



Review

Reviewed Work(s): A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau by Carolyn Morrow Long

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A NEW ORLEANS VOUDOU PRIESTESS: *The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau*. By Carolyn Morrow Long. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006. xxxvii, 294 pp. List of Figures and Tables, acknowledgments, introduction, definitions, prologue, conclusion, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. Paper \$34.95, ISBN 0-8130-2974-0).

If ever an historical figure deserved some hard-headed historical analysis, it is Marie Laveau. Born a free person of color around 1801, Laveau grew up to become the reputed "Voodoo Queen" of New Orleans until her death in 1881. Since that time, her legend has continued to grow into a tangled web indeed. Carolyn Morrow Long, in her interesting and meticulously researched study, has succeeded in untangling that web as carefully and completely as possible.

Long is well qualified for the task. Educated at Auburn University, the University of Missouri, and the University of Mississippi, she worked for eighteen years as a conservator of documents and photographs at the Smithsonian Institution. Her professional training is reflected in her rigorous research methods and painstaking examination of evidence. The book's bibliography contains an extensive list of secondary sources as well as a wealth of primary sources including local newspapers, archival collections, sacramental registers, city directories, and records of real estate conveyances and vital statistics. As she notes in her book's dedication, she relies heavily on the data and interviews collected by the Louisiana Writers Project (LWP) during the New Deal era. She also includes several helpful tables and illustrations, and her endnotes are meaty (and sometimes juicy).

Long asserts that her purpose is to separate "verifiable fact from semi-fiction and complete fabrication," and that her "speculations are always identified as such and are never presented as fact." (pp. xix-xx) As for other authors who have knowingly perpetuated false information about Marie Laveau's life, Long has little patience. In Robert Tallant's *Voodoo in New Orleans* (1946), for example, he states that Marie's father, Charles Laveaux, was a rich white planter, whereas the man was actually a free person of color whose businesses included slave-trading and real estate sales. According to Long, "Robert Tallant certainly knew better, having had access to the LWP files in which Marie Laveau's parentage is clearly documented, yet he did nothing to correct the

error." (p. 22) She catches many such errors by many writers in her valiant effort to set the record straight.

Long is also critical of recent scholars who, in her view, have manipulated the historical record in their "zeal to portray Marie Laveau as the quintessential 'strong black woman.'" (p. xxxvi) Most notable among these authors are Susheel Bibb, *Heritage of Power* (1998), Martha Ward, *Voodoo Queen* (2004), and Ina Fandrich, *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux* (2005). According to Long, these writers have tried to impose contemporary motives on an historical figure, portraying Laveau "as a social activist, an early advocate for the abolition of slavery, and a champion of civil rights for people of African descent." (p. 72) With the skeptical, analytical eye of an historian, Long objects that such claims, while possibly true, go well beyond the evidence.

Long's book is an intriguing and well-researched study not only of Marie Laveau, but also of the history and folkways of old New Orleans. My one complaint is that Long's summary of Laveau's *actual* life (as opposed to her *legendary* life) does not appear until the conclusion. There is logic to this arrangement, of course, but the reader can become fatigued with all the refutations of semi-facts and fabrications before finally finding the "nut" squirreled away in the last few pages. Just the same, it is well worth the quest.

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SLAVE AGRICULTURE AND FINANCIAL MARKETS IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA: *The Bank of the United States in Mississippi, 1831–1852*. By Richard Holcombe Kilbourne, Jr. (London: Pickering & Chatto, Ltd., 2006. 202 pp. Introduction, conclusion, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth \$60.00, ISBN 1-85196-890-3).

Few historical subjects are more arcane and difficult than banking, but there are important junctures in American history where non-specialists should know at least some of the fundamentals about financial institutions: the different types of banks and their functions; the laws governing each institutional type, as well as various forms of property; the evolving role of state regulation; and the basic economics of credit and money markets.