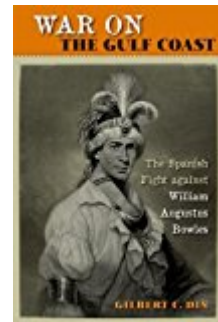




Gilbert C. Din. *War on the Gulf Coast: The Spanish Fight against William Augustus Bowles*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012. xiii + 319 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3752-3.



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The “Accidental” Borderlands Historian

During his presidential address to the 2011 Louisiana Historical Association meeting, Gilbert C. Din described a long series of chance encounters and events that led to the “accidental Louisiana historian” he is today. Din’s unintended journey started as a student at the University of California, Berkeley, where he began his training in Latin American historiography, but was uninterested in historian Herbert E. Bolton’s borderlands. While doing research at the Archivo Histórico Nacional in Madrid and the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, Din “accidental[ly]” chose the wonderful collection of documents on colonial Louisiana. In these archives, Din found a passion for the study of Spanish colonial policy in the Lower Mississippi Valley. After completing a dissertation entitled “Colonización en la Luisiana Española” at the University of Madrid, Din set his sights on examining Spanish immigration policy under Governor Esteban Miró. Following his training, Din produced well over ten monographs, twenty essays, and a textbook on Latin American history.[1] Perhaps Din’s path was inadvertent, but because of his “accidental” journey, he has achieved a

command of Spanish colonial documents that outweighs many scholars of the colonial Gulf South.

In his latest work, *War on the Gulf Coast*, Din takes on William Augustus Bowles, a late eighteenth-century historical figure of the Gulf South. Bowles, who is largely celebrated for his status as “director general of the Creek nation” and to a lesser degree, as an “artist, actor, diplomat, navigator, soldier, musician, baker, linguist, hunter, chemist, [and] lawyer,” played an interesting role in the Gulf South trading economy.[2] In spite of the region’s large influence on the Atlantic economy through the circum-Caribbean trading network, eighteenth-century Gulf South illuminates unique “social and cultural change[s],” which occurred due to intense imperial rivalry.[3] Din’s major focus in this text is the extent of Bowles’s influence on Apalache regional Native American groups, and he questions whether or not Bowles’s power was significant enough to disrupt Spanish presence in the area. Din raises these questions because he is interested in challenging historian J. Leitch Wright Jr.’s depiction of Bowles’s “larger-than-life per-

sona" (in *William Augustus Bowles, Director General of the Creek Nation* [1967]), which Din believes "fostered the mistaken notion that he was the genuine director general of the Creeks" (p. xi). Din claims that Wright's depiction is inaccurate because Wright failed to examine Spanish colonial documents thoroughly. Din concludes, "only when they [Bowles and his allies] combined with other factors did he become the formidable opponent" in the region. Of the first factors, Din believes the post-American Revolution social, economic, and political environment was most unstable for Native Americans, and during this most tenuous period indigenous peoples, Caribbean merchants, and British officials saw Bowles as a "possible territory savior" to the area (p. 226). Secondly, Din argues that with the decline in demand for deerskins, the struggle to hold onto the warrior-hunter way of life, and the strengthening of mestizo leadership, Creek and Seminole peoples found themselves dependent on English goods. Lastly, Din found that Bowles was able to achieve an advantage in the region because of the intense imperial rivalry between Spain, Great Britain, and the United States.

Din's narrative of the Apalache region covers the late eighteenth century to the Adam-Onís (Transcontinental) Treaty of 1819, which ended the border dispute of East and West Florida. While focusing on the Apalache district, he delves into the geopolitical events centering on Fort San Marcos, a solitary army post "two hundred miles away from Pensacola," and highlights the dynamic trading network that connected native and European peoples (p. 1). Although Din concentrates mostly on Spanish imperial officials, mestizo leaders, and to a lesser extent Caribbean traders and British imperial officials, this greater range of focus refigures Bowles as one actor within a complex society, which strikingly contrasts with the legendary portrait previously given by Wright.

Divided into thirteen concise chapters, Din's narrative begins by giving some context to the vibrant relationships in the region of Apalache. The first chapter lays the groundwork for understanding the development of the area and explains the reasons behind the Spanish struggle to restore Fort San Marcos. Most important, Din emphasizes the economic importance of the region to all imperial and native historical actors within the borderland location, including Bowles. In chapter 2, Bowles enters the narrative so that Din can show his connection with both major and minor historical actors. Din sets up the relationship between Bowles and the mestizo leadership, beginning with his marriage to the daughter of William Perryman, a mestizo Lower Creek chief. Din shows that Bowles's kinship ties to the Lower Creek

peoples were actually weak, as the marriage itself did little to secure much influence in the region. Additionally, Din describes the origins of Bowles's relationship with Caribbean traders and of his British connection.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 highlight Bowles's arrogant behavior when attempting to establish his Muskogee state and his inability to establish trade in the region. First, Din explores Bowles's negotiations with and exploitations of the Creek peoples in anticipation of establishing trade. Moreover, Din emphasizes the imperial rivalry and the Spanish opportunity to utilize Bowles's failure to establish trade. In chapter 3, Din begins with Bowles's Spanish capture in Havana. Thereafter, Din examines the damaging events that plagued Fort San Marcos, which established necessary conditions for Bowles to exploit those in the area upon his return. Lastly, Din investigates the Spanish captain Tomas Portell's constant pursuit of Bowles and his fight to undermine his authority.

