

David Margrett: A Black Missionary in the Revolutionary Atlantic

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David Margrett was a black missionary sent by the Countess of Huntingdon to preach to slaves in South Carolina and Georgia in 1774. Margrett did not confine his preaching in America to spiritual matters, instead speaking out against the system of slavery itself, and offering himself as a “second Moses.” Margrett’s message was not well received by authorities in South Carolina, indeed he was fortunate to escape with his life. This article argues that Margrett was a product both of his evangelical training, where speaking out on important matters was encouraged, and also of his British environment, where anti-slavery voices were becoming increasingly prominent. The story of David Margrett demonstrates how black Britons received and interpreted the message of Christianity, and in particular how they used their faith as a means to attack slavery.

The figure of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, looms large in any study of the black Atlantic. She corresponded with Phillis Wheatley and it was due to her patronage and influence that a volume of Wheatley’s poems and James Gronniosaw’s *Narrative* were published in Britain in the early 1770s.¹ John Marrant, whose own narrative went through several editions in 1785, became a preacher in the countess’s Methodist “connexion” and spent five years ministering to black congregations in Nova Scotia and Massachusetts. Both Marrant and Olaudah Equiano began their spiritual rebirth after hearing the countess’s chaplain, George Whitefield, preach in America. Yet the Countess of Huntingdon’s interest in black Christianity extended beyond those who would later become famous through their publications. One black man, David Margrett, never published an autobiography but did attend the countess’s ministerial college in Wales and preached in her employ in both Britain and America. The spiritual equality offered by Methodism seems to have resonated strongly among the wider black population of Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century, yet we actually know very little about the response of

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¹ Both volumes were dedicated to the countess. James Gronniosaw, *A narrative of the most remarkable particulars in the life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw* (Bath: W. Gye, 1772); Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on various subjects, religious and moral* (London: A. Bell, 1773).

individual Afro-Britons to evangelical Christianity.² The experiences of David Margrett shed some light on how Christianity was interpreted by Afro-Britons, and in particular how evangelicalism was translated into a message about slavery throughout the black Atlantic.

David Margrett's origins are obscure. He is usually described in extant letters as "the African" and he claimed to be "stole from the coast of Africa," though one American correspondent informed the countess, "You may depend that David is a fugitive slave."³ The black population of Britain in the later eighteenth century numbered around 20,000 and was mostly to be found in cities, with the largest concentration in London.⁴ While many blacks in eighteenth-century Britain were free and working in various menial, servile, and labouring professions, at least some native Africans were enslaved in Britain, having been brought back from the Americas by wealthy families reluctant to part with a favourite domestic, as well as by ship captains who took them as part of the profits of a slaving trip. When slaves in Britain fled their bondage they often found refuge amongst the black population of London's East End. It is possible that Margrett was indeed born in Africa, taken as a slave and somehow ended up in Britain, where he either obtained his freedom or ran away. How he came to be involved with the Countess of Huntingdon's connexion is also unknown. In the only extant letter written by Margrett, most probably dating from spring 1774, he mentions being "under the banner of Christ this 7 years," dating his own conversion to roughly 1767, and it is feasible that, like Marrant and Equiano, he was converted after hearing George Whitefield preach in Britain around that time.⁵

Evangelical preachers in mid-eighteenth-century Britain, particularly Methodists and radical Anglicans such as Whitefield, were the first to articulate a message of salvation for all and to specifically target their preaching at the most marginal groups in society by using plain and simple language and

² Vincent Carretta, *Equiano the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 168.

³ James Habersham to Robert Keen, 11 May 1775, Letters of the Hon. James Habersham, *Collections of the Georgia Historical Society*, Volume VI (Savannah: Georgia Historical Society, 1904), 244.

⁴ While there was no census of black people in eighteenth-century Britain, the figure of 20,000 was widely accepted at the time. See the *Gentleman's Magazine*, 34 (1764), 493, cited in Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Humanities Press, 1984), 68; and Paul Edward and James Walvin, *Black Personalities in the Era of the Slave Trade* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 18.

⁵ David Margrett to the Countess of Huntingdon, n.d. (c. April 1774), F1/1221, American Papers of the Countess of Huntingdon, Westminster College, Cambridge. (henceforth CH papers). Other letters refer to Margrett as Margate, but the former is the spelling used in the only extant letter in Margrett's hand.

by emphasizing emotional experience ahead of distant intellectualism.⁶ Evangelicals also shunned regular pulpits, often preferring the open air. Opposition to such irregular preaching could be vociferous: a correspondent to the *London Evening News* in 1773 signing himself “A Methodist Hater” attacked those “thinking to teach the Paupers religion” and counselled that “a parcel of poor ignorant wretches indeed might open their ears and eyes at such a novelty, people of sense and education in general know better.” Others termed evangelicals “preachers of Baal” and nothing more than a “wolf in sheep’s clothing.”⁷ Yet the willingness of evangelicals to engage with the lowest social groups earned them a growing following among the poor, women and blacks. The Countess of Huntingdon commented on the long reach of one of her preachers: “I suppose by the multitudes he preached to in the fields . . . That a hundred thousand people have heard the gospel, at least, that never heard a word before.”⁸ We know that David Margrett was a student at the countess’s Trevecca College in Wales in 1773, his skin colour evidently being no bar to admission, and shortly afterwards he began preaching by invitation in the Home Counties, where he was clearly well received, even being invited for dinner by local “gentlemen.”⁹ No doubt some of this genial reception can be attributed to the novelty of hearing a black man preach, but it is also clear that Margrett had talent as well. One woman told her regular minister that when she heard Margrett preach she felt “the Lord’s blessing” and Margrett clearly took pride that “many of my hearers were affected exceedingly.”¹⁰

While living in London Margrett told the countess, “my soul is bowed down by resone of the sins that are committed from day to day” in the city, but he was doing his best to correct this through his preaching, and it “rejoiceth my heart to see sinners flock like doves to the window.”¹¹ Margrett was particularly pleased that “many of my own complection” came to hear him, evidence that black Londoners were indeed receptive to evangelicalism. The emphasis among evangelicals generally, and by Methodists in particular, on the

⁶ Frank Lambert, *Pedlar in Divinity: George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737–1770* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 205–6.

