



Jon F. Sensbach. *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. 302 pp. \$22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01689-7.



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A Partial Life in the Atlantic World

Just prior to George Whitefield's tour of England's North American colonies, a journey that became the heart of the Great Awakening, another itinerant missionary worked to spread the Gospel of St. Thomas in the Caribbean. Her name was Rebecca Protten. While Whitefield was usually met by enthusiastic (or at least curious) crowds, Protten's movements were legally circumscribed, as were those of the enslaved people who hoped to meet with her. The white authorities (cultural, political, and social) of St. Thomas were not interested in their slave population learning about, joining, or practicing Christianity. In addition to the difficulties of trying to insert Christian faith into a slave society, Protten had the further disadvantage of being a woman. She worked with European Moravians (all men) in St. Thomas and they thought it best that she not preach or speak publicly. She was, however, allowed to teach and speak with women in less formal settings. She never reached the same fame as Whitefield, of course, but her presence on the landscape of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world is certainly worthy of note. It is her story and her context which are skillfully reconstructed in Jon Sensbach's fine

monograph.

This book should interest readers who want to know how ideas, people and information traveled across the Atlantic Ocean during the eighteenth century. The story of Protten's life moves from the Caribbean to Europe and then to Africa. The text is not a travel narrative, but rather a study of the construction of a single identity in a multifaceted Atlantic world. Besides being insightful on the functioning of this Atlantic world, this book is also a biography. While many dimensions of Protten's life remain hidden, this text remains the life story of an obviously intelligent and in some ways remarkable woman, and is therefore a good methodological example of the genre. The readers who should be most interested in this book, however, are those who think about and work with the construction of religious identity and the practice of eighteenth-century Christianity. This construction and practice is not only done within the geographical context of three continents, but it is also layered with Protten's racial and gender issues.

Rebecca Protten was a Caribbean slave who gained

her freedom and a place in the Moravian Church as an evangelist. The story of Protten's life necessarily includes details about slave life on St. Thomas, the development of the Moravian faith (as well as German Pietism more generally), and evangelical efforts in the Caribbean and Africa. In addition, Protten spent time, albeit sometimes in a marginal position, within the Moravian community in Germany. The narrative of the text includes information about slave life, culture and insurrections on St. Thomas, as well as some political details from the time. This information is immediately relevant to the telling of Protten's life story, as well as helpful in making the picture of her life more complete. What comes as a pleasant and unexpected surprise, however, is the inclusion of details about the daily life inside Moravian communities both in the Caribbean and Europe.

What the text does best is describe the creation of an individual inside the eighteenth-century Atlantic World. This description is informative in three important ways. First, while it is the story of one woman, the world in which she lived, from which she drew her identity and upon which she left traces, is shown to be a complex, dynamic, and interconnected place. While a connected Africa, Europe and Western Hemisphere in the modern period is now the accepted paradigm, this study provides an example of how those connections worked in a practical sense, at least in the life of one person in a religious setting. It is important to note here that Sensbach overtly makes no larger claims for the Atlantic World based on the single example of Protten's life.

The second way the telling of Protten's life is valuable is that from her story a black female identity can be constructed. While Protten should not and cannot stand for black women in the Atlantic World, there are dimensions to her life which are certainly applicable to larger portions of the population. For example, she occasionally has a voice that can be heard by modern historians, mostly from the letters she wrote. But Sensbach suggests that her letters, written while she was in St. Thomas, might have been shaped by the white male Moravian missionaries who oversaw her spiritual development. So, while letters exist with her signature, there are questions, not to their authenticity, but to the authenticity of the voice in which they speak. Much of what can be known about black women in the Caribbean is similarly conditional. This sort of scholarship and reasoning helps to create an understanding of the cultural and social identity of Protten in particular and serves as an excellent starting place for wider speculation about what it meant (and did not mean) to be a black woman in that time and

place.

A third and related way the telling of Protten's story is valuable is as a methodological guide. While biographies of literate men have their own set of dangers and difficulties, biographies of individuals who left only shallow footprints can sometimes be insurmountable. This biography, while leaving many questions as to what and how Protten was thinking, does an excellent job of finding details of a buried life and encasing them in a larger historical context. Without being derivative, this book follows the model Laurel Thatcher Ulrich used, in *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based upon Her Diary, 1785-1812* (1990), when describing the life of Martha Ballard.

Beyond a consideration of the Atlantic World, individual identity and historical biography, this book also distinguishes itself as a work of religious history. The most compelling passages of this book are the descriptions of the Moravian community in Germany and its religious practices. Speculations about how Protten related to that community, while sketchy, are also richly suggestive. Moreover, Sensbach focuses on the often overlooked role of the missionary. Too often, missionaries are portrayed as agents of imperialism or as self-serving opportunists. The missionaries in this book, Protten and her first husband among others, come across as agents of change in the Atlantic world, but they were also sincere Christians and people being changed by an emergent multicultural society. This study of Protten's life does a good job of demonstrating how missionaries added to the complex interplay of forces which led to the creation of Afro-Caribbean culture without vilifying or defaming Christian mission work in general.

There are, as always, criticisms. First, because so much of Protten's life, identity, and thought remain hidden, the text lapses into excessive speculation, which sometimes raises problems rather than interest. Almost every turn of Protten's life calls for speculation on Sensbach's part as to why things happened, what events meant, what she thought about events, and, in many cases, guessing about the events themselves. Because of the frequency of this creative analysis, readers are left with a certain amount of skepticism. They might be better served if the focus of the text were spread a little more broadly. For example, most of the information in this book could be included in a book about Moravian missions in the Atlantic World during the eighteenth century, which would allow for less speculation about the narrative gaps in Protten's life, as well as a more context-

tualized story. In addition, the text lacks a clear explanation of what Protten believed. There are suggestions, generalities, and implications, but in relation to her specific beliefs and theology, there is little evidence. The places where the text comes closest to explicating theology is in the too-brief discussion of the Moravian adoration of the wounds of Christ, and in Sensbach's account of Protten's court appearance in St. Thomas. But these episodes are not enough to create a complete theological picture of who Protten was or who the Moravians were. This criticism illustrates the problematic way in which Protten sometimes disappears from her own story. By the conclusion of the text, the reader is left knowing that she existed, but not really who she was. Of course, more traditional biographies of more lettered subjects have greater source material to recreate the interior life

of individuals in question.

Rebecca's Revival tells a compelling story, using prose which does not bog the reader down in historical detail, rhetoric, or theory. It is appropriate for undergraduates, Atlantic World scholars, religious historians, and biographers. While the speculation is too frequent, this fault is clearly outweighed by the mere exposure to the rich life of this eighteenth-century evangelist.

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