

V CALENDAR OF
CORRESPONDENCE FROM
WILLIAM MILES, A WEST INDIAN
MERCHANT IN BRISTOL, TO
JOHN THARP, A PLANTER
IN JAMAICA, 1770–1789

EDITED BY
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CORRESPONDENCE OF WILLIAM MILES AND JOHN THARP

INTRODUCTION

There were extensive commercial connections between Bristol and the West Indies in the eighteenth century. Some Bristol merchants spent the early part of their careers in the Caribbean and a good many later owned plantations there. Bristolians were engaged in the direct and triangular trades, sending supplies, provisions and slaves to the West Indies and bringing back sugar and other tropical produce. By the mid-eighteenth century Bristol, with twenty sugar refineries at work, was the leading English sugar market after London. Trade with Jamaica dominated Bristol's Caribbean commerce. By the 1770s, half of the 20,000 hogsheads of sugar arriving at Bristol each year came from Jamaica and between forty and sixty ships entered Bristol annually from the same source – a larger number of entries to the port than from any other colony or island in the New World.¹

One of the best primary sources on the Bristol-Jamaica trade consists of letters written between 1770 and 1789 by William Miles, a leading West Indian merchant in Bristol, to John Tharp, an important plantation owner in Jamaica. These letters form part of the Tharp Family Papers in the Chippenham Estate Records at the County Record Office, Cambridge. There are fifty-five letters altogether. The return letters from Tharp to Miles apparently no longer survive.² The correspondence written by Miles to Tharp is

¹ This paragraph is based on Kenneth Morgan, 'Bristol Merchants and the Colonial Trades, 1748–1783' (Oxford University D.Phil. thesis, 1984), ch.5, which provides a detailed analysis of the Bristol sugar trade in the mid-eighteenth century.

² The references to these letters in the County Record Office, Cambridge are R55/7/122(o)2 for letters between 1770 and 1777 and R55/7/128(b)* for those between 1781 and 1789. There are apparently no further letters from William Miles

calendared here and substantial extracts are quoted in full in order to provide detailed information on commercial practice in the Bristol-Jamaica trade in the latter half of the eighteenth century. A note on the methods used in preparing the calendar and in transcribing extracts from the letters is given at the end of this introduction. It may be useful, as a prelude, to sketch the biographies of Miles and Tharp and to offer some comments on business matters which are of particular interest in the letters.

William Miles was born in Ledbury, Herefordshire, in 1728. He was apprenticed in Bristol in 1742 and became a burgess of the city in 1749.³ According to a story, possibly apocryphal, he was the archetype of the self-made merchant. Arriving at Bristol with just three halfpence in his pocket, he travelled in a Jamaican merchant-man and, little by little, managed to profit by buying and selling casks of sugar and articles that were in demand in Jamaica. With these savings, so the story goes, he was able to amass sufficient capital to become a merchant in Bristol.⁴ We do not know how much of this tale is true; but a contemporary comment reveals that in 1752 Miles 'went as a kind of supercargoe to & from Jamaica & that for a course of years, at length became a merchant & settled in Bristol, & became immensely rich.'⁵ Miles was certainly acting as a sugar merchant in Bristol by 1764 and by the 1770s he was one of the two leading sugar importers in the city.⁶ His status as a merchant led to his becoming President of the Bristol West India Club in 1782. He was also a member of the Bristol Common Council from 1766 to 1803, mayor of the city in 1780, and Warden of the Society of Merchant Venturers in 1789–1790. He had married into a Clifton family in 1766 and was the father of seven children. He became so wealthy that he was able to hand his son, Philip John, a cheque for £100,000 when the latter married in 1795. William Miles died in 1803 but the Miles family maintained prominent trading and banking interests in Bristol for many years into the nineteenth century.⁷

in the collection R55/7 or in the additional deposits of material in the Chippenham Estate Records. There are, however, some papers relating to Miles' interests in the letters of his son Philip John Miles in R55/7/128(c), 6–7.

³ *The Trade of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. W.E. Minchinton (Bristol Record Soc., xx, 1957), p.59.

⁴ H.R. Fox Bourne, *English Merchants* (2 vols., London, 1866), II, pp.16–17.

⁵ Avon County Reference Library, Extracts from the Diaries of William Dyer, I, p.20.

⁶ Morgan, 'Bristol Merchants and the Colonial Trades, 1748–1783', pp.352, 363.

⁷ Fox Bourne, *English Merchants*, II, p.17; A.B. Beavan, *Bristol Lists: Municipal and Miscellaneous* (Bristol, 1899), p.302; C.H. Cave, *A History of Banking in Bristol from 1750 to 1899* (Bristol, 1899), pp.244–245. This last source provides a pedigree of the Miles family.

John Tharp, by contrast, was born in 1744 into a family owning a plantation in Hanover parish, Jamaica. He was sent to England to be educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge, but returned to Jamaica in the 1760s. After his marriage in 1766 he soon began to manage sugar estates on the north side of the island. His central estate was called Good Hope, but he acquired others at regular intervals over the next thirty-five years. Tharp gave vigorous attention to plantation affairs; he became the father of five legitimate and two illegitimate children; he was a member of the House of Assembly in Jamaica from 1772 to 1774; and he later held other public positions in both Jamaica and England. Tharp's first wife died in 1780 and, after ten years as a widower suffering from gout, he planned to retire to England and leave his sons to run the Jamaican properties. In 1792 his Good Hope, Covey, Wales, Lansquinet, Pantre Pant, Potosi, Windsor Pen, Top Hill Pen and Spring Castle estates were together valued at £821,530 in Jamaican currency.⁸ In the same year Tharp bought a 6,000 acre estate, Chippenham Park, in Cambridgeshire, England, for £40,691. He remarried in 1794 but, after this marriage ended in separation, he returned to Good Hope in 1802 and remained there until his death in 1804. By that time Tharp was the largest single proprietor of estates in Jamaica. He owned 3,000 slaves on seven large sugar plantations, which covered virtually all the riverside land in Trelawny parish plus land on the south side of the island. In England he owned his Cambridgeshire estate and an elegant house in Portland Place, London. After his death his estates owed over £100,000 to Bristol merchants.⁹

