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Giving an account of oneself: Tracing the Moravian Edwards family through six generations of *Lebenslauf* life writing

Author:
Lindy Stiebel[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Lindy Stiebel,
stiebell@ukzn.ac.za

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One fundamental way to leave a mark in life is to write an account of oneself, whether as a memoir or an autobiographical sketch. For Moravians, this practice is a spiritual requirement and takes the form of a *Lebenslauf*, which translates to 'life account'. The Edwards family, of which I am a descendant, has been Moravian for many generations and has lived in Moravian settlements across several countries, including England, Ireland, Canada and South Africa. Family records and archival searches have uncovered a number of Edwards' *Lebenslauf* memoirs – both short and long, authored by men and women, and encompassing both autobiographical and biographical narratives. These works have appeared in church records, and some remain unpublished, intended to be passed down to family descendants.

Contribution: This article aims to trace the development of the Moravian Church movement in the United Kingdom and South Africa through the life writings of the Edwards family across six generations. It will highlight the differences between the writings of men and women, as well as track the changes in social and religious norms experienced by those who lived through these periods, starting in 18th-century Europe and concluding in the 21st century with the South African Moravian descendants, who have since spread further afield.

Keywords: Moravian church; *Lebenslauf*; memoir; Edwards family; Gracehill; Elim.

Introduction

One of the fundamental ways of leaving one's mark behind in life is to write an account of oneself. This can be in the form of a memoir or an autobiographical sketch. For Moravians, this is a spiritual requirement and takes the form of a *Lebenslauf*, literally a life account, more accurately translated as a curriculum vitae or even a resume. Normally written in the later years of one's life, or even by another after the person's death in the form of a biographical sketch, the traditional *Lebenslauf* is:

> The description of one's life, conversion and death. Some of the contents are written by the members themselves, with enhancements from others. In other cases, someone else, for example, the sisters, whom someone shared a house with, compiled a memoir based on stories they heard. Some are quite long (6 pages) while others are very brief, a note or half a page. The most generic type will begin by noting where and when a person was born, and then go on to describe the person's movements, training, conversion, life within the community, marriage, children etc. The main point is always when and how this person encountered 'the Saviour' and joined the community. (Petterson 2021:25, fn8)

Traced back to the patron of the Moravian movement, Count von Zinzendorf's instruction of 1747 that (Faull 1997):

> [*T*]he memoir of the departed person be read at the service of song, or Singstunde, on the day he or she was to be buried in order that one could with 'vale to their soul, just as when as a final gesture one gives a handshake and says farewell. (p. xxxii)

The *Lebenslauf* is indeed a final – perhaps instructive – word from one person to the surviving family and extended community.

The Edwards family, of which I am a descendant, was Moravian through many generations and lived in Moravian settlements in a few countries, namely England, Ireland, Canada and South Africa, through these successive generations. Family records and archival searches have

yielded a number of Edwards *Lebenslauf* memoirs – both short and longer as described above, by men and by women, both autobiographical and biographical, published in church records and unpublished (handwritten or typed), and left to be handed down to family descendants. This article aims to trace the Moravian Church movement as it developed in the United Kingdom and South Africa through the life writings of these Edwards family members through six generations. It notes the differences between those written by the women and those by the men and traces the changes in social and religious norms experienced by individuals living from 18th century Europe to 21st century South Africa, where Moravian descendants have since spread further afield.

Some historical context regarding the origins and development of the Moravian Church in Europe, England, Ireland and South Africa, as well as the Edwards family's membership in various Moravian settlements across successive generations, is necessary to understand the *Lebenslauf* accounts they wrote. To begin, I will provide a brief overview of the Moravian Church and its history, followed by a parallel overview of the Edwards family and their contributions to this church movement. Finally, I will present a more detailed examination of the five *Lebenslauf* accounts in my possession to bring to life the experiences of those who lived during these times and in these places.

The Moravian Church movement

The Moravian Church, also known as the Unity of the Brethren, has its formal beginning in the 18th century, but in order to find its roots, one has to go back further to the 15th century. Drawing from various histories, one finds that the church had its seed sown in the writings of John Huss (Jan Hus), Rector of Prague who, inspired by the writings of Wycliff, the English theologian, campaigned for reform in the established church. Huss was condemned for his views and burned at the stake in 1415. This predates the Lutheran Reformation by over 100 years.

Followers of Huss kept his beliefs alive and in 1457 constituted themselves as a separate church: the Unitas Fratum or United Brotherhood. This church grew in what was then known as Bohemia and Moravia (nowadays parts of the Czech Republic) 'making simple piety, and a tolerant and charitable outlook towards other Christians, the hallmark of their communities' (White [1996]2007:2). Besides Huss, a founding father of the Moravian Church in its infancy was John Comenius (1592–1670), born in Bohemia and becoming a pastor and schoolmaster in Fulnec, Moravia. The 30 years war, starting in 1618, forced him to flee to Poland, where he died without realising his dream of seeing the Unitas Fratum restored to its Moravian homeland. What he did successfully begin, however, was the Moravian commitment to modern education that he asserted should be interesting for the child, using pictures, for example his dictum was 'let violence be absent, let learning flow spontaneously' (in White [1996]2007:4). The focus on establishing educational opportunities for boys and girls would become a feature of subsequent Moravian settlements through the centuries thereafter. At a time when both the poor and women were not considered worth educating, Comenius urged education for all. Some settlements, such as Gracehill in Ireland, even offered boarding facilities in the years to follow, which attracted pupils from far and wide. My great-grandfather, John Herbert Edwards (1843–1906), would become a headmaster of the boys' school at the Gracehill Moravian settlement in Ireland as his *Lebenslauf* attests.

