

1965

What the West Has Learned

Asia in the Making of Europe: Volume I, The Century of Discovery, by Donald F. Lach (University of Chicago Press, Books 1 and 2, 968 pp. set, \$20), is the first sixth of a major historical work that is concerned with the impact of the East upon the West as reflected in the latter's "published information." Carroll Quigley, professor of history at Georgetown University, is the author of "Tragedy and Hope: The World in Our Time," a two-volume history of the twentieth century to be released this year.

✓ By CARROLL QUIGLEY

THESE two books form volume I of what promises to be a major work of historical scholarship. If it continues on the same scale for the three centuries with which the study as a whole is concerned (1500-1800), it will reach six volumes in twelve tomes totaling more than 5,000 pages. Such an opus must be intended for reference rather than to be read, an impression which is confirmed by its many pages of minutiae about the contents, translations, and various editions of travelers' tales.

As they stand, these two books fall into eight chapters, one on antiquity and the Middle Ages, a second on the Renaissance to 1500, three on "New Channels of Information" (identified as the spice trade, the printed word, and the Christian mission), and four area surveys (India, Southeast Asia, Japan, and China).

The evaluation of a work of this size, when we have only one-sixth of it, is not easy, but certain impressions emerge. On the merit side, there are four:

The study obviously incorporates a vast amount of learning.

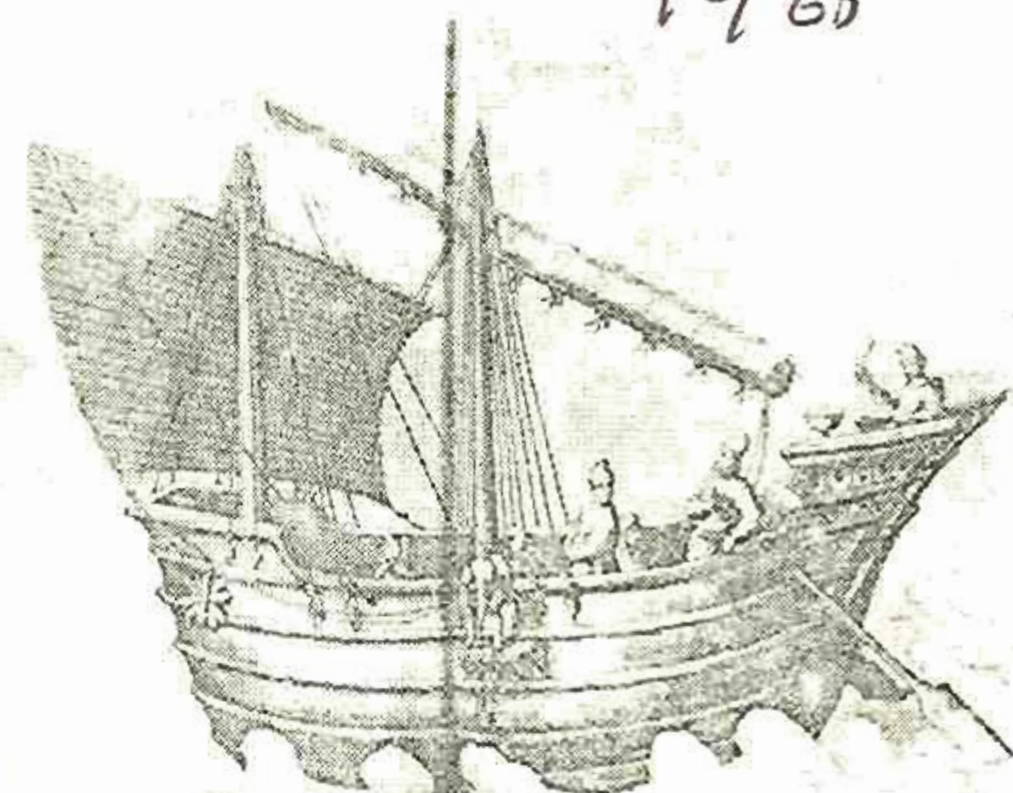
Secondly, Lach's judgment on most controversial points is sound, or at least conservative, and he does not hesitate to withhold a decision where the evidence is inconclusive.

