

November 2008

Book Review: Cuban Convents in the Age of Enlightened Reform, 1761-1807

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Recommended Citation

Dodson, Jualynne E. (2008). Book Review: Cuban Convents in the Age of Enlightened Reform, 1761-1807. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(2), 231-233.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol10/iss2/19>

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Cuban Convents in the Age of Enlightened Reform, 1761-1807. John J. Clune Jr.
2008. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida. 192 pp. \$59.95 (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Jualynne E. Dodson¹

John J. Clune Jr. is chair of the Department of History and Associate Professor at the University of West Florida at Pensacola and he has written a detailed description on a topic not often addressed. Clune has chosen to focus on one of “four female religious communities of Havana,” the Santa Clara convent, as a case study of the impact of the convent reform movement on the four communities. The book is titled *Cuban Convents in the Age of Enlightened Reform, 1761-1807*.

The major proposition of the volume is that the affects of the eighteenth century Spanish Bourbon monarch reform of Catholic convents could be felt far from the epicenters of Europe into Spanish colonies of “The Indies” and that “internal dynamics, external functions, and images of the female religious communities of Havana” were altered by these reforms (1). The author is concerned with changes occurring at the Santa Clara convent due to the Spanish Bourbon reforms and begins his book with a discussion of the Cuban context in which the Santa Clara convent existed. In chapter 2, he describes the Havana Santa Clara convent from 1671 to 1769, before reforms were truly implemented. In chapter 3, *A Respite from Common-Life Reforms: Santa Clara, 1770-1782*, Clune contends that the convent had a break from reforms designed to alter the prescribed “common life” of colonial nuns and the “private lives” to which Santa Clara holy women had become accustomed.

Details about the impact of reform on Santa Clara from 1782 to 1783 are discussed in chapter 4, while chapter 5 compares orthodox convent reform and progressive social measures from 1784 to 1796. Clune asserts that Havana was a center of colonial progressive social life and during the reform period contained ideas that conflicted with convent reform the Bourbon monarch wanted to implement throughout colonial sites across the Atlantic. Chapter 6, *Transforming the Role of Convents in Havana: 1796-1807*, explores how the role of convents in Havana was – or was not – changed in the eleven year time span of reform.

The author’s *Conclusion* restates his proposition that convents of Havana, Cuba are “excellent case studies of the wide-reaching effects of the Bourbon Reform program” (93). He then reminds the reader of the difficulty faced by such reforms to have a major impact on the Santa Clara convent because of the intimate social and political relationship its nuns had with Havana’s elite citizens, and the influence of these citizens in political and social affairs of the time. In addition, Clune briefly reminds us that Havana’s internal circumstances, companioned with changing international events, served to minimize the short-term effect of convent reform in the Santa Clara community. In the long term, however, the Havana convent “became a shell of its former self” as French nuns arrived from previously Spanish colonial sites such as the Louisiana territories and Santo Domingo. Beginning with the reform period, the convent

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community was fractured “along socioeconomic and familial lines. No daughter of a noble family appeared among the thirteen nuns who voluntarily embraced the common life...” (94).

Professor Clune’s case study of the Santa Clara convent is designed to explore the impact of Catholic convent reform, which began with the sixteenth-century Council of Trent’s response to the Protestant Reformation, and how these reforms clashed in Havana with progressive social developments associated with eighteenth-century European Enlightenment. His detailed study is situated within a multitude of historical events that erupted during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries; for example, the Church’s dogmatic response to the Reformation, Europe’s Seven Years War, the Haitian Revolution, and the military and economic reforms of the Bourbon monarch of Charles IV. Results from the successful Haitian Revolution alone catapulted Spain’s Cuban colony into the role as a key player in the international trade in sugar. This resulted in the island’s capital city of Havana becoming a cosmopolitan center of progressive ideas and development for the Caribbean, as well as for most of the colonial Americas.

