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Title: "The Full Truth at Last." Review of *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica*, by Douglas Hall

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The full truth at last

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In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750–86
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West Indian colonial societies were probably unique in human history, being based almost entirely on immigration following the extermination or decimation of the native islanders within a century of colonial rule. To replace them, British, French, Dutch and Danish colonists competed with one another and with the Portuguese to import workers from West and Central Africa; and, to ensure their subordination and compliance, for centuries they set them to work and die as slaves on sugar plantations under a regime of chattel slavery without historical parallel in its scale, scope and inhumanity. Even in ancient Greece and Rome the lot of slaves in the mines, ships and work sites, for all its suffering, was not as intensely or totally inhuman as Caribbean slavery from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. Yet long before its abolition, the great majority in most islands were slaves of African descent, predominantly black, but with enough mulattos to indicate the sexual exploitation of slave women by white men.

Though much has changed in these countries since Emancipation, their basic structures, cultural character and multiracial composition, established in slavery, persist in all, including Guyana, Surinam and Trinidad where large communities now trace descent from Indians imported as indentured labour to replace the slaves on sugar plantations and perpetuate traditional forms of white control. In consequence, to understand contemporary Caribbean peoples and the factors that govern their reactions at home, in Britain, or in other regions of the Caribbean diaspora, we should always bear in mind the grim, prolonged reality of slavery, when the foundations of Creole society, culture and economy were sunk so deep and strong that even now, in language, belief, attitudes, sex and family, work, sport, property and politics, their peoples' modes of thought and action are still to some degree constrained by that historic heritage.

It is therefore a matter of some importance that our ideas of Caribbean slavery rest on

rather superficial accounts of plantation societies by such writers as "Monk" Lewis and Mrs Carmichael, who knew relatively little of the actual conditions of slave life and work; and on authors like Bryan Edwards, who chose to highlight certain aspects of slavery, while omitting others of greater immediacy and relevance to the slaves themselves. Using estate ledgers and official statistics, historians long ago unravelled the economic and demographic histories of plantation societies, and others have since related those developments to their political and social evolution. Yet despite much persistent and careful research since the Second World War, Caribbeanists and historians of West Indian societies have hitherto had to work with inadequate information on the social life of plantation slaves and their masters, who together formed most of their populations.

Only with *In Miserable Slavery*, this carefully abridged and edited account of Thomas Thistlewood's diary of his life on Jamaican plantations from 1750 to 1786, is the raw and naked truth about Caribbean slavery in all its horror, tedium and pathos finally available to all. An intelligent, energetic, enterprising young man, to our great good luck Thistlewood had the compulsive habit of recording daily the details of his experience as tersely as possible. Having travelled extensively in the Far East and north-western Europe, he set off for Jamaica in 1750, at the age of twenty-nine, to seek his fortune, and remained there till he died in November 1786. The son of an English farmer, his education included Latin, mathematics, agriculture and a little Greek.

The narrative begins in 1749, with Thistlewood preparing to sail. After a rough voyage to Jamaica, he set out to find employment, first on a ranch or cattle "pen" in a south-western parish, and then to "oversee" or manage Egypt, a sugar plantation owned by William Dorrill, a wealthy planter in the adjacent parish of Westmoreland. Thistlewood's record of his first sugar crop at Egypt is of special interest for its detailed and gripping account of the strenuous efforts involved, and the general relief when it was over. The next two chapters summarize his life as overseer at Egypt from 1752 to 1759, and are followed by a first-hand account of Tacky's slave revolt in 1760. Written by a participant, this account of white preparations and responses to the reports and threat of revolt cannot be matched for vividness. During the years that followed, Thistlewood set out to acquire his own estate. Shortly before leaving

Egypt, without a word of regret, he records the death of his nephew at the hands of slave Driver Johnnie, whose "wife" the nephew had seduced, despite frequent warnings. By 1767 Thistlewood had acquired enough slaves to operate a small property, Breadnut Island Pen, not far from Egypt. There he lived till the end of his days, meagrely at first, less so later on. As before, throughout his last twenty years he records the intimate details of his life as proprietor with his slaves and white neighbours.

