

Olaudah Equiano: An African Slave in Guernsey

by Brycchan Carey

It is sometimes said that there were no slaves in Guernsey and, clearly, the island was not a major centre of slave-trading. However, its geographical position ensured that throughout the era of slavery, approximately from the end of the fifteenth to the middle of the eighteenth centuries, it was visited by ships from major slave-trading ports such as Bristol, Nantes, St. Malo, and Amsterdam, as well as by ships from the many smaller slave-trading towns and villages found in every country in Western Europe. Most of these ships would have carried few or no slaves. The notorious 'triangular trade' was so named to describe the process by which European manufactured goods were shipped to Africa, African slaves were shipped to the New World, and the produce of the slave-worked plantations was shipped back to Europe. Most of the ships involved in the slave trade that docked at Guernsey would thus have been carrying hammers, knives, and muskets, or sugar, cotton, and tobacco, rather than a human cargo. Nevertheless, these ships were as much a part of the slave trade as they were when carrying slaves in the middle passage. In addition, although the notion of a 'triangular trade' reflects a general pattern of behaviour, in practice there was often considerable deviation from the pattern. Some slaves were indeed brought to Europe, and were sold openly in Bristol, London, and Liverpool, as well as in Nantes, Marseilles, and St. Malo. In the eighteenth century in particular, aristocratic women were presented with child slaves to treat as if they were exotic pets. Wealthy Jamaica and Barbados planters would bring their slaves with them when returning to their estates and their bank managers, and officers in both the Royal Navy and the merchant marine travelled with slaves, either as personal servants or as portable property to sell on when the opportunity arose.

It was in just such a capacity that an African boy of perhaps eight or ten years of age was brought to Guernsey in the spring of 1755. His name was Olaudah Equiano and he was a slave owned by Michael Pascal, the captain of the merchant ship *Industrious Bee*, who intended the boy to be 'a present to some of his friends in England'. Equiano was originally from a village in the Igbo-speaking region of modern Nigeria, but he had been abducted along with his sister and sold into slavery. The two children had been passed from owner to owner until they were eventually brought to the coast and sold on to European slave-traders. Equiano was parted from his sister and taken, via Barbados, to Virginia where he was bought by Pascal and re-named Gustavus Vassa. Although this was a cruel and ironic reference to the Swedish freedom fighter and later king, Gustav I Vasa (1496?-1560), designed to emphasise the boy's servitude, Equiano continued to use this name until 1789 when, after a long series of adventures which included him earning enough money to buy his own freedom, he wrote an autobiography called *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, The African*. The book was both a best seller, going through 15 editions between 1789 and 1837, and an important document in the campaign to abolish the slave trade, at that point at its height. Its

importance is still recognised and the book, once more in print, is now widely read by students and scholars across the world. Here is how Equiano describes his stay in Guernsey, which came after a long journey from Virginia and a short stay in Falmouth:

One night I was sent on board the ship again; and in a little time we sailed for Guernsey, where she was in part owned by a merchant, one Nicholas Doberry. As I was now amongst a people who had not their faces scarred, like some of the African nations where I had been, I was very glad I did not let them ornament me in that manner when I was with them. When we arrived at Guernsey, my master placed me to board and lodge with one of his mates, who had a wife and family there; and some months afterwards he went to England, and left me in the care of this mate, together with my friend Dick. This mate had a little daughter aged about five or six years, with whom I used to be much delighted. I had often observed, that when her mother washed her face it looked very rosy; but when she washed mine it did not look so; I therefore tried oftentimes myself if I could not by washing make my face of the same colour as my little play-mate (Mary), but it was all in vain; and I now began to be mortified at the difference in our complexions. This woman behaved to me with great kindness and attention; and taught me every thing in the same manner as she did her own child, and indeed in every respect treated me as such. I remained here till the summer of the year 1757, when my master, being appointed first lieutenant of his Majesty's ship the *Roebuck*, sent for Dick and me, and his old mate: on this we all left Guernsey, and set out for England in a sloop bound for London. (pp. 68-9)

