



THE DEBATE: GUSTAVUS VASSA

Published in London in 1789, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa the African* (hereafter, ‘*The Narrative*’) came to be recognised as an important and influential book, one which arrived at the height of British political debate about the future of the slave trade.



Created by Yuvika Koul
from Noun Project

The book contains a vivid in-depth and convincing account of its protagonist’s pre-slavery life in Africa, the trauma of capture at eleven and a harrowing account of his gruelling transatlantic journey to his new life of slavery– the infamous Middle Passage.

As a result, Vassa’s account provided an emotive and influential touchstone for those calling for the abolition of the slave trade, much as Frederick Douglass’ own autobiographical *Narrative* of 1845 later did for the cause of abolishing the institution of slavery itself in the USA. As a visceral argument against and illustration of the horrors of the slave’s life and in particular the middle passage experience, *The Interesting Narrative* could hardly have been more affecting.

It is unsurprising then that after its publication, the pro-slavery camp sought to undermine the book’s power and discredit Equiano by casting aspersions on *The Narrative*’s accuracy and truthfulness. In April 1792, for instance, two London newspapers alleged that Equiano had never even been to Africa let alone been born and enslaved there, but had in fact been “born and bred up in the Danish Island of Santa Cruz, in the West Indies”. This was a groundless accusation made without evidence, and for the sole purpose of undermining Equiano’s authority. Students considering this Equiano-Vassa ‘Identity Debate’ need to remember that unlike these earliest detractors, those modern scholars, led by Vincent Carretta, who continue to search for the conclusive truth about Equiano’s origins, are not motivated by any desire to discredit him or undermine the message or importance of his *Narrative*.

Nevertheless, scholarly debate has continued about the veracity of the claims and facts presented in early sections of *The Narrative* – most significantly Vassa's birthplace and birth name.

Carretta's 1999 essay ("Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth Century Question of Identity", *Slavery and Abolition*, 20, 3, 96-105, 103-4) significantly brought to prominence key documentary evidence clearly indicating that Equiano had been born not in Igboland, West Africa (today, south-eastern Nigeria) as stated in *The Narrative* but in the then-British American colony of South Carolina.

The key documents Carretta unearthed were 1) a record of baptism, dated 9 February 1759, which reported that "Gustavus Vassa a Black born in Carolina" was baptized in St. Margaret's Church, Westminster, UK; and 2) a muster roll for the exploration ship *Racehorse*, dated 17 May 1773, which included an able seaman who had given his own details as 'Gustavus Weston' of South Carolina.

One interpretation of these documents is to conclude that Equiano must have fabricated the African origins and persona that underpinned his account. Critics who support this view note that as a well-travelled adult who had worked as a slave and a freedman in a diverse range of jobs and places, Equiano had plentiful opportunity to learn all about the Igbo region and culture from others who had been raised, lived or visited there – enough to supply the rich depth of detail that made the childhood section of *The Narrative* so vivid and emotive. This seems to undermine the argument of Paul Lovejoy and other supporters of the African origin camp, that the depth and accuracy of detail in *The Narrative* proves his account must be a genuine recollection – that, in Lovejoy's words, "a careful reading of the linguistic, geographical, and cultural details provided by Vassa leaves little doubt that he was born in Africa, and specifically in Igbo land" (Lovejoy, P. "Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano, the African". *Slavery and Abolition* 27(3):317-347 (2006)).

Lovejoy also cites the accounts of several friends and contemporaries who confirm that Vassa could speak virtually no English when he first came to Britain - which seems highly unlikely for a child who had been born and raised in an English colony.

Scholarly research (in particular that of Carretta) has found no evidence that the name Olaudah Equiano was widely used by the author before it appeared in *The Narrative* in May 1789. Surviving letters and documents show instead that

he habitually went by the name of 'Gustavus Vassa'; the slave name foisted upon him in 1754 by his then-owner, English naval officer Michael Pascal. 'Vassa' seems to have been the name his friends knew him by, and that he used officially, even after he had bought his own freedom in 1766. Proponents of the non-African origin theory ask why this part of Vassa's African heritage should have been kept quiet until the release of *The Narrative* – precisely when an “authentically-African” name and persona would be helpful to bolster the book's emotional impact and credibility.

