Book Reviews

Mauro José Caraccioli, *Writing the New World: The Politics of Natural History in the Early Spanish Empire*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020. xvi + 194 pp. (Paper US\$ 28.00)

2022 will be the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Anthony Pagden's landmark study, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origin of Comparative Ethnology* (1982), which remains one of the most influential contributions that the field of political science has made to scholarship on early modern European expansionism and the colonial encounters that resulted from it. That book, as well as many subsequent works by Pagden and his students, demonstrated how profoundly the European encounters with, and conquests in, the Americas shaped and were mediated by Western political and philosophical debates about the nature of property, rule, natural lordship, slavery, monarchy, and political sovereignty. There has also been a sustained interest in the early Americas on the part of historians of science, especially those working on the early modern Spanish Empire, who have challenged the Protestant and Eurocentric bias prevailing in the History of Science, a bias that had long eclipsed the significant contributions that Spain made in the history of modern science.

In *Writing the New World: The Politics of Natural History in the Early Spanish Empire*, the political scientist Mauro José Caraccioli aims to offer a synthesis of these two strands of Americanist scholarship by arguing that “the natural historical writings of the chroniclers, explorers, and, most notably, missionaries helped to lay out a distinct set of empirical foundations for modern political thought, as these developed in the New World. Natural history,” he writes, “was a contentious field of narrative inquiry, and should be read today as a distinct genre of early modern political thinking” (pp. 2–3).

The book is presented in five short chapters. The first offers a survey and taxonomy of the narrative and discursive models that informed the writing of natural history in the Spanish American Empire during the sixteenth century.

Chapter 2 compares the writings of the first Royal Chronicler of the Indies, Gonzalo Fernández Oviedo y Valdés, to those of the Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas. Chapter 3 focuses on the Franciscan missionary Bernadino de Sahagún's monumental work, the *Florentine Codex*. Chapter 4 provides a discussion of the Spanish physician Francisco Hernández, whose studies of New Spain were written in the sixteenth century but remained in manuscript until the early seventeenth. Finally, Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the Jesuit José de Acosta's widely disseminated *Historia natural y moral*, first published in 1590. The study is bookended by an introduction and an epilogue, which place sixteenth-century Spanish natural history writing within the larger context of the historiography of modern science and of contemporary ecological thought.

The book is written in readable, lucid, and often elegant prose. For tackling a big topic, it is a short but overall-competent synthesis of more extensive recent scholarship by Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Antonio Barrera-Osorio, Andrés Prieto, and others. Readers who are familiar with the works of these historians are not likely to be surprised by many of the arguments or insights about the natural histories under consideration in *Writing the New World*. Indeed, some of these historians' points and concepts seem at times uncritically adopted and unevenly acknowledged. Examples include phrases such as the "satanic epic" (p. 11, Cañizares-Esguerra's phrase) and "missionary science" (p. 15, Prieto's phrase). Somewhat baffling—in light of the work of these historians of early modern Spanish science—is the claim that the "contributions to history, science, and political ideology" of these writers "have been mostly overlooked" in modern scholarship (p. 17). Also, the characterization of the works of Bartolomé de Las Casas as "natural history" is highly questionable (p. 41). Finally, for a book that is presented as a contribution from political science to the study of natural histories, there is surprisingly little discussion of the sixteenth-century context in political history, theory, or practice, whether this pertains to the evolution of sixteenth-century Spanish imperial law or neo-Scholastic philosophy.

Nevertheless, the book does succeed in providing a concise overview of some of the important milestones of Spanish natural history writing during the sixteenth century and a useful synthesis of recent scholarship. Also, the book's introduction and epilogue fruitfully bring its sixteenth-century materials into conversation with current theoretical perspectives derived from environmental studies that may provide auspicious starting points for further discussions. For its reappraisal of the contemporary exigence of sixteenth-century natural history, it will primarily be useful as a textbook in the classroom.

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