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Early Religious Influences in Sierra Leone

THE Colony was founded on April 8th, 1787, with 460 African destitute ex-slaves brought to England as house and personal servants, and abandoned by their masters after the Mansfield Judgment of 1772 that slaves setting foot on British soil became free men,¹ together with 62 white women taken off the streets of London, Portsmouth and Bristol and put aboard the transport *Venus*² in the stupor of intoxication. There were some deaths on the voyage.

The purchased³ land was a peninsula about the size of the Isle of Wight on the southern side and near the eight miles wide mouth of the Rokel River. It is still the home of the Colony, the rest of the land since ceded to the British, the hinterland, being known as the Protectorate.

Within a few miles of the settlement,⁴ on Mount Aurioi, a community of Jesuit priests and laymen had been settled for some years, without, however, much recorded influence on the inhabitants. One of the Priors, Sylvain Meinrad Xavier Golberry, wrote the account of his adventurous voyages round about the neighbourhood.⁵

The Colony was the result of the faith of the members of the Committee for the Black Poor, amongst whom were Wilberforce, Granville, Sharpe, Henry Thornton,⁶ Jonas Hanway,⁷ the Clarksons and the Macaulays,⁸ mostly Quaker members of the Clapham Sect.

In the Plan of Settlement a Chaplain was added to the officials, the first chosen being Peter Fraser, a curate of St. Martin-in-the-Fields. He was one of those who signed the initial land agreement in 1788, but returned home by the next boat.

March 16th, 1793, saw the landing of an additional thousand settlers, Hegroids from the other side of the Atlantic, who because of their ten years in that land were called Nova Scotians. These brought their own religious organizations, Baptists, Countess of Huntingdon Connexion and Wesleyans. They were of those who had escaped from slavery in the Southern States, where they had been introduced to their denominations, and had continued faithful to their church fellowships during the American War of Independ-

ence and their settlement in Nova Scotia, the birthplace of many of the children who accompanied them. In October, 1800, some hundreds of Sandemanians and Wesleyans known as the Maroon Settlers arrived.⁹

Very soon the denominational leaders were well known, all honorary but as efficient in the ministry as they were at their trades, David George (Baptist), William Ash, Cato Perkins, John Ellis (Huntingdonites), Moses Wilkinson (Wesleyan) the "man who had been swept into the fold when Whitfield blazed his way through the Southern States," and the Maroons, Brown and Gordon (Wesleyans).

The first thing the Nova Scotians did on landing was to hold a Thanksgiving Service under a giant kapok (silk-cotton) tree, still standing in Freetown's Westmoreland Street, and long known as King Jimmy's¹⁰ gri-gri (fetich). It was led by the venerable William Ash, to whose character and age the others yielded precedence.

Soon booths were erected for their worship, "so near each other that the singing in one often stayed the preaching in another" Thomas Peters, the Nova Scotian leader, told his audience in Exeter Hall in the last address he gave there.¹¹ "But that was of little matter, for we fell on song then more frequently and more fervently in our worship than we do now."

The Baptists, like the others, had been helped by Canadians in Burchtown, their settlement in Nova Scotia. The brothers Chipman, one a substantial merchant and Member of Parliament, and the other, James, missionary to Nova Scotia after ordination by Henry Alline of Rhode Island, the founder of the Second Baptist Church of Halifax, fostered and encouraged them, re-baptizing David George¹² at his own request, and guiding in education his assistants, Hector Peters¹³ and George Weeks.

There (Burchtown) also Lawrence Hartshorn, a minister of the Huntingdon Connexion ordained Ash, and gave him guidance in doing likewise to Perkins and Ellis. Elijah Miles, farmer, "the master whose kindness had so attached his workers to him that no liberty seemed half so delightful as their bonded service,"¹⁴ chose Moses Wilkinson as Chaplain to the numerous people on his estate.

To the Baptists came the first aid from England¹⁵ when, in November of 1794, two young ministers landed. One was James Rodway, late minister at Burton-on-Trent, who had to be carried ashore and was sent to the Banana Islands to recuperate but had to return home by the first available boat, and the other was Jacob Grigg.

