British Slave Trade

Richard Burgess

The middle of the 18th century. A golden age in British history. A period of relative stability at home, while abroad the Empire was expanding rapidly and bringing home enormous wealth. Most of the country houses and elegant parks you see in Britain today date from this period. So do many stately town squares and stylish terraces. For the gentry it was a time of leisure, good manners and beautiful music. If you belonged to the fortunate few, life was sweet. In fact, literally sweeter than it had ever been before. For one of the new fashions among the well-off, including the flourishing middle class, was sugar. To start with sugar was seen as a sort of medicine. But during the 18th century it quickly became a part of people's daily diet. After all, what were the cakes, the puddings and the desserts, not to mention those exotic drinks from the colonies tea, coffee and cocoa - that graced the banquets and dinner parties of fashionable society without a spoonful or two of Caribbean sweetness?

But harvesting sugar posed a problem or two. The Caribbean was far away and on the islands where the sugar cane grew working conditions were quite unsuitable for Europeans. The cane had to be cut, gathered

and processed quickly so that it didn't rot and it therefore required a large and obedient workforce. There was no point in looking for a local one - the native population of Caribs that had lived on the islands when the Europeans first arrived, had long since been wiped out, or sent away as slaves. The solution to the problem was to be found on the other side of the Atlantic.

African music

In any Golden Age there is always someone who pays the bill, but they are not usually mentioned in polite conversation. Most Britons never actually saw the people who paid the price of their sweet tooth. Of the twelve million Africans that were sold into

came to Europe. Most ended their days in the sugar plantations of the Caribbean, or later in the cotton and tobacco fields of the American colonies. For the most part they remain a nameless multitude, which is perhaps partly why the Slave Trade could flourish for so long before public opinion got a guilty conscience.

There are, however, exceptions. Olaudah Equiano is one of them. A member of the Ibo tribe of present-day Nigeria, he was kidnapped and sold into slavery at the age of 11. His story is typical enough except that Equiano lived to tell the tale. After serving as a slave to a British naval officer in Virginia, he was sold to a Quaker merchant who allowed him to buy his freedom in 1766. From there he travelled to London where he wrote the

story of his life. Here he describes that day in his childhood when his life changed forever.

Equiano grew up the youngest of seven children. When the grown-ups were out working in the fields, the children of the village would play together, with one of them climbing a tree to keep a look-out for kidnappers, who were a constant threat.

"One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both; and, without giving us time to cry out, of make resistance, they stopped our mouths, and ran off with us into the nearest wood. Here they tied our hands, and continued to carry us as far as they could till night came on, when we reached a small house, where the robbers halted for a refreshment, and spent the night. We were then unbound; but were unable to take any food; and, being quite overpowered by fatigue and grief, our only relief was some sleep. which allayed our misfortune for a short time.

" Supporters of the Slave Trade would often argue that they were doing the slaves a favour. Most of them were already living in slavery in Africa, they claimed, and it was surely better to be sent to a Christian country than to be left in a heathen one. But as Equiano's story shows, slavery soon became such big business that nobody was safe. Wars were started with the purpose of acquiring slaves and kidnappings like Equiano's were

commonplace.

Newly-caught slaves were taken to fortified camps on the coast. If they were taken far inland they might have to march for as many as 70 or 80 days, usually in chains. In these camps the slaves were crowded together in appalling conditions before being sold to European traders, in return for manufactured goods from Europe - cloth, metal, weapons and alcohol. Equiano had never seen white men before and found their savageness frightening. Since they treated him as cattle, he supposed that he was being sold as just that: to be eaten.

"When I looked around the ship and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together; every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted my fate. Quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. When I recovered a little, I found some black people about me, and I believe some were those who had brought me on board and had been receiving their pay. They talked to me in order to cheer me up, but all in vain. I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces and long hair. They told me I was not."

But Equiano's relief was short-lived. Before him lay the terrors and torture of "the middle passage" - that is, the actual sea journey to the New World. It was called the middle

passage because, from the slavetraders point of view it was the second of three journeys - one from Britain to the Slave Coast with manufactured goods to buy Africans with, the next from Africa to America with the hold full of slaves, and finally the return journey to Britain with a cargo of sugar, cotton, tobacco or coffee.