Fifty years after Comenius's death, a small group of his followers – the 'hidden seed' – fled to Saxony to fulfil their desire to recreate the pre-Reformation Unity. Here they found refuge with Count Nicolaus von Zinzendorf (1700–1760), a wealthy landowner, who was sympathetic to their cause. Under his protection and patronage, a settlement called Herrnhut (the Lord's Watch) was established in 1722. Initially, von Zinzendorf intended the new community should be Lutheran, 'but on discovering the writings of Comenius in the library at Zittau he determined to renew the old Brethren's Church' (Stead & Stead 2003:7). The Lutheran impetus was not lost, however, as 'under the leadership and patronage of von Zinzendorf, this community developed as an exceptionally vigorous and expansive lay evangelistic branch of contemporary Lutheranism' (Stead & Stead 2003:xi). It was Zinzendorf who gave the Moravians the vision to carry their message overseas: in 1732, the first two missionaries volunteered to go to the West Indies, while the first Moravian missionary to South Africa arrived in 1737 in the Cape. Others followed to other countries. In central Europe itself, the Moravian Church movement spread rapidly, establishing a series of mission stations. Such stations, known as 'settlements', were built to further Moravian work:

> A Settlement was a village where all inhabitants belonged to the Church and a general store, bakery, farm, weaving shop, inn etc. were carried on as church undertakings. The object was to create an economy which could effectively support the resident population and also local evangelical work. Each Settlement had establishments known as Choir Houses (choir = group) for Single Sisters (unmarried women), Single Brethren (unmarried men), Widows and sometimes Widowers. They followed trades and crafts to earn a living and were assured of a home and an opportunity to lead a Christian life. (Moravian History Magazine [1998]2006:1)

Freedom of movement and a focus on the importance of learning a trade meant that from the beginning the Moravian Brethren 'was a highly mobile workforce that could travel and settle anywhere' (Petterson 2021:3). Petterson goes on to highlight how 'Moravian Brethren constitute an excellent case study of the socio-economic upheavals in 18th century Eastern Germany which took a different path from that of Western Europe' (Petterson 2021:2). From these humble beginnings, on a farm in the Oberlausitz, 'they rose to become a worldwide missionary movement with stations and outposts from Greenland to the Cape, and from North America to Australia' (Petterson 2021:3). Their self-reliance

(initially supported by aristocratic patronage), focus on education and equality for all and eventual communal self sufficiency meant they could grow from 'peasant piety to early modern citizen' (Petterson 2021:1), surviving changes in the societies around them.

To transition to the Moravian Church as it developed in England and Ireland is necessary, given that the Edwards family – who are the focus of this article through the *Lebenslauf*e they wrote – was based there. The bridge from the Continent to Britain, particularly Ireland, was provided by John Cennick (1718–1755), a popular preacher and teacher born in Reading. He met with Count von Zinzendorf when he came to London in 1743 to make arrangements with the British government for missionaries to go to the colonies. Cennick was impressed by the Moravian way of life and worked particularly towards 'less definition in theology, less controversy, and more liberal attitudes towards doctrinal differences' (in White [1996]2007:4). In 1746, Cennick was invited to preach in Dublin and from thence to Ballymena and elsewhere in Ireland. He set up various 'societies' or settlements in Ireland, only halted by his untimely death, aged 39, 'but, as always in the history of the Moravian Church, the seeds sown were nurtured' (White [1996]2007:9). One such seed that took root was the settlement at Ballymena, founded in 1759, which at its height boasted choir houses for the Single Sisters, Single Brethren and Widows, houses for the warden and minister, cottages for the married people, plus boys' and girls' schools, both day and boarding – unusual for the time.

Today, Gracehill remains a Moravian settlement becoming the first designated Conservation Area in Northern Ireland in 1975 and still boasts a well-regarded primary school open to local children, dwellings, an inn, an archive, a functioning church and well-tended cemetery, God's Acre, where men and women are still buried in adjoining areas covered with flat, simply inscribed headstones. Two Edwards descendants served there as ministers and one as headmaster: Richard Edwards (1822–1824 minister at Gracehill) and his nephew William Edwards (1846–1850 minister at Gracehill). William's son, John Herbert Edwards, served as headmaster at the boys' school from 1876 to 1883 (Moravian Chapels 1890:31), and his son, John Christian, was born at Gracehill in 1878. We will discuss more about them later, particularly their lives and, more significantly for the purpose of this article, their writings.

It is perhaps important to note that the Moravian Church in England from the 1740s onwards developed a slightly different personality to that of the founding Church in Europe, 'becoming a less fervent Anglo-German organization more akin to the indigenous Nonconformist denominations' (Stead & Stead 2003:xi). Close bonds always existed between the English and Continental Moravian provinces and their settlements, particularly when it came to:

> [*D*]stinctively German cultural and religious elements in the original tradition, especially musical and linguistic forms, educational principles, and the intricate network by which its members kept in touch across the globe. (Stead & Stead 2003:xi)

In summary, one can say that the 18th century (1742–c.1780) was a period of evangelical outreach to England, among other countries, 'of German religious and cultural ascendancy' (Stead & Stead 2003:7) with followers known as 'Brethren' or 'United Brethren', derived from the German term Brudergemeine, which refers to the Brethren's Congregation and encompasses the entire membership. The term 'Moravian' emerged in Britain during the late 18th and 19th centuries to denote membership in the Moravian Church. The 19th century (1780s–1880s) in England saw a focus on establishing boarding schools at Moravian settlements to meet the widespread demand for education, alongside a 'continuing divergence of views between those who wished to break away from their continental heritage and those conservatives who wished to preserve it' (Faull 1997:xii). The 20th century, with the two World Wars, separated the British province from its German roots and encouraged independence, but the later fall of the GDR made visits to the first settlement, Herrnhut, easier than they had been since the 1930s. Stead notes that a 'warm relationship with the German Province has emerged' in the latter part of the 20th century (Stead & Stead 2003:9). Despite diminishing support for organised religion in the Western world in the 21st century, the Moravian Church continues to survive, largely in part because of its missionary outposts. A census in 1998 showed a declining fraction of Moravians in the British Province: of those counted 1 808 174 identified as Anglican, 458 772 as Methodist and 2 073 as Moravian (Stead & Stead 2003:2). This is also partly explicable by the absence of the appetite to 'convert' Christians to the Moravian Church – that is not the aim of Moravians. They aim to serve the Lord using Scripture in its simplest form, encourage education, praise through music and the word and promote equality of all before God. A few changes to adapt to a changing world (and contracting church) have been to allow the ordination of women as ministers and to encourage lay leadership. Missionary work remains a strength – congregations in London and the Midlands are strengthened by the inclusion of immigrant West Indian Moravians – and strong links are maintained with other Moravian settlements, particularly those in America, for example, Bethlehem in Pennsylvania.