The settlement had just suffered a shell shattering from a French marauding fleet and the wholesale robbery of their possessions by the sansculotte crew, therefore the time was unfortunate for the starting of a mission. Grigg was sent up river to Porto Lokko, but was soon back, without leave, at Granville Town.

He was an enthusiastic emancipationist and, instead of finding himself in a land of the free, as he thought when he volunteered, found himself where the theory was ideal but the practice faulty. So he commenced a campaign in the Cornish¹⁶ "shall Trelawney die" manner, helped by Thomas Peters and David George, whose friendship he had won on the voyage.¹⁷

Had John Clarkson been still there he might have had success, but John had gone home and Zachary Macaulay and William Dawes were alternating as Superintendent for the Black Poor Committee.¹⁸ Macaulay was stiff rather than hard, and Dawes was granite. Macaulay coupled generosity with convention, but found the latter the stronger. Dawes had been hardened by his Botany Bay experiences. He brooked no interference with what he considered his duty, not even allowing argument, thereby robbing Grigg of his strongest weapon.

The reformer wished certain abuses to cease, especially the compulsion on free men to work as indentured labourers. He was right, as we now know, but was then considered wrong, and after the final scene between the fiery youth and the ice-cold man he was ordered to leave the Colony.¹⁹

Another disappointment to the Nova Scotians was the aloofness of white from black, so different from what they had known, particularly in their chapels, in Burchtown. During his few months with them John Clarkson had worshipped in their sanctuaries, but Macaulay had the official chaplain, when there was one, to his house, and Dawes gave no thought to religion.

To Dawes Sunday was a working day like the other six, and he saw that those he ruled, official or white settler²⁰ or black, should be obedient. Moreover, the Sabbath often proved the day of the hardest and longest tasks. In the labour gangs, however, and only in them, Dawes turned a blind eye to the colour-bar he enforced long before that term became part of our language.

More chapels however were built and filled and pulled down and rebuilt more securely. By the end of the century the Baptists had three, all thronged, the Wesleyans two (one holding 500), and the Huntingdonites four, with over 500 full members.²¹ All the chapels were built by their own labour, the stone for that in Rawdon Street Baptist,²² and that in Welberforce Street (C. of H.), both still standing, being carried eight miles from the nearest quarry.

Zachary Macaulay writing of the "Rawdon Street folk" says: "The Baptists are decent and orderly, but there is observable in them a great neglect of family worship, and sometimes in their dealings an unfairness is seen." Some years after, a deacon of the church, William Grant, a merchant and liberated African who became a Member of the Legislative Council, answered that illiberal statement in the words: "They knew only such family life as their

master and their hours of toil allowed, for although they were freemen and land-owners, they were compelled to serve most of the hours of every day on public and other works."

In 1796 John Wesley sent out a band of mechanics of his faith and order who remained so short a time that Charles Marke, the liberated African Methodist minister who wrote the history of his Church²³ makes no mention of them. Zachary Macaulay was a fellow-passenger with them on their way out and was more than perturbed by their loud-voiced doctrinal arguments.²⁴ When his report reached home Henry Thornton said this incident of the voyage reminded him of a story of a servant who having to carry game-cocks from one place to another tied them into one bag, finding on arrival they had torn each other to pieces. When his master called him to account for his stupidity, his excuse was: "Sir, as they were all your cocks I thought they would be all on one side."

Not until 1811 did the first missionary land; George Warren,²⁵ who came out as a guest of Paul Cuffee, the American Negro ship-owner and philanthropist, and was presented to the Governor, Sir Charles Maxwell, by the Maroons, Brown and Gordon, who had held the Wesleyan fort since their landing in 1800. Three years later William Davies succeeded Warren, arriving with his wife and seven helpers.

In 1797 the Scottish Mission sent Henry Brunton and Peter Greig from Edinburgh, followed by Peter Fergusson and Robert Graham and (still later) Campbell and Henderson, the last four from Glasgow. But of these there is no record save that Greig became "missionary at Freeport in Rio Pongos." That year also the London Missionary Society was represented by Alexander Russell and George Caffé, who reported that the black settlers were excellently pastored by their own leaders, and that the white residents were not enthusiastic about missionaries.

