

Island Queen

A NOVEL

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WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

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FIRST EDITION

Designed by Bonni Leon-Berman

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 978-0-06-300284-5

21 22 23 24 25 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dorothy Kirwan Thomas

Dorothy “Dolly” Kirwan Thomas was born in Montserrat in 1756 and died in Demerara in 1846. Dorothy was a survivor of slave rebellions and experienced the wars that shaped the Atlantic world. She was a complex, conflicted woman who overcame every obstacle, even her vulnerabilities, to change history. Her story needed to be told. A single chapter centered on this woman’s extraordinary ninety years is not sufficient to dispel the myths and misogyny that surround women of color, Black women, who endured colonialism and slavery. I am honored to be able to tell the world about her extraordinary life.

From legal transactions, newspaper articles, published anecdotal accounts, and legal records drafted at her direction, I have reconstructed her life. Mrs. Thomas was articulate, astute, and business-minded. She was a woman of passion who struggled with functional illiteracy, heart-wrenching losses, and betrayals. She was an original code-switcher who used simpler words with servants and family (like her favorite, “*tarn*”) and saved her polished parlor conversations for admirals, businessmen, and the gentry who sought her company. She was a passionate woman dealing with the issues of her time: racism, enslavement, incest, sexuality, marriage, entrepreneurialism, land ownership, taxation, and women’s rights.

My author’s note includes an extensive bibliography.

Women of Color: Who Tells the Story Matters

The first time I read *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, a contemporary author of the early 1800s, I fell in love with the time period. When

reading her last work, *Sanditon*, I learned of Miss Lambe, a wealthy mulatto West Indian woman. This character of color is the wealthiest person in the book. Upper-crust suitors (white suitors) are scheming to marry her, which is counter to the prevailing narrative that Blacks (Blackamoors) were not desirable, had no access to money, had no ability to socialize in the upper classes, and had little agency as they were either slaves or lowly servants.

As a person of color, a Black woman, a Georgian and Regency history student, and a girl of Trinidad and Tobago heritage, I felt found discovering Miss Lambe, but now new questions arose. Was this character a creature derived from a progressive author's creativity or was this character based on persons of color that Austen learned about or saw or interacted with in her community?

If the answer was the former, it cemented my lifelong love of Austen. If the answer was the latter, then my ancestors had been victims of the whitewashing of history.

Whitewashing or the sanitization of the past occurs because the victors (those allowed to tell the story) more often than not cast history through the white gaze, a.k.a. the lens of white men. These narratives often describe rape of the enslaved by slave masters in terms of consent, even in cases of incest. You'll never imagine how many scientific papers and history books I've tossed against a wall as the author chose to call these violent unions *relationships*.

I'm not a fan of book burning, but nothing makes me long for the scent of kerosene and carbon more than reading paragraphs of how the wanton enslaved woman enticed her massa to satisfy dark cravings of her oversexualized body, a body that is often painted as not experiencing pain like others.

My quest to find *Miss Lambe* took me on a ten-year journey. Finding Dorothy Kirwan Thomas, the women of the Entertainment Society, and so many other Black women who had agency and access to all levels of power has restored my soul.

Now I possess two truths. One: Jane Austen was a progressive

author. Two: The narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries whitewashed the roles of my people—the adventurers, leaders, and rule breakers—which were occupied by women of color.

Fictitious Characters vs. Real-Life People Depicted in Island Queen

Dorothy Kirwan Thomas left no diary. To discover her life, I had to rely on her legal documents, particularly the birth registries/birth order of her children and secondary accounts of people interacting with Dorothy.

The characters of Polk, Mr. and Mrs. Ben, Mr. Lionel, Overseer Teller, Mr. Johnson, Miss Smith, Mr. Runyan, and Mrs. Randolph are inspired characters or a mix of different true persons that I've found in my research of the times, traditions, and the inner workings of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century life.

Catherine “Kitty” Hunter (Lady Clarke) is an actual person who, as the wife of the governor of Jamaica, would be in both Prince William’s circle of influence and within reach of Dorothy’s business network. Her personality seemed a good mesh with Dorothy’s and helped to fill in the gaps of the narrative.

Though some names have been changed to prevent confusion, all other thirty-nine-plus characters in *Island Queen* are true persons who lived during the time of Dorothy Kirwan Thomas’s extraordinary life.

