

Subject: Equiano: an exhibition of an extraordinary life (Birmingham Museum) [exhibition review]  
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In October *The Guardian* published a striking collection of photographs chronicling the history of black Britain from the 1890s until today. It was introduced by Stuart Hall, an academic and broadcaster who came tenth in the 2003 poll to find the top '100 Great Black Britons'. He wrote that all too often it is assumed that black settlement in Britain 'began only the day before yesterday' when in fact it has spanned over four hundred years. The legacy of slavery and colonisation means that this has been a 'long, difficult, sometimes bitterly contested and unfinished story'.

One character in this unfinished story is Olaudah Equiano (1745-97). His face appears on the First Class stamp issued in 2007 to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Equiano's efforts to bring this trade to an end led to him being voted fourth in the roll call of black Britons. It also explains why he currently takes centre stage at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery in *Equiano – An Exhibition of an Extraordinary Life* (until 13 January 2008). It is based on Equiano's more modestly titled autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African*. Published in 1789 it became a bestseller, running to eight editions before Equiano died on 31 March 1797.

Equiano's alternative name – Gustavus Vassa the African – was given to him by his slave masters. It is fitting that this exceptional man should have been called after a king (Gustav Vasa of Sweden). For Equiano was born the son of a tribal chief in present-day Nigeria. He was kidnapped at the age of about eleven and taken across the Atlantic to Barbados. Equiano proceeded to travel the world – first as a slave, then as a free man. He eventually settled in London and it is here that the exhibition begins.

The curators decided to tell Equiano's story as if it were a film, with the main character looking back on his eventful life. And so, from London, we are taken back to west Africa before the arrival of the slave traders. Equiano described his rural upbringing as both cultured and peaceful. This was an important retort to those who justified slavery on the grounds that Africa was savage and uncivilised. The exact same people later sought to discredit Equiano's account by claiming that he was actually born in the West Indies. The exhibition at Birmingham explores this, presenting the documentary evidence for and against. Other unresolved issues include the identity of the famous eighteenth century portrait in the collection of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter. This was once considered to be Equiano, but research for this exhibition now suggests that it depicts another stylishly dressed black man, perhaps the writer Ignatius Sancho (1729-80).

The layout of the exhibition is a somewhat complicated affair divided into seven themes. The neat little booklet given to all visitors provides a much-needed guide through the space. It also carries a glossary of key words and a timeline, making it an informative souvenir of the visit. In the gallery itself are a series of numbered 'light-towers' which introduce the various sections. These feature extracts from Equiano's autobiography together with brightly coloured linocuts by Chris Wormell commissioned especially for the show.

Aside from copies of his book there are precious few artefacts connected directly to Equiano. This meant that the curators needed to take a lateral approach to the choice of objects on display. They have, for instance, recreated the 'freedom suit' Equiano bought to mark his liberation in 1766 but long since lost. Elsewhere items of a similar period and type serve as stand-ins. The most touching is a broken tumbler cup on loan from the St Eustatius Historical Foundation. This represents the first commodity independently traded by Equiano for a tiny profit. In the context of this exhibition this fragile, inanimate little thing becomes a really moving symbol of Equiano's long and immensely difficult path to freedom.

There are many 'unfinished stories' and 'hidden histories' in this excellent exhibition. It succeeds because it focuses on one person, someone who, by his own account, was 'neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant'. This gives us a personality to relate to, reducing the terrible enormity of the slave trade to a human level. But it does this without simplifying history. This exhibition shows, for example, how a gun made in Birmingham could become a part of the slave trade. Often we associate this barbaric business with the great ports of Bristol and London. But Birmingham's produce was linked to slavery too. This was why the Atlantic slave trade was such a complex issue: hundreds of miles away from the awful reality of the plantations and the slave ships were businessmen in Birmingham working hard to keep their companies going – and yet supporting slavery in the process.

Equiano himself encapsulates the moral complexity of the slave trade. Towards the end of his life he undoubtedly played a pivotal role in the abolition movement. Yet in his autobiography Equiano reveals that in 1776 – ten years after he had secured his own freedom – he travelled to what is now Nicaragua and helped establish a plantation *worked by slaves*. Professor James Walvin of York University, a leading expert on Equiano and the historical consultant for the exhibition, has speculated that this was because Equiano at that time was powerless to resist – he was just 'a tiny cog in a massive Atlantic machine'.

It is good that the curators had the courage not to shy away from this aspect of the story. Some would no doubt have preferred to skip over this blemish in a well-meaning attempt to celebrate Equiano's considerable achievements. But that would have been a mistake. It is too tempting to see history in black and white, with good versus evil. Yes, Equiano was a great man, but he had failings too – and that makes him all the more human, reminding us that even tiny cogs can make an enormous difference.

The most amazing thing about Olaudah Equiano is quite simply that his name is known at all today. Professor Walvin reminds us that he could so easily have 'disappeared from the record' like countless other victims of the slave trade. That he did not means that he stands as a representative for all those that have been lost to memory. Birmingham Museum has done well to begin telling one version of this vital story. They have done so not only through this exhibition but also a whole host of other related activities, including a catalogue, website (<http://www.equiano.org>), outreach programme and basic travelling exhibition based on the themes addressed at Birmingham. Even so, it does come as a disappointment to learn that this expensive, thought provoking exhibition will *not* be touring. Equiano himself went on an epic book tour to promote his *Interesting Narrative*. Over the course of five years he took in a host of great and small places from Dublin to Durham, Halsted to Hull. Surely this would have presented an ideal opportunity to tell the local story of the Atlantic slave trade across the length and breadth of Britain and Ireland? This would have really done justice to the memory of Gustavus Vassa the African, a man who, despite being 'a witness to cruelties of every kind', survived with his humanity intact. He is a shining example to be admired, emulated and – most importantly – remembered.

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