⁷ *London Evening News*, 8 June 1773. Countess of Huntingdon to John Hawkesworth, 26 March 1773, G2/1/7, CH Papers.

⁸ Countess of Huntingdon to John Hawkesworth, 13 Oct. 1773, G2/1/9, CH Papers.

⁹ John Meldrom to the Countess of Huntingdon, 6 Nov. 1773, F1/258, CH papers. Mrs. B. Peckwell to the Countess of Huntingdon, 11 Apr. [1774], F1/1353, CH Papers. Robert Keen to the Countess of Huntingdon, 15 Sept. 1774, A1/12/4, CH papers. In a possible reference to Margrett, Phillis Wheatley wrote in July 1773 of her “great satisfaction to hear of an African so worthy, to be honoured with your Ladyship’s approbation and friendship.” Phillis Wheatley to the Countess of Huntingdon, 17 July 1773, A3/5/5 CH papers.

¹⁰ David Margrett to the Countess of Huntingdon, n.d. (c. April 1774) F1/1221.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

concept of “liberty” – especially spiritual and civil liberty to worship without state interference, naturally spilled over into ideas about personal liberty. Black people resident in Britain, many of whom had been enslaved at some point and faced day-to-day discrimination in the workplace and on the streets, had an obvious interest in hearing those who talked about spiritual equality and personal freedom.¹² Those who flocked to hear David Margrett preach would have seen someone with whom they could identify, who faced the same trials and tribulations as they did and yet had overcome them to occupy a position of importance.

The generally positive reception to his preaching did not prevent Margrett having a crisis of confidence about his own abilities. He told the countess that he was “much cast down in regard to preaching my stupidity and blindness and I don’t believe there can be a greater fool than I am I know nothing and in faith I grow weaker and weaker.” Living in London meant that “every moment I am exceedingly tempted by the devil [who] tempts me to leave of preaching and prayings and it will be better for me.”¹³ Quite what form these temptations took Margrett does not say, but one friend was reported to have “cheerfully paid the Negro’s debt,” hinting that Margrett may have lost money gambling.¹⁴ In April 1774 a request was relayed from Margrett for the countess to use her patronage to get him “a sidewaiter’s place” since “there is not a more changeable creature living than himself.”¹⁵ The countess wished him to continue preaching, however, and an opportunity immediately arose in America for which she thought Margrett particularly suited.

The countess had inherited Bethesda, an orphanage near Savannah in Georgia, on the death of George Whitefield in 1770. Whitefield’s will requested that Bethesda be turned into a college that would train preachers to spread the gospel among Native Americans and the countess sent out a number of ministers and students from Trevecca to Georgia in 1772. The first reports the countess received of Bethesda were not good: the college was in disrepair, and much of the property that should have been there had been removed.¹⁶ Along with the buildings at Bethesda Whitefield had also bequeathed to the countess forty-nine slaves who toiled in the roughly five hundred acres surrounding the orphan house to grow foodstuffs and rice.¹⁷ While she was happy to encourage the conversion of “heathen” Africans

¹² David Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion, c.1750–1900* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 80, 89; *idem*, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 25.

¹³ David Margrett to the Countess of Huntingdon, n.d. (c. April 1774) F1/1221

¹⁴ Henry Peckwell to the Countess of Huntingdon, n.d., F1/1350.

¹⁵ Mrs. B. Peckwell to the Countess of Huntingdon, 11 April [1774], F1/1353, CH Papers.

¹⁶ Daniel Roberts to the Countess of Huntingdon, 16 Feb. 1773, A3/4/12, CH papers.

¹⁷ List of Negroes, 1 Jan. 1771, A3/2/2, CH papers.

throughout the Atlantic world, the countess's stance on slavery as an institution was, at best, ambivalent. While other evangelicals such as John Wesley attacked slavery on theological grounds, the countess's Calvinism meant that she saw little need either to emancipate her slaves or to do much to ameliorate their condition.¹⁸ Like Whitefield before her, the countess was content to own slaves, and indeed add to their number, while using the profits from their labour to support her own projects. This did not stop anti-slavery activists like Philadelphian Quaker Anthony Benezet from writing to the countess urging her to support international efforts to abolish the slave trade. Her response, that "'tis God alone, by his Almighty power, who can & will in his own time bring outward, as well as spiritual deliverance to his afflicted & oppressed creatures," offered him little encouragement.¹⁹

Despite the lack of urging from the countess, some of those she sent to America were concerned about the spiritual life of those enslaved at Bethesda. Housekeeper Elizabeth Cosson wrote to the countess,

I feel for the poor negroes, tho most people give them very bad carritor & that it is in vain to preach to them, one night my heart was drawn to speak to them they heard me very attentive & one woman was drownded in tears, the lord help me to be faithful to their poor souls, indeed I am willing to spend my time & talant for the good of my fellow mortals, I think about thirty of negroes atended the preaching today both morning and evening.

