

Books Reviewed

Russell, Peter. *Prince Henry "the Navigator": A Life*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001. xvi + 448 pp. + 32 unpaginated color plates.

The classical phrase "life and times" used to indicate traditional biography on the one hand and what was conceived as "historical background" on the other is significantly, if perversely, applicable to the case of this title. If one invokes the "life"- "times" distinction, *Prince Henry "the Navigator": A Life* would more properly be *Prince Henry "the Navigator": A Times*, for Russell has had to work against the fact that precious little information about Henry himself remains to us and what there is has to be extricated from centuries of myth. Indeed, as Russell dutifully informs us, even the representation that serves as the volume's cover, namely the well-known portrait from the Nuno Gonçalves retable that for centuries has provided us our "visual" of the prince, likely "started life as a portrait of someone else" (4). Fittingly, the book's cover stands for problems with its project.

What does one do when one wishes to write a biography of a subject who virtually instantiates the "absent cause" pointed to today as the core of the project of historical biography? That characterization, of course, derives from a questioning of the presumptions upon which traditional biography rests: the presumption of the ability to read "sources" "objectively," to create an authoritative narrative, and thereby to "portray" an individual in terms that simultaneously resemble those of the nineteenth-century novel and partake of "objectivity" and "authority." Answers to the question "what is one to do?" can be many, from writing a biography that in its process inventories the problems of biography in relation to the particular subject involved, to the Foucauldian creation of a theorized historical "model" to be continuously tested in analytical practice. Presumably, the list of options would include "plunge ahead with traditional biography and see what comes out." Russell opts for this last approach. While acknowledging, albeit in passing, many of the problems that the strategy brings with it as regards Prince Henry, what he chooses to do is to rely heavily on historiography contemporary to Henry's life and other contemporary sources: explorers' accounts, commercial records, period correspondence, and other documents. To be sure, his readings of such sources—especially the historian Zurara—are sensitive and made sophisticated through strong contextualization. Then, however, he literally "presumes" Henry's likely relationship to what such documents reveal. On that basis, motives, convictions, even a speculative psychology of sorts are attributed to the prince. And a "Prince Henry" is thereby created.

The result of this process is a book with a very particular texture: at its core, a "life" as imaginary as any can be and around it a "times" constructed and given coherence by the presence of that imaginary core. The "times" is repeatedly asked to extract the "life" from the realm of the imaginary, but the book is literally the record of the failure of those attempts—a failure that ultimately refers to historical biography in general as well as to this specific project that clearly puts historical biography to the test.

The failure is, however, in many ways a fruitful one. In the "times" constructed in an effort to create a "life," we see consolidated what is known about, among many other matters, the powerful and complex relationships between Portuguese expansionist activities and such factors as internal Portuguese politics, including the tensions between commercially-oriented and militarily-oriented strategies; the politics of the Iberian peninsula in general (especially the Portugal-Castile rivalry); and politics with the papacy and the question of "just war." The age-old problem of interpreting expansionist ideology

is also repeatedly touched on in an informative manner, though it is never addressed in a unified way, truncated as it and many other such issues are by the narrative movement back to the imaginary “life.” Furthermore, individual chapters constitute extractable studies highly valuable in and of themselves—especially for those who do not read Portuguese. Chapter Nine, for example, is a brief treatise on the caravel, while Chapter Twelve is a contextualized résumé of Cadamosto’s African voyages and a sophisticated approach to the explorer’s own account of them. These and many other topics are scrupulously researched and footnoted and the visuals complement the narrative well. As a result, many sequences in the “times” sector stand as little summae of current knowledge and of the questions therein suggested.

The reviewer would argue that in fact the strength of Russell’s achievement is to be found in those loci within the “times” and, perhaps most especially, in the network among them provided as much by the notes as by the narrative. Moreover, in the manifest absence of the “life,” that dimension constitutes the bulk of the book. By contrast, the “life” itself is plagued by such phrasing as: “[it] perhaps entitles us to suppose . . .” (19), “it is not difficult to establish what were some of the influences at work . . .” (22), or “the odds are that it was his reading of this passage . . . that first made him think of . . .” (117), all with regard to “Henry.” Obviously, complex locutions designed to bring a “life” into (narrative) being through linkage to the “times.”

A principal danger is that, having effectively extricated Henry from Portuguese nationalist mythology, *Prince Henry “the Navigator”: A Life* will simply enclose him in another sort of mythology: that supportive of the intellectual project of historical biography itself, the problematic character of which this study, read with an eye to that issue, in fact lays bare. The reader would be well advised to approach this volume with the concepts first that the “life” functions principally as a narrative device to coordinate the various topics developed in the “times” rather than the other way around and second that we do not know—and likely will never know—much about that man who was the third son of John of Portugal and Philippa of Lancaster.

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Treece, David. *Exiles, Allies, Rebels: Brazil’s Indianist Movement, Indigenist Politics, and the Imperial Nation-State*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 2000. ix + 271 pp. Bibliography. Index.

In this penetrating study of Indianism in colonial and nineteenth-century Brazilian literature, David Treece offers a sophisticated and textured analysis of the sociopolitical milieux that engendered this genre. Whereas some previous interpretations have depicted Indianism as a hapless adaptation of European romanticism by nationalist Brazilian authors, Treece emphasizes its homegrown origins. In historicizing Indianist literature, Treece aims to place the fictional works within the broader political debates, legislation, and government policies concerning Indians and nation-building, as well as to explore the symbolic importance of the Indian for divergent political agendas. For defenders of the status quo, rosy depictions of indigenous-white relations served to bind (or blind) a nation fissured by slavery, racism, class conflict, regionalism, and ideology; but for dissidents, the dispossessed or marginalized Indian embodied the socioeconomic and political exclusion of the majority of the Brazilian population. Nevertheless, both sides