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REVIEWS

Nigel Griffin, ed. and trans., *Las Casas on Columbus: Background and the Second and Fourth Voyages*, Repertorium Columbianum 7 (Turnhout: Brepols 1999) 494 pp.

Bartolomé de Las Casas is best known throughout history as a defender of the Indians of the New World. His ideas are forever linked with the “Black Legend,” whereby the violent actions of the Spanish conquerors overshadow attempts to justify the conquest of the Indies. However, Anthony Pagden states in his Introduction that “Las Casas is also . . . the man who perhaps did most to chronicle the life of the ‘discoverer’ of America, Christopher Columbus, the man who was, in his opinion, responsible for setting in motion what he famously described as the ‘destruction of the Indies.’” (3)

These seemingly contradictory elements join together in *Las Casas On Columbus: Background and the Second and Fourth Voyages*. Nigel Griffin has compiled a selection of Las Casas’s narration of Columbus’s life, presented in Spanish and English, which allows the reader to observe the fervent pro-Indian arguments presented alongside an “extensive and sympathetic picture” (7) of Christopher Columbus. This edition has reintroduced and made accessible to scholars at any level a text worthy of close attention and study.

Anthony Pagden’s Introduction begins with a brief overview of Bartolomé de Las Casas’s life as well as some background into the *Historia de las Indias*, where the friar’s biographical sketch of Columbus originally appears. Most intriguing, though, is the subsequent discussion of Las Casas’s ideological development and how he uses his writings to expose the truth about the conquest. Pagden sheds light on how Las Casas views Columbus’s role in history: “Columbus thus became for Las Casas the founder, the agent through which the Castilian crown had been assigned by God with no less a task than the salvation of the fourth part of the world” (9). The conversion of the Indians, as Las Casas saw it, was to be undertaken in a peaceful manner, and any abuse of this mission would bring the wrath of God. To this end, no one was exempt, not even Columbus: “Las Casas tells the story of Columbus’s subsequent fall from grace and final death in relative poverty and obscurity as the story of divine punishment” (12). The remainder of the Introduction is dedicated to revealing how Las Casas went about his primary goal of setting “the record straight” (14). The Introduction provides the reader with insight into Las Casas’s intellectual world, revealing him to be a man intent upon proving his authority and distinguishing himself from others “in explicit opposition” (18) to his ideological base, as was Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo. Anthony Pagden has succinctly provided the reader with the information necessary to begin reading the text and study, firsthand, Las Casas’s interpretation of the life of Christopher Columbus.

Las Casas On Columbus: Background and the Second and Fourth Voyages contains an excellent transcription of the original Spanish text with more than ample notes to clarify linguistic questions that may arise in a reading. Nigel Griffin has stayed true to the authentic manuscript utilized for this edition, providing a great service to the scholars in this area of study. However, the focus of this book review will be on the English translation, for it truly distinguishes

this edition from many others. A genuine feat of this work is the fact that the nuances and peculiarities of Las Casas's writing style have not been lost. Griffin has remained true to the spirit of Las Casas's words, keeping the emotion behind them intact.

A fascinating section of the translation is found at the beginning, where Las Casas goes to great lengths to describe the significance of Christopher Columbus's name, showing him to be heaven sent: "So it was that he was named Christopher, that is to say *Christum ferens*, which is Latin for the bearer or carrier of Christ. . . . His family name, Colón, means 'new settler,' a fitting title for a man whose industry and whose labors led to the discovery of numberless souls who, through the preaching of the gospel and administering of the blessed sacraments, have come and continue every day to come in triumph to the great city descending out of heaven" (24–25). This excerpt shows just how entrenched the idea of Columbus being a part of a divine plan really is in the mind of Las Casas. This idea of God intervening in order to send to the Indies messengers in order to convert the masses is reiterated throughout the rest of the work; God's intentions are good but it is his earthly couriers who act like criminals violating the rights of others.

There are some hidden treasures that surface in the text overall, such as the author's asides. It is a treat when Las Casas draws the reader into his thoughts, jumping from narrating a story to adding a small anecdote before returning to his original point. For example, in the midst of recounting the tribulations of the founding of Isabela on the island of Hispaniola, Las Casas uses a small aside to tell the tale of some headless strangers encountered by some of the Spaniards. Once he has finished with his shocking tale, he returns to his original story with the words, "Returning and picking up the thread of our narrative where we left it . . ." (114). This is reminiscent of a style employed by other chroniclers, such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo. These asides serve to remind the reader of Las Casas's extensive memory and desire to set the story straight by the use of his own direct experience and observations.

Las Casas's eye for detail can be appreciated in the translation as well as in the text itself. Characteristic of Las Casas's narration of the second and fourth voyages, he recounts long lists of items found and transported back to the king and queen, the seaward adventures of Columbus and his crew, and encounters with Indians and mutineers. Altogether these elements translate into a fascinating read, but none is more captivating than Columbus's meeting with death. Las Casas goes to great lengths to illustrate that Columbus dies in poverty because of his crimes against God and humanity: "Anyone who stops to consider the true facts that this history has so far recounted concerning the irrational and uncontrolled way the admiral conducted and condoned the insults, attacks, and injustices perpetrated against the people of this island of Hispaniola and on Veragua, allowing them to be imprisoned and oppressed . . . will be in a position to understand that all the misfortunes and adversity, grief and suffering that later befell him came about as a proper reward and punishment for the crimes he had committed" (246–247). At the same time that he is recounting the life and death of Columbus, a man who does not fulfill his God-given destiny in the Indies, Las Casas is seeking to impact the lives of those that could stand to learn from past mistakes. His final statement clearly reveals what has

motivated him to pass Columbus's story on to others: ". . . let them now open their eyes and see the truth about this wicked lie which has allowed them to salve their consciences even while they were stealing and oppressing their wretched fellow men" (250). Thanks to Griffin's able translation into English, as well as the intact transcription of the original Spanish, the reader is able to follow Las Casas's narration and get a glimpse of why his writing was so innovative for the time.

This volume of the *Repertorium Columbianum* is a strong contribution not only to the study of Christopher Columbus, but also to colonial Spanish-American literature. Where one had forgotten about the body of work attributed to Las Casas other than his widely read *Brevissima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, this text allows for a rediscovery of another dimension of Las Casas's chronicles of the Indies. The greatest achievement of *Las Casas On Columbus: Background and the Second and Fourth Voyages* is the English translation which makes this most interesting contribution by Las Casas readily accessible to all. In 494 pages, Nigel Griffin (along with Anthony Pagden's Introduction) allows scholars at all levels to take a different look at the impact of Columbus and Bartolomé de Las Casas on the enterprise of the Indies. Clearly this is simply a step on the path towards a greater understanding of two key figures that will only be enhanced by the forthcoming volumes, *Oviedo on Columbus* and *Las Casas On Columbus: The Third Voyage*.

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