

BOOK REVIEWS, 2015-2016

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Ordering the Myths and Facts

Author Ann Pond's new trilogy of books answers the questions: Where, when and how did Mardi Gras really begin in the United States?

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Organized into three brief parts to make it accessible even for those who don't normally like reading histories, Ann Pond's new books cover the origins of the Carnival celebration from about 1820 to 1870 ... with all the social, political and economic problems of that time period.

"'Cowbellion,' tells the story of Michael Krafft, who created the first mystic parading association, the Cowbellion de Rakin Society. 'Masons and Mardi Gras,' details how Mobile's parading tradition spread to New Orleans and explains all the mysterious names and symbols. 'CAIN' is the story of Joe Cain's real life, which is very different from all the stories we've read up until now," says Pond.

Here, find a brief selection from each of the books.

BOOK I "COWBELLION: THE ORIGIN OF AMERICA'S MARDI GRAS"

There are myths from the early Colonial period that have been written and rewritten in an effort to show a link between the modern tradition and the early French settlement. But none of this really has much to do with how we in America celebrate Mardi Gras today. The origins of Mardi Gras must be viewed in the proper context. The kinds of parades and productions that go along with Mardi Gras in America today were developed exclusively on American shores. They were influenced by European customs to the same degree as any other element of American culture. Apple pie is more closely related to its European origins than Mardi Gras.

The story began with Michael Krafft, whose life was important both because it was typical and because it was extraordinary. In the 1820s, the nation's economy was expanding and so was its size. The northeast was industrializing, transportation was improving, and the addition of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama to the Union between 1812 and 1819 opened up new markets of commerce, providing access to

abundant agricultural resources as well as access to the Gulf of Mexico. Krafft was part of the great wave of farmers and merchants who migrated to the South at this time, hoping to cash in on the lucrative cotton trade. He symbolized the transient lifestyle of the young urban merchant, moving frequently, buying, selling, and shipping goods between the northern and southern ports. He also died a typical death, a victim of yellow fever, during one of the worst outbreaks of the century.

Yet, typical as he was in many ways, he stands alone as the animating force behind the Cowbellions, the group that laid the basis for America's Mardi Gras celebration with its unique combination of fraternity, mysterious ritual and a festive annual street parade. Originally titled the Cowbellian de Rakeian association, it was the first of its kind, bringing popular holiday revelry under the control of an exclusive and secretive society.

The Cowbellions were organized in the City of Mobile around the year 1830, and within just a few years their parades were known in all of the country's urban ports. By the end of the decade, the word "cowbellion" was being used in a more generic sense to mean any parade or procession of respectable young men, costumed and accompanied by loud music, for the sole purpose of entertainment. The Cowbellions were enormously successful at peaking interest and drawing crowds, and they had a lasting influence on American culture.

The form of festivity that was created in antebellum Mobile, although it typically took place on New Years' Eve in Mobile, is considered the beginning of the celebration that now takes place in America on Mardi Gras, or "Fat Tuesday," the day before Ash Wednesday. What links the Cowbellions to Mardi Gras is not the day of the parade but the spirit of the "carnavalesque." Ever since Ash Wednesday was marked on the Christian calendar, the days before were considered a time of celebration throughout Christian Europe. This was "Carnival" (literally referring to the eating of meat, or indulging the senses).

The time of spring planting has been a time of celebration for all known human civilizations. Yet, as the Christian church developed an official calendar of worship, the 40-day planting season recognized among the Romans became 40 days of preparation for the [resurrection] of Jesus, beginning on Ash Wednesday. Carnival, in turn, became a last chance for self-indulgence before this period of quiet solemnity. The Carnival, like all festivals before it, was met with music, dancing, disguises, feasting and revelry of all kinds.

BOOK II "MASONS AND MARDI GRAS: SECRETS OF THE MYSTIC KREWES"

In the 1820s, Mobile was beginning to attract national attention as a major cotton depot, but it was still rugged and underdeveloped ... Business was the chief focus of the city's energies. It was not a family-oriented place ... There was little in the way of public entertainment ...