Her husband, John Cosson, made far less progress: "as for the negroes they can neither understand me nor I them."²⁰ James Habersham, an original partner with Whitefield in the Bethesda project and acting governor of Georgia during the early 1770s, reported to the countess,

Sorry I am to say, that I do not remember to have seen or heard of any of our students making an attempt to instruct these poor benighted people, not even any of your Ladyships, which looked as tho they deemed themselves too great to speak to any but white people.

Habersham also contradicted Cosson's claim that the language barrier impeded missionary work amongst the slaves: "Most of our black people can

¹⁸ Boyd Stanley Schlenker, *Queen of the Methodists: The Countess of Huntingdon and the Eighteenth-Century Crisis of Faith and Society* (Durham: Academic Press, 1997), 91. The Countess of Huntingdon had created her own "connexion" of chapels and ministers in Britain during the second half of the eighteenth century and while the connexion shared some traits with Wesleyan Methodism it was theologically quite distinct. See Alan Harding, *The Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion: A Sect in Action in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Edwin Welch, *Spiritual Pilgrim: A Reassessment of the life of the Countess of Huntingdon* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995).

¹⁹ Anthony Benezet to the Countess of Huntingdon, 25 May 1774 and 10 March 1775, A3/1/33 and A4/7/9, CH papers.

²⁰ Mrs. Elizabeth Cosson to the Countess of Huntingdon, 10 Jan. 1773; John Cosson to the Countess of Huntingdon, 9 Jan. 1773, A3/4/4 and A3/4/3, CH papers.

speak English, and many of them exceedingly well.”²¹ The Rev. William Piercy, whom the countess had placed in charge of Bethesda, lamented, “The poor slaves lie very much now upon my heart. There are thousands & thousands on every side of us in these parts, & no one cares for their Souls . . . no lasting blessing can be expect’d except it could be followed up constantly.” Since there were “ninety who are capable of being taught” at Bethesda alone, and those he had spoken with had seemed “much affected,” Piercy requested that the countess

get a few truly devoted hearts . . . who would look upon it as their blessed privilege to instruct their souls & would solemnly engage with you before God to employ themselves wholly in that blessed work of teaching them to read & instruct ’em in the nature of Christianity.

Piercy concurred with Habersham that proficiency in English was not an insurmountable problem: “Many are country born & salt water slaves soon learn the language, so that they are capable of receiving instruction in our mother tongue.”²²

It was perhaps reading this letter from Piercy that prompted Robert Keen, the London merchant who dealt with the countess’s American affairs, to muse in a letter to her, “I was thinking if David Margate [*sic*] was sent over with a white preacher whether he might not be bless’d to the Negroes as they understand and he preaches in English.”²³ Piercy’s own letter to the countess reinforced the suggestion:

I think the African you have with you would do for the purpose & God might make him the greatest blessing to his poor heathen countrymen if his heart is devoted before God. At the same time that he instructed your own slaves all the neighbouring plantations would enjoy the advantages of his labors.²⁴

With both William Piercy and Robert Keen suggesting to the countess that Margrett was an obvious choice to send to Bethesda to preach to the slaves, and aware both that he already had a following among the black population of London and that those currently in Georgia seemed “not willing” to do the job, she had agreed to the proposal by mid-September 1774.²⁵ When the mission was first proposed to Margrett in July 1774 he expressed a preference “for Jamaica, Barbadoes, or Antigua, where he says are 1000s of his complexion, but in America he expects to find few or none. The Indians there being molattoes & not Negroes.”²⁶ This statement betrays a significant

²¹ James Habersham to the Countess of Huntingdon, 8 April 1774, A3/6/14, CH papers.

²² William Piercy to the Countess of Huntingdon, 25 March 1774, A4/2/9, CH papers.

²³ Robert Keen to the Countess of Huntingdon, 20 June 1744, A1/10/3, CH papers.

²⁴ William Piercy to the Countess of Huntingdon, 11 June 1774, A4/2/10, CH papers.

²⁵ Countess of Huntingdon to William Piercy, 22 Sept. 1773, A4/3/2, CH Papers.

²⁶ Henry Peckwell to the Countess of Huntingdon, 6 July 1774, F/1357, CH papers.

degree of ignorance about the mainland colonies and is further evidence that if Margrett had been enslaved at some point, it was not in North America. He seems to have been unaware, for instance, that South Carolina and Georgia had a large enslaved population, and that many were African-born. While the proportion of African-born slaves on the mainland was lower than in the West Indies, both South Carolina and Georgia had imported many thousands of slaves directly from Africa in the years before 1775.²⁷ Once persuaded that he had a useful role to play in North America, Margrett ventured another objection to his mission, telling Robert Keen that he desired “3 or 4 months Learning before he sailed.” Keen responded by telling him that John Cosson, who was returning to America on board ship with Margrett,

was now a Schoolmaster and would begin teaching him the first day they got on Board and continue so to do to the end of the Voyage and that as they had nothing else to do, it would be as good as four months teaching amongst a parcel of other scholars.²⁸

Apparently satisfied by this answer, Margrett made preparations for the voyage.

Keen told the countess, “I shall be as sparing as possible in the necessary things they will have occasion to take with and equip them,” though receipts show that Margrett was provided with an entirely new wardrobe, including suits, neck cloths, hat and gloves, as well as bedding and supplies such as ham, wine, rum and brandy for the voyage on the *Mermaid* under Captain Hertford. Margrett’s clothes did not come from cheap back-street tailors but from those such as “Daniel Golden, Linen-Draper, at the Unicorn, near Norfolk-Street, in the Strand, London,” who could afford to send their invoices on preprinted headed notepaper. Golden’s invoice identified Margrett as “Mr Margate, the black student,” according him a status by the use of the prefix “Mr” that would have been rarely according to any black person in the Americas.²⁹

The *Mermaid* departed from London on 7 October 1774, arriving in Charleston on 28 December 1774 “after a long and tedious voyage of 11 weeks & 5 days.”³⁰ Margrett took lodgings in the house of Patrick Hinds, a

²⁷ Between 1770 and 1775 at least 19,193 Africans had arrived in South Carolina, while a further 3,417 had arrived in Savannah. All figures are taken from the transatlantic slave trade database www.slavevoyages.org. This is certainly an undercount of the number of slaves imported. For example, one shipment of 90 slaves aboard the *Anna* that arrived in Savannah in August 1774 does not appear the database. *Georgia Gazette*, 3 Aug. 1774.

