
Williams, Francis

(c. 1690–1762), the first black writer to gain recognition in the British Empire,

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was born free in Jamaica, the son of John Williams and his wife, Dorothy. John was an enslaved man who had been freed by his master, Colonel John Bourden, some years before Bourden's death in 1697 and, John Williams claimed, sometime before 1690. Jamaica was at the beginning of its sugar boom and the elder Williams somehow managed to accumulate wealth, through the acquisition of plantation property, export of sugar and other commodities, import of plantation supplies, purchase of enslaved Africans, and lending of money. Upon his death in 1723, John Williams left an estate valued at £12,000 sterling, this amount covering only personal possessions (including slaves) and not including the worth he held in land and buildings. This was a highly unusual achievement.

Francis Williams was christened in the St. Catherine parish church, in Spanish Town, capital of Jamaica, on 26 December 1697, together with his younger brother Thomas. Their older brother John (Junior) had been christened in 1691. He died in 1726, as did Thomas sometime between 1726 and 1731. Dorothy, the mother, died in 1731. Williams added their shares of the father's considerable fortune to his own. However, Williams lacked the business skills of his father and chose to live off the capital and enjoy a life centered on social and cultural activity.

The date is uncertain, but around 1710 Williams was sent to Britain for an education. Some said he was part of an experiment, devised by the duke of Montagu, to test the intellectual capacity of black men. However, his father's income was quite sufficient to cover the costs. He may have gone to Cambridge; there seems to be no record of his graduating with a degree, but such was not uncommon for the time. On the other hand, there is record of Francis being admitted in 1721 to Lincoln's Inn, London, although once again apparently without completing a law degree. He was back in Jamaica by the end of 1724, some months after his father's death.

In 1708, perhaps soon before the departure of Williams for Britain, the father John had advanced the status of his family by petitioning the government of Jamaica for rights beyond those normally granted to free black people, whose population remained very small. John noted that his wealth had been acquired by his own industry, that he had learned the doctrines of the Church of England and been naturalized (in 1699). In return for his "fidelity and good service," he requested the right to be tried by a jury, like a white man, and to deny the possibility of slaves testifying against him. His wish was granted. In 1716 he applied again for those same rights, on behalf of his wife (he and Dorothy probably married in 1708) and children, including Francis, and again was successful.

On his return to Jamaica in 1724, Williams became a local celebrity and “a conspicuous figure” around the capital of Spanish Town. He even sought a seat in the House of Assembly but this door was closed to him. In 1730 an attempt was made to reduce his privileged status to that of other free blacks. He was the only one permitted to carry a sword and pistols, which he said he needed to defend himself against his many detractors and enemies, of all colors. Appealing to England, he won this case in 1732.

Williams attended the governors’ levees, in wig and sword. Around 1740 his portrait was painted, by an unknown artist, probably in Jamaica, showing him dressed in this grand style, wearing a ruffled silk shirt, waistcoat, a long black velvet coat, breeches, and stockings. He is surrounded by books and bookshelves—the names of famous authors clearly visible—and celestial and terrestrial globes, to indicate his learning and intellectual status. The painting is now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London.

This style of life proved expensive. To finance it, Williams sold off lands and slaves he had inherited, apparently without undertaking any new investments. In later life, he ran a school for blacks in Spanish Town, teaching reading, writing, Latin, and mathematics, but this was no great moneymaker. He seems not to have married but may have had children to support. At his death, he occupied a rented house in Spanish Town. His estate was valued at just £500 sterling, most of this amount accounted for by the sixteen enslaved people he still owned.

Little of his literary output survives, apart from his Latin poems. One of these is a forty-six-line ode celebrating the arrival in Jamaica of Governor George Haldane in 1759. Sadly, most of what is known is to be found in the writings of his enemies. Contemporary comment on Williams came almost entirely from hostile whites, who went out of their way to disparage his intellectual and literary achievements. Williams challenged everything they claimed about the inferiority and incapacity of black people, and their place in creation as mere drudges. Edward Long, the prominent pro-slavery planter who denied the humanity of black Africans, devoted a great deal of space in his *History of Jamaica* (1774) to Francis, including one of his poems. Perhaps the most celebrated reference came in the Scottish philosopher David Hume’s infamous footnote M, in his essay “Of National Characters,” first published in 1753 but revised in 1777 to note that in Jamaica “they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but ’tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.” His fame spilled over into the pro-slavery thought of the French as well as the English; he appeared in antislavery literature to opposite effect.

When Francis Williams died in 1762, he was buried in the churchyard of St. Catherine parish church, in Spanish Town. This suggests limited respect for a highly visible and uniquely learned individual, surviving as best he could in the midst of capitalist barbarism. There is nothing to suggest he opposed the slave trade or the fundamentals of slave society. However, he openly challenged white dominance and, unlike other black writers of the period, was not afraid to use black imagery in his literature. He advocated the rights of free black people, his own beleaguered minority class.

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