The Steads, in their history of the Moravian Church in England, describe the movement in the 21st century as follows:

> … the British Province has continued to express the elements in its tradition which identify it as a scion of its parent, and how it has adapted to its environment in a society with rather different religious traditions. Worldwide Moravianism continues to flourish in other adaptations, in other continents, and the British Province of the church goes on into the 21st century in an evolving form. It is indeed an exotic plant, but one which has proved capable of survival in its foreign soil, in the face of competition and adversity. Its future is still linked to that of the Unity as a whole, and as a province it is strongly committed to the ecumenical efforts of the Christian Churches as they search for a style of witness which expresses their diversity within their common heritage. (Stead & Stead 2003:382)

South Africa was one of the early missionary outreach destinations, and the legacy of this remains evident in the

country today. In 1737, Georg Schmidt from Herrnhut was the first Moravian to come to South Africa – following 6 years in prison in Roman Catholic Austria because of his Protestant faith. According to the official Moravian Church in South Africa website, Schmidt's visit to South Africa was occasioned by an earlier refuelling stop in Cape Town made by another Moravian missionary, Ziegenbalg, returning home from missionary work in India. Ziegenbalg reported what he observed as poor treatment of the 'Hottentot' in the Cape to von Zinzendorf, whereupon he ordered a 'gospel bringer to the Khoi' to be sent from the Brethren (https://www.moravianchurch.co.za). On his arrival in the Cape, Schmidt found Khoi families in Baviaanskloof. He taught them to read and speak Dutch in order to read the Bible, and baptised those who came forward. The thought of baptised, literate 'natives' outraged the authorities, and thus in 1743, Schmidt was deported.

In 1793, another group of Herrnhut missionaries was given permission by the British to do Moravian mission work in the Cape Province. They established the first Moravian church at Genadendal for Dutch Afrikaans congregants, with a Xhosa-speaking following developing to the east. There is tantalising evidence of a W. Edwards, missionary, arriving at Baviaanskloof in a Moravian group led by Dr Johannes van der Kemp in 1798, but further investigation confirms that this Edwards was not related to those of my family group. The record states that 'He [*van der Kemp*] and J Edmond were going to the Xhosas in the east, while the other two, JJ Kicherer and W Edwards, left for the Bushmen in the north, after they, too, had inspected Baviaanskloof' (Kruger 1967:83). In 1867, the General Synod in Herrnhut decided to divide congregations into two groups: Xhosa speaking in the Eastern Cape and Afrikaans speaking in the Western Cape. Two Provinces of the Moravian Church developed in South Africa following this division with one office in Cape Town and the other in Matatiele. In 1998, these two regions combined to form one province encompassing 10 districts across South Africa, with the greatest focus in the Western Cape Province. The oldest congregation is Genadendal (1738), which has 1880 members according to the website. Following Genadendal are Elim (1824) with 1047 members, Goedverwacht (1845) with 1547 members on the West Coast, Bethesda (1889) with 637 members, and Elukholweni (1873) with 607 members, both located in Matatiele, Natal province. In the border region, Enjojini (1854) has 89 members, and lastly, Lower-Emtumasi (1870) has 437 members in the Mt Fletcher district. Many of these missions have smaller attached satellite outstations: for example, Elim includes the outstations Houtskloof (1850) and Sondagskloof (1878), along with several more recent additions.

Elim is of particular interest to Edwards family history as it was to this church that my grandfather – who left his family line of bishops in the Moravian Church in England and Ireland to join the Anglo-Boer War and never returned – took his family, consisting of my mother and uncle, another John Herbert Edwards, for Easter worship. Though he had left his family, who might have expected him to become a minister like those before him, he did not abandon his allegiance to the Moravian Church, at least on holy days. Additionally, he wrote a *Lebenslauf*, as required of him as an article of faith.

Elim, to begin with, was established on the farm Vogelstruiskraal by Bishop Hallbeck and others, with the first service held on 01 August 1824. A church was built and consecrated in 1835, with a feature being the Herrnhut clock displayed on the one gable. This clock was imported in 1911 and remains 'one of the oldest working clocks of its kind in South Africa' (Elim Heritage Centre). The church, like other Moravian churches, is predominantly painted white, symbolising purity of heart. There are no paintings, statues or ornaments, except for a few religious tracts. Elim as a community remains active today, featuring several well-kept buildings and the Elim Heritage Centre, which is supervised by Joyce October. The settlement is governed by an Overseers Council consisting of 12 elected congregants and the minister, and it is accountable to the Moravian Church of South Africa and collaborates closely with local municipalities.

The Moravian Edwards family

Tracking the paths of the British Edwards family, certainly once they became 'Moravian', is made easier by the copious documentation that each Moravian congregation kept. The *Congregation Book*, also known as the *Register* or *Church Book*, contains the names of the members of churches and societies and their children in order of admission, with date and place of birth, married or single condition, occupation, date of death or leaving the congregation. The *Congregation Diary* is the life history of the congregation: it records all services held, temporary absences of members of the congregation, arrivals and departures of visitors, deaths of members, relations with other religious bodies and so on. The following details for one of the Edwards' women appeared in various church records, which, when put together, make up quite a full biography for a family history researcher:

> *Edwards, Sarah (1807–1831)*
>
> b 28 May 1807 Derby
>
> educated: girls' school Ockbrook 1819, girls' school Lower Wyke 1821
>
> resided: Derby 1807, Ockbrook July 1807, Derby 1813–1819, 2 years when ill, 1831
>
> reception: baptized All Saints' Church Derby 07 August 1807, little girl Ockbrook 1809,
>
> great girl Ockbrook 1819, single sister Ockbrook 1825
>
> church service: teacher girls' school Lower Wyke, girls' school Tytherton
>
> family: daughter of John Edwards (b 1772) and Sarah (née Smith) (b 1777),
>
> niece of Richard Edwards (b 1774), sister of William (b 1798),
>
> aunt of Sarah Catherine (Baxter) (b c 1837) and John Herbert Edwards (b 1843)
>
> d 23.06.1831 aged 24 Derby, interred Ockbrook by Br S Connor 27 June 1831
>
> 1st section, 1st row, 12th grave on the left from 1st path

Diaries were most detailed in the 18th century, with annual summaries sent to headquarters in Fetter Lane, London. Some of the records of closed churches were destroyed when the Fetter Lane building was bombed during WWII, but much survived and can now be seen at the Moravian Church House, Muswell Hill, London. Many letters by leading Moravians and memoirs written for insertion in the *Congregation Diary* are also held in the Muswell Hill archives. Then there was also *The Moravian Messenger*, earlier known more simply as *The Messenger* (1879), a newsletter for the Moravian Church in Britain that detailed church news, including deaths as in the following entry in the April 1879 issue, under:

