

## End of fellowship report: **S.J. Celestine Edwards, the ‘Black Champion’ of Victorian Oral and Print Culture**

With the support of the Linda H. Peterson Fellowship I have been able significantly to advance my research project titled ‘S.J. Celestine Edwards, the ‘Black Champion’ of Victorian Oral and Print Culture’. This report will recall the objectives of the project and assess and contextualise my progress against these.

### **The project plan**

My project sought to improve scholarly knowledge of Edwards, a prominent black lecturer, editor and author in the 1890s, one who was particularly influential in northern English cities. In a prolific spell of speaking and publishing between 1888 and his death in 1894 Edwards gained nationwide renown among admirers and opponents alike as the era’s ‘Black Champion’.

In applying for the project I detailed my objectives as follows:

- i. To recover a now-neglected but once-major figure in 1890s culture;
- ii. To resituate and interpret Edwards’s better-known anti-racist and anti-imperialist work in the context of his campaigning for the Christian Evidence Society. I want to look in detail at how the latter work, often couched in evangelical terms as an ‘Anti-Infidels Crusade’ or mission against atheism on British soil, complexly interrelated to Edwards’s fostering of anti-racist and anti-imperialist networks and audiences. Edwards sheds new light on the role of black British participants in the domestic work of ‘civilising subjects’ (Hall 2002), and their part in numerous debates ‘beyond slavery and abolition’ (Hanley 2018).
- iii. Further understanding of the emergence of anti-imperial and anti-racist thought from traditional religious and humanitarian organisation, a connective theme of my past research (Burroughs 2010, 2018, 2022).
- iv. To explore the relationship between oral and print cultures. Edwards rose to fame as a hugely popular public speaker, and this talent informed not only but his prose style but also his dialogic and combative editorial style, as well as his ability to drive interest in his periodicals. Edwards’s use of both oral and print performance, and his interlinking of the two, facilitated his movement between Christian evidence (in *Lux*) and anti-racism (in *Fraternity*), providing new contexts and interpretations for the rise of anti-racist sentiment in Britain in this period.
- v. To reconsider the period’s racial prejudices through the intersecting issues of gender and social class. By investing in the period’s fraying but residually powerful belief in the prestige of gentleman status, Edwards and his supporters countered his critics, who sometimes used race prejudice against him. His prominence as a so-called ‘coloured gentleman’ reveals how charitable networks rallied against racism and imperialism by investing in traditional understandings of socially ascendant masculine conduct.

### **Outcomes from research project**

My research proposal set out ambitious aims to use the four-month period of the fellowship to complete two chapters (one to be published as an academic article) on Edwards’s editorial work and persona in *Lux* and *Fraternity*. These would contribute to a full book manuscript on Edwards which I indicated would be submissible by end of 2025, outside the timeframe of the fellowship.

As it transpired, my work on Edwards’s persona found an outlet in a chapter for a book, to be published by Liverpool University Press, based on proceedings of a conference on Victorian orality, which was completed in late 2023, slightly before the fellowship would begin. This output responds to objectives iv-v, especially, from the above list.

In early 2024 I sought to delay the start of the fellowship while undertaking substantive and unexpected duties as an Acting Dean of a large School of Humanities and Social Sciences. The then President of the RSVP, Prof Fionnuala Dillane, kindly agreed to this request. In early March, upon my permanent appointment as Dean, I wrote to Fionnuala again to explain that I would no longer be able to undertake the fellowship as previously planned and to request the terms of the fellowship be reconsidered. My institution have been fully supportive of me but I could not in good conscience dedicate the time as planned to research in what was (and remains) a very challenging external environment for humanities and social sciences research in the UK. Fionnuala was again extremely supportive, asking to me 'to keep the fellowship, spend the funds to support travel/other expenses related to archival work for the project, as and when you can over the course of the next year as the demands of your unexpected admin role permit. There is some flexibility with the grant and our main concern is that the work is supported as originally planned in terms of content even if not in terms of the original timeline.'

I subsequently revised my plans for the project. I redirected some of the fellowship funding to support a research assistant, who carried out an extensive search of the British Newspaper Archive and some other primary sources for me. Among the products of this research is a 243-page text detailing all references to Edwards in British newspaper sources, and a 6000-word scholarly timeline of Edwards's activities. Together these documents represent a rare and valuable set of findings. Our knowledge of black people's lives in nineteenth-century Britain remains quite limited, but the timeline reveals almost weekly detail in one man's public life, greatly increasing our knowledge of this individual and the contexts in which he worked. The timeline will feature in future publications as an output of the Peterson fellowship.

In addition to the research assistant, having extended the timeframes of the fellowship, I used its funding to secure my own partial respite from duties. This enabled me to work on the documents produced by the research assistant and to devote more time to my own extensive research of Edwards's periodicals, *Lux* and *Fraternity*. Initial findings from this research were presented at the 'Media and Culture Assembly' at my own institution in June 2024 and the RSVP conference in Stirling in the same month. I subsequently wrote up this research as an article titled 'S.J. Celestine Edwards: Placing Anti-Racism in Victorian Print Culture', which is presently under review with *Journal of Victorian Culture*. In an analysis of Edwards's strategies in challenging racial discrimination in the perhaps surprising context of his Christian Evidence (anti-atheist) work, the article seeks to 'see the late-Victorian period anew, as one defined not simply by its racism but by its potential to challenge racism'. Should it be published this article will meet the above-listed objectives i-iv.

I am latterly now beginning a new piece of writing about Edwards's engagement with Darwinian theory. Work has begun within the period of the fellowship but outputs will be completed beyond the time of the fellowship.

In addition to meeting my stated objectives in the ways detailed above, my project has come to ask further, perhaps bigger questions about nascent -anti-racism' in Victorian society and culture: how far can we go in identifying 'anti-racism' in Victorian thinking? What happens if we deny ourselves this possibility on the grounds of anachronism? Edwards's life and work enables us to think about various ways in which resistance to race prejudice emerged in conjunction with other diverse strands of Victorian thought.

I am very grateful to the RSVP for the opportunity to develop my research, and especially would like to thank Fionnuala and the committee for its understanding when I had to reconsider the timescales on which I could deliver this work.

Rob Burroughs, 18/10/24