²⁸ Robert Keen to the Countess of Huntingdon, 15 Sept. 1774, A1/12/4, CH papers.

²⁹ Among the invoices are those for neck cloths £1 (A2/8/22); breeches, coats and suits, £8.10.0 (A2/8/24); shirts £0.9.6 (A2/8/28); gloves £0.1.8 (A2/8/34); a hat £0.15.0 (A2/8/35); bedding £2.12.6 (A2/8/30); wine £2.12.9 (A2/8/31); ham £1.16.10 (A2/8/23). Daniel Golden’s invoice was for £4.5.8 (A2/8/21). All CH papers.

³⁰ The departure of the *Mermaid* was noted in the *General Evening Post* (London), 8 Oct. 1774. William Piercy to the Countess of Huntingdon, 6 Jan. 1775 (quote), A4/2/12, CH papers.

local bootmaker who had resided in the city since arriving from Ireland in 1739. In his youth Hinds had a reputation as a “man of pleasure, fond of company and enjoyments,” and he evidently prospered in South Carolina, owning significant amounts of land as well as several slaves, but by the 1770s he had “embraced serious religion” and become a member of the Charleston Baptist Church. While in Charleston Hinds asked Margrett “to preach to several white people and Negroes, who had collected together to hear him.”³¹

Eighteenth-century South Carolina was not a particularly fertile ground for evangelicals. George Whitefield’s attempts to preach in South Carolina in the late 1730s and early 1740s had met with stiff opposition from Alexander Garden, the Anglican commissary who had eventually denied him access to pulpits in the province. While much of the antagonism between Whitefield and Garden arose from personal animosity, Whitefield also alienated local slaveholders by informing them in 1740 that “God has a Quarrel with you for your Abuse of and Cruelty to the poor Negroes.”³² While he condemned the physical hardships slaves endured, he reserved particular scorn for those who “on Purpose, keep your Negroes ignorant of Christianity” from fear that “teaching them Christianity would make them proud and consequently unwilling to submit to Slavery.”³³ Garden’s riposte, while denying general mistreatment of slaves, accepted as “too sad a truth” that efforts to convert slaves to Christianity were insufficient.³⁴

The South Carolina elite were highly critical of the “illiterate enthusiasm or wild imagination” of new Christian sects, with Henry Laurens remarking at one point that “Christianity and Methodism must differ very widely.”³⁵ In

³¹ James Habersham to Robert Keen, 11 May 1775, Letters of the Hon. James Habersham, 244. When Hinds died in Charleston on 23 April 1798 at the age of 83 he was described as ‘reputable inhabitant’ born in Dublin in 1715, who had lived in Charleston from 1739 until his death. *City Gazette*, 25 and 30 April 1798. He owned eight slaves and several city lots at the time of his death and his estate was valued at £230.6.10. Charleston County Will Book C, 468–71; Charleston County Inventory Book C, 432, both South Carolina Archives. Patrick Hinds served as one of the messengers to the Charlestown Baptist Association in February 1775. *Minutes of the Charlestown Association. Charlestown, Feb. 6. 1775* (Charleston: n.p., 1775), 1.

³² George Whitefield, *Three letters from the Reverend Mr. G. Whitefield: viz. Letter I. To a friend in London, concerning Archbishop Tillotson. Letter II. To the same, on the same subject. Letter III. To the inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South-Carolina, concerning their negroes* (Philadelphia: B. Franklin, 1740), 13. ³³ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

³⁴ Alexander Garden, *Six letters to the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield . . . The sixth, containing remarks on Mr. Whitefield’s second letter, concerning Archbishop Tillotson, and on his letter concerning the negroes* (Boston: T. Fleet, 1740), 53.

³⁵ H. Roy Merrens, ed., *The Colonial South Carolina Scene: Contemporary Views, 1697–1774* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1977), 256. Henry Laurens to John Laurens, 30 July 1775, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, ed. George C. Rogers Jr., David R. Chesnut and Peggy J. Clark et al. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985), x, 258.

November 1774, a month before David Margrett arrived in the city, William Piercy reported that while visiting Charleston “I have met with new distress to find the state of religion in this place so much lower than when I last left it. Many of the good people are grown cold & others more stupid and hardened.” The only sliver lining he saw was the ministry of Thomas, a slave belonging to John Edwards, one of the countess’s correspondents in Charleston, whom Piercy understood had been “carrying on a most blessed work among the poor Africans” for the past year.³⁶ Thomas was evidently preaching in an acceptable manner to local slaves, and Edwards was sufficiently aware of the potential controversy that might surround a new free black preacher such as David Margrett, one who did not have a master to control him, that he made sure that Margrett was “informed of the tenor of the negro laws before he preached, and also desired by Mr & Mrs Cosson not to speak anything respecting their outward condition.”³⁷

Heedless of Edwards’s warning, the sermon that Margrett preached to his ready and receptive audience attacked the legitimacy of slavery head on:

