CHARLES WESLEY, THE MEN OF OLD CALABAR, AND THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY[1]

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This article examines a small body of correspondence from the captives Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin John, to Charles Wesley in 1774. They give us a first-hand description of the experience of conditions aboard a slave ship and provide a glimpse into the relationship between slaves and Methodists in the years before the abolition of slavery became an issue for evangelicals in England. The resourcefulness and determination of the Robin Johns to return to their home country demonstrates that slaves may not be seen merely as helpless victims rescued from their plight by benevolent Europeans. Instead they could draw on their own experience and skills to overcome their trials. The language of the letters is pervaded with Methodist piety and suggests that in the 1770s slave trading was seen as wrong by Methodists, helping us to explain their later involvement in the abolitionist movement led by Quakers and Anglicans. Though we know little with certainty about Charles Wesley's views on slavery, this small body of correspondence suggests that he was convinced of its evils and that he contributed, even if in a small way, to its final abolition.

Several years ago, I was looking through the papers of Charles Wesley in the Methodist archives in Manchester when I came across some unusual letters. Among the hundreds of letters that Charles Wesley received and wrote, there is a small collection from two young Methodist converts in Bristol named Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin John. Many young converts wrote to Charles for advice or to report their spiritual experiences and in some ways these letters were not unusual. The first surviving letter informed Charles:

> We have been informed by Mr Jones that you was ill when he left London for which we are Extremely Sorry and Shall always offer up twenty Prayers for your health. Yesterday we had the pleasure of seeing

[1] This paper was delivered at the Symposium held at Kingsley College on 24 October 2007 to mark the Tercentenary of the Birth of Charles Wesley.

> your brother he preached at the Room both morning and evening... but so many people follow'd Him he had not time to talk with us then.[2]

This solicitous concern for Charles's health and news of his busy brother John was fairly standard among the letters Charles regularly received. What made these two men and their letters stand out from Charles's other correspondents, however, was that the two converts were Africans and ex-slaves. In their letters to Charles they described their extraordinary experiences, which included a narrow escape from a massacre, enslavement, several journeys across the Atlantic and a long struggle for freedom involving the highest legal authorities in England.

As well as telling a dramatic story, these letters are historically significant. They give us an account of the experience of slavery from the pen of those who had experienced it – an unusual thing in itself. More broadly they provide a rare picture of an encounter between slaves and Methodists in the years before the abolition of slavery became a burning issue for evangelicals in England. The letters were written in 1774 – fifteen years before Wilberforce made his first speech on the issue of slavery to parliament. In the long term, of all English evangelicals, Methodists became the most passionate supporters of abolition – Methodist women were the single largest group to sign the massive anti-slavery petition of 1831.[3] It is therefore interesting to look at this early encounter for what it reveals about Methodist attitudes to slavery in this earlier period.

When I found the letters I was excited – they are listed in the catalogue of Charles Wesley's papers, but I had never seen them mentioned in any scholarship on either Wesley or on British slavery. While they weren't really relevant to the research I was doing at the time, I thought they would make a wonderful book later on. Sadly for me, I was pipped at the post. A couple of years ago, an American historian named Randy Sparks brought out a book on the two men which begins with the story of Sparks' exciting discovery of the letters in the Manchester archives![4] So I am not going to be the first to tell this story. But, since 2007 happens to mark both the

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[2] Ancona Robin John to Charles Wesley, 8 August 1774. DDCW 2/3. Methodist Archives and Research Centre (MARC), John Rylands University Library Manchester.
[3] David Hempton and John Walsh, "E.P. Thompson and Methodism," in *God and Mammon: Protestants, Money and the Market, 1790-1860* ed. Mark A. Noll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 113.
[4] Randy Sparks, *Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Odyssey* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004).

tercentenary of Charles Wesley's birth and the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, I thought it might be a good opportunity to tell the extraordinary story of the Robin Johns as recorded in their letters to Charles Wesley. Even though Charles Wesley's voice is largely silent in this story – he is the recipient of the letters rather than their author – we do learn something about him from the way the men related to him.

The Robin Johns were originally from the region of Old Calabar, an important trade centre on the Bight of Biafra, in what is now Nigeria.[5] Ephraim was the brother of the most powerful man in Old Calabar, Grandy King George Robin John, and Ancona Robin was their nephew. The Robin Johns were the wealthiest and most influential clan in Calabar and their wealth and influence came from their involvement in one of the most lucrative trades of the time: the trade in slaves. Each year, the slave ships of Britain docked at the sea port of Old Calabar, and bought thousands of slaves that the Robin Johns and their clan had abducted on raids up into the Niger River region. The clan developed close working relationships with the British slave traders and acquired the skills and trappings of the international traders of the time. Probably, as in many similar slave-trading clans, the sons of the leading men learned to write or at least read a level of English. Grandy King George purchased furniture and fine goods from the British traders and dressed in European attire on important occasions.

