

Books of Special Interest

The Stormy Petrel of the Indies

BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS, "Father of the Indians." By MARCEL BRION. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1928. \$3.

Reviewed by LESLEY BYRD SIMPSON

AMERICAN hagiography has recently been enriched by another biography of that remarkable character, Bartolomé de Las Casas. This book is, in some respects, extraordinary. In it M. Brion has not descended to such outworn devices of musty scholarship as footnotes and citations, but has skilfully concealed his facts under the colorful art of the novelist, and the reader is carried on unaware that he is learning anything. This is, beyond a doubt, the new history. For instance, what sobersides of the old school would have had the courage to say right off, on the first page, writing of America: "Rivers, wide as seas, rolled up precious metals?" Then turn to the next page:

The promises of the fantastic Admiral had been fulfilled an hundredfold. He had discovered a country where gold was the commonest metal. The natives covered the roofs of their temples with it, used it in paving the streets, and had laughed at seeing the sailors fill their pockets with such ordinary pebbles.

And so on. The result is that the unwary reader, dazzled by such pictures, is in danger of accepting several things in M. Brion's book which are, strictly speaking, not quite accurate. Now it is written that once in every generation some one rediscovers that old standby of scandal-mongers, the "Brief Relation of the Destruction of the Indies," by Bartolomé de Las Casas. Since 1552 every foreigner who has felt an urge to expose the awfulness of the Spaniards has seized upon the hair-raising revelations of Las Casas and told the world about it. So with M. Brion. It is no doubt salutary for the Spaniards to be reminded once in a while of what a hard lot their ancestors were, but it is usually ignored by these writers that the "Brief Relation" was written as a deliberate piece of propaganda in support of the Dominican reforms in

the government of the Indies. It has been repeatedly exposed for its libellous falsehoods, most recently by Manuel Serrano y Sanz in his "Orígenes de la Dominación Española" (Madrid, 1918). But M. Brion weaves the "Brief Relation" into the very stuff of his book, with scarcely a suggestion of criticism.

No doubt, too, it is legitimate for a biographer to employ distortion, but is it not going beyond the limit of strict necessity to reconstruct the Spanish empire of the sixteenth century with Las Casas as centerpiece? Must we believe that every time a certain noisy monk opened his mouth governors, viceroys, kings, stopped, looked, and listened? The plain fact seems to be that in his day Las Casas was looked upon as an intolerable nuisance, even by his brother missionaries, and that he did more harm than rampagous reformers usually do, being incredibly thick-skinned and pertinacious.

And why insist that Las Casas was a much persecuted man? A man of tremendous staying power, inordinately fond of a row, he spent the greater part of his ninety-three years pounding his adversaries, and had the not inconsiderable satisfaction of beating most of them. Posterity, moreover, has accepted him at his own valuation—no small one—and now he is in a fair way to becoming canonized. What more could a man ask? Can't we have a saint without making him a martyr?

M. Brion, too, has an original formula for biography. The twenty-two most active years of Las Casas's life as a missionary he disposes of in two pages, although it happens that these years (1517-1539), are fairly well documented and of unusual interest. On the other hand, M. Brion devotes a good third of his book to a summary of the dull and footless tracts written by Las Casas against the exploitation of the Indians. Footless, because all the talk in the world could have made very little difference in the hard fact, which was that every part of the Spanish colonial empire, the government, the church, the laity, was dependent in the end upon the forced labor of the Indians. Every law or ordinance that

ignored that lamentable fact was still-born, as were those clauses of the reform laws of 1543 generally credited to Las Casas.

Our author has the annoying trick of scrambling foreign names in a fashion which must be confusing to anyone unfamiliar with the field. Thus Toribio de Benevente, nicknamed "Motolinía," becomes "Torribio de Motalma." In "Robinson" we are expected to recognize William Robertson, the historian. Santiago de Cuba has a strange look as "Santiago de Fernandina." Blasco Núñez Vela, the first viceroy of Peru, is metamorphosed into "Vaca de Castro," with unpardonable insouciance as to the identity of either gentleman. In the same vein is M. Brion's description of the government of the native towns: "They have municipal houses with *concièrges* who meet twice a week; there they administer justice . . ." This may be an original translation of the Spanish *concejal*—councilman. It may bear looking into.

M. Brion carries his biographer's license still farther in his handling of chronology and geography. Thus Las Casas's stay of three weeks at Cumaná on the Pearl Coast, done in the radiant colors of the new history, becomes: "He traversed almost the entire continent of South America." Las Casas's first sight of Mexico was in 1531, yet: "He was . . . an eager crusader against the Mexican armies, and the hideous priests of the Plumed Serpent." Madrid, it will be recalled, was not established as the capital of Spain until 1561, but our author has Las Casas appealing to "Madrid" repeatedly. Then he performs the difficult feat of having Las Casas in America and Spain at the same time, in 1537. Again, he makes Las Casas protest, in 1517, against an event which was not to happen until three years later, the punitive expedition against the Indians of the Pearl Coast. But why go further?

The Rothschilds Again

FIVE MEN OF FRANKFORT. By MARCUS ELI RAVAGE. New York: The Dial Press. 1929. \$3.

Reviewed by JOHN M. S. ALLISON

THREE studies of this famous house have been published during the past year. The first to appear, were the two able volumes by Count Egon Corti, and then, at the close of the year, came this book by Mr. Ravage.

This latest treatment of the Rothschild family is, apparently, intended as a condensation and popularization of all of the available information concerning the financial wizards of Frankfort. A squib on the jacket proclaims that the book has been written for the man who "wants to enjoy rather than to study"! May one be permitted to ask if the one excludes the other? But, the answer to that is no matter, the principal question remains. Is the writing of such a work really worth while?

No one objects to the popularizing of Clío's art. The more that we have of it the better for the general reading public. But even "popularized history" should have its limitations and its standards. There is, for example, the need for a limitation of subject. How many popular versions of Napoleon there have been! And yet, how invariably similar their content! Sometimes, there has been, at least, the virtue of a difference in the attitude of the author. Not infrequently, alas, even this mark of distinction has been lacking.

In the present volume, there is not very much that has not been told already, and well told. Until the private papers of the Rothschilds have been released, there will probably be very little use in publishing treatments of this interesting and very important subject. Again, the book has slight originality of style. The borrowing of time-worn phrases is a dangerous practice. For example, may we never again have to read that the Holy Roman Empire was neither Holy nor Roman nor an Empire. Above all, popular history should be well-written. In this volume there are a few places where the style and treatment would offend even the least fastidious reader.

In spite of these defects, however, there is much virtue in the volume. It is not a dull book, by any means. There is an animation and enthusiasm that carries the reader along to the last page. Mr. Ravage has, as well, been most fortunate in the structure that he has selected. For the House of Rothschild, life was a series of recurring crises. The treatment of these by the average author would be tiresome, but this writer has so tempered and varied his method of narration that each dramatic episode stands out as distinct and unique. It is a pleasure, too, to find that Genz, the subtle side of Metternich, has been given a just and proportionate prominence in that whirlpool of European politics known as the Age of Metternich.

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