The Jews of the old world treated the Gentiles as dogs and I am informed the people of this country use those of my complection as such. I don’t mean myself, thank God I am from a better country than this, I mean old England, but let them remember that the children of Israel were delivered out of the hands of Pharo and he and all his host were drowned in the Red Sea and God will deliver his own people from slavery.³⁸

In the two weeks that Margrett was in Charleston he preached along similar lines on at least two more occasions and it was not long before city residents began to be alarmed both at the insurrectionary tone of his message and at the fact that he was preaching it to slaves.³⁹ After “his third time of preaching at Charles Town” Margrett received a letter “threatening what they would do to him if he preach’d to the negroes any more.”⁴⁰ Margrett’s sermons were widely interpreted by Charlestonians “as tho’ he meant to raise rebellion amongst the Negroes” and since the “laws are very pointed & severe in this respect & the consequences of the breach of ’em is a trial for life by two justices of the peace & three freeholders,” bench warrants were issued for his arrest.⁴¹

³⁶ William Piercy to the Countess of Huntingdon, 28 Nov. 1774, A4/1/19, CH Papers.

³⁷ Richard Piercy to the Countess of Huntingdon, 16 June 1775, A1/13/10, CH Papers.

³⁸ John Edwards to the Countess of Huntingdon, 16 Jan. 1775, A3/6/10, CH Papers. Another account of Margrett’s words were sent to James Habersham: “God would send deliverance to the Negroes, from the power of their masters, as he freed the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage.” James Habersham to Robert Keen, 11 May 1775, Letters of the Hon. James Habersham, 244.

³⁹ Robert Keen to the Countess of Huntingdon, 1 July 1775, A1/12/33, CH Papers.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ James Habersham to Robert Keen, 11 May 1775, Letters of the Hon. James Habersham, 244. Richard Piercy to the Countess of Huntingdon, 16 June 1775, A1/13/10, CH Papers. William Piercy to the Countess of Huntingdon, [6, 7 and 8 May 1775], A4/2/16, CH Papers.

William Piercy's brother, Richard, wrote to the countess, "Had a white man said as much his life must have gone, much less a negroe who in these parts are in the most abject state," but he and several others thought "that David was intirely culpable in this respect," and that even "faithful Thomas . . . blames him a little."⁴²

Margrett's motivation for speaking like this to enslaved people in Charleston is not clear, though perhaps an insight into his thinking can be gained by examining the sermons of Rev. Henry Peckwell. Peckwell was a regular correspondent of the Countess of Huntingdon and knew Margrett personally, being partly responsible for persuading him to go to America. Peckwell preached that no one "can draw back" from the command to "seek for Christ's sheep . . . without proving a traitor to the church," and used startlingly similar imagery to that used by Margrett to make his point.⁴³ If preaching met opposition then that was only to be expected, since the unbelievers were led by the Devil, but

If Satan be rushing on, mad in his career, as Pharaoh when he pursued the ransomed Israelites: – If the language of this spiritual foe be proud, vain, and malicious as his, stand still and see the salvation of God. – The Spirit will lift up a standard against him, take off the wheels of his malicious fury, and overthrow his evil design, by making even the tryal work together for your good.⁴⁴

Those doing God's work would be protected by God, since when the faithful "asked to be delivered, God gave them to triumph."⁴⁵ It is highly probable that Margrett heard Peckwell preach, and perhaps Peckwell even used this imagery when persuading Margrett to accept the commission to go to Georgia to preach to the enslaved. The biblical story of Moses freeing the Israelites from slavery resonated throughout the black Atlantic world, and it was only natural that Margrett would use it when he talked to enslaved people in Charleston.

Preachers such as Peckwell gave Margrett the vocabulary to attack slavery as it required only a small adjustment of the message to condemn not only the lack of Christianity among the enslaved but the entire edifice of slavery. William Piercy and John Cosson, by contrast, believed "that a great part of David's wicked conduct arises from his pride . . . His pride seems so great, that he can't bear to think of any of his own color being slaves."⁴⁶ What Piercy and

⁴² Richard Piercy to the Countess of Huntingdon, 16 June 1775, A1/13/10, CH Papers. John Edwards to William Piercy, Charleston, 11 Jan. 1775, A3/6/9, CH Papers.

⁴³ Henry Peckwell, *The captain of salvation: A sermon preached on Christmas-day, 1773, at the Parish-Church of Saint Sepulchre, near Newgate-Street; for the benefit of the children belonging to St Ethelburga Society* (London: J. & W. Oliver, 1774), viii. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 35–6.

⁴⁵ Henry Peckwell, *The glory of the Lord filling the house of God: a sermon preached on the thirteenth of August, 1775. at the opening of a new chapel, at Lewes in Sussex* (Lewes: William Lee, 1775), 21.

⁴⁶ William Piercy to the Countess of Huntingdon, [6, 7 and 8 May 1775], A4/2/16, CH Papers.

Cosson considered “pride,” however, might also be interpreted as a deep-seated anti-slavery sentiment that simply could not be held in. If speaking out against racial slavery in South Carolina aroused the ire of whites then so be it. Margrett had been trained to speak God’s message fearlessly regardless of earthly consequences, and to rely on the Holy Spirit for support, guidance and protection.

