

“There’s nothing like a well-written, thoroughly researched biography of a godly saint to stir one’s heart, stretch faith, and expand kingdom vision. This fascinating and gripping book makes the life of John Newton come alive for the contemporary reader. There’s no hedging on Newton’s depravity, nor his utterly passionate devotion to his precious Savior. I highly recommend this excellent work—it’s one that will transform not only minds but hearts!”

—JONI EARECKSON TADA, JAF International Disability Center; renowned author

“Skilled and colorful biographer that he is, my friend Jonathan Aitken has brought to life one of eighteenth-century England’s most influential Christians. This is the riveting story of John Newton’s transformed life through Christ. It is the story of amazing grace both in the life of Newton and in the song that has become the Christian national anthem. This is a powerful read about one of the most powerful figures in Christian history.”

—CHUCK COLSON, founder, Prison Fellowship

“Men and women used by God to change the course of history have rarely escaped the label of unconventional, eccentric, or born out of their time. Such is the story of John Newton, infamous for his total transformation from slave trading to slave emancipator. But even more amazing than Newton’s life with all its drama and color is the reminder of how completely revolutionary is God’s agenda to change the world his own way and through imperfect, broken people. Newton is just another entry to God’s long resumé of his amazing grace in changed lives.”

—JAMES MACDONALD, Senior Pastor, Harvest Bible Chapel, Rolling Meadows, Illinois

“A new life of John Newton is a fitting celebration of the bicentennial both of Newton’s death and of the abolition of the slave trade, Wilberforce’s triumph in which Newton played a key role. Master biographer Jonathan Aitken is in fine form, sympathetic, insightful, scholarly and vivid, and his book, like its subject, must be rated unobtrusively spectacular.”

—J. I. PACKER, Professor of Theology, Regent College; author of *Knowing God*

“A rip-roaring adventure, a passionate romance, and an astonishing journey of faith all in one. But as if that were not enough, Aitken’s superb new biography is also chock-full of extraordinary insights into friendship, prayer, networking, spiritual growth, providence, and above all ‘amazing grace’ and a life of gratitude. I knew the story well, but this telling made a deep impression on me.”

—OS GUINNESS, author of *The Call*

“A fresh, insightful, and inspiring account of this great yet neglected figure. With that rare skill of a superb biographer, Aitken brings Newton to life for a new generation of admirers.”

—ALISTER MCGRATH, Professor of Historical Theology, Oxford University

“John Newton not only wrote one of the greatest hymns of all time—he lived one of the greatest stories of salvation. A wonderful book.”

—RODNEY STARK, author of *The Rise of Christianity*

“This moving account of John Newton’s life reveals something of the depths, the complexities, and the passions of this unique figure. Jonathan Aitken’s writing is both elegant and meticulous. Using unpublished documents, he conducts us in the discovery of this extraordinary personage, so neglected in our time. Today we are hardly done with slavery. If we could follow Newton’s example, we would be well equipped in our own struggle for abolition.”

—WILLIAM EDGAR, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“Grace is always amazing—that’s what makes it grace—but in the case of John Newton it is also astonishing. Only God could take a vile slave trader and turn him into a useful instrument in abolishing the slave trade and igniting a gospel revival, the flames of which are burning still. The story of Newton’s life is compelling and inspires all who seek to follow the path of Jesus today.”

—TIMOTHY GEORGE, Dean of Beeson Divinity School, Samford University; executive editor, *Christianity Today*

“Jonathan Aitken’s personal journey of faith—and his brilliance as a writer—makes him the ideal person to write this biography of John Newton. The book captures superbly how one life can be transformed by God for the benefit of thousands of others.”

—TRICIA NEILL, President, Alpha International, London

“John Newton is well-known to many as the slaver turned preacher turned abolitionist. Jonathan Aitken’s book tells the story behind the man. It is filled with touching and humanizing details. Aitken has also done his homework. He has plowed through thousands of pages of his most prolific subject’s books, letters, and sermons, all in order to know the man as he really was. This book is a page-turner, and I, for one, was caught off guard by the interest generated on every page. Four stars!”

—PAUL ZAHL, Dean/President, Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry,
Ambridge, Pennsylvania

“This is an informed, authoritative biography of the man who played a critical role in helping William Wilberforce abolish the slave trade. As the composer of the most popular spiritual song in the history of American music, his life story is absolutely spell-binding. I could not put the book down.”

—ARMAND M. NICHOLI JR., M.D., Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School;
author, *The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate
God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life*

“Millions have sung ‘Amazing Grace.’ And thanks to Jonathan Aitken, the world now knows its author—John Newton. In this masterfully portrayed biography, John Newton, a brutal slave trader, emerges from the shadows of England’s dark maritime enterprise to confront the most heinous inhumanity of his time. From a life of callous cruelty to a champion of compassion, he counsels, challenges, and inspires the political leadership of his day to bring to an end the shameful practice of slavery. In careful and colorful detail, Aitken resurrects this nearly forgotten giant of the faith and establishes Newton in his rightful place as one who has altered the course of western history.”

—ROBERT (BOB) LUPTON, president of FCS Urban Ministries, Atlanta

“Jonathan Aitken’s account of Newton’s life story is so dramatic and inspiring that it reads like a novel. Newton made a significant contribution to both political and spiritual history. This is perhaps most notable through the profound influence that he had on William Wilberforce and the abolition of the slave trade in Britain.”

—NICKY GUMBEL, Vicar, Holy Trinity Brompton; pioneer of the Alpha Course

“A superbly written new biography of one of the most influential people in the eighteenth century. A hardened atheist, slave trader, and himself for some time a slave in Africa, John Newton was converted to a dynamic Christian faith and became not only the author of America’s favorite hymn, ‘Amazing Grace,’ but the mentor of William Wilberforce. Without Newton, Wilberforce would never have achieved the abolition of slavery. Jonathan Aitken has written a book that, enriched by fresh research into unpublished papers, will enhance his reputation as one of today’s foremost biographers. Secular and religious readers will alike profit enormously from this book.”

