

Primary Source:

Olaudah Equiano's Arctic Voyage – "Towards the North Pole"



Introduction

Olaudah Equiano's account of his 1773 Arctic expedition aboard HMS *Racehorse* provides us with an extraordinarily rare perspective: a first-hand narrative from a formerly enslaved person who participated directly in British maritime scientific exploration. Equiano joined a British naval expedition to the North Pole led by Constantine John Phipps on a voyage that was commissioned by the Royal Society and supported by the British Admiralty.

Discussion questions

- What does Equiano's Arctic voyage description tell us about Black sailors' experiences on British ships? Give specific details from the text.
- How does Equiano contribute to natural history knowledge through his narrative?
- Why is it important that we have Equiano's first-hand account of this scientific expedition?

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Introduction

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Olaudah Equiano's Arctic Voyage - "Towards the North Pole"

Source: Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, vol. 2 (Printed for and sold by the Author, 1789), chapter 9, 102–14, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/equiano2/equiano2.html>. The source excerpts have been edited and annotated for modern readers. The original text may be found at the location listed in this citation.



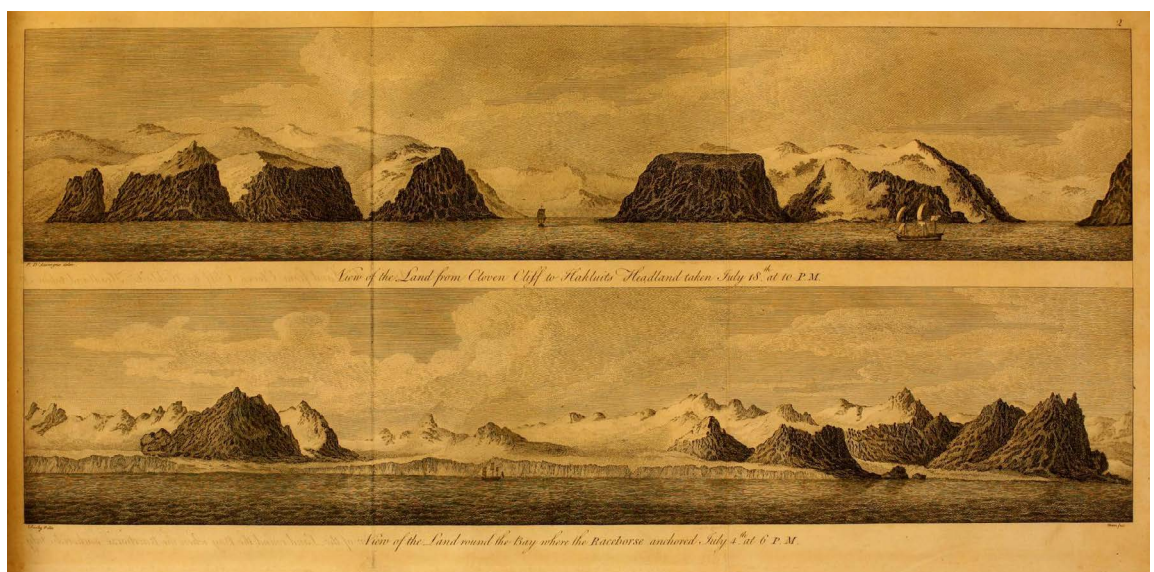
A later colorized view of the HMS Racehorse and HMS Carcass passing through an expanse of floating ice, 1773.

CHAP. IX

[In] May 1773, when I was roused by the sound of fame, to seek new adventures, and to find, towards the north pole, [...] a passage to India. An expedition was now fitting out to explore a north-east passage, conducted by the Honourable John Constantine Phipps (a British naval officer), since Lord Mulgrave, in his Majesty's sloop of war (a type of small warship), the Race Horse.

