Author(s): M.G. Smith
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 mulattoes to indicate the sexual exploitation of slave women by white masters.

Though much has changed in these countries since Emancipation, their basic structures, culture 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 labourers 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 English-speaking world, we must 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 life, sport, property and politics, their peoples’ modes of thought and action are 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 Carmichael (author of "The Negro: His Physical, Social, and Economic Condition"), who knew relatively little of the actual conditions of slave life and work; and on anecdotes 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 these developments to their political and social evolution. Yet despite much persistent and careful research since the Second World War, Caribbeans 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 Jamacian 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 everywhere 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 and modern languages. His primary interest, however, was the plantations.

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 "own" or manage a sugar plantation, a sugar plantation owned by William Dorrill at adjacent parish. When he was hired as a sugar 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 summarise 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 revolt. The untold story of this 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 friend, and the death of his slave Caroline Johnnie, whose "wife" the nephew had seduced, despite frequent warnings. By 1767 Tacky's slave revolt had been averted. After Tacky was hanged, Thistlewood moved from one parish to another, and spent much of his time as a sugar planter, farmer, merchant and lawyer. In 1774 he moved to Cuba, where he continued to practice law, and was a slave owner in his own right. He was a slave owner for three years until 1777, when he moved to London and became a solicitor.

The diaries recorded in this book are only a fraction of the total written by Thistlewood. He kept a diary from 1749 to 1786, and the volume contains over 17,000 pages of his diary. The diary is a valuable resource for historians and students of the history of slavery in the Caribbean.

In Miserable Slavery is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the history of slavery in the Caribbean. It is a testament to the power of personal testimony and the importance of preserving such records for future generations.