Thistlewood writes without comment, rationale, or expression of feeling. The diary that results is therefore all detail, keenly observed, briskly and precisely recorded: "Tuesday 24th [January 1749]: 2d bitter apples, steeped in Beer and took at twice, it is said will cause abortion certainly. J. Cook." Or: "Sunday, 11th June 1758: . . . Rode to Mr. Mordiner's, dined there. (Read in the Humorist several entertaining things. This was the 2nd vol.). Stayed at Mr. Mordiner's till the evening then rode home . . . Mr. Mordiner says, reported, Mrs. Cocker has made free with one of Michigan's Negro fellows! Strange, if true, but scarce to be doubted." Or: "Saturday, 2nd July 1768: Hear Stompe, the Mial Man, was burnt alive this evening, and his wife (Dr. Frazier's Polly, a mulatto) hanged. (She was Robert Paton's daughter, who lived with Billy Cunningham)."

Besides the diary of about 10,000 closely written pages, Thistlewood also recorded information on the weather and kept a journal in which he listed and discussed the books and papers he had read, many of which he imported from Britain and North America. Once he had a place of his own, he also experimented with such exotic plants and trees as breadfruit, mango, camphor and lichee, and retained an interest in science till the end of his life. By recording his actions and reactions, he also lays bare his character. It is clear from the diary that he was an unusual man, disciplined, amoral, resilient, promiscuous, pitiless and tough, determined to control all that concerned him, and in many ways a formidable anti-hero. Sexual exploits he records routinely in Latin: "In the evening, *Cum Mulier*, up an alley to the west of Fleetmarket, in a *Chamb. Sup. Lect. 6d. Spent 3d*"; but he noted his sadistic abuses in plain English, unaware that they degraded him even more than his victims.

Never before to my knowledge have we had such an utterly raw, factual and comprehensive account of the interactions of masters and slaves in plantation societies. Thistlewood records almost daily the varied situations, acti-

vities and transactions in which slaves and their masters engaged, and their diverse social relations. Slaves emerge in these pages as individuals, with distinct interests, personalities, and ailments. Though without compassion and apparently indifferent to pain, Thistlewood administered his slaves with an extraordinary mixture of brutality and care. Despite his promiscuity, he soon became attached to Phibbah, the head slave of the cookhouse at Egypt, and remained so till his death. That attachment allowed Phibbah's owner, Dorrill, who employed Thistlewood until he acquired his own estate, to control him by refusing to manumit her, despite repeated pleas. Only Phibbah's servitude and his own frustration moved Thistlewood to condemn slavery as "miserable". Five days before he died, he made his will, leaving sufficient money to purchase her freedom and provide her with land and a house. Their son, Mulatto John, had died some years before, aged twenty, perhaps of poison. He was their only child, both Phibbah and Thistlewood having contracted gonorrhoea, as the diary records in detail.

The diaries remained undisturbed in England, at the Lincolnshire County Archives, until Douglas Hall, a Jamaican historian who lives not far from Thistlewood's estate and Phibbah's last home in Westmoreland, having learnt of them, visited Lincoln to inspect them almost 200 years after Thistlewood's death. This abridged version is the result of prolonged study. To reduce the thirty-odd volumes of the diary to book length without losing coherence or detail, Hall has compressed and supplemented the passages he quotes by linking paragraphs that supply the information necessary for the reader to appreciate their significance. He has edited the diary with an acute awareness of its uniqueness as the complete and candid inside account of Jamaican society by a white planter who, though at home with his own people, lived more closely and continuously with the slaves.

For libraries and specialists, a complete edition of the Thistlewood Diaries will shortly be published in the United States by Philip Morgan. Yet even when that is available, this abridged edition will remain the standard version for Caribbean scholars, historians and the general reader for generations to come. Given the importance and immediacy of its contents and their scholarly presentation, it fully merits a place in the personal library of all Caribbeanists and students of New World slavery.