

## Doll Thomas

“Who do you think is in Glasgow”, a merchant wrote teasingly to his wife, “but Gilbert Robertson’s Mother-in-Law Doll Thomas with about 19 of her children and Grandchildren come home for education.”

Doll Thomas, also known as Dorothy Kirwan, Dolly Kirwan, and Mrs Dorothea Thomas was described by one traveler as ‘The Queen of the Demerara’ and by another as ‘the richest woman in the colony’. Yet she was described by most as a Negress.

Doll Thomas was born a slave in Montserrat in 1760 and was soon taken to a plantation in Demerara, Guyana. By developing a relationship with the person whom she was made to call master, she bore him two daughters and used this leverage to secure both her emancipation and a certain amount of financial security. By 1785 Doll was 25 years old and a free woman in nearby Grenada with three children, Elizabeth, Fanny and Charlotte. She had a house in her name and a number of enslaved people she had been ‘gifted’, to support herself and her children. In 1797 she was able to manumit one of her slaves, referred to only by the single name Betty. Betty was Doll Thomas’ own mother, given to her as a gift by the Montserrat planter John Kirwan when Doll herself was manumitted 13 years earlier.

When Doll met her partner Joseph Thomas, a doctor in Grenada, she was already an extremely wealthy woman. She had five more children, Ann, Eliza, Joseph, Harry, and Christina. When Joseph Thomas passed away, Doll returned to Demerara where she used her wealth to secure the title of Mrs Dorothea Thomas.

Yet Mrs Dorothea Thomas was a title that was rarely afforded to her. The Demerara Gazette allowed her the surname but insisted upon using the title “Miss”, suggesting a previous ownership by Joseph Thomas rather than a partnership. But Doll Thomas was made of strength and continued to insist upon her title. She was fiercely persistent, boundlessly determined and in 15 years of emancipation had generated an incredible amount of wealth.

Like most mothers of wealth in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, her main concern was the security of her children, particularly her daughters, for whom she secured partners of status and means. In Guyana, these people of means were Scots. In 1810, she came to Glasgow to ensure her children and grandchildren were well educated. She returned in 1823 to visit them at Dollar Academy and stayed with her Daughter Christina and her husband who both lived in Glasgow. But this was not the only purpose of her visit. From Glasgow Doll travelled to London with a memorial from the people of colour, addressed to the king and both houses of parliament. These were a series of petitions protesting the denial of full civil and legal rights, presented from the free coloured citizens of His Majesty’s West Indian colonies.

Doll Thomas fought hard for her own status, the status of her family and the status of her people. In 1837 she arrived in London, dressed with diamonds in her hair, a necklace of gold doubloons, ostrich feathers, and a skirt made of five-pound notes sewn together. Her custom was to stuff her close acquaintances with tamarinds and preserved ginger, yams, and guava jelly. She gifted her young relatives in Britain with playthings from Guyana, peggalls, calabashes, clubs and Amerindian poisoned arrows, of which some were sent to the British Museum and may still be there to this day.

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## Elizabeth Junor

Elizabeth Junor, known as Eliza Junor, was born in 1804 in Essequibo. It is presumed her mother was either an enslaved woman or a free woman of colour from Demarara, but there are no records to identify her by name. Her Father was Hugh Junor, a Carpenter from the Black Isle who travelled to the colonies and bought a half share in the Timbre Estate industry in Essequibo.

In 1816 at age 12, Eliza left Guyana for Scotland with her father and Brother, where she was Christened in Rosemarkie. She attended Fortrose Academy and in 1818, received an award for proficiency in penmanship.

In 1817 her father married Martha Matheson, daughter of the chief of Clan Matheson. Five years later, her father died and her step-mother remarried Reverend Archibald Browne, first Presbyterian chaplain in Demerara. Archibald Browne was a supporter of slavery who had published three sermons in pamphlet form in 1824 *On the Duties of Subjects to their Sovereign and the Duties of Slaves to their Masters*. When Archibald Browne entered into her family, Eliza was 22 years old. At some point before 1837, Eliza left Scotland for London and at the age of 33 she had an illegitimate daughter named Emma, born on the 15th November at 18 Great Hermitage Street in Wapping, London. Emma's father is recorded to have been Thomas McGregor, gentleman born in Kirkhill, Scotland.

