

## Sir Thomas Bertram's "Business in Antigua"

JUDITH TERRY

Department of English, University of Victoria, PO Box 3070, Victoria, BC V8W 3W1

What precisely did Jane Austen intend, or what did she reveal unintentionally, by making Sir Thomas Bertram the owner of a sugar plantation in the West Indies? Such questions are hotly debated in these post-colonial days.<sup>1</sup> The evidence accumulated in recent years as to Austen's interest in slavery and the slave-trade, and her familiarity with matters relating to the ownership of a sugar plantation in the West Indies, is largely circumstantial but very persuasive.<sup>2</sup> Although the references to Antigua in *Mansfield Park* are few, she would have been perfectly aware what they would convey—and that was much more to the contemporary reader than we have often assumed. I propose to try and recover something of that contemporary reader's perspective so that we may be better informed when responding to the new and exciting controversies surrounding the presence/absence of slavery in *Mansfield Park*.

Matthew Gregory Lewis wrote his *Journal of a West India Proprietor, Kept During a Residence in the Island of Jamaica*,<sup>3</sup> when he made two visits to his estates in the West Indies within five years of Sir Thomas's fictional one.<sup>4</sup> He stayed approximately three months each time: 1 January–31 March, 1816, and 23 January–2 May, 1818. "Monk" Lewis is well known to Janeites through *Northanger Abbey*, in which her opinion of the Gothic horror novel by which he earned his nickname may be gauged by the fact that *The Monk* is the only novel which that insufferable semi-literate oaf, John Thorpe, has actually read and enjoyed (48).<sup>5</sup> Lewis was exactly Jane Austen's contemporary, born in the same year and dying (of yellow fever, like Cassandra's fiancé) only one year later, as he was returning from his second visit to Jamaica.<sup>6</sup>

Lewis was the Stephen King of his day. *The Monk* catapulted him into notoriety and high society before he was twenty. Byron's words fairly represent the general opinion of him: Lewis was "a good man, a clever man, but a bore—a damned bore."<sup>7</sup> Temperamentally difficult, physically ugly, he was never much liked, yet "good" was an epithet frequently applied to him. This aspect of his personality dominates the *Journal*. There is an underlying surprise in Coleridge's comment:

Lewis's *Jamaican Journal* is delightful; it is almost the only unaffected book of travels or touring I have read of late years. You have the man himself, and not an inconsiderable man,—certainly a much finer mind than I supposed before from the perusal of his romances, etc. It is by far his best work, and will live and be popular.<sup>8</sup>

Lewis was a committed "abolitionist," that is to say, he was pre-occupied with the abolition of the slave trade. Abolitionists believed that "the institution of slavery was 'created and sustained' by the slave trade and hoped that it would simply fade away once the trade was stopped."<sup>9</sup> The act to abolish

what Lewis calls the “execrable” slave trade (100) had been passed in 1807. Agitation for emancipation, for the abolition of slavery itself, began again in earnest in the 1820s, and emancipation itself occurred much later, in two stages: in 1834 “apprenticeship” began, when slaves were compelled to work for their former owners; in 1838 “full freedom” came into effect.

A pro-abolitionist was not automatically pro-emancipation (and most West Indies planters were neither). The word “slave” gave Lewis “a pang at the heart”<sup>10</sup> (he tried, most of the time successfully, to substitute “negro”), but a situation which confronted him as soon as he arrived in Jamaica caused him to set forth some anticipated consequences which made him question emancipation. Nicholas Cameron’s white father, when on his deathbed, had charged his nephew and heir with freeing his son. All was in train, when suddenly the nephew died, and the whole process had to begin again. Lewis wrote:

I felt strongly tempted to set . . . [Nicholas] at liberty at once; but if I were to begin in that way, there would be no stopping; and it would be doing a kindness to an individual at the expense of all my other negroes—others would expect the same; and then I must either contrive to cultivate my estate with fewer hands—or must cease to cultivate it altogether—and, from inability to maintain them, send my negroes to seek bread for themselves—which, as two-thirds of them have been born upon the estate, and many of them are lame, dropsied, and of a great age, would, of all misfortunes that could happen to them, be the most cruel. (76)