> Departed this life: … (b) At Ockbrook, on March 18th, aged 80, Br. William Edwards, Bishop of the Brethren Church, who has served in the ministry in various congregations and as a member of the Provincial Elders' Conference. (p. 162)

And then a later 1900 issue of the renamed *Moravian Messenger* (1900) carried this entry:

> Notice of the Consecration of Br J.H. Edwards as a Bishop of the Brethren Church
>
> For the second time within our memory we have in our Church a Bishop Edwards, for on the evening of Tuesday, the 16th October, Br. J.H. Edwards, President of the P.E.C. and son of the late Bishop [*William*] Edwards, was consecrated by Bishops Ellis and Sutcliffe in London, at our Fetter Lane Chapel. (p. 263)

And so on and so forth: the day-to-day activities of each congregation were recorded faithfully in such church diaries and are invaluable to the researcher.

In order to contextualise the *Lebenslauf*e written by various Edwards family members, what follows is a brief family tree – the repetition of names such as John and Richard makes this a necessary exercise. Here, I use a combination of family archives passed down through the generations and the notes gleaned from the sources mentioned above. The first Edwards relevant to this article is Richard Edwards (1730–1807), who was greatly influenced by Cennick's preaching circa 1754. As a result, he joined the Moravian settlement at Fulneck (near Leeds), thereby commencing the long association between the Edwards family and the Moravian Church. He was a shoemaker by trade, adhering to the Moravian principle of learning a skill to improve oneself and become part of what was in fact 'an artisan culture' (Stead & Stead 2003:377) within the Moravian movement. Leaving no *Lebenslauf*, his life was recorded by persons unknown in the Fulneck Moravian Church Congregation Diary (n.d.):

> *Life of Widowed Br Richard Edwards (1730–1807)*
>
> He was born at Wain at St Martin's in Shropshire of honest and industrious parents. At an early age he was apprenticed to a shoemaker in Wales. During his apprenticeship he had to suffer greatly from want of sufficient food and other cruelties of his master. He had also during that time a severe illness, where no medical assistance could be had. The Lord graciously preserved him through the whole of this trying period. Some years after the expiration of his apprenticeship, he went to London to improve in his business and lodged in the house of the late Br Camel by whose means he was induced to attend the preaching of the late Br Cennick in White's Alley. He obtained in his heart a love for the Brethren and the doctrine of the atonement preached by them. He soon became acquainted with Br Thompson and other single brethren and obtained leave to live with them in Roll's buildings. Of this period he was used to speak with the most lively pleasure as a particular blessed season for his heart. He removed from thence to the choir house in Fulneck where he spent upwards of a year and then returned again to the brethren's house in London, where he remained until a proposal was made to him to undertake the management of the shoemaker's business in the brethren's house at Fulneck, which he accepted. After sometime he was there married to the single Sr Sarah Lister, which marriage was blessed with four sons and two daughters of whom three sons and one daughter survived him. Occurrences of a painful nature afterwards occasioned his dismission from the privileges of the congregation. While separated from the congregation he became a widower and travelled with his youngest son into his native country from whence he soon returned and settled in Manchester, where he renewed his acquaintance with the Brethren at Fairfield and moved there to work at his business. He afterwards removed to Ockbrook to spend the latter part of his days in the neighbourhood of his children who treated him with filial affection and made his declining age comfortable. He obtained leave to spend his days in the brethren's house which he highly valued as a very great favour. Even when his bodily weakness required his removal and constant abode at his son's house it was with evident reluctance he left the brethren's house, where indeed he was much beloved and respected on account of his great contented and affectionate walk and conversation, so that he felt himself and was treated by the single brethren as one of the family. He was readmitted to the congregation on 31st December 1803, a favour which he much valued and which his natural diffidence had prevented him from applying for sooner. He was soon after readmitted to the enjoyment of the Holy Communion. Nothing now seemed wanting that could add to his happiness, and his joyful countenance bespoke the joy that glowed in his heart. In this happy frame of mind he continued. About a year ago his bodily health began to decline. He was seized with a hoarseness and cough which brought on an apoplexy that ultimately occasioned his departure. When he spoke of himself a deep sense of his natural depravity and want of a Saviour was to be felt, and the greatest and most fervent wish of his heart was that as an humble and contrite sinner redeemed with the blood of Jesus he might be more and more enabled to place a firm reliance upon what our Saviour had done for his redemption. In this comfortable state he visited and conversed with his sister, his children and his friends during his illness while he was able to go about. About a month before his departure he was confined to the house and though he had not a clear impression that the time of his dissolution was so near, yet it was a pleasure to him to think and speak about his going home to our Saviour. He used to ask with a loving astonishment *Can he receive such a vile sinner as I am?* It was manifest the death and sufferings of his Lord and Saviour had made a deep and indelible impression upon his heart. He was beloved and respected by all who knew him. (Fulneck Moravian Church Congregation Diary, n.d.)

What did he do to cause his banishment from the community, together with his wife (yet he was taken back once he was a widower after applying for readmission)? What is interesting

from this account, meriting its complete inclusion, is the amount of detail provided of a Moravian life lived in communal conditions where everyone had a place, and which was lived with the aim of simple salvation.

Of his many children, two are significant for the purposes of this article: John (1772–1845), born at Fulneck, and Richard (1774–1839). John is interesting not only for his Moravian connection (that was his younger brother Richard's destiny) but because he – besides being a vintner – was a poet and became a friend of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. A small correspondence between Wordsworth and John Edwards survives (donated to the Wordsworth House and Collection at Grasmere). In one written by Wordsworth, the confidential tone speaks of a real friendship between the two men:

> I cannot but be grateful to hear that my Poems are often looked at by you … But I am shocked to find how indifferent I am becoming concerning things upon which so much of my life has been employed. I am not quite 41 years of age, yet I seem to have lost all personal interest in everything which I have composed. (Wordsworth 1810 [Grasmere, 27 March 1810])

A later letter from Wordsworth to John's son, William Edwards, thanks him for informing him about:

> [*T*]he decease of your excellent Father, for whose virtues and talents I entertained a high respect; and sincerely can I say that I am sad at the thought of our never meeting again in this world. Wordsworth 1845 [Rydal Mount, 24 May])

His passing is recorded in the Fulneck Moravian Church archives thus:

> *Life of Married Br John Edwards (1772–1845)*
>
> Br John Edwards of Derby departed this life at 8am in his 73rd year; for some weeks he had gradually declined, but was favoured to partake with us of the holy communion on 27th April, and was not confined to his bed till a few days before his end, and we were glad he had the pleasure of his son's company during his latter days. Our late brother though he pursued the wine and spirit trade was of very temperate habits and attentive to religious duties and sincerely attached to the Church of the Brethren. At the same time he took delight in literary pursuits and was an admirer of the grandeur (beauty displayed in the works of God as he testified by his poem on Dovedale and other publications). The funeral took place on 21st when his earthly remains were deposited in our burial ground. We are sorry that he left no record of his life. (Fulneck Moravian Church Congregation Diary, n.d.)