My master, [Dr. Charles Irving,] being anxious for the reputation of this adventure, we therefore prepared every thing for our voyage, and I attended him on board the *Race Horse*, the 24th day of May 1773. We proceeded to Sheerness (a port town in southeast England), where we were joined by his Majesty's sloop, the *Carcass*, commanded by Captain Lutwidge. On the 4th of June, we sailed towards our destined place, the pole, and on the 15th of the same month, we were off Shetland (islands north of Scotland).

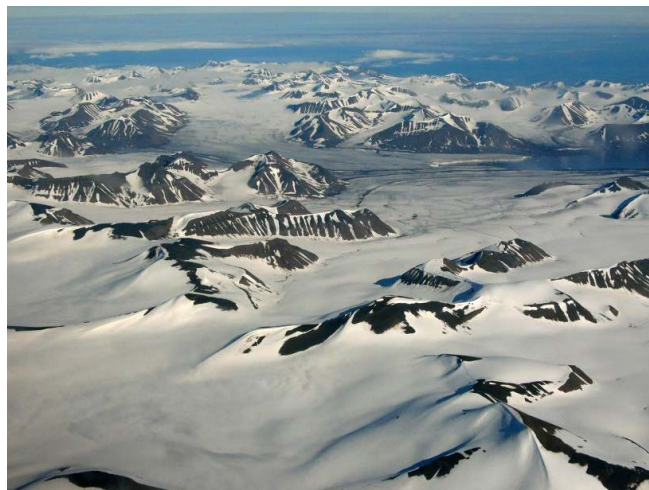
[...] On this day I had a great and unexpected deliverance from an accident which was near blowing up the ship and destroying the crew, which made me ever after during the



View of the arctic landscape, from an account by Constantine John Phipps Mulgrave, the commander of the 1773 Racehorse and Carcass expedition.

voyage uncommonly cautious. The ship was so filled that there was very little room on board for any one, which placed me in a very awkward situation. I had resolved to keep a journal of this singular and interesting voyage; and I had no other place for this purpose but a little cabin, or the doctor's store-room, where I slept. This little place was stuffed with all manner of combustibles, [...] and many other dangerous things. Unfortunately it happened in the evening as I was writing my journal, that I had occasion to take the candle out of the lant[ern], and a spark having touched a single thread of [some loose fibers], all the rest caught the flame, and immediately the whole was in a blaze. I saw nothing but present death before me, and expected to be the first to perish in the flames. In a moment the alarm was spread, and many people who were near ran to assist in putting out the fire. All this time I was in the very midst of the flames; my shirt, and the handkerchief on my neck, were burnt, and I was almost smothered with the smoke. However, through God's mercy, as I was nearly giving up all hopes, some people brought blankets and mattresses and threw them on the flames, by which means in a short time the fire was put out. I was severely reprimanded and menaced by such of the officers who knew it, and strictly charged never more to go there with a light: and, indeed, even my own fears made me give heed to this command for a little time; but at last, not being able to write my journal in any other part of the ship, I was tempted again to venture by stealth with a light in the same cabin, though not without considerable fear and dread on my mind.

[...] On the 20th of June we began to use Dr. Irving's apparatus, [a distillery,] for making salt water fresh; I used to attend the distillery: I frequently purified from twenty-six to forty gallons a day. The water thus distilled was perfectly pure, well tasted, and free from salt; and was used on various occasions on board the ship.



Contemporary photograph of the region visited by the HMS Racehorse and HMS Carcass voyage.

On the 28th of June, being in [the far north in the Arctic], we made Greenland, where I was surprised to see the sun did not set. The weather now became extremely cold; and as we sailed between north and east, which was our course, we saw many very high and curious mountains of ice; and also a great number of very large whales, which used to come close to our ship, and blow the water up to a very great height in the air. One morning we had vast quantities of sea-horses (walruses) about the ship, which neighed exactly like any other horses. We fired some harpoon guns amongst them, in order to take some, but we could not get any.

