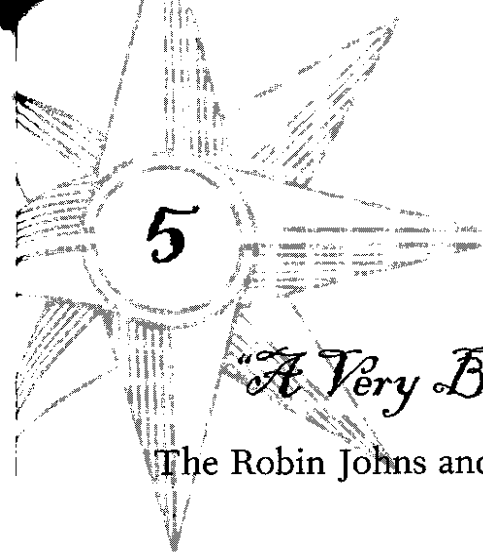


The Two Princes of Calabar

settled out of court. Clearly, Bivins was unwilling to face the Robin Johns in Mansfield's court, where the bloody details of the Massacre of 1767 would be laid before the bench and the public. It may also be that the closely knit slave traders in Bristol, who had their own reasons for not wanting to have the case heard given the actions of the captains in the massacre, brought pressure to bear on him. The intriguing possibilities behind the compromise aside, Little Ephraim and Ancona walked out of jail in Bristol as the freemen they so adamantly claimed to be.



"A Very Blessed Time"

The Robin Johns and English Methodism

When Little Ephraim and Ancona found themselves locked in irons on board the *Brickdale* contemplating a return to enslavement in Virginia, "with tears and trembling" they "began to pray to God to help us in this Deplorable condition." But to what God did they pray? According to Little Ephraim, he and Ancona asked Thomas Jones for religious instruction after they were released from prison. They had heard of Charles Wesley, the famed Methodist hymnodist, and asked specifically to be brought to him "that we may soon come to have some knowledge of God." Their interest in Christianity raises intriguing questions about their motivation. They could well have simulated this sudden piety to facilitate their return home, but features of Efik religion and culture made the Efik unusually receptive to other

belief systems. The evidence strongly suggests that the Robin Johns' conversions were genuine and lasting, but also useful as they negotiated their way through the Anglo-Atlantic World.

The Robin Johns may have learned the basic tenets of the Christian faith from the slave traders with whom they interacted at Old Calabar, but seamen were a notoriously irreligious lot. John Newton, the slave trader turned cleric, described the effect of the slave trade on those Europeans engaged in it; "I know of no method of getting money, not even that of robbing for it upon the highway, which has so direct a tendency to efface the moral sense, to rob the heart of every gentle and humane disposition, and to harden it, like steel, against all impressions of sensibility."¹ Despite their adoption of many of the trappings of English culture, particularly those that facilitated commerce, there is no evidence that any of the Efik converted to Christianity before the arrival of Presbyterian missionaries in the nineteenth century.

Could the Robin Johns' interest in Christianity have been tied to their desire for freedom? Although both legal thought and popular opinion on the subject was complex and varied, there was certainly a widely held belief on the part of many Englishmen and enslaved Africans that while Christians could enslave infidels, they could not legally enslave other Christians. Sir Thomas Coke, England's most influential legal theorist, ruled that Christians could enslave infidels, but no basis for chattel

slavery existed in English common law. In 1729, after considerable legal wrangling and confusion, the English Attorney-General and Solicitor-General issued formal opinions arguing that baptism did not change the status of a slave brought to Great Britain. American colonists had already taken matters into their own hands, and beginning with Maryland in 1664, slave-holding colonies passed their own laws clearly stating that baptism did not confer freedom on slaves. Such legislation continued to be enacted in British America as late as 1781, and as the historian David Brion Davis has pointed out, "the continuing insistence of such legislation revealed a deep-seated doubt" about the effects of baptism on the legal status of slaves.²