Aside from Mobile's annual Masonic Ball, there were a few "Cotillion Parties" held during the winter months. Some were private affairs and others were "City Cotillions," announced in the newspaper during the social season from November through April or May.

Early public cotillions were held at Murray's Exchange Coffee House on Royal Street. Even though they were technically open to the public, tickets were two dollars each and were only sold in advance with application. Because the streets of Mobile and New Orleans presented somewhat permeable social boundaries, those who had upper class ambitions sought ways to socialize in a private setting. Public ballrooms in both cities were sometimes rented out by private groups for "subscription" balls. However, Mobile's population was not large enough to support as many of these as New Orleans, where they were very popular.

Even though Mobile was a much smaller city, young men and women of marriageable age needed some opportunity to socialize within the "right" circles, and prominent families needed a way to become better acquainted. Cotillions were the most popular way for Mobile's elite, mainly the physicians, attorneys, artists, and those who were building wealth from the quickly growing cotton market, to socialize.



This early Order of Myths invitation reads, "Compliments of the Order of Myths, Mobile Theatre, 13th Anniversary, Tuesday Evening, February 10th 1880." Like the Cowbellions that preceded them, the OOM society was established in the tradition of secrecy, entailing mysterious initiation rituals coupled with public revelry in costume.

"Order of Myths 1880," Mobile Public Library Digital Collections

Because the economy of this region remained so unstable throughout the antebellum period, experiencing waves of great prosperity followed by years of financial panic, social prominence did not always accrue with material wealth alone. Other factors, such as education, cultural awareness, manners and gentility were almost equal in significance ... In the Deep South, power was determined almost exclusively by image, comportment, and association with the right group, and fraternal societies were extremely important for creating and maintaining power.

Mobile and New Orleans were both dominated by young and mostly transient bachelors who needed the benefits of associations to establish themselves. In Mobile particularly, men outnumbered women about three to one; and for both sexes, the vast majority were between the ages of 20 and 40. The reason for the preponderance of single men was cotton. Mobile's economy was more dependent than any other city on the trade of cotton. Young men ready to rise in the new world of international trade were traveling south in droves. It was not a business for the weakhearted, and Mobile presented them with no luxuries, but they still kept coming. From close to 3,000 in 1830, the population had exploded to just over 12,000 by 1840 and Mobile's population was over 20,000 by 1850. New Orleans' growth was almost as dramatic; the population in 1850 was four times larger than it had been in 1820.

What was an unattached young man in this environment, on his own and far away from home, going to do during the holidays? There were many "saloons," or "exchanges," for drinking with friends, but not much else...

It is not surprising then that the Cowbellion de Rakin society was founded by a group of creative yet anxious young merchants looking for holiday entertainment. The benefits of association were already apparent to them. But, if they were going to form a private group, like the many "orders" or "societies" that existed in other port cities, on what model would it be based? Would their association be purely benevolent, established for the purpose of giving back to the community, like volunteer fire companies, or militia units? Would it be a secretive fraternal "order," created for the purposes of both charity and self-improvement, somewhat like the International Order of Odd Fellows? Would it have some specific military or political agenda like the Order of the Eastern Star or the Knights of the Golden Circle?

Regardless of the specifics, the basic rituals of all these associations were modeled on the practices of the Freemasons. They combined a mission of benevolence and self-help with the search for spiritual and intellectual fulfillment, achieved in ceremonial rites that emphasized the need for total dedication. Within their lodges, members found the sense of unity and belonging that they had promised to defend to their death. The Cowbellions' main objective in the first few years of their existence was not to create the kind of intense ritual experience that might be found in older associations. In the early 1830s they wanted to gain just enough organization to make their public exploits acceptable. The association they created in the early 1830s was, like many other secret societies that formed around this time, modeled generally on the example of the Freemasons. They all had similar initiations, in which a candidate was blindfolded,

brought into a room surrounded by other men who recited a scripted conversation, having the young man promise his secrecy and dedication to the group. These groups all drew from a catalog of common symbols like the skull, the serpent, etcetera. What the Cowbellions gained from the Masons in the beginning was the value of mystery, an idea of how to create a meaningful ritual experience.

