

THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE: THE LEEDS EDITION

A Research Paper

INTRODUCTION

There were nine editions of *The Interesting Narrative* published in Great Britain and Ireland between 1789 and 1794. Unauthorised translations of Equiano's book were made in Dutch (1790), German (1792), Russian (1794), and a New York (American) version in 1791. There were other publications of the *Narrative* after he died in London on 31 March 1797. One of those, called the 'Leeds Edition' of *The Interesting Narrative*, is held at the Special Collections section of the Leeds University Library. It was published by James Nichols on 27 August 1814 and has additional notes that seemed to be censuring, then forgiving Equiano for the reference in his book to 'fortune' rather than 'the providence of God.'

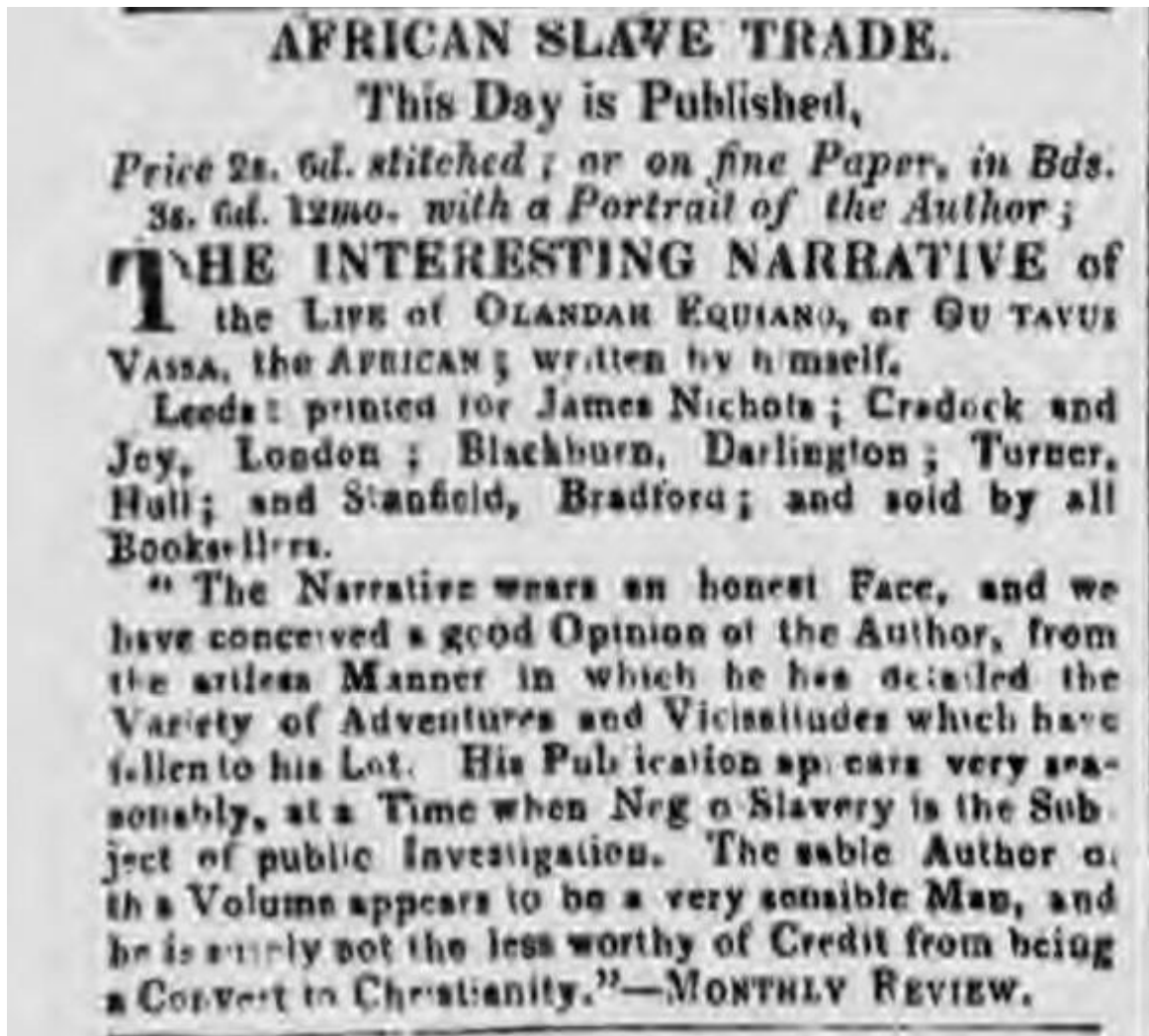
The edition supported the local anti-slavery movement that also included Reverend Richard Watson and other prominent members of the Methodist Church. The author of the 'Preface' of the Leeds Edition was not named but appeared to be a staunch defender of Equiano's integrity, memory and place of birth. Those involved in the publication did not know Equiano personally. They acknowledged that all they knew of him was through *The Interesting Narrative* and described him as having died 'a few years ago' at 'some place in the South of England.'

