Most historians of slavery are familiar with Thomas Thistlewood, the young man from Lincolnshire who settled in Westmoreland Parish, Jamaica in 1750, where he lived and worked in various capacities until his death in 1786. Much of the historical literature on slavery in the British West Indies is seasoned with material from Thistlewood’s extensive diaries, which are among the richest surviving documents for the period. Thistlewood himself has been the subject of one book-length study by Douglas Hall; but, whereas, Hall’s book reads almost like an annotated abridgement of the diaries, Trevor Burnard’s work is a finely crafted microhistory of Thistlewood’s life and world, brimming over with fascinating detail.[1] If (as is almost certain) it was one of Burnard’s goals to transport the reader to a distant time and explore Jamaican plantation society in fine-grained detail, the book succeeds admirably. Along the way, Burnard uses the diaries as a springboard to discuss the workings of power in a mature (and still ascendant) plantation colony, emphasizing throughout the overwhelming dominance of the planter class.

Thomas Thistlewood was born in Tupholme, Lincolnshire in 1721, the son of a tenant. Apparently lacking in other opportunities, he sought his fortune abroad, first as a supercargo on an East Indiaman, then in 1750 as a migrant to the prosperous colony of Jamaica. Settling outside of Savanna-la-Mar, Thistlewood worked as an overseer for two different planters. In 1756 he purchased his first slave, and in 1767 he managed to purchase his own land, which he operated as a livestock pen and horticultural establishment. At the time of his death in 1786 he was the owner of thirty-four bondpeople, enough to garner respectability but far too few to place him in the ranks of the colonial elite. Thistlewood never married, although he did maintain a long-term relationship with a slave woman named Phibbah, who belonged to a neighbor and former employer. Thistlewood and Phibbah had a son, Mulatto John, who died in 1780 at the age of twenty. By most standards, Thistlewood was a colonial success story, leaving behind an estate worth over £2,000. In his will he directed that a portion of his estate be used for the purchase and manumission of Phibbah, which occurred in 1792. Other than the diaries, Thistlewood left little mark on his home of over thirty years.

Perhaps the most striking theme in the diaries, at least for the modern reader, is Thistlewood’s sheer brutality. On numerous occasions he recorded punishments meted out to slaves, never expressing remorse or second thoughts. At times these punishments were exotic in their cruelty. One practice, which he nicknamed “Derby’s dose,” involved forcing one slave to defecate into the mouth of another. On another occasion, he placed a bondsman in stocks, rubbed molasses on him, and allowed insects to swarm over him during the night. There is no reason to believe that Thistlewood was uniquely violent or sadistic by Jamaican standards. In fact, Thistlewood and his neighbors actually judged some white newcomers to be too violent. For Burnard, violence and brutality were far from incidental to Jamaican slavery—they were its very heart. In a colony with such a large enslaved majority, whites quickly learned that instilling terror, or what Burnard refers to as “tyranny,” was
routinely sold livestock, as well as other goods, and was otherwise have been possible. Phibbah also “owned” and allowed her to enjoy more creature comforts than might (an arrangement largely engineered by Phibbah), which able to keep her with him by hiring her from her master her relationship. For much of the time, Thistlewood was tion colonies. Notably, Phibbah gained a great deal from context–slavery in one of the world’s most brutal planta-
bah may have had for Thistlewood never transcended its
able here. At one point, for example, while the couple was living apart, Phibbah brought Thistlewood small gifts on a daily basis. “So good a girl she is” (p. 239), he wrote in a rare expression of emotion, albeit in his typically sparse prose. Their sex life appears to have been both vigorous and consensual–Burnard identifies at least ten occasions on which Phibbah successfully turned Thistle-
wood down for sex. Phibbah also nursed Thistlewood on several occasions. The diary, of course, cannot reveal Phibbah’s true feelings, but Burnard makes a case that is more than plausible.

In addition to providing a window into slave life, the diary gives us a glimpse into the lives of non-elite whites in Jamaica, always an elusive topic. Analyzing Thistle-
wood’s social life, Burnard reveals a culture of hospitality that entailed a surprising level of cross-class sociability. From the moment of his arrival, Thistlewood dined and drank frequently with the neighborhood planters, along with other non-elite whites. Conviviality of this sort was rare in most of the British Atlantic world, where rank and deference were of paramount importance. Casual associations between the better and meaner sort were common in Jamaica, argues Burnard, because white unity was essential in a colony overwhelmingly populated by slaves. In addition, Burnard argues that whites of tem-
perate habit (which included Thistlewood, his sexual es-
capades notwithstanding) and who did not succumb to disease had ample opportunity for economic advance-
ment.

Burnard’s study yields a number of provocative con-
clusions, several of which are likely to raise eyebrows among scholars in the field. For example, his argument that white Jamaican society was characterized by “her-
renvolk egalitarianism” (p. 84) runs counter to prevailing interpretations that emphasize rank and deference. More controversially, most readers will probably find that Burnard underplays slave resistance. Deeming the whole concept of resistance problematic (he prefers the term “opposition”), he winds up resurrecting the “D-
nage School” interpretations of the 1960s, arguing that enslaved Jamaicans were too psychologically “bruised” (p. 178) to challenge white authority—this despite the fact that Thistlewood’s own Westmoreland Parish was one
of the areas most affected by Tacky’s Revolt of 1760, in which at least at least one thousand local slaves took part. Burnard’s decision to devote fewer than four pages to analysis of the revolt represents a missed opportunity, not only because it might complicate his discussion of resistance, but also because the diary is the only surviving contemporary account of this very significant event.[3]

The reintroduction of the damage thesis is also frequently contradicted by Burnard’s own more nuanced analysis of the diary itself. For example, after stating that true “resistance” was nearly impossible in Jamaica, due to the planters’ monopoly on force, he profiles a Thistlewood slave named Coobah, whom he labels a “rebel” (p. 217), as well as Phibbah, who, he argues, managed to “transcend [slavery’s] limitations” (p. 228). And, after arguing that the master-slave relationship was “subject to continual negotiation” (p. 177) and was a “long term battle” (p. 155) in an “undeclared war” (p. 138), the assertion that slave “agency was very difficult” (p. 212) in the face of planter power is simply confusing. How exactly did negotiation occur if slaves possessed agency only seldomly or not at all? Lastly, he offers a problematic reinterpretation of Jamaica’s provision ground system, suggesting that slave producers were “wedded to an ideology of proto-peasant capitalist accumulation” (p. 153), that “slaves were capitalists” (p. 154) animated by “acquisitive individualism” (p. 178), and that they engaged in “capitalist market-oriented activity” (p. 169). There is no need to rehearse the slavery-capitalism debates of past decades to suggest that the notion of slaves as acquisitive individualist capitalists runs counter to most historians’ understanding of capitalism and proto-peasanneries.

These issues aside, Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire is a valuable book, virtually required reading for students of slavery and Caribbean history. Many readers will likely disagree with some of the more controversial interpretations, but all will appreciate Burnard’s painstakingly detailed reconstruction of Thistlewood’s life and world. Apart from Douglas Hall, whose approach was very different, no author had attempted to present Thistlewood’s extremely illuminating history; the diary has been used more often to support other narratives. Burnard has given us a finely executed treatment of a fascinating and significant subject.

Notes