[On t]he 30th, the captain of a Greenland ship came on board, and told us of three ships that were lost in the ice; however we still held on our course till July the 11th, when we were stopped by one compact impenetrable body of ice.

[...] On the 29th and 30th of July we saw one continued plain of smooth unbroken ice, bounded only by the horizon; and we fastened to a piece of ice that was [approximately 27 feet] thick.

We had generally sunshine, and constant daylight; which gave cheerfulness and novelty



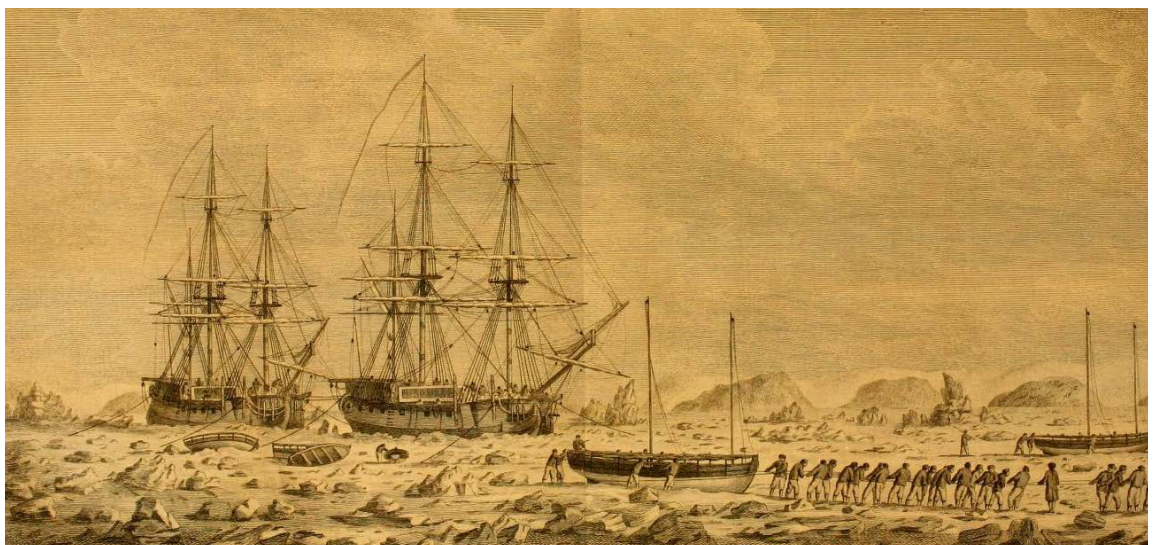
A later colorized view of an iceberg along the sea, encountered on the expedition on August 18, 1773.

to the whole of this striking, grand, and uncommon scene; and, to heighten it still more, the reflection of the sun from the ice gave the clouds a most beautiful appearance. We killed many different animals at this time, and among the rest nine [polar] bears. Though they had nothing in their paunches (stomachs) but water yet they were all very fat.