We must here recognize practical constraints, bred by the abominable system itself. It is some pleasure to see Lewis recording that Nicholas, who was obliged not only to save money to purchase his manumission (as many resolutely did) but also to find another to take his place, steadily pursued and finally achieved his object, just before Lewis left Jamaica for ever. Lewis’s final verdict on emancipation is expressed in a statement near the end of the *Journal*:

Every man of humanity must wish that slavery, even in its best and most mitigated form, had never found a legal sanction, and must regret that its system is now so incorporated with the welfare of Great Britain as well as of Jamaica, as to make its extirpation an absolute impossibility, without the certainty of producing worse mischiefs than the one which we annihilate. (402)

The slave trade itself had not instantly been ended by the act of 1807. It was an enormously profitable trade that had been flourishing for two centuries, and the only means of enforcing the new law was by a naval presence consisting of “two elderly vessels, a frigate and a sloop, facing the slave outlets along 3,000 miles of coastline, and behind them the vast extent of the Atlantic sea lanes.”<sup>11</sup> The passing of a further bill in 1811, which made slave-trading a felony punishable by up to fourteen years’ transportation, indicated the failure of the 1807 bill to achieve its object. Posed to Sir Thomas under such circumstances, Fanny’s question is a much more pointed enquiry than it superficially seems: “Is abolition working at last? Have they finally succeeded in stopping the slave trade?” she was asking. As to Sir

Thomas's reply, I have no doubt that Jane Austen envisaged him as an abolitionist, but it would certainly have caused him labour problems: between 1810-1813, the slave population in Antigua declined by 500-600 slaves per annum.<sup>12</sup>

There are numerous reminders of *Mansfield Park* in the *Journal*, through mention of sudden alarms over pirates, for example, and balls and dancing. Jamaica and Antigua stood in a similar relation to Britain: both had been colonized in the first phase of British expansion, Antigua in 1632, Jamaica in 1655; both were Caribbean "sugar islands," where "the agrosocial system of slavery developed in its fullest and most harsh form."<sup>13</sup> By the end of the seventeenth century, each had its own planter-controlled legislature, and laws regulating the relationship between owner and slave. Black inhabitants outnumbered white by eight or ten to one.<sup>14</sup> Antigua as well as being smaller (108 square miles compared with Jamaica's 4,411) was flatter, with no natural streams, but a reliable trade wind that drove the many windmills.<sup>15</sup> Sir Thomas would surely have reported to the family circle at *Mansfield* the beauty of the landscape, the exotic flora and fauna. Lewis records the tamarinds, the orange and mango trees, the yams and the bread-fruit, the alligators and the galli-wasp, the cockroach he nearly ate, and the barbecued pig he really ate, with the liveliness of the best travel writer. He describes the great house, raised on pillars, with Venetian blinds all round for coolness, and the wicker structure of the stables, the blowing of conch shells to mark the passing of time, the shaddocks and pine-apples he is eating, and—with some relief—the smallness of the mosquitoes. "I could listen to him for an hour together" (197), as Fanny said of Sir Thomas—although Sir Thomas would have been unlikely to say, as Lewis did within the first two weeks:

I am as yet so much enchanted with the country, that it would require no very strong additional inducements to make me establish myself here altogether.  
(67)

For the ultimate aim of the British sugar planter had always been to return home. By the beginning of the nineteenth century many planters had realized their object and settled in England, leaving their estate in the hands of an overseer or attorney, who received a fee amounting to 6% of the estate's income. Thus, to the monstrosity of the master-slave relationship was added that of absentee landlordism. "Unless a West-Indian proprietor occasionally visit his estates himself, it is utterly impossible for him to be *certain* that his deputed authority is not abused," says Lewis (115-16). But of course, no matter how humane Lewis was—or how "active and methodical" (190) Sir Thomas Bertram—what happened on the plantation during the owner's absence was beyond his control. (Sir Thomas's criticisms of non-resident clergymen [247] take on new interest in this context.)