Dorothy Kirwan Thomas and Literacy

Secondary accounts describe Dorothy as illiterate. This could be wrong. The intricacy of her transactions and the anecdotal retelling of her having a scribe in her entourage contradicts her having this problem. I suspect Dorothy was functionally illiterate, or more liter-

ate than she would attest. Her drive to have her children and others of color educated also leads me to believe that she valued knowledge and learning. To explain this in *Island Queen*, I hinted at there being a problem reading, which would not be uncommon.

Dorothy Kirwan Thomas and William IV

My research tells me there were many Miss Lambes, each achieving unheralded accomplishments for their race and the plight of women. Upon finding a 1788 Gillray cartoon depicting Prince William's affair with a mulatto beauty, I discovered a newfound appreciation for the height of access these women achieved in Georgian/Regency society. The cartoon is remarkable in the fact that this woman of color is drawn to be beautiful and loving, not subservient or garish as Gillray had done to other women with dark skin.

Then I stumbled upon the story of Prince William dancing with a mulatto woman, Dolly Kirwan, at a mulatto ball in Roseau (the capital of Dominica), where the prince's frigates, the *Pegasus* and the *Andromeda*, would come to dock as he awaited orders. Firsthand accounts from people like Dr. Jonathan Troup of Prince William introducing him to his "handsome mulatto girl" recounted the prince's dedication to this woman. This interest and affection for his mulatto mistress was so great that he risked censure from his commanders to take her on board his ship and have her accompany him to England.

Rumors of Dorothy and William meeting again in 1810 spurred my belief of a longer, deeper association. William kept friendships with Black women he admired in the West Indies like Cubah Cornwallis of Jamaica. Henrietta, Dorothy's granddaughter, was friends with Lady Augusta FitzClarence, one of Prince William's daughters by Dorothea Jordan.

The depths of their relationship we will never know, as Dorothy kept no diary, and all of William's personal correspondence was destroyed upon his death.



Gillray cartoon of Prince William and his mulatto lover, first print of cartoon later redrawn and printed in 1788 *Rambler Magazine*

Prince William Henry, King William IV

Prince William Henry, the Sailor King, is a difficult person to assess. I wanted him to be Prince Harry in the historical record. At times, he was and seems very progressive with his friendships and socializations with peoples of color. At other times, particularly as he grew older and more attuned to the pressures of society and his position, he became a typical privileged white man of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Prince William as the commander of the *Pegasus* and *Andromeda* in the West Indies was young, full of life, and enjoyed the women of the islands as much as his duty. He often went against convention, riled up his superiors, and befriended women such as Cubah Cornwallis, the famed healer from Jamaica. When he and his fellow officers got so drunk that they vandalized a brothel in Jamaica, William felt so remorseful that he repaid the owner, a Black woman proprietor.

With his devotion to command, he impressed Lord Nelson, the revered admiral of the Royal Navy. Between patrols and occasional

skirmishes, William was riotous. He went from pleasure to pleasure, woman to woman . . . until the island of Dominica. There, he met a beautiful mulatto woman who became his constant companion. In this relationship, we see more of the monogamous man that William became through the rest of his life. His association with his Irish mistress, Dorothea Jordan, lasted over twenty years (1791–1811). He was domestic with her, had ten illegitimate children with this union, and was reported as happy and faithful. When that affair finally ended and he married Princess Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen (1818), William remained loyal to her until his death in 1837.

The less progressive side of William was exposed as he grew older. In 1799, ten years from his break with Dorothy Kirwan Thomas, Prince William, as the Royal Duke of Clarence, addressed Parliament to cast his voice against abolition outlined in the Slave Trade Limitation Bill. This legislation would have limited the transport of Africans being enslaved in British colonies. He gave a full-throated argument against the bill, which led to the bill's defeat.

In 1833, William, now as King William IV, signed the decree to abolish slavery throughout England's colonies. I'd like to think that he returned to his senses, but this was more his response to the mood of the nation. England wanted abolition.

Creole Determination of White

Because of the mixing of Black and white in the West Indies, definitions to define who was white, or colored, or Black became a topic of discussion and in a few of the colonies defined by law. In general, a person had to be three generations removed from Black blood to be counted as white. This was not uniformly employed. Definitions changed based on circumstances and relations and money.

