

COLONIAL AND INDEPENDENCE PERIODS

La naturaleza de las Indias nuevas: De Cristóbal Colón a Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo. By ANTONELLO GERBI. Translated by ANTONIO ALATORRE. México, 1978. Fondo de Cultura Económica. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. 562. Cloth.

A special attention in recent years has been devoted to the first European accounts of America. How Indians appeared to the earliest witnesses, the extent to which Europeans were able to identify what was “new” in the New World, the intensity and timing of different intellectual and psychological responses—these have been significant topics for our generation, perhaps especially because of the new discoveries and rapid changes now occurring. Carl Sauer, J. H. Elliott, Alfred Crosby, and the contributors to *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old* (1976) have been prominent in these researches. As is well-known, the Italian historian Antonello Gerbi, in *La Disputa del Nuovo Mondo* (1955), focused on a later aspect of the European reaction to America, the eighteenth-century controversies over America’s supposed inferiority. Just prior to his death in 1976, however, Gerbi completed the text of a study of the earlier period, analyzing the writings of Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, Peter Martyr, and a number of others, but especially Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, from this same point of view. The work was published in Milan in 1975. The Spanish translation by Antonio Alatorre contains additions and corrections not present in the Italian edition.

What fascinates Gerbi is the detail of the Europeans’ commentary on the natural world, the environment, the plants and animals, and the Indians of America. Columbus, whose indifference toward some aspects of the American continent has been often noted, was nevertheless an acute observer of the natural order. So also was the letter-writing doctor of Columbus’ second voyage, Diego Alvarez Chanca. Gerbi resurrects from obscurity others of the Columbian period, such as Nicola Scillacio and Michele da Cuneo, and he comments further on Martín Fernández de Enciso, Antonio Pigafetta, and Giovanni da Verrazzano. The number of Italians among the early European commentators is interesting to see. Indeed this entire work stands as a kind of tribute to the role of the Italians in the period of American discovery and exploration, and it may be added to the writings of Charles Verlin-den and Ruth Pike and others who have explored this subject.

Oviedo, to whom two-thirds of the book is dedicated, was a Spaniard, not an Italian, but he spent more than three years (1499–1502) in Italy and Gerbi can call him “un italiano . . . por su formación mental” as well as for his scientific curiosity, his concept of the historian’s calling, and his sense of humor (p. 163). Gerbi analyzes Oviedo’s knowledge of Italian literature, his use of Italian words and phrases, and the other ways in which he reflected his Italian experience. Oviedo’s work on America is an enthusiastic eulogy of the environment, as is demonstrated in item after item. And there is additional and abundant commentary on the subjects that Oviedo described: iguanas, Indian conversion, Erasmianism, miracles, tobacco, the Requerimiento, and many more. Gerbi occasionally takes issue with other historians, and his footnotes have a grab-bag quality that lends a sense of heterogeneity to the composition. It is less original and less systematic than *La Disputa del Nuovo Mondo*, but it is a rich and detailed work and it is by far the most extensive commentary on Oviedo that we have.

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Evangelización y conquista: Experiencia franciscana en Hispanoamérica. By LINO GÓMEZ CANEDO. México, 1977. Editorial Porrúa. Notes. Appendixes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xxiii, 393. Paper.

Fr. Lino Gómez Canedo has added another important scholarly contribution to his long list of studies on the Franciscan Order and on the Roman Catholic Church in colonial Latin America. As with all of his works it is carefully researched, logically presented, and elegantly written. In his introduction, the author states that the present study was not designed to be a history of the Franciscan missions in Hispanic America but rather an examination of the problems missionaries faced as they completed the spiritual conquest. Gómez Canedo is especially interested in the Franciscan approach to missiology—the methods and techniques of evangelization. He stresses that the Franciscans left much to the individual initiative of friars and that eclectic approaches were used, very practical and pragmatic, because the Order of Friars Minor was little inclined to theoretical speculation or radical solutions. Father Lino discusses the so-called “rationality controversy” regarding the Indian’s capacity to understand Iberian Catholicism, to be converted, and to participate in the sacramental system of the Church. The introduction contains a fine commentary on Franciscan missionary chronicles and other sources.

Evangelización y conquista is divided into four major chapters and