H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gilbert C. Din, John E. Harkins. *The New Orleans Cabildo: Colonial Louisiana's First City Government, 1769-1803.* Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1996. xvii + 330 pp. $45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8071-2042-2.

Reviewed by Philip S. Macleod (Tulane University)
Published on H-LatAm (February, 1998)

This book has a twenty year saga behind it. The study began as John Harkins's doctoral dissertation in the 1970s. Publishers told Harkins his original manuscript, based on English translations of Acts of New Orleans Cabildo (written by the WPA), needed revision. Mr. Harkin's interest moved into other areas of history. After some years, Harkins contacted Gilbert Din and suggested he finish the work and make necessary revisions. Mr. Din, the author of several books and articles about colonial Louisiana, was involved with his own projects and could not begin work on this volume until 1991.

The result of this collaboration is a well-written study of Spanish municipal government in New Orleans. The book is based on the original "New Orleans Actas del Cabildo," the Code O'Reilly, numerous other published documents, research in Louisiana and Spanish archives, as well as the many secondary sources dealing with Louisiana, Spain's North American Frontier and general works on the cabildo in the Spanish Empire.

The authors first differentiate New Orleans from the rest of the Spanish borderlands. They state that only New Orleans could "truly be called a municipality" (p. xv). The remaining towns of the southwest had smaller, predominately Hispanic populations, weaker economies, and were far removed from markets." These locales lacked the financial and human resources and the communications to attempt the many activities that New Orleans engaged in. The other important distinction was that the Spanish imposed the cabildo on a French population after a rebellion (p. xv).

The authors state that their central purpose is to accurately depict the history and duties of New Orleans cabildo. They seek to move beyond the "French Creole mythology" which has colored so much of Louisiana history. French Creole mythology claims Spaniards had little influence on Louisiana and the province's Spanish government in general was ineffective, intolerant, cruel and corrupt. This legend further holds that French Creoles survived Iberian domination by not learning the Spanish language or being changed in any appreciable way. This traditional view finally asserts that French law and custom had in many ways continued during the Spanish period. The most extreme writers of this school claim the Spanish left only a few place names in Louisiana. Throughout this book, Din and Harkins show this French Creole mythology is patently untrue (p. xvi).

This volume may be divided into two sections which total twelve chapters. The first part consists of four background chapters. The first chapter presents a fascinating picture of New Orleans during the Spanish period. Chapter Two studies the establishment of the cabildo in New Orleans between 1763 until 1770. A brief discussion of the cabildo in the Iberian world concludes this chapter. The third chapter is a detailed examination of the New Orleans cabildo offices and the body's employees. The cabildo's relationships with Louisiana's governors, intendants and the Catholic Church are traced in Chapter Four.

The second portion of the book examines specific functions of the cabildo. Chapter Five looks at the role of the cabildo in the Spanish legal system. The sixth chapter covers New Orleans's municipal finances. It is here the authors make some of their more interesting points including that New Orleans enjoyed a comparatively *high per capita* municipal income which exceeded that of Havana, Buenos Aires and even Mexico City (p. 152). The authors assert that New Orleans made greater efforts to raise revenue that other Spanish American cities and "worked strenuously to provide services in important areas where neglect might threaten the lives and property of the inhabitants" (p. 152).

Chapter Seven deals with the cabildo and New Orleans's African populace. This chapter concentrates on attempts to deal with fugitive slaves, as well as measures taken to regulate slave entertainments and laws which

sought to limit the importation of slaves. Chapter Eight traces how the municipal council regulated city markets and the food supply. The practice of medicine and health regulations in a city inherently prone to numerous maladies is covered in Chapter Nine. In the tenth chapter, the authors detail the public works programs of the cabildo. The most interesting section details the problems of maintaining the levees which protected New Orleans from the waters of the Mississippi. Chapter Eleven explores the New Orleans cabildo's very limited power to make land grants and the attempts to enact some type of building regulations in the face of the two fires which destroyed the city in 1788 and 1794. The liaison and ceremonial functions of the cabildo are the focus of the final chapter.

The authors conclude that the New Orleans cabildo reached the height of its power in the 1780s while the body enjoyed a good working relationship with Louisiana's governors. It then entered a period of sustained decline after 1790. Firstly, the cabildo proved unable to muster a quorum. Secondly, the planters who dominated the cabildo lost influence as Louisiana's traditional exports (tobacco and indigo) disappeared. Thirdly, merchant interests became more powerful and their concerns diverged from those of the planters, which further weakened the body. Finally, the blatant antagonism of Louisiana's last two governors towards the institution greatly weakened the cabildo. A number of external factors influenced the cabildo's decline (pp. 291-93).

The deaths of Charles III and his Minister of the Indies, Jose de Galvez, led to the subsequent division of the Ministry of the Indies's affairs among five other departments which deprived the cabildo of friends in high places and probably hurt the council in its complaints and appeals. Many cabildo pleas remained unanswered in the last years of Spanish rule. The outbreak of war between Great Britain and Spain in 1796 further isolated Louisiana. Finally, Spain's attitude towards the colony changed. Louisiana was no longer considered a critical buffer needed to protect Texas and Mexico, but was viewed as financial and military liability. Spain ceded Louisiana to France in 1800 and the French never really took control of the colony which threw the status of the cabildo into further limbo. The body was finally abolished when the United States gained Louisiana in 1803 (pp. 294-96).

Overall the writers view the New Orleans cabildo as advanced for its time. It was more active in welfare and public works than its Spanish American counterparts. The body saw one of its principal functions as safeguarding the public interest. The authors also show New Orleans had the only cabildo in Louisiana, which theoretically gave the body authority over the entire province. The cabildo primarily limited its role to lower Louisiana and then mainly to New Orleans and its immediate surroundings, except in some matters pertaining to African slavery (pp. 297-98, 300).

Din and Harkins further state that New Orleans city government did not receive the appreciation its efforts deserved. The outsiders who penned travel accounts failed to notice cabildo efforts in such areas as streets, lighting, drainage, sanitation, levees and police & fire protection. The authors believe these travel accounts failed to note that these works required money which was always in short supply. Furthermore, New Orleans often needed funds to recover from natural disasters such as floods, fires and hurricanes which repeatedly struck the city in the late eighteenth century (pp. 297-99).

Din and Harkins also argue that the New Orleans cabildo devoted its municipal revenues to public well-being, so perhaps the New Orleans municipal council was more similar to city governments in the United States than its cousins in Spanish America. They note the colonial ports of Boston, Newport, New York, Philadelphia and Charleston all had similar problems and experience similar frustrations in providing services and protections for their residents (p. 299).

The drawbacks to this study are three-fold: In attempting to present a more accurate portrayal of the New Orleans cabildo the authors seem overly laudatory of Spanish rule. Occasionally the writers overwhelm the reader with detail, especially when trying to explain the mistaken interpretation of other Louisiana historians. This reviewer also found the book's discussion of the intendancy and the Iberian and New World background to the cabildo somewhat lacking.

Overall these criticisms are minor. This remains a well-written, thoroughly researched book about a long neglected New Orleans institution and is a welcome contribution to the historiography of colonial Louisiana. This reviewer hopes other Latin Americanists will simply not ignore a good study of Spanish municipal government in the New World because it deals with a city in the "Borderlands."

Copyright (c)1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit, educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permissions, please contact H-Net at H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Philip S. Macleod. Review of Din, Gilbert C.; Harkins, John E., *The New Orleans Cabildo: Colonial Louisiana's First City Government, 1769-1803.* H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. February, 1998.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1701

Copyright © 1998 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.