So much for biographical details; what of the business matters discussed in the letters written by Miles to Tharp? The correspondence clearly illustrates the working of the commission trade with the West Indies. In accordance with this system, Tharp shipped his sugar to Miles who was paid a 2½ per cent commission on sales in return for selling the sugar and for carrying out additional services. A variety of tasks were undertaken by the Bristol merchant. Miles purchased miscellaneous supplies in Bristol for Tharp including stills for making rum and copper worms for boiling sugar.¹⁰ He corresponded with Cork merchants who added provisions to the outward cargoes for Jamaica.¹¹ He dispatched his own ships to

⁸ County Record Office, Cambridge, Tharp Family Papers, R84/29, Chippenham Estate Records.

⁹ This sketch of Tharp's life is based on A.E. Furness, *The Tharp Estates in Jamaica* (unpublished study deposited at the County Record Office, Cambridge, n.d.) and Patrick J. Tenison, *Good Hope, Jamaica* (Jamaica, 1971).

¹⁰ See nos. 4, 41.

¹¹ See nos. 2, 3, 4, 19, 40.

carry Tharp's goods between Bristol and Jamaican harbours such as Martha Brae, Lucea and Morant.¹² He insured cargoes for Tharp (for an extra $\frac{1}{2}$ per cent commission) and was keen to receive firm written instructions on this matter.¹³ He acted as quasi-banker by accepting bills of exchange drawn on him by Tharp, including some substantial bills for cargoes of slaves.¹⁴ He forwarded sale prices at Bristol for sugar, logwood, pimento and other commodities from the Caribbean.¹⁵ He suggested that adding stone lime to temper sugar and keeping curing houses as hot as possible would improve the quality of sugar produced by Tharp.¹⁶ His business services were further enhanced by friendship with Tharp and by visits to Bristol from members of the Tharp family and mutual friends living in Jamaica.¹⁷

The correspondence calendared below also throws light on the financial affairs of Miles and Tharp. Miles tried to secure sugar consignments and to increase his profits by making loans at interest to Tharp and other planters. But Miles continually had to endure 'that malignant organism, a West-India debt', whereby planters fell into arrears through a combination of personal extravagance, poor plantation management, exorbitant annuities on existing estates, the purchase of slaves and new estates, the need to cope with debts inherited from previous generations, and falling incomes coupled with rising costs.¹⁸ Miles advanced a great deal of money to planters in Jamaica but persistently found that they became indebted to him, often for thousands of pounds.¹⁹ Tharp's current account alone was debited by Miles for over £4,000 in 1774 and for £8,500 in 1782.²⁰ In addition, Miles incurred large financial obligations as guarantor for four vessels that delivered slaves to planters in Jamaica and he was obliged to protest many bills of exchange, including one set amounting to £20,000.²¹ There was one large debt in particular that caused Miles much anxiety. In 1780 Jamaica was hit by two hurricanes and the estates of Edward Chambers, an uncle of John Tharp, were devastated. Chambers died in the same year and Miles, who held a mortgage on these properties, was left with debts of more than £28,000 on the estates.²² These liabilities were apparently increased by a further

¹² See nos. 14, 18, 24, 25, 32, 40, 51, 52.

¹³ See nos. 3, 20, 50.

¹⁴ See nos. 29, 32, 35, 39.

¹⁵ See nos. 22, 24.

¹⁶ See nos. 3, 36, 45.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ These aspects of West-India finance are analysed in Richard Pares, *A West-India Fortune* (London, 1950), pp.239–292. The phrase I have quoted can be found on p.239.

¹⁹ See nos. 17, 19, 20, 42, 45, 47, 49, 53, 55.

²⁰ See nos. 8, 34.

²¹ See nos. 8, 10, 15, 30, 32, 39, 41.

²² See nos. 19, 21, 22.

£22,000 during the next six years.²³ Miles saw these debts as a millstone around his neck; he even felt that they were the cause of a long illness he had experienced.²⁴ He had difficulty in satisfying the annuitants on Chambers' properties, but in 1789 he was at least able to foreclose his mortgage on the estates.²⁵

The problems of transatlantic shipping in the final years of the American War of Independence and the nature of the Bristol sugar market are also illuminated by Miles' letters to Tharp. The French and Spanish fleets were prowling in the mouth of the English Channel for much of 1781 and 1782 and the Royal Navy had to defend Jamaica at the Battle of the Saints in the Spring of 1782.²⁶ In such circumstances, Miles considered that it was foolhardy for planters such as Tharp to send sugar home with unknown masters and vessels.²⁷ The crucial decision for Miles as a shipowner in these years was whether or not to send his vessels with convoy protection. He clearly felt in a dilemma:

If I send out a ship to run it . . . that don't answer, because it does not meet with the approbation of the planters to risque their property in running ships. If it goes with convoy, then it is not in my power to hasten the arrivals of the ships, under such convoy, and in that case [they] are always to late.²⁸

After Bristol shipowners became frustrated by convoy delays and found that large fleets were being attacked by enemy privateers, Miles gambled by instructing Tharp to insure the *Lord North* and the *Eagle* to 'run it' home without a convoy.²⁹ But in 1781 and 1782 Miles lost five ships either through shipwreck or capture, which led him to adopt a more cautious strategy.³⁰ Thus he instructed Tharp to send home a well-armed ship like the *Lord North* as a runner but to dispatch his other ships with a convoy,³¹ and, because of recent ship losses, he fully insured all these vessels.³²

As for the Bristol sugar market, the correspondence in the calendar suggests reasons for seasonal and yearly price fluctuations. Thus falling sugar prices in London at times of high imports were likely to induce lower prices at Bristol.³³ Poor sugar prices at Bristol could occur when the West India fleet arrived en masse,³⁴

²³ See no. 45.

