

# Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

Volume 12. Asia, Africa and the Americas  
(1700-1800)

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LEIDEN • BOSTON  
2018

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# Nicholas Owen

DATE OF BIRTH First part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, possibly 1720s  
OR 1730s  
PLACE OF BIRTH Ireland (location unknown)  
DATE OF DEATH 26 March 1759  
PLACE OF DEATH Sherbro Estuary, Sierra Leone

## BIOGRAPHY

Nicholas Owen was an Irish trader who, from 1754 until his death in 1759, lived in the Sherbro Estuary (along the Bum-Kittam and Jong rivers), in present-day Sierra Leone. He was raised in a well-to-do Irish family, but left Ireland – possibly in the 1730s or 1740s – after his father lost his fortune (Owen, *Journal of a slave-dealer*, p. 97). Together with one of his younger brothers, Blayney, he spent the rest of his life working as a sailor and petty trader. The two men undertook six transatlantic voyages and three trips between West Africa and Europe, before settling down in 1754 on the banks of the Sherbro Estuary, trading in slaves, tusks, wax and other commodities (Owen, *Journal of a slave-dealer*, pp. 21-8). He began writing the narrative of his travels as a means of passing time. From 9 August 1755 onwards, the narrative gradually takes the form of a diary, with regular entries until his death.

According to a post-script by his brother Blayney, Nicholas Owen died on 26 March 1759 (Owen, *Journal of a slave-dealer*, p. 107).

## MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

### Primary

Nicholas Owen, *Journal of a slave-dealer*. 'A view of some remarkable excedents in the life of Nics. Owen on the coast of Africa and America from the year 1746 to the year 1757', ed. and intr. E. Martin, London, 1930

### Secondary

G.E. Brooks, *Eurafricans in western Africa. Commerce, social status, gender and religious observance from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century*, Oxford, 2003, pp. 246-9  
E. Martin, 'Introduction', in Owen, *Journal of a slave-dealer*, 1-19

## WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

*Journal of a slave-dealer. A view of some of the remarkable axcedents in the life of Nics. Owen on the coast of Africa and America from the year 1746 to the year 1757*

DATE Between 1754 and 1759

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE English

## DESCRIPTION

*Journal of a slave-dealer* is a text of about 100 pages in the Martin edition (56 leaves of manuscript), and includes maps and illustrations drawn by Owen himself. About half the document consists of a narrative relating Owen's journeys and adventures as a sailor and trader, while the remainder of the text takes the form of a diary.

In the diary part, Owen documents the day-to-day life of a petty trader, buying slaves and commodities along the Guinea coast in the 1750s. Among other things, he describes the process of negotiating with African chiefs and middlemen ('very troublesome', *Journal of a slave-dealer*, p. 45; all the references that follow are to the Martin edition), the slackness of business, and being cheated by rival traders, as well as personal issues such as housing, food, sickness and loneliness.

The diary also includes detailed eye-witness accounts of the customs and traditions of the people of the Sherbro Estuary region. Especially noteworthy are Owen's reports on the Poro 'secret' society, and he also gives careful detailed descriptions of divination rituals and other services performed by itinerant Mandinka *marabouts* (pp. 49-50, 54-6, 71, 90), as well as some short reports on a Mandinka jihadist movement that created upheaval in the late 1750s in Sierra Leone (pp. 92-3, 96, 100).

While Owen is given to rather elaborate reflections on the meaning and purpose of life, he has no such qualms about the slave trade: 'Some people may think a scruple of congience in the above trade, but it's very seldom minded by our European merchts' (p. 45).

Owen is thought to have begun writing his narrative around 1754 and he continued his diary until his death in 1759 (Martin, 'Introduction', pp. 15-16).

It is unclear how the manuscript came to England after his death. Until the 1930s, it was owned by the descendants of George Marsh, Commissioner of the Navy and Chairman of the Navy Board from 1772-1800,



and was sold at Christies in 2000. It is now in the hands of an American collector, and its location is unknown.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

Owen gives elaborate eye-witness descriptions of the services (for example, writing, divination, healing) performed by itinerant Mandinka *marabouts* among the non-Muslim people of southern Sierra Leone. He narrates in detail the occasions when the *marabouts* were called upon to perform their services, as well as their techniques and the mechanisms used to cross-check their verdicts in legal matters. Owen also remarks that not only Africans, but also European Christian traders (including Owen himself) called upon their services. On 20 May 1757, he records in his diary: 'We have been surprised this morning with finding our store broken open and tabaco, rum and goods to the value of 10 or 12 crowns or bars caried away, and very little sighns of finding out the theves, otherwise then [*sic*] by the Mandingo envention menthon'd in the fore part of my Journal, which we intend to try out of curiosety at its wonderfull virtue as soon as the priest comes home' (p. 71). And two years later he writes: 'There's a great many whites that thinks all these thing are false, but what a man sees and imploy his reason upon upon [*sic*] must have some grounds of truth. Neither do I think it in any way unlikely, since we have examples in all ages of the power of witchcraft among persons who dedicate themselves to the impious practice; every day I see examples of this kind' (p. 90).

Owen also testifies that in 1758 a Mandinka warrior from the interior regions, whom he calls King Furry Do (p. 93) and later Mosolum (p. 100), embarked on jihad in an attempt forcefully to convert non-Muslims to Islam, in the process conquering large territories, enslaving many and creating general upheaval. So far, researchers have not been able to identify 'King Furry Do'. Bruce Mouser, with a reference to the unpublished PhD dissertation of James F. Hopewell, has pointed out that in mid-18<sup>th</sup>-century Sierra Leone, there were Mandinka warriors who copied the expansionist strategies of the Fula of Futa Jallon, and under the cloak of jihad conquered extensive territories (Mouser, 'Rebellion', p. 33). Owen might well be referring to one of these Mandinka warlords in his diary.

#### PUBLICATIONS

The autograph manuscript was for a long time the property of the Marsh family and their descendants. It was auctioned in 2000 by Christie's of London and sold to William Reese booksellers, New Haven CT, who confirm that it is now in the hands of an American collector.

Nicholas Owen, *Journal of a slave-dealer. 'A view of some remarkable axcedents in the life of Nics. Owen on the coast of Africa and America from the year 1746 to the year 1757'*, ed. E.C. Martin, London, 1930, 2009, 2017; <http://sites.uci.edu/slavingfall15/files/2014/03/Nicholas-Owen-Journal-of-A-Slave-Dealer.pdf>

## STUDIES

- K.E. Sinanan, *Slave masters and the language of self. Traders, planters and colonial agents, 1750-1833*, Chapel Hill NC (forthcoming)
- B. Mouser, 'Rebellion, marronage and jihād', *Journal of African History* 48 (2007) 27-44
- J.F. Hopewell, 'Muslim penetration in French Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia before 1850', New York, 1958 (PhD Diss. Columbia University)
- Martin, 'Introduction'
- A.G., Review of 'Nicholas Owen: Journal of a slave-dealer', *Studies. An Irish Quarterly Review* 19/76 (1930) 684-6

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