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Beyond Freedom's Reach

ADAM ROTHMAN

BEYOND FREEDOM'S REACH

A KIDNAPPING IN THE TWILIGHT OF SLAVERY
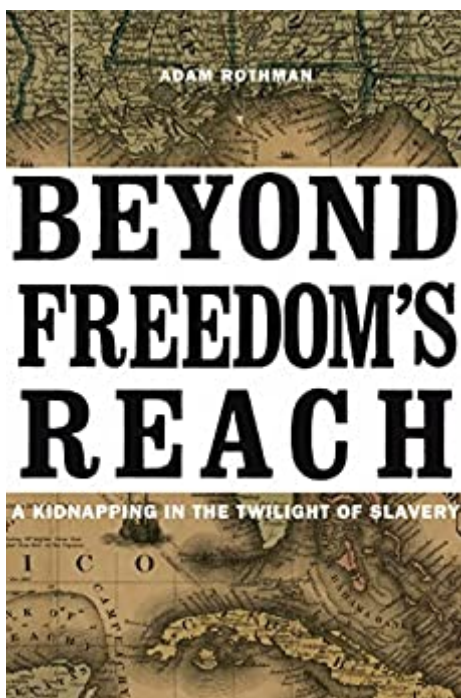
Synopsis

After Union forces captured New Orleans in 1862, Rose HereraÃ¢ ¬â„¢s owners fled to Havana, taking her three children with them. Adam Rothman tells the story of HereraÃ¢ ¬â„¢s quest to rescue her children from bondage after the war. As the kidnapping case made its way through the courts, it revealed the prospects and limits of justice during Reconstruction.

Book Information

File Size: 2780 KB

Print Length: 288 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press (February 25, 2015)

Publication Date: February 25, 2015

Sold by:Ã Â Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00TGZWTQ8

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Not Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #333,277 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store)   #91 inÃ Â Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Law > Perspectives on Law > Legal History   #131 inÃ Â Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > History > Americas > United States > Civil War > Abolition #280 inÃ Â Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Regional U.S. > South

Customer Reviews

Wonderful true story about a formerly enslaved mother fight to get her children back from Cuba during and after the Civil War.

Well written and very informative

Through the prism of one slave woman's efforts to recover her kidnapped children during the Civil War, Adam Rothman weaves a masterful and gripping story of the cruelty and chicanery of slave owners and slave dealers alike in thwarting the potential freedom of young children. By swiftly transferring her three children to a ship bound for Cuba, the owners sought to hang on to their

"property" in the form of three children under 10. Rose fights relentlessly to have her children returned from Cuba, using lawyers and politicians sympathetic and skilled. Rothman keeps the story's excitement keen, and yet also buttresses the events with the attending history of New Orleans from 1862 to 1865. I found this single story a way to learn about the tumult and uncertainty of life in the south during the Civil War: slave owners, wanting to keep their property were prepared to take any number of circuitous routes to capture and re-enslave freed African Americans. Both Confederate and Union sides were capable of taking advantage of the former slaves, and only a few men of principle were willing to try to help a woman reclaim her children. The vision of post Emancipation southern life, especially in places like New Orleans, informs our country even today. The book is a page-turner, fascinating in its unique story and skilled in its writing. I could not sleep until I finished it!

Both Edward Bartlett Rugemer, in The Problem of Emancipation, and Adam Rothman, in Beyond FreedomÃƒÂ¢Ã â¬Ã â„¢s Reach, reframe the history of the American Civil War as a conflict that was part of the larger debate over emancipation in the Caribbean world. Rugemer argues that British abolition changed the social landscape of the British West Indies while giving power to American abolitionistsÃƒÂ¢Ã â¬Ã â„¢ work in a way that threatened southern slaveholders. RothmanÃƒÂ¢Ã â¬Ã â„¢s narrative, set during the twilight of slavery in Union-occupied Louisiana, shows how slaveholders looked to Cuba in a desperate attempt to maintain their human property. Both engage with the historiography of the Atlantic world, with Rugemer linking the American experience of slavery to that of the broader Atlantic in which ideas were not circumscribed by national borders. Rothman, on the other hand, portrays Louisiana as a city connected to the world through the Caribbean and follows the lead of Rebecca ScottÃƒÂ¢Ã â¬Ã â„¢s Freedom Papers or Carlo GinzburgÃƒÂ¢Ã â¬Ã â„¢s The Cheese and the Worm in using microhistory to explore larger themes. To both Rothman and Rugemer, the American Civil War extended beyond the borders of the United States.Rugemer argues that a full understanding of the American Civil War demands an understanding of British abolition and its effect on the American South. Rugemer lays out his approach in his introduction, writing, ÃƒÂ¢Ã â¬Ã Å"An Atlantic approach to the antebellum United States demands the recognition of two contemporary realities. First, the boundaries of the United States were permeableÃƒÂ¢Ã â¬Ã Â|Second, American society had much in common with the societies of the Atlantic world, especially their divisive struggles over slavery and its abolition.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â¬Ã Â• These permeable boundaries allowed West Indian newspapers to circulate in the United States and spread fears of slave uprisings throughout the South. Additionally,