In keeping with valuing the lives of men and women equally, there is a similar account of his wife Sarah's life and death:

> *Life of Widowed Sr Sarah Edwards (1777–1852)*
>
> She was born in Derby 11th February 1777 and was from early years under the impression of divine grace. Her marriage with her late husband Br John Edwards first brought her acquainted with the Brethren's Church, which she joined after. In 1807 they removed from Derby to Ockbrook in order more fully to enjoy both for themselves and their children the privileges of a congregation. During their residence here, which lasted 7 years she had many serious illnesses and ever after was subject to many distressing headaches. She also lost one child after another till in the year 1835 only her eldest son was left to her. These trying dispensations however were not without fruits of blessing. Acting upon a naturally serious and thoughtful mind, they tended to bring her into yet closer communion with the friend of her soul, causing her and after and earnestly to turn to him for help and comfort. In the year 1845 her dear partner was likewise taken from her and this lonely path was appointed her for the rest of her pilgrimage. None of these things however shook her trust in him whom her soul loved, nor deprived her of that Christian cheerfulness which is the happy privilege of those who are built up in faith and love.
>
> A severe and dangerous attack of illness in April 1850 permanently reduced her and cut her from us in Derby. In June last she had another attack of illness from which whoever she partially recovered and was able to converse cheerfully with friends who called to see her. The expected arrival of her son and his family gave her pleasure and it seemed to be her greatest earthly desire to be enabled in the good providence of God to spend the little remnant of her days in this place and with them. She died unexpectedly on the 9th of this month by an attack similar to that she had in June. When her son arrived she had just gone to her rest. In the early part of the week she had suffered much from pain. She was 75. (Fulneck Moravian Church Congregation Diary, n.d.)

It seems to me that this was written by a woman who knew Sarah, as it includes detailed descriptions of Sarah's physical ailments and the pleasure she experienced while with her family.

John Edwards' younger brother, Richard, began as a teacher in the Boys School at Fulneck and then moved to Ockbrook outside Derby, where he practised as a surgeon. His life thereafter was one of ministering to various Moravian settlements both physically and spiritually. He also left no *Lebenslauf*, and there is no biographical note that I can uncover, but, curiously, there is an 'Ode for the funeral of our beloved Brother Richard Edwards, who fell asleep in Jesus, 09 February 1839' by an anonymous hand.

John Edwards' son William (1798–1879) grew up in the Moravian communities of Ockbrook, near Derby, and later Fulneck, where he became a teacher. Drawn to a religious life, he went to Herrnhut for a while to learn German and work as a tutor. On his return to England, he became a Moravian minister, eventually being consecrated as a bishop at the General Synod in Herrnhut in 1857, serving at Baildon (Dublin), Gracehill, Fulneck and Ockbrook, where he is buried with his wife Elizabeth. Though he left no *Lebenslauf*, there remains in the family a 'Short Sketch of his Life', which precedes a number of 'Occasional Poems' written by William and published under this title. Their subject is religious love and, more broadly, his love for his wife and friends. The biographical sketch was probably written by his son, John Herbert, and details the main movements of his life, most poignantly his decision not to leave the 'Brethren's Church' for service within the Church of England: in a letter to his father quoted within the sketch, he describes how (Edwards 1880):

> … all the excellencies of our own Church rushed with irresistible force upon my mind. I thought of her simple, self-denying piety, her freedom from formality, her catholic spirit, her sole dependence on the doctrine of atonement, with the varieties she permits in minor and non-essential points, and I thought of the visible communion of saints, of which earth affords no hope if it be not realised in her midst; and I thought too of the unpleasantness of being estranged from my friends by uniting with another Church. (p. 7)

From the next generation on, there are fairly substantial *Lebenslauf* accounts, which can be looked at in more detail. The first two full *Lebenslauf*e in the family possession are both written by a woman, Marie Edwards, née Christiansen (1852–1942). She wrote her own in 1915, a long and descriptive account of her life illustrated by photographs, and a shorter one for her husband John Herbert Edwards (1843–1906), who died fairly suddenly in office at the age of 63. His widow clearly felt the need to write an account of his life, given that he was a bishop in the Moravian Church and could not die without an account given of his life and service. An account as full as that written by Marie Edwards for herself is unusual. As Faull (1997) writes in her research on Moravian women in Pennsylvania, United States (US):

> To date few memoirs by women from a religious community, such as the Moravians, have been published. However, it is invariably a woman's experience that acts as a litmus test for the emancipatory claims of the founders of these alternatives to mainstream society … These Moravian women's memoirs reveal the intersection of the private and public spheres of their lives. (p xii)

What is also unusual about the two life accounts written by Marie Edwards is that although the *Lebenslauf* is 'written to be shared with the congregation as a public relation of the author's spiritual and secular path through life' (Faull 1997), these two foreground the private, the family and her children. It seems to the reader today that they are her primary audience. She mentions 'your father' – meaning her children's father – in her own (Edwards 1915:25); though she also refers to the more public 'my husband' elsewhere in the *Lebenslauf* (Edwards 1915:28). The 'biographical sketches', as she calls it, of John Herbert begin as follows:

> When a dearly beloved one has gone to his rest we like to record some incidents of his life and when the first great grief and sense of void and loneliness has somewhat abated we can focus on what the impression is that it has left behind – in Father's case that of a man who walked humbly with God and trusted him in all things great and small and who was ever filled with a desire to serve Christ and to serve the Church into which he was born. (Edwards n.d.b:1)

Here, there is clearly a mix of the public ('a man who served God') and the personal ('in Father's case').

