

Estas críticas no pretenden desmerecer el argumento de un libro que constituye un aporte importante a la historia política latinoamericana del siglo XIX.

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TREVOR BURNARD: *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Historians of British Atlantic colonial societies have often puzzled over how immigrant whites made sense of the new social and ecological environment in which they found themselves. In this insightful new study of Jamaican slave society, Trevor Burnard argues that slave-owning whites in Jamaica, bound together by virtue of their skin color, maintained power over their slaves by the application of brutal and tyrannical force. However, white solidarity and terror were never enough to keep slaves “in check.” According to Burnard, what kept whites alive was the slaves’ reluctant acceptance of their masters’ right and ability to force them to do their will.

Historians of Jamaican history as well as of North American colonial era slavery will no doubt be well acquainted with the central source and subject of Burnard’s text. Thomas Thistlewood, born in Lincolnshire, England, but who moved in the early 1750s to Jamaica to achieve his “competency,” kept a detailed diary of over 10,000 pages that historians have mined since its discovery nearly thirty years ago. Were Thistlewood to have remained in England, he would have had few prospects of prosperity or improvement. Seeking to secure his fortune and become a man of property, he immigrated to Jamaica and the western parish of Westmorland, where he became a much sought-after overseer. Through hard work, careful management of his finances, and capitalizing on the acute need for skilled overseers, by the end of his life Thistlewood had acquired an estate named Breadnut Pen (valued at £3,000 at his death in 1786) and achieved a measure of public social standing as a gentleman gardener, justice of the peace, and commissioned officer in the local militia. As Burnard argues, Thistlewood’s economic and social achievements are significant in demonstrating that the prosperity of the mid-century sugar boom in Jamaica was not limited to elite land-holding whites. For those non-landholding white individuals with the right temperament and the tenacity to work hard, Jamaica was indeed “the best poor man’s country” (41).

Central to Burnard’s study of Thistlewood’s experience as a gentleman slave owner in Jamaica is an examination of how whites of all social classes negoti-

ated Jamaica's social and racial boundaries. Jamaican whites struggled to accommodate "ideological egalitarianism" within a society built upon "structural inequality"(73). Their adherence to slave society and the inherent inequality that sustained it made whites cling to one another and formed the foundation of white egalitarianism pictured in the famously lavish hospitality of Jamaican whites. However, this "*Herrenvolk* Egalitarianism" (85) was set firmly within the boundaries of English Atlantic social hierarchies. Elite whites would never have considered Thistlewood their social equal, despite the dependence of these elites upon eager men like Thistlewood to prudently manage their slaves and estates.

While whites struggled to accommodate themselves with one another as racial equals, they became "egalitarian tyrants" (99) within the context of Jamaican slave society. The cult of hospitality could reflect white solidarity, material wealth, and white supremacy, but in the face of such an overwhelming black majority as Jamaica represented throughout the eighteenth century, the enforcement of racial boundaries and slavery required the application of brutal force. Whites' day-to-day survival, as Burnard argues from his examination of Thistlewood's diaries, rested on terror and tyranny. However, there were limits to white dominance and violence. The black majority in Jamaica, where slaves outnumbered whites by at least 10 to 1 throughout the eighteenth century, required that slaves accept their servile status. Burnard suggests that we can better understand why slaves reluctantly accepted this situation by considering the slaves' position within the plantation economy of Jamaica. Burnard argues that as "propertied persons" (154), attached to the provision ground allotted by their white masters, slaves had much to lose by putting up resistance. The provision ground and the produce that slaves garnered from it lacked legal protection, placing slaves in a precarious position. With no one looking out for or protecting their economic and propertied interests, slaves were forced to maintain satisfactory relations with whites, who could be their primary protectors or predators. This served to weaken slave resistance to white power and explains why more slaves did not become involved in Tacky's revolt.

The final chapters of the text are devoted to an excellent study of ten of Thistlewood's slaves, four men and six women, and seeks to explore how slaves coped within the brutal system of Jamaican slave society. Some, such as the slave woman Cooba, rebelled almost constantly. Others, like Congo-born Sally, simply gave up in the face of repeated rapes and the traumatizing effects of slavery. However, Thistlewood's first slave purchase, Lincoln, or his primary slave mistress and long-time lover, Phibba, were able to "transcend the limitations of slavery" (228). Burnard is at his best here, describing the lives of slaves while also situating them within a carefully crafted historiographical discussion

of “strategies of resistance” versus “tactics of opposition” (212). Burnard argues that we can no longer look upon slaves’ activities that did not support the system of slavery (e.g. intentionally slow work, running away) as resistance. Resistance required that slaves be able to operate outside the system of slavery and maintain some level of agency that was outside the control of whites. Citing Michel Foucault’s theoretical work on power, Burnard argues that “there can be no relations of power unless subjects are free” (212), which was certainly not the case in Jamaica. Burnard suggests that “opposition” is a more analytically persuasive view to evaluate slaves’ abilities to exploit gaps within the system of slavery. Denied the ability to act outside slavery by virtue of whites’ physical power and violence, slaves worked within the system to blur the social and racial boundaries of slave society and acquire, as Thistlewood’s lover Phibba did, a degree of social independence and economic advantage.

Historians of the colonial British Atlantic, new-world slavery, and Jamaica, as well as those studying the implications of the unhindered application of violence and tyranny within a society, should read this interesting and well-written text. Burnard situates his study of Thomas Thistlewood not only within Jamaican slave society, but also within the British Atlantic world that valued sensibility, liberty and enlightenment. For modern readers this would seem to create a rather confused individual who was at once a proponent of liberty, independence of spirit and enlightenment, but who could in the next instant visit on his slaves the most dehumanizing and vicious violence that one human being can inflict on another. Burnard’s final comment on Thistlewood as a “tyrannical and cruel despot” should come as no surprise to those familiar with Thistlewood’s diaries. What should provoke further discussion is Burnard’s sweeping assessment of eighteenth-century Jamaican society, where “tyranny... accompanied whiteness,” a fact which, according to Burnard, ultimately “undid the pretensions of whites wishing to create Albion in the Tropics” (271).

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**BONHAM C. RICHARDSON:** *Igniting the Caribbean’s Past: Fire in British West Indian History*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Fire is inextricably bound up with the development of human society. The use and abuse of this source of energy, fire, has served extremely important functions in the socio-economic, political and religious life of a people. These include: the clearing of land for settlement and agricultural plots for food production, the