

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Casas, Bartolomé de las. Brevisima relación de la destrucción de las Indias. Ed. José Miguel Martínez Torrejón

James Nelson Novoa

Volume 38, Number 2, Spring 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087518ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i2.25628>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Novoa, J. (2015). Review of [Casas, Bartolomé de las. Brevisima relación de la destrucción de las Indias. Ed. José Miguel Martínez Torrejón]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 38(2), 162–165.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i2.25628>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2015

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Spies,” the subject is “the less radical [than *Hamlet*] but [...] more extreme” (26) tragedy of *King Lear*. Focusing on redemption and transcendence as promises for a future after the unravelling of tragedy, this chapter examines how these states are reached through a new consciousness and feelings experienced by Lear and Cordelia.

Moving from tragedies to romances—as plays generically more suited to the poetic music of the gospels—the book examines a series of losses, recoveries, endurance, and resurrections that engulf Pericles, Marina, and Thaisa; Cymbeline and Imogen; Leontes, Perdita, and Hermione; and Prospero and Miranda. The book devotes individual paragraphs to *Pericles* (ch. 3), *Cymbeline* (ch. 4), *The Winter’s Tale* (ch. 5), and *The Tempest* (epilogue). Each of these romances dramatizes the force of destiny whose outcome depends on a series of experimentations with sources, and on transformations and adaptations of literary traditions, as these resources are reshaped by the spirit and words of the gospels.

This is an engaging book, written in an accessible style that will appeal to general readers, students, and scholars. Shakespeareans will find many exciting, if underdeveloped, and occasionally well-known points in this book. They will also find much more to build on when they finish reading it.

GORAN STANIVUKOVIC

Saint Mary’s University, Nova Scotia

Casas, Bartolomé de las.

***Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*. Ed. José Miguel Martínez Torrejón.**

Biblioteca clásica de la Real Academia Española 28. Barcelona: Círculo de Lectores / Galaxia Gutenberg, 2013. Pp. xii, 366. ISBN 978-84-15863-01-4 (hardcover) €23.65.

The Spanish scholar José Miguel Martínez Torrejón has presented readers with a definitive, exhaustive, and rigorous edition of a text that has long been considered one of the classics of Castilian prose of the sixteenth century: the *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* by the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas (1474–1566). It is a text Martínez Torrejón knows thoroughly, having

provided readers with two previous editions (2006 and 2009); his latest rendering of the classic work will surely be considered the definitive version of the work for many years to come. Written and worked on between 1542 and its publication in 1552, the work purported to be what its title proclaims: an account of the discovery and plunder of the New World by the Spanish. Although short—a little over one hundred pages in Martínez Torrejón's edition—the Dominican friar's concise text is many things: a description of the territories that the crown ruled over in the first decades since Columbus's discovery of Central and South America; the manifold injustices, abuses, and excesses committed by the *conquistadores*; and the rampant widespread corruption that existed in the administration of lands submitted by force.

Las Casas's text is a readable and vivid description of places, peoples, and episodes of great violence, gripping the attention even of the reader of today, far removed from events. Often drawing on his own experience—during his prolonged sojourns in early Spanish America, first as a colonizer then as a priest in the first half of the sixteenth century—his language is direct and forceful. As Martínez Torrejón points out repeatedly in his erudite study of the text, its composition and content, the historical shortcomings of the work (Las Casas often relied on second-hand accounts or even falsified information for his own ends for greater effect) do not detract from its force. Readers who seek an accurate source of information of the early colonial period or of the indigenous peoples of the Americas will often be able to find faults with the Dominican's text. Yet at no point does Las Casas present himself as an aloof and objective observer and compiler of ethnographical data. His work was composed so that it could be read to Charles V in 1542 for the purpose of bringing the injustices perpetrated in the name of Castile to the attention of the Habsburg emperor upon his return to Spain. His pleading, acerbic, and rhetorically charged account did not fall upon deaf ears: it was largely the impetus for the so-called *Leyes Nuevas* (New Laws) which were promulgated in the same year as the initial version of a text that would ameliorate the plight of the indigenous peoples—albeit to a degree that Las Casas deemed insufficient. In the light of these laws, which he sought to enhance and render more forceful, Las Casas spent ten years revising his own text during his brief tenure as bishop of Chiapas and his return to Spain; he had it published in an unauthorized edition in Seville in 1552, along with other works, in order to raise awareness of the continuing abuses perpetrated against the indigenous peoples of the Americas in spite of measures to protect them.