—REV. DR. MICHAEL GREEN

“Only a few eighteenth-century people continue to influence modern life more than John Newton. Yet today his story remains largely unknown. Jonathan Aitken’s biography of Newton grips us because its applications to our own present moment are so crucially pertinent. Newton’s dramatic conversion and the fits and starts of his subsequent spiritual development speak powerfully to our present religious scene. And Newton’s embodiment of how individual transformation holds within itself the potential for vast social benefits—lifting entire civilizations—speaks directly to our secular scene. All of us owe Jonathan Aitken a huge debt of gratitude for this thrilling true-life tale. In some ways, the title reflects his own life experience, which makes him uniquely qualified to tell this story. And he does know how to tell a story!”

—HOWARD E. BUTT JR., President of the Laity Renewal Foundation and Laity Lodge;
author of *The Velvet Covered Brick, Renewing America’s Soul, and
Who Can You Trust?*

“Jonathan Aitken’s biography on John Newton is a thorough, insightful, and inspiring work that rekindles in the modern conscience the life of an extraordinary man. The way Aitken describes the transformation of this flawed yet grace-filled human being will be a source of great encouragement to all who read it.”

—DAVID SWANSON, Senior Pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Orlando

“Jonathan Aitken has succeeded in providing a full, rich, and inspiring biography of a remarkable Christian leader. Drawing on hitherto unpublished documentation, his picture of John Newton’s childhood and early adult years highlights the radical but gradual and painful transformation in the former slave-ship captain. Disgrace there was in abundance, but God’s amazing grace is vividly portrayed in its super-abundance. Perhaps the most moving aspect is Aitken’s insight into Newton’s personal relationships—with his beloved wife Polly, with William Wilberforce, with parishioners in Olney and London, with the deeply depressive poet William Cowper, and with a large number of younger clergy to whom he gave himself as mentor. God’s Word was Newton’s authority and delight, and God’s grace molded him into a compassionate, gracious, patient, unselfish, and deeply humble leader—a model for our equally needy times.”

—REV. DAVID PRIOR, Rector of Christ Memorial Chapel, Hobe Sound, Florida

“This is the long-lost story of a man called by God through the words of others whose lifetime calling was to spread the good news of the gospel. It is also a story of the impact of belief on one’s worldview and how that worldview impelled a lifetime of action as a preacher, as a best-selling author and hymn-writer, and as a spiritual counselor of William Wilberforce in their shared goal of the abolition of the slave trade. What was John Newton’s belief? That he was ‘a great sinner’ saved by God’s ‘Amazing Grace.’”

—JOHN M. TEMPLETON JR., M.D.; President, John Templeton Foundation

“Jonathan Aitken’s fast-paced, well-researched, and detailed book shows why Newton was such an important figure as reformer, adviser to politicians, pastor, and—above all—encourager for the Christian life. This is a book to read, ponder, and read again.”

—MARK NOLL, Professor of History, University of Notre Dame

“Jonathan Aitken has written such an intimate account of one of the great saints of God that I can now say I have been mentored by John Newton! This book has informed and inspired me as a pastor.”

—JOEL HUNTER, Senior Pastor, Northland A Church Distributed, Longwood, Florida

“Award-winning biographer Jonathan Aitken has done it again with his timely account of the life of John Newton, author of the famous hymn, ‘Amazing Grace.’ His careful research provides important new information, and his description of Newton’s influence on hymnody as well as the abolition of slavery makes captivating reading.”

—DR. LUDER G. WHITLOCK JR., Executive Director, The Trinity Forum

“Many years ago I learned that John Newton wrote ‘Amazing Grace.’ Not long ago I watched the movie *Amazing Grace* and was deeply moved by Albert Finney’s portrayal of Newton, the repentant ex-slave trader. Today I have read *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* and found it to be the most engaging and edifying biography of my spiritual journey.”

—LARRY KREIDER, President, The Gathering/USA

“Here is a timely and exceptionally well written biography of one of the great sinners and saints in our Christian legacy. Jonathon Aitken’s readable, yet well researched biography of John Newton tells a powerful story, placing this remarkable man in the fascinating context of his times, his personal history, and his faith in a God who is greater than his sin. Rarely have I been at once as challenged and consoled by any biography.”

—SANFORD C. SHUGART, President, Valencia Community College

“John Newton’s story is a classic and powerful story of depravity and redemption. Jonathan Aitken as always writes with elegance, clarity, and sympathy in describing an extraordinary eighteenth-century life.”

—THE REV. DR. GRAHAM TOMLIN, Principal, St Paul’s Theological Centre,
Holy Trinity Brompton, London

“With unusual clarity and perception, Jonathan Aitken has crafted an accurate and comprehensive portrait of the extraordinary life of John Newton. This well-written account is not only historically faithful but also captures the nuances of the personal and spiritual dynamics of the journey of this remarkable exemplar of the grace of God.”

—KENNETH BOA, President, Reflections Ministries, Atlanta

“Jonathan Aitken proves once again his great skills as a biographer with this marvelous book. John Newton is best known as a former slave trader who is the author of the most sung hymn in the world. But as Aitken shows in this illuminating biography, he was so much more than that. This book brings to light sorely neglected dimensions of Newton’s remarkable life, highlighting his work as a pastor, preacher, and social reformer (the chapters on his relationship to William Wilberforce are deeply moving and inspiring). Reading Aitken on Newton reminds us how one consecrated life can literally change the course of history. This is essential reading for all who need such reminders.”

—MICHAEL CROMARTIE, Vice President, Ethics and Public Policy Center

“Jonathan Aitken is a gifted writer, and his biography on John Newton is an outstanding and riveting historical account of the life of this notorious eighteenth-century sinner who was so dramatically saved by God’s grace and befriended the great William Wilberforce. This book should be required reading for any person who loves history, loves the song, and is serious about following Christ. I heartily commend it to you.”

—JACK KEMP, former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development;
former vice-presidential candidate; former U.S. Congressman

“John Newton is largely known through his hymn turned anthem, ‘Amazing Grace.’ And yet Aitken’s well researched book enlarges our understanding of this unusually talented and complex individual. Perhaps Newton’s finest moment was in urging a young devout parliamentarian named Wilberforce to remain in the world of politics rather than pursue the pulpit as the arena where God could best use his mind and heart. Kudos to Aitken for bringing such timely and instructive revelations to us through the life of John Newton.”

