

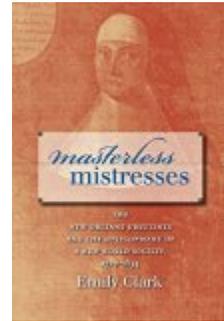
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Emily Clark. *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727-1834*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. xvi + 287 pp. \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5822-6; \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3122-9.

Reviewed by Elena Thompson (Department of History, University of Maryland University College)

Published on H-SAWH (July, 2008)



Women with a Mission for Women

Emily Clark's love for New Orleans shines through every page of *Masterless Mistresses*, her groundbreaking social history of the Ursuline sisters in the Crescent City. After documenting the arrival in 1727 of the first six of these Roman Catholic women with a mission to educate women, Clark traces the social patterns within the New Orleans convent, those on the outside affiliated with the convent, and those served by the convent through the sisters' ministries. She finds both the expected—the Ursulines provided young ladies with high-quality primary and some secondary schooling—and the unexpected—the Ursuline house became a meeting place for women across the conventional social boundaries of race and class, although relations were strained at the borders of nationality.

The male leaders of early New Orleans decided that it would be a good idea to bring in some sisters to nurse the sick. When they called on the Ursulines, they got more than they had bargained for. The first group of young women to arrive, some of them quite young, came with a zeal and a pioneering spirit for their own charisma of teaching, leaving the hospital work to the Sisters of Mercy and Charity, whose story has yet to be adequately told. The Ursulines moved into temporary quarters with a vision of the house and school that they wanted built. Given a sizeable lot on what was then the edge of urban settlement, they had it done their way. The procession across the city into the house drew a crowd; New Orleans has always known how to do a parade.

Once finished with her description of the building of the Ursuline house, Clark focuses on three ministries there: the membership of the sisters in the house, the group of mostly married women formally associated with the house for their spiritual growth and the sisters' support, and the women and girls taught in the classrooms. The Ursuline house, as the rest of New Orleans, remained a community of immigrants throughout the time period of Clark's study. Young and middle-aged women arrived from France over a period of one hundred years, bringing new attitudes and experiences of a rapidly changing Europe with them, and joined together by their common and determined mission to provide education for women. The house received some local women as novices, including women of color, but remained basically expatriate French. When Spanish authorities took political control in 1763, novices began to arrive from Cuba. The resident community found it difficult to integrate the Cubans; few island sisters professed their final vows, and none rose to the top leadership.

The colonial marriage registers delivered a positive verdict on the effectiveness of the sisters' primary instruction. When asked to sign their names to the register, prospective brides were able to do so, while the grooms were only able to make their mark. The "grande dames" of plantations, alongside urban workers struggling to make ends meet, visited the Ursuline house for religious programs and joined one associate group without class distinctions in the membership, avoiding both within

and without the cloister the separation of “lay” working women into a subordinate category, as was common practice in Europe. Clark seems to see this as an experiment in democracy, though the question of republican sisterhood lies beyond the scope of the present study.

This is groundbreaking research by a Tulane historian, fortunately completed just before Hurricane Katrina, but much too hastily edited in the rush to rebuild New Orleans’s academic life. Redundancies abound, and while the storytelling is first-rate, the conclusions are much too pedantically delivered. The unfortunate title

does point to truth: the Ursuline women would not be controlled by external male authority, yet they would, at some point, become owners of slaves.

While the present volume stands on its own merits, this reviewer hopes for a future volume building on this beginning, one that will take as its focus the creation of an American identity and ideology among the orders of immigrant sisters in New Orleans who contributed so much to the pioneer growth of their city, and of the nation that passed through that great port. The profession should look forward to Clark’s further contributions.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-sawh>

Citation: Elena Thompson. Review of Clark, Emily, *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727-1834*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. July, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14689>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.