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Sue Peabody, *Madeleine's Children: Family, Freedom, Secrets, and Lies in France's Indian Ocean Colonies.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. xiv + 344 pp. Maps, figures, notes, and index. $34.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780190233884.

Review by Gregory Mole, University of Memphis.

By the nineteenth century, the slave narrative had developed into a powerful Anglo-American literary genre. Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass became best-selling authors, detailing the horrors of their respective slave societies and--in the process--firing the engines of abolitionism. Part personal history, part morality play, their autobiographies inspired sympathy, activism, and legal action across the Atlantic World. Such voices are curiously absent from French literature of the same period. Yet as Sue Peabody shows in this impressive study of the family history of Madeleine, an enslaved woman from Bengal, the experiences of slaves in the Francophone world lacked for neither drama nor didactic imprint. Following Madeleine and her two children, Constance and Furcy, as they navigated the harsh realities of the East Indian plantation complex, Peabody delivers a tale of personal tragedy and salvation, set against a global backdrop of revolution, restoration, and imperial rivalry. The result is not only a compelling glimpse of figures marginally represented within the historical record, but also a provocative analysis of what it actually means to be free.

First the details of the story. Madeleine was born in the mid eighteenth century (an apocryphal slave contract places her birth in 1762), but her parentage, early history, and race remain a mystery. What we do know is that she eventually came into the service of a Mademoiselle Despense--reputedly a nun--who took her back to France in 1770. Once there, Despense seems to have sold her to the Routiers, a family of wealthy planters from Isle Bourbon, who brought the now-teenage Madeleine back with them to the Mascarenes. But Despense did so without either recording the sale or registering Madeleine as a slave, skirting French free soil legislation. The Routiers' ownership of Madeleine was thus based on dubious legal foundations--circumstances that would prove critical to her son's campaign to free himself in the early nineteenth century.

Under the Routiers, Madeleine's ambiguous situation and legal status became decidedly hazier. The terms of her service remain especially unclear; Peabody speculates that she may have served as both a wet nurse and, during the long voyage to Isle Bourbon, as a concubine to the Routier patriarch, Charles. Whatever the case, she eventually gave birth to three children: Maurice, about whom little was recorded; Constance, manumitted in her youth; and Furcy, who spent much of his adult life contesting the legality of his enslavement. The parentage of all three remains a mystery. But given Constance's early emancipation and Furcy's later claims to be the son of a Frenchman, there is good reason, Peabody maintains, to believe that their father was Charles.

As Madeleine and her family grew up and worked on Isle Bourbon, they experienced the delayed but nonetheless disruptive aftershocks of the French Revolution, the First Empire, the Bourbon restoration, and the Orléanist monarchy. The politics of reform followed a decidedly more circuitous path in the Mascarenes than in the Caribbean, as a powerful planter lobby managed to temper efforts toward wholesale emancipation. Indeed, even as the French empire buckled under the successive aftershocks of revolution and reaction, elite families like the Routiers consolidated their land and status through marriage. In 1794, they married their eldest daughter, Eugénie, to Joseph Lory, an up-and-coming merchant and plantation owner. Every good story needs a villain, and Lory would prove to be just that.

As Peabody shows, Lory's nuptials had significant implications for Madeleine and her family. Five years before this marriage, the widow Routier, Charles's wife, formally manumitted Madeleine--without either informing her of freedom or, in later censuses, recording her new status. As the widow's health declined, Joseph came increasingly to manage her affairs. Whether through legitimate transfer or accounting sleight-of-hand, Furcy somehow came into Lory's service during this time, appearing on his census in 1806. Madeleine, meanwhile, finally discovered the truth about her manumission in 1808, after the widow's death. Isle Bourbon's manumission laws required owners to pay former slaves a small pension; since Madeleine had legally but unknowingly been free for nineteen years, she was owed a tidy sum of back payments. Hoping to use some of this money to secure Furcy's freedom, Madeleine entered into negotiations with Lory soon after her manumission. Though the circumstances are a bit unclear, the unscrupulous Lory seems to have conspired with the local notary both to cheat her out of her pension and solidify his ownership over Furcy. Madeleine died broken-hearted and destitute in 1814. Her cause, however, would live on. Furcy dedicated the next thirty years to securing his liberty as well as restitution--an effort that illustrates the complex mechanics of emancipation in France's Indian Ocean empire.

If Madeleine and Furcy's journey seems tortuous and punctuated by long periods of uncertainty, that is Peabody's point. She juxtaposes the experiences of enslaved people--and the spotty record they left behind--with that of the Routiers, Lorys, and other planter elites, whose influence can be measured not only through the property they owned, but also their archival imprint. Whether white or of mixed racial extraction, French or creole, slave-owning families left their mark across the colonial registry, from baptisms and property deeds to birth certificates and census reports. Slaves, meanwhile, feature irregularly in the archives, their record colored by inconsistencies, erasures, and outright fabrications. As Peabody shows, the ability to document one's family history represented both an enduring source of power in eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave society and a clear dividing line between the free and unfree.