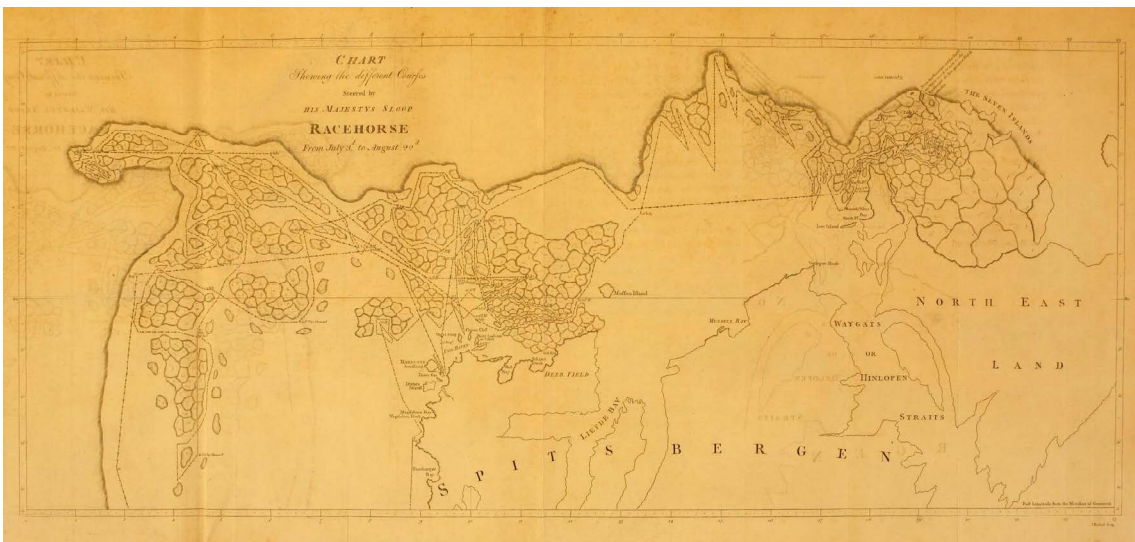
[...] Some of our people once, in the boat, fired at and wounded a sea-horse, which dived immediately; and, in a little time after, brought up with it a number of others. They all joined in an attack upon the boat, and were with difficulty prevented from staving or oversetting her; but a boat from the Carcass having come to assist ours, and joined it, they dispersed, after having wrested an oar from one of the men.

[...] Though we wounded several of these animals we never got but one.

[...] We remained hereabouts until the 1st of August; when the two ships got completely fastened in the ice, occasioned by the loose ice that set in from the sea. This made our situation very dreadful and alarming; so that on the 7th day we were in very great apprehension of having the ships squeezed to pieces. The officers now held a council to know what was best for us to do in order to save our lives; and it was determined that we should endeavour to escape by dragging our boats along the ice towards the sea; which, however, was farther off than any of us thought. This determination filled us with extreme dejection, and confounded us with despair; for we had very little prospect of escaping with life. However, we sawed some of the ice about the ships to keep it from hurting them; and thus kept them in a kind of pond. We then began to drag the boats as well as we could towards the sea; but, after two or three days labour, we made very little progress; so that some of our hearts totally failed us, and I really began to give up myself for lost, when I saw our surrounding calamities.



Depiction of shipmates laboring on the ice, from an account by Constantine John Phipps Mulgrave, the commander of the 1773 Racehorse and Carcass expedition.



Route of the HMS Racehorse and HMS Carcass.

[...] It was the eleventh day of the ships being thus fastened, and the fourth of our drawing the boats in this manner, that the wind changed to the E. N. E. The weather immediately became mild, and the ice broke towards the sea, which was to the S. W. of us. Many of us on this got on board again, and with all our might we hove the ships into every open water we could find, and made all the sail on them in our power; and now, having a prospect of success, we made signals for the boats and the remainder of the people. This seemed to us like a reprieve from death; and happy was the man who could first get on board of any ship, or the first boat he could meet. We then proceeded in this manner till we got into the open water again, which we accomplished in about thirty hours, to our infinite joy and gladness of heart.

[...] As soon as we were out of danger we came to anchor and refitted; and on the 19th of August we sailed from this uninhabited extremity of the world, where the inhospitable climate affords neither food nor shelter, and not a tree or shrub of any kind grows amongst its barren rocks; but all is one desolate and expanded waste of ice, which even the constant beams of the sun for six months in the year cannot penetrate or dissolve. The sun now being on the decline the days shortened as we sailed to the southward; and, on the 28th, in latitude 73, it was dark by ten o'clock at night.

[...] And thus ended our Arctic voyage, to the no small joy of all on board, after having been absent four months; in which time, at the imminent hazard of our lives, we explored [almost as far as the North Pole], much farther, by all accounts, than any navigator had ever ventured before; in which we fully proved the impracticability of finding a passage that way to India.

Image Citations

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