A description of the early congregations is given by Hector Peters in the *Memoir* of his father, Thomas, he sent to his Gravesend friends²⁶ for publication, "Aku and Akim and Egba, people of the famed Yoruba race of the Grain Coast, and Ashanti-Popo and Temne and Mende, tall men and comely women who would have fetched high prices in the slave markets of the New World," and individual pictures of some of the leaders, who like those to whom they ministered had trodden hard paths to individuality: enslaved from this Western Coast, enduring the horror of the Middle Passage, forced to labour in sugar plantation or cotton field by the overseer's whip, branded when attempting freedom, then finding the Underground Passage²⁷ to the Carolinas or Canada, joining the British in the American War as camp-servants and fighting soldiers,²⁸ trying to make the best of their settlement²⁹ in Nova Scotia, and

finally repatriation after Thomas Peters, their representative, had gone from Burchtown to London to ask George III to let them return home and, without seeing the King, won for them a fleet of small ships and John Clarkson.

Typical of their leaders were William Ash, the "very intelligent man" of Zachary Macaulay who "proved of exceeding worth in the management of those he accompanied here," the tall, gaunt carpenter with the kindly eyes, who died in 1813 at the age of one hundred years or more; David George, the Baptist, who like Thomas Peters was a stone-mason, the man who captivated the congregation of Camden Road in 1794 so completely that even the most sedate made haste to the entrance lobby to shake him by the hand, who died in 1814 and was succeeded by Hector Peters, to whom he had been pastor and friend and hero: Cato Perkins the fiery enthusiast "who put a Whitfield fervour into all his ministerial duties" and "having great fluency the chapel was always full to hear him," who died in 1820: John Ellis, who partnered Ash and Perkins in their carpentry, also tall and gaunt, said to have been "almost dumb save in the pulpit," and although never learning to read possessed a memory enabling him "to recite without pause or fault anything he heard read," who died in 1829: Moses Wilkinson, the Wesleyan who had a bad crossing from Nova Scotia³⁰ and became more or less an invalid through the rigours of the first rainy season, yet kept his church vital and trained young men for his helping. With the Maroons came Domingo Jordan, a "slender youth and agile," who, amidst the doing of other things such as the making of roofs with shingles of his own invention, built a chapel for himself³¹ and gathered a congregation he registered as a "Free Church." For reasons not recorded this congregation appealed to white as well as black and had two of the Colonial officials amongst its officers. Dr. Edward Fitzgerald,³² writing in 1817 of Hector Peters and Domingo Jordan,³³ says: "Although these men cannot be supposed to be altogether qualified to expound the Sacred Scriptures, they are persons of superior intelligence in their class; and the rectitude of their general principles, as well as the example of their lives, coming in aid of their instructions, their labours have an evident beneficial influence."

Five years later (1815) Thomas Jenkins, a Paul Cuffee Settler,³⁴ arrived the first time, one of the strangest figures seen in the streets of Freetown, "garbed fantastically in a Scotch kilt and having the new American flag above it." He had been born in the Southern States and after various adventures had become Cuffee's chief henchman and supercargo, visiting the West Coast several times before deciding to settle in Sierra Leone. A short time later he was wandering round Scotland, attending classes at Edinburgh University, acting as schoolmaster in a village near Berwick-on-Tweed,

volunteering for service with the Christian Knowledge Society, and becoming a missionary to Mauritius. The climate there affecting his health, he returned to Freetown, where Thomas Peters built him a house in Wilberforce Street, which Jenkins made into a successful school. He was an orator, therefore in much demand, delivering the "Funeral Lament" over Hector Peters³⁵ and his father, Thomas, and the "Oration" at the Nova Scotian Jubilee, and filling with great acceptance most of the pulpits of the town.

