

BOOKSHELF

‘Mutinous Women’ Review: Exiled From Paris to a Land of Alligators

Many of the women that France first settled in its American colonies had been arrested for prostitution—or poverty—and shipped away.



‘The Conduct of the Girls of Joy in the Salpêtrière, the Passage by the Gates of St. Bernard’ (1755) by Etienne Jeaurat.

PHOTO: PHOTO JOSSE/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

By Kathleen DuVal

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On an October day in 1719, more than 100 women filed out of Paris’s Salpêtrière prison. Chained to one another and wearing only their shifts, they climbed onto carts that took them out of the city. They knew they had been banished from Paris, but they could not imagine the place they were being sent. Half a world away lay their new home, the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, where France had recently begun to establish a colony.

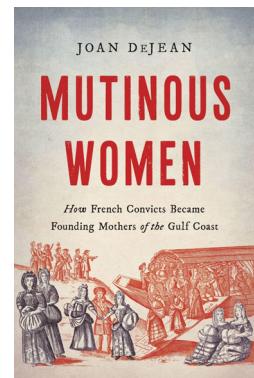
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Mutinous Women: How French Convicts Became Founding Mothers of the Gulf Coast

By Joan DeJean

Basic Books

448 pages



Gripping from its opening scene of a corpse discovered on a Paris side street, Joan DeJean’s “Mutinous Women” tells the stories of these French women, deported as unwanted criminals to what would become, less than a century later, part of the United States. Through astounding research in French and Louisiana archives, including police files from the women’s arrests and trials, Ms. DeJean, a French literature professor at the University of Pennsylvania, reconstructs the lives of nearly every one of these largely unknown women.

In June 1719, 16-year-old Marie Baron was arrested for stealing a ribbon. She had arrived in Paris around a decade earlier with her family, seeking food and work. Her village usually grew enough wheat to sell to France’s urban population, but a series of disastrously bad harvests and extremely cold winters had brought famine to the country. In 1709, a parish priest noted, “this year there was no wheat at all.” Hundreds of thousands of French people died that year and many more did so in the following years. Among the deaths were Marie’s parents and siblings. Parisian anger at the rural poor who crowded into their city was high, and many of these unfortunates ended up in prison on charges of theft or prostitution. Marie’s first arrest came when she was only 7, swooped up by a French officer on horseback. By the time Marie Baron was arrested for the third time—the ribbon theft—the French judicial system had devised a new way to deal with girls and women like her. Banishment from the city was a traditional punishment, but hungry people had a habit of sneaking back in. This new plan would mean lifetime exile.

Most of the women Ms. DeJean writes about were branded as prostitutes, but she argues that “what happened to these ordinary Frenchwomen could have happened to virtually any woman who found herself in Paris in 1719.” Some were Parisians, some were members of the rural poor like Marie Baron, and some were foreign-born, mostly Irishwomen or

“Bohémiens,” ancestors of Europe’s Romani. Most of these women were trying to piece together a living with the kinds of work available to them, including washing dishes and cleaning and mending clothing. Law enforcement officers saw the deportation plan as their chance to clear the streets. Charges against the women included “debauchery” and “caught begging for the fifth time.”

A few women targeted for deportation did avoid it. Marie Baron’s friend Anne Crétin was also arrested for the ribbon theft, but she had family in Paris. When they learned that she was on the deportation list, they worked to secure her release. Marie had no one. Along with the others, she was carted to the port of Le Havre and loaded onto a former slave ship, the frigate aptly named *La Mutine*, “the mutinous or seditious woman.”

Ms. DeJean uses her knowledge as a scholar of early modern France to great effect. Paris comes alive as a place where women and men lived and died, trying to take care of themselves and their families. Through the eyes of Marie Baron, we see the luxurious, well-stocked ribbon emporium on Paris’s Rue Saint-Honoré. We hear the voices of women selling “carnations, carnations, my beautiful carnations” and “baked apples, apples baked in an oven.” We witness one woman stripped naked in public and forced to watch an alleged accomplice’s execution.

In “Mutinous Women,” the poverty and brutality of Paris become a vivid backdrop to surprising contrasts in North America, although, as Ms. DeJean reveals, it would not have seemed that way at first. Shackled together in the ship’s hold and then dumped on a desert island off the coast of what’s now Mississippi, many of the women died during the voyage or soon thereafter. In the colony, as the author explains, they “found a land where the French were but a tiny minority, vastly outnumbered by indigenous peoples. They found themselves surrounded by flora, fauna, and landscapes that were strange, forbidding, and at times even nightmarish.” Perhaps scarier than the alligators for a Frenchwoman was learning to cook with cornmeal instead of wheat flour.

Yet a surprisingly large number of the survivors built lives for themselves in colonial towns. With no prison to hold them, the women slipped away from colonial authorities. They made homes in Mobile, in New Orleans and in Arkansas Post, far up the Mississippi River. They literally built the houses and bore the children who would become French Louisiana’s colonial population. Of the first 10 women married in the city of New Orleans, half were deportees from 1719.

Many of the women sent away from Paris established businesses, married farmers and soldiers and fur traders, and acquired property. Some lived into their 40s and 50s and beyond—much longer lives than they could have had on the streets of Paris. Marie Baron married a farmer, survived being captured and seeing her husband and eldest son killed in the French-Natchez War of 1729-30, and ultimately told her story to Louisiana's first historian (and married him).

By discovering these poor women from the colonial past, “Mutinous Women” conveys a fascinating history and a reminder that all kinds of people helped to build what became the United States. As Ms. DeJean shows, these women, “who had left France in disgrace and had been treated as subhuman upon their arrival in Louisiana,” became “pillars of their communities” and played a crucial role in North American history.

—*Ms. DuVal, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is the author of “Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution.”*

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