It seemed that the book was not profitable. Nichols was declared bankrupt less than three years after its publication. He recovered some time afterwards and became a respected figure who was later remembered in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

LAUNCH OF THE 'LEEDS EDITION' OF THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE

It was published on 27 August 1814 by James Nichols who was based at 36, Briggate, Leeds. The extract below from the *Leeds Mercury* of 27 August 1814 showed the price as 2 shillings and 6 pence for the 'paperback' or 3 shillings and 6 pence for the hardback. Sale of the book was not restricted to Leeds and was 'sold by all booksellers.'¹

¹ Leeds Mercury 27 August 1814



The *Leeds Mercury* 27 August 1814

The advert includes a short summary from the '*Monthly Review*²' which the publisher felt would endorse and help popularise the book. The extract from the *Monthly Review* was more than 25 years old when the Leeds Edition was published. The review had originally appeared in June 1789.

The extracts from the *Monthly Review* and the *General Magazine*³ were reproduced in full in the 9th edition of *The Interesting Narrative* along with a series of letters from supporters of Equiano, who was defending himself against accusations concerning his integrity and true place of birth. Those letters and reviews were not reproduced in full in the Leeds Edition, although the Preface contains a lengthy extract from the *Monthly Review*.

Both the *Monthly Review* and *General Magazine* entries are shown in full below.

² <https://www.owleyes.org/text/the-interesting-narrative-of-the-life-of-olaudah/read/letters-and-reviews>

³ <https://www.owleyes.org/text/the-interesting-narrative-of-the-life-of-Olaudah/read/letters-and-reviews>

MONTHLY REVIEW FOR JUNE 1789

'We entertain no doubt of the general authenticity of this very intelligent African's story; though it is not impossible that some English writer has assisted him in the compilation, or, at least, the correction of his book. The Narrative wears an honest face; and we have conceived a good opinion of the man from the artless manner in which he has detailed the variety of adventures and vicissitudes which have fallen to his lot. His publication appears very seasonable, at a time when negro-slavery is the subject of public investigation; and it seems calculated to increase the odium that has been excited against the West-India planters, on account of the cruelties that some are said to have exercised on their slaves, many instances of which are here detailed.

'The sable author of this volume appears to be a very sensible man; and he is, surely, not the less worthy of credit from being a convert to Christianity. He is a Methodist, and has filled many pages towards the end of his work, with the accounts of his dreams, visions, and divine influences; but all this, supposing him to have been under any delusive influence, only serves to convince us that he is guided by principle, and that he is not one of those poor converts, who, having undergone the ceremony of baptism, have remained content with that portion only of the Christian religion; instances of which are said to be almost innumerable in America and the West Indies.

'Gustavus Vassa appears to possess a very different character; and, therefore, we heartily wish success to his publication, which we are glad to see has been encouraged by a very respectable subscription.'

The *General Magazine and Impartial Review* for July 1789, characterised the book in the following Terms:

'This is "a round unvarnished tale" of the chequered adventures of an African, who early in life, was torn from his native country, by those savage dealers in a traffic disgraceful to humanity, and which has fixed a stain on the legislature of Britain. The Narrative appears to be written with much truth and simplicity. The author's account of the manners of the natives of his own province (Eboe) is interesting and pleasing; and the reader, unless, perchance he is either a West-India planter or Liverpool merchant, will find his humanity often severely wounded by the shameless barbarity practised towards the author's hapless countrymen in all our colonies: if he feel, as he ought, the oppressed and the oppressors will equally excite his pity and indignation. That so unjust, so iniquitous a commerce may be abolished, is our ardent wish; and we heartily join in our author's prayer, "That the God of Heaven may inspire the hearts of our Representatives in Parliament, with peculiar benevolence on that important day when so interesting a question is to be discussed; when thousands, in consequence of their determination, are to look for happiness o misery!" '

The introduction to the Leeds Edition ends with a letter from Equiano dated June 1792. This is the letter in his *Narrative* dated 24 March 1789 'To the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and the Commons of the Parliament of Great Britain.'

