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Patricia Cleary, *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil: A History of Colonial St. Louis* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011, £24.22). Pp. xiv + 357. ISBN 978 0 8262 1913 8.

During the course of the eighteenth century, the French colonized a swath of North American land, ranging from Montreal to New Orleans – the “Creole Crescent,” as historian Jay Gitlin has named it. The most important inland settlement in this crescent was St. Louis, founded in 1764. In an irony endemic to an age of slow communications, the French settlement actually took place after France had formally ceded the Louisiana Territory to Spain in the Treaty of Fontainebleau. This came in compensation for Spain’s assistance to France in its losing struggle against Great Britain in the Seven Years War. Although the territory remained officially in Spanish hands until shortly before the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the local white elite and most of its citizens remained French throughout the eighteenth century.

Though it never grew beyond a village during this period, St. Louis had a disproportionate importance. Unlike other regional French villages its economy was based on the fur trade rather than on agriculture, which was greatly facilitated by its strategic location at the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Indeed, its fur-trade-addicted citizens sometimes found themselves short of the food they could not be bothered to grow, thus briefly earning their settlement the sobriquet “Paincourt” (“Short-of-Bread”). In addition to the fur trade, the village was strengthened by its position as the territorial governmental center for “Upper Louisiana,” presided over by the lieutenant governor (the governor and territorial capital were located in New Orleans in “Lower Louisiana”). The third contributor to its importance was the influx of French colonists formerly living in settlements east of the Mississippi River, which had become British territory after the Seven Years War.

Given both its real and illustrative importance as an international border community, Cleary insists that colonial St. Louis is a historically neglected subject. If her comparison is to colonial Boston then that is true enough, but quite a number of talented scholars have made the eighteenth-century village and its environs their subject, especially in recent years. So it is rather in the face of her own assertion that the significance of Cleary’s achievement stands out as fresh.

While her book rests squarely on her research in primary documents, Cleary uncovered no new documentary material. What she does do is ask a lot of original questions of old documents, and in so doing she found new meaning hiding, as it were, in plain sight. In one sense, she simply puts forward a variant of “borderlands” themes fashionable with recent historians. St. Louisans resided in an imperial European no-man’s-land – the Spanish masters could not control the situation, but neither could anybody else. The alternatively useful and quite menacing Indian tribes were the true dominant force for many of these years. St. Louis was, accordingly, buffeted about by imperial ambition and incompetence until, after 1800, the influx of westering Americans spelled an end to Old World contests and brought the Indians under white control.

The best part of Cleary’s book is the social history that flows from these political realities. All of the old mores collapsed. The consequences had an important effect on race, sex and gender roles, religion (on which she is particularly insightful), law, the

economy, and social customs, including alcohol use – and she marvelously shows how all of these things work together.

There are also some important new understandings of politics as well, especially concerning the 1760s and 1770s. This basic political history is well known, but she does a fine job of explaining local political motivation and its root in social reality. Of less interest is her political discussion of the period ranging from St. Louis's brief appearance in the American Revolution to the Louisiana Territorial transfer and the Lewis and Clark expedition, in which she treads familiar paths.

Finally, Cleary's book is exceptionally well written. Her clarity of expression, as well as her perception, makes the book not only useful, but a pleasure to read.

*Missouri Supreme Court*

KENNETH H. WINN