

Places Journal review of *Bienville's Dilemma*” *A Historical Geography of New Orleans*, by Richard Campanella, 2008

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REVIEW: DOROTHY BALL

Bienville's Dilemma



The City of New Orleans by Currier & Ives, 1885. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

In the mid-19th century, New Orleans (pop. 102,193) was the third largest city in the United States, the fourth busiest port in the world (after London, Liverpool and New York), and such a rich mix of cultures and races that a contemporary newspaper, the *Daily Picayune*, called it “a world in miniature, subdivided into smaller commonwealths.” [1] Today, four years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the built and natural landscapes of the Gulf Coast — an anniversary that passed uneventfully, to the relief of locals — New Orleans remains a major city, but just

barely, and more for its storied past than troubled present; it often seems a struggle to reconcile the distance, and difference, between then and now. So it is no small achievement that *Bienville's Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans* [Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana, 2008], by Tulane University geographer Richard Campanella, succeeds in illuminating the complex trajectory of this most unusual of American cities.

Bienville's Dilemma consists of 68 discrete articles on diverse topics. Campanella ranges widely, moving from the city's "geological origins" in the Ice Age, to the 16th-century expeditions of Spanish and French explorers, to an analysis of the conflicted meanings of "Creole" in the 19th century, and right on up to the cataclysmic Katrina and its anguished aftermath. Blending geology, geography, history, culture, economy and sociology, Campanella assembles an idiosyncratic but well-researched portrait of New Orleans. He describes how the city came to be located on the delta plain ("the lowest-lying and flattest metropolis in the nation," as he says in an early chapter called "The Topography of Ooze") and how it continues to struggle with its geographical legacy (in the penultimate chapter he describes what he calls the "great footprint debate," the ongoing arguments about whether the city should deliberately shrink, rebuilding only on high ground).



Post-Katrina New Orleans. [Photo Credit: Richard Campanella]

The title refers to the crucial and still controversial episode in the city's founding: when a French explorer, Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, selected the site, on behalf of commercial interests, for the future French colony — "thirty leagues above the entrance to the Mississippi," in Bienville's words, on land that is today the French Quarter, and what was then a swamp. Campanella

grants that the choice was counterintuitive, yet he argues for its geographical logic. "Indeed, this is a challenging site for a major city," he writes. "Yet Bienville acted wisely in selecting it in 1718, because he knew what makes a city great is not its site, but its situation. 'Site' refers to the city's actual physical footing; 'situation' means its regional context and how it connects with the world." [2]. But, of course, this situation would change, and throughout Campanella links the city's history with its geography, emphasizing how settlers and citizens have interacted with the delta landscape and the Mississippi River, how they have manipulated both for their benefit, defined themselves by their relationship to land and river, created an economy that requires ceaseless engineering, and periodically been forced to reassess everything in the wake of disaster.

Campanella groups his chapters according to themes, with sections devoted to forming, settling, urbanizing, populating, manipulating, humanizing, devastating and restoring the landscape; and he opens with a thick and detailed timeline, starting with "prehistoric" and ending with "April 2008." For the uninitiated, this approach — a rich gumbo, you might say — provides a strong and fascinating foundation for understanding the city, and the book rewards browsing; though the story, as Campanella tells it, is so compelling that I imagine most readers will browse their way through the whole volume (429 pages, including endnotes and an index).

It is somehow comforting to this New Orleanian to learn that the questions we are asking ourselves today — about how and why to live here — are the questions that the city has been confronting since its founding; and too, that efforts to ease the challenges of inhabiting this low, flat strip of land, in the midst of marsh and swamp, so that we can enjoy its situation, have been ongoing since the 1720s, when the French colonists built the first levees to protect the city from flooding. Of course, the historic journey from small settlement to major port to post-Katrina landscape is replete with cautionary tales of the unintended consequences of successful attempts to make the city more hospitable to settlers or better suited to commerce. Draining swamps to make way for stylish neighborhoods, building more and higher levees, cutting canals to connect the Gulf of Mexico with the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain — over the decades such large-scale engineering has supported the

delta's economy and its lifestyle, and yet we know now — and some have been warning us for years — that the manipulation of the land and the river would lead inexorably to disaster — that a big storm would overwhelm the manmade waterways, and that neighborhoods built on fragile land unsuitable for inhabitation would be washed away. [3]



[Photo Credit: Michelle Stapleton]