It is not clear why the date of the letter has been altered in the Leeds Edition.

THE CONTENT OF THE LEEDS EDITION

The title page of the Leeds Edition makes claims to be ‘A New Edition, corrected.’ Quite which bits have been ‘corrected’ are difficult to ascertain. It is almost certain that those involved in the production and publication of the Leeds Edition had never met Equiano and knew very little about him.

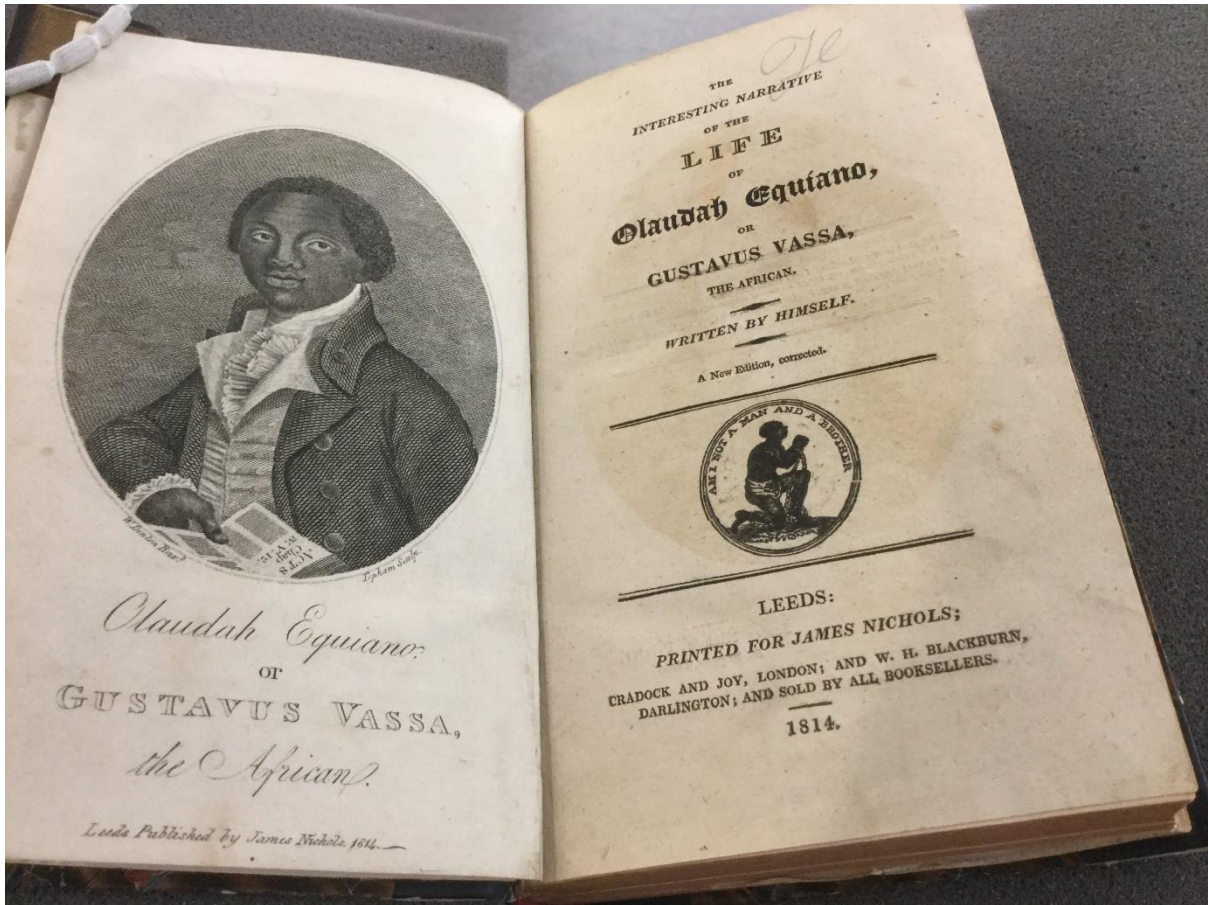
However, Brycchan Carey, an authority on Equiano, claims that ‘the corrections substantially alter Equiano’s text.’⁴

We are told in Chapter V of the 8th and 9th editions of Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* that ‘One Mr Drummond’ had sold 41,000 negroes and had once cut off the leg of one for running away. Equiano does not include the paragraph beginning “One Mr. Drummond” in the first (1789) edition of his *Interesting Narrative*. The paragraph begins “One Mr. D—” in editions two to seven. In the Leeds Edition, Mr Drummond’s identity is protected (22 years too late) as he is referred to simply as ‘Mr D’.

