

SPANISH CIVILIZATION IN AMERICA

DON Salvador de Madariaga's latest work¹ deserves an extensive review, not only because of the importance of its subject, but because its distinguished author justly holds a position of authority among the English public as an interpreter of his country's history and civilization.

Perhaps none of the great movements of history has been more consistently misrepresented than the Spanish conquest and colonization of America. No culture has suffered more from the 'whig interpretation of history' than that of Spain. For at least two centuries there existed what seemed to many Spaniards a conspiracy to belittle and distort the contribution of their country to human civilization. Of late years this tendency has been reversed, and the 'reevaluation' of Spain's past, in which English and North-American scholars have played a prominent part, has swept away a great deal of ignorant prejudice. As regards Spanish America in particular, there have been published in both the Americas and in Spain a large number of careful historical studies which make such prejudice no longer excusable. Most of these works will, however, be unknown to the general reader in England, and there is therefore need of a re-presentation and summing-up of the facts.

Sr Madariaga's present work is the logical continuation of his biographies of Columbus and Cortés, and itself points further: 'This study of the rise and fall of the Spanish Empire in America came to be written as the indispensable background to the life of Simón Bolívar, and as the answer to the question: what is it exactly Bolívar destroyed? It is divided into two equal parts of which this book, 'the Rise', is part one, and part two, 'the Fall', will follow shortly. . . .'

The fact that prejudice against the Spanish Empire still lingers on, even, as Sr Madariaga shows, among some contemporary historians who should know better, has made him conceive this present work largely in the form of an apologia. Not that he ignores or even minimises the evils that this history reveals, but he corrects the bias, first by presenting the virtues that went side by side with the vices, then by placing the whole subject in its proper historical perspective—by showing how absurd it is to condemn men of the sixteenth century for not thinking like men of the twentieth, and especially by showing that cruelty, greed, injustice and intolerance were not, at any period, the monopoly of Spaniards. Sr Madariaga has no difficulty in proving that the misdeeds of Spaniards were not only always paralleled but usually surpassed by the men of other countries, and

¹ *The Rise of the Spanish American Empire*. (Hollis & Carter; 21s.)

that examples of cruelty and exploitation are to be found in the British and French colonial empires in the nineteenth and even the twentieth centuries. He shows, in short, that there are certain instincts deeply rooted in human nature, which the special environment of colonial enterprise everywhere and at all times raises into temptations of terrible strength. Once imperfection rather than perfection is recognised to be the human norm—and we can, of course, no longer share the optimism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—then the bright side of the Spanish Empire shines not weaker, as it has usually been made to do, but more resplendent by contrast with the dark side. For there can be no question that the record of Spanish colonisation provides some of the noblest examples of high human ideals and endeavour to be found anywhere in history, examples all the nobler because Spain, being the first in the colonial field, was the first to grapple with new problems for which the classical and medieval tradition of law and politics provided no ready-made solutions. From the ordeal of these unprecedented responsibilities both the incarnations of authority in Spain—the Church and the central Government (the Crown and the Council of the Indies)—emerged throughout the three centuries with the greatest credit. If at particular times and in particular places things went badly wrong, Sr Madariaga shows that it was not for want of proper direction from above, but because of the defects below—selfishness and greed in individuals, conflicts of groups and interests, which everywhere make up human society, and which, over those enormous distances, the central Government had insufficient power to control.

One wonders, however, whether this vast subject might not have been better covered if the author's zeal for historical fairness had been a little less explicit. He will do good service if his work helps to banish any self-righteous conception of British imperialism that may still linger among us (not, of course, that Sr Madariaga concentrates upon the British, but the comparison is the obvious one). Yet this aim might have been just as effectively achieved with less attention to gruesome details—not in order to spare any national feelings, but to safeguard the dignity of his book. Far more space is given to atrocities than, for instance, to Vitoria's impressive defence of the rights and freedom of the Indians with his consequent limitation of the rights of their conquerors; to the valiant apostolate of Las Casas and his fellow Dominicans on behalf of the Indians; and to the public debate between Las Casas and Sepúlveda, surely one of the turning-points in the history of politics and law. Here sixteenth-century Spain certainly deserves to be called, as Karl Vossler has called her, the mentor of ethics among European nations. Sr Madariaga does rather less than justice to this aspect of his subject. In the same way he

places the Inquisition against its background by referring to the contemporary witch-hunts of Protestant countries. But since this has been done before, and since the persecution of witches is not unfamiliar, the amount of space devoted to the tortures and executions is disproportionate. It is also another example of a lack of balance since the account of the Inquisition takes up practically the whole of the chapter devoted to the Church, and much more important aspects of ecclesiastical activity are omitted.