Another Jenkins, William, a liberated African³⁶ merchant, built a chapel for himself that was listed by Dr. Fitzgerald as Anabaptist. William was a deacon of Rawdon Street but did not agree with Hector Peters following David George,³⁷ and built Ebenezer at the bottom of his garden³⁸ and took to share the ministry another liberated African who bore the lengthy name of James Bailey Rock St. Harry Marshall.³⁹

Twelve months after the last Colonial Chaplain appointed by the Company had left the Colony, the Church Missionary Society's missionaries began to arrive, 1804, Renner, a German, Hartwig, a Russian, Nylander, a Livonian, Butscher, a Swabian, Prass, a Lusation, all within a few months dying or invalidated home save Nylander, who stayed until 1820.

After them came During of Gloucester,⁴⁰ Wilhelm of Waterloo from 1811 to 1821, and William Augustine Bernard Johnson, born at Hanover, known as the Apostle of Regent for his remarkable work there from 1818 to 1823, which has been the theme of several books.⁴¹

One of the many friends of Johnson was Dr. Macaulay Wilson of Freetown, whose labour of love for the churches helped and inspired many. He was the son of King George of the Bulloms, whose headquarter town was Yongroo, had graduated with honours at Edinburgh and London, and had become Colonial Surgeon of the Colony. His house seemed always crowded with friends as well as patients; he was the welcome guest of official and settler; all the churches desired his help, even those of the hardest Non-conformity. To the regret of all on the southern side of the river he accepted, after great persuasion, the throne of his father and became King George II.

Of the two Garrison Chapels erected in the early days there is neither trace nor record. The first building in Freetown used by the C.M.S. was the Free Church of Domingo Jordan,⁴² renamed St. John's, Westmoreland Street, and sometimes known as Maroon Chapel. St. George's, Water Street, which became the cathedral, took (from 1816) fifteen years to build. In it are memorials to the first three bishops, Owen Emeric Vidal (1853-54), John William Weeks (1855),⁴³ John Bowen (1857-59), and the first liberated African to reach episcopate rank, that remarkable Yoruba, Samuel

Adjai Crowther, consecrated in Canterbury Cathedral as Bishop of the Niger.⁴⁴

In 1821 the American Mission Society sent a deputation (Andrews and Bacon) to tour the country, and about the same time the Society of Friends was represented by a Mr. Singleton of London. The reports of some of these gentlemen are extant and are complimentary to the religious work they saw. The last-named became conspicuous by, Quaker fashion, entering places of worship without removing his hat; this causing loud remonstrance until the congregations understood it was part of his creed.

Another link with the United States, also about that same time, was the appearance in the Rawdon Street pews of some American-African Baptists. They came to the country to establish a mission, chose Sherbro as the site, lost several of their number by fever, and bought an estate at the back of Fourah Bay.⁴⁵ There they are reported as "keeping largely to themselves save in attendance at worship." That was 1820-21, and the next year they moved to Liberia, there raising the flag of the first Negro Republic in Africa.

Their leader, John H. Waring, who was to build the first Baptist Church of Monrovia and whose daughter was to marry the first Liberian President, became friendly with Hector Peters and for some time helped him in his pulpit work. Both were friendly men, and fearless, as history records. Hector was then the beloved leader of his Nonconformist brethren, had led the religious revival of 1817, and was to prove invaluable, with Thomas, his father, and Mary, his mother, and Margaret (Peggy), his wife, in the 1823 Year of Death, when 77 whites and over 100 blacks died of yellow fever. Dr. Fitzgerald's report states: "He stimulated many to find strength to resist the disease and helped many to an easier passing by his singular piety and brotherly-kindness."

Since David George had preached at Camden Road the fellowship there had sent gifts to Rawdon Street; Bibles and hymn-books and some church furniture. Now, in Hector Peter's time, the Particular Church of Newport, Isle of Wight, began to do the same.⁴⁶ One of their members answered the call for white artisans, but quickly found the climate unsuitable for his brick-making work. However, on return he did not forget the congregation to whom he had made his first essays in preaching, and for several years he and his Garden Island friends proved generous.

On June 21st, 1853, Rawdon Street and its two branch churches became the property of the Church of God, an American denomination of Baptist principles, through John McCormack, an Irishman and a notable figure in the Colony for more than fifty years.