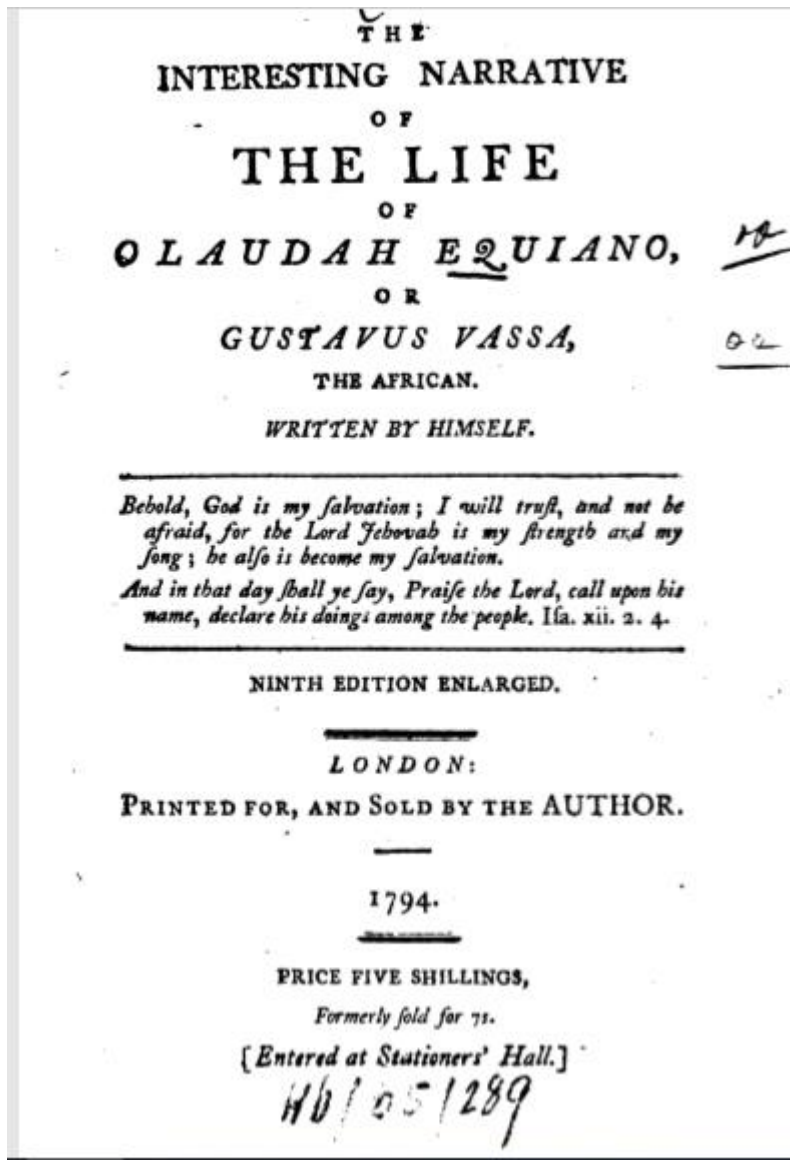
There are some noticeable but still relatively minor differences in lay out between the two editions, however. These appear in the title page. The Leeds Edition includes an illustration of Josiah Wedgwood and Son’s 1787 anti-slavery medallion with the words ‘Am I Not A Man and A Brother.’ This illustration replaces the extract from Isaiah chapter 12, verses 2-4 in the 9th Edition. There was no list of subscribers in the Leeds Edition. Those involved in the edition were deeply religious men, non-conformists and fervently anti-slavery. They included Equiano’s favoured verse on the following page.

The two versions of the title page are shown below.

⁴ <http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/biblio.htm#editions>



Title page of Leeds Edition of *The Interesting Narrative*



Title page of Equiano's 9th Edition

Those responsible for the Leeds Edition questioned Equiano's use of the term 'fortune'. In Chapter 2 Equiano found comfort with a family in 'Tinnah'. Just as he was reconciling himself to a life of relative ease he was 'hurried away, even amongst the uncircumcised.' He wrote that he found himself 'most miserable; and it seemed as if fortune wished to give me this taste of joy, only to render the reverse more poignant. The change I now experienced was as painful as it was sudden and unexpected.'