The liberal use made of picturesque stories and entertaining gossip culled from the contemporary records certainly gives the work a lively 'human touch' not usually associated with scholarly histories, but it also, perhaps, contributes to the lack of balance by tending to obscure the main outlines. The subject deserves to be given a popular appeal, but the combination of an emphasis on the sensational and a liking for the picturesque can be dangerous. It is perhaps responsible for the acceptance of luridly coloured accounts of the corruption of the Church in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (pp. 143-47). I need quote only one phrase: 'the monasteries are transformed into public brothels'; the whole is in the same vein. There is no reason to doubt that during this period the Church in both Spain and America fell away to a considerable extent from the high level of discipline and zeal characteristic of the sixteenth century, and that (as throughout Europe) much laxity and corruption set in; but such a statement as the above is frankly incredible. This sensational picture of the moral iniquity of the clergy is derived in part from the records of the Inquisition: Sr Madariaga should need no reminder that one does not judge the moral life of a society from the records of its criminal proceedings. The main sources, however, are for the seventeenth century Thomas Gage, and for the eighteenth the 'Secret Report' presented to the King of Spain by Ulloa and Jorge Juan, which was published in London. The first-named was an apostate friar, writing a work of deliberately anti-Spanish propaganda; in another context Sr Madariaga quotes an estimate of his character that makes him out to have been a highly disreputable person (p. 359). The second source is one whose authenticity has been several times called in question; Sr Madariaga accepts it as authentic, though he notes that 'the obvious bias of the English editor may have induced him to some infidelities of detail' (p. 391). These are scarcely sources that, on a subject where there has been so much notorious slander, a responsible scholar should accept uncritically. What is more, in a later chapter we read: 'This picture in which science and the Church are seen working together for the people may surprise those who are not acquainted with the truly enlightened spirit which animated the Church—or at any rate many Churchmen—in the

eighteenth century. The far-reaching reforms undertaken then in education both in Spain and in the Indies were nearly always sponsored, conceived and carried out by Churchmen' (p. 227). The qualification in the first sentence scarcely bridges the contradiction between this passage and the earlier section on the Church. It is, to say the least, unlikely that both statements can be true: the second, however, is based on fact.

In the treatment of the Church's part in the building of the Empire there is a gap that must be pointed to as the gravest defect in the book. The only account, and it is an inadequate one, of the missions towards the end of the imperial era is taken from Humboldt. Why is there nothing about the Jesuit missions in Paraguay?² Why is there nothing about that noble Franciscan, Junípero Serra, and the long series of missions founded in California, from San Diego to San Francisco, between 1769 and 1823? It may be that this last impressive flowering of Spanish missionary and civilising activity may be dealt with in the second part of Sr Madariaga's history; none the less, fairness required a reference here to offset the lurid pictures of clerical depravity; and historical completeness required an account of Paraguay. Both these aspects of Spanish imperial history are witnesses to the fact that not all was rotten in the Church, and that the Orders, far from turning their houses into public brothels, still preserved an apostolic zeal and a concern for the spiritual and material welfare of the natives.

Sr Madariaga defends the Spanish Empire not only by comparing the conditions prevailing there with those to be found in the rest of the European and American world, but also in a more positive way. He refutes the charge of Spanish oppression, first by pointing out that, in the economic sphere, far from being guilty of exploitation, Spain in fact became impoverished while the Indies prospered; and secondly by maintaining that, in the political sphere, the central Government was consistently impartial and fair, that the officials in the Indies were on the whole inefficient and easy-going, and that a wide measure of practical self-government was enjoyed through the municipal councils and the trading organisations. Perhaps more revolutionary is his contention that under Spain these American nations were more prosperous than they have ever been since. This is rather too sweeping: it cannot apply to the southern republics. But Sr de Madariaga has in mind the former vice-royalties of Mexico and Peru, which were the centres of Spanish colonial culture, and here the statement seems certainly true. It is clear that in these areas a rapid

² Why, incidentally, is there nothing about the suppression of the Society—a most important episode in Spanish and Spanish-American history?

decline set in immediately after the war of independence.

Why, then, if there was no oppression, and if there was a marked prosperity, was the tie binding the Empire to the mother country so suddenly broken? We must expect the answer to this in the second volume. Here Sr Madariaga prepares the ground by some suggestions. At least two of these reveal his tendency to simplify by means of generalisations, but here the limitation of space allows us to deal with only one. He traces the trend to anarchy throughout the three centuries of the Empire's history as seen in the conflict, open or latent, between order and authority as represented by Madrid, and the indiscipline of the individual American Spaniards; and he lays considerable stress on the 'anarchical individualism' of the Spanish character. But this conflict seems to be sufficiently explained by the economic factors following from the complex racial problem, and by the natural tendency to selfishness in individuals and classes. The anarchism of the Spaniard is a topic that has been much ventilated. But if we except the Middle Ages, where special racial and religious factors were involved, this anarchism was nowhere particularly in evidence until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Since then instability and recurring periods of disorder have been marked features of all Hispanic countries. The question of 'environment'—political, religious and cultural—would seem to be at least as important as that of 'national psychology'; the two are in any case correlative. Important considerations are here raised, which it is to be hoped that Sr Madariaga will later discuss fully.