In Virginia, where the Robin Johns spent the longest time in slavery, the question of the compatibility of Christianity and enslavement was a thorny one. The historian Edmund Morgan has noted that "before the 1660s it seems to have been assumed that Christianity and slavery were incompatible." Morgan found early examples of Africans and Indians who sued for their freedom and won it on the basis of baptism, but the Virginia Assembly closed that loophole in 1667. Still, doubts persisted. The doctrine of Christian equality inherently challenged the racist underpinnings of the slave system, and enslaved converts often transferred doctrines of spiritual freedom and equality into the secular realm. Despite the 1667 law, slaves did not lose hope that conversion might

break their bonds. One Anglican clergyman in Virginia reported to his superior in 1729 that some enslaved converts believed that "at some time or another Christianity will help them to their freedom." A year later the Anglican minister James Blair reported that one factor contributing to a rumored slave rebellion was that a number of black converts believed "that the king designed that all christians should be made free." That belief persisted in England, where "much of the impetus behind conversion of English slaves came from the blacks themselves who widely—but mistakenly—believed that baptism or marriage bestowed automatic freedom." The role that Christianity played in inspiring slave revolts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provides clear evidence that the link between Christian faith and freedom remained deeply embedded in African American Christianity.³

The Robin Johns might well have been exposed to these beliefs, which were gaining wide currency in Virginia owing to the rapid spread of evangelicalism in the 1760s and 1770s. The New Light Baptist and Methodist faiths, for example, spread to the Tidewater in the 1770s and especially to port cities, including Portsmouth and Norfolk, where the Robin Johns would have traveled on their master's ship. Methodist revivals began in Virginia in the 1760s. Indeed, the coastal region and its primary ports formed one of the Methodists' first conferences—a conference was a network of churches—and was the

base of support of black Methodism in Virginia. Ancona implied that his faith in Christianity began in Virginia. When he described his suffering at the hands of John Thompson he wrote, "I Hop[e] almight[y] great God he observe me from all great Danger so did."⁴ The "great God" he called upon could have been Abasi, the high god of the Efik, though the fact that he wrote this passage to Charles Wesley strongly suggests that he referred to the Christian God.

Knowledge of Methodism in Virginia could explain why the Robin Johns asked to meet Charles Wesley. Another possibility is that Thomas Jones, himself a Methodist, directed them to the Wesleys, though the records suggest that the request originated with the Robin Johns themselves. The fact that they made their request only after they were freed from their jail cell is also suggestive. Had they sought to use conversion to build a case for their manumission, surely they would have adopted it while their case hung in the balance. It is possible that they saw conversion as additional "insurance" against any attempt to reenslave them before they reached Old Calabar, but it seems more likely that their conversions were genuine.

If Ancona and Little Ephraim found Jesus under the ministry of Charles and John Wesley, how can their attraction to Methodism be understood? Elements of Efik religion and culture can help to answer this question. The introduction of Ekpe and its ready adoption demon-

strate that the Efik were open to other belief systems. Early missionaries found the Efik to be remarkably inclusive in their worship and reported that they quite easily shifted their attendance between Christian and traditional worship "without any pangs of conscience." Nineteenth-century missionaries in Old Calabar reported that the Efik believed that the powers of their god stopped at Parrot Island and that "the God of the white man" presided over the sea. Although it is impossible to read backward from such sources with any certainty, if the Robin Johns shared that view it could explain why they looked to the Christian god for assistance.⁵

Another factor in their conversion could be the Efik slave traders' eagerness to adopt aspects of English culture and to be recognized as "gentlemen." The Efik embraced English clothing, housing, goods, language and even table manners, but not English religion. It may be that the hardened English slave traders accorded the Efik the status of gentlemen without concern for their religious beliefs, and they certainly made no efforts to convert them to Christianity, but the Robin Johns would have found a different situation outside Old Calabar. The English considered the Africans' heathenism to be a principal failing, "a fundamental defect which set them distinctly apart."⁶ The Robin Johns' conversion removed one of the most obvious marks of their otherness and opened the door to a world of close fellowship and support among the hardy Methodists of Bristol.

Methodism attracted African and African American converts in British North America and in England, and the Robin Johns' experience can be compared with that of other Africans in the eighteenth century. A number of enslaved Africans and African Americans who recorded their experiences during that period converted to Christianity. Almost all of them joined dissenting sects, and a surprising number converted to Methodism. John Marrant, Olaudah Equiano, and Robert Wedderburn, the authors of three important eighteenth-century slave narratives, all found salvation among the Methodists. Were there unique characteristics of Methodism that attracted them? Methodists reached out to humble folk, and their rituals and practices, including class meetings, love feasts, and extempore preaching and prayer, ushered converts into a supportive and emotional network of believers where each individual was considered precious in the sight of God. They rejected many of the traditional social values of the day, including those based on race, and offered all comers an ecstatic release from their sins and isolation. Ultimately, Methodists sought "a collective, emancipating sense of divine power."⁷ It is no wonder that Africans and African Americans were drawn to them.