But Katrina is only the most recent disaster in a city that has weathered more than its share. There was the Good Friday fire of 1788 that destroyed almost 900 buildings, or 80 percent of the city; there was the yellow fever epidemic that in the summer of 1853 killed more than 8,000; there was the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 that inundated 26,000 square miles of southern Louisiana; there was Hurricane Betsy, in 1965, that damaged one-third of the city and flooded the Lower Ninth Ward. The disaster narratives of New Orleans testify to the city's tenacity, and also to its history of using devastation as a spur to civic improvement. Which of course brings us to the present, and to the current debates about how and where to rebuild the city and the delta. (Campanella is not content simply to describe the footprint debate; he rolls up his sleeves and dives in, even including a detailed "proposed rebuilding methodology," in which he is sensitive to residents' ties to community but ultimately unsentimental about the need to abandon dangerous and unsafe areas. "They should be bought out, cleared, and returned to forest, to serve

as (1) flood-retention areas, (2) green space and wildlife habitat, and (3) Katrina memorial parks . . .” [4])

And Campanella understands that what perpetually inspires New Orleans to renew itself after disaster is a well-developed sense of its own destiny and distinction. Somewhat cheekily, he engages what he calls “New Orleans’ complex and conflicted relationship with the United States of America,” tracing the lively debate between the “exceptionalists,” who insist on the city’s “enduring uniqueness,” its sui generis mix of Franco-Afro-Caribbean influences, and the “assimilationists,” or “Americanists,” who acknowledge the traditions of Mardi Gras, the local architecture, etc., but who actually view the city as part of the United States. As Campanella deftly puts it: “Ask an informed American citizen today to ruminate on Dallas or Atlanta or Phoenix, and you will probably get small talk, lukewarm pleasantries, and a brief conversation. Ask them what they think about New Orleans, and you are in for not only an opinionated retort, but a sentimental smile, a scolding finger, a treasured memory, a shaking head, or an exasperated shrug. . . . This enigmatic capacity to rile and inspire, to scandalize and charm, to liberate and fascinate, helps explain why thousands of people have rejected the amenities and opportunities of the Dallases and Atlantas and Phoenixes of the world, and chosen instead to cast their lot with this troubled old port — embracing all its splendors and dilemmas, all its booms and busts, all its joys and tragedies.” [5]

Notes

1. *Bienville's Dilemma*, 168.

2. *Ibid.*, 113.

3. For a vivid and detailed discussion of the history of the manipulation of the delta landscape, see John McPhee, “Atchafalaya,” *The New Yorker*, February 23, 1987.

4. *Bienville's Dilemma*, 341.

5. *Ibid.*, 260.

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Well-written, insightful review of a great book. Though Ms. Ball doesn't say it explicitly, this book really is a "must read" for anyone who thinks they have an informed opinion on New Orleans, Katrina, or the aftermath of the storm. Truly, the

complexity of this city and its history is just astounding, but this book clarifies like no other. (It also includes some great maps.)

Claire Anderson

10.22.09 at 06:50

Interesting review of an intriguing work. Delving into all aspects of the past like that really helps bring to life the myths and stories of a fascinating place.

The Atlantic just posted a less sweeping but still interesting article specifically about the rebuilding there- <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200911/curtis-architecture-new-orleans>.

faslanyc

10.25.09 at 10:14

From my recollection of online news comments during the post-Katrina/ levee failure, I remember some Americans were kinder to Baghdad during the Shock & Awe bombing than they were to New Orleans. As if the city brought it on itself by sin, location and drunkenness.

No one ever said those things about California fires or that Washington DC itself lies on a fault line. For every Yankee who said it was a sinkhole of filth: we'd pour another Dixie beer and revel in their distain.

The "otherness" which had protected it from the increasing blandness of urban America elsewhere give New Orleans a sense of gritty rebelliousness. This time it worked against us. A sizable chunk of the population that evacuated never returned, not because they just wouldn't, but because they couldn't. The poverty shocked many. People groused about their tax dollars going to ruffraff. There was a racist undertone to the rude comments.

Of course, counterbalancing that was grassroot aid, before FEMA muddled in and the Blackwater mercenaries left. And outsiders who made an effort to care about the recovery long after media attention moved on. Even church groups from other states drove there to gut houses and clean up out the mess out of sheer goodness. Unlike the government. It's still a sore subject to many.

One organization I'm aware of, Make It Right, put sweat, good sense and environmental creativity into housing reconstruction in the Ninth Ward. They've been nominated for an award at this years Whitney-Hewitt Museum for environmental architecture.

Yes, it's had it's share of disasters, fires and hurricanes before, but this time it was the Army Corps of Engineers and the magnitude of the catastrophic failure of the levee system that did some areas in. Saved a few million, lost billions. The goal now is restoration and there have been thoughtful plans where and how to rebuild, since a huge chunk of the barrier wetlands are completely gone.

As a geologist I met afterwards told me, it's a geologic inevitability that without a better levee system that the city is living on borrowed time once again. That's a tragedy.