²⁴ See no. 51.

²⁵ See nos. 39, 54. Further material on Edward Chambers can be found in the County Record Office, Cambridge, Tharp Family Papers, R84/44, Chippenham Estate Records.

²⁶ See nos. 21, 29, 30.

²⁷ See nos. 20, 21.

²⁸ See no. 29.

²⁹ See no. 23.

³⁰ See nos. 23, 28, 32, 34.

³¹ See no. 34.

³² See no. 35.

³³ See no. 12.

³⁴ See nos. 13, 16.

while good prices could result from the arrival of small sugar cargoes at an understocked market.³⁵ The greatest fluctuation in such prices occurred in wartime. For most of the American War of Independence sugar prices increased rapidly but also widened in range from top to bottom.³⁶ High sugar prices led to a fall in consumption by 1781.³⁷ This in turn reduced the number of sugar refineries in operation in the city; it led to slow sales; and it caused speculators to invest in government securities rather than in the purchase of sugar.³⁸ These factors plus the importation into Bristol of large amounts of foreign sugar from Tortola and St. Thomas led to fall in prices in 1782.³⁹ In this situation Miles found that the high costs of freight and sugar duties prohibited any attempts to undercut the prices offered by rival commission agents in Bristol.⁴⁰ The low prices persisted into 1783, when peace was declared, but Miles felt that more certain trading conditions after the cessation of hostilities would remedy the situation.⁴¹

The letters written by Miles to Tharp are most useful for providing details on the West India commission trade and the business problems encountered by a major shipowner and sugar factor in Bristol, but it is hoped that historians will find that they include other items of interest. In compiling the calendar I have identified the major people mentioned in the letters. All footnote comments where authorities are not cited are based on internal evidence in the letters. In extracts quoted in full, the original spelling and abbreviations are maintained; punctuation is also left as in the manuscripts except for the occasional modernisation where the meaning would otherwise have been unclear. Capitalisation is in accordance with modern practice. All prices mentioned, unless otherwise stated, are in sterling, using old shillings and pence. Any inserted words in the calendar and in the quoted extracts are given in square brackets.

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³⁵ See no. 5.

³⁶ Prices which substantiate this point are presented and analysed in Morgan, 'Bristol Merchants and the Colonial Trades, 1748-1783', pp.280-282.

³⁷ See no. 19.

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ See nos. 32, 34.

⁴⁰ See no. 34.

⁴¹ See no. 35.

CALENDAR OF CORRESPONDENCE

1. 7 OCTOBER 1770

Miles informs Tharp about goods to be shipped to him on the *Swan*. He comments on sugar received from Tharp:

I ask 38/6 pc for your $\overset{H}{\cancel{\text{£T}}}$, but for the $\overset{V}{\cancel{\text{£T}}}$ they are very bad indeed, of the colour & consistence of thick tar. I have sold some of them for 22/6 [but] the best cannot bring 34/ unless a favorable turn happens.

Miles is worried that war with Spain is likely to occur and that the Spanish intend to attack the north side of Jamaica.⁴²

2. 25 JANUARY 1771

Hopes that Tharp received all his goods safely on the *Swan*. Encloses sales of 35 hogsheads of Tharp's sugar; the net proceeds amount to £729 6s. 0d. The remaining 25 hogsheads were 'so ordinary that I have not had it in my power to sell them.' Miles refers to provisions sent to Tharp on the *King George*; the invoice and bill of lading for this shipment will be provided by Mr. Gray of Cork. Miles comments that

our sugar market is quite flat and nothing doing, owing to the unexpected turn to our publick affairs, the Spanish Court having signed a disavowall by their ambassador of the proceeding of their Governor in taking Falkland island, which they are ready to restore in the same condition as when it was taken.⁴³

Miles hopes that Tharp will have a good sugar crop.

3. 23 AUGUST 1771

Notes that the *Swan* arrived 'before your advice for to make £500

⁴² There was an Anglo-Spanish dispute in 1770 over claims to the Falkland Islands. War seemed likely by the summer of that year, but was averted when the Spanish failed to gain French support. See Paul Langford, *Modern British Foreign Policy: The Eighteenth Century, 1688–1815* (London, 1976), pp.159–160.

⁴³ See note to letter 1.

insurance on your sugar by her came to my hands, by which event your insurance was saved.' Complains that last year's sugars from Tharp were very green and that those from the Wales estate were particularly bad – so bad that Miles has had difficulty in selling them. Mentions that 'your brother Brissett' is here with 'your sister, their daughter and Miss Campbell, sister to J. Campbell of Salt Spring' for nearly two months to take the Hotwell water. Three visitors, together with 'Mr. Lamb⁴⁴ and his lady', have dined with Miles. Miles comments on sugar sales:

I have this year sold 180 hhds of Batchelors Hall & Richmond sugar for upwards of 40/ pc round, nearly 40/6. The tierce of sugar you mention & desire me to take notice of is not so good as about 7 hhds in the parcell of Wales sugar this year, which if I sold separate might yield 42/, but the parcell together cannot yield more than 37/6 together, many being very moist & ordinary. Take a lesson from Lamb's method of curing and you will do well.