Southerners closely monitored the influence of abolitionists and maintained contact with their slaveholding counterparts in the West Indies. Rugemer uses this framework in The Problem of Emancipation to write an Atlantic history while engaging the scholarship of the Civil War and abolition in the Atlantic world. Rugemer identifies Bryan Edwards's 1797 book, An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingo, as crucial to slaveholders' perception of the threat to slavery throughout the Atlantic world. This volume "argued that the Amis des Noirs, the French abolitionist society, was entirely responsible for the insurrection in Saint-Domingue." Edwards's book, translated and distributed throughout the English-speaking world, became the model by which slaveholders understood abolition's impact on their societies. Planters linked abolitionists' actions to the Barbados rebellion of 1816 and the Demerara Rebellion of 1823 and, coupled with the Haitian Revolution, these stories served as dire warnings to Southern planters in the United States of the threat of British abolition to the institution of chattel slavery. Expanding on this framework, Rugemer writes, "Southern leaders feared that even the slightest agitation of antislavery belief would cause slave insurrections, and beginning in South Carolina, they acted to forestall abolitionism that caused such mayhem in the British West Indies." The later Jamaican insurrection, with the press coverage surrounding the arrest of missionaries supposedly involved in fomenting the rebellion, presented a greater threat and Southerners could present it as proof positive of their fears. The press coverage of the Jamaican insurrection, especially that focused on the missionaries, gave additional attention to the abolitionists' cause, further stoking Southern fears. Finally, British abolitionists' actions led to a concerted effort to avoid discussing slavery in Congress due to Southern politicians' fears that such discussions would legitimize abolition and pose a threat to their way of life. According to Rugemer, Southerners looked to the Spanish empire as an example of how to prevent the threat of the uprising in Jamaica. Robert Monroe Harrison, the U.S. consul to Jamaica, "cited the case of Cuba, who had recently appointed a consul in Jamaica to keep an eye on British activity." Rugemer writes, "The Spanish consul shared Harrison's conviction that the British sent emissaries to both the United States and Cuba to 'unhinge the minds of the slaves' and cause insurrections." This demonstrates how Edwards's argument about the cause of the Haitian Revolution had spread to both the United States and the Spanish authorities in Cuba, linking the two in an Atlantic and Caribbean system determined to preserve slavery. Rugemer's discussion of First of August

celebrations adds an Atlantic context to slave celebrations and further demonstrates the permeability of America's borders and the ability of West Indian abolition to influence popular political life. After the British Parliament's abolition of slavery on 1 August 1834, African Americans organized celebrations to commemorate the date and link the cause of abolition to the types of celebrations typically held on the Fourth of July. Rugemer argues, "…The fortuitous proximity of the Fourth of July and the First of August…allowed black and white abolitionists, often together, to project their movement into the public square." These celebrations spread throughout the North and Rugemer argues that William Lloyd Garrison's suggestion that the gatherings of black Americans "were absurd and monstrous" led to the split between he and Frederick Douglass, whose 1848 Fourth of July speech in Rochester, New York was simply a First of August speech presented a month early. That this speech occurred in Western New York further demonstrates the reach of Atlantic and Caribbean ideas. Writing seven years after Rugemer, Rothman uses the medium of microhistory to focus on Rose Herera's story and, in so doing, to explore Louisiana's connection to Caribbean slavery. In responding to the historiography, he writes, "Historians have tended to write about slavery in the aggregate rather than to delve deeply into the experiences of particular enslaved people." He argues that a more focused approach humanizes the narrative of slavery and that "the story of Rose Herera's life, the kidnapping of her children, and her efforts to get them back dramatizes the struggle between slaveowners and slave parents over the possession of slave children." Rothman briefly alludes to the work of Rebecca Scott and his book uses a similar approach through legal documents. Rothman argues that the Herera's "singular case draws attention to widespread, subterranean fears that newly freed people in the United States were in danger of being kidnapped and sold into slavery in Cuba and Brazil." In this manner, Rothman incorporates the Atlantic world into the narrative of the American Civil War, but he still writes primarily for American historians. Rothman's discussion of Rose Herera's husband, George, a free person of color demonstrates how free African Americans were as much a threat to race-based slavery as British abolition. According to Rothman, Southerners wished to ensure that all people of African descent were enslaved "along with such causes an annexing Cuba and reopening slave importation." The laws in New Orleans presumed that those classified "Negroes" were enslaved, while those termed

