

The Transatlantic Slave Trade in Translation: Dido Belle, Justice and Jane Austen

Penny Mawdsley describes how Jane Austen ‘translated’ the story of Dido Belle, the half black great-niece of Lord Mansfield brought up at Kenwood, into her novel *Mansfield Park*

In mid-June this year the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and its aftermath stole global headlines. The 2013 BLM (Black Lives Matter) campaign was rekindled and many people were prompted to re-examine the wide-spread and often subtle ways in which the notorious transatlantic slave trade has long permeated cultural life. The vast wealth accrued by Caribbean planters and their business investors – many of the latter well-known philanthropic Stuart and Georgian names – was ploughed into the building of magnificent civic structures – schools and hospitals, graceful squares and crescents, as well as most of those ‘stately homes’ we visit today and which are now preserved by the National Trust.

Before Covid-19 struck our shores, SOF Merseyside and North Wales held its meetings in a Liverpool flat near the site of the Goree Piazzas, warehouses named after an island off Senegal, where captured slaves were auctioned before transportation across the Atlantic. Liverpool itself had overtaken Bristol by the 1780s as the European capital of the slave trade. Before 1807 when the British Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was passed, Mersey ships had transported nearly 1.5 million African slaves across the Atlantic, more than 10% of all slaves carried by Europeans to their colonies in appalling and overcrowded conditions, many dying en route in the infamous ‘Middle Passage’.

Not many former hardened captains of slave ships were like the remarkable John Newton, author of *Amazing Grace*, who underwent a dramatic religious conversion in mid-life and left Liverpool to become a pious Evangelical Anglican clergyman. Newton, at his living in Olney, collaborated with the poet William Cowper to write the famous Olney hymn collection and became a staunch abolitionist. Today Liverpool’s excellent International Slavery Museum tells in great detail the complex and horrific story of the notorious trade from Africa, via the sale platform

to plantation life. Further, it demonstrates the legacy of the trade in everything from Liverpool’s street names like Penny Lane to what is known of the lives of freed slaves and their descendants living in Britain today. Sited at the Albert Dock it is well worth a visit.

I’m tempted at this point to interest our North Walian SOF members by linking the above to the shocking story of wealthy, absentee Jamaica sugar plantation owner, Richard Pennant, 1st Baron Penrhyn, who was formerly one of Liverpool Borough’s two MPs – a notorious Anti-Abolitionist who made some outrageous speeches in the Commons and on whose once family-owned land we live... but I will resist! The clear brief for this article is to illustrate the strong links in the writings of Jane Austen (1775-1817) to this woe-filled period in our history, and to show how, in particular, she has ‘translated’ – albeit substantially adapted – a very unusual real story that she came across, namely the life of Dido Belle (born circa 1761), into the novel *Mansfield Park* (published 1814).

Although there are brief references to the slave trade in several of her other novels, *Emma* in particular, (such mention often appearing in dialogue), slavery is, as Paula Byrne puts it, ‘the shadow story’ in *Mansfield Park*, and it is here that Jane Austen’s *immediate* family’s true abolitionist colours fly. I should point out that Jane was actually not unconnected to the sugar plantations herself, through wider family and friends, as so many British people were.

We will first look at the novel itself and then at the story of Dido Belle and her great uncle guardian, the 1st Earl of Mansfield, a particularly distinguished Chief Justice of England, and the one from whom *Mansfield Park* gets its name.

The *pater familias* of *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas Bertram, is portrayed as a typical Georgian sugar plantation owner, although one who is not a total absentee from his Antigua land. His family live in leisurely comfort in a

mansion set in a landscaped park. The girls are typically educated for ladies of the time, learning how to display themselves and their ‘accomplishments’ to best advantage, ultimately to attract marriage offers from similarly cultured young gentlemen. Into their comfortable midst suddenly arrives young Fanny Price, who, although a niece of Lady Bertram, has been brought up in contrastingly straightened circumstances because Lady B’s sister has married ‘beneath her’, a lazy and uncouth Portsmouth naval man. At first Fanny is overwhelmed by her new environment, but she copes and eventually thrives, thanks mainly to the sympathetic understanding and help she receives from her upright cousin Edmund. But it is not until towards the end of the book that her fortune changes assuredly for the better. Sir Thomas returns from Antigua, her beloved naval officer brother visits and the Bertram family at last recognise Fanny for the good, wise – and by now well-educated – person that she is.

