

H-France Review Vol. 8 (May 2008), No. 73

Carl J. Ekberg, *Stealing Indian Women: Native Slavery in the Illinois Country*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007. xvi +236 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, and index. \$38.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-252-03208-0.

Review by Bob Morrissey, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

There are few historians who have done more to explain the nature of French colonialism and French colonial culture in a single place during the eighteenth century than Carl J. Ekberg. Beginning in the 1980s, Ekberg began what became a four-part series of books on the colonial Illinois Country, the network of French colonies near modern-day St. Louis that were the most remote but also among the most flourishing colonial regions in the French “Creole crescent” in the colonial period. Founded by Jesuits and illegal *coureurs de bois* who married Indian women and settled permanently beginning in the early 1700s, the colonies of Kaskaskia, Cahokia, Chartres, and Ste. Phillippe attracted numerous settlers from Canada and Louisiana from the 1720s forward. By 1750, the agricultural region was thriving as the breadbasket of Louisiana, with around 1500 residents including slaves. After the Seven Years War ended the French regime and transferred these villages to British control, many of the French Creoles of Illinois emigrated across the Mississippi River to Spanish territory and the growing villages of St. Louis and Ste. Genevieve. While officially part of the Spanish empire from 1763 forward, these growing villages were never colonized by Spanish speakers, and instead witnessed the continuation of the Francophone culture of the Illinois Country well into the early 1800s. Ekberg mastered this world and became its most important scholar.

Ekberg’s previous books delved into this complex world from different angles, but always examined the development of what Ekberg has convincingly shown was a *sui generis* colonial culture.[1] His most important contribution through all of his books was an explanation of the distinctive common-field agricultural complex in Illinois Country. As he argued in very creative and marvelously researched writings, the cooperative agricultural practices of Illinois led to a distinctive local system of *habitants* without *seigneurs*. Illinois, in Ekberg’s telling, was a place where many decisions were made by local assembly, and where a strong communitarian *mentalité* characterized local life.

But Ekberg’s portrait of Illinois has always been incomplete. For while Ekberg directed his focus deeply into the French *habitants* of Illinois, he very seldom addressed the issue of the relationships between these Frenchmen and the Indians with whom they lived so closely.[2] Even as many historians were exploring “Frontier exchange economies,” and “middle grounds” in the French empire, Ekberg never gave a sustained treatment of the issue of French-Indian relations in Illinois.[3] Ekberg was surely careful to reveal in his demographic analyses how significant a part of the colonial population in Illinois was made up by slaves, both Indian and African, and by Indian wives and métis children in the community. But even as he recognized the importance of slavery and Indians to the society, Ekberg usually confined his research energies to elucidating the French society and, in many ways, emphasized its very “Frenchness.” Indeed, one of Ekberg’s strong claims was that Illinois society and culture were more the transplants of an Old World European peasant tradition than they were an essentially American innovation formed out of a Turnerian encounter with the American frontier. While this argument was convincing, one wondered how “Old World” the community could have been given the importance of Indians to the community and the heavy reliance on slavery in the agricultural system.

Ekberg's final book in the Illinois Country quartet, then, finally explores the multicultural dimensions of Illinois colonial culture head-on. *Stealing Indian Women* is a fascinating examination of a system of Indian slavery which was part of Illinois society from the first explorations of Marquette in 1673 and whose scale, Ekberg shows, was significant. Indian slaves comprised 17 per cent of the colonial population of Illinois in 1732. Further, like French-Indian marriages, Indian slavery was an institution that created a fully "integrated" world of Frenchmen and Indians. Given the scale and longevity of the institution in Illinois Country, Ekberg's work not only adds a crucial new dimension to his portrait of the distinctive colonial culture of Illinois Country, but it also will be a much-discussed intervention into a growing conversation among early American historians about the nature of European engagement in Indian slavery in the colonial period.[4] As Ekberg argues, there were few places in colonial America where Indian slavery was as stable and important an institution.

Ekberg is a master researcher, and this book is a fitting conclusion to his Illinois quartet in part because it is a demonstration of Ekberg's absolutely tenacious research and mastery of the sources on Illinois Country. Indian slavery is an elusive topic, and its traces show up scattered throughout the notarial documents kept in eighteenth-century Kaskaskia, census records sent occasionally from Illinois to Versailles, baptismal and marriage records kept by Jesuits in local churches in Illinois Country, and in administrative documents in the archives of the French, Spanish, and British governments which administered the Mississippi Valley in the eighteenth century. Ekberg's research is absolutely impressive.