Conversion marked another step in the Robin Johns' ongoing process of creolization. Throughout the Americas, slaves found in Christianity a language of protest, liberation, and reform, and they appropriated it, melded

it with traditional African beliefs, and created their own rich, synthetic religious systems. When Africans or African Americans experienced the evangelical New Birth, they found a sense of release and spiritual empowerment that one scholar referred to as “the liberated *self*—sanctified and redeemed.” The Robin Johns prayed that “God will make we have strength and Knowledge to serve him.” Strength and knowledge—those attributes had served the men well in their quest for freedom and their possession of them challenged the negative views of Africans’ spiritual and cultural capacities held by many Englishmen. Edward Long, a contemporary of the Robin Johns, wrote a popular history of Jamaica in which he outlined the character of Africans as “brutish, ignorant, idle, crafty, treacherous, bloody, thievish, mistrustful, and superstitions people.” His negative views were widely shared across the Anglo-Atlantic, but the Robin Johns certainly defied those stereotypes, and they used their faith as one means of winning acceptance and inspiring confidence. For example, when they made their depositions before their case came before Lord Mansfield, they proclaimed, “We, Little Ephraim Robin-John and Ancona Robin Robin John, believing in One God, the Creator of the world, and that God is a rewarder of them that do well, and an avenger of those that do ill; do swear.”⁸ Conversion, then, put the Robin Johns in a position to call for justice, to rebel against their enslavement, and to demand that their fellow Christians hear and be-

lieve them. In this sense, conversion was an act of defiance, an effort to erase concepts of difference and inferiority based on race through religion, the only belief system that militated against the prevailing racial ideology.

Bristol was the cradle of English Methodism; John Wesley first preached outdoors there and the first Methodist meetinghouse was built in the city. The Methodists drew large and emotional crowds; indeed, John Wesley claimed in 1739 that he could “advance the glory of God and the salvation of souls better in Bristol than anywhere else.” While John Wesley traveled by horseback to carry his message across the British Isles, his brother, Charles, made his home in Bristol until his move to London in 1771. (There he renewed his friendship with Lord Mansfield, his childhood friend from Westminster School. There is no evidence that the two discussed the Robin Johns’ case, but they may well have been in contact during that time). Though no longer a resident of Bristol, Charles and his family continued to make frequent visits there. Charles’s wife, Sally, gave birth to eight children, but only three survived to adulthood, Charles (born 1757), Sally (born 1759), and Samuel (born 1766), and the entire family became friends of the Robin Johns. Best known as a writer of hymns, Charles was also a gifted preacher. Charles’s wife left an affectionate description of her husband as “tender, indulgent, kind . . . warmly and unbelievably devoted to his friends, discern-

ing in the character of men, incapable of disguise . . . As a preacher he was impassioned and energetic and expressed the most important truths with simplicity, brevity and force.”

Little Ephraim and Ancona began to study regularly with Charles Wesley, and Little Ephraim reported that they “felt Better and Better and to my comfort I Dreamt of reading two nights the last night I Dreamt I . . . read the 100 Psalm and . . . found good for my heart.” A joyful song of praise, Psalm 100 hints at the universalist appeal of Christianity and the unity of all believers (“Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands . . . we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.”) Little Ephraim’s dreams of reading are one vivid indication of the importance of literacy to the Robin Johns, and their letters to Wesley demonstrate how quickly they advanced in their studies. Soon, “they received the truth with all gladness, appeared to be deeply penetrated therewith: and after some time, desired to be baptized.” Through Charles, they also met John Wesley, and took every opportunity to meet with him and hear him preach. Perhaps they heard him preach from one of his favorite passages of Scripture from the Gospel of Luke: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted; to preach deliverance to the captives, and . . . to set at liberty them that are bruised.”¹⁰

In August 1774, Ancona wrote Charles, “yesterday we

had the pleasure of Seeing your brother he preached at the Room both morning and Evening & Drank Tea at Mrs. Johnson with us.” They took communion from him on that occasion and “felt very comfortable in our mind.” Charles called them “very extraordinary Scholars & Catechumens” and described their emotional baptism: “this morning I baptized them. They received both the outward and visible signs of the inward & spiritual grace in a wonderful manner & measure.” Certainly Charles, who was “discerning in the character of men,” had no doubt as to the sincerity of their conversions and held the Robin Johns in deep affection.¹¹

