

John Shelton Reed. *Dixie Bohemia: A French Quarter Circle in the 1920s*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012. Illustrations. viii + 334 pp. \$38.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-4764-1.



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Commissioned by Anthony Dyer Hoefer (George Mason University)

New York City has its Greenwich Village, Paris has the Left Bank, and New Orleans, according to John Sheldon Reed, has the French Quarter of the 1920s. Inspired by a literary curiosity, *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles: A Gallery of Contemporary New Orleans* (1926), Reed presents the story of the artists, writers, musicians, architects, actors, and others all loosely associated around Jackson Square, Tulane University, and the Newcomb College Art School in the decade following World War I. Richly decorated with historical detail and meticulously researched, the work transports its readers into the Bohemian world of the roaring twenties, demonstrating that this association was more than just a social gathering; it was a formative group in developing the arts and culture of 1920s New Orleans and in preserving the French Quarter. Being careful not to overplay their connection, Reed maintains that the Bohemians of the French Quarter “were not a group at all, in the sociological sense,” but “they did make up a *social circle*, a loose network of relationships linked by friends in common,” by “association

with the same institutions, and by common interests” (p. 5). Reed clarifies that he is not investigating the sociological phenomenon of the Bohemian lifestyle in general, but “refer[s] readers to the extensive literature on Bohemia” instead (p. 6). For Reed, then, “Bohemian” here refers to any person associated in the social circle of the artists and socialites living in the Quarter whose affiliations included architects and artists working at the aforementioned colleges, as well as newspaper reporters covering, and sometimes living in, the French Quarter social milieu. For purposes of this review, I will lump the term “Bohemians” in the same way.

These associations were captured in 1926 by artist William Spratling and writer William Faulkner. In what was supposed to be an inside joke and a teasing tribute to Sherwood Anderson—the leader of the loosely affiliated group—Spratling and Faulkner caricatured members of the group in their privately distributed *Famous Creoles*. The work includes forty-three encyclopedia-like entries fraught with almost unintelligible inside

jokes (part of the joke is that only two of the entries are actually creoles and, arguably, only Anderson was famous), and an “unmistakable parody of the older man’s [Anderson’s] pompous style” (p. 3). Expanding on what is now a collector’s item, Reed, unlike Spratling and Faulkner, intelligibly brings this era to life for outsiders.

Dixie Bohemia is actually two books in one. The first part explores the various Bohemian elements in the French Quarter, their influence therein, their connection to institutions such as Tulane and Newcomb, and their relationship to the newspapers that covered the social scene of “Dixie Bohemia.” Reed also portrays life in the Quarter among the Bohemians and their neighbors—Sicilians, Jews, gay men, and the city’s African American population—maintaining that the interconnectedness of the above groups was integral to the flowering of Bohemian life. Each chapter presents a specific aspect of the Bohemian life of 1920s New Orleans, with the strength of the book being the intricate historical detail offered in each chapter. One anecdote includes an exasperated Spratling and Faulkner revenging themselves on Anderson’s teenage son, Bob. Apparently he had made a nuisance of himself by coming around too often while they were working. Spratling and Faulkner tried to get him to leave them alone, but Bob did not take their hints, so they “grabbed him, took his pants off, painted his peter green and pushed him out on the street, locking the door” after which, Spratling recalled, he “didn’t bother us much” (pp. 14-15). It was not all fun and games for the group. While a good many of the loosely affiliated Bohemians were poseurs that did not get a lot of work done, several did—Faulkner, of course, included. In fact, it was during this time that Anderson mentored Faulkner, convincing him to write fiction instead of poetry and convincing him that his native Mississippi offered plenty of writing material, or what Faulkner would go on to call his “little postage stamp of native soil.”^[1] Moreover, despite a breakfast of whiskey and beignets, Faulkner,

unlike many others included in this volume, often worked long hours, finding material for two books (*Mosquitoes* [1927] and *New Orleans Sketches* [1925]) and polishing off his first novel *Soldiers’ Pay* (1926) during his stay in New Orleans.