Into a scene around the Bertram family dining table after Sir Thomas’s return, Austen skilfully inserts a short piece of pointed dialogue to illustrate Fanny’s fearlessly intelligent curiosity about the slave trade. As conversation freezes uncomfortably in response to her questions (which are not answered by Sir Thomas) we are persuaded that Fanny’s sympathies are located in the right place and encouraged to think that she has already found out much from her brother about this odious trade in human flesh. It is notable that Bertram’s financial return from his plantations is described as dwindling. As slavery in British Colonies was not abolished until after the 1834 Act we might guess that this might be as a result of shipping difficulties during the Napoleonic Wars – or even the success of the Anti-Saccharite ladies’ campaign to boycott the purchase of sugar and rum. There are several other subtle references to the trade in the novel but not the space to cover them here.

Austen herself was clearly well-informed about the transportation trade, sale and work on the sugar plantations. Not only did her favourite writers include the poet William Cowper, Dr Johnson and Thomas Clarkson, all abolitionists, the latter a leading campaigner, but she would have come across the many anti-slavery pamphlets published after 1787, when the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was formed. She



Kenwood, Lord Mansfield’s house on Hampstead Heath
hampsteadheath.org.uk

would have learned something about it too from her brother Captain Charles Austen RN.

Now to the particular story that captured Jane Austen’s imagination: Dido Elizabeth Belle, as she was baptised at St. George’s, Bloomsbury in 1766, was the mixed-race daughter of Scottish Captain John Lindsay RN (later a distinguished Admiral) and Maria Bell, an African slave, sometime his mistress, accompanying him at sea on some of his voyages, as Captain Charles Austen’s young family did. We know little about Dido’s birth, whether it was at sea or in Scotland. All we do know is that her mother died before she was 4 or 5, at which time Captain Lindsay delivered her to Kenwood House in Hampstead to be brought up by his childless uncle and aunt, William Murray, 1st Earl of Mansfield and Murray’s wife, Lady Elizabeth (née Finch). At around the same time the Mansfields also adopted Lady Elizabeth’s six-year-old great-niece, daughter of the recently widowed Lord Stormont, a distinguished diplomat posted to Vienna. The two little girls, technically cousins and near contemporaries, were brought up as sisters.

Although it was relatively common by the 1760s to find freed black servants, usually footmen, in the great country houses – either clothed in smart European bespoke frogged livery and periwigged, or in exotic Eastern servants’ robes and turbans – it was extremely unusual, if not unique, for high-ranking families like the Mansfields to accept, openly acknowledge and unashamedly display a black child as a *bona fide* relative living on virtually equal terms with other family members. This mid-Georgian period was exceptionally status and class-conscious, a time when everyone was expected to know their place. Jane Austen’s Fanny Price, although not a mulatto, was deliberately cast as someone from a less privileged and less culti-

vated position in society than her cousins, someone like Dido, whom Austen could imagine feeling overawed and uncomfortable on first arriving at Kenwood.

Much that has been discovered about Belle is very recent and largely researched by the Camden historian Gene Adams and further by Paula Byrne, who has written extensively about Jane Austen and those who influenced her. A fascinating double portrait by Johann Zoffany, which was later titled 'Lady Elizabeth Finch-Hatton and Negress' and used to hang in Kenwood House, is now in Scone Palace in Perth, still belonging to the Mansfield and Stormont families. A beautiful and deeply symbolic painting, it portrays an adolescent blonde Lady Elizabeth Murray sitting formally with an open book on her knees, smiling demurely and extending a hand to Belle. By contrast, darkly beautiful Belle stands behind Elizabeth yet leaning forward animatedly, dressed in oriental costume, smiling quizzically and bearing a basket of exotic fruits. That Lord Mansfield should have ordered a double portrait shows his clear approval of – and pride in – both his adopted great-nieces. Again we see a fictional parallel in Sir Thomas Bertram's affection for, and admiration of, the young adult Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*.

