

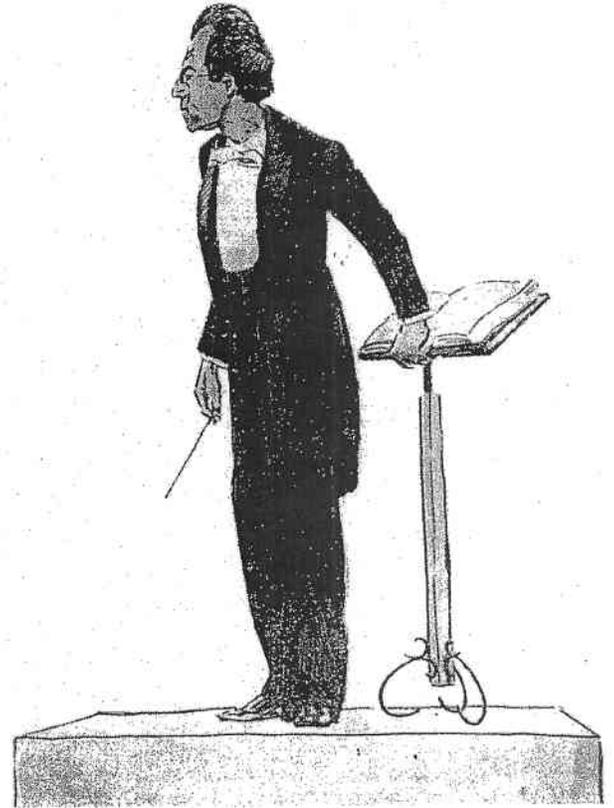
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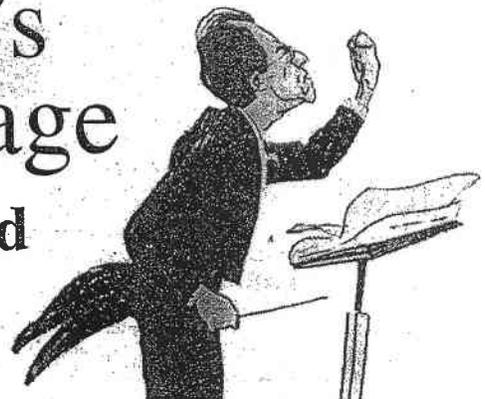
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Mahler's long voyage

Hugh Wood



'The Sons of Belial'

Oludah Equiano in 1794

The bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade has called attention to the remarkable figures who fought for this cause, not least the former slave Oludah Equiano, who became a celebrated author.

Equiano's first-person account of being kidnapped into slavery and of surviving the horrendous Middle Passage in *The Interesting Narrative of The Life of Oludah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) was highly influential in the eighteenth century and remains powerful today. In addition to having an important role in the abolition movement, Equiano was also a key figure in late-eighteenth-century activism for democratic reform. But because he wrote very little, and, aside from newspaper notices, published nothing after his autobiography, his relation to the 1790s radical movement, and his experience of William Pitt's programme of surveillance and persecution of democratic activists, have remained subjects only for speculation. We know that in 1794, the year that saw widespread arrests of political activists and the suspension of habeas corpus, Equiano brought a halt to his public activities. After printing nine editions of his bestselling *Interesting Narrative*, he did not release another after 1794. What is more, that year the indefatigable Equiano ended his trail-blazing book tour of the British Isles which, since 1789, had taken him to towns and cities throughout England, Ireland and Scotland.

It was in this door-to-door campaign that Equiano established contacts for the radical London Corresponding Society. When his close friend, the London shoemaker Thomas Hardy, founder of the LCS, was arrested in 1794, a letter from Equiano of 1792 was seized as evidence by the Bow Street Runners (it is still on file in the Treason Papers at the Public Record Office). Equiano's name was certainly known to the Privy Council.

A newly discovered letter from Equiano, held at the Wellcome Trust in London, reveals that in the harrowing spring of 1794 he was as occupied by the Pitt Ministry's sweeping arrests as he was by his book tour. In this letter, dated June 20, 1794, and addressed to "Mr or Mrs Liversege, Linen Draper, Ipswich", Equiano expresses his anxiety about the rumours swirling around these arrests (there were reports that the government had prepared 800 arrest warrants). Equiano was no stranger to political rumours. He took pains in *The Interesting Narrative* to defend himself against charges of wrongdoing relating to his dismissal from the British Government's Sierra Leone settlement plan of 1787. And five years later, as he was helping abolitionists forge significant links with labouring-class reformers, a slur campaign appeared in the press alleging that Equiano had lied about his birthplace: no African, the anonymous report claimed, Equiano was born in the Caribbean, and hence his heart-wrenching description of the Middle Passage was not a first-hand account.