BOOK III CAIN AND HIS LOST GENERATION



Joe Cain was recognized during his own life as a leader in that shift toward a “people’s” celebration. His obituary called him the “Father of Mardi Gras in Mobile.”

One of the highlights of the carnival season in Mobile is “Joe Cain Day,” celebrated each year on the Sunday before Mardi Gras. The day begins when a group of women known as Cain’s Merry Widows, shrouded in black, make their pilgrimage to Cain’s Downtown gravesite. They wail, weep and argue over who was his favorite. Then, although still in mourning behind their black lacy veils, they join in the festivities. Cain himself is represented leading the procession wearing a Native American costume and is called “Old Slac” or just “Chief.” ...

Four years after Comus formed [in New Orleans], the Civil War interrupted holiday festivities in both cities. It was just after the war that Joe Cain and his Lost Cause Minstrels appeared, part of a long evening of festivity. It was the first time that Mobile had ever recognized Mardi Gras with a public celebration. The Lost Cause Minstrels were the first to appear on the street that evening and were well received as a comical act preceding the night’s main event, the Order of Myths. The O.O.M.s, as they were called, tried to outdo even the most expensive and elaborate New Year’s Eve parades, like those of the Cowbellions.

Joe Cain and his Minstrel Band never intended to outshine the spectacle of the big parades. They tried to bring a sense of lighthearted burlesque to the parading tradition, as it existed in Europe and to a lesser extent, also in New Orleans. That comical element had not been a part of Mobile’s festivities since the first few years of the Cowbellions. Cain and his Minstrel Band represented Mobile’s version of the “people’s daytime” Mardi Gras while the mystic societies of Mobile were still focused on the nighttime revelry of the elite ...

From the Cowbellions to Comus and then to the Order of Myths, each of those organizations created major change, but each continued the same purpose and spirit. The men of the mystic societies used their parades to emphasize how different they were; how much wealth they had, so much that it could be poured into frivolous entertainment for the public. They also used the parades to reveal their knowledge and wisdom, so great that the common person had no idea what their parades were all about.

Joe Cain and the Lost Cause Minstrels on the other hand, used Mardi Gras to break down barriers, bringing the people into the celebration by connecting with them on the street both mentally and physically, giving them something to laugh about, something they understood and felt a part of. Cain never bought into the idea that the parade was an opportunity to manipulate public opinion or flaunt social status. Even when Cain paraded with the antebellum T.D.S. [Tea Drinkers Society] organization, the themes of that group were never as overly-intellectual or intimidating as those of the other organizations. In 1868, Cain became a true catalyst for change. Following his inspiration, the people of Mobile began dressing in costume during the day and gave themselves a part to play in the revelry of the season.

Joe Cain was recognized during his own life as a leader in that shift toward a “people’s” celebration. His obituary called him the “Father of Mardi Gras in Mobile,” and the Minstrels were recognized each year in the press as the “oldest” of the Mardi Gras parading groups. But by the 20th century, Joe Cain and his Lost Cause Minstrels had been nearly forgotten.

Cain was resurrected from historic obscurity by Julian Lee Rayford during the 1960s to become a symbol once again of the power of the people and everyone’s right to a moment of self-expression. But the new 20th century manifestation of Joe Cain differed from the reality in many ways. Rayford described Cain’s appearance after the war this way:

In his masquerade as a Chickasaw, Joe Cain did a great deal more than imitate a cigar store Indian. He cheered the spirit of a people despairing and depressed. He told them that though they might be defeated, they could still look up in pride — for the Chickasaw Indians were never defeated in all their history.

That was not the real Joe Cain. But, at least on Joe Cain Day, those details don’t really matter ... Rayford made Cain into a symbol of local pride, individual rights and freedom from oppression. In other words, he was the essence of the “Lost Cause,” refusing to abandon his values.

Lagniappe Reviews :

Local historian pens Mardi Gras series

By: [Kevin Lee](#) | May 27, 2015

For the last few decades, Mobilian Ann Pond has taught history at Bishop State, Spring Hill College and the University of South Alabama in addition to her work as a freelance journalist. Now she's managed to combine all of those pursuits into one project with the potential to impact local legends.