In 1767, however, trouble flared up between Grandy King George and a rival slave-trading clan. The rivalry between the two clans virtually brought trade to a stop, as the two groups blocked each others' access to the regions where slaves were raided. The British slave ship captains, frustrated that slaves were becoming increasingly sparse and expensive, became involved in the conflict. Grandy King George and his closest men were invited to come on board the docked slave ships as a neutral space in which a deal could be brokered between the two clans. Ephraim and Ancona, as members of Grandy King George's family, were included in this group, as was another royal brother, Ambo Robin John.

It is from this point in the story that we gain a perspective from the participants themselves. In his second surviving letter to Charles Wesley, Ancona recounted that he, Ephraim and Ambo, while

[5] The following information about Old Calabar and the clan of Grandy King George comes from Sparks, *Two Princes of Calabar*, 10-32.

waiting on one of the slave ships, began to realise that they had been betrayed. He wrote:

> My Brother Ambo upon the first appearance of the fraud which was discovered by the Captain and mate coming in to the Cabin with pistols which my Brother saw & felt for the Capt. Stroke him on the head then my Brother seized the Captain & men & threw them on the floor but behind him were those that were cutting him on ye head and neck till he were spent & 'must all kill'd at which Time he cryed out O Capt. Bevans what fashion is this for white men to killed Black men so he cryed for mercy but obtained none but was thrown up to the hands of his Enemies who cut off his head and on the side of the ship this being Done they sunk ye canoes and drowned more than we can tell.[6]

The British slave ship captains had in fact conspired with the rival slave-trading clan to ambush the Robin Johns. As Ephraim and Ancona watched, the war canoes of the rival clan emerged from hiding places and, with the help of the slave canoes, began attacking the men of their clan. Many were massacred.

This conspiracy and the resulting massacre was, of course, completely illegal and some years later the whole event was to be investigated by the British Parliament. In the short-term it devastated the slave-trading empire of Grandy King George and led to his clan turning to the highly profitable palm sugar trade instead. For Ephraim and Ancona, however, it meant the beginning of an entirely different existence. Like many of those who survived the massacre, they were turned into slaves, and sent on the appalling journey to which they had themselves doomed many others.

For eighteenth and nineteenth century abolitionists – as anyone who has seen the movie *Amazing Grace* will be aware – the most potent symbol of the suffering caused by the slave trade was the slave ship. Here, as the abolitionists informed people, men and women were packed in rows upon rows, with little space and little air, force fed, raped and tortured at any sign of resistance, for the two months or so of the journey from Africa to the Caribbean.[7] In Ancona's account of their enslavement, he does not mention the experience of this journey, though we know from the records that the ship on which they sailed was more tightly packed than many –

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[6] Ancona Robin John to Charles Wesley, 17 August 1774. DDCW 2/4, MARC.

[7] For a good account of slave ships and the abolitionist response to them, see Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005).

with only five square feet per slave – and that of 336 captives who began the journey only 272 survived. It seems quite possible Ephraim and Ancona might have been used as quartermasters on the ship, thus being spared the worst conditions of the slaves.

In Ancona's account, the next thing he mentions is that on arriving in Domenica, the two men were sold to a French doctor. He wrote: "We was treated according to what they could meke of us upon ye whole not badly but we were determined to get home."[8] This determination can be seen as a result of the men's former involvement in the slave trade: unlike many of the people they themselves had sold into slavery, they understood the slave trading system, they could read maps, they knew that people did make their way back to Africa from the plantations of America and the Caribbean. This determination clearly sustained them. But in the short term it did them little good. Ancona wrote that they were then sold on to a Captain Thomson in Virginia who was a far harsher master. "He would tie me up & whip me many times for nothing at all then some time because I could not Dress his Diner for im not understanding how to it and he was excidingly badly men ever I saw."[9] Reporting his ill treatment at the hands of Captain Thomson, Ancona commented "I hope almighty great God he observe me from all Great Danger... and gave me knowledge to remember what I have suffer[ed]."[10]

This reference to God's observation of his danger perhaps relates to what Ancona next recounted: while walking on deck one day, after complaining of a belly ache, Captain Thomson suddenly fell down dead. This terrified all those on the ship, Ancona wrote "everybody in that case all thinking he has been so bad man and weeked and Great God above s[aw] him how he deserve."[11] With Thomson dead, the two men were able to find a sympathetic British ship's captain, O'Neill who promised to take them back to his home town of Bristol, where they could find passage back to Africa. After much suffering, it seemed as though the Robin Johns might be able to make their way home.