—FORMER AMBASSADOR J. DOUGLAS HOLLADAY, General Partner,
Park Avenue Equity Partners, L.P.

“After seeing the movie *Amazing Grace* I was fascinated to learn more about John Newton, who influenced Wilberforce and who wrote the famous hymn. This book is a fascinating look into his life and times. It should be read by anyone who wants to be inspired that God can use the failings in our life and use them for his glory. John Newton’s life influenced the church and western civilization much more than he could have ever anticipated. I highly recommend this book.”

—STEPHEN STRANG, CEO, Strang Communications Company

“Jonathan Aitken brings to life one of the unsung heroes of the Evangelical Revival. From his first encounter with God on the *Greyhound*, to listening to Whitefield and Wesley on the dockside in Liverpool, the writing of ‘Amazing Grace,’ and the quest for ordination, the hand of God shines through Newton’s life. Jonathan Aitken has written a deeply significant and inspirational biography with meticulous care, passion, and a real heart for his subject.”

—REVD. DR. RICHARD TURNBULL, Principal, Wycliffe Hall, Oxford

“Jonathan Aitken is one of our outstanding commentators, and he has written a challenging and moving account of a man who contributed so much to the anti-slavery campaign. Aitken is well-qualified to serve an account of Newton for the modern reader. He is a renowned writer and biographer, a former businessman and politician, and, like Newton, a man whose heart has been changed through amazing grace.”

—KEN COSTA, Vice-Chairman of UBS Investment Bank; Chairman of Alpha International

John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace

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To
Marylynn Rouse

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FOREWORD

BY PHILIP YANCEY

*G*race, like water, always flows downward, to the lowest place. I know no one who embodies this principle better than John Newton, author of perhaps the best-loved hymn of all time. Against all odds “Amazing Grace,” written some 230 years ago, still endures. When Judy Collins recorded it she found herself on the Top 30 charts. The great Mahalia Jackson sang it at civil rights rallies. Johnny Cash made it a staple of his prison visits. We hear the bagpipe version on solemn occasions such as state funerals.

This book recounts in agonizing detail the early descent of its author. Pressed into service in the Royal Navy, John Newton attempted desertion, was beaten senseless and dismissed for insubordination, then turned to a career trafficking in slaves. Notorious for cursing and blasphemy even among his fellow degenerates, Newton served on a slave ship during the darkest and cruelest days of trans-Atlantic slavery, finally working his way up to captain.

A dramatic conversion on the high seas set him on the path to grace, but only in part. He wrote the hymn “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds” while at anchor, awaiting the next cargo of captured Africans. Later he admitted he could not consider himself a true believer until some time after that initial awakening onboard ship.

When he left and renounced the slave trade, Newton faced new obstacles. After studying theology, he applied for ordination to the Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Independents and was rejected by each until at last, seven years later, the Church of England appointed him to a parish.

I have visited the beautiful stone church in the small town of Olney, England, where Newton began his ministry, a bucolic setting far removed

from the vile stench of a tropical slave port. He never forgot, nor did he ever deny, the sense of *undeservedness* that marked all that followed. As he wrote in his diary soon after moving to Olney, “Thou hast given an apostate a name and a place among thy children—called an infidel to the ministry of the gospel. I am a poor wretch that once wandered naked and barefoot, without a home, without a friend: and now for me who once used to be on the ground, and was treated as a dog by all around me, thou hast prepared a house suitable to the connection thou hast put me into.”

Under the tutelage of such luminaries as John Wesley and George Whitefield, Newton became a rousing evangelical preacher and eventually a leader in the abolitionist movement. He befriended a haunted young poet named William Cowper and ministered to him throughout Cowper’s suicidal episodes of mental illness. (The town of Olney preserves the record of their friendship in the Cowper and Newton Museum.) Meanwhile, Newton served as a kind of spiritual director to the eminent politician William Wilberforce, urging him not to give up his forty-year fight to abolish slavery in the British Empire. Newton himself appeared before Parliament, giving irrefutable eyewitness testimony to the horror and immorality of the slave trade. These two friendships, with a pathologically depressed genius and a wealthy Minister of Parliament, demonstrate something of Newton’s range and effectiveness.

He went on to serve as pastor of a distinguished church in London, where he befriended many notables of his day. The grace that had “saved a wretch like me” worked its way thoroughly in his life. His achievements earned him a monument in Westminster Abbey, and the honors continue even today, two centuries after his death. Newton was recently inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame, and in 2007 the actor Albert Finney played him in *Amazing Grace*, a film about Wilberforce. Perhaps the surest emblem of his transformation is a town named Newton in his honor in Sierra Leone, where he used to dock his slave ship.

Newton faced opposition, sneers, and second-guessing during his lifetime. Some scorned his evangelical enthusiasm, some charged him with worsening rather than helping the travails of his friend William Cowper, and some scoffed at his abolitionist crusade as an attempt to assuage the guilt of his past. Newton did not try to defend himself but pointed to any good in himself as an outworking of God’s grace. In doing so, he stands squarely in the biblical tradition, for its great heroes include a murderer and adulterer (King David), a traitor (the apostle Peter), and a persecutor

of Christians (the apostle Paul). Grace always has about it the scent of scandal.

Which brings me to the author of this book, Jonathan Aitken. Though unfamiliar to many American readers, he needs no introduction in the United Kingdom, for not long ago his name was splashed across the headlines of every tabloid in Britain. During John Major's term as Prime Minister, Aitken was often mentioned as a potential successor. He had impeccable family credentials, as the great-nephew of Lord Beaverbrook, the son of an MP and grandson of a baron. He gained a seat in Parliament, then served John Major as Chief Secretary to the Treasury. In a steep and sudden fall, he was accused of criminal behavior, fought the accusations fiercely, then admitted to perjury, and was sentenced to eighteen months in prison. Unable to cover the legal costs of his trials, he declared bankruptcy. A divorce soon followed.

We have a strange phrase in English, "fall from grace," a phrase often applied to Aitken at the time. Actually it was a fall *into* grace for, like John Newton, Aitken found in abysmal depths the first steps toward redemption. Guided compassionately by his friend Chuck Colson, who knew the pattern well, Aitken used the time in prison to study the Bible and learn Greek, then emerged to study theology at Oxford.

