

Judith Kelleher Schafer. *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women: Illegal Sex in Antebellum New Orleans*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. 229 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3397-2.

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The Wickedest City

In her book, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women*, Judith Kelleher Schafer has produced a generally well-written work of extraordinary research. Based primarily on local newspapers and the examination of more than two thousand trial transcripts from the First District Court of New Orleans, she investigates prostitution and its ramifications during the last decade and a half before the Civil War. Divided into an introduction, nine chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography, Schafer's study explores a variety of topics from the legal status of prostitution, its interracial nature in New Orleans, the exploitation of children, larceny, and violence to the economic importance of the sex trade to the city. Although the extent of detail can be almost overwhelming, this study contains few actual surprises.

Schafer's antebellum New Orleans lives up to its reputation. It was a hot, humid, violent, and often disease-ridden community with a cosmopolitan and transient population. Its municipal government was corrupt, inefficient, and underfunded. The members of the inadequate and undermanned police force earned fifty dollars per month after 1855, just a little more than an unskilled laborer. An editorial in one of the city's newspapers declared that one could walk for miles through the most heavily populated section of New Orleans after dark without encountering a single policeman and could repeat this experiment at different times, night after night. Despite this, New Orleans's officers managed to make 25,706 arrests in 1849 alone, a number equal to

one-quarter of the city's official population. Yet, "between 1859 and 1861," she writes, "the Orleans Parish coroner held inquests over the bodies of 132 murder victims, about one a week" (p. 5).

Prostitution, however, occupied a unique position. It was not against the laws of either the state or the municipality. The "women of the town," therefore, were arrested for violating laws that were on the books: vagrancy, lewd behavior, obscene language, and drunkenness were among the most popular—while free Negro prostitutes were also arrested for attacking or insulting white people. The purpose of these arrests was not to discourage prostitution, but rather to maintain public order and collect the fines that were an important part of the city's budget. The revenue from the sex trade, according to one historian, was second in importance only to the revenue generated by the port.

At the center of the sex trade, of course, were the prostitutes themselves. Schafer writes that they were generally young, between eighteen and twenty-four. They were native born and immigrants. They were black and white. They were free and slave. They were prostitutes because they had been seduced and abandoned, because they liked the life's freedom and adventure, or because it paid better than any other job available to working-class women.

The prostitutes had working names, such as "Boston Kate," "Pittsburgh Mary," "Irish Susan," "Royal Mag," and

“Judy Come Home with the Soap.” They bought expensive and gaudy clothes and accessories. They were usually linked to a pimp or “fancy man.” They fought among themselves. They robbed customers. And they were occasionally murdered. Unlike Ruth Rosen’s study, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900 to 1918* (1982), Schafer found no trace of solidarity among New Orleans’s antebellum prostitutes.

Schafer notes that, exploited by the men in their lives, by one another, by the merchants who sold them overpriced gewgaws, by corrupt policemen, and by the brothel keepers whose premises they worked in, antebellum New Orleans’s “soiled doves,” “street angels,” “broken blossoms,” “frails,” “nymphs de pave,” and abandoned women were indirectly exploited by some of the city’s oldest and most respectable families as well. Brothel keepers only leased their houses; the actual property was owned quite often by members of New Orleans’s elite. John McDonogh, for example, was a merchant and plantation owner. He was infamous for renting houses to brothel keepers in respectable neighborhoods; then buying up the nearby houses at a fraction of their value from the fleeing respectable home owners; and, finally, evicting the brothel and reselling everything for a substantial profit. And, ultimately, the “women of the town” were exploited by the town, itself. At fines ranging from five to five hundred dollars, the surcharge on sin accounted

for a significant portion of the city’s annual budget; to paraphrase the words of Delia Swift (aka “Bridget Fury”), it was of but little use for her and her fellow Cyprians to make money if it was all extracted in the shape of fines.

On the eve of the Civil War, however, pressure from the electorate did manage to force the city council to pass an ordinance restricting prostitutes to the outskirts of the city. But the measure was short-lived, killed by the state supreme court and real estate interests. It would not be until the second half of the 1890s that New Orleans more or less confined its sex trade to Storyville.

Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women is essentially a narrowly focused narrative. It is the result of superb scholarship. It is likely to remain the definitive study of late antebellum prostitution in New Orleans for the foreseeable future, as it provides a cornucopia of information for scholars. There are, however, some problems. The book contains far too many typos and misspellings as a result of careless copyediting. An entire chapter could have been devoted to a casual observation by Schafer that evidence exists that “some” prostitutes came to New Orleans during the business season from October to May and then departed. What effect did these “migrant workers” have on the character of the local sex trade? Finally, since prostitution was not illegal under either Louisiana or the city’s laws, why is the subtitle “Illegal Sex in Antebellum New Orleans”?

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