When Lewis arrived at Cornwall, his 1600-acre estate in the parish of Westmoreland, where there were about 250 slaves, and found everything "much better than I expected; the negroes seem healthy and contented" (64), his relief is palpable. And he took obvious pleasure in documenting the evidence:

I never witnessed on the stage a scene so picturesque as a negro village. . . . Each house is surrounded by a separate garden, and the whole village is intersected by lanes, bordered with all kinds of sweet-smelling and flowering plants;

(107-08)

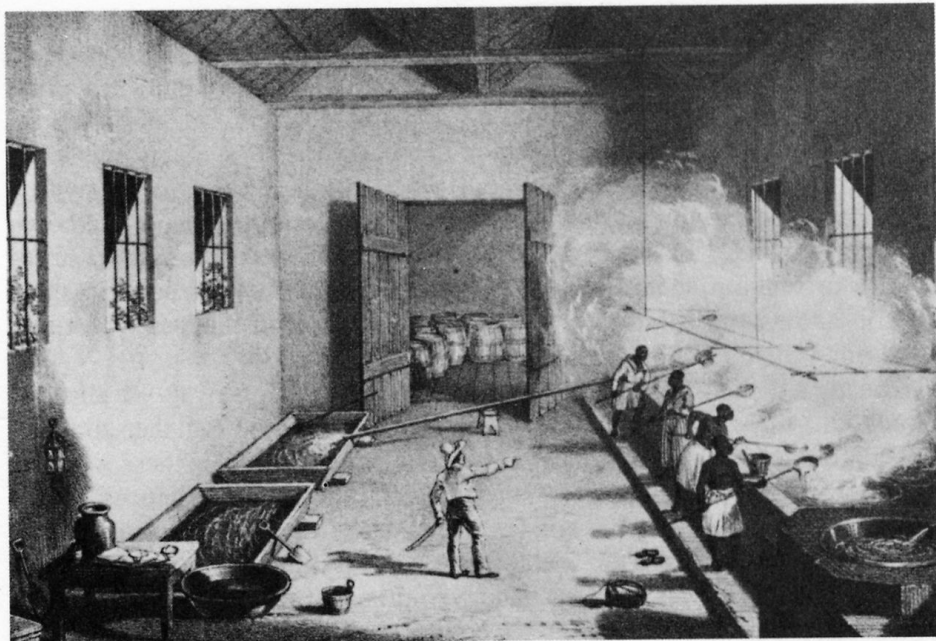
The negro houses are composed of wattles on the outside, with rafters of sweet-wood, and are well plastered within and whitewashed; they consist of two chambers, one for cooking and the other for sleeping, and are, in general, well furnished. (110)

His first response to the slaves, in Black River, where they were celebrating the New Year, was full of longing. "I never saw so many people who appeared to be so unaffectedly happy" (58). The affection Lewis was shown by the slaves at Cornwall unquestionably assuaged his deep, personal loneliness. Even those who had previously been "manumitted" (freed) returned to welcome "Massa," and assured him they would come again to say goodbye:

All this may be palaver; but certainly they at least play their parts with such an air of truth, and warmth and enthusiasm, that, after the cold hearts and repulsive manners of England, the contrast is infinitely agreeable . . . my own heart, which I have so long been obliged to keep closed, seems to expand itself again in the sunshine of the kind looks and words which meet me at every turn, and seem to wait for mine as anxiously as if they were so many diamonds. (90)

Such an attitude, genuine though it is, must not mislead us into overlooking how fully the *Journal* participates in the discourse of slavery. This was a colonial encounter. Lewis's desire to change the terms of the discourse was admirable but superficial: slaves or negroes, they were still essentially other. Once or twice he seems on the verge of breaking through into a different perspective, as when, complaining about a slave who has run away and taken his wife with him, he comments: "In England, a man only runs away with another person's wife: but to run away with his own—what depravity!" (209). Such an analogy challenges the usual terms of the discourse. Most of the time, however, the demeaning stereotypes—beauty, charm and grace (of an unconscious or childlike kind), and also incompetence, stupidity, laziness, go hand-in-hand with loving concern.