In 1841 Eliza was living in Brixton with her daughter. By 1851 Emma was enrolled in a private boarding school in Somerset and Eliza had returned to Scotland. Separated from her stepmother, Eliza was living in Fortrose on the South Side of the High Street with her 60 year old Aunt Catherine Mackenzie and worked as a dressmaker. In 1861 on the census day, Elizabeth Junor, 57, dressmaker, was recorded to be living at 3 Union Street, Fortrose, still with Catherine Mackenzie, now a widow age 70 and proprietor of the cottage. Her Daughter Emma was recorded to have been visiting at the time, now 23 years old and working as a governess.

Elizabeth Junor died on the 20th April 1861. The cause of her death was unknown and was reported by her daughter Emma who was caring for her mother at the time. She was buried in Rosemarkie and a stone in her memory was erected in the kirkyard along with her brother who died in Buenos Aires.

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## Susanne Kerr

Susanne Kerr was a free woman from Demerara. She had three sons and a daughter with George Inglis of Kingsmills. In 1798, she sent her children with their father to Scotland where they were pupils at Inverness Royal Academy. She believed she would join them soon after but, like many other women in Guyana who sent their children abroad with their fathers, she was never sent for. Instead, George Inglis married a young wife in Scotland. Susanne Kerr's children lived in the shadow of their fathers legitimate children. In 1801 he moved to Bristol, leaving them alone in Inverness. In 1813 Susanne's daughter Helen eloped with George Hepburn, a master in the Royal Navy and they were married in December 1813. Hepburn left the Navy and become a captain in the Demerara trade, based in Port Glasgow and Greenock. The couple had six children before Helen Inglis' death sometime between 1824 and 1828.

Despite being unable to join her children in Scotland, Susan Kerr did everything she could to secure a future for them from Guyana. She developed great wealth and a prosperous position. Her will notes her extra care of her daughter, to who whom she left the majority of her estate, denoting:

*To each of my sons Robert Macdowell, William Inglis [...], Hugh Inglis and George Inglis the sum of one hundred pounds sterling as a mark of my affection for them and in consideration of all my sons being now in such situations in the world as to enable them to support themselves comfortably I hereby will and bequeath to whole residue of the money for which my effects may be sold to my daughter Helen Inglis. This last bequest subject to the approbation of the before mentioned George Inglis Esquire one of my executors to be by him either paid to my daughter or invested in the purchase of an annuity for her life.*

Susanne Kerr's experiences gave her a strong understanding of the potential powerlessness of women, and she was determined to make a better life for her daughter. She knew that her well educated sons as free men of colour had more possibilities open to them and with the support she had given them so far, could build a comfortable lives for themselves. However, she was very aware that she would need to do more to ensure the same for her daughter. Susanne Kerr's will lists a number of precious possessions and trinkets collected in love and hope and bequeathed to her daughter.

10 pairs of earrings and one odd one  
2 garnet necklaces  
5 finger rings  
a gold ornament for the head  
a gold thimble  
a silver watch  
a miniature of R McDowall her son  
2 locket with hair  
2 pair bracelets

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## **Elizabeth Swain Bannister**

Elizabeth Swain Bannister was a free woman of colour in Demerara. She was born a slave in Barbados and her freedom was secured in 1806 by a woman named Susannah Ostrehan. In 1809 she developed a relationship with William Fraser of Cromarty and they had four children, John, George, Elizabeth (who died before 1822) and Jane. Elizabeth also had a step daughter named Anna-Maria, who was the daughter of William Fraser and a free woman of colour from Barbados called Mary Stuart.

William Fraser was a very wealthy man. He was the owner of Goldstone Hall, with a modern steam-powered sugar mill and 'assets' which were valued at almost 2.2m florins. Through her connection to William Fraser, Elizabeth Swain Bannister carefully accumulated her own significant means and advanced her position. By 1822 William Fraser's fortune had significantly diminished, while Elizabeth Swain Bannister and her children were recorded have had over 4 times as many assets as Fraser as twice as much wealth. At this time Elizabeth had only been a free woman for 16 years. As an ex-slave, to have accumulated such a fortune in that amount of time was unheard of. She had also ensured a good education for her children. In 1823 John and George were attending Paisley Grammar School, where in 1827 John would be among the prize-winners, and Jane was at school in Liverpool. Elizabeth died in 1828 leaving property to her four children, including £3,000, to be applied to the maintenance, education and support of her daughter Jane Fraser, who at that time was at school in Glasgow. Elizabeth was yet another mother who understood that she would have to work harder to secure a good future for her daughter than she would for her sons. In 1838, her daughter Jane married and in 1841 she was living in Rothesay, with her husband, a daughter named Maria and her half-sister from Barbados, Anna-Maria. Anna-Maria eventually returned to Inverness where she died in 1893.

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