Still today my friends in Britain look on Aitken with suspicion. Was his a conversion of convenience? Can his contributions now overcome the reputation he gained in the days when the headlines trumpeted words like "liar," "shame," and "disgrace"? Aitken has set forth his own account in a biography, *Pride and Perjury*, and in collections of the psalms and prayers that upheld him in those dark days. Like Newton, Aitken does not defend his past but rather falls back on the amazing grace that saved a wretch like him. The existence of this book is a testament to the possibility of a new start, of redemption that uses and transforms the past without erasing it. For grace, like water, always flows downward, to the lowest place.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge all those who have helped me in the research, preparation, and production of this new biography of John Newton.

My greatest thanks go to Marylynn Rouse, my principal researcher and adviser. She is the director of The John Newton Project (JNP), a charitable foundation specializing in the collection and preservation of Newton's papers in various archives. Without the academic scholarship and spiritual encouragement of Marylynn Rouse I would never have been able to access and appreciate the significance of so many of the unpublished papers that enrich the pages of this book. So huge is my debt of gratitude to Marylynn and so impressive is her long record of service to the life and achievements of John Newton that this biography is dedicated to her.

I also gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the JNP and the expertise of its trustees: John Langlois (chairman), Tony Baker, Martin Hines, Mike Swales, Malcolm Turner, and Robert Watson (the great-great-great-great-grandson of John Newton's close friend William Bull). My discussions with these eminent Newton experts, collectively and individually, have been of great assistance in giving me fresh perspectives on my subject.

Additional research, with particular emphasis on the chapters relating to the slave trade and William Cowper, was carried out with great skill by Alex Davis, a talented young poet currently reading English language and literature at Sheffield University.

A constant source of encouragement to me during the writing of this book was Ralph Veerman, my good friend who also acts as my U.S. literary agent. For his friendship and for his understanding of the growing American interest in John Newton, I am deeply grateful.

The burden of typing and retyping the many drafts of the book's man-

uscript was shared by a hardworking team of secretarial helpers. They were Jackie Cottrell, Helen Palmer, Katie Charles, Rosemary Gooding, Margaret Wikins, and Prue Fox. Helen Kirkpatrick led and coordinated this excellent team. To all of them, my warm and appreciative thanks.

Finally, my special gratitude to the publishers who commissioned this biography: Robin Baird Smith of Continuum and Al Fisher of Crossway. The production team at Continuum headed by Ben Hayes and Anya Wilson, who took responsibility for the illustrations and for the final editing under pressure of a tight timetable, deserve high praise and thanks.

Any biographer who reassesses a well-known subject owes much to authors in the previous centuries who have been down the same road. So to all who have written earlier books or studies relating to John Newton's life and works I record my gratitude, particularly to Josiah Bull, Richard Cecil, Brian Edwards, Bernard Martin, John Pollock, Steve Turner, and Bruce Hindmarsh.

Last and furthest from least I record my loving gratitude to my wife, Elizabeth. With great forbearance she has borne the burden of living alongside the mountains and rivers of Newton papers that became part of the landscape of our home. She made many comments on this landscape, most helpfully on the early drafts of the manuscript, which greatly benefited from her insightful wisdom and encouragement.

Having gratefully acknowledged all those mentioned in the above paragraphs for helping me to navigate along the route of John Newton's life, I should make it clear that I alone have steered the course and that every judgment, opinion, and decision in the book is my responsibility.

Jonathan Aitken

PREFACE

INTRODUCING JOHN NEWTON

Who was John Newton? The question would scarcely have needed an answer two hundred years ago. For during his lifetime Newton's story, in all its famous and infamous detail, was renowned as one of the most sensational, sinful, spiritual, romantic, influential, and historically important sagas of the eighteenth century.

In the course of his personal journey, Newton left two remarkable imprints on the sands of time. Politically he stirred the conscience of the world by helping William Wilberforce to abolish the slave trade. The cooperation between these two campaigners, illuminated in these pages by many previously unpublished letters, was a vital force in the abolitionist movement.

Important though he was in that reforming political battle, John Newton was an even more vital force in the closely connected world of transforming spiritual faith. The stranger-than-fiction story of his own conversion from reprobate slave trader to born-again gospel minister turned him into an iconic figure for many evangelical Christians. As a best-selling author, preacher, and hymn composer he became revered as one of the founding fathers in the great revival of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century religion. That revival and Newton's enduring contribution to it still helps to fuel the worldwide growth of evangelical churches in our contemporary society.

Yet for all his seminal contributions to political and spiritual history, most people today are woefully ignorant about John Newton. If he has penetrated the mass consciousness of the twenty-first century, it is because he is remembered as the writer of America's most frequently performed and recorded spiritual song—"Amazing Grace." With that exception the average man in the street, or even in the bookstore, has today hardly

heard of John Newton. I began to realize how forgotten he had become in our secular age when I talked about writing his biography to a normally well-informed friend who reacted with astonishment. “But are you sure you’ll be able to handle his physics and mathematics?” he asked, confusing John with his namesake Sir Isaac Newton.

John Newton was far more celebrated in his time than Isaac, the discoverer of gravity. Perhaps that was because while only the educated elite could relate to the author of *Principia Mathematica*, millions could identify with the account of “a great sinner” as John Newton described himself. His love story, slave ship story, conversion story, hymn-writing story, and fifty-year story of Christ-centered service combined into a personal epic that fascinated and inspired his contemporaries.

Making a reassessment of this epic at the time of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade and giving it the title *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* seems appropriate for many reasons. A condensed account of Newton’s life and times swiftly illustrates this by highlighting the peaks and valleys of his tempestuous journey.

Newton’s early years were indeed disgraceful. He was a wild and angry young man who rebelled against authority at every opportunity, starting with foolish acts of disobedience against his father. Press-ganged at the age of eighteen into the Royal Navy, he broke its rules so recklessly that he earned himself a public flogging for desertion. Filled with “bitter rage and black despair,” he was torn between committing suicide and murdering his captain. Only his unrequited love for a thirteen-year-old girl he had met in Chatham, Polly Catlett, restrained his destructive instincts.

