

## Equiano And His Times

© Mark Mantho

*(\*Editor's Note: Reasonable doubt has been cast upon the veracity of "Equiano's Travels" in recent years. The author cannot thereofer vouchsafe truth of the account.)*

In *Equiano's Travels* readers are treated to an informative, entertaining, and often eloquent narrative of one man's experience as a slave in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Along the way, we learn about the particular events that shaped his character and the implicit political agenda behind his book. Equiano's adventures can also be seen in context with the larger global developments of the 1700's.

Probably the formative experience of Equiano's life -- certainly one of the most harrowing -- was his kidnapping at the age of ten by "slave raiders," native Africans who abducted both children and adults at the behest of European slave traders, for a price. After travelling with his kidnappers by sea, Equiano's initial shock and distress dissipated somewhat upon being sold (or bartered) to other, relatively kind Africans. This respite did not last long, however. Taken to a slave ship, the terrified Equiano believes himself in the midst of evil white spirits who will not only kill him, but eat his flesh as well. Eventually disabused of this notion, he very nearly comes to wish it might be true as the ship continues toward its destination, for:

"The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome that it was dangerous to remain there for any time... The closeness of the place and the heat, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. the air soon became unfit for respiration... and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died. This wretched situation was aggravated by the galling of the chains, and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women and the groans of the dying rendered the whole scene of horror almost inconceivable... Every circumstance I met with

served only to render my state more painful, and heighten my apprehensions and opinion of

the cruelty of the whites..." (28-29)

What is perhaps most extraordinary about Equiano was his ability to assimilate, even to flourish, in the white world. This was due both to the beneficence of some of his "masters" as well as his own eagerness to learn and adapt. In a very real sense, he sought to "become white." Nowhere in his writings does he turn a blind eye to the brutality of whites toward blacks, whether "free" or slave (on the contrary, examples of truly savage treatment are littered throughout the book). Still, after living in service to a British gentleman for a few years, he finds his fear of the Europeans has abated. He believes his captors are superior and strives to emulate their behavior, "relishing their society and manners." To this end he learns to read and write (his first owner sent him to school), and, later, picks up the rudiments of navigation. Such an education, needless to say, was highly unusual for a black slave in the 1700's. The fact that the development of reading and writing skills came primarily under the tutelage of an English patron underscores a significant cultural division between British and American slave owners; Equiano was afforded a level of personal dignity largely unknown to the slaves of the America's, who's back-breaking labors produced profitable crops like sugar and tobacco. These slaves were viewed simply as chattel, to be used up and then summarily discarded. In this respect, Equiano was extremely fortunate to find himself in comparatively enlightened hands.

Another important element in Equiano's successful acclimation to Western society was his adoption of Christianity. From a purely pragmatic angle this conversion could hardly fail to meet with the approval of the "upright, Christian" masters he was to encounter during his travels. Indeed, indoctrination of black slaves into the religion of their white owners was a widespread practice and became one of the hallmarks of institutional slavery. While I suspect Equiano was well aware that an ability to quote scripture with just the right amount of awed humility and the fact that his insistence upon formal baptism (in February, 1759) did him no social harm, it appears that he actually took The Good Book to heart. "If it were God's will I ever should be freed it would be so," he writes at one point, "and on the contrary, if it was not his will it would not happen." (88) Equiano's

journal contains several like passages, which once again indicate an enthusiastic embrace of a major component of the dominant white culture, and reinforce the notion that he very much wanted to be a part of it.

The contradiction between this fervent desire to conform to the ways of the white world and Equiano's equally vociferous opposition to both the concept and application of slavery is not easily reconciled. If *Equiano's Travels* has one over-arching political and moral message, it is that slavery by its very nature is wholly irredeemable. The most poignant and articulate sections of the book are given over to the denunciation of enforced bondage and passionate appeals for its abolition:

"Surely this traffic cannot be good, which spreads like a pestilence and taints what it touches! Which violates that first natural right of mankind, equality and independence, and gives one man a dominion over his fellows which God could never intend! For it raises the owner to a state as far above man as it depresses the slave below it, and with all presumption of human pride, sets a distinction between them, immeasurable in extent and endless in duration.

"Yet how mistaken is the avarice even of the planters! Are slaves more useful by being thus humbled to the condition of brutes than they would be if suffered to enjoy the privileges of men? The freedom which diffuses health and prosperity throughout Britain answers you -- No. When you make slaves of men you deprive them of half their virtue, you set them an example of fraud, rapine, and cruelty, and compel them to live with you in a state of war, and yet you complain that they are not honest or faithful!

"You stupefy them with stripes and think it necessary to keep them in a state of ignorance, yet you assert that they are incapable of learning. Why do you use those instruments of torture? Are they fit to be applied by one rational being to another? Are you not struck with shame and mortification to see (others) of your nature reduced so low? Above all, are there no dangers attending this treatment? Are you not hourly in dread of insurrection?

"By changing your conduct and treating your slaves as men every cause of fear would be banished. They would be faithful, honest, intelligent and vigorous; and peace, prosperity, and happiness would attend you." (73-74)

It may be that Equiano felt the best and least circuitous route was to "work within the system," as it were, and the fact that between 1789 and 1827 his book went through seventeen editions in Britain and the U.S. ("as well as translations into Dutch and German") seems to attest to the wisdom of that strategy. By becoming a close adjunct of white society, if not a full-fledged

member, he was able to deliver his argument to a far wider audience than might otherwise have been the case, thereby adding to its strength and currency.

On a larger scale, Equiano and his travels are, of course, a product of his times. Although some of his experiences are at significant variance with those of most African slaves, many are typical and reflect ongoing economic and social changes in the eighteenth century.