Thirdly, there is, on the whole, excellent chronological coordination among diverse areas, including such frequently overlooked benchmarks as the general economic depression of the fourteenth century in Europe and the influence of the "Mongol peace" of Eastern Asia upon contemporary Europe.

Fourthly, the work establishes the state of our knowledge and the sources on which it is based, so that it provides, as a whole, a historiographical index to this, with frequent indications as to the directions in which future research should go.

The weaknesses of this work are less obvious, but may be fundamental. In general, they seem to lie in two directions: (1) a general pattern of organization which does not follow the nature of the subject but is quite arbitrary, and (2) a basically pro-literary bias, which seems to blind the author to much of the significant nonliterary evidence.

Lach's organization deals with each of the three centuries from 1500 to 1800 in two volumes, of which one will be concerned with the channels of communication and the second will be concerned with "the impact of Asia upon the West." This is an artificial and unhelpful distinction, especially in the terms in which Lach conceives "channels of information." His three "channels" (spice trade, books, and Christian missions) are not channels at all, and two of them cannot be separated. It is quite clear that the printed word (which disseminated information in Europe) is not parallel to the other two (which acquired information in Asia). Moreover, it is evident from Lach's well-informed



—From the book.

discussion of the Portuguese "Padroado" (Chapter V) that, for the Portuguese at least, religion was inseparable from trade and that Lach's rather rigid separation of the two distorts both.

The real channels of Asia's influence toward Europe were the trans-Asiatic trade route (the so-called "silk road") from East Asia to the Black Sea and Syria and the maritime trade on the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Lach discusses neither of these. It can be inferred, from incidental remarks such as the references to "the Mongol peace," that Lach has some idea of the history of the land routes, but it is equally clear both from his text and his bibliography, that he has no real grasp of the history of the maritime routes between Europe and Asia. Anyone concerned with this subject must recognize that trade in the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean had been going on (in Semitic, Persian, and Indian hands) for thousands of years prior to A.D. 1500, when the Portuguese and the Turks simultaneously intruded into this ancient trade system, the one from the south and the other from the north. Lach does not seem to see this.

The reason he fails to do so is because he is far too exclusively concerned with literary sources and with literary information. He says expressly that he is concerned only with "published information." This view easily leads to neglect of the real influences of Asia on Europe, since these arose from artifacts and technology, often received without any European awareness of their origin (as European men over recent centuries came to wear trousers without knowledge of their Asiatic steppe origin).

In his introduction Lach makes the astonishing assertion that "knowledge of Asia before 1500 effected no fundamental alterations in Europe's own artistic, technological, or religious premises." In view of the fact that Europe's technology and religious premises until 1500 were almost entirely Asiatic in origin,