Equiano was quick to respond, printing in the fifth and later editions of *The Interesting Narrative* a letter from the editor of one of the newspapers that had run the report, who confessed that he had believed the story to be "fabricated by some of the advocates for continuing the Slave Trade"; Equiano also printed a note from the prominent abolitionist James Ramsay asking, "can any man that reads your Narrative believe that you are not a native of Africa?". In the newly discovered letter, we find Equiano once again the subject of political rumours. He tells his friends in Ipswich that "false report[s]" are being circulated by "the Sons of Belial" suggesting that government agents are searching for him in London. Equiano's letter was posted in Colchester, and from the towns he mentions, he seems to have been travelling south from Ipswich and Colchester to Kelvedon and Chelmsford. Both Suffolk and Essex were active in the abolition movement: Thomas Clarkson was from Ipswich, as was the Quaker banker and abolitionist Jonathan Peckover, mentioned by Equiano. Here is the letter in full:

Colchester June 20th, 94
Very Worthy friends &c.

This with my innate respect to you & Wife - & also to my dear friends Peckovers. Pray show them this Letter as he wish'd me to write to him - give my Love to them - Mr & Mrs Ransome - &c. & tell them I mean to write to them when I have used their kind Letter to Kelvedon which may be on Thursday next God willing.

I make no doubt but you have heard of the false report which the Sons of Belial have raised of Late in saying that the Kings messengers were in quest of me, & my friends here persuaded me to go to London - so I did & inquired of Gentlemen in Power - my friends - & they went to the Privy Council & were told that there was not any messengers after me. So I went to Soham to see my family which is well. I left them ten days past & am again selling the Last 110 Copies of my narrative - which I hope to sell against I go from Chelmsford.

I came here yesterday & I mean to go from here about Tuesday next, & will be glad to hear from any of you my friends - if you write direct to me at John Banks High Street, Colchester.

Dear Friends - I remain with all due respects ever yrs &c &c.

Gustavus Vassa
The African

Pray give these Lines to Mr William Nortcoft or Mr John Taylor -

Colchester June the 20th. Gust. Vassa send his best respects to Mr. John Taylor & Mr. William Nortcoft & familiy & the Revd. Mr. L. Atkinson & Wife hope they are all well.
Adieu &c.

Equiano's reference to the rumour-mongers as "Sons of Belial" recalls his use of this phrase in *The Interesting Narrative*, in which he describes meeting a "Musquito Indian" prince, who, although baptized, seemed ignorant of Christian doctrine.

Equiano decides to minister the young prince on board a ship bound from England to Jamaica. "Thus we went on nearly four-fifths of our passage", he writes,

when Satan at last got the upper hand. Some of his messengers, seeing this poor heathen much advanced in piety, began to ask him whether I had converted him to Christianity, laughed and made their jest at him . . . but this treatment caused the prince to halt between two opinions. Some of the true sons of Belial, who did not believe that there was any hereafter, told him never to fear the devil, for there was none existing . . . Thus they teased the poor innocent youth, so he would not learn his book anymore!

Education and literacy are the highest good in *The Interesting Narrative*, so the work of these "sons of Belial" to put a stop to the prince's education registers as a serious violation. No wonder this phrase reappears in his Colchester letter: Equiano has found new "messengers" and new "sons of Belial" preparing to disrupt his civilizing mission in England. As is often the case in *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano appeals to his powerful friends for assistance. He had many connections in the radical movement, but who were these "Gentlemen in Power" who enquired about his status with the Privy Council? Might they have included some of the titled aristocracy who subscribed to *The Interesting Narrative*, or some of his high-profile acquaintances in the abolition movement, such as Granville Sharp and Josiah Wedgwood?

Although we are able to piece together a record of Equiano's 1790s book tour from letters and newspaper notices, much about his social, political and financial connections during these years remains cloudy. If it was this close call with Pitt's spy network that led to Equiano's retreat from the public eye in 1794, there is evidence that he nonetheless remained interested in the welfare of the democratic activists he had befriended a few years earlier. In the *Morning Post and Fashionable World* of May 19, 1795, he appears as one of the subscribers to a fund "for defraying the Expence of Defendants in the late Trials for HIGH TREASON". These defendants, including John Thelwall, John Horne Tooke, and Equiano's friend Hardy, had been held in prison under suspension of habeas corpus through the spring and summer of 1794. When they were finally acquitted in the autumn, a burst of confidence was felt within the Reform movement (that is, until the Pitt ministry finally stepped in with the "Gagging Acts" of December 1795). While Equiano, with many other writers at this time, may have fallen silent during the 1794 crackdown on political radicals, he remained solicitous of the plight of his fellow activists who were battling the sons of Belial in 1790s England.

JOHN BUGG

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