In this context, the omission of any detailed record of the slaves at *work* is significant. We enjoy details of the wild and wonderful parties, one of which Lewis gave to celebrate his arrival, when two heifers were slaughtered, the supplies of sugar and rum were unlimited, and gumbie drums and dancing went on into the small hours (by which time Lewis had retired with a headache). But when Lewis describes the process of making sugar, he largely depersonalizes it. Boiling the juice, for example, sometimes entailed a heat so extreme that water had to be sprayed on the roof shingles of the boiling house to prevent them catching fire. The many carrying tasks, of which we hear nothing, included "moving hogsheads of sugar weighing up to a ton and puncheons of rum and molasses containing up to 120 gallons from the boiling house to the curing house, or the distillery to the rum store."<sup>16</sup> Lewis does not concern himself with this kind of computation. He wants to believe that the slaves' lives are tolerable, and, indeed, compares



Interior of a boiling house.

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their lot favourably with that of the English labourer (101)—a standard argument made by all those *defending* slavery.

Lewis was alert, however, to what was generally acknowledged as the heaviest work: preparing the ground for, and planting the sugar cane. (Coffee, cotton, cocoa and pimento crops did not require such heavy physical labour.) His solution—not, as he himself admits, very satisfactory—was to resolve to use jobbing gangs of slaves to do the task instead of his own. He also, while in England between visits, had ploughs sent out, although the experiment apparently failed. (The plough was “an exotic implement,” never much used anywhere in the West Indies, *except* in Antigua, where it was used extensively.)<sup>17</sup>

I see no reason to believe that Lewis falsified the reasonably comfortable conditions of life at Cornwall, although nothing could, of course, obliterate the monstrous master/slave relationship. When he first toured the slave village, he took pleasure in acceding to requests: lime for whitewashing a house, a new axe, and several for “the purchase of some relation or friend belonging to another estate, and with whom they were anxious to be reunited” (111). The acquisition of lime or an axe or a person: we are starkly aware at such moments of the commodification of human beings in which both master and slave are driven to acquiesce, and to which many eventually became inured.

By the beginning of his third month at Cornwall, after checking off all he had done for his slaves, Lewis was somewhat disillusioned: “Now for my reward” (203): forty-five workers, excluding children, were in the hospital, most of whom were not sick, and sugar production down again. At this point he begins to draw upon the uglier aspects of the stereotype, referring to the

slaves' "extreme laziness" (215), and grumbling that they are "perverse beings." "Still they are not ungrateful; they are only selfish" (231), he says, quite unable to recognize that, just as his own personal kindness cannot obviate the evils of slavery, neither can it dismantle the forms of resistance the system itself generated, of which "laziness"<sup>18</sup>—best interpreted as a work-to-rule or go-slow in a system where neither pay nor bargaining existed—was one. Stealing was also a form of resistance. A well-known Jamaican saying, "Massa's horse, massa's grass," expresses the ironic response to such an accusation. As "Massa's" property, how could a slave appropriating something else which also belonged to "Massa"—usually food not valuables—be "stealing"?<sup>19</sup>

The most common challenge to subjection was running away. On all slave plantations there were runaways. Wherever they banded together and sustained themselves in the wild they were called maroons. Then there were the short-term absences—"le petit marronage." The many instances which Lewis dealt with during his comparatively short time in Jamaica indicate how deeply embedded in the social fabric was this kind of covert resistance.

No sugar island was without its slave uprisings. (Resistance in Antigua had been strong in the first half of the eighteenth century, with an island-wide African-creole plot involving thousands in 1735-36).<sup>20</sup> Lewis makes reference to many instances in Jamaica, past and present, and at such times the inherent contradictions in his attitude are most striking. Told about the discovery of a "meditated insurrection" on a neighbouring estate "where the overseer is an old man of the mildest character, and the negroes had always been treated with peculiar indulgence" (225), Lewis was horror-stricken. According to his report, the conspiracy involved over 1,000 people in a plan to massacre all the whites on the island. One of the two leaders was sentenced to be hanged, the other to be transported. It would be expecting too much that Lewis should identify this as a brave show of resistance to a regime he himself abhorred, but that is, of course, what it was. A copy of the "Song of the King of the Eboes,"<sup>21</sup> produced as evidence, leaves us in no doubt:

Oh me good friend, Mr. Wilberforce, make we free!  
 God Almighty thank ye! God Almighty thank ye!  
 God Almighty, make we free!  
 Buckra in this country no make we free:  
 What Negro for to do? What Negro for to do?  
 Take force by force! Take force by force!

