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# Belle, Dido Elizabeth

(1760?-1804),

Asselin Charles

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a mixed-race member of a noble Scottish family, was the illegitimate daughter of Captain John Lindsay of the Royal Navy and a slave of African origin, Maria Belle. Her parents met in the West Indies where Maria may have been captured from a Spanish ship. Belle may have spent part of her childhood in Pensacola, Florida, where Captain Lindsay was stationed for a year, from 1764 to 1765. He brought the child to England. His uncle, William Murray, first Earl of Mansfield, and his wife were childless. They were already raising another motherless great-niece, Elizabeth Murray, and they took Dido into their household, perhaps as a companion for Elizabeth. She was baptized on 20 November 1766 in St. George's, Bloomsbury, London, the parish church of Lord Mansfield's London house in Bloomsbury Square. Her age is given as 5 years, and her father is recorded as a fictitious "Bell." Lindsay conveyed land he had acquired in Pensacola to Maria Belle in 1774, when she was recorded as being in London, possibly visiting her daughter.

Belle seems to have had the same ambiguous status as other illegitimate natural children, like the (white) daughter of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. Her family supported her, but she was neither given the full privileges of legitimate offspring nor treated as a menial servant. She received an allowance, was given expensive presents, and people knew that she lived in the household. This caused some to doubt whether Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, could give a truly unbiased verdict in the cases involving enslaved people that came before him, like that of James Somerset, which produced the famous Mansfield judgment (1772), and that of the *Zong* (1783).

The house in Bloomsbury Square was wrecked in the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780, when Lady Mansfield and her wards were in residence and had to be escorted to safety. Thereafter the Murray family lived in their country home, Kenwood House, on Hampstead Heath. Here Belle was in charge of the dairy and the poultry yard (something other gentlewomen did), and she also acted as Lord Mansfield's amanuensis (which was rarer). Thomas Hutchinson, an American visitor to Kenwood in 1779, was shocked that she had after-dinner coffee with the family, and that she and Lady Elizabeth were so intimate, walking arm in arm. He observed that although Lord Mansfield and Dido had a close relationship, she did not dine with the family. Whether this was always the case when the family had important guests, or whether it was in deference to the known American attitude to black people, is not known.

A double portrait attributed to Johann Zoffany of the cousins painted in the late 1770s displays their relative status. Both wear white silk dresses and pearl necklaces. Lady Elizabeth sits calmly, looking directly at the spectator, a book in her lap. Standing slightly behind her, apparently moving to the left

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out of frame, and wearing an exotic turban with a feather and carrying fruit, Belle roguishly raises a finger to her face and looks over her shoulder at the spectator. Lady Elizabeth's hand is extended to touch Dido, showing they are linked by family and affection.

When her father, by now Admiral Sir John Lindsay, died in 1788, he left money to two other illegitimate children but nothing to Belle. This was presumably because he knew she would be well provided for by Lord Mansfield, who, on his death in 1793, bequeathed Belle a lump sum of £500 and an annual income of £100. She also inherited £100 from another Murray relative who had been taken into the household. Lord Mansfield's will confirmed that Belle was free. This may have been because he feared that Parliament would pass laws to introduce slavery into England, which, as he pointed out in the Somerset case, did not exist there. The fight to abolish the slave trade might go either way and, at this time, various eminent thinkers had suggested solving the problems of supporting the poor by enslaving them.

On 5 December 1793 Belle married John Davinier in St. George, Hanover Square, in London. He seems to have been a Frenchman (no doubt French had been part of her education) who was the steward of a family in Mayfair. The steward was the senior outdoor servant in a household, responsible for the running of an estate, which would produce part of the family's income. It was an important post.

Mrs. Davinier settled into the kind of life she knew well. Nothing is known of her day-to-day life, but the very lack of any record suggests it was uneventful. She and her husband had at least three sons. Their twins, Charles and John, were baptized on 8 May 1795, and William Thomas was baptized on 26 January 1802. Seven years was quite a gap between births at that time, and it may be that she suffered ill health. It is known that while living at Kenwood she had received medical treatment. She died around the age of 43 and was interred on 8 July 1804 in St. George's Fields burial ground in Bayswater Road. This area was cleared for redevelopment in the 1970s. Her husband later remarried and had two more children.

Her surviving Davinier sons had solid, middle-class careers. John disappears from the records early, but Charles went into the Madras Native Infantry. In 1841 he was promoted from captain to major, and in 1855 he became a lieutenant colonel and transferred into H.M. Indian Army when the government wound up the East India Company in 1858. He died in 1873 in London. In 1858 William Thomas was working as a clerk in London in the Accountant General's Department of the new government of India. Later he became the company secretary of the Hendre-Ddu Slate and Slab Quarry Company.

Charles's son, Charles George, went into the civil service in the War Department. Although he had at least nine children, only one produced a single surviving son, Harold Charles Bertram Davinier, the last of Belle's descendants, who died in 1975 in apartheid South Africa, classified as white.

Although the recent movie *Belle* (2014) has a number of factual inaccuracies, such as the decision in the *Zong* case and her husband's occupation, it does convincingly recreate the household and society in which Belle grew up, as well as her position within them.

[ *See also* Zong Massacre Victims.]

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### **See also**

Zong Massacre Victims <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-75396>>