Here Ancona's account breaks off and the story was picked up in a letter written to Charles on the same day by Ephraim. Once back in Bristol, the men prepared to disembark. But, Ephraim wrote, O'Neill

[8] Ancona Robin John to Charles Wesley, 17 August 1774. DDCW 2/4, MARC.
[9] Ancona Robin John to Charles Wesley, 17 August 1774. DDCW 2/4, MARC.
[10] Ancona Robin John to Charles Wesley, 17 August 1774. DDCW 2/4, MARC.
[11] Ancona Robin John to Charles Wesley, 17 August 1774. DDCW 2/4, MARC.

> alter'd his mind and never return to us but order the pilot to put us aboard [a transport] vessel which Did to our great surprise & horror when he come to put on the irons we then with ters and trembling began to prayer to God to help us in this Deplorable Condition we lay for 13 days among the wretched transport.[12]

Kept in irons below deck in a ship docked in Bristol, the men were at first in despair, but then Ephraim wrote "the Lord helped us." They remembered a Bristol sea captain, Mr Jones, with whom they had done business when they were slave traders in Calabar. Ephraim wrote several letters to Jones, imploring him to help them and, at the last minute, Jones turned up. When the Captain of the ship refused to release the Robin Johns, Jones got a warrant and had them taken off the ship and put in prison while their case was being decided.

At this point, the muddy waters of British legislation surrounding slavery in the late eighteenth century came to the brothers' aid. Two years earlier, in 1772, the Chief Justice, Lord Mansfield, had ruled that an escaped slave named James Somerset who had made his way to England from America, could not be re-enslaved under British law. This ruling was not intended to outlaw slavery in Britain, but it did open some complicated legal loopholes that at this time were being explored. Ephraim was obviously aware of this process, because from the prison in Bristol he wrote directly to Lord Mansfield. Mansfield had the men taken to London, where he examined them. After some further legal wrangling, including some skillful legal arguments from Ephraim, Mansfield discharged them under the same legal provisions which had freed Somerset. Finally, six years after they had been taken into slavery, they were free men.

This, then, was the story of the Robin Johns' journey across the world – from Africa to the Caribbean, to Virginia, to Bristol. But what about their spiritual journey? The letters of Ephraim and Ancona are full of the language of Methodist piety. Ephraim began the narrative letter I have just been quoting with an account of his spiritual progress:

> Blessed be the Lord he gives us to Reading his Word all the Daylong and it is very sweet to us your Brother has been so kind as to talk to us and has given us the Sacrament thrice. I find him so good as to shew me where I do wrong I feel in My heart great trouble & see great deal more

[12] Ephraim Robin John to Charles Wesley, 17 August 1774. DDCW 2/5, MARC.

> of my own faults & the faults of my Country men which I hope the Lord will permit me to tell them when I get home.[13]

How and why did two African ex-slaves come to embrace the spiritual world and language of the Methodists? Ephraim wrote that while in Bristol they had told Mr Jones that they wanted to "read is Lord Word" and that they had then been introduced to Charles himself. "After which you read to us that which we were so new and good to us that we were glad to hear it every Day and still we find it Better and Better."[14] This suggests that their exposure to Methodism was relatively recent, but in their accounts of their enslavement, they repeatedly mention praying or calling out to God. And their desire to hear the Lord's Word read indicates some spiritual interest.

In his book, Randy Sparks speculates about the meanings of and motivations for Ephraim and Ancona's conversion. He notes the openness to new ideas within the religion of the Calabar region from which the brothers came – a monotheistic religion known as Ekpe; the value of conversion to Christianity for those like the Robin Johns who wanted acceptance in British culture; as well as the attractions of Methodism itself, as a relatively egalitarian religious movement.[15] Interestingly, when Ancona wrote about his mistreatment by his harsh master, Captain Thompson, he recounted an occasion on which a man on ship tried unsuccessfully to stop Thompson from flogging Ancona. This man, Ancona said, seemed to be very sorry that Ancona was flogged – "seemed to be good Chrastian." This suggests that the Robin Johns had already developed some distinction between the behaviour of their violent master and that of a 'good Chrastian'.