However, even as Clune focuses his work on how, where, and sometimes why the Havana Santa Clara convent responded to reforms initiated within this historical caldron, I felt that there is insufficient exploration of such local, national, or international circumstances. Although there are a plethora of detailed descriptions of the actions and reactions of the convent, I kept wondering how these convent responses to these reforms fit in the larger dynamic of European as well as Spanish colonial occurrences. The author provides brief and efficient interludes to describe such events. According to Clune, “commercial reforms better positioned the island’s [Cuban] planters to take advantage ... in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution” (15). The concise paragraph in which this sentence occurs outlines the larger state of affairs but not quite enough for me to capture a full command of the impact on convent activities. For example, what of the nuns of African descent who migrated to Cuba after the Haitian Revolution and eventually became the Order of Oblates?

Granted, John Clune’s *Introduction* states clearly that the book “is not a study of race, slavery, ethnicity, or gender in Cuba. [Nor] is it set to be a study of statecraft in Spain.” Rather, the author maintains that his work is a study of “convent reform in Havana carried out under the auspices of the Spanish Bourbon state and the Catholic Church during the reigns of Charles III and Charles IV.” But without more than succinct summaries about selected social and/or political events of the period, how does a reader connect convent reform to the contextual dots of Santa Clara’s historical, social, and political location? I was left with an overall impression that a small number of Havana elite and wealthy nuns, plus a similarly small number of the city’s elite and powerful political figures, were influenced by, or they themselves influenced the life of, the Santa Clara convent. I still have unanswered questions about how reform impacted the other three Havana convents; the Poor Clares, the Recollect Dominicans, the Discalced Carmelites, and the Ursulines.

I’ve always felt the aim of the discipline of history was to provide a fuller description of people, places, events, and their interaction within an historical environment in order to provide a more profound probing of a particular issue. *Cuban Convents in the Age of Enlightened Reform, 1761-1807* isn’t such a description. It’s not as though Professor Clune’s book had no space for a more inclusive or at least a more

insightful presentation of the larger world in which the Santa Clara nuns waged their battles against convent reform. The book has six chapters of text followed by a *Conclusion* and *Epilogue*, with *Notes*, *Bibliography*, and an *Index*. This gives the book a total of one hundred and thirty one pages of content. Perhaps the publisher placed this numerical limitation, but if so, Professor Clune might have taken the lead from the nuns of his study and argued that the breath and magnitude of events during the historical time period required infinitely more space. I wish he had.

Equally, Dr. Clune's disclaimer that the book "is not a study of race, slavery, ethnicity, or gender in Cuba" and does not engage "statecraft in Spain" did not persuade me that he was not writing about issues of gender. It is difficult to comprehend how the fact of females contesting the power of colonial male authorities isn't about gender or that a study of such contestations does not need to be concerned with the issue. Clune does selectively incorporate of at least one other author's ideas about gender and colonial power, particularly military issues of Cuba (3, 12, 15, 37). Yet, he dismisses gender from his scope of analysis. My read of the book is that the author made a serious error in not choosing to fully explore the significance of gender, just as I believe there is an error in not choosing to give more consideration to the significance of colonial social class and race relations as well as other salient categories of social life for the historical period, the Havana convent, and convent reform in general. Such issues had to have been intimately intertwined and influential to Santa Clara's response to the dynamics of reform. Perhaps Clune felt ill-prepared to conduct such an analysis but I see no evidence for such a misperception. He presents exceptional details in his volume and appears to have researched his questions well. The burning query I make, therefore, and I believe other readers will/should also, is why avoid probing the significance of issues of such paramount importance?

John Clune's small book is probably a good resource or reference for those who need details about one convent in one forty-year period of colonial history but, it pales when asked to deliver a full comprehension of the dialectical nature of convent reform within the context of Havana's complex of socio-political issues; within the context of imperial Spain and its colonies; within the management of colonial sites in the Americas; inside the Catholic Church's reasserting of international power and authority, or in the nature of convent reform within any of the larger historical topics whose dynamics influenced social life. I wish the author had engaged the more significant potential of his topic.