

The Last Voyages of Columbus

The Last Voyages of the Admiral of the Ocean Sea, as related by himself and his companions. By Charles Paul Mac Kie. \$1.75. A. C. McClurg & Co.

MR. MAC KIE might very properly have entitled his volume "Columbus Self-depicted." Our readers have already had an opportunity of judging of the impression to be formed of the discoverer's character from his own narrative of the events of his first voyage. The author now gives us similar evidence concerning this remarkable character, as developed under the extraordinary trials of the three subsequent voyages. To the Admiral's numerous letters and reports are added the testimonies of his companions who knew him best, closing with the deliberate judgment of the greatest authority of all, Bartholomew de Las Casas, pronounced many years after the death of its subject.

It is impossible to attempt here to give even an epitome of a work filling over five hundred closely-printed pages, packed with narratives, discussions and documents of every sort, all bearing directly on the matter in hand, all presented with the utmost clearness and candor, and producing by the sheer force of accumulated testimony an effect which every reader must feel to be decisive. The result is that the misjudgments—to use the most lenient term—of which Columbus has been the object, not only recently but in earlier centuries, are corrected and in many cases completely reversed by these newly discovered and properly interpreted proofs. Yet it can fairly be said that the author extenuates nothing. All the acts of Columbus which are objectionable according to modern ideas are frankly and fully set forth. But the ascription of evil motives suggested by malice or through ignorance,—the imputations of sordid cupidity, of vulgar ambition, of hypocritical pretence, with the more serious charges of cruelty and of tyranny,—are shown to have no foundation whatever. In point of fact it becomes clear that Columbus's worldly fortunes were actually ruined by his selfishness and his devotion to the interests of others, and especially of his followers and his sovereigns. The striking fact that on his return from his second voyage the king and queen were so much impressed with the value of his services that they urged him to accept an immense tract of land in Hispaniola, 200 miles long by 100 miles wide, with the rank and title of duke or marquis, as he might prefer, and that the offer was promptly and even bluntly declined, has not before been so clearly brought out, or the highly creditable words of his refusal so fully stated by any biographer. The non-acceptance was probably most disastrous for him. The title of Admiral conferred no assured rank. A naval office could be given or taken away by a royal decree. But a Spanish grandee, holding with his title a vast hereditary estate, became an exalted member of one of the most powerful castes in Europe, whose privileges the greatest monarch and all his officials must respect. We may be sure that a mere Commandant, like Bobadilla, whatever rescript he might have borne, would not have ventured to seize and occupy the mansion of a duke in his absence, confiscate his valuables, and send him to Spain in chains. The whole nobility of the kingdom would have been in an uproar at the indignity. If Columbus had accepted the royal beneficence which was urged upon him, which he declined mainly with the object of avoiding the envious suspicions of his colonists, the course of his after-career would almost certainly have been changed.

Mr. Mac Kie writes well, and his volume possesses the singular interest of a constant succession of unexpected disclosures. The many extracts from Columbus's writings are happily rendered, and are so introduced and elucidated as

to have an instant and convincing effect. Of other translated passages the most important, as already stated, is that in which Las Casas, who had freely censured Columbus's methods of dealing with hostile Indians, pronounces, as Mr. Mac Kie remarks, "his deliberate judgment of the Admiral's character, written after many years of association with the very men who had contributed most of the material upon which later criticism is founded." We can only find room for a few sentences of this judgment, which are fair specimens of the rest:—

"Don Christopher Columbus was affable and cheerful, well-spoken and eloquent, grave in moderation, amiable with strangers, courteous and mirthful with those of his household; preserving a modest dignity, but given to discreet conversation, so that he readily won the affection of those who knew him. He possessed the manner and appearance of one entitled to veneration, of high rank and authority and worthy of all respect." "In the observance of the Christian religion he was an earnest Churchman, of notable devotion." "He was very zealous for the honor of God, and very anxious for the conversion of the Indians and that the faith of Jesus Christ should be extended. He was singularly devoted to the hope that God would make him worthy to do something towards the recovery of the Holy Sepulchre. He was a man of lofty soul, valiant, of high aims, especially inclined, as may be gathered from his life, deeds, writings and conversation, to undertake preëminent and singular exploits; patient and long-suffering; a forgiver of injuries; one who desired nothing more—according to what is related of him—than that those who wronged him should recognize their errors and become reconciled to him. He was most constant and forbearing in the trials and adversities which constantly beset him, and which were incredible and endless; maintaining always a perfect trust in Divine Providence."

As Mr. Mac Kie justly observes, "one who gains in the battle of life such victories as were given to Columbus to win, and who leaves behind him such an impression even upon those with whom he disputed upon vital issues of right and wrong, does not need the intemperate applause of 'canonizers,' and cannot suffer by the censure of professed iconoclasts." Mr. Mac Kie's own work fully confirms the description of Las Casas, and will be a storehouse for all who seek to learn the truth concerning Columbus's motives and actions. It is unfortunate that the access to this storehouse has been left difficult by the omission of a proper index—an omission for which, in justice, the publishers should be held equally responsible with the author. Every publisher ought to know—and to impress upon the less experienced author—the fact that to put forth a work of history or science without a careful index, is a proceeding as unbusinesslike and unreasonable, if not quite as ridiculous, as it would be to publish a book without a title-page.