As Vincent Carretta of the University of Maryland has shown, Equiano misremembers the date. Admiralty records in the Public Record Office alongside newspaper reports and Cornish meteorological records, cross-referenced with Equiano's own account of unusual weather conditions in Falmouth shortly before the *Industrious Bee* set sail for Guernsey, suggest that he arrived on the island in the spring of 1755 and stayed until the early summer. Pascal and 'Dick' (Richard Baker) both appear on the muster book of the *Roebuck* in late June 1755 while Equiano himself, under the name of Gustavus Vassa, appears on the muster book on 6 August 1755. Pascal had clearly changed his mind about making the young slave a gift to his friends since Equiano served under him aboard a number of vessels in the Royal Navy, eventually reaching the rank of Able Seaman, before being suddenly sold to a captain James Doran, a slave-trader bound for Montserrat, on 10 December 1762. In the meantime, as well as having become a fully-trained seaman, Equiano had seen action in various naval engagements during the Seven Years War, had caught and recovered from smallpox and a gangrenous leg, had paid two visits to the family of Pascal's relation in London, Maynard Guerin, and had, in September 1762, paid a brief additional visit to Guernsey on board the *Aetna*, Pascal's ship at that point. This visit is also described in the *Narrative*:

After our ship was fitted out again for service, in September she went to Guernsey, where I was very glad to see my old hostess, who was now a widow, and my former little charming companion her daughter. I spent some time here very happily with them, till October, when we had orders to repair to Portsmouth.

The first passage in particular is a carefully constructed and moving piece of writing. It offers us a complex 'double narrative' in which the older and wiser Equiano, the author of the book, speaks with the voice of a naïve child. The image of a lonely and bewildered child trying to wash his black face white is moving, deliberately so, and emphasises both the young Equiano's difference from those around him and his powerlessness to change the situation into which he has been forced. Yet the behaviour of the mate's wife in treating him with 'great kindness and attention' is presented to contrast strongly with the treatment he receives at the hands of slave traders, and it reminds the reader that the inhumanity displayed by slave-traders is not the only way that slaves could be treated. As is the case throughout the *Interesting Narrative*, Equiano manages to combine autobiography with arguments against slavery.

Equiano's visit to Guernsey certainly confirms that the island was not free of slaves, but it also highlights the fact that slave-trading in Guernsey ships was being carried out in proximity to some of the most influential Guernsey families of the mid-eighteenth century. The *Industrious Bee*, a snow with a crew of around 10, was built in New England. According to Admiralty records, however, its owners were based in Guernsey [PRO ADM 7/87]. Equiano mentions that the ship was partly owned by 'a merchant, one Nicholas Doberry', almost certainly the younger Nicholas Dobrée (1732-1800), who had inherited a substantial trading business from his father. Pascal's origins have not yet been traced, but his will [PRO PROB 11/1142] shows that, even if he was not a Guernseyman himself, his closest friends were mostly from the Channel Islands. Pascal died in Southampton in 1786 and left both money and personal effects to friends and relatives. Much of this went to the family of Maynard Guerin. But others were also beneficiaries. 'To my good friend Cap.^l Carteret of the navy residing in this town' Pascal writes, 'I give my uniform sword and sword belt.' This was presumably Philip Carteret, born in Jersey in 1733, the sailor and discover of Pitcairn Island, who died in Southampton in 1796. There was also a gift for 'my friend Mr Dobree Esquire of Guernsey' who was no doubt the same Mr. Dobrée who part-owned the *Industrious Bee*. Only one person received two gifts: 'my good friend' Paul Le Mesurier in London who received 'five pounds' and 'my silver mounted sword'. It seems certain that this was Paul Le Mesurier, MP (1755-1805) whose political career was based on his opposition to Charles James Fox's India Bill in 1783 and who would in 1793-4 become the first Guernsey-born Lord Mayor of London. Whether he had met Equiano at the time when he was Pascal's slave we cannot know, but there is no doubt that Le Mesurier was aware of Equiano's existence and of his connection with Pascal for, in 1789 when the *Interesting Narrative* was published by subscription, Le Mesurier's name appeared at the front of the book as one of the original subscribers. Guernsey may not have been a major centre of

slave trading in the eighteenth century, but slaves certainly passed through, and did so with both the knowledge and the direct involvement of some of the island's most powerful families.

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Further Reading

Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta, 2nd Edition (London: Penguin, 2003)