

Belle: the true story of Dido Belle

by Paula Byrne

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Book review by Sally Ramage (first appeared in *Current Criminal Law*, June 2015)

This book, authored by Paula Byrne, was written in conjunction with the major box-office film of the same title. It stormed the cinemas and has been a much-loved film that endures in popularity to this day. It tells the story of the film *Belle*.



Oil on canvas by Sir Joshua Reynolds of Dido Belle Lindsay and Lady Elizabeth Murray

Miss Dido¹ Belle was the illegitimate mixed-race daughter of a Royal Navy Captain and a slave woman. How did this come about? Captain Lindsay had spent 18 months in the West Indies and Belle's mother Maria might have been one of the slaves captured by Captain Lindsay's ship *MS Trent*².² Dido's mother Maria Belle had been forcibly removed from her home in Africa and taken to the Caribbean to be exploited. She was among millions of people whose lives were dislocated over a period of centuries 'in a trade that took decades

¹ The African name Dido was known to be the name of the legendary founder and first queen of the North African city of Carthage. See Mason, at pg 58.

² Mason, at pg 51.

of military pressure before it came to an end...'³. Her father, Lindsay, took her to the home of his uncle Lord Mansfield, Chief Justice of England and beseeched Lord and Lady Mansfield to take his daughter whose mother had died and whom he was unable to keep aboard any ship he captained. This they did and Dido, as she was called in the Mansfield household, lived as part of Lord Mansfield's family alongside her cousin, another niece of Lord Mansfield whom he cared for because her mother had died and her father did not want her with his new wife and new family.

Lord Mansfield whom both girls called 'Papa' commissioned their portrait and it still hangs in Scone Palace in Scotland: two young ladies, one black and one white, cousins by blood.

Research

Paula Byrne, author of *Belle* acknowledges that for many years others had sought to research Dido Belle and what became of her and this book's bibliography includes the following books and records:

1. Gene Adams, 'Dido Elizabeth Belle, a black girl at Kenwood: an account of a protégée of the first Lord Mansfield', *Camden History Review*, Vol. 12 (1984), pgs 10-14.
2. Charles Daviniere, at www.ancestry.com/
3. Dido Elizabeth Belle, at www.ancestry.com/
4. King, R. (2004) *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
5. Sarah Minney, 'The search for Dido', *History Today*, Vol. 55, Number 10, October 2005.

The book and film and the historical facts

Dido Belle was a person the British (in those times) called a mullato, a term used for the offspring of white and black parents. The author Paula Byrne tells us that it is not clear whether Dido's mother was raped or seduced but that she had been taken on board the ship captained by Lord Mansfield's nephew; had become pregnant, and had been brought to England to give birth to Dido, according to historical records.

The book, *Belle*, largely relates the story of Dido Belle with the backdrop of a case Lord Mansfield was judging at the time. It was the case of the Zong ship which gripped Dido's attention in this book. However, we note that Lord Mansfield had employ Dido as his legal secretary, working in his study at Kenwood House, in which position she became well versed in English law. He apparently gave her a generous allowance which amounted to much more than his servants' wages. The Zong case occupied all of chapter 15 of this book, *Belle*, caselaw reported as *Gregson v Gilbert*.

³ Ibid.

The author, Paula Byrne, relates details of several cases that occupied Lord Mansfield during this time, including chapter ten of this book on the Somerset (sic) case, which was a habeas corpus case of a Negro man named James Sommersett, decided at the King's Bench, London. Lord Mansfield had also decided on a huge number of cases over the years including *R v Staplyton*; *Lockyer v Offley*; *Inkle v Yarico*; *Hayes v Jacques*; *Stanley v Harvey*; and many admiralty cases. Lord Mansfield was a commercial lawyer, not a criminal lawyer.

Intellectual Property Law

As is allowed by Intellectual Property Law, it takes 'poetic licence' in certain respects, making it a lovely 'story' but the facts are not all included and sometimes embellished and in some cases, are left unwritten and silent. The film based on this book, *Belle* by Paula Byrne, also takes poetic license and portrays Dido Belle as planning a marriage to a vicar's son, Davinier, who became a barrister with Lord Mansfield's help and they lived happily ever after.

Lord Mansfield's death and Dido's marriage in London

The truth is that Dido cared for her Papa, Lord Mansfield, until his death, after which time, (she was already 31 years old, an 'old maid' as considered in those times) she married a French caucasian servant; bore five children it is believed, three of whom died at birth, and Dido herself dying quite young at the age of 43 (Lord Mansfield died at age 88). Historical research revealed that Dido Belle did not marry until after Lord Mansfield's death in 1793, (5 years after Lady Mansfield's death in 1788) and despite her handsome trust funds provided by her own father and by Lord Mansfield, her father in every way. Lord and Lady Mansfield enjoyed an exemplarity marriage lasting over four decades and after Lady Mansfield died, Dido cared for Lord Mansfield until his death. Her sister (and cousin by blood) with whom she shared her early life with Lord and Lady Mansfield has long since married a minor member of the nobility and never invited Dido into the bosom of her family. Dido was the dutiful and loving daughter Lord Mansfield raised. She married a white French servant in London and lived in Pimlico where her sons who were lucky enough to survive childbirth, lived, Charles and William Davinier.