John Coseveldt Cells was an interesting Creole man. Unlike other men I researched, his notations were always attached with the following descriptors—*he was very liberal, he was articulate and well-*

mannered, he spoke many languages well, he was well-liked. Well, well, well. While all these phrases sounded like compliments and were probably meant to be compliments, no other white man or white-acting man is described in such terms. It sounded to me like dog whistles, things one says when describing a man of color and are surprised by his upward mobility or success. Joseph Thomas, who possessed all the same attributes, is never described as such. Cells's characterizations in *Island Queen* are purely this author's assumptions based on my feelings. Thus, Cells became a tool to highlight this dichotomy of whiteness to Creole society and also to mirror who was expected to succeed based on skin color.

The Power of White Associations

The want of a white lover *to take you far* was true in the colonial West Indies. Whites, for the most part, had the economic power and autonomy over women of color as much as the Anglican religion held power over those of Catholic and Jewish faiths. These economics meant the ability to pay for manumission was often in the control of white hands.

Both sides, Black and white, understood this. When the governing council of Montserrat tried to raise the manumission fee, the price that had to be paid to free an enslaved person, the white planters of the island rose in protest, saying the fee needed to remain low to reward the *female slaves* for their *love and loyalty and service*. In the West Indies, more than any other territory, more women were freed than anywhere else. These men used the hope of manumissions to coerce a compliant mistress. Women who longed for freedom or even protection from abusive overseers and other plantation males complied. Please note the power dynamics and the inability to refuse make it impossible for slave-master relationships to be consensual.

In *Island Queen*, I wanted to dispel the assumption that Dorothy Kirwan Thomas pushed her daughters into relationships with

white men to gain power or entered into such relationships to garner wealth. This is not true. Dorothy utilized white and Black allies to earn income, to protect it, and to grow it. Nonetheless, the network she built and maintained was because of her dedication, fortitude, and strength.

Like all mothers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, she wanted her daughters to marry well. Mrs. Bennet's dilemma in *Pride and Prejudice* was a universal truth to all women of these times. Dorothy wanted her sons-in-law to have the means to protect her girls and to help grow the family mercantile network.

Charlotte's first husband, Jean-Joseph Fédon, Ann's John Gloster Garraway, and Catharina's D.P. Simons are not white Anglican/Catholic men. Frances never married, and Dorothy did not push her to do so. Eliza and Lizzy married white men whom they loved and stayed with until their deaths. Charlotte's second husband, John Fullarton, left her and went to Europe then remarried. Crissy's first choice was Robert Garraway, a mixed-race man. Her second was a wealthy Black Trinidad plantation owner (Dorothy tried to play matchmaker). Her third choice was Major Gordon. However, all of these romances ended poorly. When Crissy lost a trial in court to prove the legitimacy of her marriage to Gordon, custody of her son, Huntly, was taken from her and given to Gordon. She returned to Demerara, where she married a merchant. Dorothy's sons-in-law took her money or depended on her means more than her daughters ever benefited.

Dorothy never seemed to be without a man. In the South, we'd say she was keeping time with a friend. With ten children, and several baby daddies, I was sure she enjoyed male company. Without a diary, I traced Dorothy's relationships through whose children she bore. She was very dedicated to getting their birth registries completed in the church parishes where she lived. Therefore, I can only document those relationships. But judging by her children's choices, I suspect she chose men by who had power and not by their race.

The Notions of Black Beauty and Power

A holdover of regressive, revisionist thought of the late Victorian era was that light skin was preferred and that African women were thought of as undesirable. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, there was more fluidity in the definition of beauty, with skin pigment and hair more centers of adoration.

Some people think that the terms *mulatto* and *mixed race* would refer to light-complexioned persons who then gain affinity because they are white adjacent. Dorothy was a beautiful woman who had dark skin. No personal portraits have been discovered, so I had to use secondhand accounts. How dark her skin was is lost, but her appeal was undeniable. She was a magnet to many men, even when she had no means. Her face and personality drew them first.

Dorothy, I believe, was undeniably beautiful by all standards. Her wit and charm sealed the deal and gained her access to the world of privilege. Dorothy learned their rules—their languages, their dances, their modes of dress, their ways of conducting business—and engaged on all levels. She earned her money and freed herself by her own gambits and built a legacy by utilizing the network she skillfully erected.