As far as can be discerned, Belle's later life was happy and comfortable. She had been left a basic annuity of £100 by Lord Mansfield, a sum to which he later added £200 'to set out with' and a further £300. Along with two of Lord Mansfield's spinster nieces, Belle had helped look after him after his wife died and one of these ladies left Belle a further £100 'in token of my regard'. Belle married John Davinier, a (white) French servant, whom she had probably met when he was working for Lord Stormont, the new Earl of Mansfield. Mixed marriages amongst 'the lower orders' were apparently common enough, especially in British cities, from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, but it was rarer for black women to marry white men than the other way about. Dido Belle was of course of mixed race herself and probably had lighter skin colour.

The couple lived in a comfortable house in up-and-coming Pimlico. Belle had 3 surviving children who all did well, particularly Charles, the eldest, who had attended a respectable private school that prepared him, aged 14, to join the

East India Company as a clerk. From there he rose to become a distinguished officer in the Indian Army. We have no evidence to suggest that Belle immersed herself in anti-slavery campaigning as many freed slaves did. She may have just valued having the independence to pursue a fulfilling domestic life of her own after an early life constrained by obligations due to her guardians. Sadly, Belle herself, still only in her early 40s, died in 1804 and before the abolition of the slave trade. It is a pity too that her grave in Bayswater had to be moved to make way for development in the 1970s and no record has been found of its new location.

Now to William Murray, Lord Mansfield himself: Despite the ready and compassionate response by this intelligent Scotsman (1705 - 1793) to the request to provide a home for his two great-nieces, he appears to have been more circumspect when it came to his support for the abolitionist cause. His cautious approach to taking sides may well have been formed as a thirteen-year-old, when his desperate desire to win a King's Scholarship to Westminster School meant not only a long ride south from Perth to London but a determination to extricate himself from suspicion of sharing his father's Jacobite sympathies. Many suspect his change of heart over abolition was due to Belle's influence. He had been angered by the persistent Granville Sharp, spouting anti-slavery propaganda and disrupting Mansfield's courtroom. As an innovative judge on the King's Bench, Mansfield was held in high regard for his knowledge, fairness and his strict application of the law. His hero was Cicero, volumes of whose works he memorised and was able, for pleasure, to translate into English and back again into Latin. His portrait in Christ Church, Oxford, shows him with his hand on a copy of Cicero.

Mansfield was known particularly for helping struggling young barristers, cutting through red tape, modernising court procedure and speeding up hearings. One of his great reforms was in mercantile law, where in a landmark contract case, *Carter v Boehm*, he established the duty of utmost good faith in insurance contracts. Another ground-breaking ruling in 1777, known as 'Lord Mansfield's Rule', is still in use today. It protects children by laying down that a child born into a marriage is a legitimate product of that marriage – i.e. a husband is made responsible



Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay (1761-1804) and her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray (1760-1825)
[wikimedia.org](https://www.wikimedia.org)

for his wife's offspring even if he does not believe the child to be his. As Lord Chief Justice for a remarkable 32 years, Mansfield's many rulings had considerable influence not only in England and the British colonies, but also on foundational USA laws. It was however for his conduct and ruling in several notorious cases that he became famous beyond close London legal circles.