As part of her doctorate work at the University of Southern Mississippi, Pond decided to focus on a distinctly Creole phenomenon in the United States: Mardi Gras. Her dissertation aimed to untangle the knot of folklore around the holiday's American origins and she has now turned all that research into a trilogy of books.

Her initial offering, "The First Cowbellion: Masons, Mummies and the Birth of America's Mardi Gras," couldn't be more self-explanatory. It traces a consummate story of American creation, blending pre-existing cultural elements to fashion something new.

Pond begins the story with the first French incursions into the New World but then widens scope. With an academician's sense for truth, she thoroughly covers the holiday's background, its customs centuries beforehand.

The first of Ann Pond's three books inspired by Mardi Gras begins with the first French incursions into the New World but also paints a picture of Mobile in the 1830s.

However, it's her ability as a writer to speak in relatable language that will endear the book to average Gulf Coast residents. Likewise, the picture she paints of Mobile in the 1830s — on the cusp between its frontier roots and the feudal South soon to emerge — is crucial to grasping context.

Pennsylvanian Michael Krafft and his family relocated to Mobile as it was at the beginning of the Cotton Boom. It wasn't long before Michael reshaped Mobile's social calendar, with New Year's celebrations spawned in part by similar happenings in Pennsylvania and elaborated further through input from others.

Following "The First Cowbellion" is a volume entitled "Masons and Mardi Gras." It explores how secret societies formed for Mobile New Year's events shifted time, place and form to something we would more clearly recognize now.

New Orleans' licentious Carnival party resulted in their banning masking in 1803. However it was the violent and rambunctious happenings of free-for-all parades in the 1840s and '50s that led local press to call for the events' outlaw altogether.

Once again, customs merged as Mobile's habits and patterns for New Year's were applied to New Orleans pre-Lenten celebrations. What emerged was a more modern version of what we know as Mardi Gras processions.

Pond goes further, though, with an examination of possible secret purposes to the fraternal societies. She looks at the private and public lives of the men behind the masks and rumors of how it was tied to the Civil War's beginning.

The last of the trilogy is "Cain and His Lost Cause Generation." Pond looks at the modern connotation of Joe Cain for Mobilians and holds it up against the truth of his times.

The first book is currently available. The second goes on sale June 1 and the third will be available July 1. All are available on Google, Amazon or ann-j-pond.squarespace.com. Kindle and electronic versions may also be purchased.

It's obvious Pond has put years of research and scholarship into this. Anyone who loves regional and national history would be well served by her efforts.

The greater part of Pond's contributions to Gulf Coast history is that she makes a wonderful effort to not shine a light on the truth for its own sake but to fill in the divides many strive to entrench between Mobile and New Orleans on the subject of Mardi Gras. Such pedantry is not just unbecoming but self-defeating, as it robs us of our hallmark strength as Americans.

Second book in Mardi Gras trilogy peels back the masks

By: [Kevin Lee](#) | July 15, 2015

Author and historian Ann Pond's second book in her trilogy on Gulf Coast Mardi Gras landed in the Artifice email recently. Its relatively short length relative to the first work — roughly 66 pages apart from footnotes — made it a quick read, but that's no indictment of its story.

If anything, Pond has revealed a history far more baroque than the shortened version so widely disseminated in these parts. Interwoven with so much of the cultural landscape and our nation's knack for reinvention, she has given us a tale quintessentially American.

The first book established the Gulf Coast backdrop in the colonial and early American era, along with the emerging prosperity of Mobile and the birth of the city's New Year's Eve celebrations at the hands of Michael Krafft and friends. It also showed New Orleans' own Fat Tuesday masking tradition documented as far back as 1730.

This work, "Masons and Mardi Gras," briefly touches on those times then ventures headlong into titular matters. Pond maintains such fraternal organizations imbued the Cowbellion de Rakins and subsequent groups with uniquely mysterious elements.

According to the author, "Masons and Mardi Gras" examines the private and public lives of the men behind the masks, the reason for all the secrecy, and the rumors that link Mardi Gras in New Orleans to the start of the Civil War.