To put John Herbert and Marie Edwards in context: John Herbert Edwards was born in Dublin at a time when his father, William, was the Moravian minister there. Typical of such families who moved where they were 'called', John moved with his family to Gracehill and then to Fulneck, where he did much of his schooling. At the early age of 15, he went to take the course for Moravian ministry at Niesky in Prussia, followed by studies at a theological college at Gnadenfeld in Silesia. He returned to England in 1866 to become a teacher at Ockbrook. In 1869, he attended the General Synod in Herrnhut, where he met his future wife Marie Christiansen. She was born in Herrnhut, of Danish parents. Her father was the accountant at Herrnhut who, owing to unfortunate family circumstances (Edwards 1915:2), had to leave the Moravian settlement of Christiansfeld in Denmark for Herrnhut. Her mother was the daughter of the Reverend Roentgen, the Moravian minister at Christiansfeld – whose brother, incidentally, was the inventor of the Roentgen rays or X-rays as they came to be called. Marie's parents died young and she was fostered by the Wauer family with whom she was happy. She was educated at Herrnhut and then sent to a family in Lausanne to learn languages, whereafter she returned to the Wauers at Herrnhut, where:

> I spent my time in music, fancy work and social pleasures and never was a girl so little fitted to enter the married state than I was when your father asked me to be his wife and come to England. (Edwards 1915:24–25)

This threw Marie Christiansen into some turmoil as she was young, hardly knew the proposer and was loath to abandon her foster parents who depended on her. This was resolved through the lot – in essence, a church-arranged match. According to an early account, marriage by lot was used by eligible and keen suitors as 'a means whereby God might vouchsafe to show them His will – to counsel and direct them to do his pleasure' (Mortimer 1868:53). Marie Christiansen's experience of the lot is well documented in her *Lebenslauf* and supports Mortimer's assertion that:

> [*T*]hough this manner of selecting a partner for life may seem very strange and unnatural … it is a remarkable and well-authenticated fact, that connubial unhappiness was of rare occurrence among these simple-minded children of faith. (Mortimer 1868:54).

She writes:

> [*The Lot*] was an old Moravian institution and was used by the authorities in cases of calls or when a missionary asked the above to send them out a helpmeet. Some minds cannot grasp the singleness of mind, sincerity of purpose and absolute dependence on God's goodness to show his will in that way to his children. It certainly was asking for a sign. I have employed it in several cases but I do not know whether I could do it anymore – with age I seem to be beyond it and in our Church, in England, it never is used anymore and very seldom in Germany. The 'Lot' consisted of a little box with two papers 'yes' or 'no' – prayer and silence preceded its use and then whatever paper was drawn and said was acted upon.
>
> I used it in this case and my little paper said 'no' but a voice added 'it is to be 'yes' if you are asked a second time without any interference on your part'. That was now settled and I never gave it another thought – then came the unexpected question 3 months later. I had no choice according to my principles and

> accepted Christmas 1872. In January Father came over [from England] – there was a formal engagement in the Church, he remained a week, to return in May 1873 for the wedding. (Edwards 1915:25–26)

Despite the impression gained from this extract that the lot takes personal decision out of a proposal, Marie Christiansen, as she was then, does show some agency in her assertion 'I resorted to the means of the "Lot"' (Edwards 1915:25) as a way out of her initial dilemma once the proposal had been made.

Once married, the couple made their home in England in a succession of Moravian settlements: Mirfield in Yorkshire, which they enjoyed; Gracehill, which was a harder assignment as it was cold and rural and the boys' school, where John Herbert served as headmaster, needed improvement; Baildon in Yorkshire; Bedford and then, finally, London, where John Herbert became President of the Provincial Elders' Conference and was made a bishop, like William his father before him. His heart was never strong, necessitating periods of rest, and it probably was the cause of a relatively early death while still in office. His widow describes his ending after many years of service to the Moravian Church, 33 happy years of marriage and five children, as follows:

> We two had however a wonderful experience of God's presence. Father was troubled about his sins and seemed to lack the assurance of forgiveness. To me the future was very dark – we both fell asleep. At 1 we woke and a wonderful peace had come over both of us, he had heard distinctly the words: Thy sins are forgiven thee, go in peace, and to me the voice had said in German: Cast all thy care upon Him, for He careth for you. The room felt inhabited by angels and that peace never left Father till the end, he seemed to grow daily more Christ like, patient and calm and thankful; full of trust, just leaving everything in God's hand like a tired child resting in its father's arms. (Edwards n.d.b:6)

By all accounts, John Herbert was a compassionate and well-liked minister. One interesting anecdote Marie Edwards offers up in her husband's life sketch describing his time in Baildon is that the congregation 'liked the weekly prayer meetings where he did not object to sisters offering up prayer which in those days was unusual' (Edwards, n.d.b:4). Having such a strong wife, perhaps, had an influence on his listening to the voices of women around him.

Being the wife of a minister in a foreign country, and with a growing family, cannot have been easy for Marie Edwards. She is frank about the challenges: on their arrival in Mirfield after their wedding, Marie writes:

> I had never been to England and now – all of a sudden to be transplanted into a strange country whose language I knew little of, with whose literature I was not at all acquainted and whose code of manners and thoughts were so different to what I had been brought up [*with*] … my willingness to help in Sunday School work, of which I knew nothing, pleased them; my foreign brogue probably amused them and certainly the utter ignorance on my part of the ways of the world helped me to grow into their customs and made me soon feel at home amongst this rough and ready by strong straightforward race of the North. (Edwards 1915:29)

Of their arrival in winter at Gracehill, she writes: 'A beggar in his rags was standing at the door of the Academy in pouring rain and the place gave an impression of disorder and decay' (Edwards 1915:30). Both John Herbert and Marie's health was frail, necessitating trips back to Germany in Marie's case to recover some stamina: frankly, she admits, 'It did me no end of good but I really had no business to leave my husband alone for half a year' (Edwards 1915:32). After her husband's death, Marie spent her time with her children, living finally with her youngest daughter, Dorothy, a nurse, until her death aged 90 in Surbiton, London.