Miles mentions that 49 hogsheads and 2 tierces of sugar have been received in good order from the *Swan*. He notes that Captain Chubb has bought a little horse for Tharp's son. Miles will get supplies ready and send the *Swan* to Cork for provisions. He adds that 'Mr. Gray of Cork has declined all business, but I will direct Mr. [Richard] Hare of Cork, the person I have long dealt with, to supply you with the best provisions that can be procured.' Miles comments that he will not insure any goods ordered by Tharp from Bristol and Cork unless he receives specific orders. The letter ends with a plea for firmer written instructions about making insurance.

4. 28 SEPTEMBER 1771

Tharp's order for plantation supplies has arrived too late for goods to be dispatched on the *Swan*. Miles will try to procure a still and worm ordered by Tharp even though it 'will take up a great deal of time to get it well manufactured.' Miles refers to sales of 25 hogsheads of sugar from the *Swan*; the net proceeds are £348 5s. 11d. He mentions that sundries shipped on the *Swan*, John Chubb master, for Martha Brae amount to £221 0s. 10d. He again notes that provisions will be shipped by Richard Hare of Cork who 'has served me well for twenty years.' Miles concludes by remarking that

If you can dispatch Chubb very early in next year, there is a

⁴⁴ Lamb managed one of Tharp's sugar estates.

likelihood of sugar yielding a good price. I am now building a very fine snow of about 450 hhds for Capt. Chubb that will be ready for him on his return home, and if you think proper you may hold $\frac{1}{4}$ part of her. She will cost to sea about £3,200. I have wrote Harbart Newton Jarrett Esqr. and made him a like offer. I shall hold the other half. I shall not engage with any other persons till I hear from you both on this head.

5. 3 DECEMBER 1771

Refers to sales of 49 hogsheads and 2 tierces of Tharp's sugar from the *Swan*; the net proceeds are £797 4s. 6d. Miles considers this a good sale, but the short crops made in the Windward Islands 'has made a short import, and by this means an advance in price, so that there is now a good appearance of sugars yielding a good price in next year as all must be consumed, or nearly, before new can arrive.' Notes that Mr. Lamb's sugars turned out well and might fetch '43/ pc round.'

6. 24 DECEMBER 1771

Refers to sundries to be shipped to Tharp on the *Eagle*, John Smyth master, for Jamaica; the goods cost £57 16s. 3d. These commodities complement those sent on the *Swan*, so Miles has asked Captain Chubb to assist Captain Smyth with their delivery. Mentions goods supplied to a William McDonald. Considers that 'early sugars will certainly sell well as everything will sell before new can arrive.'

7. 26 OCTOBER 1772

Refers to sales of 40 hogsheads and 10 tierces of Tharp's sugar from the *Swan*; the net proceeds are £1,823 1s. 5d. Notes that goods shipped on the new ship *Sally*, John Chubb master, for Martha Brae amount to £298 12s. 7d. Tharp has a one-eighth share in this vessel. Miles needs to know whether Tharp wants to insure his share of the ship in the future. He hopes that the *Sally* will make two voyages next year, for 'we must keep her employd now she is good [so] that we may make her earn a little money,' He adds that 'there is no knowing as yet what the new ship will cost,' but he will keep Tharp informed about the matter. Turning to a different subject, Miles states that Mr. [William] Blake⁴⁵ 'has

⁴⁵ The brother-in-law of John Tharp. Blake, who was often short of money, mortgaged Deans Valley estate to Tharp in 1770. See Furness, *The Tharp Estates in Jamaica* ch. I, pp.8-9.

drawn upon me in your favour for £1,000 stg.; the sugars he has shipped may net about £620. People in general draw for so much more than their goods can net that there is no such thing as being able to accommodate their wants. As it is in your favor I believe I must depend upon you for payment of the balance that will be due to me.

A postscript notes that 'there has been distressfull times in London; indeed, many worthy familes [have been] ruined.'⁴⁶

8. 18 MAY 1774

Refers to Tharp's account current made up to 31 March 1774, when the balance owed to Miles was £4,346 5s. 7d. Miles has returned one of Mr. Blake's bills protested in Tharp's favour for £265 13s. 4d. Miles says this occurred because he was unable to pay the bill while his sugars remained unsold. Miles awaits the quick arrival of the *Sally* for he hopes 'to do handsomely by her this year.' He adds that 'great crops of sugar are expected from all our islands. The buyers know it & expect it to be very cheap, to tempt them to buy, which I am fearfull will greatly lessen the net proceeds.'

9. 9 JUNE 1774

Mentions that Tharp's son and Mr. [Edward] Chambers'⁴⁷ children are staying at London with a Mrs. Roberts. Miles has entrusted Tharp's order for a still and head to a coppersmith. Following Tharp's orders, Miles has insured 300 hogsheads of sugar sent on the *Sally* for the sum of £3,000. The cost of insurance is £135 13s. 0d. Miles considers that reports of very wet weather 'will lessen your crops on the North side, as well as hurt the quality of the sugar.'

10. 4 JULY 1774

Has received 210 hogsheads and 40 tierces of Tharp's sugar, in good order. Comments on the quality of sugar received from different plantations:

Many of Wales & Good Hope [are] very brown but strong.
Many of Lambskinnot⁴⁸ wants more strength. Try Bristol stone

⁴⁶ A reference to the severe credit crisis in London in 1772. See Richard B. Sheridan, 'The British Credit Crisis of 1772 and the American Colonies', *Journal of Economic History*, xx (1960), pp.161-186.

⁴⁷ An uncle of John Tharp. Furness, *The Tharp Estates in Jamaica*, ch.2, p.2.

⁴⁸ A misspelling of Lansquinet estate.

lime and [add] more fire to boil it off quicker. These remarks I submit to your judgment as many of Lambskinnot sugars are tough and not cured. This got over would make them fine sugars indeed.

