

Book Reviews

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Celia Cussen, *Black Saint of the Americas: The Life and Afterlife of Martín de Porres* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. xvi + 292, £60.00, hb.

Martín de Porres (1579–1639) was the illegitimate son of a Spanish father and a former African slave mother who had been born in Panama. In 1962 he was canonised as a saint and today is widely revered as the patron saint of racial equality and social justice. How did this socially and racially marginalised individual come to achieve such widespread recognition? In this book Celia Cussen argues that his mulatto heritage and humble background, rather than being an obstacle to his sainthood, were central to his attraction. This book is not a faith-driven biography dedicated to extol the virtues of Porres, but rather it attempts to place a history of his life and his subsequent path to sainthood in the context of changes to social values and beliefs, not only in Peru but worldwide.

The book is divided into two parts: his life and his ‘afterlife’, the latter tracing efforts by different individuals and groups to have him canonised. The first section consists of four chapters. The first chapter constitutes a richly drawn account of his birth and family background. The second goes on to describe his entry at the age of 15 into the Dominican convent of El Rosario, joining as a lay servant and professing some nine years later. Here Cussen provides a vivid sketch of conventual life in Lima before moving on in the third chapter to discuss Porres’s methods of healing in the context of medical practice at the time. The first section concludes with Porres’s death from typhoid fever in 1639 and the contemporary discourse around mortality. Cussen thus examines Porres’s life against the background of the cultural values, religious beliefs and social structure of early colonial Lima. Readers will find much of the contextual scholarship on which the author draws very familiar, but her narrow focus on Porres as an illegitimate mulatto enables her to illuminate the general experience of marginalised persons of mixed race, a group that has been relatively neglected by scholars of the early colonial social history.

The second part of the book considers Porres’s ‘afterlife’. It starts with early efforts, especially by his Dominican friend, Cipriano de Medina, to collect accounts of his life and death. The author then describes the collection of testimonies of his virtues and miracles, including those he performed posthumously, and their dispatch to Rome. Analysing these testimonies Cussen argues that they emphasised two main qualities: Porres’s healing powers and his humility. While not denying that he possessed qualities as a healer, she suggests they may have been elevated by the general belief, indeed fear, that Africans possessed special powers which they had acquired from their association with the devil. At the same time she describes how evidence for his humility was found in his penitence, his unwillingness to disclose mystical experiences, his kindness, including towards animals and that he was prepared to treat people regardless of their background. She argues that his humility was founded in part on his recognition of his low social status that was demonstrated most revealingly in his self-designation

as a 'mulatto dog'. Humility was generally thought to bring people closer to God and enable them to acquire divine powers. Hence, stories existed that he could control the flow of rivers and visit distant lands, such as China and Japan, without ever leaving Lima. Cussen demonstrates through illustrations how these qualities as a mulatto healer and penitent were depicted in images employed to popularise his cult.

Most of book focuses on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the final chapter follows the final path to canonisation. The testimonies collected in 1679–84 were lost in a storm off the coast of Cuba. Although the Pope granted permission for copies kept in the cathedral to be remitted to Rome, the case lost impetus until the Vatican in reviewing the case in 1836 came to the conclusion that two of his miracles justified his beatification. Cussen observes that it was no coincidence that it came at a time when the Pope also issued a papal bull condemning the slave trade. After beatification his reputation grew, especially in the United States among African American Catholics where his image was employed to both attract and engender loyalty to the Catholic Church, including by Catholic missionaries in Africa and Asia. After a final push for recognition of saintliness and investigations of new miracles, he was canonised in 1962 symbolising the Vatican's Christian commitment to social and racial equality at a time of racial tensions in the United States and of decolonisation in Africa and Asia.

In writing this book Cussen set herself a difficult task. Porres left no writings and existing biographies, the first written in 1675, were composed by those seeking to promote his case for canonisation. However, through archival research in Peru, Spain and Italy and a critical reading of the biographies she has assembled an impressive range of historical fragments about his life. Because of the relative shortage of direct evidence about Porres's life and death, the study has of necessity had to rely on secondary sources. Nevertheless, Cussen deftly weaves the fragments of evidence she has garnered into a lively and readable narrative that contributes to an understanding of the life of marginalised groups in early colonial Lima, as well as that of Porres himself.

The efforts to canonise Porres and develop his cult reveal the process to have been little different from other virtuous individuals. What makes Porres's history different was his mixed ancestry. Paradoxically it was his marginality that produced the qualities that were to chime with the needs of society both in the past and today. It will no doubt seem heretical to his adherents, but at the end one is left wondering whether Martín de Porres would have achieved his saintly status had it not been for his African heritage. It is a very readable and thought-provoking book that will be of interest to colonial historians in general and not just scholars concerned with colonial Peru or the Catholic Church.

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Adrian J. Pearce, *The Origins of Bourbon Reform in Spanish South America, 1700–1763* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. xiii + 264, £60.00, hb.

The year 1700 brought the end of Habsburg rule in Spain and its empire and the accession to power of the Spanish Bourbon dynasty, which faced the challenge of both protecting the empire from its European rivals and making the colonies more profitable for the metropolis. How the Bourbon monarchs and their ministers dealt with