The book is divided into two main parts. The first part will likely be the most-discussed by academic historians. It is an examination of the nature of Indian slavery in Illinois throughout the eighteenth century. As Ekberg shows, Indian slaves came from many sources. French travelers in the Illinois Country obtained or purchased captives or "slaves" as a form of diplomatic alliance with Indian allies in the late seventeenth century. Illegal fur traders also became the owners of Indian slave women who were their concubines in the early years of the Illinois frontier. By 1715, some Frenchmen in Illinois were trading Indian slaves and actively acquiring them from Indian slavers up the Missouri River. Some of these "Panis" slaves may have been sold to traders in Carolina, or downriver in Mobile or New Orleans, where they may have eventually made their way to Caribbean sugar plantations as chattel slaves. But Ekberg doubts that this chattel slave trade was such a major enterprise (p. 15), since the Louisiana government banned this traffic in Indian slaves in 1726. In any event, Ekberg is interested in the institution of slavery as it developed and flourished in Illinois, and not in the slave trade itself.

A main preoccupation of the book is to define what "slavery" meant in the Illinois Country. For Ekberg, Indian slaves occupied an ambiguous position in the Illinois Country society. The traditions defining slavery in Canada and Louisiana—the parent societies of Illinois Country—were various. Slavery "was a complex admixture composed of various concepts, traditions, and practices" (p. 10). Informing the French colonial understanding of the institution of slavery were traditions such as English Atlantic chattel slavery, Western ideas of slavery dating back to the ancient classical world, and contemporary notions of status hierarchy from European society. But also informing the treatment and status of Indian slaves was the tradition of slavery in Native American societies themselves. Among Indians like the Iroquois, chattel slavery was non-existent. Instead, the status of Native "slaves" was determined by a complex system of rules about captives of war and what Iroquois scholars have called an "adoption complex." [5]

Given these many traditions informing the institution, Ekberg tries to parse out just what position Indian slaves occupied in Illinois, legally and socially. He provides the most thorough explanation in print of the colonial laws pertaining to slavery in Louisiana and Canada and essentially concludes that trading Indian slaves was formally banned from a fairly early date by the colonial authorities. Yet, slavery only flourished in spite of these official discouragements, and Ekberg demonstrates that Indian slavery was an improvisational, shadowy, and *ad hoc* institution rather than a practice controlled by

official policy. Rather than in formal definitions of slavery, then, Ekberg looks for the essence of slavery in practice. In chapters that follow the development of slavery in the various villages of the Illinois, as well as a very strong chapter on the family connections of slaves, Ekberg argues that many slaves in Illinois were “thoroughly integrated” into the colonial community (pp. 69, 71, 73, 74). Further, for many, their lives and status were far more flexible than under a rigid system of chattel slavery.

Ekberg’s strongest chapter about the ambiguity of Indian slavery focuses on family life and the social integration of slaves. As mentioned, many Indian slaves were concubines and sexual partners of Frenchmen. While Ekberg can learn little about the intimate content of these relationships (see p. 86), he tries to find out all he can about the families that resulted. As he shows, the children of these women were not simply treated as slaves themselves, but were often baptized and often cared for as well as legitimate children, as in the case of Marie-Joseph Deguire, or the daughters of Auguste Chouteau and an Indian slave woman in early St. Louis. Additionally, certain Indian women were emancipated so that they could marry Frenchmen. In most cases, slaves could not marry one another, but some slaves were freed so that they could marry, and the children of slaves were often baptized and could grow up to be quite distinguished members of the French community. Significant numbers of slaves were liberated when their masters died. In one fascinating case, two slaves owned by the widow Billeron were liberated while she was alive, but remained in her household as “adopted” members of the family (p. 73). These acculturated slaves became not just legally free members of the French community, but also became “intimate members” of the Billeron family. Ekberg’s chapter on “Couples and Coupling” suggests also that many Indian slaves had freedom of movement in the town and were able to develop regular communication with one another. The social integration of slaves and the flexibility of their status suggest an institution very different from strict chattel slavery.

