

Dangerous Freedom

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Trinidadian novelist Lawrence Scott has just published a new novel, a cause for celebration—he isn’t a prolific writer—called *Dangerous Freedom*. Scott said at the wonderful Bocas Lit Fest last weekend that he doesn’t consider himself a “historical novelist” but someone “inspired by historical stories”. Yet what he has done in his last two novels is what the historical novelist typically does: bring imagination and creativity to the stories of persons living in the past, either actual historical figures, or inventions of the author.

In *Light Falling on Bamboo* his subject was the nineteenth-century Trinidadian painter Cazabon. In

Dangerous Freedom it's Dido Belle, like *Cazabon* a real person, born in 1761. She was the daughter of a British naval officer and a formerly enslaved African-born woman known as Maria Belle (not of course her "real" name). After a few years in Pensacola, then a British held port in modern Florida, she's brought to London by her father, and put in the care of his uncle, Lord Mansfield, who would become chief justice. She lived in his household, something between an adopted daughter and an upper servant, until she leaves to marry and establish an independent life

As Scott explained at the Bocas session, she has an "established story", told in historical documents (and a famous portrait of her and her white cousin Elizabeth Murray). But that is the "official" account. What Scott does is to tell her story from her own perspective, brought to life by the novelist's creative imagination.

Dido Belle was her name when she lived with the Mansfields. Dido was the name of a mythical heroine in Roman literature (enslaved people were typically given fanciful names from classical times) and "Belle" came to be applied to the "housekeepers" (really lovers) of white

men in the Caribbean. But the novel is written from the point of view of Elizabeth d'Aviniere, the name she took when she left the Mansfields, got married to Mr d'Aviniere and had three sons. The change of name, Scott shows, is a crucial symbol of her rejecting her previous life and embracing full personhood and humanity.

The novel moves smoothly between Elizabeth as a married adult in London around 1802-03, and her childhood and young adulthood as Dido; she reminisces about her past, trying to make sense of her experiences in the Mansfield household. She is a witness and even participant in historical events, notably Mansfield's famous ruling of 1772—which did NOT abolish slavery in England, but was a partial victory for the abolitionists.

The transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans, and slavery in the Americas, looms large in Elizabeth's life and memories. Her lost mother was "cargo", a survivor of the Middle Passage. Scott imagines an independent and creative life for her as a free black woman in Pensacola. Elizabeth's sons, though legally free, are not safe from the threat of being kidnapped on the London streets and

bundled off to the Caribbean to be sold, despite Mansfield's much earlier ruling which made that illegal.

Was Dido herself free when she was with the Mansfields, her father's relatives? Not, it turns out, until the end of her time with them, when Lord M's will says "I confirm to Dido Elizabeth Belle her freedom". Longing and searching for her mother, who has been lost to the child Dido despite her frantic efforts to stay in touch through letters between Pensacola and London, is central to Elizabeth's story.

This is a beautifully written novel which gives Elizabeth d'Aviniere—known to history by the imposed name of Dido Belle—a voice and a life of her own, sensitively imagined and constructed by a major Caribbean writer.