Freemasonry was an important component of colonial America. Brought from Europe, it was "redefined and standardized" in the mid-1700s by American intellectual and political leaders. Its strong presence was evidenced throughout the philosophies and arguments of our Founding Fathers and George Washington even sported Masonic attire at his inauguration.

Mobile's first Freemasons lodge was founded in 1813. Its Grand Warden even happened to hold the office of mayor at the time the Cowbellion de Rakins were organized.

Freemasons used mystique to their advantage. They draped their doings in ritual and secrecy, a fanciful adaptation which quickly migrated to the New Year's Eve groups.

One of the Freemasons' few public efforts were parades, which waned not long before the New Year's groups launched their efforts. Ironically, the last procession of the last lodge of an order dedicated to "the refinement of virtue" marched past a slave market and public slave whipping post on their way down Royal Street.

Pond quoted New Orleans Picayune notes of Crescent City parades in 1837, but on Fat Tuesday. They were a shadow of the pomp and circumstance seen in Mobile streets on New Year's at the time.

The author noted Mobile's Krafft could have been in New Orleans in 1837 but the term "cowbellion" used in said article was a general term for a rambunctious gathering. It emerged in New Orleans newspaper accounts long before Mobilians' impact.

Another influence in the 1830s and '40s was the emergence of live theater on the Gulf Coast. Theatricality grew in both cities' Freemasonry, in Mobile's New Year's festivities in the form of tableaux and themed parades and in the masquerade balls popular in New Orleans on Fat Tuesday.

An interesting footnote is that John Wilkes Booth's father visited Mobile for a stage performance in 1838, not three years after he wrote a letter to President Andrew Jackson threatening to cut the chief executive's throat with a knife over a pair of captive pirates Booth wished free. Talk about foreshadowing.

The tone of Mobile's festivities also changed over those first decades. When the New Year's groups began at the spark of Mobile's biggest-ever boom, observers found all levels of society gleefully merging in the soirees. Within 20 years, the events grew more exclusionary, with costumes ordered from Paris and members who took themselves far more seriously.

New Orleans still held generally rowdier and more-inclusive affairs. Another difference was the longtime popularity of New Orleans' mixed-race balls, whereas Mobile passed city codes banning blacks from events.

As the Cowbellion de Rakins grew more refined through the 1840s, New Orleans' events lost luster. Daytime costumers ebbed and the pranking of young boys became worse, with weapons being thrown amidst the traditional powdered sugar and flour. In 1848 the Picayune wrote "few respectable persons now dare to show themselves in the streets, and mob law has triumphed." The evening's balls, however, retained hearty endorsement.

In 1852, one last attempt at a daytime New Orleans parade was a shambles. The author credits two men — cotton broker Joseph Ellison and merchant Samuel Manning Todd — with a solution.

Both New Orleanians had dealings and connections in Mobile, with Todd having once held public office here. They solicited advice from Cowbellion de Rakins and members of similar Mobile groups and from that grew the Mystick Krewe of Comus, New Orleans' first Mardi Gras parading society built on the Mobile New Year's template.

As that came to fruition, war brewed between North and South. Before long, both cities were ravaged and their separate days of frivolity ceased. In 1864, the Mobile Advertiser and Register noted there were no New Year's events.

"The Civil War might have caused an irrevocable break with the past in Mobile, as it did in many other American cities, had it not been for the richness, the quality and the depth of the ritual experience among Mobile's elite," Pond wrote. "There remained in Mobile an undeniable continuity with the past exhibited in its continued conservatism toward all social and economic aspects of life. Such a conservative response was well grounded in the functions of the antebellum fraternal order ... The continuity of ceremonial ritual was synonymous with Old South values."

Her extensive footnoting and documentation give this history heft uncommon to urban mythology and folklore. The arrival of the third book and the tale of Fat Tuesday's renaissance is eagerly anticipated on this end.

For more on this book and its companions, go to ann-j-pond.squarespace.com. Kindle and electronic versions may also be purchased.