Miles states that he does not want to be in 'advance' to Jamaicans for large sums of money; last year he had to 'protest many thousand pounds and that [I] must do to make and keep myself independent.'

11. 11 JULY 1774

Has insured 200 hogsheads of Tharp's sugar sent on the *Swan*, John Chambers master, for Bristol for the sum of £2,000. The cost of insurance is £90 13s. Od. Miles will deal with Tharp's memorandum for supplies. He congratulates Tharp for giving quick dispatch to the *Sally* and the *Swan*.

12. 15 JULY 1774

The *Alsop*, Captain Harvey master, has arrived at Bristol and brought a bill of lading for 13 hogsheads of Tharp's sugar. Miles mentions his luck in selling sugars brought by the *Sally* for 'the London market has been falling, which has affected this . . . [a] full 2/ pc and I greatly fear will fall 2 to 3/ pc more; for the import into England must be great and that all the buyers know.' Miles wishes that the annuities Messrs. Mure, Son & Atkinson⁴⁹ owe Tharp could be paid off. He suggests that Long, Drake & Long⁵⁰ would prove suitable London correspondents for Tharp. He hopes that Tharp will ship some sugar to him this year on the new ship *Anna Maria*, James Turner master. Miles will accept bills from Mr. Blake for £1,000, but for no more. He notes that Blake's sugars last year were poor in quality and that Tharp should 'put him in the way of giving his sugars a good body.' Nevertheless, he has sold Blake's sugars at a higher price than they would fetch in London.

13. 20 SEPTEMBER 1774

Miles has received 166 hogsheads of Tharp's sugar from the *Swan*. He reports that the *Anna Maria* has been wrecked near Cornwall on her homeward voyage. He has sent Captain Chubb and another man to see what can be salvaged. Miles also reports the loss of the

⁴⁹ Merchants, I Fox Ordinary Court, Nicholas Lane, London. Kent's *London Directory* (1774), p.126.

⁵⁰ Merchants, 17 Bishopsgate Street, London. *ibid.*, p.112.

Elizabeth on the Welsh coast en route from Bristol to Cork to collect provisions. The master, mate, pilot and 23 others have drowned. There were possibly 500 hogsheads of sugar on board, but only about 120 hogsheads were insured. Miles comments that

to have two such fine ships destroy'd, by which I suffer severely, and to have all my money in Jamaica, is such an affliction upon me I can scarce support. Add to that the great glut of sugars and very slow sale: that drives me almost mad. I have been greedy by keeping my sugars at to high a price; now can't sell at any price. The London market is powering in sugar upon us bought there at 24 to 30/ pc. Your bills I must and will pay, and Mr. Blake I have mostly honord seeing many are in your favor . . . I must drop two thirds of my correspondents or be ruined. There is no going on to advance. People will soon have enough to do to sell, as the immense quantity made overstock every market. I have been very fortunate indeed in the sale of yours.

14. 7 OCTOBER 1774

Miles has chartered the *Swan* to Grenada and from thence to Martha Brae. The master, John Chambers, has instructions to secure a return cargo from Tharp and other friends of Miles in Jamaica. Miles considers that 'prime sugar to arrive early may do, but what will be done with the increased quantities of sugar more than can be consumed I am at a loss to know. The sugar market here [is] exceeding [ly] bad, the London market much worse.' Miles mentions that the *Anna Maria* was lost through lack of care by those on board. The charges incurred in dealing with the wreck will cost more than the value of the sugar saved. Miles requests early advice about making insurance on sugar cargoes and advises Tharp to insure all the sugar he ships. He comments, in relation to this, that 'there was an account of the *Anna Maria* loss 16 days before your letter came to hand.' He states that he can no longer assist Mr. Blake and that he has 'no wish to extend but lessen my commission business. To have a large capital and to have it all out in Jamaica is to much.' Tharp has sent 20 hogsheads of sugar to Craig & Morrell of Philadelphia; the net proceeds are to be remitted to Miles. Miles refers to sales of 210 hogsheads and 40 tierces of sugar from the *Sally*; the net proceeds are £4,329 2s. 0d. Some hogsheads sold were very heavy so they were weighed and the brokers recommended that the buyers, Edward Garlick & Co.,⁵¹ should be allowed more tare⁵² than in the sale. Refers to

⁵¹ Sugar refiners, 7 Counterslip, Bristol. Sketchley's *Bristol Directory* (1775), p.35.

⁵² This is the difference between the gross weight and the net weight of a cask.

sundries shipped on the *Sally*, John Chubb master, for Martha Brae, amounting to £1,175 16s. 2d., on which £1,070 is insured. Also refers to 34 hogsheads of sugar sold from the *Swan*; the net proceeds are £648 5s. 8d.

15. 20 NOVEMBER 1774

The *Andalusia*, carrying 12 hogsheads of Tharp's sugar, has put in at Marblehead, near Boston, to be condemned. The sugar was transferred to the *General Wolfe*, Hugh Hill master, and has now reached Bristol. Miles notes that Mr. Blake will soon owe him between £1,200 and £1,500 'yet many more of his bills has appeared which I cannot pay.' Miles again mentions the loss of the *Anna Maria*. He considers that if the ship had sailed a fortnight or month sooner it might have avoided bad weather. He comments that

the sugar market in London is terrible. From the prices ordinary and bad sugars are selling at there, I suppose many hundred hhds will not net more than from £8 to £10 p hhd. I have some will not yield 27/ pc, so that you see how essential it will be to make fine sugars. All your sugars of this year have a noble grain which I assure you has been much in your favor.'

Miles advises Tharp to keep his curing houses as hot as possible when the sugars are curing, so that the treacle will run off freely and give colour to the sugar. He mentions that reputable Bristol sugar bakers consider that damp air at night impairs the quality of the sugar produced. He gives advice about fitting hoops and staves into sugar hogsheads. Miles finally states that he has been 'drawn upon so unmercifully' by people in Jamaica that he will be 'obliged to protest very near £20,000.'