Aware of the trouble Margrett was causing, on 11 January 1775 John Edwards put Margrett on a “private” boat belonging to fellow evangelical, George Galphin, “going for Georgia.” Eight days later Margrett arrived at Bethesda.⁴⁷ William Piercy welcomed him enthusiastically: “I love the appearance of David, he appears pious and devoted, and I do hope the Lord will make him a great blessing to these poor heathen around us.” John Edwards had already warned Piercy that Margrett might “speak imprudently to the black people,” and therefore Piercy decided on a pre-emptive approach and asked the countess to “drop a word to him i.e. David, upon that subject.” Piercy “desired him to take notice of my manner of addressing the negroes & he has taken it in great love,” but he cannot have been too concerned about what Margrett might preach to Bethesda’s slaves since he confessed “I did not hear him preach myself, being obliged to go to Savannah to preach at night according to appointment.”⁴⁸ James Habersham was also initially positive about Margrett, reporting that he “conducts himself very well,” but he had concerns that

the kind notice he has met with in England, will make him think too highly of himself. I have hinted this to Mr Piercy and I hope he has cautioned him to avoid splitting upon this rock. This work of instructing the negroes, if it should have the desired effect, I am persuaded will meet with all the opposition and reproach that men and Devils can invent. Indeed something of the kind has already appeared, however this is must be otherwise the work would not be that of God.⁴⁹

This last sentence was an oblique reference to Margrett’s preaching in Charleston that Habersham was apparently either willing to overlook or had not been made fully cognisant of.

Despite William Piercy’s attempt to curb the insurrectionary message of his new missionary, Margrett “was soon led again by the Devil into the same snare” and by the end of January he had declared that he had been sent to America “to be a second Moses & should be called to deliver his people from slavery.” In a phrase that might have come from Henry Peckwell’s mouth, Margrett informed Richard Piercy that “God told him so & appointed the

⁴⁷ John Edward to William Piercy, 11 Jan. 1775, A3/6/9, CH Papers. William Piercy to the Countess of Huntingdon, 24 Jan. 1775, A4/2/13, CH Papers.

⁴⁸ William Piercy to the Countess of Huntingdon, 24 Jan. 1775, A4/2/13, CH Papers.

⁴⁹ James Habersham to the Countess of Huntingdon, 19 April 1775, A3/6/15, CH Papers.

time” and began to convey this message both to the Bethesda slaves and to those “negroes present who came from Savannah to hear him preach.” William Piercy lamented that “Nothing could have happened of a more distressing nature, [as] we are so surrounded with blacks,” but the fear that Margrett’s message might encourage a general insurrection of slaves was not simply confined to Bethesda. Word reached Savannah and earned Piercy, the person supposedly responsible for Margrett’s behaviour, “the greatest reproach as well as censure from the Governor & all the white people.” It was not long before the entire lowcountry was “under a continual apprehension of an insurrection among the slaves from his conduct & discourses to the negroes.”⁵⁰

Any chances that Margrett might have actually become the leader of a slave insurrection, if indeed that was his intention, were thwarted by his own actions at Bethesda. Shortly after he pronounced himself a “second Moses” he told William Piercy that “the Lord had told him that he should take a negro woman . . . to be his wife that was already wife to one of your slaves & that I must comply as it was from God.” When Piercy refused on the grounds that this would be “the sin of adultery,” Margrett coolly informed him “that he was wrong before, but there was another negro girl that he must take who was not married & that God would have it so.” Piercy also refused this request, but this did not stop Margrett going “amongst the poor ignorant negro slaves, I mean wenches, continually.” By this behaviour, which Piercy was convinced was dictated by simple “lust,” Margrett “put the whole plantation into disorder & all the negroes into murmuring” and evidently succeeded in alienating the majority of the slaves at Bethesda to the extent that later attempts by John Cosson to preach to the slaves foundered “for they will not come to hear the word through fair or fowll means.”⁵¹

However, Margrett’s message had clearly resonated among those in South Carolina who had heard him preach. Visiting Charleston in May 1775 Piercy noted that “the imprudent conduct of poor David while here” had ultimately proved to be “a great hindrance” as slave-owners now made special efforts to prevent access to the enslaved because of the fear that evangelicals were fostering rebellion. On 7 May 1775 Piercy was visited by a “gentleman” who informed him “that the people are determined to send a party of men to Georgia & take David & should they lay hold of him he will certainly be hanged for what he has delivered, as all the laws are against him.” Piercy was told, “The people are continuously apprehensive of an insurrection among the slaves & insist upon it that he was the first cause. In all their town meetings

⁵⁰ William Piercy to the Countess of Huntingdon, [6, 7 and 8 May 1775], A4/2/16, CH Papers.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*; Elizabeth Cosson to the Countess of Huntingdon, 30 July 1775, A3/3, CH Papers.

this affair has been upon the carpet & they seem more and more terrified with the consequences.”⁵²

William Piercy’s anger and dismay at Margrett’s conduct did not stretch as far as wishing him lynched, and once he had been informed of depth of feeling towards him amongst South Carolinians he immediately wrote to James Habersham in Georgia:

In my last, I advised you to have nothing to do with paying David’s passage to England; but now I find it absolutely necessary in order to save his life. The gentlemen of this town, are so possessed with an opinion that his designs are bad, that they are determined to pursue, and hang him, if they can lay hold of him. I have only therefore to beg of you to send him off privately, in the first vessel, that sails for home. I would indeed be very sorry that the poor fellow should lose his life.

The days of trying to prevent Margrett speaking out against slavery were over and Piercy now accepted that there was “no making him sensible of the state of the blacks in this country.” Habersham was deeply critical of Margrett’s “ignorance and folly” and particularly the effect his behaviour had had on lowcountry slaves:

His business was to preach a spiritual deliverance to these people not a temporal one, but he is, if I am not mistaken, very proud, and very superficial and conceited, and I must say it’s a pity, that any of these people should ever put their feet in England, where they get totally spoiled and ruined, both in body and soul, through a mistaken kind of compassion because they are black, while many of our own colour and fellow subjects are starving through want and neglect.