On all three journeys, profit was the only priority. For the middle passage it meant stowing the slaves as tightly as possible. The average slave ship was between 80 and 90 feet long and 25 feet wide, and carried a cargo of around 300 slaves. In order to make room for them, special shelves were constructed in the hold so that slaves could be stowed in several levels. Even at the beginning of the journey, conditions were awful. This is how Equiano describes his first impressions:

"There I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life. With the loathsomeness of the stench and the crying together" I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, Death, to relieve me."

Slaves were in chains for most of the journey, both for security reasons and to prevent them from jumping overboard. The only sanitation was buckets placed at intervals in the hold, which slaves could only reach by climbing over each other. As they became weak and ill in the course of the crossing, many were not

squalor that is difficult to imagine. And it should be remembered that Equiano and his fellows were used to a higher degree of cleanliness than their European captors.

"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... some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air. But now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place and the heat of the climate, added to the number of the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us."

It's no surprise that many did not survive the crossing. Dehydration as a result of heat and diarrhoea was the chief cause of death. The cramped conditions also meant that any diseases that slaves had before the passage spread like wildfire. The death rate varied tremendously from ship to ship. In the 18th century it is thought that an average of 12.5% of slaves died in middle passage. Figures of 40-50% were by no means uncommon. As if living conditions weren't bad enough, slaves also had to suffer the brutality of the crew:

"I inquired of these what was to be done with us. They gave me to understand we were to be carried to these white people's country to work for them. I then was a little revived, and thought if it were no worse than working, my situation was not so desperate. But still I feared that I should be put to death, the white

people looked and acted in so savage a manner. I have never seen among my people such instances of brutal cruelty, and this not only shown towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves."

The agony and indignity of the middle passage lasted on average for about 5 weeks, but could take several months if there was little wind. Conditions generally got worse the longer they lasted. Even if they escaped serious illness the movement of the ship would gradually have rubbed their bodies raw in places, for they had no bedding to lie on. We can only wonder what feeling was strongest; a longing for the torture of the journey to be over, or a dread of what was in store for them when they arrived.

Equiano was bound for Barbados, the oldest of Britain's sugar-producing colonies in the New World.

"As the vessel drew nearer, we plainly saw the harbour and other ships of different kinds and sizes and we soon anchored amongst them off Bridgetown. Many merchants and planters came on board.

They put us in separate parcels and examined us attentively. They also made us jump, and pointed to the land, signifying we were to go.Then we thought by this we should be eaten by these ugly men, as they appeared to us. When soon after we were all put down under the deck again, there was much dread and trembling among us and nothing but

apprehensions. At last the white people got some old slaves from the land to pacify us. They told us we were not to be eaten, but to work, and were soon to go on land, where we should see many of our country people. This report eased us much, and sure enough, soon after we landed, there came to us Africans of all languages."

Barbados had a slave population at the time of Equiano's arrival of about 70,000. If his fellow slaves had known more exactly what lay ahead, it is doubtful whether they would have been so easily pacified. It's been estimated that a third of all slaves arriving in Barbados died within three years. Between 1764 and 1783 some 50,000 slaves died, so that even the constant arrival of new slave cargoes was not enough to prevent the total number of slaves declining.

But for Equiano Olaudah quite a different fate was in store. In the course of his life he travelled the world, sailing to America, Turkey and the Mediterranean. He took part in naval battles and in the search for the North-West Passage through the frozen waters of the Arctic. As a freed slave his voice became a unique one in the popular movement to abolish slavery. He never lived to see abolition which in Britain was achieved in 1807. But his autobiography, from which these extracts are taken and which became a best-seller in Britain, rivaling Defoe's Robinson Crusoe in popularity, had a vital role to play in convincing public opinion of the inhumanity

of the trade and the humanity of its victims.

"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 independency, and gives one man a dominion over his fellows which God could never intend!"