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Review Of "The Two Princes Of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey" By R.J. Sparks

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Randy J. Sparks. *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004. 189 pp. ISBN 0-674-01312-3, \$22.00.

While researching the history of Methodism, Randy Sparks stumbled upon a small collection of letters written in the late eighteenth century by two enslaved Africans from Old Calabar (on the eastern coast of modern-day Nigeria). He first discussed this “chance discovery” in the *William and Mary*

Quarterly in 2002; he has now expanded that article into this small volume (2). Despite the truncated voices of their authors, Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John, these letters provide Sparks the raw material out of which he fashions an emblematic story of the creolized Atlantic World.

And it is certainly an intriguing story: as escalating tensions between two slave-trading communities in Old Calabar threatened the area's supply of chattel, the captains of five English slavers conspired with their New Town allies to ambush a delegation of Old Town rivals. As a result of this bloody massacre in 1767, survivors of the attack were taken captive, destined to be sold into slavery themselves. These included two members of Old Town's ruling family, Sparks's titular "princes," who endured the Middle Passage before being sold together as slaves in the West Indies. They soon escaped, only to be betrayed and sold back into slavery, this time in Virginia to a merchant who made them sailors. Five years later they escaped again, this time to Bristol where, nearly betrayed once more, they gained their freedom. With the support of Bristol's Methodists, the Robin Johns finally returned to Old Calabar in 1774. Involving both the tragic basis of the African dispersal—the transatlantic slave trade—and a Black Atlantic seascape now freighted with undeniable significance, the ordeal of the Robin Johns thus invites careful consideration. As Sparks puts it, their story "opens a window onto the creolized trading communities along the coast [of West Africa] and the regular movement of goods, people, and ideas around the Atlantic World" (9).

In the course of six chapters, *Two Princes of Calabar* draws together a number of historical threads to support Sparks's contention that the Robin Johns' "story, written in their own hand, survives as an early, and as yet virtually unknown, firsthand account of an Atlantic slave experience with important implications for the history of the slave trade, slaves' relentless quest for freedom, the early British antislavery movement, and the role of enslaved Africans in the creation of the early Atlantic World" (1–2). His first two chapters, then, provide the context necessary to situate the ordeal of the Robin Johns within this momentous era. In the first, he focuses on the 1767 massacre, which not only launched the two princes' travails, but also ended Old Town's dominance of the local slave trade. After detailing the ambush itself and describing its immediate causes, he takes a longer view in the second chapter of the historical forces that motivated the massacre, sketching the emergence of Old Calabar in the sixteenth century and its transformation in the eighteenth as the transatlantic slave trade grew to dominate the region economically, socially, and culturally. In the third chapter, Sparks begins to deal directly with the experiences of the enslaved Robin Johns; here Sparks considers their experiences during the Middle Passage and as slaves in

Dominica and Virginia, proposing that, as creolized members of Old Calabar's slave-trading elite, the Robin Johns were able "to negotiate their enslavement in ways that other captives could not" (73). In the fourth chapter, Sparks recounts the Robin Johns' successful efforts, after landing in Bristol, to use their contacts among English slave-traders (who "had formed close personal relationships with their Efik counterparts in Old Calabar") to free themselves (92–93). Sparks's fifth chapter discusses the relationship that developed between the newly freed Robin Johns and Methodist leaders John and Charles Wesley, while the sixth chapter recounts their eventual return to Old Calabar (and to slave-trading, most likely), before concluding with a brief description of growing antislavery activity in England late in the eighteenth century—activity partially spurred by renewed interest in the massacre at Old Calabar as evidence of the trade's evils.

Relying heavily on the work of Ira Berlin and Paul Gilroy for its conceptual framework, *The Two Princes of Calabar* concerns itself most with recovering the princes' exceptional story to "provide a microhistory of the eighteenth-century Anglo-Atlantic World" (3). Sparks thus plots the princes' story with a series of historical convergences, set in multiple sites, which enriches it appreciably. In this respect, his final chapters work particularly well. With the Robin Johns' arrival in Bristol, Sparks explains the importance of Bristol as both slave port and hotbed of English Methodism. With their attempts to enlist the support of Chief Justice Lord Mansfield, whose ruling in the *Somerset* case of 1772 limited the ability of slaveowners to remove their slaves from England, he finds the Robin Johns a place in the country's growing concerns over the legal status of slavery. With their eventual return to Old Calabar, he considers their possible influence on the arrival of the first Christian missionaries in the area. In the wake of their departure, he establishes the importance of their story, particularly its origin in the 1767 massacre, to the antislavery activity that grew stronger at the end of the century. Drawing from a wide range of primary sources to supplement the Robin Johns' letters, Sparks ably spins a web of connections around their experiences that gives their story real historical heft. Written in a manner certain to appeal to a wide readership, this is the book's greatest strength.

For this reason, *The Two Princes of Calabar* serves as a useful work of historical recovery; as a contribution to life writing, however, the book will inevitably frustrate readers expecting the two African princes to be agents at the center of their own narrative, rather than the instruments motivating a history that ultimately overshadows them. Although Sparks insists that they "offer one opportunity . . . to restore the voices of two of the individuals who survived the Middle Passage, the journey from the west coast of Africa to the

Americas,” the Robin Johns frequently disappear in the departures Sparks takes to provide his “microhistory” (5). The structure of the book certainly betrays this weakness: the Robin Johns do not really appear in the first two chapters, which comprise nearly half of the book, and they exit the narrative before Sparks concludes with his discussion of English abolitionism. This imbalance undoubtedly results from the basic challenge Sparks faces—namely, extrapolating full “voices” from a collection of letters that speak so little—but even in the chapters dealing directly with the Robin Johns’ odyssey, Sparks tends to use their own words as transparent documents of their experiences, not as expressions of the princes’ evolving self-consciousness, or as instances of performative self-presentation. After citing Gilroy, Sparks reiterates finally that “[t]he princely Little Ephraim and the free-spirited Ancona help counter the tendency to reduce Africans who suffered the horrors of the slave trade to commodities and numbers,” but his book ultimately denies these Africans the centrality Gilroy’s own reconsideration of modernity demands (146). Recovering a history without recovering the Robin Johns’ lives, Sparks never really affords them the depth he promises. While this failing does not completely undermine *The Two Princes of Calabar*, it must certainly qualify it.

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