Among the anecdotal portrayals of opulent entertainment of the Quarter, such as the Arts and Crafts Club Ball, Reed demonstrates that the Bohemians created lasting and influential institutions, such as the Arts and Crafts Club and Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carré. They further created some not so permanent institutions with momentary influence, like the literary magazine *The Double Dealer* (Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway had their first publication here), but died out when the Bohemian flavor dissipated. Despite this local influence, however, *Dixie Bohemia* had its problems. Speaking on the Quarter’s desire to emulate the Left Bank and Greenwich Village, “there was no real risk of confusion. Being in the Deep South rather than New York or Paris had consequences,” says Reed. “One, justly or unjustly, was that little of the French Quarter’s literature was respected and little of its art even widely known outside the region. Another, not surprisingly, was that its Bohemia was for whites only” (p. 56). The Bohemians, for Reed, could not transcend the racial prejudice of their era despite their modern artistic views. Nor could they transcend the local. “Both artists and writers seem to have found it hard to get beneath the colorful surface of south Louisiana’s life and landscape. It was too easy to write local color instead, or to paint courtyard after courtyard, swamp after swamp,” offers Reed (p. 57). So, despite the potentially progressive label of Bohemians—and, to be sure, they brought modern art into the French Quarter—the Dixie Bohemians, with few exceptions, were unable to offer an artistic vision beyond their circumstances, and could not achieve a racial vision beyond the societal norm of the Jim Crow South.

And in one more touch of the commonplace, the French Quarter Bohemians fell victim to the classic gentrification process. Reed credits the movement with beginning the preservation of the Quarter, but it spelled the doom of the movement once it began. After the preservation movement took hold, entrepreneurs began investing in local business and after some revitalization, word of the region spread, causing tourists and “faux-hemians” to flock to the area, cheapening the authenticity. Finally, once preservation and revitalization took full hold, rents went up, and artists and local Sicilians, who, according to the Bohemians, gave the area a Continental feeling, could no longer afford to live there. Some remained, but nearly all those featured in *Famous Creoles* (and in *Dixie Bohemia*) were living elsewhere by the decade’s end.

The second part annotates Spratling and Faulkner’s book clarifying what was a text written by the Bohemians of New Orleans for the Bohemians of New Orleans. Reed distills the inside jokes and seemingly irrelevant information to the historical and biographical information of each entry in *Famous Creoles*. Calling her omission “truly inexplicable” and “almost inexcusable” (p. 101), Reed creates an entry for Elizabeth Anderson, the then wife of Sherwood Anderson. He further explains why some Bohemians who had a potential right to be included in the book might have been excluded (being dead was a primary reason), offering that “it’s not that Faulkner and Spratling were filling quotas, but the results were almost as if they had been” and that some omissions were “capricious” (p. 100). Despite a cursory exploration of the “creoles” who might have been included, Reed only provides one new entry, for the matron of the Bohemian proceedings taking place in the Andersons’ Jackson Square Apartment. This portion of the text offers a straightforward presentation and exploration of who the famous creoles were, what they did, and what they would go on to do after this formative time in the order of their inclusion of Spratling and Faulkner’s book.

Meticulously researched, this section is a valuable addition to the first part. Anderson, Faulkner, and Spratling are included among the forty-four entries in all, but other less-known or forgotten notables, Flo Field, Lyle Saxon, and Hamilton Basso can be found among the annotations as well (Reed also provides a short list at the beginning of the book for easy reference). These annotations do not offer any new argument per se, but expand and touch on previous points of argument.

In sum, *Dixie Bohemia* is valuable to any scholar interested in New Orleans of the 1920s, the preservation movement, journalism and certainly the arts and architecture. Interested scholars of the individuals listed in Reed’s work will find colorful anecdotes and relevant facts and social connections, but not in-depth analysis of said individuals; the book is not heavy on argument. Instead, Reed focuses on capturing a moment in time with his excellent research. Reed’s work is probably most interesting to those already interested in the period or the Bohemians included in *Famous Creoles*. He succeeds in what he sets out to do. While it is interesting to read, for example, of Faulkner’s social relationships and participation in a group remaking the Quarter, I could not help but wonder how these experiences might have shaped the vision of social change that appears in his fiction; however, since Reed only speculates as to what might have been going on in Faulkner’s mind during this time, those questions are not fully entertained here.

Note

[1]. Philip Gourevitch, ed., *The Paris Review Interviews* (New York: Picador, 2007), 2:57.

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