



PROJECT MUSE®

*City of a Million Dreams: A History of New Orleans at Year
300* by Jason Berry (review)

Michael Shane Powers

Journal of Southern History, Volume 86, Number 1, February 2020, pp.
136-137 (Review)

Published by The Southern Historical Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/soh.2020.0071>

the JOURNAL OF
SOUTHERN
HISTORY

February 2020 • Vol. LXXXVI, No. 1
Published Quarterly by the
SOUTHERN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/748774>

Georgia is a solid work of scholarship, and even specialists in the field of colonial slavery will derive considerable benefit from reading it.

Hampden-Sydney College

JOHN C. COOMBS

City of a Million Dreams: A History of New Orleans at Year 300. By Jason Berry. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. Pp. [x], 412. \$35.00, ISBN 978-1-4696-4714-2.)

The tricentennial in 2018 of the founding of New Orleans has produced a wealth of excitement and interest in the Crescent City's storied history. Jason Berry, a journalist and writer, contributes admirably to the recent groundswell of popular attention to the city, which dates to Hurricane Katrina and controversies over Confederate monuments. Drawn mostly from academic secondary sources, Berry's work focuses on individuals from Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville to Mayor Mitch Landrieu as case studies to demonstrate the evolving and contentious development of New Orleans. Yet *City of a Million Dreams: A History of New Orleans at Year 300* avoids the pitfalls of great-man history that often mark books written by journalists and geared toward a popular audience. Berry gives apt attention to how marginalized people—enslaved people dancing in Congo Square during the colonial era, for instance—helped mold the city's unique history.

Berry's work is at its best when chronicling cultural and social history. Readers should look elsewhere for a synthesis of New Orleans politics or economics. The history of voodoo, burial marches, carnival krewes, jazz, and other cultural waypoints are covered well. *City of a Million Dreams* is also notable as a work of popular history for consistently placing the Crescent City in the wider world and demonstrating the myriad ways fluid borders and transnational exchanges have defined New Orleans. For example, Berry gives sufficient attention to the importance of Spanish control in developing the city from a colonial backwater to a significant Atlantic world hub. In addition, Berry assesses environmental and biological forces when appropriate, such as the trajectory of yellow fever pathogens from mosquitoes to humans.

Readers must expect a book that covers three hundred years of history to reflect tough choices of what to include. For instance, Berry merely scratches the surface of New Orleans during Reconstruction. While accurately reminding readers that "[t]he real war in New Orleans began after the war," he gives short shrift to the postbellum politics that defined the contours of Louisiana's political arena until the rise of Huey P. Long in the 1930s (p. 161). Moreover, Berry chooses not to address the significance of New Orleans's world's fairs in 1884 and 1984. Including an assessment of the fairs would have strengthened Berry's otherwise accomplished goal of demonstrating the rich and nuanced history of New Orleans as a "crossroads of humanity" (p. 5).

On the whole, such faults are minor. The book's purpose to provide a synthesis of academic scholarship on New Orleans past and present is achieved in a well-written narrative. Berry's focus on "[t]he tension between spectacle and law" is carried throughout (p. 6). *City of a Million Dreams* should be a go-to

resource for scholars and the general public alike wishing to find a concise and engaging account of New Orleans's colorful past.

Angelo State University

MICHAEL SHANE POWERS

Revolutionary: George Washington at War. By Robert L. O'Connell. (New York: Random House, 2019. Pp. xxviii, 368. \$32.00, ISBN 978-0-8129-9699-9.)

In this lively and fast-paced history of George Washington and the American Revolution, author Robert L. O'Connell examines the motivations and actions of Washington, the political, social, and economic origins of the Revolution, and a politico-military history of the war itself. O'Connell suggests three main points of departure from earlier studies: First, that revolutionary fervor moved very rapidly across America and became accepted by a great majority because of the combination of radical Whig critiques of the British government, the ability of rebel leaders to quickly gain control of colonial legislatures and militias, and a wildly touted and believed "conspiracy theory" that the British were attempting to enslave white Americans (p. xvi); second, that the British effort to crush the American Revolution was doomed from the beginning and could not succeed (this conclusion is based on the widespread popular support for the Revolution and the British misunderstanding of this support); and third, that not only was George Washington's military and political leadership vital in preserving and regenerating the Continental army, but also that his "rectitude and moderation" toward the enemy (British and Loyalists) and his rivals were the reasons the American Revolution was comparatively bloodless and led to a stable national republic rather than civil war (p. xxi).

After an introduction, the book moves to "The Gentrification of George," a chapter that presents a lively discussion of Washington's upbringing, growing ambition, political and social climbing, frontier experience, including interaction with Native Americans, and finally French and Indian War diplomatic and military experience. This last experience, which, as colonel of the Virginia Regiment, included military administration, choosing officers, troop training, fortification design, and irregular combat tactics, proved vital to his later position as commander of the Continental army.

In the third chapter, "Rage Militaire," which covers the beginning of the Revolutionary War, O'Connell investigates his contention about the American fear of enslavement. O'Connell presents a well-documented discussion of American opinions about various British acts and taxes and the tremendous acceleration of revolutionary thinking after the British reaction to the Boston Tea Party and First Continental Congress. Americans' actions, O'Connell effectively argues, are explained by their fear of losing liberty and therefore of being enslaved.

The final four chapters investigate Washington's leadership and British military strategies and actions during the war itself. O'Connell demonstrates that Britain's often poorly conceived strategy, brutal tactics, and rough occupation could never lead to victory, but he does not, in my opinion, demonstrate that the British could not have won the war under a different strategy