

An Amazing Life

John Newton. **Amazing Grace.** Arr. by E. O. Excell.



1. A - maz - ing grace! how sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me! I
2. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears re - lieved; How
3. Thro' man - y dang - ers, toils and snares, I have al - read - y come; 'Tis
4. The Lord has prom - ised good to me His word my hope se - cures; He
5. And when this flesh and heart shall fail, And mor - tal life shall cease; I
6. When we've been there ten thou - sand years, Bright shin - ing as the sun, We've

once was lost, but now am found—
pre - cious did that grace ap - pear, T
grace has brought me safe thus far, A
will my shield and por - tion be,
shall pos - sess with - in the veil,
no less days to sing God's praise



Helen Fallon details the fascinating life of John Newton who wrote the much loved and frequently sung *Amazing Grace*.

One evening, many years ago, after milking the cows, my father joined us, the children of the house, and watched Top of the Pops for the first time. *Amazing Grace*, sung by Judy Collins, was 'Number One'.

Like many who loved *Amazing Grace*, my father, I imagine, had no idea how true the words, "I once was lost but now am found", were for the man who wrote the lyrics, John Newton.

Jonathan Aitken's recent biography of *John Newton, From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*, is a rich and very well researched account of an extraordinary life.

John Newton was born in London in 1725. His father, also called John, was the commander of a merchant ship which sailed the Mediterranean. When his young wife Elizabeth died, their son was just six. John quickly remarried, having two more sons and a daughter. After a brief spell at boarding school and aged eleven, young John was taken on a voyage by his father and his seafaring life began.

At seventeen, on a visit to his mother's cousin Elizabeth Catlett in Kent, John fell head over heels in love with her daughter Polly. However, his youth and lack of means stopped him from declaring his love.

REBELLIOUS, QUICK TEMPERED AND DANGEROUS

He continued working on ships, earning, however, a reputation for being rebellious and quick tempered. On a voyage to collect slaves from Sierra Leone for

transportation to the West Indies, Newton decided, following a disagreement with the captain, to remain in Sierra Leone to work with a slave trader.

Describing Newton's decision, Jonathan Aitken writes, "As Amos Clow described the profits that could be made from this cruel exploitation of the Africans, 20-year-old John Newton had no scruples about wanting to make profits of his own in the same way. He declared that Clow's stories gave him 'golden dreams'."

Aitken goes on to explain, "In that era the Guinea coast (which gave its name to the English coin, the guinea) was to eighteenth-century seafarers what the Klondyke was to nineteenth-century gold-diggers."

However, Newton's relationship with Clow deteriorated and he found himself a virtual prisoner on an island off the coast of Sierra Leone. He managed to get a letter to his father begging for help.

However, his fortune took a sudden turn for the better when he found a new employer. By 1747, Newton was a prosperous trader and, according to Aitken, had grown "hardened to the gruesome operations of slave hunting, capturing, buying and selling." He had also begun to dabble in witchcraft.

Back in England, having received John's despairing letter, his father set about organizing a rescue. He persuaded a shipowner friend to send one of his ships, *The Greyhound*, to Sierra Leone to rescue John. Captain Swanwick located Newton, who at this stage had no desire to return home.

Swanwick pretended that John had come into an inheritance, worth four hundred pounds a year. Remembering Polly and feeling that he would now be in a position to marry, Newton decided to return.

A DRAMATIC CONVERSION

The voyage was to be a life-changing experience. Newton began to read Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*. Aitken writes, "Newton said that he picked up this volume "carelessly...to pass away the time...I read it with the same indifference as if it was entirely a romance."

However, the things he read disturbed him and he shut the book, trying to put what he had read out of his head.

On the night of March 9, 1748, he recorded how he "was awakened from a sound sleep by the force of a violent sea which broke on us. Much of it came down below and filled the cabin where I lay with water. This alarm was followed by a cry from the deck that the ship was going down."

The crew, close to despair, made one last attempt to secure the ship. Newton said, "If this will not do, the Lord have mercy on us." He later recalled, "I was instantly struck by my own words. This was the first desire I had breathed for mercy in many years."

Talking afterwards about that traumatic time, Newton said, "I thought I could see the hand of God displayed in our favour. I began to pray."

In the days that followed, while the badly damaged ship continued searching for a safe harbour, Newton studied the bible, marvelling at the mercy of the father in the story of the prodigal son and seeing parallels between his life and that of the son.

On April 7, Tory Island came into view and the ship limped into port in Lough Swilly. Newton recorded, "I began to know there is a God who hears and answers prayers."

He returned to London and married Polly. He continued to work at sea for another seven years, becoming

more convinced of the inhumanity of slavery. In 1755, he secured a job in Liverpool. He read widely and studied the writings of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism.

In 1758 he decided to become a minister. His request was initially refused – possibly because of his slaving past. Newton persisted and was finally ordained.

HIS STORY, HIS HYMN

Assigned to the parish of Olney in Buckinghamshire, Newton became friendly with the poet William Cowper. The two organised weekly prayer meetings, endeavouring to produce a new hymn for each meeting. One of these was *Amazing Grace*.

Newton is credited with writing the lyrics, which have been added to over the years. The origin of the melody is unknown. It is thought it may have been the tune of a slave song that Newton remembered from his seafaring days.

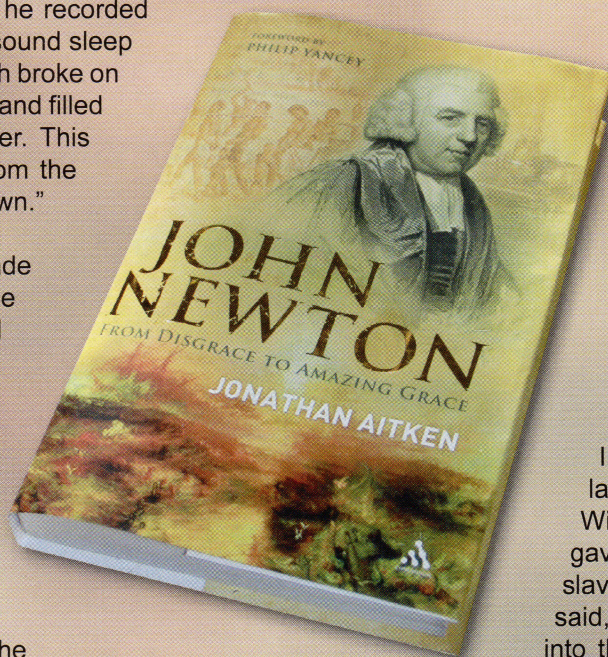
Newton and his wife had no children and adopted two of Polly's nieces. In 1789 he moved to a London parish. Polly died the following year.

In London, Newton's sermons drew large crowds. The politician William Wilberforce was impressed. Newton gave him a firsthand account of slavery. The story goes that Wilberforce said, "Mr. Newton, I think I want to go into the Church." Newton replied, "No, no, Mr. Wilberforce, stay where you are and serve God in Parliament."

Wilberforce lobbied the British government and was influential in bringing in the Abolition of Slavery Act in 1807. That same year, Newton died.

Jonathan Aitken, author of *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*, is a former British MP and cabinet minister. He endured a sudden fall from grace when sentenced to eighteen months in prison for perjury.

His biography of John Newton's life brings the fascinating story of the little-known man who gave us that most frequently sung and performed hymn, *Amazing Grace*. ■



Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone. Jonathan Aitken's *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* is published by Continuum Books.