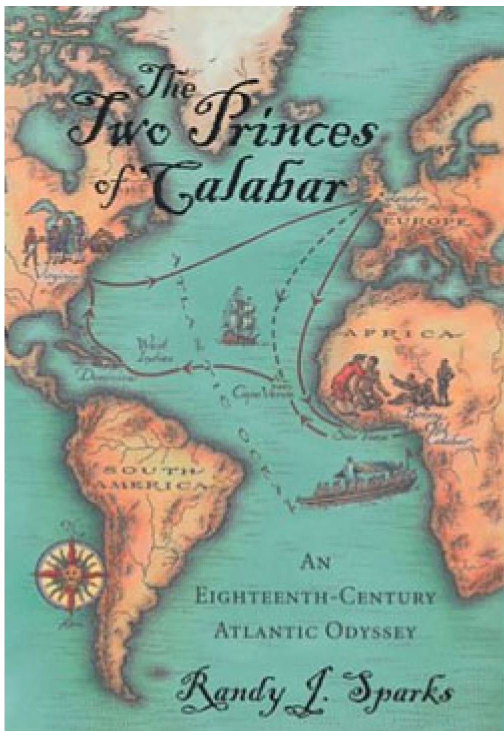
Captors to Captives to Christians to Calabar



The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey

The largest forced migration in human history has left a powerfully silent documentary record for historians to work from. Given the long-lasting historical repercussions of the estimated eleven million African captives forced to cross the Atlantic from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, we know amazingly little about the individual experiences of the horrific middle passage. Those who controlled and directed the trade were far more interested in quantifying the cargo to determine profits than in somehow accounting for the humanity of the individual captives.

Historian Randy Sparks's slim but extremely informative book corrects this silence. It tells the remarkable story of two African princes enslaved at Old Calabar in the Bight of Biafra, taken first to the Caribbean and then shipped to Virginia. They then escaped to England where they sued for their freedom, and finally made their way back to Old Calabar. Sparks's study began not with a research proposal and set of historical questions to answer, but a chance encounter in the archives. While conducting research at the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England, on the topic of nineteenth century American and British Methodism, Sparks encountered a series of letters by former slaves to Charles Wesley, the brother of the founder of Methodism, John Wesley. The letters were written by Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin John,

natives of Old Calabar, a principal source for the Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth century. The brothers Robin John called upon and received assistance from Charles Wesley to gain their freedom and guide their conversion to Methodism. Rather than setting the sources aside as part of that never-ending wish list historians tend to compile for future studies, Sparks studied the letters in detail and searched for other sources that could shed light on the Robin Johns' odyssey. The result is a much-needed examination of the transatlantic slave trade centered on the lives of two individuals. In Sparks's hands, the Robin Johns' story allows us "to translate those statistics [of the slave trade] into people" (5).

Sparks's book is a testament to the ongoing convergence over the last thirty years among the specialized fields of colonial North American history, Latin American and Caribbean history, and African history under the rather broad title of Atlantic history. The Robin Johns' odyssey could not be told any other way. History conveniently divided by nation-state boundaries and imperial rule to conform to academic specialization has neglected how fluid these commercial, cultural, political, and social boundaries have been since the fifteenth century. While the increasing interest in the field of Atlantic history undoubtedly reflects contemporary concerns (as with all historiographical trends), namely globalization and the origins of transnationalism, scholars of once-specialized fields are situating their studies within multiple contents to speak to multiple audiences.

The Robin Johns' enslavement and liberation resulted from their active roles as slave traders at the West African region of Old Calabar. Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin John were members of the elite Efik slave traders of Old Calabar and participated in the Ekpe secret society that governed the commercial relations with Atlantic traders. As Old Calabar grew from a small town in the late seventeenth century to one of the most important slave trading regions of the eighteenth century, Efik traders such as the Robin Johns came to dominate Old Calabar society. The Robin Johns' ability to speak and write English and a pidgin trade language (even before they left Africa), and effectively move through the cultural milieus of Africa, America, and Europe, Sparks shows, was indicative of the increasing interconnectedness of the Atlantic littoral.

The Robin Johns' power and control of the trade, which often resulted in British traders being held captive until higher prices were agreed upon, ultimately created the conditions of their undoing. In 1767 British slave traders aggravated with paying exceedingly high costs demanded by Old Calabar Efik traders directly assisted rivals at nearby New Town in a bloody massacre that resulted in the capture of the Robin Johns. Immediately upon enslavement in Old Calabar, the Robin Johns began to use their intimate knowledge and connections developed through years of participating in the Atlantic slave trade to scheme for their freedom. Sparks rightfully concludes that "[h]owever rare such cases may have been, the Robin Johns knew what most captives did not—that it was possible to make their way home" (73).

