

MAGELLAN AND HIS MYTH

Straits: Beyond the Myth of Magellan. By Felipe Fernández-Armesto. Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. Pp. 380. \$29.95 cloth; \$29.95 e-book.
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The 500th anniversary of the circumnavigation of the globe initiated by Magellan has been widely celebrated in Portugal and the Philippines with academic conferences, attempts to locate where the first mass was celebrated in the Philippines, and a Filipino national holiday in honor of the chief who killed him. These events complement the vast number of prizes for scientific accomplishment, universities, journals, and manifestations of popular culture that bear Magellan's name.

Yet, according to Fernández-Armesto, all this is frustratingly misguided. Magellan was a failure by almost every measure by which he is esteemed today. He did not intend to circumnavigate the world. In fact, he had explicitly promised not to do so, and had set out instead to find a new route to the Moluccas, which he believed were in the portion of the globe allotted to Castile in the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas—a fact that led him and his pro-Spanish contemporaries to vastly underestimate the breadth of the Pacific Ocean. Magellan was far more interested in reenacting chivalric romances than pushing the boundaries of scientific knowledge.

Even the navigation of the strait that now bears his name was more the result of luck than foresight. Despite the inspirational quality of that voyage, it came at the cost of much blood and treasure, much of it thrown away by the foolhardy Magellan himself. As the crews of the three overburdened ships of his tiny flotilla grew nervous, he meted out arbitrary justice to weed out resistance to his personal command. There were even allegations of torture. This is before taking into account his abandonment of his original allegiance to Portugal to seek fame under the protection of Spain, his high-handed treatment of the indigenous populations he encountered, and his failed attempts at empire-building in the Philippines. As the author so pithily puts it: “The fleet sailed on, oblivious to failure, indifferent to risk, and bound for disaster” (197). Magellan, then, is a complex figure, the equal of Columbus or Cortés, to whom recent posterity has been far less kind.

Bookended by discussions of Magellan's legacy, this timely biography provides an antidote to the unthinking portrayals of Magellan as a Renaissance man of action. Magellan's world is assiduously reconstructed by an author whose knowledge of Iberian expansion, Hispanic culture, and early modern environmental history is without peer. Organized chronologically, the book begins by situating the reader firmly, in “The Globe around Magellan” (Chapter 1). This was not the sparkling zenith of the Renaissance, but a hostile world that forced men like Magellan to leave their homes in the hope of bettering their lot in a world that had no use for Europeans apart from their capability to conduct shipping to facilitate trade within more

economically vibrant regions, like the Indian Ocean. Magellan, Fernández-Armesto underlines, sailed during the Little Ice Age, when vicious cold snaps were accompanied by outbreaks of the plague that more than decimated European populations. Even as Iberians were making tentative voyages in rickety ships, their petty kingdoms were dwarfed by rapidly expanding land empires from Mesoamerica to Russia. From this perspective, why the Ottoman conquest of mighty Egypt is less well known than Magellan's voyage is puzzling.

Fernández-Armesto leads the reader through the motivations and miscalculations of this dissatisfied minor noble brought up on chivalric romances and millenarian fantasies. As the inglorious and ultimately tragic tale unfolds, every page features a shining nugget or two to surprise and delight even the most informed reader. At one point, we find the historian of the voyage, Antonio Pigafetta, attempting to make indigenous language word lists to satisfy his humanist tendencies. At another, we find Magellan attempting to bring local chiefs under the control of the rajah of Cebu (baptized as Don Carlos in honor of Charles V), although Cebu would prove unequal to the role of local hegemon. Short excursuses then provide background for particular events, such as the frequent impact of the "stranger effect," which led exotic new arrivals to be revered by host cultures (142, 195, 226).

As with all ambitious works of history, hairsplitting readers will find something to complain about. For instance, one does get a clear understanding of the ongoing debates about the role played by Sufi missionaries in Southeast Asia (21). Nevertheless, such issues can be cleared up in all instances by referring to the literature quoted in the voluminous footnotes—replete with word-perfect quotations in German, Latin, Spanish, and Portuguese—that the publisher has generously accommodated. Few other historians could have written this book. The master has not lost his touch.

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MEDICINE, RACE, AND DISEASE

Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World, 1780–1840. By Rana A. Hogarth. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. Pp. 290. \$27.95 paper.
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In delving into late eighteenth- to mid nineteenth-century medical literature, Rana Hogarth was prescient, writing a book whose implications about medical authority, treatment of infectious disease, and race have direct bearing on some of the most tragic and dramatic events of the past few years. She examines evidence from the Greater Caribbean, broadly