Chapter 6 marks a major turning point in Bowles's influence and the downfall of Portell's military career. This particular chapter shows how Bowles overpowered Spanish authority by capturing Fort San Marcos. Bowles accomplished his endeavor through his indigenous alliances; however, Din asserts that the siege was short-lived because of a lack of guns and ammunition for Bowles's defense. Din describes a weak Fort San Marcos due to a lack of supplies, men, and funding, which sets the backdrop to Bowles's besiegement.

In the last seven chapters, Din investigates the after-shock from Bowles's capture of Fort San Marcos. Chapters 7 and 8 are concerned with the Spanish colonial politics regarding the restoration of Fort San Marcos and Spanish appeasement of indigenous peoples. In chapters 9 and 10, Din surveys Spanish control of the region and the loss of Bowles's trade control due to the Truce of Amiens. The final three chapters illustrate the concluding efforts of Bowles and the Spanish in dealing with the issues of the empire and Bowles's capture. Din begins with Spanish strategy in recapturing Bowles, but most important, he illustrates how Bowles attempted to develop the state of Muskogee. Lastly, Din outlines Bowles's final days and the Spanish efforts to prosecute him.

Din relies on several theoretical frameworks, but the approach that is most relevant to borderlands or Gulf South historians is his use of dependency theory to explain Bowles's influence in the region. He claims that because indigenous peoples depended on English goods this allowed Bowles the opportunity to manipulate his

relationship with indigenous peoples and assert his authority. However, Din's explanation is problematic, because he ignores the "internal dynamics of receiving societies," which leads to the portrayal of indigenous societies as fixed.[4] A dependence on goods may serve as one aspect of the relationship between indigenous peoples and colonialism, but this framework suggests that Native Americans did not possess the power to influence the dynamics of the Apalache region. In light of recent studies, when considering the role of Creek and Seminole power, a more critical and comprehensive approach to the trading relationships in the Apalache region would account for native peoples' political motivations. Clearly, more work needs to be done in this area to expand Din's efforts, opening up other perspectives, especially on issues of native peoples' geopolitics, colonial practices, and historical change in the Apalache region.[5]

Perhaps Din's interests were purely "accidental," but his expertise in Spanish colonial documents fills a gap in borderlands historiography. Borderland historians work tirelessly to counter master American narratives by dismantling established paradigms of "early and modern Americas." [6] Until recently, the last generation of borderlands scholarship has overlooked the northeast Spanish frontier, but as historian Daniel H. Usner Jr. notes, scholars of the Gulf South are "read[ing] more widely across international boundaries ... [which] will enhance our ability to compare different colonial regions in innovative ways." [7] Although Usner is speaking to early Americanists, Gulf South scholarship is working to fill the void in borderlands historiography and Din accomplishes this task. Din's text signifies his long devotion to the study of the northeastern Spanish frontier through his command of eighteenth-century Spanish documents. *War on the Gulf Coast* represents a true model of expertise.

While borderland scholars can appreciate Din's concentration on the Spanish period of the Florida Gulf South in order to connect Bowles to the larger American narrative, some borderland scholars may argue that he is replacing an old master narrative with a new master narrative. Because Din adheres mostly to an analysis of Spanish colonial documents, he limits himself to a specific historical period and silences more times than not voices of Creek and Seminole peoples, runaway slaves, and British and American settlers. Yes, Din's text is about the "Spanish fight against" Bowles, but if we are to splinter traditional models, such as "imperial and national histories, immigrant and indigenous subjects, state and non-state realm, and peoples and places that eventually

pertain to one nation or another," we must focus more closely on indigenous peoples.[8]

Although Din does not consider himself a scholar of borderlands, *War on the Gulf Coast* fits within the scope of the field. Din's text is a good starting point for examining the historical processes that resulted in the dynamic meeting places of empire and native peoples of the Apalache region, the far northeast Spanish possessions, and West and East Florida. Din's text somewhat "embrace[s] more nuanced [borderlands] definitions of power" by expanding the scope of historical actors involved in the making of Apalache by looking beyond a singular figure in Bowles.[9] The drawbacks to his text are few. In attempting to bridge the Gulf Coast historiographical gap, Din touches on native peoples, though at times we may not hear them. Overall, this text is well written, the criticisms are minor, and Din contributes to borderlands historiography in a clear way.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Gilbert C. Din, "Spanish Control over a Multiethnic Society: Louisiana, 1763-1803," in *Choice, Persuasion, and Coercion: Social Control on Spain's North American Frontiers* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Gilbert C. Din, *The Canary Islanders of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); and Gilbert C. Din, *Francisco Bouligny: A Bourbon Soldier in Spanish Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993).

[2]. J. Leitch Wright Jr., *William Augustus Bowles, Director General of the Creek Nation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967), vii-viii.

[3]. Richmond F. Brown, ed., *Coastal Encounters: The Transformation of the Gulf South in the Eighteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), x.

[4]. Brian C. Hosmer and Colleen M. O'Neill, *Native Pathways: American Indian Culture and Economic Development in the Twentieth Century* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2004), 10.

[5]. Pekka Hämäläinen and William P. Clements, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

[6]. Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, "On Borderlands," *The Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (2011): 338-361.

[7]. Daniel H. Usner Jr., "The Significance of the Gulf South in Early American History," in *Coastal Encounters*,

25.

[9]. Ibid., 352.

[8]. Hämäläinen and Truett, "On Borderlands," 339.

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