It is frustrating, in any search for a definitive conclusion, that many of the arguments for supposing that Vassa fabricated the Equiano persona, can be easily turned around into arguments to reject that accusation. For instance, it has been claimed that the character and experiences of 'Equiano' are suspiciously tailor-made to make *The Narrative* such an effective propaganda piece against slavery. The mirror of this is that, since Vassa knew full well how important his account would be, all the more reason for him to be as honest as possible – he knew any exposures that discredited his account could have disastrous consequences for public support of the abolitionist cause.

It is also true that the young Vassa had no control or perhaps even any understanding of what origins his godparents entered on his behalf in baptismal records, especially given his poor grasp of the English language – it is entirely feasible that the godparents sought to protect him and smooth his place in society by entering what may have been viewed by others as a more 'civilized' and certainly a “more English” birth place and name. As Equiano scholar Brycchan Carey points out, “...the fact that Equiano seems never to have used his birth name before 1789 makes little difference to question of where he was born. In the eighteenth century, few slaves or former slaves used their African names in everyday life” (B. Carey, 'Special Feature Introduction: Olaudah Equiano - African or American?' in K.L. Hope (ed) *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era: Volume 17. Professional & Vocational*. AMS Print Inc., New York, 2010 – accessible at http://www.brycchancarey.com/Carey_1650-1850_2008.pdf).

By the time of his sailing with the *Racehorse*, the adult Vassa may just have decided that claiming a Carolinian heritage carried less stigma and baggage, in terms of how others perceived and treated him, than his authentic African origins. Given the youthful traumas he underwent, his experiences as a slave and the general perception and treatment of Africans, he may even have felt ashamed or defensive about claiming the Equiano mantle until he felt ready to tell his story.

It is interesting also that the original Gustav Vasa was a sixteenth-century Swedish nobleman who led a successful rebellion against Danish Rule and became the first king of an independent Sweden –indeed this Vasa sometimes compared himself to Moses in leading his people out of slavery. Equiano was certainly well-read and educated enough to have learned this. It's not inconceivable that the adult Equiano may have thought this name so appropriate to his own struggle and how it had shaped him, that he would 'own it' –and that even after obtaining his freedom, he would retain this symbolically-loaded identity on official documents in place of or alongside his own birth name. It follows from this interpretation that his use of the Vassa identity doesn't necessarily equal a rejection of the name Olaudah Equiano, or mean that the African name must be a later invention. It may also simply be that after years of using the Vassa identity, and building a personal and professional reputation under it, it was easier to keep on using it, than to revert to Equiano.

Given the strong cases that can be made on either side, it seems that no conclusive answer can be reached using the evidence currently available. In the very same article where he promoted his evidence for a South Carolinian origin, Carretta himself admitted that, while for him "there can be no doubt that Vassa manipulated some of the facts in his autobiography...the evidence regarding his place and date of birth is clearly contradictory and will probably remain tantalizingly so...." By 2005, the time of his subsequent biography of Vassa, Carretta was no nearer a definitive answer, cautioning readers to "...keep in mind that reasonable doubt is not the same as conclusive proof. We will probably never know the truth about Equiano's birth and upbringing" (Carretta V, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*. University of Georgia Press: 2005).

Nor should the existence of real doubts about the biographical facts make Equiano's achievements any less important, or diminish the huge impact that *The Narrative* had on the antislavery cause. As Brycchan Carey noted in his comprehensive summary of the historiography of the debate, "...whether born free in Africa or enslaved in America, Equiano reached adulthood as a slave, emancipated himself by his own efforts, and produced a key text in the campaign that was to lead to the end of the Atlantic slave trade and, ultimately, to the end of slavery in the Atlantic world."