As mentioned at the outset, Equiano was kidnapped by slave raiders. He was abducted from a village in what is now called Eastern Nigeria and then brought by his captors to waiting European slave traders. Obviously, this practice did not exist before the advent of European economic intercourse with Africa. However, it is important to note that the "mechanism of enslavement" (as Eric Wolf terms it in *Europe and the People Without History*) already existed. Slavery had taken one of three basic forms long before the first Portuguese explorers found their way to West Africa. Slaves were indentured in lieu of debt payment, because of "infractions against the kinship and lineage order" which rendered a given individual an outcast and therefore fit for subjugation, or taken as booty in the aftermath of war. These forms of slavery allowed for a measure of inclusion in the "adopted" slave-owning family or kinship group (as Equiano's earliest slave experiences while still in Africa would suggest). As Wolf states, then, all three of these devices were employed in service of the African-European slave trade that was to flourish directly before and during Equiano's time. Although initially trade between African and European states centered around the exchange of items like gold and spices for textiles, wheat, and brass utensils, this was to change. Discovering how lucrative the enterprise could be, African kingdoms apparently had few qualms about trading their own people to the rapacious Europeans. It does not undercut the power of Equiano's righteous indignation against slave-trading white Europeans, therefore, to point out the complicity of many African kingdoms, such as the Asante and the Benin, in the procurement of slaves.

It is ironic that were it not for the disease the Europeans themselves brought to the America's, the African slave trade that was to reach its zenith in the eighteenth century might never have emerged. In subduing the Aztec and Inca empires, the Spaniards most potent weapon proved to be the spread of fatal diseases like smallpox, measles, and plague, which they had unwittingly brought with them from Europe. Such afflictions were unknown in the New World, and quickly decimated the indigenous population. The text *Societies and Cultures in World History* estimates that by 1650, contact with Europeans had eliminated from 80 to 95 percent of the Mesoamerican people. Because of this, and because native peoples under Spanish and Portuguese control strongly resisted attempts at enforced labor, these Iberian powers were compelled to look elsewhere for their slaves. As outlined above, the kingdoms of Africa were quite willing to supply them. The Dutch, via the Dutch West Indies Company, became the chief providers of slave labor in the seventeenth century, and by the beginning of the 1800's, "slaves constituted the main commodity of the African trade, and the English dominated that trade." (Wolf) (Recall that when Equiano was kidnapped and sold into slavery, around 1755, his first voyage was to England, and his first real master, "one Mr. Campbell," a well-heeled Englishman.) Thus the institution of slavery as we think of it arose almost from a quirk of nature into a massive global industry which would have a lasting and corrosive effect upon socio-economic history, even to this day.

Although the slave trade was abolished throughout England by 1807, slavery itself would survive in the United States until after the Civil War. Equiano in his lifetime surely witnessed and fell victim to much cruelty and privation due to his status as a bondsman, yet there was one fate that providence mercifully chose to spare him -- that of the black slave in the antebellum South. In her book *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, Deborah Gray White examines the physical and emotional struggles of female slaves during this period. Using both statistical and anecdotal evidence, White analyses the systematic oppression and degradation of Southern slaves and how it has shaped the black family in America.

The author explores the mythologies used by pro-slavery interests to perpetuate its existence, such as the "Jezebel" image of the promiscuous sexual temptress to explain away and excuse sexual abuse by white slave owners, and that Southern ideal of docile black servitude, "Mammy," happily tending to every detail of the household on behalf of her benefactors. White discusses the preeminence that childbearing had as a tool of economic productivity for the plantation owner, and how black women were often coerced, sometimes through reward, mostly by threat, to bear as many children as possible while still fertile. Slave women were also forced to do the same kind of arduous labor as their male counterparts, who, it was determined, were cheaper to work to death and replace than to treat humanely. Against this backdrop, White contends, a peculiar kind of equality existed between male and female slaves; since the men had no power (not even the power of a husband to protect his wife from a severe beating or the lecherous advances of an overlord), black women were obliged to acquire their own resources and coping mechanisms, and hence, their own autonomy. Despite these "benefits," to say that the lives of slaves in the pre-Civil War South were difficult beyond belief is to understate matters considerably. By contrast, the circumstances Equiano often found himself in, while far from idyllic, were vastly superior.

Finally, as Wolf relates in *Europe and the People Without History*, historian Eric Williams, in his book *Capitalism and Slavery*, "argues that the slave trade and its adjuncts provided the capital that allowed England to take off into the industrial revolution." Wolf believes this is an oversimplification, and perhaps it is, yet it cannot be denied that the capitalist West was built largely on the backs of African slaves. More, by the eighteenth century, while birth rates and life expectancy in most of the world were increasing at a healthy clip, the mass extraction of men, women and children from Africa as a direct consequence of the slave trade caused a precipitous decline in population on that continent. It may be suggested that this, combined with the equally unconscionable behavior of the European powers in regard to colonization (witness the treatment of the Khoi at the hands of the Dutch settlers of Cape Town) effectively prevented Africa from

contributing to and benefitting from the industrial revolution. In engaging in such grossly avaricious conduct, Europe dealt a blow to Africa from which it has yet to recover.

As a post-script I'd like to add that though I felt uncomfortable with the frequently suppliant attitude of Equiano toward his "masters" and their society, I thoroughly enjoyed his book. Of course, it's easy from the vantage point of the present (and being a white male, no less) to find fault with some of Equiano's sentiments. I don't really know what it was like to be a black slave in the eighteenth century, but I'm glad I got the chance to learn a little about the life of this remarkable man -- if only second hand.