Exchanged from his warship to a slave ship in Madeira, Newton became even wilder in his behavior. “I was exceedingly vile,” he said. “I not only sinned with a high hand myself but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion.” Revealing the first glimpse of his later talent as a hymn-writer, he composed a derogatory song about his new captain and taught it to the entire crew. He had to leave the ship in a hurry after that bout of troublemaking; so Newton’s next move was to work for a shore-based slave trader in Sierra Leone. He indulged in every available vice including witchcraft. Accused (unfairly) of stealing, he fell foul of his employer’s black mistress, a tribal princess who imprisoned him in chains, starved him, and treated him brutally. He was rescued from a remote part of the West African coastline by a ship’s captain from Liverpool. Because Newton’s lifestyle had improved by this time, he ini-

tially refused the offer of a passage home, but the thought of seeing Polly again won him over.

During the long voyage to England Newton again behaved appallingly as a troublemaker. Although he had been brought up in the Christian faith by his devout mother, who died when he was six, Newton had become such an aggressive atheist and blasphemer that even his shipmates were shocked by his oaths. Halfway across the Atlantic, out of boredom, he picked up the only available book on board the ship, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. As he read it he began to worry that its words might be true. So he slammed the book shut and went to sleep until awakened in the middle of a terrifying storm by the cry, “The ship is sinking!”

The ship was badly holed and waterlogged. As it seemed to be going down, Newton, to his own great astonishment, began to pray, “Lord, have mercy on us!” After many hours of extreme peril, the storm subsided, and Newton felt at peace. “About this time,” he said, “I began to know that there is a God who answers prayer.” Almost immediately Newton stopped swearing, changed his licentious lifestyle, and started to pray and read the Bible. From that day, March 21, 1748, until his death in 1807 he never let a year go by without recognizing in prayerful thanksgiving what he called his “great turning day” of conversion.

Newton’s conversion was a struggle. Although he searched, he also strayed. In order to win the hand of Polly he needed to show that he had good prospects for earning a living. So he went back to sea and the slave trade, making four voyages to Africa between 1748 and 1754, three of them as a slave-ship captain.

Newton’s diaries, letters, and logbooks provide one of history’s most authentic eyewitness accounts of the mid-eighteenth-century slave trade in all its gruesome details. At the time he did not understand the full horror and immorality of the business he was engaged in. His remorse and repentance for it came many years later. However, when he was commanding slave ships he developed an aversion to the trade because it involved so much brutality. Unlike most of his fellow seafarers in charge of the transportation of slaves, Newton showed himself to be an exceptionally humane captain. On his last voyage from Africa to the Caribbean in 1754, not one single slave or crew member on his ship perished. This was an unusual and probably unique humanitarian achievement in an era when it was considered normal for several crew members and a third or

a quarter of the slaves imprisoned below decks to die in the course of the “middle passage” journey.

Newton left slave trading in 1754 at the age of twenty-nine because of a personal health problem. By this time he had married Polly, who remained the love of his life in an exemplary matrimonial relationship until her death forty years later. Neither of them were exemplary Christian believers at first, but Newton continued to search for a right relationship with God. How he found that relationship is a key part of his life’s story. It involved several remarkable pastors, mentors, and preachers, among them the Methodist leaders George Whitefield and John Wesley. They came, on separate occasions, to preach in Liverpool when Newton was the city’s Surveyor of Tides, an official post in Customs that allowed him plenty of free time to pursue his increasingly intense spiritual life.

Approaching his thirty-third birthday, Newton felt the call to serve God as an ordained minister. To test his vocation he set himself an elaborate self-examination of readings, exercises, and high standards of behavior. He kept a record of them in a hitherto unpublished journal that he called *Miscellaneous Thoughts and Enquiries Upon An Important Subject* (1758). It is difficult not to be impressed by Newton’s thoroughness, maturity, and humility as he put himself through the processes described in this document, which is extensively quoted in Chapter 21. Any candidate for ordination in modern times could well profit from studying the way Newton tested his vocation two and a half centuries ago, for his *Miscellaneous Thoughts* remain a most impressive theological and spiritual litmus test for an aspiring minister. The document concluded with his goals after being ordained: “To know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified that I may declare his unsearchable riches to sinners . . . to insist much upon the great essential points of the glories of his person and offices, his wonderful love and condescension, his power, faithfulness, and readiness to save, the grandeur of his works, the perfection of his example, his life, passion, death, and resurrection.”

Having become certain of his Christ-centered call to ordination, Newton discovered how difficult it was for him to answer it. For the next six years he suffered rejection after rejection at the hands of various bishops and archbishops of the Church of England. His trouble was that he was suspected of the heinous crime of “enthusiasm.” This was a code word inside the established church for showing too much partiality toward Methodism.

Although Newton was indeed a sympathizer with Methodists,

Independents, and Baptists in whose chapels he had listened to gospel preachers for many years, he felt called to the Church of England, even though it did not feel called to accept him as a candidate for its ministry. Eventually Newton was rescued from ecclesiastical exile by the intervention of the Earl of Dartmouth. He was a godly nobleman whose evangelical leanings had earned him the nickname of “the psalm singer.” He admired Newton, offered him the Dartmouth-controlled living of Olney adjacent to a Dartmouth country house, and persuaded the local bishop to ordain the Dartmouth candidate. As the historian George Macaulay Trevelyan summarized the episode: “Lord Dartmouth made interest in high Episcopal quarters to obtain the ordination of John Newton who was too much in earnest about religion to be readily entrusted to teach it—except as a matter of favor to a great man.”

Arriving in Olney, Newton soon proved himself to be an outstanding and innovative curate. He trebled the size of the church’s Sunday congregation to six hundred, introduced Bible teaching classes for children and adults, carried out a busy schedule of pastoral visits, and preached sermons that attracted listeners from neighboring towns and villages. Some people came down from London to hear Newton preach, among them members of the Wilberforce family, including the schoolboy William Wilberforce.