But some questions about the nature of Indian slavery remain unanswered here. While we gain a great understanding of the status of slaves in part one, Ekberg might have spent more time investigating the specific meanings and practices of slavery within the Indian cultures of the Mississippi Valley in this period, which one suspects directly affected the way that the institution of Indian slavery developed and was incorporated into the French colonies of Illinois Country. In addition, Ekberg devotes precious little attention to the question of labor. While he frequently comments that most Indian slaves did domestic labor as opposed to the agricultural labor performed by African slaves, Ekberg seems to have few sources that can explain the specific conditions of Indian slave work. Also missing from these sources is any sense of labor discipline or enforcement. Did slaves receive punishment? Only one instance is ever mentioned (p. 112). Did they resist their status?

This final question is partially answered in part 2 of *Stealing Indian Women*. Here, in five narrative chapters, Ekberg painstakingly reconstructs the dramatic story of Marianne, an Indian slave who in 1773 ran off with a fur trader called Céladon, stealing herself and abandoning her family for a life of freedom in the wilderness of the West. Using an approach inspired by Natalie Zemon Davis’ deep contextualization and analysis of the trial transcripts of the Martin Guerre controversy in sixteenth-century southwestern France, Ekberg renders an intense narrative of Marianne’s flight and the ensuing investigation by authorities in Ste. Genevieve. Through Marianne’s life story, Ekberg reveals that Indian slavery, despite its relative flexibility, could be restrictive and oppressive enough to inspire a woman to undertake a dangerous flight and even to abandon her children. Further, he reveals an interesting underworld of resistance in Illinois by slaves, fur traders, and social outcasts.

The insights in part two of the book are not easily summarized, and part of the strength here is the sheer richness of Ekberg’s depiction of the world of Illinois. Ekberg never misses an opportunity to give a mini-biography of each new character that enters the story, and one is struck by the sometimes overwhelming comprehensiveness of the treatment. Still, as exhaustive and impressive as this research is, Marianne’s story leaves us with unanswered and curious questions. Given the relatively flexible nature of Indian slavery as it is described in part 1 of the book, Marianne’s risky choices seem hard to

fathom. The sources just do not reveal certain essentials— the particular motives that led to her decision to flee, what her life was like under slavery, or why freedom with a cranky fur-trader in the remote Black River region seemed more attractive than remaining in Ste. Genevieve. Further, since we know the answers to these questions pointed Marianne towards escape, it is not exactly clear why the records from Illinois are not full of more such flights and fugitives.

Further answers to some of these questions may come only with more research on the nature of Indian slavery and slavery in general in Illinois. But Ekberg's contribution will be definitive for some time. What emerges in this book is a complicated institution of Indian slavery. This institution was truly a product of a middle ground where imperial authorities, French settlers, or Indians were not powerful enough to establish hegemony. Indian slavery was a set of negotiations and improvisations made between Indian and French peoples sharing a common new world. Previous volumes of Ekberg's quartet on the Illinois Country have provided countless insights into a *sui generis* and fascinating colonial culture in this remote colonial outpost. This final excellent volume increases our sense of how complex and distinctive that culture really was.

NOTES

[1] Ekberg's books include Carl J. Ekberg, *Colonial Ste. Genevieve: An Adventure on the Mississippi Frontier*, (Gerald, Mo.: Patrice Press, 1985); Carl J. Ekberg, *French Roots in the Illinois Country: The Mississippi Frontier in Colonial Times*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Carl J. Ekberg, *François Vallé and His World: Upper Louisiana Before Louis and Clark*, (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

[2] An exception is his article, co-authored with Anton J. Pregaldin, "Marie Rouensa and the Foundations of French Illinois," *Illinois Historical Journal* 84(3) (1991): pp. 146-160.

[3] Daniel J. Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[4] See Alan Galloway, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1717* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002); James F. Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Brett Rushforth, "A Little Flesh We Offer You: The Origins of Indian Slavery in New France," *William and Mary Quarterly* 60 (2003): 777-808.

[5] Brett Rushforth, "A Little Flesh We Offer You," p. 779

Bob Morrissey
University of Tennessee, Knoxville
rmorriss@utk.edu

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the [Editor-in-Chief of H-France](#). ISSN 1553-9172