

John Bailey. *The Lost German Slave Girl*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003. xiii + 268 pp. \$24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87113-921-4.



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In the course of researching mid-nineteenth-century New Orleans court records for a planned book on the law and slavery in the American South, John Bailey stumbled upon the fascinating story of a slave suing for her freedom on the basis that she was a German immigrant enslaved illegally as a child. On making this discovery, Bailey shifted gears and decided to focus his book on Sally Miller, the “German slave girl” of the title, and her struggle for freedom.

Bailey begins the story with the discovery of Sally by a German immigrant woman who had traveled to America with Sally’s family and with the subsequent decision by the German community in New Orleans to file suit for Sally’s freedom. In the remainder of his book, Bailey retells the contending claims of the Germans and Sally’s prior master about her identity and narrates the details of the trial and several appeals that followed. Throughout the narration, he demonstrates a strong sense of place and character and helps the reader understand the atmosphere in New Orleans in the mid-nineteenth century and the characters’ motivations, emotions, and thoughts. The former effort is laudable, and too often lacking in scholarly history books. However, the latter is less so and is at times quite troubling to any reader who believes that the inner lives of historical individuals are largely unknowable.

Bailey intersperses narrative sections with sections discussing larger historical issues necessary for comprehension of the story. These issues include the passage of slave status through the mother (leading to a small group of essentially “white” slaves), the peculiar legal system of Louisiana (based on a mixture of English common law and French civil law), and the history of the city of Louisiana. These sections are competent, accurate, up-to-date, and can serve as a good introduction to the subjects for a reader unfamiliar with this area of history. However, they are also shallow and not at all original. A reader knowledgeable about slavery and Louisiana history will find only familiar ground.

The most troubling aspect of Bailey’s book is his interpretation and use of sources. Bailey bases the entire book, necessarily, on a handful of sources. These sources include the court records, pamphlets written at the time, and accounts of the story written decades after the fact that even Bailey recognizes as untrustworthy. He uses these sources to produce an almost novelistic story that cannot possibly be thought to reflect any kind of “reality.” Characters in the book “looked up in surprise,” (p. 9), “[were] envied” by other slaves (p. 97) and “took a deep sigh” (p. 127). The reader learns of the inner thoughts and feelings of characters such as Madame Carl Rouff, the German woman who discovered Sally (pp. 1-4), and

Wheelock Upton, the plaintiff's attorney (p. 127). Bailey also admits that he has indulged in creating conversations (p. xi) and tailored the course and content of the trial for ease of retelling (pp. xi and 132). Complicating Bailey's interpretative problem is his extremely lax method of citation. The reader rarely learns where Bailey found a particular quote or fact. He also cites very few secondary sources, so that, while his sections on larger historical issues are quite good, the reader has no way of knowing from where he drew them.

In the end, one is left wondering if this particular story would have been better told by a writer more willing to read the sources critically while sticking more closely to what they actually said. One could imagine, for

example, a history of the trial and subsequent appeals in which the reader hears the voices of the witnesses unencumbered by Bailey's need to force narration upon them. In such a telling, many of the same issues could be explored and similar conclusions drawn without creating what is, in the end, more historical fiction than history. One could also imagine a history of the trial that wholly eschews narration and instead critically picks apart the records to learn more about slavery, immigration, and the law in Antebellum Louisiana. To be fair to Bailey, this book is popular history and does succeed in what it set out to do: entertain and edify the casual reader. However, most professional historians will come away from this book unsatisfied.

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