"Mulatto" under the law were assumed free. This system, though similar to the gradated racial system of some Atlantic and Caribbean countries, was more rigid than that in the Caribbean. While those of mixed race may have had the benefit of presumed freedom, laws like the 1859 Act to Permit Free Persons of African Descent to Select Their Masters and Become Slaves for Life demonstrated that Southerners could not tolerate any threat to their institution, whether ideological in the form of abolition or physical in free people of color. Similar to Rugemer's contention that the permeability of the United States allowed rumors of abolition to spread, Rothman demonstrates the power of hearsay and rumor in maintaining the threat of the Atlantic world even as slavery gradually ended in the United States. Rothman writes, "Throughout the [former] slave states, newly freed people stared down the prospect of renewed enslavement as white Southerners tried to resuscitate their power. The fear of a return to slavery found expression, above all, in stories and rumors of kidnapping that circulated across the South in the early days of Reconstruction." Even as slavery ended in the United States, kidnapping remained an ever-present fear based on freedpeople's "knowledge of the persistence of slavery and the slave trade outside the United States, and the ties of trade and travel that linked Southern ports to the Atlantic's last remaining slave societies, Cuba and Brazil." Emancipation in the United States, like British emancipation, was not the end of Atlantic and Caribbean slavery, but served to focus former and remaining slaveholders' determination to maintain the practice. Further, "even after the war ended, the consuls continued to track ex-Confederate movements in and through Havana as the losers fled into exile." Though the Civil War had ended, Cuba remained a bastion for those Americans unwilling to relinquish the institution of slavery and with the means to beguile their former slaves into the Caribbean. Rothman explains that Cuban planters "tried to keep their slaves from getting wind of the slave revolt in St. Domingue in the 1790s and abolition in the British West Indies in the 1830s" and now feared the results of emancipation in the United States. Rothman pushes the boundaries of his Americanist perspective in his coverage of the fears of abolition that swept through the Atlantic and Caribbean worlds. Rothman's discussion of the legal proceedings following the kidnapping of Rose Herera's children reveals a complex conflict in legal discourses in Reconstruction-era Louisiana much like that Scott discussed in Freedom Papers. Initially, a civil magistrate dismissed Herera's case, but she successfully appealed to the military court, resulting in the arrest of her former owner for kidnapping. Rothman writes, "From Mary De Hart's perspective, the proceedings in the provost

court must have seemed deeply unjust—as it represented an inversion of the racial hierarchy. Alternately, for Herera, "the injustice was that anyone would deprive a mother of her children by kidnapping them and holding them as slaves in a foreign country." To further complicate matters, the court had to determine at what point Herera and her children were freed and under which laws to try the case with the result that the court invoked Louisiana's Code Noir, which no longer applied to the general populace following abolition. Rothman, like Scott before him, demonstrates the complicated process by which slavery ended and the attempts to define freedom in a society in which slavery played such a crucial role.Between the two, Rugemer offers the most to the increasingly Atlantic-oriented historiography of the Civil War. While Rothman writes with felicity and conveys a fascinating narrative, the Atlantic and Caribbean contexts of his work appear as an afterthought and little of the narrative explores the connections between Louisiana and Cuba that made such a kidnapping possible. Nor does Rothman examine the conditions facing the Herera children in Cuba except at the dock when they disembarked. Rothman's narrow focus locks him into an American perspective. On the other hand, the Atlantic and Caribbean worlds play a critical role in Rugemer's argument. To Rugemer, only English abolition and the pressures of the British West Indies can explain the tensions that led to the Civil War. Both historians encourage Americans to look beyond their own borders in examining the history of the Civil War, but only Rugemer successfully argues that the conflict was part of a greater pattern in the Atlantic world.

This is micro-history at its finest. In examining and contextualizing the trials of the Herera and the De Hart families, Rothman is able to do much more than relate a story. He is able to see the Civil War in a new light--to celebrate the great triumph of emancipation while simultaneously recognizing its lamentable limitations. By weaving together concise narrative with sharp analysis, the reader is treated to a compelling glimpse of the lives of the extraordinarily typical men, women, and children of Civil War-era Louisiana. I look forward to seeing how Rothman is able to synthesize this history in his anticipated scholarship on nineteenth-century New Orleans.

Adam Rothman has succeeded in crafting a work that is both historically informative and emotionally gripping. In Beyond Freedom's Reach, he writes about the complexities of the Emancipation movement through the story of Rose Herrera, a mother who struggles against an unjust system to retrieve the children that were stolen from her by her previous mistress. Rothman is an incredibly knowledgable and resourceful historian as well as an eloquent writer; he has created

a compelling narrative that seamlessly integrates fact, detail and compassion. Beyond Freedom's Reach is a story that is highly relevant today, amidst continuing racial turmoil and the ongoing struggle for true emancipation. Thus Adam Rothman's Beyond Freedom's Reach is a must read for all those who believe we need to learn from our past to achieve true justice and freedom.

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