

## Notes on the Black Abolitionists Quobna Ottobah Cugoano and Ignatius Sancho

**Quobna Ottobah Cugoano**, usually known by the shorter form Ottobah Cugoano

- Born in present-day Ghana in the 1750s.
- At the age of 13, Cugoano was kidnapped and taken into slavery. The price he fetched was 'a gun, a piece of cloth, and some lead.'
- He worked on plantations in Grenada before being brought to England, where he acquired his freedom.
- He was baptised as 'John Stuart' in 1773 and continued to use this name for the next fifteen years. During this time he worked for the artist Richard Cosway.
- Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Commerce of the Human Species* was published in 1787, being the first directly abolitionist publication in English by an African. His work part autobiography, part political treatise, and part Christian exegesis was bold for its time, attacking the colonial conquest of the Americas as well as slavery. He argued that slavery and Christianity are incompatible. The book seems to have been widely read. It went through at least three printings in 1787 and was translated into French.
- Friend of Olaudah Equiano, and a neighbour of Ignatius Sancho.
- We do not know where, when, or how he died.
- Despite being a servant to an artist, no image of Cugoano survives.

The following extracts are taken from Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments*.

This extract describes how Cugoano was kidnapped and put aboard a slave ship.

"...Soon some of us attempted in vain to run away, but pistols and cutlasses were soon introduced, threatening, that if we offered to stir we should all lie dead on the spot ... we were then immediately divided into different parties. We were soon led out of the way which we knew, and towards the evening ... we came in sight of a town, they told us that this great man of theirs lived there ... I was kept about six days at this man's house, and in the evening there was another man came and talked with him a good while, and I heard the one say to the other he must go, and the other said the sooner the better ... Next day we travelled on, and in the evening came to a town, where I saw several white people, which made me afraid that they would eat me, according to our notion as children in the inland parts of the country. This made me rest very uneasy all the night ... After I was ordered out, the horrors I soon saw and felt, cannot be well described; I saw many of my miserable countrymen chained two and two, some hand-cuffed, and some with their hands tied behind. We were conducted along by a guard, and when we arrived at the castle, I asked my guide what I was brought there for, he told me to learn the ways of the *brow-sow*, that is the white faced people ... But when a vessel arrived to conduct us away to the ship, it was a most horrible scene; there was nothing to be heard but rattling of chains, smacking of whips, and the groans and cries of our fellow-men. Some would not stir from the ground, when they were lashed and beat in the most horrible manner. I have forgot the name of this infernal fort; but we were taken in the ship that came for us, to another that was ready to sail from Cape Coast. When we were put into the ship, we saw several black merchants coming on board, but we were all drove into our holes,

and not suffered to speak to any of them. In this situation we continued several days in sight of our native land; but I could find no good person to give any information of my situation to Accasa at Agimaque. And when we found ourselves at last taken away, death was more preferable than life, and a plan was concerted amongst us, that we might burn and blow up the ship, and to perish all together in the flames; but we were betrayed by one of our own countrywomen, who slept with some of the head men of the ship, for it was common for the dirty filthy sailors to take African women and lie upon their bodies; but the men were chained and pent up in holes. It was the women and boys which were to burn the ship, with the approbation and groans of the rest; though that was prevented, the discovery was likewise a cruel bloody scene.

“But it would be needless to give a description of all the horrible scenes which we saw, and the base treatment which we met with in this dreadful captive situation, as the similar cases of thousands, which suffer by this infernal traffic, are well known. Let it suffice to say, that I was thus lost to my dear indulgent parents and relations, and they to me. All my help was cries and tears, and these could not avail; nor suffered long, till one succeeding woe, and dread, swelled up another. Brought from a state of innocence and freedom, and, in a barbarous and cruel manner, conveyed to a state of horror and slavery: this abandoned situation may be easier conceived than described. From the time that I was kid-napped and conducted to a factory, and from thence in the brutish, base, but fashionable way of traffic, consigned to Granada, the grievous thoughts which I then felt, still pant in my heart; though my fears and tears have long since subsided. And yet it is still grievous to think that thousands more have suffered in similar and greater distress, under the hands of barbarous robbers, and merciless taskmasters; and that many even now are suffering in all the extreme bitterness of grief and woe, that no language can describe.”

