
In an ambitious volume, fifteen scholars explore how people living along the Gulf Coast (generally west Florida to Texas) understood questions of loyalty and identity during the late 18th and early 19th centuries as competing Spanish, French, English and American empires wrestled for control of this contested region. The collected essays, as a result, cover an enormous range, examining Frenchmen and Spaniards, Creeks and Caddos, Englishmen and Americans, slaves and slaveholders, politicians and military leaders, merchants and would-be revolutionaries, the desperately poor and the impossibly rich. Most essays revolve around particular individuals, using biography as a lens for examining the competing—and often contradictory—ways in which identity and loyalty played out in people’s lives. Thus we learn in great depth about people like Daniel Clark, an Irish émigré to New Orleans who acquired tremendous wealth during the 1790s and early 1800s as a merchant and powerbroker serving both Spaniards and Americans. Yet we also learn about people like Marie Thérèse dit Coincoin, a woman of color freed from enslavement in 1778, who came to discover that her African ancestry meant that “freedom” would never be for her what it was for someone like Clark. By juxtaposing lives as varied as those of Clark and Coincoin—people who shared these borderlands, yet experienced them so differently—this volume offers new windows into what loyalty and identity meant in this tumultuous time and place.

Common themes, and sometimes people, weave throughout the collected biographies. In nearly every instance, Gulf Coast residents appear to have evaluated and shifted loyalties based primarily on local and personal interests. Someone like Antonio Gil Ibarvo, for example,
remained far more loyal and committed to himself and the local community in east Texas than any decree or leader connected to New Spain. Other figures apparently harbored stronger commitments to a particular nation, such as merchant Oliver Pollock, although usually for compelling economic reasons. Yet all apparently took advantage of the unique opportunities afforded them by living in a region so heavily contested by multiple governments. Competition for influence in the region meant that would-be empires had to battle openly for the loyalty of local residents. Native Americans, as a result, emerge in the collection as some of the region’s most important and powerful groups. A persistent theme throughout the essays, then, is that as long as the region remained contested, power within these borderlands tended to reside with locals and thus emanated from the bottom up rather than the top down.

Throughout, most of the essays do an admirable job of wrestling with the slippery (and often difficult to define) concepts of loyalty and identity in the lives of their subjects. A handful do that less well, largely due to poor organization and failing to connect their biographical sketches to larger themes. Far more elites than average people appear within these pages (William C. C. Claiborne, Daniel Clark, and James Wilkinson, indeed, are overrepresented), most likely a byproduct of the available sources rather than an oversight. As a whole, however, the collection teems with tremendous insight (the result of impressive primary source research) into the lives of people wrestling with what it meant to be French, Spanish, Caddo, Creek, English, American, or none of these, along the Gulf Coast during the Age of Revolutions.

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