The young men cut quite a figure in Bristol. Both were described as about five feet and nine inches in height, “well shaped, neither fat nor lean, and exactly proportioned.” Their careful grooming as members of Old Calabar’s elite showed; “they were perfectly well-bred; all their motions were easy, proper and graceful, notwithstanding their colour, there was something agreeable in their countenance.” Despite their similarities, “there was a manifest difference both in their look and carriage. *Anacona* was all Sweetness; *Ephraim* was all a Prince. No one would have Conceived that he knew what slavery meant.”¹²

The Robin Johns formed a close attachment to Charles and his family and to the Methodists in Bristol. They closed letters to Wesley with “kind love to Mrs. Wesley and too [two] young gentlemen.” They even car-

ried on a direct correspondence with his daughter, Sarah, whom they addressed as "My Dear Sarah." In one such letter, they "Received your Letter and am sorry you are angry with us for not writing to you when we did to your Brother but hopes you will for give us for it and hopes your prayer will all ways be for us . . . our Love to your father, Mother and Brother and all our Brethren," a letter they signed, "Your Loving Brethren." Such warm and personal greetings were a part of the conventional correspondence between the Old Calabar elite and their English traders, though the personal relationships reflected in this mutual correspondence go well beyond the merely formal. The Robin Johns lodged with Methodists, regularly took part in their meetings, and received individual instruction from pious Methodist women like Elizabeth Johnson.¹³

Elizabeth Johnson was a member of Wesley's innermost circle in Bristol, and he often lodged with her when he came to town. Her father, a West Indian merchant, opposed her conversion to Methodism and cut her out of his will entirely. Wesley regarded her as one of the most faithful women in the Methodist connection, and referred to her as "*a rara avis in terris*" (a bird rarely seen on earth). He praised her "great calmness and meekness," though he added that she wanted "more softness and tenderness . . . more of human mingled with the divine." But he found her cold and stoical and confessed that even after an acquaintance of over thirty years he

could not feel real friendship and freedom with her. The Robin Johns, however, had a very different relationship with Miss Johnson, whose care and concern for the men reveals another side of her character.¹⁴ Their association with her placed them at the center of Methodist life in Bristol, and the picture of the Robin Johns, John Wesley, and Elizabeth Johnson sitting down to converse over tea raises yet another series of questions.

What drew the Methodists to the Robin Johns, and no ordinary Methodists either, but the Wesleys themselves? Again, several alternative explanations present themselves. Were the Robin Johns exotic trophies, the ultimate symbols of the power of Methodism to convert the heathen? There are certainly hints of this attitude in some of the records surrounding the men and their complex relationship with the English Methodists. Stories of enslaved African princes became a literary trope in eighteenth-century British literature. In 1688 Aphra Behn published a novel entitled *Oroonoko; or the History of the Royal Slave*, the tragic story of an African slave-trading prince who was captured and sold into slavery in Surinam. Her story, adapted for the stage and widely translated, became one of the most popular stories of the eighteenth century and the source of the image of the noble African slave. In a rare case of life imitating art, in 1749 two African princes attended a performance of the play in London. They entered the theater to a standing ovation, and the audience looked on as one of the

princes was so overcome by the performance that he fled the theater while the other watched in tears. There was not a dry eye in the house. In a tale similar to the Robin Johns', the princes had been sent to London to be educated, but had been kidnapped and sold in the Americas by a deceitful captain. By the 1770s and 1780s, many of England's most famous writers, including William Blake, Robert Burns, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth had taken up the plight of the noble African slave. Englishmen showed little sympathy for the millions of slaves sent to the New World or for the thousands of slaves and impoverished free blacks in England itself, but, as one scholar noted, "your free-born Briton could feel for a prince, particularly a prince in distress."¹⁵