Whatever the reasons, Ancona and Ephraim professed conversion and wrote of their love for Scripture, their comfort in the sacraments, their spiritually significant dreams and their desire to amend their lives – all typical characteristics of the ardent Methodist in the late eighteenth century.

This spiritual change had implications for their future lives. As the quote from Ephraim suggests, the two men desired to return to Calabar and tell their people the Gospel. Ephraim said that he was increasingly aware of "my own faults & the faults of my Countrymen." One of the faults of which he appears to have become

[13] Ephraim Robin John to Charles Wesley, 17 August 1774. DDCW 2/5, MARC.
[14] Ephraim Robin John to Charles Wesley, 17 August 1774. DDCW 2/5, MARC.
[15] Sparks, *Two Princes of Calabar*, 107-126.

conscious was that of his slave-trading past. This becomes clear in a letter written from Ephraim to Charles later in 1774. Ephraim wrote that it was "much on my Mind that [] how shall I pay My good friend Mr Jones who has been so kind in laying out so much money to searve us?"[16] Jones had not only rescued and accommodated the men, but also paid out large sums of money to secure them berth on a ship back to Calabar. Ephraim continued "if we must not sell slaves I know not how we shall pay him."

Clearly, under Methodist discipling, the brothers had been told that slave-trading was incompatible with the Christian life. This suggests that quite early in the movement – by the 1770s – slave trading was seen as wrong. And specifically, that Charles Wesley was convinced of this. In fact, we know little of Charles's views on slavery. We know that, like John, he had been confronted by the experience of slavery in America in 1736, and he wrote in his diary of his horror at the cruel practices of slave owners.[17] But though John Wesley wrote powerfully against slavery, I have not found any equivalent statement by Charles. Of the six thousand or so hymns that he wrote, there are plenty on social and political issues, from the American War of Independence to the practice of women sending their children to wet nurses, but none on slavery. Here, though, it becomes clear that he was preaching that slavery and Methodist faith were incompatible.

The troubles of the Robin Johns were not entirely over. In August 1774, they boarded a ship purchased by Mr Jones, in order to take them back to Calabar. But the Captain was drunk and ran the ship aground. Within a week or two the men were back in Bristol. It took another six weeks for Jones to find a ship that would take them and this time they were able to make it safely back to Calabar. A year later, Charles wrote in a letter that "my 2 African children got safe home." Ancona had written that they were preaching their new-found faith and though their countrymen had originally laughed at them, "many...were now glad to sit by and hear them read the Bible." History is generally less neat than fiction and, in spite of Ephraim's good resolutions, it seems that the two men probably became involved in slave-trading again.[18] But a few years after they arrived

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[16] Ephraim Robin John to Charles Wesley, included in letter from Elizabeth Johnson to Charles Wesley, 27 August 1774. DDCW 2/9, MARC.
[17] See 2 August 1736, *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.,* ed. Thomas Jackson, vol 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 36-37.
[18] Randy Sparks suggests that this was the most likely outcome. Sparks, *Two Princes of Calabar*, 127-145.

home, they invited the English Methodists to send missionaries to Calabar, which resulted in a brief Methodist mission there.

Well, this is an interesting story out of the archives, but what is its historical significance? I'd suggest a few things. In the first place, I note Ancona's strong statement of the men's determination to get home, their actions in writing to Mr Jones from their imprisonment in the ship; writing to the Chief Justice and making detailed legal arguments about their case; seeking spiritual knowledge through contact with the Methodists. The history of abolition has suffered somewhat from a tendency to portray slaves simply as helpless victims, rescued by the benevolence of good white men like Wilberforce. This account reminds us that slaves were not simply victims but people who drew on their own resources and will power to respond to the appalling experience that befell them. Not all of them had Ancona and Ephraim's opportunities and skills, but many acted in profoundly determined, resourceful and courageous ways to survive the experience of slavery.

In addition, this story provides new evidence for the long-term opposition of Methodists to slavery. This perhaps helps explain why Methodists joined so enthusiastically in the abolitionist movement, even though its main leaders were Quakers and Anglicans.

Finally, it gives us a new perspective on Charles Wesley. Even though Charles is silent for much of this narrative, he is the focus of much affection and respect from Ancona and Ephraim. They clearly valued his pastoral ministry to them and found him a caring and supportive friend. Recent studies of Charles Wesley have emphasised his ability as a pastor, and these letters certainly add to that argument. It also gives us evidence of an area in which he was socially radical – a surprise, in some ways, because in many areas he was politically and socially conservative. Clearly, however, he was preaching that slave trading and Christian faith were mutually exclusive. In this small way, I like to think, he contributed to the long-term battle for the abolition of slavery.