Newton’s fame grew as a result of his success as an author. His autobiography, *An Authentic Narrative* (1764), became a national and international best-seller as well as being regarded as a classic of conversion literature. Although he wrote other successful books after *An Authentic Narrative*, his highest achievements as a writer were stimulated by his friendship with William Cowper, later to be acclaimed as one of England’s greatest poets.

Cowper moved to Olney to be under Newton’s ministry. They developed a close and creative relationship, collaborating together in pastoral work and in the writing of hymns. But Cowper suffered a mental breakdown in 1773 and was only narrowly prevented from committing suicide by Newton’s dramatic intervention. Because of his friend’s illness, Newton alone had to complete the book that had started as a joint endeavor. So the majority of the hymns in *Olney Hymns* (1779) were written by Newton. They included “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken,” “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds,” and his most popular composition of all, “Amazing Grace.” How Newton came to write these hymns and how

“Amazing Grace” evolved into the most popular spiritual song in the history of American music is a riveting part of his story.

During his sixteen years in Olney, Newton’s letters, diaries, and journals of prayer trace the development of his soul through many crises, among them Cowper’s suicide attempts, Polly’s close calls with life-threatening illness, and a villagers’ revolt against their curate. The diaries are also full of historically interesting material such as Newton’s support for the rebel American colonists in their War of Independence in 1776, from which he was forced to exonerate himself.

In 1780 John Newton, thanks to the influence of his friend and patron John Thornton, moved to become Rector of St Mary Woolnoth in the heart of the city of London’s financial district.

As in Olney, Newton’s fame as a preacher soon filled the church, attracting worshipers from other parishes and denominations. He also developed a writing ministry, dispensing advice to a wide range of correspondents in the manner of a theological agony uncle. These letters were so well received that Newton eventually turned them into best-selling books. He reinforced his reputation as a spiritual sage by founding The Eclectic Society, a discussion group for young clergymen and devout laymen. Several of them became renowned missionaries and evangelists. Newton’s unpublished notes of his contributions to the Eclectic Society’s debates demonstrated his growing influence as a father figure to future leaders of the church.

Newton’s finest hour as a figure of influence began when William Wilberforce sought his advice at a secret meeting on a cold December evening in 1785. The twenty-four-year-old MP for Hull was in a state of emotional turmoil, wanting to cut short his promising parliamentary career in order to enter the church. Newton firmly advised his young friend not to withdraw from politics but to stay in the House of Commons and to serve God as a Christian statesman. This was not the obvious recommendation a senior clergyman might have been expected to give to a talented potential candidate for ordination. What would have happened if Newton had agreed with Wilberforce’s view that he should leave public life to follow a religious vocation? The loss to British politics, to parliamentary history, and above all to the cause of abolishing the slave trade would have been devastating.

Newton became Wilberforce’s spiritual director in the months and years following this crucial conversation. Their friendship, well chronicled in their respective letters and diary entries (see Chapters 41-42), was

to be of momentous political as well as spiritual importance. Newton's expertise on the slave trade and his abhorrence of it, belatedly pricked by his Christian conscience, made a powerful impact on Wilberforce. The famous words "God Almighty has placed before me two great objects: the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners [Morals]" were written by Wilberforce in his diary at the end of a long day, October 28, 1787, which he had spent largely alone in Newton's company.

Newton's public testimony on the slave trade to the Privy Council, to a Select Committee of the House of Commons, and in his sensational pamphlet *Thoughts Upon The African Slave Trade* (1788) made him a great ally in Wilberforce's abolitionist cause. Just imagine the effect on public opinion of these words from Newton as he described the sadistic execution of slaves by a fellow slave-ship captain whom he had known:

Two methods of his punishment of the poor slaves, whom he sentenced to die, I cannot easily forget. Some of them he jointed; that is, he cut off, with an axe, first their feet, then their legs below the knee. Then their thighs, in like manner their hands, then their arms below the elbow, and then at the shoulders, till their bodies remained only like the trunk of a tree when all the branches are lopped away; and, lastly, their heads. And, as he proceeded in his operation, he threw the reeking members and heads in the midst of the bulk of the trembling slaves, who were chained upon the main deck. He tied around the upper parts of the heads of others a small soft platted rope, which the sailors call a point, so loosely as to admit a short lever: by continuing to turn the lever, he drew the point more and more tight, till at length he forced their eyes to stand out of their heads: and when he had satiated himself with their torments, he cut their heads off.

Newton and Wilberforce also collaborated on less dramatic causes than the battle to abolish the slave trade. They were often allies in ecclesiastical matters, such as securing church and missionary appointments for young clergymen recommended by Newton. One example of this was Newton's prompting of Wilberforce to ask the Prime Minister, William Pitt, to send an official chaplain to Australia with the first fleet of convicts dispatched to settle Botany Bay in 1787. As a result of this successful lobbying effort, Newton's nominee, Rev. Richard Johnson, became the first Christian preacher of the gospel in the Antipodes. As Newton presciently wrote to Wilberforce at the time: "Who can tell what important

consequences may depend upon Mr. Johnson's going to New Holland [Australia]. It may seem but a small event at present. So a foundation stone when it is laid is small compared to the building to be erected on it, but it is the beginning and earnest of the whole."

From his pulpit at St Mary Woolnoth, Newton continued to build up his own influence. He preached and traveled with remarkable energy. Sometimes he took on major evangelistic projects such as delivering fifty consecutive sermons on the words of the recitatives, arias, and choruses of the *Messiah* during the year of Handel's centenary. Regularly he made journeys around the country to towns and cities where there was a hunger for gospel preaching. Toward the end of his life he noted that the number of evangelical incumbents in the church had risen from one to over four hundred in half a century. Newton himself played a major role in that revival. One of his many examples and legacies (analyzed in detail in the Epilogue) was that he moved gospel evangelism from the fringe toward the mainstream of English religion. It is a trend that continues both nationally and internationally today.

A final ingredient in this biographical reassessment of John Newton is the picture that emerges from a historical study of his diaries and prayer journals. They show that he was a true servant of Jesus Christ whose commitment to the Lord looks even stronger when seen from the inside by a twenty-first-century reader of his secret prayers than it did when studied from the outside by admiring eighteenth-century observers of his well-known ministry. For throughout his long and influential public life, the outstanding features of Newton's private character were faith, humility, and gratitude. The faith was his certainty of God's faithfulness. The humility was his genuine sense of a sinner's unworthiness. The gratitude was the overflowing thankfulness of his heart to God for the "amazing grace" that, in the lines of his immortal hymn, "saved a wretch like me."