The second half of the book explores Furcy's efforts to secure his liberty. Here the interplay between family, historical memory, and freedom becomes particularly pronounced. While the Routiers and Lorys could mobilize mountains of paper to support their ownership claims, the illiterate Furcy remained more or less invisible bureaucratically. Indeed, he lacked the means to define even the most basic components of his identity: his legal status; his relationship with Virginie, a free person of color with whom he had two children, and even his parentage (and possible relationship through marriage to Lory). In the years following Madeleine's death, Furcy suffered increasingly harsh treatment under the Lorys, who harmed him physically while invalidating him legally. Yet, as Peabody shows, political and military developments outside the immediate context of Isle Bourbon soon opened up new opportunities for the island's most marginalized inhabitants.

In 1810, Britain conquered both Isle Bourbon and Isle de France. Although the British restored the former to France in 1814, they retained the latter, rechristening it as Mauritius. As in the French Caribbean, the threat of invasion forced colonial administrators in the Mascarenes to reconfigure existing slave policies. These reforms fell far short of the revolutionary achievements made in Saint-Domingue, but they nonetheless introduced important ambiguities and loopholes for figures like Furcy to exploit. The British pressured France to ban the slave trade in the region--although this prohibition was only lightly enforced. While they left much of the plantation complex on Mauritius intact, their presence there meant that elite families like the Lorys, who owned land on both of the Mascarenes, now found their property divided among multiple jurisdictions. The restored French monarchy, meanwhile, dispatched a cohort of reform-minded officials to Isle Bourbon, hoping to streamline its administration there. Among these were Louis Gilbert Boucher, the colony's new attorney-general. Boucher proved sympathetic to Furcy's cause, which he learned about through the entreaties of his sister, Constance. Soon after taking office, Boucher and his associates sued the Lorys to free Furcy.

Peabody uses the legal imbroglio that followed to illustrate the practical challenges of both securing and defining freedom in the colonial Mascarenes. As in the case of other lawsuits brought about by slaves in the Anglo-American world, Furcy's campaign reminds us of the limited recourse available to litigants when they lacked legal personhood. Over the next thirty years, Furcy and his sponsors employed a range of legal strategies. They invoked natural law and sifted through French free soil legislation, questioning whether those categorized racially as Indians could be sold as slaves. But for all their resourcefulness, Furcy and his advocates struggled to find the evidence necessary to support these claims, especially before an island judiciary eager to maintain the integrity of the plantation system. Their efforts came to naught; Furcy was imprisoned and then exiled to the Lory property on Mauritius in 1818.

Furcy's experiences in the final phase of the book provide a framework from which to explore the many ways that freedom was parcellated and understood in the nineteenth century. Eight years into his Mauritian exile, British administrators granted Furcy his freedom. After years of legal wrangling, during which he challenged everything from the racial and geographical to the juridical and moral foundations of his enslavement, Furcy ultimately secured his emancipation through a technicality: the Lorys had failed to register him as a slave when he arrived in Mauritius. On that island, at least, Furcy could now enjoy both *de jure* and *de facto* freedom. He was free, too, to experience other forms of liberty, especially the right to own property. By the 1830s, Furcy had become both a wealthy baker and--in a powerful reminder of the strictly personal limits to his moral outrage--a slaveowner himself. Furcy, as Peabody is quick to remind us, was no abolitionist.

Yet even this freedom remained conditional. Furcy could not visit his family in Isle Bourbon for risk of re-enslavement. Nor could he marry the mother of his children, since he had not obtained free status under French law. These constraints might explain Furcy's determination to appeal his standing in France, even if, by most practical measures, he had already obtained his freedom. Furcy brought his appeal to Paris in the 1840s, where his lawyer again invoked pre-revolutionary free soil legislation to claim that, since Madeleine's owner had failed to register her upon arrival in France, she had been emancipated before she came into the Routiers' service. Furcy, by extension of this argument, was freeborn. The Parisian court accepted these claims, awarding Furcy his liberty in 1843. Soon after, in 1848, Furcy succeeded in obtaining roughly 25,125 francs in punitive damages--short of the recompense he desired, but not an inconsequential sum. That same year, as revolution engulfed Paris, the French decided to emancipate all slaves in the Mascarenes. Furcy would spend the rest of his days as a freedman in a free society, dying in 1856.

Peabody is at her best sleuthing through the archives. The book is an academic labor of love, with years of painstaking research needed to fill the gaps surrounding Madeleine, Constance, and Furcy. Yet the significance of the book goes beyond Peabody's impressive detective work. *Madeleine's Children* contributes to a broader shift within the scholarship on French slavery, a move away from the iconic campaigns of liberation on Saint-Domingue, Guadeloupe, and elsewhere toward the everyday realities of slaveholding. The result is a more nuanced understanding of seemingly self-evident concepts such as freedom. Furcy's story lays bare the mechanics of enslavement and emancipation outside the telos of abolitionism, allowing us to explore what these conditions actually meant to bondsmen in both the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

If there is a criticism here, it is one common to microhistories: the line between speculation and reality gets blurry at points. Peabody sometimes drops the careful "mays" and "could haves" with which she begins discussion of some of the book's more ambiguous issues--Furcy's parentage, the terms of Madeleine's service to the Routiers--treating her own interpretation as established fact. This may seem like a minor point of phrasing, but careful reading is required to separate the verifiable context from informed guesswork.

Still, such concerns do little to detract from the book. Peabody has given us a readable, nuanced, and compelling piece of historical scholarship, one that is at once informative to specialists and accessible to a wider audience.

Gregory Mole
University of Memphis
gmole@memphis.edu

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