

# H-Net Reviews

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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.

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## Spanish New Orleans, 1769-1803: A New Perspective

Gilbert Din and John Harkins have presented colonial and urban scholars alike with a significant contribution to the historical literature. In an effort to re-evaluate the role of the Spanish in the development of New Orleans, they have written a detailed history of the Cabildo (or city government) in the second half of the eighteenth century. This thematically organized book deals quite thoroughly with the structure of the city government and its ability to order the lives of the citizens under its administration. Persons interested in the study of Colonial Louisiana will find the work's primary significance in the authors' assertion that the Spanish government was vital in New Orleans' transformation from village to city. The detailed analysis of the functions of the Cabildo and the well-researched explanations about the relationships between city and colony and state should edify both urban historians and colonial scholars alike.

Din and Harkins' revised view of Colonial New Orleans is built on a solid foundation. Instead of relying on the oft-cited views of eighteenth century French and American travelers to construct their history of the city, the authors made every effort to incorporate the voice of the Cabildo through the incorporation of Spanish language source materials. This effort is quite significant because it allows the authors to present a more balanced view of the difficulties facing New Orleans and the attempts by the city's administration to solve those problems. The first two chapters provide the background material for the rest of the work by offering a general description of the New Orleans the Spanish found when

they arrived in 1766 and an explanation of the difficult transition between the colonial governments of Spain and France. Much of the rest of the work is organized along thematic lines. Several chapters detail the structure of the Cabildo and offer definitions and descriptions about government offices and powers. Though the authors leave a number of words in Spanish, they usually provide good explanations of the terms in the body of the text or in footnotes. Where it is possible, they also offer reasonable English and French comparisons to facilitate the reader's understanding of the text.

The Cabildo included a variety of officials and employees responsible for the public welfare of the city. The authors' deal with much of that concern for the public welfare in the chapters that follow the explanation and analysis of the city government. Some of the topics under consideration include: the relationship between the Spanish government and slaves, municipal finances and public works, and health regulation. Through this portion of the work, the authors argue that, despite limited resources and difficult frontier conditions, the Cabildo worked diligently and responsibly to provide adequate services in a number of areas. City officials instituted various plans to improve the streets and sidewalks in New Orleans, but often found citizens unwilling to finance or participate in these projects. In the area of medicine and public health, the city government required a thorough examination of all medical practitioners, organized prisoners into work gangs for street cleanings, and attempted to eliminate standing water in

the city by a system of levees and drainage canals. Despite the fact these chapters and topics could stand on their own, Din and Harkins constantly refer back to the central theme and remind readers that many residents of New Orleans favored the Spanish administration and believed its officers had made a concerted effort to improve their lives. The work concludes with the brief transfer of New Orleans back to the French government in 1803 and Napoleon's quick sale that many in the city did not view

as particularly desirable. Though the Cabildo was not always successful in its endeavors, the citizens of New Orleans, and the authors of this work, admired its pro-active efforts to improve conditions in the city.

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