

Alejandro Malaspina: Portrait of a Visionary

John Kendrick

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Alejandro Malaspina was an eighteenth-century officer in the Spanish Navy, whose sailing exploits rival those of his near-contemporary, Captain James Cook, and whose visionary political notions were ahead of their time. He is little known in the English-speaking world, but this biography will help rescue him from undeserved obscurity.

Born in 1754 to a noble Italian family-his great-uncle was viceroy of Sicily-Malaspina was early exposed to Enlightenment thinkers like Locke, Descartes, Voltaire, and later Adam Smith, a background that shaped his ideas throughout his life. Set on a naval career, he joined the Spanish Navy in 1774. Ascending steadily in rank, in 1789 he proposed a major project-a scientific-political voyage to Spain's colonies in the Americas and the Pacific to investigate their flora and fauna, assess their economic value, and evaluate their political state, with the ultimate aim of making proposals for reform. Ambitious in scope and infused with Enlightenment spirit, it proved both his crowning achievement and his undoing.

He sailed down the east coast of South America, around Cape Horn, and north as far as Alaska. He scouted for the fabled Northwest Passage, then crossed the Pacific to the Philippines before visiting the fledgling British colony in Australia on his return journey. After more than five years, he reached home and started preparing his report.

His proposals-essentially that Spain abandon imperial control in favor of a mutually profitable trade confederation-were farsighted but unwelcome in the reactionary Spanish court; more important, they criticized Godoy, the power behind the throne and a master of palace intrigue. Malaspina's report was swiftly suppressed as seditious and he was jailed. Released seven years later, he was exiled to his native Italy, where he died in 1810.

The author, who helped edit the Hakluyt Society's translation of Malaspina's journal, has covered aspects of this subject in a previous book, *Men With Wooden Feet*. Here he draws on Malaspina's own writings to trace both his cruise and his thinking. His treatment is competent, yet readers may feel that he has not captured the full drama of five years at sea and the court chicanery that followed. Kendrick's reluctance to speculate beyond his sources shows commendable fidelity to available historical records but makes for a less satisfying biography. Still, it's a fascinating tale, presented with enough context to explain the complex politico-economic issues involved, as well as illustrations, copious notes, and an extensive bibliography.

Malaspina's exploits and ideas are well narrated, but the man himself remains out of focus: was he simply a superb navigator and gifted analyst, or a would-be First Minister foiled by a tin ear for the political realities of a treacherous court? Readers will have to judge for themselves.

PEYTON MOSS (March / April 2004)

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