John came, with a brother, in 1812 to Freetown and there built up a successful timber trade along the river from Tombo

Island⁴⁷ and commanding an army of contented labourers "who were housed and clothed beyond the ordinary manner." In the decade 1816-26 he increased his annual output for the Royal Dockyards and for British merchants from just over 700 teak and African mahogany logs to nearly 25,000. So it continued for another twenty years before loss of health caused loss of business. While in Liverpool attempting to obtain money for his helping, in 1852, he became a sudden but complete disciple and advocate of the "new Yankee denomination," and when he returned to his Freetown house⁴⁸ he sought to propagate his creed. The Baptists were pastorless at the time and, somehow, their chapels passed into his hands.

As Pastor he chose William Thomas George Lawson, Government Interpreter at King's Yard and son of the Paramount Chief⁴⁹ of Little Popo. He spoke twenty-seven African languages, according to the inscription on the silver chain presented to him on retirement. He had himself missed slavery by a hair's breadth. Taking a holiday trip down the coast with his wife and young family the ship was taken by a Slaver.⁵⁰ Fortunately the *Sophia*, a German man-of-war, proceeding to Lagos to coal, took the Slaver as it was trying to escape, and landed the Lawsons in Nigeria to resume their holiday.

Like that other Prince, Macaulay Wilson, William Thomas George was chosen to succeed his father,⁵¹ but declined the honour and continued his government work and his preaching at Rawdon Street, helped by his two sons, William George, who became Interpreter and wore his father's presentation chain in the pulpit, and Thomas George, trained as a civil engineer, who became the Assistant Colonial Surveyor.

Not all the Baptists joined the new denomination, thirty-five in 1865 choosing a Baptist missionary, the Rev. J. Diboll,⁵² late of Fernando Po, as Pastor. He had spent a couple of holidays with his friend George Weeks, who succeeded Hector Peters, and reported to the B.M.S. he liked both climate and Baptists in Freetown. He was, however, a sick man when he landed and died in the same year.

F. W. BUTT-THOMPSON.

NOTES

¹ James Somerset, the slave for whom the Judgment was delivered, being one of them.

² Consorted for the voyage by H.M.S. *Nautilus*, Commander Thomas Boulden Thompson, R.N.

³ "Purchased" for a few secondhand garments and some rum.

⁴ Known as Granville Town, later Freetown.

- ⁵ Published Paris, two vols., 1802.
- ⁶ The Patron who so generously helped John Newton who, when a slaver, lived twelve months in Sierra Leone, afterwards visiting it several times.
- ⁷ Remembered as first man to carry an umbrella.
- ⁸ John Clarkson was first Superintendent here, followed by Zachary Macaulay (father of Lord Macaulay). Kenneth, another son, also served the Colony.
- ⁹ 500 rebels against British rule in Jamaica.
- ¹⁰ Temne chief who, for Naimbanna the Overlord, reigned in that part of the land in which the Colony was formed.
- ¹¹ The *Life of Thomas Peters* has been published by the R.T.S.
- ¹² The *British Weekly* in a report (1953) of the Centenary of the African Baptist Association in Canada speaks of George.
- ¹³ Son of Thomas and Mary Peters. He and Weeks were the successors of George.
- ¹⁴ An admission that these Africans had not then fully won their freedom.
- ¹⁵ Two years later the first Wesleyan help came.
- ¹⁶ He had been minister at Launceston whilst attending classes at Bristol Academy. See article by Rev. Kenneth E. Hyde, B.A., in *Baptist Quarterly* of January, 1953.
- ¹⁷ Peters and George had been as deputation to Company to stop these very abuses.
- ¹⁸ Later The Sierra Leone Company.
- ¹⁹ He went to America, where he had a long and honoured ministry, there keeping in touch over the years with his Sierra Leonean friends and Rodway in England. This last suggesting the youths did not quarrel and thereby bring the B.M.S. effort to an end, as the Assistant Bishop of S.L. has stated in book published by the S.P.C.K.
- ²⁰ 40 artificers and 16 soldiers sent out by the Company.
- ²¹ In 1850 they had 11 chapels, 3 Sabbath schools, 48 preachers and exhorters, 89 class-leaders, 1,513 full members, 107 candidates, and 5 week-day schools with 500 scholars, under the Rev. Anthony Elliott.
- ²² Rawdon Street, built 1793-5, "comfortable, with egg-shaped pulpit," seated over 500.
- ²³ *Origin of Wesleyan Methodism in Sierra Leone*, 1913.
- ²⁴ Such argument in a small cabin might have been hastily interpreted as quarrelling.
- ²⁵ Accompanied by Schoolmasters Rayner, Healy, and Hearst.
- ²⁶ The family that supplied the Commander who took out the early settlers and the Lieutenant who became the first Crown Governor and, during the years, many who acted as officials.
- ²⁷ "The Middle Passage" was the Atlantic and "The Underground Passage" the secret escape route kept open through America by men like Thomas Peters.
- ²⁸ They were enlisted into a Brigade known as The Black Pioneers.
- ²⁹ The appeal to enlist was accompanied by promise of freedom and farm as reward.
- ³⁰ Sixty-five died on that voyage.
- ³¹ Thomas Peters drew the plan, volunteers built the walls, Domingo himself made "the neat roof."
- ³² Chief Justice here from 1804.
- ³³ Who had established a David and Jonathan friendship.
- ³⁴ Paul Cuffee brought several small bands of settlers to Sierra Leone.
- ³⁵ Who was stabbed to death by a madman in December, 1830.
- ³⁶ The term used to denote those taken off the captured slave-ships.