Despite this attitude, Habersham agreed a price of eight guineas for Captain Inglis of the *Georgia Planter* “to take him as a steerage passenger,” even though he thought it “a great deal of money, however I think it is best to get him away at any rate.”⁵³

The speedy actions of Piercy and Habersham most likely saved Margrett’s life. Piercy had been informed of the attitudes of South Carolinians towards Margrett on 7 May and sent his letter to Habersham the following day. Four days later Margrett departed Georgia for good, having spent just 135 days in America, arriving back in London on 26 June 1775.⁵⁴ Robert Keen, the countess’s agent in London, reported a week after Margrett’s return that “he seems very much cast down and seems happy when I hearken to his complaints as he does not find so much freedom in telling them to any other.” For the next month Margrett lodged in Fleet Street but called on Keen “four or five times a week and when I am along and can spare time to hear him he crys and

⁵² William Piercy to the Countess of Huntingdon, [6, 7 and 8 May 1775], A4/2/16, CH Papers.

⁵³ James Habersham to Robert Keen, 11 May 1775, Letters of the Hon. James Habersham, 244.

⁵⁴ The *Georgia Gazette*, 12 May 1775, noted the departure of *Georgia Planter* for London. The ship’s arrival was recorded in *Lloyd’s Evening Post* (London), 26 June 1775.

tells all his misdemeanours from his going out at Gravesend to his arrival at London." Keen did not really know what to do with Margrett once he had returned from Georgia in disgrace. He asked the countess for her suggestions but evidently she did not wish to see him personally, perhaps because what he had preached had been so antithetical to her own position on slavery, and Keen made a point of reassuring her that "he will by no means come near Bath."⁵⁵ Margrett disappears from the historical record shortly after his return from America and his future movements and activities are not known.

Although Margrett was, so far as we know, the first black preacher to come to South Carolina from Britain, he was not the first black person to minister to slaves in the colony. Free black John Marrant, who, coincidentally, would later be ordained as one of the Countess of Huntingdon's ministers and work very successfully among black loyalists in Nova Scotia in the 1780s, had been converted after hearing George Whitefield preach during the evangelist's last visit to Charleston in the spring of 1770.⁵⁶ Sometime between 1772 and 1775 Marrant was employed, along with his brother, on the Jenkins plantation in the southern part of Colleton District as a house-carpenter.⁵⁷ In the evenings he began to gather first the children and later some adults to receive religious instruction but quickly aroused the ire of the mistress, who told her husband that "it was the ready way to have all his negroes ruin'd."⁵⁸ Urged on by the mistress, Jenkins whipped the slaves who been attending the prayer meetings until "the blood ran from their backs and sides to the floor." In a subsequent conversation Jenkins acknowledged to Marrant that the Christian slaves "did their tasks sooner than the others who were not instructed" but confessed that his real concern was that Marrant's preaching "should make them so wise that

⁵⁵ Robert Keen to the Countess of Huntingdon, 1 July 1775, A1/12/33, CH papers (first quote); Robert Keen to the Countess of Huntingdon, 3 Aug. 1775 (second quote), A1/13/4, CH papers.

⁵⁶ John Marrant, *A narrative of the Lord's wonderful dealings with John Marrant, a black*, 4th edn (London: R. Hawes, 1785), 11. The date of Marrant's conversion was Sunday, 4 March 1770, as Whitefield told him he was leaving Charleston the following day. Local newspapers reported Whitefield's departure for Georgia on 5 March 1770. *South Carolina Gazette*, 8 March 1770.

⁵⁷ The chronology is not precise here. After conversion in Spring 1770 Marrant travelled back to his family in Florida, and then spent 23 months among the south-eastern Native American tribes, suggesting that the earliest he can have gone to the Jenkins plantation is late 1772. It has not been possible to identify which of various Jenkins plantations in Colleton District Marrant visited. See Mabel L. Webber, "Descendants of John Jenkins, of St. John's Colleton," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, 20 (1919), 223–51. Marrant had been trained as a carpenter before his conversion. Marrant, *A narrative*, 9.

⁵⁸ Marrant, *A narrative*, 31. The section relating Marrant's time on the Jenkins plantation only appears in the fourth edition of his narrative, the last one published before Marrant left for Nova Scotia.

he should not be able to keep them in subjection.”⁵⁹ Once Marrant had returned to Charleston the “mistress continued to persecute them for meeting together as often as she discover’d them,” thus obliging the slaves “to meet at midnight in different corners of the woods that were about the plantation.” Jenkins himself was less antagonistic toward the idea of his slaves being Christianized and when his wife died of a fever two months after Marrant’s stay he “gave them liberty to meet together as before, and used sometimes to attend with them.”⁶⁰

Why did John Marrant’s preaching to slaves in South Carolina turn out so differently from David Margrett’s? Both were free black men and both brought a message of evangelical Christianity to an enslaved majority population. One key difference was that Marrant, at least as far as we know, taught only prayers and the catechism to slaves, and said nothing to them about the institution of slavery itself. Marrant, of course, had lived in the South since childhood and had grown up with daily experience of slavery in East Florida, Georgia and South Carolina.⁶¹ As a free black he had been able to secure an education and an apprenticeship in Charleston, both of which were beyond the reach of the enslaved, and helped to contrast his own relatively elevated situation with the degraded status of slaves. Marrant was evidently aware of his special status as a free man in a society full of slaves. When the mistress urged Jenkins to have Marrant whipped “he told her he did not dare to do it because I was free, and would take the law of him, and make him pay for it.”⁶² Perhaps Marrant had limited sympathy for slaves, seeing little congruity between their condition and his own. He certainly makes little mention of his skin colour in the text of his narrative, never commenting on the racial prejudices of southern whites he encountered and omitting any mention of slavery in each of the four editions, except the last, of his narrative published before he left Britain for Nova Scotia. Subsequent regional editions of his narrative did not reproduce the short section relating Marrant’s time on the Jenkins population that had appeared in the fourth edition. By concentrating his attention purely on the spiritual, rather than temporal, welfare of slaves Marrant was in complete agreement with the attitude of his future patroness, the Countess of Huntingdon, and it is possible that Marrant was cognizant of the countess’s views on slavery and that his narrative simply reflects a desire to keep the support of his patroness.⁶³

⁵⁹ Marrant, *A narrative*, 32.