CHORUS

To be sure! to be sure! to be sure! (228)

(Later, Lewis was told that because of his benevolence towards his slaves, he had been included in this song.)

Lewis records that the leaders of the rebellion were "cool and unconcerned" at their trial. The one who was hanged "died, declaring that he left enough of his countrymen to prosecute the design in hand, and revenge his death upon the whites" (234), and the one due to be transported burned down the door of the prison in order to escape. Yet, only ten pages earlier he had

stated that "in any bodily pain it is not possible to be more cowardly than the negro" (216). The leaders' behaviour is never named as courage, nor is that earlier statement revised.

Lewis made improvements at Cornwall. The slaves were already legally entitled to a certain amount of time for visiting their "provision-grounds," usually at some distance from the estate, where they grew vegetables for their own use. Lewis doubled the number of "provision-days," increased the holidays, and was adamant that "Sunday is now the absolute property of the negroes for their relaxation. . . . If my slaves choose to go to church on Sundays, so much the better; but not one of them shall be *ordered* to do so" (141). Warned repeatedly against abolishing the cartwhip, he refused: "there is something to me so shocking in the idea of this execrable cart-whip, that I have positively forbidden the use of it on Cornwall; and if the estate must go to rack and ruin without its use, to rack and ruin the estate must go" (119).

Lewis's actions aroused the ire of other planters. Having read in the local newspaper the comments of a local judge on people who "thought proper to interfere with our system, and by their insidious practices and dangerous doctrines to call the peace of the island into question, and to promote disorder and confusion" (221), Lewis was amazed to discover that the remarks were directed at him. On reflection, he decided that "If I *really* am the person to whom Mr. Stewart alluded, I must consider his speech as the most flattering compliment that I ever received. . . . God grant that I may live to deserve it!" (223).

Lewis gained nobody's approbation. His friends and relations thought him decidedly strange, and he was under attack from not only the planters but also from the anti-slavery lobby, which considered, not without reason, that the *Journal* painted too rosy a picture of plantation life. If Lewis had provided more detail about his experiences at Hordley, his other estate, which he visited only once, for five days, during his second stay, that would not have been the case. Hordley, in the parish of St. Thomas's-in-the-East, at the opposite end of the island from Cornwall, was likewise its antithesis. At Hordley, Lewis "expected to find a perfect paradise, and found a perfect hell" (365). The agent had allowed the slaves "to be maltreated by the book-keepers, and other inferior agents, with absolute impunity" (367). Lewis dismissed one book-keeper, finding him guilty of "atrocious brutality" (367), and another ran off. He demoted the "chief black governor" and found a neighbouring gentleman, of whose humanity he was convinced, to agree to hear the slaves' complaints in future.

Yet although examples of the vicious treatment of slaves *are* graphically related in Lewis's narrative, neither the "atrocious brutality" of the book-keeper nor the breaking of the master/slave laws—nor anything else at Hordley for that matter—are elaborated. Lewis had a tender heart, and we may deduce that it was easier for him to write of atrocities that had taken place in the past or elsewhere than to document them as they were happening on one of his own estates. But, considering the centrality of slavery to the *Journal*, a full record was essential to its truthfulness. Condensing it to five pages of a 408-page book results in the narrative itself becoming biased.

The *Journal* evidently represents the point of view of a more than commonly benevolent and generous slaveowner, yet it is still inescapably part of the discourse of slavery. A careful reading of it enables us, I believe, to make a more informed response to Sir Thomas, to Fanny, to Jane Austen herself, and to the spate of articles his "business in Antigua" has occasioned.

