed, I was so indifferent to these records that I used to joke about them when people asked me about the corpus of Thistlewood's records. These weather records seemed to me perfectly useless as historical sources. What, I joked, would such records tell me about life in

eighteenth-century Jamaica--monotonous lists of "another hot and sunny day."

Chenoweth's important book based on Thistlewood's weather reports proves me wrong in every respect. The journals are invaluable for examining life in a plantation society based on black chattel slavery. The weather records, however, are even more precious than the journals. They are the most important daily record of the earth's climate from anywhere in the tropics in the eighteenth century yet found and as such are a unique source for studying a topic--the earth's weather--that is undoubtedly likely to become a matter of prime historical importance as the effects of global warming start to change everything in the twenty-first century. The weather records Thistlewood left are a previously unrecognized legacy that casts Thistlewood less as a villain, as in my book and in other accounts that are concerned with the contours of slave experience in Jamaica, than as the distinguished gentleman whose "social qualities" made him "greatly endeared" by "the whole circle of his neighbours and acquaintances" as "a most desirable companion to men of science," as his obituary in the *Cornwall Chronicle* of December 16, 1786 eulogized him. As Chenoweth rightly argues, his garden and his weather reports were what Thistlewood himself felt marked him as a man of distinction. No doubt Thistlewood would be as greatly pleased (and perhaps a little surprised, given his relatively lowly origins) by Chenoweth's recognition of his scientific achievements, as he would be disappointed by my portrayal of him as a brutal tyrant towards his slave charges.

Chenoweth is a climatologist rather than an historian, so he is relatively uninterested in the social context within which Thistlewood conducted his weather experiments. Chenoweth is primarily concerned with how we can use eighteenth-century records to create credible climatic time series that provide us with useful comparative information about weather patterns and thus

aid climatologists' investigations into long-term variability in significant weather events such as El Nino and La Nina. Nevertheless, he does concern himself with the quality of Thistlewood's observing practices, which he concludes are of a standard well above normal for the time. They are so good, in fact, that, with proper adjustments whereby Thistlewood's terms can be translated into modern terminology, the weather records can be used to make valid comparisons with observations of tropical weather patterns in the twentieth century. As Chenoweth observes, the type of information that Thistlewood collected and the scientific care with which Thistlewood went about his work is very rare for historical weather records and provides climatologists with invaluable data to assist in modeling past, present, and future climatic patterns. Moreover, not only does Thistlewood carefully record temperature and rainfall over an extended period, he gives invaluable information about thirty-four tropical storms that fill out the historical record. He is particularly useful as a guide to the devastating hurricane of October 3, 1780, perhaps the worst hurricane to have affected Jamaica since records began.

Chenoweth uses Thistlewood's weather observations to great effect. He demonstrates that they show that the eighteenth-century Caribbean was cooler by nearly three degrees Fahrenheit in the third quarter of the eighteenth century than it was in the third quarter of the twentieth century and that it was somewhat moister than it is now. In addition, he shows that the economically booming years between 1750 and 1780 in Jamaica coincided, probably not insignificantly, with a period of low hurricane activity. He shows, also, that the recent weather patterns in Jamaica are anomalous with respect to the 253-year record that Thistlewood's weather observations allow us access to and that these anomalies may possibly be attributed to global warming. He concludes that the modern climate of Jamaica is increasingly remote from that experienced and carefully docu-

mented by Thistlewood. Such findings are of obvious importance to climatologists. They are also important for historians who should be able to use Chenoweth's copious statistical data to examine the effects of weather conditions on agricultural production. Most important, the mere existence of such records must cast doubt on the common claim, made at the time and ever since, that Jamaica was a cultural and scientific wasteland. As we are increasingly realizing, contemporaries did not see the contradictions we see between establishing a vicious society predicated on arbitrary terror and creating a society where cosmopolitan scientific accomplishments were carried out.

When we think of the connections between Enlightenment science and slaveholding, a name that quickly comes to mind is Thomas Jefferson, who, as Chenoweth notes, was similar to Thistlewood in being a keen observer of the weather, a dedicated gardener, an active scientist and a committed slaveowner. If nothing else, what Chenoweth has shown is that Jefferson was far from being alone in enjoying this combination of characteristics. We have recently turned more incessantly to viewing Jefferson through the prism of slavery rather through the prism of the Enlightenment. Thistlewood--not as great a man as Jefferson but possibly a more naturally talented scientist and certainly a better climatologist--has always been seen in the context of slavery. Seeing him in the way Chenoweth does has opened my eyes to his true talents. Moreover, Chenoweth's excellent work has made me realise that the thirty-four volumes of weather observations, that I briefly looked at and then put aside, were not pointless exercises in record keeping, but are invaluable documentary evidence of a truly significant historical phenomenon--global climate change.

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