Mardi Gras mystery solved in Cain book

By: [Kevin Lee](#) | November 11, 2015

A favorite quote likens journalists' social status to that of prostitutes and bartenders, but their philosophical standing as "beside Galileo because they know the world is round." Those attributes aren't independent but intertwined.

Outside the power structure, you have nothing to lose by speaking truth. Yet to do so is a path to alienation and marginalization.

The same could be said of a good historian. Part detective, part epistemologist and philosopher, their dogged adherence to uncovering truth often puts them at odds with the status quo.

Ann Pond enters the fray with the last in her trilogy of books on Mobile Mardi Gras, "Cain and his Lost Cause Generation." More than a regurgitation of threadbare popular myth, Pond's citation of sources and unraveling of fable reads as well-grounded in diligence.

Pond's preview revisits territory meticulously traced in the previous works — "The First Cowbellion" and "Masons and Mardi Gras" — and sketches the intricate symbiosis between Mobile's New Year's celebrations and New Orleans' Mardi Gras. It's a good primer.

The first chapter delivers a wallop when it looks at the central question of how modern myths about the holiday emerged despite ample documentation to the contrary. Two names emerge as the wellspring.

Artist and writer Julian Rayford is well known as the man who gave us the modern Joe Cain Day and wrote the first book-length historical account of Mobile Mardi Gras, "Chasin' the Devil 'Round a Stump." It canonized contemporary beliefs.

But where did Rayford gather his information? It seems to have come from Francois "Frank" Diard, an early 20th century Mobilian committed to elevating the status of his hometown without adherence to a historian's ethics.

Diard amassed a so-called “family history,” an abundance of information and “records” about colonial Mobile and its residents as spurious as his claims of relationship to the Brothers Le Moyne, d’Iberville and Bienville. Pond said no proof of such lineage exists.

The problem with Diard’s research is his dedication to making his findings fit his end goal of giving Mobile as many credited “firsts” as possible. Among those claims are that Mobile and his family had the first azalea, the first garden, the first gumbo and the first Mardi Gras on the Gulf Coast.

Through his 38-year occupation with the Mobile Register and lifelong association with its editor Erwin Craighead, Diard’s claims were never subjected to due scrutiny. Plus, there is the human tendency to believe what is most flattering.

Diard claimed “Boeuf Gras” celebrations began in colonial Mobile and continued uninterrupted until Fat Tuesday of 1861. Pond and previous researchers say historical proof for this is nonexistent, not in d’Iberville’s journals, the Penicaut Narrative or historically documented stories from subsequent French immigrants. Diard disseminated these other fanciful ideas as widely as possible, including in articles written for national publication. After a while, it became the accepted narrative.

Rayford was undoubtedly influenced by Diard. Rayford also championed a vision of Joe Cain as a symbol of wresting power from elites and spurning outside influence.

Pond cites not only Cain’s participation in New Orleans Mardi Gras festivities of 1867 but newspaper accounts claiming the 1868 Mobile Mardi Gras celebrations “ushered in a new era.”

To Rayford, Cain was a worthy source of information about Mobile’s most cherished pastime. He extolled Cain’s virtues, engineered the long-dead city clerk’s disinterment from Bayou La Batre to historic Church Street Graveyard and spurred the inception of the Joe Cain Day procession on the Sunday preceding Lundi Gras.

Pond’s book goes on to discuss the Mobile of Cain’s youth, a town on the crest of the Cotton Boom wave. The social picture she paints is that of a frontier town on the rise, reinventing itself and hewing away the rougher parts of its culture.

Also included is an in-depth telling of the story of the Boyington Oak and the tragedy that led to its eerie legend. Fittingly, the oak stands not far from Cain’s current resting spot.

There’s no way to tell this story without ample focus on New Orleans, and Pond doesn’t disappoint in that regard. Her descriptions of the Crescent City culture and Mardi Gras customs are just as vivid and detailed as those of Mobile, detailing the similarities and differences.

Unsurprisingly, the nascent civic rivalry between both cities is obvious and manifested in the tourism marketing undertaken in the antebellum period. Let’s just say the “family Mardi Gras” angle was well underway long before Mobile even observed Carnival.

If “the truth will set you free,” then these three volumes are pure liberation.