One of these was the Somerset case where in 1772 Mansfield ruled in favour of granting *Habeas Corpus* to a runaway slave (i.e. regarding the slave as a person rather than a chattel), but it was his ruling over the horrendous Zong Massacre of 1783 that brought him to wider prominence. The 'Zong' was an English slave ship, captured from the Dutch, that had been dangerously overloaded with 442 African slaves bound for Jamaica. The original captain had

handed charge of the vessel to an inexperienced fellow officer (Collingwood, ship's surgeon) when he needed to join another vessel. The 'Zong' overran her destination, water was dangerously short, and an epidemic among the tightly packed slaves had broken out. Collingwood panicked, making the cruel decision to jettison 132 slaves, a third of the ship's human cargo, into the Caribbean, calculating harshly that this would make economic sense to the ship's owners. The syndicate made an insurance claim of £30 per slave lost (a slave's nominal value). Collingwood had died a few days after the ship arrived in Jamaica.

The insurers refused to pay up so the syndicate took the case to court. As the case unfolded further horrors were revealed: Both the captain's log and a separate one in which Collingwood, in his dual role as surgeon, should have

kept medical records, were missing, and the First Mate had taken insufficient food and water on board to cover the infamous 'Middle Passage'. It should be noted, however, that although Mansfield's ruling did not require the insurers to pay up (so at least partial justice was done), and the ruling generally drew further welcome attention to the abolitionist cause, the case was strictly treated as an insurance matter rather than one of murder.

Mansfield was probably dead by the time Jane Austen visited Eastwell Park in Kent and met Lady Elizabeth, Belle's cousin, now married, but found her disappointingly dull. The Finch-Hattons were friends of Jane's brother Edward.

Whether Belle herself ever visited the house is not clear, but this was possibly the place where Jane pieced together Dido Belle's story, later to translate it into a much-loved classic Austen novel.

Sources

Belle by Paula Byrne, William Collins (2014);
Belle, DVD of screenplay (2014) starring Gugu Mbatha-Raw as Dido Belle and Tom Wilkinson as Lord Mansfield;
Mansfield Park by Jane Austen (1814), Penguin Classics edition (1996) ed. Kathryn Sutherland.

Penny Mawdsley is a long-term member of SOF. She has been a SOF trustee, chair of trustees and a past editor of *Portholes*. She now convenes the Merseyside and North Wales SOF Group.

Helen Thomas Visits Ivor Gurney

He met me in pyjamas and a dressing gown
 but there was nowhere in that bare room to sit down.
 I put my flowers on the bed, no vase –
 glass or pottery shards can sever arteries.

He liked the pretty hat I'd chosen specially to wear
 and stared directly in my face
 as if he sought a likeness there
 to my dead Edward. *Let us talk of him*, I said.

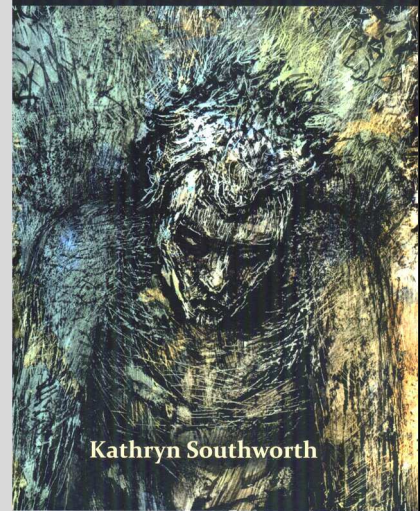
In the common room was a piano
 and Ivor played – but none of the men
 who sat around, eyes bent on the floor,
 gave any sign they heard.

He wouldn't go into the garden – that travesty
 of countryside. If only he were let
 out to his Gloucestershire for an hour's happiness ...
 What if he did end his own life after that?

So next time I brought Edward's ordnance survey map,
 and Ivor trod those lands and villages again,
 with finger walking down each track,
 better than ever we sane could imagine them,

wandering the hills beside my husband,
 though they had never met – and Edward
 brought back to life for him
 and me.

No Man's Land



Kathryn Southworth

The poet and composer Ivor Gurney served in the First World War and was committed to a mental hospital in 1922. The poet Edward Thomas, Helen's husband, was killed in action in the war in 1917. This poem is reprinted from *No Man's Land* by Kathryn Southworth (Dempsey and Windle, Guildford, 2020) by kind permission of the publishers and the author.