Martínez Torrejón has provided readers with a thoroughly annotated text of 112 pages, guiding the reader through the multitude of references to people, places, and other works referred to in the *Brevísima*, which would be lost on many people. The notes are copious throughout, and his edition is by far the most objective rendering available—not giving way to the kind of passionate diatribe or defense that a text such as the *Brevísima* naturally inspires. In establishing the text, Martínez Torrejón has undertaken a painstaking philological exercise, basing his work on the 1552 *editio princeps* yet integrating the necessary corrections provided by the extant manuscript tradition, which he is thoroughly conversant with. He has wisely chosen to provide the critical notes (211–18) after the text itself to facilitate the reading of the work in which the variants to the 1552 text in the manuscript tradition are clearly indicated.

The text is complemented by an erudite study of the work (125–210) replete with an exhaustive summation of its contents, its reception, the manuscript tradition, and the critical tradition—from its appearance to the present day. Martínez Torrejón provides the reader with an extensive philological description of the language of the text and its previous treatment by critics. Translations and the impact of the work both in Spain and beyond are all dealt with thoroughly. He masterfully situates the work in its historical context, identifying the players in the drama that was Spanish America in the sixteenth century, and the theological and political debates that were provoked by the treatment of its native populations by the Spanish *conquistadores*. He evinces a complete command of the historical bibliography regarding the period, reflecting events that took place in the American continent and in Europe. By providing a clear picture of what was a very murky period, Martínez Torrejón allows readers to better read, understand, and enjoy the work.

In his critical study he is able to navigate between the myriad of passions that Las Casas's work inspired (and still does) and he is wary of any temptation to hagiography. He carefully goes over previous editions of the work and points out their deficiencies, without being brash and dismissive; rather, he indicates the limitations of these renderings and explains them. His aim in this edition is to provide the reader of the twenty-first century with an objective, readable, and definitive version of Las Casas's work. Aside from being one of the canonical works of Spanish literature, the book is a must for all scholars of colonial literature, Spanish and Latin American history, and indeed early modern history

itself. With his edition, Martínez Torrejón has done readers and, indeed, Las Casas himself an invaluable service.

JAMES NELSON NOVOA

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Christ-von Wedel, Christine.

Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. Pp. 374. ISBN 978-1-4426-4508-0 (hardcover) \$85.

This book is an important contribution to scholarship on Erasmus that brings to the English-speaking world the work of a scholar who has published mainly (and widely) in German. In fact, this book is a translation and expansion upon a work originally published in German in 2003 under the title *Erasmus von Rotterdam: anwalt eines neuzeitlichen Christentums*. The book is important because it addresses the complex issue of the relationship between Erasmus's historical consciousness and his theology—ultimately one of the main lines that distinguished him from (and drew the ire of) both his Catholic and reformed critics. What emerges from this thorough and insightful study is an Erasmus comfortable with ambiguity on matters of faith, where such ambiguity would support an understanding of Christian doctrine that “fit with the times.” While this understanding was unacceptable to contemporary critics of all stripes, it is a consciousness that appears surprisingly modern, and familiar to our eyes. As such, the book's English title is somewhat misleading, because the core of this study is much less the novelty of Erasmus's views on Christianity than it is the historical consciousness that underlay those views. The English word “new” certainly does not offer the same nuance as the German *neuzeitlichen* (which has the sense of modern or contemporary), and it certainly tells us very little. How many times have we warned undergraduate students from basing their argument of a time period on the fact that it is new? However, as Erasmus might have advised, *fronti nulla fides* (loosely: don't judge a book by its title). Readers will find here a useful and fruitful model for analyzing both how Erasmus understood Christian doctrine and how that understanding shaped his theological vision.