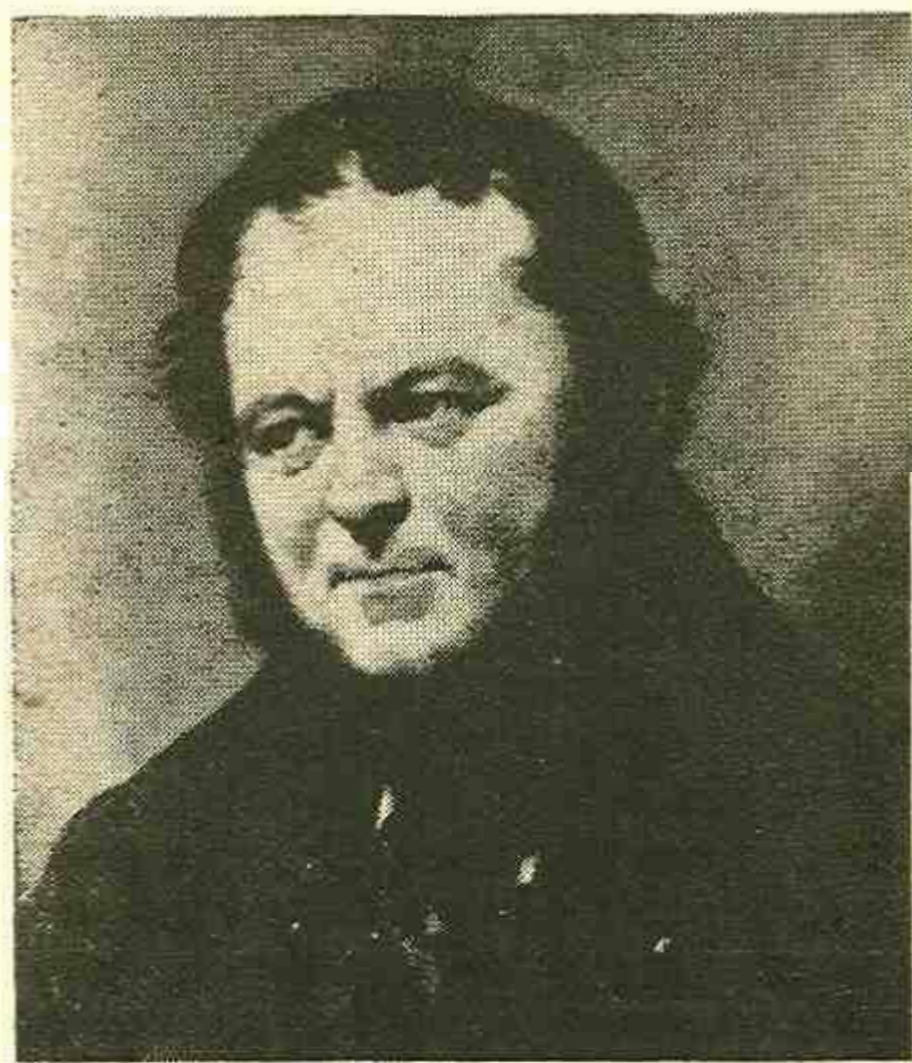


Habitus e China regno pretiose degantis et
ecum omnium affluentissimum

—From the book.

this statement indicates a very serious deficiency based on the author's almost exclusively literary bias.

While we cannot judge the extent of this deficiency until we get volume II, the first chapter of the present volume dealing with "Antiquity and the Middle Ages" indicates that this weakness could be very serious. In good, old mid-Victorian fashion, Lach starts with a reference to Homer and, on the same first page, begins his subject about 600 B.C. This omits the whole Asiatic foundation of European culture including food (fowl, swine, cattle, grain), technology (the plow, arch, wheel, weapons, etc.), and basic culture (writing, alphabet, units of measurement, basic religious and cognitive attitudes) from the archaic period (before 600 B.C.). But even more serious is the fact that Lach's discussion of the medieval period also omits the same kind of Asiatic influences (such as Europe's basic religious outlook, including the heresies, and much technological innovation which, over the last thousand years, has embraced such items as horse-shoes, stirrups, effective harnessing of horses so they could be used for heavy work, windmills, the compass and rudder, fore-and-aft sails, an efficient number system, gunpowder, printing and paper, steel-making, a variety of crops of vital significance to Western agriculture, among them those two indispensable legumes, alfalfa and soybeans, many food products, and much else). Lach ignores most of this because he is not concerned, as he says, with the "impact" of Asia on Europe but is really concerned only with Europe's awareness of Asia (that is why he wants to restrict his attention to *published* information), and he is concerned with "awareness" because his attention is still anchored in the area where it began, the use of Asia by men like Montesquieu, Leibnitz, or Voltaire as a weapon to criticize European culture during the Enlightenment.



—Bettmann Archive.

Stendhal—"a repressed sentimentality."

SR/May 22, 1965