Dido's demise after Lord Mansfield died in 1793

It leaves a bitter taste in the mouth to read of Dido's demise after Lord Mansfield died and reveals the still entrenched racism in Britain, then, as now, centuries later. Dido's husband must have inherited all the money left to her by her own father, Captain Lindsay (who had died at sea) and by Lord Mansfield (William Murray, 1st Earl of Mansfield) in his Will and after Dido's death, Davier quickly found a Caucasian partner with whom he fathered a second family, a boy and a girl and to whom he became legally married a few years later. Of Dido Belle's two surviving sons, Charles Davinier became an officer in the Indian Army and himself fathered a son⁴ to whom he gave the Christian name Lindsay, his natural

⁴ Payne, at pg 236.

grandfather's surname. Nothing is known about Dido's second surviving son named William Davinier.

Dido's grave in London

The whereabouts of Dido's grave is still unknown today, although she was attached and was genetically part of such an eminent and prominent society family.

Conclusion

This most enjoyable book was written at a time when the United Kingdom's Modern Slavery Act was passing through Parliament and it is an opportune time to retrospectively consider the Slave trade and UK statutes that followed several centuries later. Recently a British television series examined the abolition of the slave trade when slave owners were compensated by the government to the tune of approximately seventeen billion pounds sterling in today's money, a British television series in which historian David Olusoga traced the bitter propaganda war waged between the pro-slavery lobby and the abolitionists and examined how in the slave owners with the equivalent of £17 billion in today's money, revealing that this was the only way to bring the slave trade to an end.

1834 the British government arrived at the extraordinary decision to compensate The National Archives hold the names of the 46,000 owners of slaves from across the British empire who benefited from this 17 billion pounds sterling⁵. The slaves themselves had not a single penny in compensation for being captured and transported to a life of abject horror⁶. After the statutory abolition of slavery, the slave trade, for awhile, continued by using loopholes in the law of the time⁷. Concluding, the reviewer admits that Dido Belle was indeed a very brave lady and it is fitting that her memory lives on in the book and expensive film made about her life and in past books about her. This book is a balm to the horror of slavery and has embedded into many, a deep-founded admiration for English law and the rule of law. Laura Payne, author of Belle, tells us at page 237 that Dido Belle's body was buried in London but that her grave was moved 'in the 1970s due to the redevelopment of the Bayswater area'.

The portrait of Dido Belle and her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray was moved from Kenwood House in London to Scone Castle in Scotland. Elizabeth's father, Dido's uncle

⁵ Note that, of the 46,000 names of owners of slaves in the 1834 compensation records, the 3,000 British owners of slaves in the West Indies owned fifty percent of all of the West Indies slave population. They and not the slaves, were amply compensated for the statutory abolition of slavery.

⁶ Originally, it was the Utrecht Treaty of 1713 that gave Britain the chance to become the world's leading beneficiary in the slave trade business. The Utrecht Treaty was signed to end the war of the Spanish Succession in North America and British negotiators demanded and succeeded in their demands to win 'massive concessions from the French, including the North American colonies of Nova Scotia, Hudson Bay, New Foundland and half of St Kitts and the contract to supply slaves to Spanish America, etc.

⁷ Love of money and greed can find ingenious way of sidestepping the most draconian laws passed by government.

by blood must have surely been told by the authorities of the plans to move her grave. He could have paid for it to be moved to a prominent place or to the family crypt had he wished to do so, but as it was, their own left 'flesh and blood' was left to be forgotten into obscurity in some unmarked place. What a wicked travesty of history.

Our gratitude goes to all historians everywhere for they have the learning and skilled acumen to uncover the truth.

Lord Mansfield cited the Latin phrase in his decision of the Zong appeal:

'Fiat justitia ruat caelum' or

'Let justice be done though the heavens fall.'

Further reading

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Carrington, S.H.H (2002) The sugar industry and the abolition of the slave trade: 1775-1810, US: University of Florida Press.

Case law

Miller v Race (1758) Caselaw Haylin v Adamson (1758)

Moses v Macferlan (1760)

Pelly v Royal-Exchange Assurance (1761)

Rex v Barker (1762)

Rex v Delaval ((1763)

Pillans v Van Mierop (1765)

Carter v Boehm (1766)

Rex v Wilkes (1768)

Lowe v Peers (1768)

Rex v Webb (1768)

Millar v Taylor (1769)

Perrin v Blake (1770)

Rex v Woodfall (1770)

Somerset v Stewart (1772)

Mostyn v Fabrigas (1774)

Rex v Tubbs (1776)

Rex v Minnish (1776)

Foone v Blount (1776)

DaCosta v Jones (1778)

Hawkes v Saunders (1779)

Liardet v Johnson (1779)

Rhodes v Peacock (1781)

Folkes v Chadd (1782)

Ringsted v Lady Lanesborough (1783)

Rex v Eccles (1783)

Rex v Shipley (1784)

Editor, (2007), Inside out: abolition of the British slave trade, BBC TV. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/articles/2007/02/27/insideout_abolition_special_feature.shtml

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Legislation:

1713 -Utrecht Treaty.

1788-UK Slave Trade Act (or Dolben's Act)

1807- UK Slave Trade Act

1824- UK Slave Trade Act

1833- UK Slavery Abolition Act

1843- UK Slave Trade Act

1873- UK Slave Trade Act

1926- League of Nations- Slavery Convention

1946- United Nations- Human Rights Convention

1998- UK Human Rights Act

Mason, F (2014) Dido Elizabeth Belle: a biography, London: Lifecaps Publishers.

Paterson,) (1967) The Sociology of Slavery, US: Harvard University Press