



Journal of a West-India Proprietor: Kept During a Residence in the Island of Jamaica (1834)

Matthew Gregory Lewis

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Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775 – 1818) was an English Deputy-Secretary at War; Member of Parliament as well as famous travel author, novelist, and dramatist, often referred to as "Monk" Lewis, because of the success of his 1796 Gothic novel, *The Monk*.

The *Journal of a West-India Proprietor* is indeed a curiosity: it is a posthumous production of the author of 'The Monk,' and, is regarded as the best of all the creations of his pen.

By some accident this most agreeable and amusing volume, "Journal of a West-India Proprietor" slipped off the reading public's table and was for a time forgotten; yet it ought to rank among the first and foremost of the 19th century productions of the press, for its graceful humour, its lively narrative, its elegant descriptions, its characteristic anecdotes, and its easy unaffected style; not to speak of the very delightful verses scattered over it

Lewis owned considerable property in Jamaica, within four miles of Savanna-la-Mer, or Savanna-la-Mar. Mr. Lewis was the proprietor of the two estates in Jamaica—and he very wisely and humanely determined to visit them himself; to inspect their condition, correct their abuses, calculate their means, arrange their future establishment, and in fact make himself master of that little-understood subject, the nature of a West India estate, with its tribe of overseers, governors, trustees, drivers, doctors, sugar-boilers, book-keepers, slaves, quadroons, oboem 'n, turkies, alligators, kittie-katties, not to mention centipedes, galliwaspes, landcrabs, and musquitoes, all of whom claim a right to the soil, and jointly with his gracious Majesty's Custom-house officers, to no small parts of the profits of the estate; leaving, however, generously to the owner, if he should reside in England, a handsome profit of one pound on each hogshead of sugar; and if he should go to the West Indies, in order to increase his profits, and look after his slaves; the probable chance of the yellow fever or an insurrection of the slaves.

This book importantly gives an insight into conditions and history of slavery in Jamaica.

Regarding his slaves, the author writes:

"The negroes . . . had been praying for a sight of their master year after year; they were in raptures at my arrival. I have suffered no one to be punished, and shown them every possible indulgence during my residence amongst them; and, one and all, they declare themselves perfectly happy and well treated. Yet, previous to my arrival, they made thirty-three hogsheads a-week; in a fortnight after my landing, their product dwindled to twenty-three; during this last week they have managed to make but thirteen. Still they are not ungrateful, they are only selfish; they love me very well, but they love themselves a great deal better; and, to do them justice, I verily believe that every negro on the estate is extremely anxious that all should do their full duty, except himself. My censure, although accompanied with the certainty of their not being punished, is by no means a matter of indifference. If I express myself to be displeased, the whole property is in an uproar; every body is finding fault with every body; nobody that does not represent the shame of neglecting my work, and the ingratitude of vexing me by their ill conduct: and then each individual—having

said so much, and said it so strongly, that he is convinced of its having its full effect in making the others do their duty—thinks himself quite safe and snug in skulking away from his own.

This book possesses three recommendations,—its subject—its writer—and its intrinsic agreeableness. It is one of those works which we would not willingly suffer to pass unnoticed. This journal stands high among works of a similar kind, for grace, lightness, pleasantry, descriptive power, felicity of expression, and conversational fluency and freedom.

1834 publication reformatted for the Kindle; may contain occasional imperfection; original spellings k

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