The Robin Johns earned the title “Two Princes” upon enslavement because they clearly set themselves apart from other Africans. Their knowledge of the English language and well-known connections to merchants trading in the Atlantic served to keep them away from what Sidney Mintz aptly described as the “agro-industrial graveyards” of the plantations. Upon arrival on the British Caribbean island of Dominica, they spent seven months working for a French physician who undoubtedly found their English-language abilities a great asset. While on Dominica, the Robin Johns made their plight known through smuggling channels and promised a handsome reward upon their return to Old Calabar. William Sharp of Liverpool contacted the Robin Johns and told them if they could make their way to his ship he would return them to Africa. Sharp, however, was bound not for Africa, but for Virginia, where he sold the Robin Johns. The brothers proved equally determined to escape their Virginia enslavement. They contacted Captain Terence O’Neil who promised to return them to Africa after their return voyage to Bristol if they could escape to his ship.

Although the Robin Johns had never been to Bristol, they certainly knew much more about the city than the average African trapped in the Atlantic slave trade. One of the great strengths of Sparks’s book is his examination of the numerous Atlantic connections between Bristol and Old Calabar. Merchants from Bristol and Liverpool dominated the trade from Old Calabar, and approximately 85 percent of the 1.2 million slaves exported from the area in the eighteenth century left on English ships. Several Old Calabar Efik traders sent sons to England to learn English and solidify commercial relations.

Luckily, the Robin Johns landed in Bristol at a fortuitous moment. In 1772 Chief Justice Lord Mansfield ruled that James Somerset, who had been brought to England as a slave by his Virginia master but had escaped, could not be re-enslaved and forcibly sent outside the country against his will. The Robin Johns sued for their freedom on the basis that they would be sent back to Virginia and sold as slaves against their will. Unable to establish a “legitimate” account for the Robin Johns enslavement, Lord Mansfield declared them free in 1773. Shortly thereafter, they began their return journey back to Old Calabar.

In their seven-year odyssey crisscrossing the Atlantic the Robin Johns repeatedly drew upon their connections established as Efik slave traders, but also sought out new allies to assist them in their quest for freedom. During their stay in Bristol, the cradle of English Methodism, they sought out Charles Wesley and became associates of his family. Sparks warns that reading the Robin Johns’ conversion to Methodism as merely a strategy for freedom is far too simplistic as their personal letters attest to spiritual and emotional convictions, even though it undoubtedly helped their case. As traders conversant in multiple languages and cultures, the Efik were particularly receptive to other belief systems, molding them to their own values. For Sparks, their conversion to Methodism serves as another example of their ongoing process of creolization. In regard to the significance of their embrace

of Methodism, he argues, “their conversion was an act of defiance, an effort to erase concepts of difference and inferiority based on race through religion” (115).

While conversion allowed the Robin Johns to claim equality with other Methodists by demonstrating they were just as equal as any whites in regard to Christianity, we need a more complex discussion of what defiance specifically means. How conversion represented a form of resistance different from other strategies to end their own enslavement is not clear from Sparks’s analysis or the Robin Johns’ subsequent actions. This is not a problem specific to Sparks’s analysis, but one that marks slave studies in general. While the emphasis on resistance has been necessary to destroy the “Sambo Myth” of slavery, the scholarly tendency to label any agency on the part of the slaves as resistance has severely dulled its effectiveness as an analytical tool.

The hardest lesson for modern readers of the Robin Johns’ extraordinary story will undoubtedly be that they never renounced the slave trade or slavery. Avoiding both disappointment and shock, Sparks concludes that they returned to slave trading. Here lies the tragic consequence of Atlantic slavery and the close relationship between slavery and freedom. Without their personal investment in the slave trade, the Robin Johns most likely would not have gained their freedom.

In the slave societies bordering the early-modern Atlantic, whether they were connected by trade such as that between Old Calabar and Bristol or plantations in the Americas, the clearest indication of personal freedom was marked not by individual autonomy and economic independence, but by ownership of another human being. With great care, engaging prose, and appreciation for the complexities and contradictions of the human condition, Randy Sparks allows the Robin Johns’ story to vividly illustrate the few triumphs and numerous tragedies that marked the transatlantic slave trade.

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