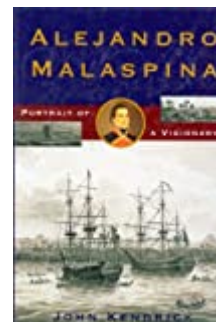


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Kendrick. *Alejandro Malaspina: Portrait of a Visionary.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. xi + 212 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7735-2652-5.



Reviewed by John Gascoigne (University of New South Wales)

Published on H-Canada (June, 2005)

With this book John Kendrick has filled what has long been a conspicuous gap in the study of European exploration in the age of the Enlightenment by providing a soundly researched biography of Alejandro Malaspina. While other major explorers of this period such as Cook and Laperouse have received extensive biographical treatment Malaspina has languished in relative obscurity. This owes much to the fact that his expedition never had the impact that it merited: five years' work from one of the most successful voyages of exploration and scientific discovery of all time was left unpublished and undisseminated because of the vagaries of Spanish politics in the age of the French Revolution. However, with the recent publication by the Naval Museum of Madrid of the massive multivolume edition of the complete transactions of the voyage and the just completed Hukluyt Society three-volume English translation of Malaspina's own journal, Malaspina and his great voyage of 1789 to 1794 are finally receiving the long overdue acclaim they merit. Kendrick's work adds further to this recovery of a hitherto relatively neglected major chapter in the interaction of the world of the European Enlightenment with the Pacific.

Like Columbus before him, Malaspina was born in Italy (in 1754) but enlisted in the service of the Spanish navy. Kendrick brings out the cosmopolitan nature

of the world from which he came: a member of the minor Italian aristocracy which were well used to dealing with the various foreign powers that ruled their land for centuries before Italy became a unified country in 1871. Family contacts combined with those of the highly international Catholic Church to obtain for Malaspina a naval post with the Knights of Malta—an order whose origins went back to the Crusades and which continued to rule Malta until the time of Napoleon. This in turn provided a useful preliminary for entry into the Spanish navy.

Malaspina's time in Spain came at a time when that highly traditional land was subjected to new winds of change. The increasing realization that Spain was receding in importance prompted some moves to modernize and to implement some of the ideas of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment—the movement of ideas that stood for taking a more critical view of tradition, including the entrenched power of the clergy and the aristocracy, and subjecting institutions to the light of reason and the methods that had proved so successful in the sciences. Malaspina's great voyage was one of the outcomes of such a change in the climate of ideas within Spain: a scientific voyage using the best methods and equipment then available represented a modern response to the problem of Spain's waning power and, in particular, the challenges to its authority in the Pacific, long consid-

ered a Spanish lake.

One of the great strengths of Kendrick's work is the extent to which he locates Malaspina within the context of the Enlightenment, underlining, for example, the way in which major Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau colored his outlook—hence his long and sympathetic account of Tonga which he saw as a home for “natural man” unencumbered by the weight of civilization as understood by Europe with its artificialities and hypocrisies. The book brings out the extent to which Malaspina's Italian education and particularly his time at the Clementine College laid the foundation for a more questioning view of tradition, which became evident in Malaspina's guarded anticlericalism and his criticism of the past and present conduct of the Spanish colonial empire.

This desire for reform and for greater intellectual consistency was to prove Malaspina's undoing on his return. His determination to hitch the ramshackle vehicle of the Spanish crown to the cause of modernization led to a very imprudent foray into court politics and his subsequent arrest. Not only was Malaspina himself incarcerated but so, too, were the papers from the voyage—casualties of factional struggles that had been exacerbated by the momentous events of the French Revolution.

But for all his sympathies with the Enlightenment, Malaspina was a foe of the French Revolution, which he saw as “threatening with a violent fury to overturn public order and the political system of nearly all the other States of Europe” (p. 95). Part of the reason that

Malaspina plunged so precipitously and so ineptly into Spanish court politics was his determination to influence the king to adopt policies which would better contain this French menace. Earlier, in 1791, he had predicted that the French would follow a similar course as the English during their revolution of the mid-seventeenth century with a Cromwell figure holding military power emerging as dominant after a period of chaos. It was a perceptive prophecy though, ironically, it was Napoleon, France's answer to Cromwell, who secured Malaspina's release from jail in 1804—five years before he died in 1810.

Within the compass of 170 pages of text Kendrick has given us a well-rounded account of Malaspina's achievements and, in particular, the intellectual influences which shaped his view of the world. As with Cook it is difficult to penetrate far into the psyche of Malaspina himself—the absence of personal papers means that we largely know these two great explorers only through their journals. If the work were written on a larger scale it would have been worth devoting more space to an analysis of the impact of the Enlightenment within Spain and the way in which its impulses were both welcomed and condemned. It would also have been interesting to locate Malaspina more firmly within the company of his fellow Pacific explorers of this period, comparing his methods and goals more programmatically with figures such as Cook, Lap- erouse, and Vancouver. But this is to ask for a different and bigger book—brief is often beautiful, and Kendrick is owed our thanks for providing us with a long overdue life of Malaspina which is both economical in scope and perceptive in its portrayal of that star-crossed visionary.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-canada>

Citation: John Gascoigne. Review of Kendrick, John, *Alejandro Malaspina: Portrait of a Visionary*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. June, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10673>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.