⁶⁰ Marrant, *A narrative*, 33.

⁶¹ New York, where Marrant resided until he was five, was also home to several thousand slaves.

⁶² Marrant, *A narrative*, 32.

⁶³ See Cedrick May, *Evangelism and Resistance in the Black Atlantic, 1760–1835* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 64–82.

Although Marrant and Margrett were both free black men in anglophone Atlantic societies in the 1770s they came from completely different worlds. In Margrett's world it was possible to speak out against slavery without being imprisoned or lynched. Granville Sharp had published his *A representation of the injustice and dangerous tendency of tolerating slavery* in 1769, wherein he argued that slavery was essentially illegal in Britain since there was no statute law that permitted it. Sharp was one of the lawyers who represented James Somerset in 1772 in an attempt to prevent him being shipped to Jamaica against his will to be sold. Lord Chief Justice Mansfield's widely reported decision largely accepted Sharp's argument and was generally interpreted as marking the end of slavery in Britain.⁶⁴ Furthermore, Sharp had been unequivocal in his condemnation of slavery: "slavery is destructive of morality and charity, and cannot therefore be consistent with the Christian religion; because it gives worldly minded men a power to deprive their slaves of instruction and spiritual improvement, by continually oppressing them with labour."⁶⁵ Five years later John Wesley published his *Thoughts on Slavery*, highlighting the cruel treatment of slaves throughout the Americas: "Their sleep is very short, their labour continual, and frequently above their strength; so that death sets many of them at liberty, before they have lived out half their days."⁶⁶ Wesley condemned the institution of slavery itself, declaring, "Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air. And no human law can deprive him of that right, which he derives from the law of nature," and warned slave owners that "the great GOD [will] deal with *you*, as you have dealt with *them*, and require all their blood at your hands. And at that day it shall be more tolerable for *Sodom* and *Gomorrhah* than for you!"⁶⁷ Margrett came from an English context where publications that questioned the entire edifice of racial slavery in the Americas were beginning to have a significant impact.

By contrast, John Marrant resided in an entirely different environment where speaking out against slavery led to arrest, trial, expulsion or even death.⁶⁸ Some Americans, of course, were challenging slavery in precisely the same

⁶⁴ Mansfield's judgement was far less expansive than this, mainly relating to the legality of shipping Somerset to the West Indies to be sold, but the public understood his decision to have much wider implications.

⁶⁵ Granville Sharp, *A representation of the injustice and dangerous tendency of tolerating slavery; Or of admitting the least claim of private property in the persons of men, in England* (London, Benjamin White, 1769), 162.

⁶⁶ John Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery* (London: Joseph Cruikshank 1774), 24. An American edition appeared the same year, printed in Philadelphia.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 56, 52.

⁶⁸ The violent reaction to whites and blacks who dared to question slavery in Charleston in the 1770s is examined in J. William Harris, *The Hanging of Thomas Jeremiah: A Free Black Man's Encounter with Liberty* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

manner as Sharp and Wesley. Anthony Benezet had published his *Caution and Warning* about slavery in 1766 while Benjamin Rush's *Address* on slave-keeping appeared in 1773. Phillis Wheatley's strongest condemnation of slavery was in a letter to Samson Occam published in several New England newspapers in March 1774, but the circulation of all these works outside major northern cities was limited.⁶⁹ A thousand miles further south slavery had become an institution that it was inadvisable to challenge.

Margrett was certainly idealistic – naive, perhaps – to think that he could attack slavery in America in the same manner that slavery in Britain was being challenged. Throughout the Americas, and in South Carolina especially, slavery was deeply entrenched and formed the basis of planters' wealth. All those with power and influence would naturally oppose any criticism of slavery. With hindsight it is easy to dismiss Margrett as foolish, reckless even, but he spoke from religious conviction and his training would have led him to expect opposition. After all, those with similar religious convictions had taken the lead in the anti-slavery movement in Britain and all Margrett did was export those ideas to South Carolina. Sadly for him, and for the many thousands enslaved in the lowcountry, South Carolina was not Britain, and he spoke words that not only failed to gain traction amongst whites but were not even permitted to be heard. Ultimately Margrett's voice is important because it shows us how ordinary black people in Britain were absorbing the message of evangelical Christianity and translating it into anti-slavery activism. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century the voices of black activists such as Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho would increasingly be heard. David Margrett demonstrates that these authors were just a small part of a much wider anti-slavery sentiment in the eighteenth-century black Atlantic.

⁶⁹ Anthony Benezet, *A caution and warning to Great Britain and her colonies, in a short representation of the calamitous state of the enslaved Negroes in the British dominions* (Philadelphia: Henry Miller, 1766). Benjamin Rush, *An address to the inhabitants of the British settlements in America, upon slave-keeping* (Philadelphia, John Boyles, 1773). Wheatley's letter appeared in the *Connecticut Gazette*, 11 March 1774. See Vincent Carretta, *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 69.