The next generation of Edwards was to prove critical in that no one followed in the now well-established Edwards footsteps of serving in the Moravian Church and, indeed, in the case of my grandfather John Christian Edwards (1878–1951), steps seem to have been taken to remove himself from the family orbit, once an adult, by moving to South Africa. As the eldest son of the eldest son, John Christian probably felt the weight of family expectation keenly. This was perhaps inevitable given the prominent reputation of his father: the *Moravian Messenger* (1906) carries this entry on John Herbert's death and funeral:

> I think it is conceded by all that Br Edwards was one of the most attractive and powerful, if not the most attractive and powerful preacher of our Church in this country at this time… By his brilliant intellectual endowment and great powers of expression in speech and writing, he was enabled to carry a message from God to many a heart. (p. 170)

Nevertheless, unintellectual as he was, John Christian felt the compulsion towards the end of his life to write a *Lebenslauf* in faithful Moravian tradition. It is a fairly prosaic account devoid of the detail and opinions that emanate from his mother's, Marie Edwards', account. The bulk of it is taken up with his movements during the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) when he was a young man and his work career thereafter. Known as 'practical' rather than 'scholastic', his life account is a brief, matter-of-fact account of his life.

Born in Gracehill, his earliest memory is of falling out of a 'perambulator [*which*] ran over me but without doing damage' (Edwards n.d.a:1). He documents moving from Gracehill to Fulneck School and thence on to Ockbrook School as his father was variously assigned to these settlements. Of Ockbrook, he records 'the food seemed better anyway' (Edwards n.d.a:1) in typical schoolboy fashion. From there, he moved to Bedford. He states in a resigned way, 'I left school eventually, bottom of my class at the age of 18' (Edwards n.d.a:2). Noting his practical bent, his father enrolled him for carpentry lessons – following the Moravian belief in each learning a trade – which led him into studying building at the Regent Street Polytechnic in London, where his father was now Bishop at the Fetter Lane church. In May 1900, he enlisted, having been turned down initially, in the Boer War:

> I will never forget leaving the Docks at Tilbury, the family all standing at the quay side waving me off and my Father whom I was never to see again. (Edwards n.d.a.:3)

There is a weight of sadness and perhaps guilt in the devastating statement. His nephew, John Campbell Edwards (1926–2015), in his *Lebenslauf*, notes:

> His daughter-in-law Aorea once told me he was stirred not so much by patriotism, but more by an eagerness to escape from a strict home where there was a note of disappointment that he had chosen not to enter the Church. (Edwards 2000:21)

This sentiment is repeated by his granddaughter in her *Lebenslauf* as discussed by Edwards (2023):

> [*A*]s the eldest son, he was expected to be a priest in the Moravian Church like the other eldest sons in the Edwards family, but he became an engineer instead. (p. 1)

John Christian then details army life as it was for him – 'my duty consisted mostly of patrols around the Pretoria district' (Edwards n.d.a:4) – and that by December, his regiment was recalled, with the option of staying in South Africa if he so wished. 'Most of us stayed', he writes, and then details how after 6 months of making do he applied to work on transport lines 'as I did not want to join a fighting unit again'(Edwards n.d.a). Given the pacifist leanings of the Moravian Church, it is surprising that John Christian signed up for the Boer War in the first place. His post-war career led him to join various Public Works Departments in South Africa, ending up as District Engineer in the Cape province.

John Christian's choice of wife was also untraditional for a Moravian. On 6 months' leave in London, he met two Neill sisters, whose father he had worked with in South Africa. Born in Australia, the sisters Jessie and Maggie were actresses on the London stage, hardly a 'modest' profession befitting a church family union at the time. John Christian chose Maggie, and they were married in Durban, South Africa, in 1911. By then, his father had died, and there is no mention made as to his mother's thoughts on her eldest son's career and adult life choices in Marie Edwards' *Lebenslauf*. With the outbreak of WW1, John Christian – now with a small son, also named John – 'volunteered for the front and received a Commission as a Lieut. in the SASC … appointed to take charge of Carnir Transport work in East Africa' (Edwards n.d.a:8). In a very truncated way, the life account lists the 2 years spent in East Africa away from the family; then the move to Windhoek as Director of Works, where my mother, Elizabeth Christina, was born in 1920; then to Port Elizabeth and finally to Cape Town in the post of District Engineer. The final line reads: 'I retired from the service at the age of 60 on the 22 May 1939' (Edwards n.d.a:8). Doubtless, he had done better career-wise in the colonies than he might have done in England, given that he was resolutely opposed to following his forefathers' footsteps into service in the Moravian Church. My mother recalls, however, that he would take the family for Easter to the Moravian settlement at Elim in the Cape province, denoting a residual tie to his religious roots.

Maggie Edwards (1881–1966), John Christian's wife, was not religious by all accounts; a very strong, business-minded woman who set up her own elocution school in Durban and was frequently requested to give public recitals of poetry, such as by Tennyson, in front of the Durban City Hall, and who was listed among the Who's Who in South Africa (Arts section) in her day. Prior to her coming to South Africa to marry, she had frequently given recitals in London, most notably a Command Performance at Windsor Castle on the occasion of the King and Queen of Sweden's visit to England in 1910.

The following generation of Edwards children descended from this union comprised John Herbert Edwards (1912–1983) and my mother, Elizabeth Christina Edwards (1920–2010). Neither wrote accounts of their lives, though both were very proud of their Moravian roots and kept family records. Particularly, my uncle pursued research into the Edwards family lineage, which he shared with his sister, hence my access to a number of family accounts and data. His first cousin, John Campbell Edwards (1926–2015), wrote a full account of his family's ancestry and thus an account of his own existence, a kind of *Lebenslauf* (see Edwards 2000).

Curiously, the pull towards a religious life reappears in the female line descended from Elizabeth Christina: both her daughters by a first marriage to medical doctor Ockert Oosthuizen dedicated substantial parts of their lives to following a spiritual path. Rosemary Elizabeth Oosthuizen (1947–1999) became the first white Hindu nun in South Africa. At the time of her premature death, she served as the spiritual leader of the Sri Sarada Devi Ramakrishna Ashram in Durban. Upon taking her final vows, she became known as Pravrajika Atma Prana, affectionately referred to as 'Didi' or 'Big Sister'.

