

Olaudah Equiano: Slave, sailor, scribe



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Kidnapped from his Benin village in Africa when he was 11 (1756), Olaudah Equiano spent many years of his life enslaved. When he was finally given the opportunity to learn to read and write, he kept a record of his adventurous journeys, published in London in 1789 as "The Life of Olaudah Equiano." His compelling storytelling made the book a bestseller.

Equiano uses the first part of his narrative to describe his early life in Africa. Years after his capture and enslavement his memory remained sharp. His village was far from the coast, in fact, he had: "never heard of white men or Europeans, nor of the sea." His father was a village elder and the family participated in memorable rituals and ceremonies as well as exchanges of slaves between tribes (the narrator makes it clear that slavery was only for prisoners of war and as punishment for serious crimes). "We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets," he writes, speaking with affection and in the present tense.

The women of the village work in the fields like the men as well as spin, weave and dye clothing and make pottery and pipes. Growing crops was a central part of village life and everyone contributed and shared in the abundance. "We have no beggars," he explained.

Faith plays an important part in the story. Though he became a fervent Christian later, Equiano speaks with respect for the religious beliefs of his early years. "As to religion, the [African] natives believe that there is one Creator of all things, and that he lives in the sun." This Creator was the overseer of tribal life though Equiano remembered no discussion of an after-life except the belief that ancestors were near. Recalling his mother – "I was almost constantly with her" – he describes her offerings and laments, which as a small boy frightened him. At the time of his birth he was named "Olaudah" meaning "one favoured, and having a loud voice and well spoken." He honored the belief that the image of the Creator was "carved in ebony," and he was disturbed when Africans were among white people and forgot their "language, religion, manners and customs." Based on his own terrible experiences, he asks: "Are they treated as men? Does not slavery itself depress the mind, and extinguish all its fire ...? In this eloquent section, when the narrator

puts white and Black beside each other on equal ground, he quotes an oft-forgotten passage from the Book of Acts: "God has made of one blood all nations of humanity to dwell on the face of the earth" (17:26).

The youngest of seven children, Olaudah was especially beloved by his mother who encouraged him to be a protector, a warrior. At the age of 11 he would climb a tree to watch over other village children while their parents were in the fields. One day kidnappers arrived and the children ran. Equiano and his sister were captured. He saw his sister one more time, but cruelly never saw his family again. He was taken aboard a slave ship bound for Barbados, then Virginia and on to England. He had several masters and captains on his many sea voyages through the years. Learning to read after thinking he could "talk to the books," he grew to be an essential part of any crew.

While serving in a London household, he was told he would not go to heaven unless he was baptized. Worried, he asked his master to take him to a priest for baptism, though it wasn't until some years later he overcame his "fear of eternity" and converted. Finally purchasing his freedom from his owner on Montserrat about 1766, he felt it was the happiest day of his life to become, as he

powerfully states, "my own master."

The rest of his story reads somewhat like the miraculous shipboard tales of the Apostle Paul. Equiano has both tragic and inspiring experiences traveling as a free man. One passage shows his insatiable curiosity. While sailing the Mediterranean, he encountered Turks who were kind and honest, yet wouldn't allow him, as a Christian, into their mosques. This troubled Olaudah because he was "always fond of going to see the different modes of worship of the people wherever I went."

The final legacy of Equiano, along with his narrative, was the fight to end slavery. In 1788 he presented a petition to the Queen and continued to work with abolitionists until his death in 1797.

We purchased a copy of "The Life of Olaudah Equiano" at Fort Sumter, S.C., where the American war over slavery began. A powerfully significant place to discover one courageous human being's story of faith, freedom and fortitude.

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