In a lengthy footnote in the Leeds Edition, the reader is told that Equiano's use of the term 'fortune' to denote 'the providence of God' is 'exceedingly blameworthy.' The footnote, rather patronisingly, continues, 'It is a conformity to the expressions of a vain world not to be expected from Gustavus, who generally manifests a becoming sense of the benefits which he received, and a knowledge of the Blessed Fountain from whence they issued.' They commented on Equiano's remarks as follows, 'After

censuring it as a slip of his pen, let none venture to attribute it to atheistical motives. The tenor of his conduct and of his words belies such an insinuation. He had heard the term thus misapplied by others, and from an imitative habit, he thoughtlessly gave it the same appellation.'

As can be seen from the illustrations above, the 1794 edition was vastly more expensive than the 1814 version. Dropping the price to 2 shillings and 6 pence may have been a move designed to make the book more affordable to the working-class person, although it would still represent a large chunk of their weekly wage. It did little, however, to help Nichols make a profit. He later ran into serious financial difficulties.

One other area where the content of the book differed from Equiano's was the Preface. The Preface to the Leeds edition was written many years after his death. The author is unknown.

THE PREFACE TO THE LEEDS EDITION

The Preface helps us to better understand why James Nichols and some of his friends decided to re-issue a little-known book by an author who had died many years previously. The motivation was religious fervour and opposition to enslavement. The Preface, dated 25 August 1814, was written in Leeds but is unsigned. The author is unknown. He could have been James Nichols, because he was an accomplished author as well as a publisher and printer. It may have been an eminent Methodist minister, the Reverend Richard Watson.

The Preface opens with a reminder of how many eminent people had subscribed to Equiano's original work:

'When this "Interesting Narrative" was first given to the world, some of the most public-spirited gentlemen and eminent philanthropists in Great Britain had begun to exert themselves, and to interest the public in the degraded sons of Africa. The subscription list could boast, that it was graced with the names of a greater number of worthy characters than had before adorned the pages of any small book published in this country'

There then follows a list of some of those exalted names including the Prince of Wales and the Dukes of York and Cumberland, Reverend Thomas Clarkson, John Wesley and Granville Sharp.

The writer of the Preface also strongly defends Equiano against those who had alleged he must have fabricated details of his past in Africa because he was surely too young to recall such facts. He dismisses the thought that 'To many people it seemed too circumstantial to be recollected by a youth who was but eleven years of age when he was forced to visit foreign lands.'

He also defends and supports Equiano's religious beliefs. The writer of the Preface attempted to explain Equiano's view on life, religion and God by reminding the reader just what tribulations he had seen, suffered and lived through. 'Candour will

suggest to them, that he might have formed his notions of the Christian God, from the conduct of those, who unworthily take upon them the Christian name. Nurtured at the icy bosom of slavery, accustomed to the whip and the rack, why should it appear strange, that he should coincide in opinion with the free-born Briton, who while he possesses the light of philosophy and revelation, yet views the God of Nature, as the unfeeling despot, and the cruel task-master?’

The writer admits that he had not been able to collect any particulars concerning Gustavus Vassa beyond ‘what he gives of himself in the following [Interesting] narrative.’

His lack of knowledge of Equiano is further revealed when he states that he died ‘a few years ago’ – it was actually over 17 years – ‘at some place in the South of England’. He died in London. Even allowing for the possible parochiality of a Yorkshire author, London is hardly ‘some place in the South of England.’ It is more likely that the writer had heard that Equiano married a lady from a small Cambridgeshire town (Soham) and settled there. He might have assumed Equiano also died there.

The Preface ends with a celebration of the Bill of the Abolition of the Slave Trade and laments the fact that Equiano did not live long enough to see its passing. This suggests the writer knew Equiano had passed away prior to 1807.

The final paragraph of the Preface sums up the writer’s view of abolition: ‘This durable monument of god-like benevolence to the oppressed Children of Africa will remain, to give the most refined pleasure to those who raised it. This, one of the glories peculiar to England, will, it is hoped, never suffer from the negligence of those who are its appointed guardians. May other European nations be induced, by the excellence and success of our example, to erect similar trophies of humanity and true greatness! And may universal kindness find an asylum in every breast; and all men “own its pleasing sway!”

The writer of the Preface focussed on two areas. The first is his fervent defence of Equiano’s honour. The second is the religious zealotry that Equiano expressed throughout his adult life and in *The Interesting Narrative*. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Leeds Edition was intended as a vehicle to show, through Equiano’s story, the power of God and Christianity.