Her sister, Christina Marguerite Emmaus Edwards (formerly Oosthuizen; name changed officially), followed a path closer to that of the Moravians from whom she is descended and has written a *Lebenslauf* to account for herself in recent years. The tone is far more relaxed than those of earlier generations, yet there is the same sense of gratitude for God's perceived blessings and declaration of faith. The informal tone is evident from the first sentence: 'I was born on 12 February 1944 in the Dalherbe Nursing Home, Gardens, Cape Town. What a wonderful place to kick off one's life!' (Edwards 2023:1). There is an openness to recounting childhood hardships, including the divorce of her parents: 'What an unlikely couple! Such different backgrounds [*Afrikaans and English*] and cultural roots … Divorce was not usual in those days and it was a difficult time for everyone' (Edwards 2023:2). Moving cities in South Africa and then schools within Durban was unsettling, although there could be advantages that ring a particular Moravian bell:

> Chapel was a focus while at St Mary's. We went to chapel twice a day except on Saturdays. I liked singing in the choir. I think that was where my faith first came alive in a cognitive way. (Edwards 2023:10)

Post-school, Christina went to study Fine Arts at Rhodes University, Grahamstown and thereafter became resident set designer (Opera and Ballet) for the Natal Performing Arts Council. The profound shift in her life happened in the 1970s:

> My faith came alive again in 1974 after a long fallow period of following an Existential path outlined by Simone de Beauvoir. Her life and thoughts inspired and directed my life for many years. The change came when I was visiting Rosemary, who had joined the Ramakrishna Ashram at Avoca in 1970, and was given the name Sri. It was after the opera and ballet season in September of 1973 that I made this visit. Swamiji was away in India. I went every day for 3 weeks to the Ashram to help repaint the statuettes in the shrine, to give Swamiji a nice surprise when he returned. All I can say is that I had a profound experience of God's love for me and I responded by opening myself to the love that was offered. My life has not been the same since! (Stead & Stead 2003:3)

This renewal of faith found expression in the Anglican Church, where Christina was encouraged to pursue the idea of priesthood. At the time, women priests were not permitted in the Anglican Church in South Africa. Therefore, Christina left her natal country for theological studies in Nottingham, England, not far from the Ockbrook Moravian settlement, which she occasionally visited as part of her family heritage. In the Ockbrook graveyard (known as 'God's Acre') are buried her great-great-grandfather, William, as previously mentioned, along with his wife, Elizabeth and his uncle, Richard, who passed away in 1807, also noted earlier. Christina's account of her studies at St John's College in Nottingham indicates her passion for a spiritual life, which was fulfilled when she was invited to Canada to work in the Anglican Church, which at that time allowed women in the priesthood. On 18 November 1982, she was the first woman to be ordained a priest in Newfoundland. Her studies were not yet complete, however: after 2 years in her parish, she went to New York to do a Master's programme in Ascetical Theology. Christina's next posting was to the multi-faceted parish of Stephenville, again in Newfoundland; this was cut short because of ill health, which necessitated a change to a more sedentary job. A second Master's degree, this time in Pastoral Theology, and certification as a qualified therapist led to her opening a private practice from her home in Cambridge, Ontario. She worked as a therapist until retirement in 2014.

As if her life journey has not been adventurous enough, Christina's personal life choices are described with the frankness that the contemporary era encourages. She writes: 'In 2004 I met the darling of my life, Gail Hill. We have been on many adventures together …' (p. 5). This is a particularly personal insight, certainly unthinkable in the *Lebenslauf*e of earlier generations – the closest comparison comes from the unlikely source of William Edwards, who declares his love for his wife Elizabeth (1808–1876) in his poems dedicated to her, attached to his biographical sketch:

> Elizabeth, my Love! thy natal morn-
>
> The first since Happiness filled up her horn –
>
> Comes around again, and something I would say
>
> Of what my heart feels, word it as I may.
>
> First let me greet thee then with soul sincere
>
> On the completion of this fateful year.
>
> Through pleasure and through pain thy course has passed;
>
> May all the pain depart – the pleasure last! (Edwards 1880:19)

This relationship, no matter how effusively described, was more traditionally heterosexual, in contrast to Christina's open declaration of a lesbian relationship in the 21st century.

Typical, however, of the *Lebenslauf* is Christina's declaration of faith in God:

> As I think about my life, I will say that I have had an abiding sense of God's presence and provision throughout. During my Existential phase I tried to deny this fact but I was lovingly reminded that I am a child of God. It's hard to talk about the experience of God's presence … All I can say is that my experience is real. For the last 20 years I have found an earthly home for my spirit with the Quakers. From time to time I go to the Anglican Church out of nostalgia. The familiar words take me to a sacred inner place, even though I don't believe half the words anymore. (Edwards 2023:6)

There is also gratitude expressed for life itself and for the opportunities to serve others, which is another typical characteristic of the *Lebenslauf*e studied above.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article aims to provide an insight into the Moravian Church movement through the lens of the Edwards family, using the life accounts and biographical sketches found in both official and personal archives left by the family members. My research has yielded valuable insights while highlighting the potential for further exploration in the field of 'giving an account of oneself'. One area that particularly interests me for future investigation, though not linked to my sources directly, is the interrelationship between early Moravians and indigenous populations: I've already referred above to the deportation of Georg Schmidt from the Cape after teaching the Khoi families he found in Baviaanskloof to read the Bible in Dutch, whereafter he baptised them. Another fascinating reference to such an interaction occurs in a memoir written by Hilda Doolittle (known as H.D.) called *The Gift* (1969). This work, written in the early 1940s and published posthumously with a preface by her daughter, recalls Doolittle's childhood in the Moravian settlement of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Using a stream of consciousness style and incorporating flashbacks, *The Gift* 'expands the genre of memoir through free associative meditations on myth … on Moravian history, emphasizing the pioneer missionaries' rapport with Native Americans' (University Press of Florida website: https://upf.com/book). The fact that this 'rapport' was sometimes strained is hinted at in a short extract from this strange book:

> I saw, I understood … a memory of my grandmother's or her grandmother's – a lost parchment, terror that led back finally to the savages, burning and poisonous arrows.

> This I could remember, letting the pictures steadily and stealthily flow past and through me. When the terror was at its height, in the other room, I could let images and pictures flow through me, and I could understand Anna von Pahlen who had been the inspirer of the meetings at *Wunden Eiland* when the unbaptized King of the Shawanese gave his beloved and only wife to the Brotherhood; I saw it all clearly. (H.D. [1969] 1982:134)

Renowned for their missionary efforts in India, the West Indies, Greenland, the US, Denmark, and South Africa, the Moravians likely have numerous accounts of 'first encounters' because of their excellence in record-keeping. Further investigations in this area may prove illustrative, and it is hoped that this article will stimulate such research.

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