16. 5 DECEMBER 1774

Refers to sales of 13 hogsheads of Tharp's sugar from the *Alsop*; the net proceeds are £205 0s. 6d. Comments that 'sugars are selling in London at 24 to 30/ pc. The market there [is] quite glutted with low & brown sugar, which has lowered this market prodigiously.'

17. 26 JUNE 1777

Miles is recovering from a severe illness. He includes some routine information about settling a debt for the Old Hope estate. He notes that the *Commerce* is entirely owned by him and that it is insured for a reasonable sum even though it is an unarmed vessel. This is because insurers know 'all masters in defenceless vessels

will keep with and not quit their convoy on any acct. To sail singly or without convoy it is otherwise: then an armed vessell has the preference greatly.' Turning to the matter of sterling debts in Jamaica, Miles states that 'payment should be made so that the person the money is owing to in England should always receive his principal and interest up to the day of payment.' Miles has settled debts owed him by McDonalds & Montague James junior in this manner. Captain Thomas Salmon of Miles' ship *Eagle* has called on Mrs. Reid and son and Mrs. Tharp and her children in London. Miles has arranged two sets of insurance for Tharp. He has paid £244 9s. 0d. to insure £1,500 on 110 hogsheads of sugar and 40 puncheons of rum on the *Commerce*, John Ardis master, for London. He has also paid £358 4s. 0d. to insure £2,200 on 220 hogsheads of sugar on the *Good Hope*, John Munt master, for Bristol. A return of 7 per cent will be paid on these premiums if the vessels arrive safely. Miles provides routine material about a bond of Sir Charles Price and bills of exchange involving Mr. Chambers and a Mr. Vernon. 210 hogsheads of Chambers' sugar has recently arrived at Bristol. Miles concludes by noting that his wife has given birth to a baby boy.

18. 8 DECEMBER 1777

Goods to the value of £250 4s. 6d. plus provisions from Cork will be shipped to Tharp on the *Good Hope*, John Munt master, for Martha Brae. Notes that the 'sugar market [is] quite at a stand. [There is] little sold of the quantity imported in the last fleet. Sugar has fallen in price in London 7/ pc.'

19. 10 MARCH 1781

The *Good Hope* and the *Sally* and 35 other Bristol ships were at Cork on 20 February 'where several of them had been waiting for the convoy almost four months.' The *Lord North* will sail for Cork in about ten days to take in provision orders. Refers to the deaths of Mrs. Tharp and Mr. Chambers. Miles comments on Chambers' affairs:

I believe you will find it absolutely necessary for you to take possession of the estates for me as mortgagee to prevent the creditors tearing it to pieces. How Mr. Chambers could run himself so much in debt when I turn over to my books to see the enormous sums I have from time to time paid on his account surprizes me.

Tharp, George Brissett and Miles are executors for Chambers' property in Jamaica. The *Lord North* has damaged some of her

cargo in bad weather. Refers to sales of 60 hogsheads of sugar from the Deans Valley estate, the property of William Blake. These sugars arrived on the *Bristol*; the net proceeds are £1,390 19s. 1d. Miles has sent supplies to Jamaica and has referred complaints about provisions to Cuthbert & Hare of Cork. He has dismissed John Webb as master of the *Lord North* for being too generous with wages to crew members picked up in the Caribbean: 'to give 35 guineas to his runners home at a time when the whole of the ships to this port only give from 10 to 15 guineas p man by the run has been ruin to his owners.' Miles is thinking of sending the *Lord North*, the *Eagle* and the *Mary* without convoy so that Tharp can receive supplies in good time. He comments on the Bristol sugar market:

I have not sold one hhd of your sugar yet. Your ~~£~~[£] are very brown; your casks not so heavy as usual. All I shall be able to make of your sugar more than 55/ will go in aid of keeping. The consumption has lessened so much that the advance is little indeed compared with my ideas taking in the effects of the hurricane. The fact is, we used to have 18 to 22 sugar houses fully at work; now there is not as much refin'd as eight of those houses could do if fully worked. This occasions a slow and heavy sale and the advance nothing comparatively speaking. Another thing operates against it. The speculators that had money all employ it in government security's. Another thing [is that] all our sugar bakers agreed and would not buy a cask of sugar unless the seller consented for the casks to be tared. I stood out against that till I was deserted and left alone, and by the sugar bakers perseverance I was obliged to comply or keep all my sugar. That custom now being introduced it will ever be so. The buyers have been aiming to effect this for these twelve years past.

Miles notes that [Edward] Knowles will owe him £10,000 when he makes up his account. He has sent 200 guineas to Tharp, as requested. Captain Thomas Trenham of London has drawn on Miles for £500 for Tharp's one-eighth part of the *Neptune*. Tharp wants his account kept separate from that of Mr. Blake. Miles thinks Captain Chubb is foolhardy in not leaving the command of the *Sally* for that of the *Lord North* 'as the chance of prizes is something. Salmon in my ship *Eagle* shared upwards of £500 Stg. prize money for the prize he took going out last voyage.' Miles refers to the will of Edward Chambers and suggests that Mrs. Chambers should live frugally in England until the financial position of her deceased husband's estate improves. Miles would like to help the widow and her children, but he wants to avoid

further expense on Chambers' property in Jamaica. Miles tells Tharp that he cannot get him a plumber, blacksmith or coppersmith because 'the Navy & Army take all the young and unsettled people.' He refers to money owed him by the widow of Montague James. Miles had originally lent this money 'after the misfortunes that befel Serocold & Jackson.'⁵³ He expects a short sugar crop this year because of the hurricane, but he hopes that sugar prices will not fall too much. He comments that 'your account of Montague James and William Henry Ricketts is dreadfull. I thought J.R. James's debt to me had been secured and was to be paid here on the sale of an estate to Fowler, Vaughan & Co.'⁵⁴ Miles notes the expense of damage done by the hurricane to Chambers' property. The only solution seems to be for Tharp to take possession of the property for Miles as mortgagee. Miles has not yet sold any of Tharp's recent consignments of sugar but, by keeping it back, he thinks he might gain from 2/ to 4/ per hundredweight on this occasion.