³⁷ Many thought George Weeks should have followed George. He succeeded, however, Hector Peters.

³⁸ Still standing but used as store.

³⁹ The names were given by the officials of King's Yard (the reception centre of the Repatriation work) from list of donors to the C.M.S. funds.

⁴⁰ Gloucester, Waterloo, Regent, were villages built for the Liberated Africans.

⁴¹ One by Dr. A. T. Pierson, 1897, called *Seven Years in Sierra Leone*, founded on an anonymous *Memoir* of W. A. B. Johnson.

⁴² See Special Report of the Directors of the African Institution published in *Tracts on the Slave Trade*.

⁴³ Missionary here from 1825.

⁴⁴ 1864.

⁴⁵ Where now stands Fourah Bay College, the C.M.S. and W.M.S. university of the Colony.

⁴⁶ *Story of the Newport Baptists* by Dr. Testrail.

⁴⁷ Where Thomas John Sawyerr, Liberated African bookseller of Rawdon Street, after giving £1,000 to the Native Pastorate Church, built and endowed a church, helped by his mulatto friend, Charles Forsyth.

⁴⁸ By leave of his creditors, who had formed themselves into a Company to carry on the timber business, the chairman being Boston King, Nova Scotian and Baptist Deacon.

⁴⁹ The rather silly title the British give to African kings.

⁵⁰ Nearly fifty years after the Abolition!

⁵¹ Educated in England and America, traveller through Europe and the Western Isles, and an enlightened ruler. He died June 20th, 1857, at New London, his capital, which he had made sanitary and habitable, whilst attending the Baptist Church he had built.

⁵² Of Holt in Norfolk, who landed in Fernando Po 1854, and when the British ceased to administer the island went across to his friend Alfred Saker at Victoria, Ambas Bay.

Congregational Quarterly, April, 1956, has Principal Lovell Cocks' Drew Lecture, articles on sociological factors affecting communication, Pascal's Apology, training leaders, Congregational social theory, Christian art and preaching.

Mennonite Quarterly Review, April, 1956, has articles on the modern social Gospel, the dependence of the first Anabaptists on Luther, Erasmus and Zwingli, the officers of elder and bishop in Anabaptist-Mennonite history.

Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, March, 1956, has appreciations of the late F. F. Bretherton, articles on John Cennick, Wesley and proverbs, Tanderagee, and Methodist ministry in Inverness in the nineteenth century.

Scottish Journal of Theology, June, 1956, has articles on the meaning of ordination, modern Swedish theology, Barth's *Dogmatics* and the usual book reviews.

Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society, May, 1956, has articles on Knox's Genevan congregation, Charles Thomson, Carlyle, and Allan Cunningham, Katherine Babington of Harnham.