But unlike almost all of their contemporaries in the English church or the literary world, John and Charles Wesley had seen American slavery firsthand when they traveled to the colony of Georgia as missionaries in 1736, and that experience left them with a sympathy for the enslaved that never wavered. With high hopes of converting the American Indians, John and Charles suffered an agonizing Atlantic crossing to take up their posts, John in Savannah and Charles in Frederica. The Wesleys scarcely laid eyes on natives, but they did encounter African slaves, and they were deeply shocked by what they saw. Slavery was prohibited in Georgia, but flourished in neighboring South Carolina, where slaves made up a majority of the population. On his visits

there, John was deeply distressed by the slaveowners' complete lack of interest in the spiritual welfare of the men and women they held in bondage. He took every opportunity to talk with slaves and to minister to them. John Wesley's personal encounter with slavery made a profound impression on him, so overpowering that "in the last months of his American ministry, and in his vehement denunciation of chattel slavery thereafter, giving the gospel to slaves was a constant, recurrent goal he seemed scarcely able to get out of his mind." Charles had less direct contact with enslaved Africans than his brother, but nonetheless shared John's abhorrence of slavery. Charles filled his journal with descriptions of the horrid punishments inflicted on slaves and added, "It were endless to recount all the shocking instances of diabolical cruelty these men (as they [the slaveowners] call themselves) daily practice upon their fellow-creatures."¹⁶

Although the Wesleys' American experience lay over thirty years behind them when they encountered the Robin Johns, the horrors of slavery were burned into their minds, and the plight of enslaved and native Africans still concerned them. They would have encountered enslaved Africans and African Americans in the teaming slave port of Bristol, and the Robin Johns were not the first African converts to Methodism. In 1758, for example, John "baptized two negroes . . . one of these is deeply convinced of sin; the other rejoices in God her Saviour, and is the first African Christian I have known.

But shall not our Lord, in due time, have these Heathens also 'for his inheritance?'” Charles also made black converts. For example, he frequently took his ministry to the infamous Newgate Prison in London. Among his converts was “a poor black that had robbed his master,” who found Jesus and became “quite happy.” In one sermon, John asked,

who cares for thousands, myriads, if not millions of the wretched Africans? Are not whole droves of these poor sheep (human, if not rational beings!) continually driven to market, and sold, like cattle, into the vilest bondage, without any hope of deliverance but by death? . . . O Father of mercies! are these the works of thy own hands, the purchase of thy Son's blood?

In 1772 John read “a very different book, published by an honest Quaker, on that execrable sum of all villainies, commonly called the Slave Trade.” The pamphlet, by Anthony Benezet, a prominent Quaker from Philadelphia, confirmed Wesley's worst conceptions of the trade: “I read of nothing like it in the heathen world, whether ancient or modern: And it infinitely exceeds, in every instance of barbarity, whatever Christian slaves suffer in Mahometan countries.” Benezet may well have sent Wesley his pamphlet as a part of his effort to enlist the support of English religious leaders, including the Arch-

bishop of Canterbury, in the cause of abolition. The two men began a correspondence, and soon the story of the Robin Johns was crisscrossing the Atlantic as Wesley told Benezet about the plight of the Robin Johns and the massacre. Benezet recognized the potential value of the massacre for discrediting the trade and punishing the English captains who had participated in it. Immediately upon hearing of the Robin Johns and their story, Benezet dashed off a letter to his fellow abolitionist Granville Sharp in England in which he described the Robin Johns and the bloody event. He placed particular blame on Captain Bivins, and asked, “Now in this Case or any other of the like nature, which I believe frequently happen, would it not be right to endeavor to get the matter proved, & the Villian and his Accomplices, who have so flagrantly transgressed the Laws of God & Man, arraigned and brought to justice. It would, I am persuaded, be in several respects productive of good.” Benezet enjoyed his greatest success with Wesley, and by 1772 he was referring to the founder of Methodism as “my friend John Westly.” The following year Wesley met the Robin Johns, whose personal experiences gave vivid testimony of the evils of the slave trade.¹⁷

In 1774, shortly after John Wesley's close association with the Robin Johns came to a close, he published a landmark pamphlet in the crusade against the slave trade entitled *Thoughts upon Slavery*, which borrowed liberally from Benezet. Although Wesley made no direct mention

of the Robin Johns, his conversations with them, perhaps those over Elizabeth Johnson's tea table, may well have shaped some of his thinking. He related the story of the Robin Johns to Benezet in a 1774 letter, which indicates that the princes were still in his thoughts as he wrote and published his pamphlet. He attacked the idea that Africa was "so remarkably horrid, dreary, and barren, that it is a kindness to deliver them [enslaved Africans] out of it." He described a fertile and rich land "some governed by kings, others by the principal men, who take care each of their own town or village" (an apt description of Old Calabar). As for religion, the Africans "believe there is one God, the Author of them and all things." He attacked the image of Africans perpetuated by writers like Edward Long. He argued that Africans were not "senseless, brutish, lazy barbarians," but rather "remarkably sensible . . . industrious to the highest degree . . . mild, friendly, and kind to strangers." He concluded that "certainly the African is in no respect inferior to the European." David Brion Davis observed that in Wesley's view, Africans "behaved like potential Methodists." Given his conversion of the Robin Johns, he had every reason to believe that Africans *were* potential converts, a belief he would act on in later years.¹⁸