20. 4 JULY 1781

Refers to sale of 36 hogsheads of Tharp's sugars from the *Good Hope* and 152 hogsheads from the *Baltic Merchant*; the respective net proceeds are £1,020 10s. 7d. and £4,285 11s. 11d. Mentions that John Coghlan⁵⁵ wants to send a slave vessel to the Gold Coast and from thence to Martha Brae. Miles notes that he is mayor of Bristol until 29 September 1781 and that his correspondence is therefore not so punctual as usual. Miles briefly refers to his ships the *Sally*, the *Good Hope*, the *Mary* and the *Eagle*, all of which are engaged in the Bristol-Jamaica trade. He also mentions several ships which have arrived at Bristol from Jamaica and sympathises with friends in Jamaica who shipped sugar on the missing *Adventure*. He again emphasises the need for clear orders about insurance in wartime. He refers to money owed him from Jamaica by Mr. Knowles, Mr. [Thomas] Adlam and the deceased Edward Chambers. He mentions that sugar duties are nearly 11s. 9d. per hundredweight.⁵⁶ On shipping sugar he considers that

⁵³ Merchants, 2 Love Lane, Eastcheap, London. Kent's *London Directory* (1781), p.153.

⁵⁴ Probably John Fowler, merchant. Wine Street, Bristol, and Richard Vaughan & Co., linen merchants, Small Street, Bristol. Bailey's *Western and Midland Directory*. . . (Birmingham, 1783).

⁵⁵ Merchant, 24 Crutched Friars, London. Kent's *London Directory* (1781), p.41.

⁵⁶ The duty on muscovado sugar for home consumption was raised from 6s. 7½d. per cwt., set in 1779, to 11s. 8½d. in 1781. Lowell Joseph Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833: A Study in Social and Economic History* (London, 1928), p.164.

upon recollection you and everybody else will find that shipping your goods upon precarious bottoms seldom answer. In the present circumstances of tryall you will experience a loss on your goods p *Adventure* and *Lion*. I promise you I would prefer keeping my crop a year round rather than ship my goods on ships and with masters I know nothing off.

Miles hopes to settle Chambers' Jamaican affairs. He hoped Sir John Taylor would persuade his brother Simon to buy Prosper estate, but the brothers declined because of the uncertain wartime conditions. Miles is trying to settle a transaction between Chambers and Mr. [John] Wedderburn⁵⁷ about a bill sent to the latter by John Parkinson.

21. 18 AUGUST 1781

Expresses pleasure that the *Sally* and the *Good Hope* have arrived safely in Jamaica, but explains that, on this occasion, he did not send these ships to Cork for provisions because

those ships might not have had time to do it before the convoy sailed, by that means might have gone light, and at [the] same time not have carried your provision; for the convoy was given out to sail the first wind after the 1st January when in truth it did not sail until 22^d Feby.

Notes that

the unfortunate *Lion* on which you shipt twenty hh'ds of your sugar will not be the only loss you have met with by shipping on strange ships and masters that are little known; for the *Adventure* on whom you had twenty hh'ds more of your sugar is taken, the *Saint George* did arrive, which was next to a miracle, for there was such a set of poor starved wretches on board when she arrived that the risque was well worth 70 pr cent. You might at that time have had the *Eagle* or *Mary* to have dispatched with that convoy; ships and masters that you might have depended upon. The loss must be felt severely by those vessels, not having an order to do one single shilling insurance on either of them.

Commiserates with the problem of poor crops caused by dry weather on the north side of Jamaica. Hopes that the *Lord North* arrived on time with Tharp's provisions. Thanks Tharp for making up the breach between Miles and a Mr. Atherton. Miles is uncertain what to do about Chambers' affairs; but he is unwilling

⁵⁷ A London Merchant. Furness, *The Tharp Estates in Jamaica*, ch. I, pp.5-6.

to pay any more debts on Chambers' behalf. Notes that Chambers' account with him on 31 March 1780 was £28,224 6s. 2d. By 30 June 1781 Miles was owed an extra £2,101 5s. 2d. Mentions other people who have claims on Chambers' estates and hopes money can be raised by selling some of the estates. States that Tharp has shipped 40 hogsheads of sugar on the *Mary*, Abraham Frizwell master, for Bristol without insurance. Miles has insured £2,800 on 140 hogsheads of Tharp's sugar on the *Good Hope*, John Munt master, for Bristol; the cost is £455 14s 0d. He has also insured £2,520 on 120 hogsheads of sugar on the *Sally*, John Chubb master, for Bristol; the cost is £410 4s. 0d. Hopes he did not injure Mr. Stogdon when he sent protested bills to Adlam to recover. Fears that Chambers' property will not pay the debts owed on it. Thomas James has been appointed to deal with the property. Refers further to Chambers' will, his property in Jamaica, and a bill sent to John Wedderburn by John Parkinson.

I note your opinion of the next years crop, wishing me to send my ships out early, or they may go again light the next year. Heaven send them to arrive safe, being at this moment in the greatest anxiety for the whole of the fleet, having had expresses that the combined fleets of France and Spain, consisting of 49 sail of the line, being off the chops of the channel, for the purpose of intercepting the Jamaica fleet.⁵⁸

Considers that 'the present are fearful times to enter into business where nothing but ruin surrounds us. The planters should encourage ships of force to run it, for coming in fleets, such as is daily expected & miscarry, merchant and planter may be ruined at once.'

