

Notes

INSIGHTS ON 'LORD HOTH' AND OTTOBAH CUGOANO

LITTLE is known of the biography of Ottobah Cugoano beyond the details he shares in his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*.¹ A particular piece of information contributed by the French abbé Henri Grégoire has long puzzled scholars. In the section dedicated to Ottobah Cugoano in *De la littérature des nègres*, Grégoire writes: 'Esclave à la Grenade, il dût sa liberté à la générosité du lord Hoth, qui l'amena en Angleterre.'² The sentence is rendered as follows in the English-language translation of the book by David Bailie Warden, *An Enquiry Concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties, and Literature of Negroes*: 'He was a slave at Grenada, and was indebted for his liberty, to the generosity of Lord Hoth, who carried him to England.'³

Grégoire mentions Italian abbot, author and political figure Scipione Piattoli as the source for this information. Scholars have been unable to identify this 'Lord Hoth'. His existence is all the more problematic because, in his book, Cugoano designates Alexander Campbell, Esq., as the man who brought him to England. Campbell owned land in the West Indies and North America, but did not hold a title of nobility. In his 1999 edition of *Thoughts*, Vincent Carretta notes:

Unfortunately, Grégoire is often unreliable. I have not been able to discover anything about a Lord Hoth. Piattoli, an Italian abbot, was a longtime supporter of Poland's struggle for independence, a drafter of the Polish Constitution of 1791. . . . Since Piattoli was in an Austrian prison from 1794 to 1800 and resumed his political activities in

St. Petersburg, Russia, if he did meet Cugoano he must have been in London between 1800 and 1803.⁴

According to the French translation of Cugoano's book attributed to French political economist Antoine Diannyère, *Réflexions sur la traite et l'esclavage des nègres*, Piattoli met Cugoano much earlier. In the 1780s Piattoli was part of the entourage of Polish princess Elzbieta Lubomirska, whose son he tutored, and with whom he travelled around Europe, notably staying in England and France.⁵ Piattoli frequented and corresponded with the cream of European Enlightenment thinkers. He is listed as a foreign associate in the tables of the French abolitionist Société des Amis des Noirs, residing 'chez Madame la Princesse Lubomirska'.⁶ Diannyère writes in the translator's preface:

M. Piattoli, qui a vécu long-tems à Londres, et qui a connu particulièrement Ottobah Cugoano, m'a envoyé une note italienne dont voici la traduction: l'Afriquin, auteur des Réflexions sur la traite et l'esclavage des Nègres, est doux de caractère et simple dans ses manières; ses moeurs sont excellentes; son âge est entre trente-six et quarante ans, il est très religieux; la Bible est sa principale étude;—il est depuis quelques années au service de *M. Richard Cosway*, premier peintre du prince de Galles. Sa fidélité, son exactitude et son intelligence lui ont mérité l'estime et l'amitié de ses maîtres.—Il est marié à une anglaise et vit très-bien avec elle.—Il parle et écrit l'anglais; il entend le français qu'il étudie avec plaisir.—Je le connais particulièrement; il m'a donné son ouvrage qui a fait à Londres la plus grande sensation.⁷

Most of this information is paraphrased in Grégoire's note on Cugoano, yet Piattoli says nothing of a lord Hoth. Elements towards a

¹ Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York, 1999).

² H. Grégoire, *De la littérature des nègres, ou; Recherches sur leurs facultés intellectuelles, leurs qualités morales et leur littérature* (Paris, 1808), 215.

³ H. Grégoire, *Enquiry concerning the intellectual and moral faculties, and literature of Negroes*, trans. D. B. Warden (Brooklyn, 1810), 189.

⁴ Carretta, *Thoughts*, 153, fn 8.

⁵ A. G. Czartoryski, *Memoirs of Prince Adam Czartoryski, and his Correspondence with Alexander I*, ed. Adam Gielgud (London, 1888), II, 92–3.

⁶ 'Tableau des Membres de la Société des Amis des Noirs' (Paris, 1789), 8.

⁷ Ottobah Cugoano, *Réflexions sur la traite et l'esclavage des nègres*, trans. Antoine Diannyère (Paris, 1788), v–vi.

solution to this mystery lie further in Diannyère's translation.

Cugoano's text is replete with religious imagery and biblical quotes gleaned from the *King James Bible*. One such expression is especially interesting: the phrase 'lord of hosts', English translation of the Latin *dominus exercituum* in the Vulgate. The standard French-language Bible in the eighteenth century, Le Maistre de Sacy's *Port Royal Bible*, translates it as 'le Seigneur des armées'. Cugoano uses the expression on three occasions. In one instance, he cites Isaiah 1:9, '*Except the Lord of Hosts had left us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorah.*'⁸ Diannyère translates the passage in his own words rather than borrowing from Lemaistre de Sacy, and leaves the reference to 'hosts' untranslated: '*Si le Seigneur ne nous avait pas laissé quelques fidèles, nous aurions été comme Sodome, et nous aurions ressemblé à Gomorrhe.*'⁹ In the two other instances, it seems that Diannyère did not recognize the biblical origin of the phrase, and understood Cugoano's 'Lord of Hosts' to be an English aristocrat. Indeed, where Cugoano writes: 'This Lord of Hosts, in his good Providence, and in great mercy to me, made a way for my deliverance from Grenada',¹⁰ Diannyère trans-

lates: 'La compassion et la bienfaisance du lord Hosts, m'ont délivré de la Grenade et de mes chaînes'.¹¹ More puzzlingly, where Cugoano writes: 'But above all, what I have I obtained from the Lord God of Hosts, the God of the Christians!'¹² Diannyère translates: 'Mais, ce qui est au-dessus de tout, j'ai obtenu par le bon lord Hosts, le Dieu des Chrétiens'.¹³

It appears therefore that Diannyère's misguided translation, rather than Piattoli's note, is the source of Grégoire's mention of the mysterious lord Hoth. The elusive aristocrat is likely Grégoire's misspelling of Diannyère's twice repeated translation mistake. Piattoli's note to Diannyère nevertheless shows that he met Cugoano while staying in London with Princess Lubomirska, prior to the publication of Diannyère's translation in 1788. It also makes the interesting suggestion that, in spite of not being advertised or reviewed in English newspapers and journals of the time, Cugoano's book nevertheless reached a certain level of notoriety.

GREGORY PIERROT

Pennsylvania State University

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⁸ Cugoano, *Thoughts*, 79.

⁹ *Réflexions*, 123.

¹⁰ Cugoano, *Thoughts*, 16.

¹¹ [Diannyère], *Réflexions*, 18.

¹² Cugoano, *Thoughts*, 17.

¹³ [Diannyère], *Réflexions*, 22.