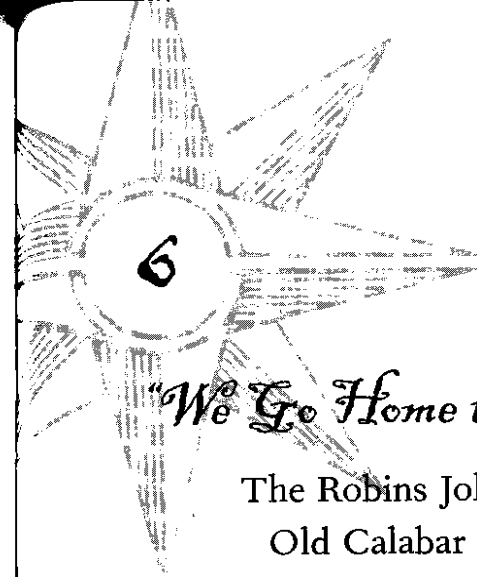
One reason that the slave trade weighed so heavily on John Wesley's mind in 1774 may well have been his efforts to convince the Robin Johns of its evils. Wesley roundly condemned slave traders as "man-stealers," a

phrase that he employed frequently. In his 1743 *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* he wrote, "Man-stealers—The worst of all thieves, in comparison of whom Highwaymen and House-breakers are innocent!" We can only wonder if he spoke so bluntly to the Robin Johns, the first *African* slave traders he had confronted; certainly he was not a man to pull a spiritual punch, and the Robin Johns hint that he made his feelings known. In August 1773 Little Ephraim informed Charles Wesley that "Your Brother has been so kind as to talk to us and has given us the Sacrament thrice[.] I find him so good as he shew me when I do wrong[.] I feel in my heart great trouble & see great deal more of my own faults & the faults of my Countrymen which I hope the Lord will permit me to tell them when I com home." Though Little Ephraim does not specifically say so, Wesley very likely condemned the Efik's involvement in the slave trade as the principal fault of his countrymen. While he condemned the Africans who participated in the trade, his remarks to the Robin Johns may have been tempered by his belief that the ultimate responsibility for the trade rested squarely on the shoulders of the European slave traders and planters. It was the European slavers who enticed Africans into preying on one another; it was they who introduced alcohol and firearms and helped foment the wars that produced slave captives.¹⁹

Encouraged by the Wesleys and nurtured by the close Methodist fellowship in Bristol, the Robin Johns con-

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verted to Christianity and were baptized, took every opportunity to attend preaching and other religious meetings, and pored over Scripture. Their heartfelt conversions mark yet another step in their acculturation after over six years spent in the Americas and England. Encouraged by aspects of Efik religion and culture, including a receptivity to English culture, by the nature of evangelicalism, and by the Wesleys' personal interest in the plight of slaves, the Robin Johns found a faith that sustained them through their trials and tribulations and enabled them to challenge their captors and win their freedom. In a letter to Charles Wesley, Ancona probably spoke for Little Ephraim as well when he gave thanks to the "almight[y] great God" who had protected him "from all great Danger" and "gave me knowledge to remember what I have suffered."²⁰



"We Go Home to Old Calabar"

The Robins Johns' Legacy in Old Calabar and England

*A*fter several months in Bristol, the Robin Johns hoped that their long-sought voyage home was about to begin; in mid-August they wrote Charles Wesley that "our good friend Mr. Jones is fitted a ship out for us[;] we suppose she will be ready in about five weeks." He also reported that he had heard from his brother, Grandy King George, via a captain recently back from Old Calabar who had passed on the good news that Little Ephraim and Ancona were alive and on their way home. By February 1774 the vessel Jones had outfitted, the *Maria*, was ready to leave and set sail, but it was forced to come back in again, "the Wind being Contrary for We go home to Old Calabar." Six days later the ship still remained in port, and Little Ephraim and Ancona wrote