This extract appears towards the end of the book following Cugoano's argument that slavery and Christianity are incompatible.

“To put an end to the wickedness of slavery and merchandizing of men, and to prevent murder, extirpation and dissolution, is what every righteous nation ought to seek after; and to endeavour to diffuse knowledge and instruction to all the heathen nations wherever they can, is the grand duty of all Christian men. But while the horrible traffic of slavery is admitted and practiced, there can be but little hope of any good proposals meeting with success anywhere; for the abandoned carriers of it on have spread the poison of their iniquity wherever they come, at home and abroad. Were the iniquitous laws in support of it, and the whole of that oppression and injustice abolished, and the righteous laws of Christianity, equity, justice and humanity established in the room thereof, multitudes of nations would flock to the standard of truth, and instead of revolting away, they would count it their greatest happiness to be under the protection and jurisdiction of a righteous government. And in that respect, in the multitude of the people is the King's honour; but in the want of people, is the destruction of the Prince.

“We would wish to have the grandeur and fame of the British empire to extend far and wide; and the glory and honor of God to be promoted by it, and the interest of Christianity set forth among all the nations wherever its influence and power can

extend; but not to be supported by the insidious pirates, depredators, murderers and slave-holders. And as it might diffuse knowledge and instruction to others, that it might receive a tribute of reward from all its territories, forts and garrisons, without being oppressive to any. But contrary to this the wickedness of many of the White People who keep slaves, and contrary to all the laws and duties of Christianity which the scriptures teach, they have in general endeavoured to keep the Black People in total ignorance as much as they can, which must be a great dishonor to any Christian government, and injurious to the safety and happiness of rulers.”

### **Ignatius Sancho (1729-1780)**

- Thought to have been born on a slave ship crossing the Atlantic from Africa to the West Indies.
- His earliest memories were of Greenwich, near London, where he worked as a child slave. He then became employed by the Montagu family as their butler before retiring to run a grocery shop in Westminster.
- He composed music, appeared on the stage, and entertained many famous literary and artistic figures of London.
- Sancho was the first African we know of to vote in a British election, he wrote a large number of letters, which were collected and published in 1782, two years after his death.
- To eighteenth-century British opponents of the slave trade he became a symbol of the humanity of Africans then disputed by many.

The following extract is taken from a letter written c.1778 to Jack Wingrave, who was the son of John Wingrave a London bookbinder and bookseller. It contains a strong attack on empire, as well as his outspoken views on slavery

“I am sorry to observe that the practice of your country (which as a resident I love - and for its freedom - and for the many blessings I enjoy in it - shall ever have my warmest wishes - prayers - and blessings); I say it is with reluctance, that I must observe your country's conduct has been uniformly wicked in the East - West Indies - and even on the coast of Guinea. - The grand object of English navigators - indeed of all Christian navigators - is money - money - money - for which I do not pretend to blame them - Commerce was meant by the goodness of the Deity to diffuse the various goods of the earth into every part - to unite mankind in the blessed chains of brotherly love - society - and mutual dependence: - the enlightened Christian should diffuse the riches of the Gospel of peace - with the commodities of his respective land - Commerce attended with strict honesty - and with Religion for its companion - would be a blessing to every shore it touched at. - In Africa, the poor wretched natives - blessed with the most fertile and luxuriant soil - are rendered so much the more miserable for what Providence meant as a blessing: - the Christians' abominable traffic for slaves - and the horrid cruelty and treachery of the petty Kings - encouraged by their Christian customers - who carry them strong liquors - to enflame their national madness - and powder - and bad fire-arms - to furnish them with the hellish means of killing and kidnapping.”