Sr Madariaga is on surer ground when he turns to some of the economic causes for the Empire's decline. Spain never made herself the economic head of the imperial system. She did not develop an industrial productivity to meet the influx of gold and silver. By being content to act as a sort of broker between Europe and the Indies, she connived at her own impoverishment, was unable to carry out her 'metropolitan duties', and so prepared the end of her own empire. Her inability to keep abreast with the times as life became more and more mechanical and technical; her failure to arrest the decline of her navy and merchant marine; the fact that she never endeavoured to use the Indies as a source of military and naval manpower—all this points to her inefficiency (in the modern sense) as an imperial power. This Sr Madariaga accounts for by two features of Spanish life: 'idleness'—an indifference to activity, especially economic activity, as such—and a 'neglect of technique'. Spanish civilization was thus outside the main stream of human history. 'This main stream was leading men away from the Christian fold, through the Renaissance and the Reformation, to free-thinking humanism

towards the era of the Machine which is now swallowing us. The Spanish world was, and to a great extent still is, on the margin of that evolution of Western man. Its aversion to technique had a positive as well as a negative aspect. It was, and still is, an instinctive spring whereby the individual soul defends its integrity and its autonomy against that huge mechanized monster—the modern community' (p. 332). From the point of view of political and economic efficiency the Spanish Empire was thus a failure. But it was a great human and cultural achievement, which Sr Madariaga sums up in one word—*style*. It made possible a leisurely human life in a civilized environment of artistic splendour.

To indicate something of the quality of this civilization—of the conception of human life on which it was based—we can here return to the opening section of the book. The original conquerors, for all their crudity, ruthlessness and individualism, were the conscious heirs of a great tradition: they felt the majesty of law and instinctively respected royal authority because they 'were all imbued with the sense of common fellowship fostered in Spain as in all the Latin world by the twofold tradition of Rome—the Imperial and the Christian. They were, in one word, deeply *civilized*' (p. 6). The Spanish Government was very conscious of its existence as part of Christendom, of its responsibilities as a Christian and Roman nation. Its task in America was thus essentially viewed not in terms of self-interest but as a duty to the great tradition of civilization: 'Spain, therefore, confronted with an entirely original historical situation, reacted *as a State*, first almost instinctively, then deliberately, in a Christian and generous way; she recognized the human problem involved, examined it intelligently and objectively in the light of the highest principles, and officially adopted the most Christian and enlightened attitude towards the population of the New World' (p. 14).

Hence, from the start, the basis of settlement was the civilized unit of the municipality—civic order under political authority. Don Francisco de Toledo, the great viceroy of Peru, thus reported to the king: 'As I have explained to your Majesty, for these Indians to learn to be Christians they must first learn to be men and be taught the government and mode of life of political and reasonable people. . . .' To achieve which end the viceroy organized open councils in the Indian villages, in which the Indians could discuss their own administration under their own elected officials.

Much ridicule has been cast by modern historians on the custom of reading out to Indians, who were seeing Europeans for the first time, a long proclamation, which beginning with Adam and Eve set forth the doctrines of Christianity and the authority of Pope and King. The truth is that, on this basis of a civilized order, Church and

Government set about the task of implanting Christianity in an eminently practical and human way. Sr Madariaga quotes a most impressive royal ordinance enjoining the teaching of gardening and farming to Indian children 'by way of enjoyment and play and pastime one or two hours a day, even though it be taking it out of the time due to catechism, for it also is catechism and morals and good behaviour' (p. 6). In accordance with Catholic tradition in all its richness, the Indians were taught a living human worship, full use being made of pictures, statues, colour, processions and music—the Indians formed their own choirs and had their own orchestras. They were even taught (how marvellous this is!) to act miracle plays translated into their own languages—performances that deeply moved the Spaniards present. The first book to be printed in America (Mexico 1539) was a catechism in Spanish and Nautl. Within a short time many Indians were able to compose Latin orations and write Latin hexameters.

All this aspect of Spanish civilization in America is so impressive that it is to be regretted that Sr Madariaga gives it so little space. The work would have been better balanced if we had been given more examples like these and fewer anecdotes, atrocities and less gossip; if, in short, we had been given a fuller account and a clearer interpretation of the 'Christian-Roman-human culture' that was Spain's civilizing gift to America. In the same way, Sr Madariaga stresses the splendour of Spanish colonial art, but he never describes it or deals with it. In this connexion the illustrations must be considered unsatisfactory. They are mostly old prints and all are interesting enough, but many are irrelevant and none are adequate as examples of this culture. Mr Sacheverell Sitwell will have given many people in this country an idea of the extraordinary baroque architecture of Mexico—but there is so much else! How many of us know of the existence of the architectural splendours of Quito, for example?

The Rise of the Spanish American Empire must be warmly welcomed for the good things it contains, and it is to be hoped that it will be widely read. At the same time it is not quite the book that the subject deserves.³

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³ One small point. The bibliography 'is limited to the books actually quoted in the text', which are referred to in the notes by short names. The notes, however, contain abbreviated references to several other works not to be found in the bibliography, which the ordinary student cannot be expected to identify.