

PICTON, Sir THOMAS (1758 - 1815), soldier, colonial governor and enslaver

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Name: Thomas Picton

Date of birth: 1758

Date of death: 1815

Partner: Rosetta Smith

Child: Thomas Rose Picton

Child: Richard Rose Picton

Child: Frederick Rose Picton

Child: Augusta Rose Picton

Parent: Thomas Picton

Parent: Cecil Picton (née Powell)

Gender: Male

Occupation: soldier, colonial governor and enslaver

Area of activity: Military; Politics, Government and Political Movements

Author: Marion Löffler



Thomas Picton was born on 24 August 1758 in Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire, the seventh of the twelve children of Thomas Picton (1723-1790), a landowner who traced his ancestry back to the Norman knight William de Pyketon, and his wife Cecil (1728-1806), daughter of the Reverend Edward Powell and a half-sister to Richard Turberville (**TURBERVILLE family** of Coity, Glamorganshire). Growing up at Poyston Hall, the family home in Ruddaxton, he attended Haverfordwest Grammar School until 1771, when he moved to a military academy at Little Chelsea before joining the Twelfth Regiment commanded by his paternal uncle William Picton. He served at Gibraltar before joining the Seventy-Fifth 'Prince of Wales' regiment in 1777, where he was promoted Captain. Until 1796 his only active service was the quelling of a potential military riot in Bristol in 1783 by means of his imposing stature, rough demeanour, foul language and sword. Decommissioned on half-pay, he returned to the paternal home for a period of almost twelve years, and about 1793 he suffered a gun-shot wound to his throat in a duel with **Charles Hassall**, which left him with a rasping voice.

Towards the end of 1794, he sailed on a merchant ship to the West Indies, where he was welcomed in Martinique by fellow-Welshman **Sir John Vaughan**, commander-in-chief of the Leeward Islands, who made him Deputy Quarter-Master General, a position confirmed by his successor Ralph Abercromby, who valued Picton's 'stern look and harsh voice' and his assistance in capturing St Lucia, St Vincent and Grenada in 1796-7. On his departure, Abercromby left Picton as Military Governor of Trinidad for the British Crown, which confirmed that he should continue to govern by 'Spanish law'. Picton succeeded in doubling sugar production to fourteen million pounds weight between 1799 and 1802, and was promoted Brigadier General and confirmed as Civil Governor by the Crown in 1801, complimented by governmental circles on his 'ability and zeal'. However, Picton's 'trimmed down' Spanish law amounted to a 'a brand of justice that was seldom tempered by mercy', according to Chris Evans, his brutal governance resulting in the execution of thirty-five people during his time as governor (some of them for raping free women of colour). It was the enslaved inhabitants of the island, among them those on his own plantations, who felt 'the full force' of a new 'slave code' introduced by him, and which carried extremely harsh sentences. Picton's partner and the mother of his four children, free woman of colour Rosetta Smith, appears to have been complicit in his régime, running a parallel network of spies and using Picton's forces to intimidate competitors to their businesses.

Following a campaign of brutal punishment of the enslaved in 1801-1802, the torture of a free fourteen year-old girl of colour, Louisa Calderon, accused of involvement in the theft of £2,000 from a Pedro Ruiz, and a petition drawn up by British subjects in the island, Picton was demoted to Third Commissioner to Colonel William Fullarton's First Commissioner, who made systematic inquiries into Picton's governance and put in train sweeping reforms. Picton resigned on 18 February 1803, the sixth anniversary of the conquest of Trinidad. However, in Fullarton's absence, and with the support of most of the French and Spanish planters on the island (who would offer substantial financial support during his later trials), Picton resumed power, now as a de facto dictator, until relieved of all posts and sailing for Britain in June 1803.

In London, Picton faced several trials for misuse of power. The trials were preceded and accompanied by an illustrated press and public campaign designed to titillate, because of the age and gender of Louisa Calderon, as much as to accuse and inform. Arrested in December 1803, Picton faced thirty-two charges of which only the charge relating to Calderon was pursued from May 1804. The first trial did not come to court until 1806, when Lord Chief Justice Ellenborough presided and Picton was found guilty. However, both defence and prosecution in all trials were based on whether the Spanish law compendium (*Recopilación*) allowed torture and applied to Trinidad, and whether torture had habitually been used there and on other West Indian islands. Different accounts on this, and the death of Fullarton, meant that re-trials in 1808 and 1812 were inconclusive.

By 1808, the British establishment was responding to the pan-European Napoleonic threat, and Picton re-joined the army for active service during the unsuccessful Waicheren expedition of summer 1809, but distinguished himself during Wellington's Peninsula War of 1809-12 as commander of the Third Division. Having recuperated in Wales from a bout of malaria, he was made a Knight of the Order of the Bath in February and elected the Tory Member for Pembrokeshire boroughs in March 1813. Now Sir Thomas Picton, he rejoined his Third Division in April 1813 and participated in Wellington's re-conquest of Europe.

Sir Thomas Picton died at the Battle of Waterloo on 18 June 1815, at the helm of his Division despite severe wounds sustained two days earlier. He was the most senior officer killed in that battle. In the only surviving **war diary** by a common Welsh soldier, Private Thomas Jeremiah described him as 'our commander, right hand man and the talisman of the army among his men'. He was buried in the family vault at St George's cemetery in Hanover Square, London, on 3 July 1815. In his last will and testament, he bequeathed his estates on Trinidad to his brother, Rev. Edward Picton, and £1,000 to each of his 'four natural or reputed children by Rosette Smith', of whom we have the names Thomas Rose, Richard Rose and Augusta Rose.

Public commemorations of Picton would be dominated by his image as 'hero of Waterloo' for over a century. Sir Thomas Picton was the subject set for the Chair competition at the eisteddfod held in Carmarthen in 1819, which was won by **Gwallter Mechain**. Other poems in that competition were composed by **John Howell**, **William Edwards**, **Thomas Williams** (Gwilym Morgannwg), and **David Saunders**. In 1828, a monument to Picton was erected at Carmarthen by public subscription; in 1836, one of the first Welsh biographical dictionaries claimed that his 'meritorious life was distinguished for his zeal in the service of his country'; in 1846 the by then unsafe original Carmarthen monument was replaced by a stele which survived into the twenty-first century. On 8 June 1859, Picton's remains were transferred to St Paul's Cathedral, the only Welshman to be (re)buried there. Patriotic poems celebrated him at the outbreak of the Boer and the Great War, and his statue was one of twelve 'national heroes' sponsored by **Lord Rhondda** and erected in the newly-built Cardiff City Hall by 1916. He featured as a heroic commander in a video game about the Napoleonic Wars in 2010, by which time Robert Havard's meticulous biography of him had provided a sound foundation for shorter assessments by twenty-first century scholars. Yet it was not until the Black Lives Matter movement that his public monuments were reinterpreted between 2020 and 2023, the statue in Cardiff City Hall being boxed in prior to removal. Following the 'Reframing Picton' project, his portrait in the National Museum of Wales is now displayed in a travel frame and is accessible only via an exhibition contextualising his life.

Picton has been branded an 'ogre' and a 'villain', and he certainly was an enslaver and architect of a brutal colonial régime on Trinidad. Yet his condemnation must take note of the fact that singling out this one man for punishment and vilification enabled the Crown and British establishment to hide the systematic dehumanization, exploitation, violation and murder of enslaved people that fed the British Empire economy, and the systemic racism on which the British Empire was built. Any reassessment of Picton's life and legacy must include considerations of the legal, political and economic system that enabled, indeed encouraged and rewarded, his actions and dominated public memory for almost two hundred years.

Author

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