Judith Terry is currently editing Lewis's *Journal* for Oxford University Press, World's Classics Series.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See for example, Moira Ferguson, "Mansfield Park: Slavery, Colonialism and Gender," *Oxford Literary Review* 13.1-2 (1991): 118-39; Peter Smith, "Mansfield Park and the World Stage," *Cambridge Quarterly* 23.3 (1994): 203-29; and especially Edward Said's comments on *Mansfield Park*, reprinted in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), which have provoked a flurry of responses, among them: Michael Wood, "Lost Paradises," *New York Review of Books*, 3 Mar, 1994: 44-46; Susan Fraiman, "Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender Culture and Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 21.4 (1995): 805-21. The latter refers to at least seven more reviews or articles.
- <sup>2</sup> See Frank Gibbon, "The Antiguan Connection: Some New Light on *Mansfield Park*," *Cambridge Quarterly* 11.2 (1982):298-305. Ruth Perry, "Austen and Empire: A Thinking Woman's Guide to British Imperialism," *Persuasions* 16 (1994): 95-105. It is of interest that a map of Antigua by Herman Moll, dated 1739, on which estates are identified by owner's names, shows not only the name Nibbs (of whose plantation Jane Austen's father had been made trustee), but also several identified as "Wickham" and "Lucas."
- <sup>3</sup> The record he kept of his experiences was first published posthumously in 1834. Another edition appeared in 1845, as *Journal of a Residence among the Negroes of the West Indies*, and was re-issued in 1861. The only edition in this century was in 1929. The *Journal* is well known to historians of slavery. Michael Craton calls Lewis "the most famous of all visiting absentee planters," in *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982) 36.
- <sup>4</sup> In "The Silence of the Bertrams: Slavery and the chronology of *Mansfield Park*," *Times Literary Supplement* 17 Feb, 1995: 13-14, Brian Southam makes a convincing case for a chronology of 1810-13.
- <sup>5</sup> This and all subsequent page references to Jane Austen's novels are to the Chapman Edition.
- <sup>6</sup> Lewis was also a prolific dramatist, and responsible for translating one of Kotzebue's plays (though not *Lovers' Vows*) into English. *Die Spanier in Peru oder Rollas Tod*, which Lewis published in 1799 as *Rolla; or the Peruvian Hero; A Tragedy, in Five Acts*. See Louis F. Peck, *A Life of Matthew G. Lewis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961) 78. Lewis was even, like Sir Thomas Bertram, an MP from 1796-1802.
- <sup>7</sup> Qtd. *M. G. Lewis: Journal of a West India Proprietor 1815-1817*, ed. with an introduction by Mona Wilson (London: Routledge, 1929) 10.
- <sup>8</sup> Qtd. Peck, 168-69. Craton calls the *Journal* "honest though romantic and naive" (37).
- <sup>9</sup> B. W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984) 303.
- <sup>10</sup> *Journal of a West India Proprietor, Kept during a Residence in the Island of Jamaica* (London: John Murray, 1934) 62. All subsequent references are indicated by page numbers following the quotations.
- <sup>11</sup> Southam, 13.
- <sup>12</sup> Higman, 417.
- <sup>13</sup> Gordon K. Lewis, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought: The Historical Evolution of Caribbean Society in Its Ideological Aspects, 1492-1900* (Baltimore and London: Johns



Hopkins University Press, 1983) 2. Higman points out that Jamaica was never so exclusively monocultural as Antigua, and warns against the dangers of assuming that all island cultures were exactly alike.

<sup>14</sup> In 1815, the estimated slave population in Jamaica was 339,840, and in Antigua 33,025. The facts and figures are derived from Higman, 41, 43, 417.

<sup>15</sup> Craton, 115.

<sup>16</sup> Higman, 166.

<sup>17</sup> Higman, 162.

<sup>18</sup> A book has been written on this topic, with reference to cultures other than the Caribbean: S. H. Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (London: Frank Cass, 1977).

<sup>19</sup> Craton, 53.

<sup>20</sup> Craton, 337.

<sup>21</sup> Craton points out that the rhythms of calypso can be heard in this song.