22. 18 OCTOBER 1781

At 30 July 1781 the balance owed by Tharp to Miles was £12,474 3s. 10d. At 30 May 1781 William Blake of Deans Valley estate owed Miles £371 7s. 4d. Notes that all ships from the Windward Islands have arrived safely at Bristol. The French fleet has returned to Brest and the Spanish to Cadiz.⁵⁹ States that 'it is dreadfully severe upon me to have all my ships at Jamaica subject to the hurricane season, and little more than half full.' Refers to a new partnership between Alexander Campbell⁶⁰ and John Whit-

⁵⁸ The threat to England was prevented when the French and Spanish fleets separated on 5 September 1781 and returned to their home ports. Piers Mackesy, *The War for America, 1775-1783* (London, 1964), pp.397-400.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ Tharp's brother-in-law.

taker. Miles has had four bills drawn on him by the latter. These have been noted, but Miles will pay them when they are due. Miles has paid Andrew Martin's bill for £70, for which Tharp acted as endorser. At 4 August 1780 Martin's account showed him debited to Miles for £10 18s 7d. Edward Chambers owed Miles £28,224 6s. 2d. on the principal of a mortgage and £2,773 18s. 8d. on current account at 30 June 1781. There are additional sums owed by Chambers to Miles. Edward Knowles owed a balance of £10,067 7s. 1d. to Miles at 30 May 1781. Miles wants this account sent to Mr. Adlam 'that he may proceed to foreclose the mortgages on both his Mr. Knowles's estates for I can not go on any longer in this way.' Sugar is currently in great demand at Bristol. The prices range from 58/ to 66/ per hundredweight, with very fine sugar selling at 68/. Miles gives current prices in Bristol for rum, cotton, fustic, mahogany, white ginger, pimento and logwood. He notes that £50,000 would nearly buy '£100,000 stock in the 3 p cents bank consol, that the war before the last cost more than the stock; so much for the decline of national credit.' Joseph Brissett has received £200 from Miles. Captain Watson has been given command 'of a fine new three decker belonging to Messrs. Meyler & Maxse⁶¹ called the *Orange Valley*, the first three deck ship ever built here, at least in my time.' Hopes that Tharp can provide a return cargo for the *Lord North* either to Bristol or London, 'for to lay unemployed is sure destruction.'

23. 5 DECEMBER 1781

Provides details about the will of Edward Chambers. Mentions that his ships the *Good Hope*, *Sally* and *Eagle* have arrived at Bristol, but the *Mary* has been wrecked on the Welsh coast with 'everything lost and four of her crew perished, owing entirely to too great a security and anxious to get to an anchor a tide before the rest of the fleet.' Tharp has lost 40 hogsheads of sugar on the *Mary*. The *Lion* has arrived at Bristol with 90 hogsheads of sugar from Jamaica. This sugar 'is in a most miserable wet condition owing to the ships making so much water.' The *Adventure* has been taken. Miles fears that many ships bound from Jamaica to London have miscarried. He mentions that large fleets should not attempt to leave Jamaica in the winter through the Windward passage. Miles suggests that Tharp should put his sugar on board the *Lord North*

and give her 2/ pc more freight to run it than to others unarmed

⁶¹ Richard Meyler and John Maxse, West Indian merchants, The Exchange, Bristol. Bailey's *Western and Midland Directory*. . . (1783).

p fleet, and get my ship *Eagle* to run it with her. Their insurance would be done for at most 3 guineas more than p convoy. It will answer your end and all the gentlemen concerned. Encourage that ship and keep her going, for I would not furnish such another. . . . had you taken up the *Eagle* and *Mary* immediately on their arrival at North Side in January, they might have sailed full ships with the first convoy or have run it. A glorious hand you would have made of it.

Miles complains about sugar ships arriving at Bristol late in the year. He notes that another Jamaica vessel, the *Cyrus*, has been wrecked near Bristol. He considers that

the war now operates so severe upon the trade of this kingdom that it's going to ruin. The best of the gentlemen in trade connected with the islands hardly know what to do: our ships in general little more than half full, wages never so high at any period before.

Miles has accepted more bills from Tharp than the sugar sent via the *Eagle* can net. He has paid Tharp's bill in favour of William Blake. He mentions that he cannot afford to pay any more money on Chambers' estates. He refers to an unnamed ship to be loaded with sugar from various Jamaican estates. 'The enormous advance I am in with the late Mr. Chambers' estates is a mill stone about my neck that will demolish me at last.' Miles mentions various debts on these estates and states that if bills are drawn on him for these properties they will be protested 'until my debt is reduced to the mortgage, then I shall have no objection to lett every creditor be paid as far as it will go.' Notes that the *Comet Packet* has been taken and carried into Boston. Miles will send a small amount of supplies to Campbell & Wedderburn, but he reminds Tharp of the high cost of freight and insurance in wartime. He feels he has suffered because his ships returning home from the Caribbean are only half full. 'This year of all others has been the most destructive to planter, merchant and underwriter, and our publick concerns never so bad as at present. it is impossible the ships can be out early and this cursed war will ruin us all.' Comments on the debts of John Robert James. Writes that John Coghlan has dispatched the *Gascoyne* not to Martha Brae but to Kingston, where negroes were in high demand for high prices. Payment for this cargo is to be made in bills at 9, 12 and 15 months. Coghlan will provide security for this and Phipps & Lane of Kingston will sell the cargo. Includes miscellaneous comments on Tharp's son, sending out provisions, and prices for various commodities in Bristol. Advises Tharp to send sugar hogsheads full because they are liable to break when partially empty.