

**Peter Russell. *Prince Henry 'the Navigator': A Life.*
New Haven: Yale UP, 2000.**

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Perhaps the most recognizable name in the catalog of cultural heroes associated with the Age of Discovery is Prince Henry of Portugal (1394-1460). It was he, as many remember from school books and public monuments, who launched the first ships into the Atlantic seeking new worlds and thereby marked the beginning of the modern era. Both the positivistic and nationalistic historians of an earlier age celebrated his evident "rationality," a trait clearly displayed by his commitment to cartography, astronomy, and oceanic navigation, and placed him at the head of those involved in the long march of progress. Yet despite this heroic image, modern historical scholarship has disabused us of the notion that Henry was so radically different from his contemporaries, and that, as a figure from the dawn of modernity, he contained an awkward combination of medieval values and modern ambitions. Both a precocious empire builder and an antiquated crusader, an economically astute colonizer and a knight obsessed with chivalric glory, the *Infante D. Henrique* resists attempts at easy definition.

Peter Russell's recent biography of the Prince seeks to recast Henry's life in light of an accurate reading of the available sources telling of his deeds. Relying primarily on the standard chronicles and narratives as well as on sources culled from over fifty years of study in archives throughout Europe, Russell succeeds in presenting an informative new look at the *Infante*. The story he tells of Henry's life, from his birth in Porto to his feats of arms in North Africa to his final years in the Algarve, reveals a complex character who bore the marks of a host of familial, religious, and cultural influences yet matched them all with a relentless drive for renown. The reader catches glimpses of Henry in a variety of guises—the bold, often reckless, military leader; the unsatisfied third son of D. João I forced to seek glory abroad; the shrewd sponsor of lucrative sea voyages—all of which appear appropriate for his times, yet uniquely combined in the man who forced the beginning of the European expansion.

Since the basic elements of Henry's life and the outlines of the Henrican discoveries are well known, Russell's biography is most valuable for casting

light on the political context of his actions and reducing some of his enigmatic singularity. For instance, the debates in Portugal surrounding the attack on Ceuta in 1415, the traditional starting point of the Portuguese discoveries, are discussed thoroughly. Here Russell reveals that the course of expansion into Africa was by no means clear in the early fifteenth century, and that many at court questioned both its cost and overall wisdom. Henry's ambition brooked no resistance, he shows, enabling him to convince successive kings to send invading armies into risky battles in Morocco using the worn rhetoric of crusade. Russell also demonstrates how, despite the Prince's wealth and influence, royal councilors continually saw him as a menace to good diplomatic relations with the other Iberian powers and an impediment to increased royal revenues. Nevertheless, Russell reveals, it was precisely the economic and political innovations that the *Infante* used to administer his overseas territories that would provide the organizational template for the Portuguese overseas empire. Determined to find an outlet for his chivalric desires, Henry sponsored the explorations of the African coast, seeking allies for a final crusade against Islam, but, in their absence, gladly traded in goods ranging from gold to wheat to slaves. His innovations, Russell contends, were not necessarily in the novel nature of his ambitions, but in their geographic direction, out into the Atlantic rather than onto the battlefields of Europe.

Despite the considerable length of this survey, however, Russell does not completely dispel Prince Henry's shroud of mystery. Although he provides an attentive, if long-winded and oftentimes repetitive, reading of the available sources, he advances interpretations of the various aspects of the *Infante's* character that are unconvincing and often contradictory. For instance, after insisting that his crusading zeal overrode all "merchant considerations" to the conquest of Ceuta, Russell insists that Henry drew on considerable business savoir-faire for the successful development of the Atlantic islands. Later on, Russell claims, one Henry would foolishly attempt the conquest of Tangier because of his "fanaticism" while another, more calculating, Henry would recruit Venetians to sail under his banner to the uncharted waters of sub-Saharan Africa in search of trade. With a more consistent respect for fifteenth-century mores and without such trite characterizations that posit a troubling conflict between religion and rationality, apparent vestiges of older interpretations of "the Navigator's" life, the complex figure of the Prince would cease to be so disturbing. Russell also strays far from his commitment to contextuality in his muddled explanation of Henry's involvement in the

Atlantic slave trade. While accurately noting the lack of racist perspectives in the early modern period and suggesting that Henry followed the footsteps of slavers who acted with the approval of Church authorities, his discourse remains full of moralizing overtones in his ironic descriptions of the Prince's "Christian" character. Nevertheless, Russell's new account of Prince Henry's life presents a wealth of easily accessible information to help expand the one-dimensional figure familiar to all.

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