Later in life, she hosted a dinner for the governor of Barbados on behalf of the lieutenant governor of Demerara. She would not be given this honor and responsibility if she weren't a power broker.

Dorothy Kirwan Thomas as an Entrepreneur

Dorothy began selling goods in Montserrat and engaged in huckstering and housekeeping services in Dominica, Grenada, and Demerara. She and her daughters owned property and a store in Grenada. In Demerara, she constructed several hotels. Noted in

Island Queen were the one in Werk-en-Rust and her largest hotel in Cumingsburg.

Dorothy Kirwan Thomas as a Slave Owner

One of the hardest parts of Dorothy's story to wrap my arms around was her decision to own slaves. She hated enslavement. She worked tirelessly to get all her family freed. When news of an enslaved relative's whereabouts came to her attention, she immediately sought to get this person free, even engaging in lengthy, relentless negotiations to do so.

Therefore, I'm confident in her attitude about the topic in general and also confident in her fear of failure. Watching white planters punish those of different faiths and colored planters who did not conform to their systems and way of life was at the forefront of her mind. She saw from the beginning with the rebellions in Montserrat how leaders were targeted. She watched governments tighten rules on the Catholics in Montserrat and in Grenada. Grenada's council also terrorized free Blacks and coloreds who they felt weren't in league with them.

Fear of failing or being vulnerable had to be her top concern. I believe that this fear and her desire to protect her *fhortún* (fortune) and perhaps rescue persons from being purchased by harsher slavers led Dorothy to rationalize and accept the horrid position of becoming a slave owner.

Oral histories of Dorothy's enslaved persons show her to be a fair and liberal owner. As it took Dorothy sixteen years to earn the money for manumission, I can see how she could have put her enslaved on the same path to earn their freedom since she allowed them the same liberties she had in Montserrat: leisure time off, Sunday and Wednesday church service access, and the ability to hire out and huckster to earn their own money. The records are scant that show her freeing any enslaved person until emancipation (1833)

when she freed them all. Before emancipation, Dorothy owned the most slaves in Demerara.

The Thomases' Legacy

The silver plate given by the Entertainment Society in October 1824 has vanished. The accounts of Dorothy Kirwan Thomas's life are left to snippets of paper: wills, newspaper clippings, business transactions, birth records, etc. With her death in 1846, she outlived many of her children, but the seeds of her boldness for life lived on through the generations. Charlotte continued to run Kensington Plantation. Though Dorothy Christina's gambit fails, she was the first Black woman to sue for legal recognition of her marriage in Scotland. Henrietta became a London stage sensation known as Madame Sala. Grandson Huntly Gordon advanced in the army to the rank of surgeon general. He continued in the sphere of interacting with nobility as he remained close to his half brother, the Baron of Drumearn. Harry Robertson (Eliza's son) studied in London to become a physician. Joseph Garraway (Ann's son) trained in law in Britain but then returned to Grenada where he was appointed a judge to the Court of Appeals.

Themes in Island Queen

Remarking on Dorothy's incredible life, I needed to assert and kill the superhuman myth. Dorothy was special, but she was not superhuman. Surviving incest and rape as well as witnessing the dehumanizing aspects of slavery and racism took a toll on my Dorothy's spirit. The lack of control over one's person, the inability to say no to sexual aggression, I believe deeply affected her. To become the person she dreamed to be, a well-respected woman of means, she had to control what she viewed and internalized.

To protect herself, Dorothy saw or invented good when there

may not have been any. She closed her mind and blocked out things meant to make her crumble. The birthing sadness was my tangible way to make all the things she'd survived resonate. I balanced it with the very real danger of dying in childbirth.

In the West Indies, the birth rate of the enslaved compared to other cultures as well as enslavement in the United States was lower. Was this a factor of the climate, the prevalence of yellow or bulam fever and other tropical diseases? Was the harsh nature of enslavement and debilitating effects on the mother's physical and mental health the culprit? What about the mother's unwillingness to bear a child of rape in captivity or the availability of herbs like the peacock flower, which can affect fertility? Could this have been the cause?

I don't have the answers, but these topics were addressed in my attempt to defeat the superwoman myth. Dorothy Kirwan Thomas was strong, beautiful, and determined, but not superhuman. She would look upon her life as lucky, *tarn* lucky.

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