Almost the last words ever spoken by John Newton conveyed the essence of the spirituality that made him such an effective communicator. "I am a great sinner," said the dying Newton, "but Christ is a great Savior." How he used the power behind these words to change not only himself but also the religion, the politics, and the society of the times in which he lived are the themes of this biography.

A SPIRITUAL UPBRINGING



The old saying, “The child is father to the man” has the ring of truth about it in the life of John Newton. He had an uncertain and unhappy childhood. His mother died when he was only six years old. His relationship with his largely absent father was too fearful and formal to allow any intimacy between them. Yet, for all these difficulties, the boy inherited from each of his parents certain strong characteristics, values, and beliefs. Although in the early part of his life he was to wander from that inheritance into other paths, described in his most famous hymn as “through many dangers, toils, and snares,” nevertheless the qualities he absorbed from his mother and father were among the strongest influences on John Newton during the eighty-two years that followed his birth in London on July 24, 1725.

Two days after he was born, Newton was baptized at a Dissenting chapel known as the Old Gravel Lane Independent Meeting House in Wapping on the north bank of the River Thames on July 26, 1725. He was given the Christian name John, after his father, a respected sea captain who had been the master of various merchant ships trading in the Mediterranean. John’s wife, Elizabeth, was a regular member of the congregation at the Old Gravel Lane Chapel. Its pastor, Dr. David Jennings, lived two doors down the road from the Newtons in Red Lyon Street, Wapping. The fact that the Jenningses and the Newtons were such close neighbors may explain why the chapel came to play such an important part in John’s childhood.

Captain John Newton did not play a comparably important role in his son’s early upbringing because of his frequent absences at sea. Voyages

to the Mediterranean were long nautical commitments in the eighteenth century, and Captain Newton was away for months at a time. When he did come home he was a strict father. He expected his son to keep silent until spoken to, to call him “Sir,” and to show him proper deference, obedience, and respect at all times. This was not an unusual pattern of behavior in father-son relationships of that era. If Captain Newton’s attitude to young John seemed excessively formal, it may have had more to do with the manners he had acquired during his education in Spain than with the feelings in his heart, for, as later events were to show, the Captain was a consistently loving and forgiving parent whenever John behaved rashly or made mistakes.

Nothing is recorded about the family background and antecedents of John Newton Senior, but the few facts known about his life suggest that he was an aloof, stubborn, and intriguing character. “He always observed an air of distance and severity in his carriage,” said his son, “which overawed and discouraged my spirit. I was always in fear before him.” This remoteness was attributed to the education he had received from Spanish Jesuits, the renowned religious teaching order of the Catholic Reformation, whose founder, Ignatius of Loyola, is credited with the remark, “Give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man.” Whether or not the attribution of the remark is correct, the philosophy it expresses has been the cornerstone of Jesuit teaching for many centuries. So it gives an interesting insight into the character of John Newton Senior to note that although he was schooled by the leading Catholic educators of his time and spent several years at a Jesuit college in Seville, he refused to become a Catholic. Throughout his life he was reticent in matters of religion, but he observed his faith as a Protestant of high moral principles and low-church practices.

From this and other glimpses of his personality we can surmise that Captain John Newton was a well-traveled, well-educated man of the world, who knew his own mind and could be stubborn in sticking to it. This may not have made him an easy father to love, particularly as he shielded his inner thoughts and feelings behind a carapace of coldness. Nevertheless, his strength of character and the air of authority he derived from his years of command at sea made it easy for the Captain to be respected by his son, even though that respect was tinged with fear.

John Newton, as a boy, was far closer to his mother Elizabeth. She was a well-educated young woman, the daughter of Simon Scatliff, an East London maker of mathematical instruments. Elizabeth dedicated herself

to the Christian upbringing and education of her only son. She spent long hours with him over his books each day, usually with a deep intensity that may have stemmed from the realization that her own life was likely to be short. Elizabeth knew from her coughings and expectorations that she was suffering from consumption—the old name for tuberculosis—a killer disease that was far more feared in that age than cancer is today.

Elizabeth was a good teacher, and she molded young John into an able pupil. He had a keen intelligence and an exceptional memory. “When I was four years old I could read (hard names excepted) as well as I can now,” recalled Newton in later life, paying tribute to his mother for storing his mind “with many valuable pieces, chapters and portions of Scripture, catechisms, hymns and poems.” His feats of memory included knowing by heart many of the answers to the questions in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* of 1647, and also the responses to Dr. Isaac Watts’s *A Short View of the Whole of Scripture History*, which was published in 1732 in catechetical form addressed to “persons of younger years and the common ranks of mankind.”

All this hard work of learning by rote may have made John a dull boy. By his own account he was “of a sedentary form, not active and playful.” Perhaps he did not have time from his lessons to join the other five-year-old sons of the Newtons’ Wapping neighbors in their noisy games with drums, hoops, and sticks along the edge of the River Thames. Memorizing long passages from the Watts and Westminster Catechisms would have been an arduous task for an adult, let alone for a boy under six. The fact that Newton took it in his stride at such a young age suggests either a precocious ability for repetition or a gifted and retentive mind.

There were three key figures who exercised a spiritual influence over John Newton’s boyhood. The first was his mother Elizabeth. Although frail in her physique, she was formidable in her piety. As a devout member of the congregation at the Old Gravel Lane Dissenting Chapel she knew her Bible and her Reformed theology. She was ambitious for her son to rise above his seafaring background and to become a minister of religion. “I have been told that from my birth she had in her mind devoted me to the ministry,” recalled Newton. “Had she lived till I was of a proper age I was to have been sent to St Andrew’s in Scotland to be educated.” It is interesting to speculate on the course of John Newton’s career had this maternal wish been fulfilled. He would probably have become a Scottish Calvinist minister, for that was the school in which St Andrew’s trained its eighteenth-century students of divinity. Instead

Newton's self-taught theology gave him a more tolerant and transdenominational outlook. In later life this enabled him to appeal to a far wider audience as a preacher, hymn-writer, and best-selling author than he would ever have reached from the narrower spiritual confines of strict Scottish Calvinism.

