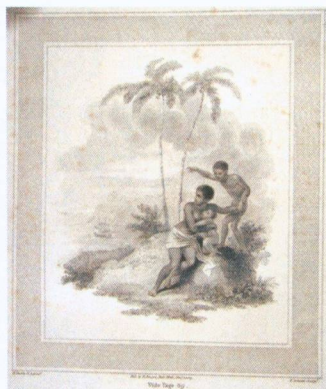


The Power of the African Voice



Poems on the Abolition on the Slave Trade by James Montgomery, London. Printed for R. Bowyer... by T. Bensley, 1809 (Special Collections)

“Oh the horrors of slavery! - How the thought of it pains my heart! But the truth ought to be told of it; and what my eyes have seen I think it is my duty to relate; for few people in England know what slavery is. I have been a slave - I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows; and I would have all the good people in England to know it too, that they break our chains, and set us free...”

Mary Prince, *'The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, related by herself*, London, 1831

Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugoano, Phillis Wheatley and Mary Prince were among the prominent African abolitionists who actively fought against slavery in Britain. They toured and lectured to crowds, telling of their experiences, published their accounts in autobiographical form and in poetry, and drummed up support for the movement. Undoubtedly, the Lunar Society were strongly influenced by Equiano, who visited Birmingham in 1790. Frederick Douglass, James Watkins, Moses Roper, J.C. Pennington, and the Rev. Peter Stanford are among the names of black abolitionists who also came to speak in Birmingham.

What are now known as 'slave narratives' are important personal documents which record the personal suffering endured by millions of Africans. In the 18th century they were an effective tool in the struggle for emancipation. These first-hand accounts by those forced into slavery, the struggle of their lives and horrors they endured, effectively awakened the world to a mass abuse of human rights and played a large part in galvanising the unstoppable force of public opinion. Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince featured here are just two of many powerful and enduring voices.

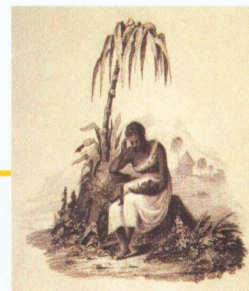
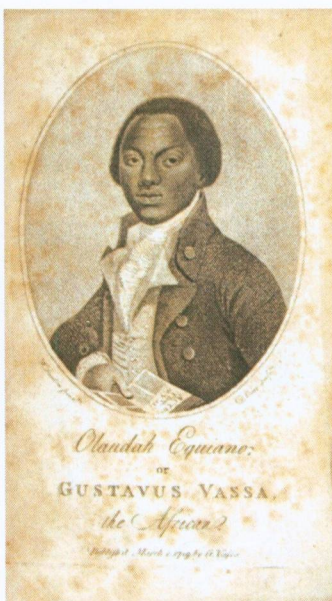


Illustration from the *Female Society for Birmingham, West Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall and neighbourhoods for the Relief of British Negro Slaves* report (Special Collections)

Olaudah Equiano

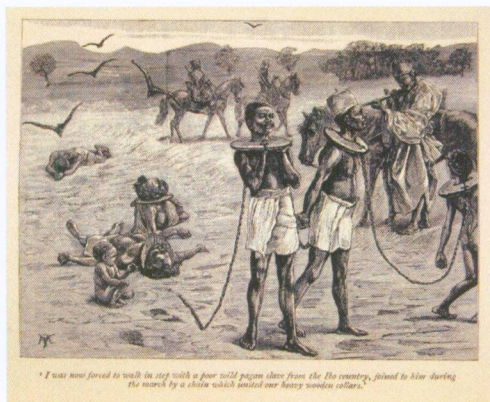
(c.1745–1797) Olaudah Equiano's *An Interesting Life* gives an autobiographical account of his life in slavery.



From the title page of Equiano's autobiography, *Life of Olaudah Equiano*, London 1789 (Special Collections)

Kidnapped by slave raiders at the age of eight, along with his sister, Equiano was sold, resold then transported to the Americas on an Atlantic slave ship. His record of this experience forms the classic account of the fate of kidnapped Africans. He educated himself by learning from fellow seamen on an English ship where he was slave to a naval officer. In 1762 he was shipped to the West Indies and managed to buy his freedom with money accrued from trading. He settled in England, marrying in 1792 and settling in Soham, Cambridgeshire.

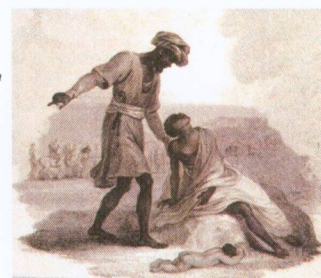
It was not until the 1960s that his autobiography was rediscovered and reissued by African scholars. It has since been published in various editions and has sold in large numbers in Britain, North America and Africa.



The History of a Slave by H.H. Johnston, London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1889 (Special Collections)

Mary Prince

Mary Prince (quoted above) was the first black British woman to, in her own words, 'walk away' from slavery, claim her freedom, and chronicle her experiences. Born into slavery in 1788 she endured sexual and physical abuse for the first 40 years of her life. When her 'owners' moved to England in 1828 she bravely made her way to the headquarters of the Anti-Slavery Society and was emancipated in 1829. Her narrative was a valuable document in the struggle for the abolition of slavery. Her biography was reprinted in 2000 by Penguin Classics.



Poems on the Abolition on the Slave Trade by James Montgomery, London: Printed for R. Bowyer... by T. Bensley, 1809 (Special Collections)

The Publishing of Slave Narratives

Dating from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, many slave narratives were published as broadsides or pamphlets, whilst some of the more substantial biographies of fugitive slaves were published in book form. They were a staple of the Victorian literary market with at least twenty American slave narratives printed in England by the mid-century. Despite their importance it is only within the last fifteen to twenty years that these essential documents have been made accessible by modern publishers – their literary, as well as social impact, being recognised.

The University of Carolina's *Documenting the American South* web site has initiated an outstanding project to digitise slave narratives and make them available, free of charge, via the Internet. Many of them are now available at: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/index.html>