

## *Book Reviews*

Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), 247 pages plus notes.

Jon Sensbach has written one of the most extraordinary books on the Moravians ever published, and everyone interested in Moravian missions or race relations should read it. *Rebecca's Revival* rescues from historical obscurity a remarkable woman who “crossed, and sometimes threatened, boundaries between slavery and freedom, whiteness and blackness, male and female activity” (p. 233). Originally named Shelly, Rebecca was a mulatto woman born on Antigua who was sold as a slave on the Danish colony of St. Thomas in the 1720s. She eventually gained her freedom, perhaps because of her embrace of Christianity. Throughout her life people remarked on her intellectual and spiritual gifts as well as her fortitude, courage, and prudence. In the 1740s she was one of the most celebrated Moravian figures, but her grave on the Gold Coast of Africa is lost today.

After finding joy and peace through the ministrations of the Moravian missionary Friedrich Martin, Rebecca used her gifts and virtues as an evangelist for the Moravian Church. Sensbach shows that it was her abilities as a preacher, counselor, and organizer, in the face of violent opposition, that made the Moravian mission on St. Thomas and the neighboring islands a prodigious success. Her marriage to the white missionary Matthäus Freundlich contributed to the couple's four-month imprisonment on St. Thomas, a hardship that Rebecca endured as a martyr. Her courage and resistance to injustice inspired other slaves suffering for their faith. In the 1740s Rebecca journeyed from the Caribbean to Germany, and after the death of Freundlich, she became one of the first missionaries of African lineage to preach the gospel in Africa. Sensbach refers to this connection between Europe, Africa, and the New World as a “spiritual triangle trade,” of which Rebecca was the pioneer.

Sensbach's book is more than an account of an important figure forgotten by history; it is a compelling study of the creation of African American Christianity under the conditions of dehumanizing slavery. Sensbach argues convincingly that the Moravian work on St. Thomas was in fact the genesis of the Black Church, and that Rebecca was the key figure in this history. This is a bold claim that will no doubt produce heated as well as helpful scholarly debate. If nothing else, Sensbach's work demonstrates that American history needs to be understood in a transatlantic and multi-lingual context. Sensbach generally avoids the temptation of reading modern motives and motifs into his historical sources, preferring instead to let Rebecca and others speak for themselves. He does, however, give a good analysis of the political agenda behind some of the Moravian sources and ways in which the white Moravians may have shaped the slaves' self-expression.

Sensbach impresses on the reader the brutal realities of slavery, which also highlights the courage (or fanaticism) of the Moravian missionaries and their African converts who faced torture and murder at the hands of white planters. It is heart-breaking to read the accounts like that of the planter who would set the Bible on fire and beat the flames out on the faces of his Christian slaves to the delight of his children. Sensbach recognizes that conversion to Christianity was not simply a ploy by slaves to gain better living conditions, but it was part of a dangerous struggle for personal dignity in the face of cruelty. Slaves who accepted the simple message of the Moravian missionaries that the Son of God had been a slave who gave his life in love for them found new resources for endurance. No “white devil” could rob Christian slaves of their worth or their humanity if their souls belonged to the Savior. Some slaves found they could use their new knowledge of the white planters’ own Scriptures to shame their abusers with the commandments of Jesus himself. Eventually Danish and English evangelicals used the example of the Moravians and those same teachings of Jesus in their successful political struggle to end the slave trade.

The complexities and contradictions of the slave system are clearly evident throughout his discussion, especially when addressing the establishment of Posaunenberg, the Moravian plantation on St. Thomas. What are we today to make of the decision of Matthäus Freundlich, husband of a manumitted slave, to buy a plantation to serve as a mission center? What do we make of the fact that it was Rebecca herself who suggested the purchase or the fact that hundreds of converted slaves cheered at the news that the missionaries were to become slave-holders? As horrifying as that sounds to us today, it is important to note that the planters saw this move as a serious threat to the slave system itself. They sent gangs of men to beat worshipers and threaten the missionaries.

The plantation may have been the best decision for the Moravians and their new black brothers and sisters at the time, but this also marked the first time that the Moravians themselves became public defenders of the institution. Sensbach calls this the “devil’s bargain,” and it bore bitter fruit later. One feature missing from his account of Posaunenberg, though, is comparison between the condition of the slaves on the Moravian plantation and the other plantations in the Caribbean. Did the Moravian *Baas* and the *Bombas* treat their slaves the way other whites did? Was there an effort to introduce some type of Christian ethic into a diabolical economy or did the Moravians succumb to the vices common to slave holders?

One strength of Sensbach’s book is his awareness of the distinctive nature of the Moravian Church in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the only institution where Rebecca’s odyssey was possible. Sensbach also demonstrates that both the successful mission methods and the accommodations to the implacable reality of slavery made by Zinzendorf set the pattern for later Methodist and Baptist missions to enslaved Africans. The promise of the work of Rebecca and Matthäus Freundlich and Friedrich Martin could not be fully realized as long as European and American governments encouraged and endorsed brutality against the African workers. But the missionaries did inspire hope for a better day and provided some space for the

slaves to create spheres of dignity. And, as the historian points out, the bell that once called slaves to bend their backs in relentless labor to provide sugar for European tables today calls men, women, and children to kneel in prayer and song. The Moravian brothers and sisters in the Caribbean today are the spiritual children of Rebecca.

— Craig D. Atwood

Geoffrey and Margaret Stead, *The Exotic Plant: A History of the Moravian Church in Great Britain 1742-2000* (Peterborough, England: Epworth Press, 2004), 383 pages plus notes, bibliography and index. 25£

Geoffrey and Margaret Stead took on the ambitious project of writing a comprehensive and professional history of the Moravian Church in England down to the present. As the Steads point out in the opening chapter of their book, the history of the Moravians in England has not been well served by historians over the past century. Earlier histories were more interested in the Moravian Church as a whole than in the history of the British Moravians themselves. In many cases, those earlier histories were too apologetic in their approach, which meant that the actual history was somewhat distorted. The Steads, in contrast, are non-Moravians who have written a sympathetic yet rigorous account of the long history of the British Province. Their research confirms rather than contradicts the recent studies of J.C.S. Mason *The Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening in England*, which was reviewed last year in *The Hinge* by David Schattschneider, and Colin Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England 1728-1760*, but *The Exotic Plant* has a broader historical lens.

The central thesis of this book is that the Moravian Church was indeed a foreign implant in England that has only partially been anglicized through the years. Initially the church was primarily a religious fellowship for German Pietists living in England that also provided a safe haven for Moravians en route to or from the New World. Except for a few evangelists, like John Cennick, who loom large in the lore of the British Province, Moravians had difficulty adapting to the social and religious culture of England and attracting members. Even though the church did indeed adapt gradually to the British setting, its close ties with Germany always marked it as distinct and even “exotic.”

The Steads show that British Moravians gradually moved away from the German Moravian pattern and became a dissenter denomination in England with free-standing congregations served by an ordained pastor. But this in turn made it increasingly difficult for the church to survive and thrive in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The authors note that the contemporary British Province is being forced by circumstances to adopt informal structures and creative forms of ministry that are quite similar to the original Zinzendorffian plan. The irony of this history is not always recognized.