Mrs. Elizabeth Newton and her son were spiritually mentored by their neighbor, Dr. David Jennings, the pastor at the Old Gravel Lane Chapel. Like most leaders of Independent meetinghouses he preached for at least an hour every Sunday morning with a detailed exposition of "the Word"—a chosen passage of Scripture. Newton was stirred by Jennings's sermons, and the one preached on a Sunday morning in 1730 may have made a particular impact, for with little John Newton sitting in the chapel, Jennings based his message (subsequently published in his book *Sermons for Young People*) on St. Paul's letter to Philemon, which features a plea by the apostle for an errant slave named Onesimus: "We have in this epistle a memorable instance of the richness and freeness of the grace of God, for the encouragement of the meanest and vilest sinners to fly to him for mercy," declared Jennings. There may be an echo in these words of the opening lines of Newton's great hymn:

*Amazing grace!—how sweet the sound—
That saved a wretch like me!*

Perhaps this sermon on the themes of grace, sin, and slavery planted a first seed in the heart of the boy Newton, even if it took many years to germinate. Whether or not this suggestion is valid, John Newton certainly regarded his childhood pastor, David Jennings, as his first spiritual leader. After his conversion, Newton corresponded extensively with Jennings, often describing him as his "patron."

A third spiritual influence on the young Newton was Dr. Isaac Watts (1674–1748), close to David Jennings as a colleague and fellow minister. Watts was renowned as the leading hymn-writer of his day and also as an outstanding preacher. He sometimes came to deliver sermons in the Old Gravel Lane Chapel where, along with other members of the congregation, Elizabeth Newton and her small son would have listened to him as he illustrated his preaching with his hymns. Given the cooperation and the relationship between Watts and Jennings, it is certain that Newton's earliest spiritual upbringing was influenced by Watts's hymnody. Indeed, nearly fifty years later, when the Reverend John Newton published his

best-selling *Olney Hymns* (1779), it was clear that many of his compositions had been inspired by Isaac Watts.

One of Watts's most popular hymns, likely to have been sung in Wapping's Gravel Lane Chapel at Christmastime in Newton's childhood, was:

*Joy to the world! The Lord is come:
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room
And heaven and nature sing.*

The tune to this Christmas carol, still popular in the twenty-first century, was written by a rising young composer, George Frederick Handel, who became a naturalized British subject in 1726, the year after Newton was born. When he was at the height of his fame as a London preacher, one of Newton's extraordinary achievements was to draw large crowds to his series of fifty sermons on the words of the recitatives, arias, and choruses of Handel's *Messiah*, delivered from the pulpit of St Mary Woolnoth in 1785, the centenary year of the composer's birth.

The impact made on John Newton as a small boy by his early experiences of Handel's music, Jennings's sermons, and Watts's hymns is a matter for speculation. His exposure to them was real and perhaps emotionally powerful, particularly when he heard Isaac Watts's most famous hymn on Good Friday. Its opening lines, as Watts originally wrote them, were:

*When I survey the wondrous cross
Where the young prince of glory died.*

The reason why these words might have had a poignant meaning for six-year-old John Newton was that his young mother was surveying her own cross of mortal illness.

By the spring of 1732 Elizabeth Newton was showing all the symptoms of advanced consumption—severe weight loss, a bright-eyed pallor in the face, and racking spasms of coughing up blood. In a desperate attempt to recover from the disease, she went to stay in the family home of her cousin, Elizabeth Catlett, who lived in Chatham on the Kent coast. Deep breathing of sea air was believed to be a cure for tubercular patients, but it was no help to Elizabeth Newton. On July 11, 1732, at the age of twenty-seven, she passed away in the Catletts' house. Her son was not at

his mother's bedside because he was thought too young to witness the distressing sights and sounds of her terminal illness. He, therefore, remained in London, boarding with a family who worshiped at Dr. Jennings's chapel. Just two weeks short of his seventh birthday, the news was broken to John Newton that he had lost his mother.

Elizabeth Newton's educational and spiritual legacy to her son was greater than either of them realized during her lifetime. She had brought him up to believe in God's omnipotence, to fear his judgment, and to accept that his Word, as recorded in the Bible, was the source of all truth. In his adolescence and early manhood John Newton often rebelled against these teachings. Yet the spiritual lessons the boy had learned at his mother's knee were never forgotten. They became the foundation for Newton's eventual conversion and Christian commitment.

In addition to her spiritual instruction of her only son, Elizabeth also inculcated the good habits of industry and intellectual curiosity, as well as the enjoyment of expressing oneself in a wide-ranging vocabulary. It is clear that Newton's prolific writings and sermons in later life were, at least in part, the product of his mother's early inspiration. "Almost her whole employment was the care of my education" was Newton's description of her devotion to him.

John Newton's father was away at sea when his wife died. He did not return from his Mediterranean travels until early in 1733. When he came home to discover that he was a widower, Captain Newton spent little time in mourning. He remarried quickly, taking as his second wife the daughter of "a substantial grazier" from Aveyly in Essex. Her name was Thomasina, and her background was a relatively wealthy one, for in those days the difference between a farmer and a grazier was at least five hundred acres. Thomasina, who was of Italian descent, bore two sons and a daughter to Captain Newton. The arrival of these children resulted in John's being sidelined into the predictable but unhappy position of a stepson who is excluded from the inner circle of the new family. "My father left me much to run about the streets" was how Newton described his plight. "He kept me at a great distance."

The distance widened when, at the age of eight, Newton was sent away to boarding school in Stratford, Essex. His first teacher there was a sadistic wielder of the cane. "His imprudent severity almost broke my spirit and my relish for books. . . . I forgot the first principles and rules of arithmetic which my mother had taught me," recalled Newton. However, his second teacher noticed that the boy had considerable ability. Newton

came top of his class in Latin, which in that year's syllabus required studies of Virgil and Tully. However, before John Newton's learning of Latin or any other subject could make deep progress, he was taken away from school. His formal education ended at the age of ten, when Captain Newton decided it was time for his son to go to sea.