

Ocean expeditions of eunuch admiral Zheng He: “A few catastrophic calls by some Chinese emperors in Zheng He’s time . . . helped send all of Asia into a tailspin from which it is only now recovering.” As an even partial explanation of events from Afghanistan to Japan over many centuries, this is paltry. Elsewhere, the authors speak of the

“cold, cruel discipline that . . . is one of the lubricants of Asia’s great economic machine,” fueling the vast region’s “competitive advantage”—and cite as an illustration the practice of selling young girls into prostitution. If that were the key to prosperity, Asia would have taken off centuries ago.

—JONATHAN MIRSKY

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

A BISHOP’S TALE:

Mathias Hovius among His Flock in Seventeenth-Century Flanders.

By Craig Harline and Eddy Put.

Yale Univ. Press. 384 pp. \$27.95

As students are quick to complain, good academic histories too often make for amazingly dull reading. To the short list of exceptions for early modern Europe—including Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980), Natalie Davis’s *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983), and Steven Ozment’s *The Bürgermeister’s Daughter* (1996)—add *A Bishop’s Tale*.

The Catholic bishop of the title, Mathias Hovius (1542–1620), lived in what became the Spanish Netherlands. As a young scholar, cathedral canon, and, eventually, archbishop of Mechelen, he witnessed the great events of his age—wars and rebellions, Reformation and Counter Reformation. He was nobody exceptional, “simply a flesh-and-blood prelate,” according to Harline, professor of history at Brigham Young University, and Put, senior assistant at the Belgian National Archives. But Hovius left behind voluminous records, correspondence, and a daybook that once ran to 10 volumes (all but one have been lost).

Rather than write a traditional biography of Hovius, the authors set out to immerse themselves and their readers in his world. They

have freely exercised their historical imagination, piecing together hints from the archives to conjecture about the bishop’s close friends, his private conversations, his food and drink, and even his nightclothes. The individuals they depict emerge as believable characters, sometimes drawn with thick brush strokes but real personalities nonetheless. We come to feel considerable sympathy for Hovius himself, even though he hounded his enemies mercilessly and once buried a woman alive for her religious beliefs.



St. Eloi Preaching (1626), by Adriaan De Bie

If Harline and Put know how to make historical figures come to life, they also know a thing or two about plot. The book begins in medias res, on a day that will end with Hovius hiding

in a wardrobe while Protestant troops sack his city and pillage his church. After a brief flashback to his early years, the authors move through the compelling incidents of the bishop's life. Although their account may read like a hard-to-put-down historical novel, the source notes demonstrate that Harline and Put are thoroughgoing archive rats.

A charming final chapter lays out the argument that is implicit all along: In a world where bishops were struggling to implement the decrees of the reforming Council of Trent (1545–63), “religious life was a constant negotiation among all parties rather than a simple matter of the hierarchy proclaiming and the flock obeying.” Throughout the book, we see Hovius negotiating, cajoling, threatening, compromising, and bargaining, in a struggle to make the church in his archdiocese conform to his vision of what it should be, a task that sometimes pitted him against his superiors in Rome. Nothing was easy.

The book also makes a second, unstated argument. Published with the academic imprimatur of Yale University Press, *A Bishop's Tale* proves by example that a good academic history can also tell a good story. If academics take up its model of accessible yet rigorous historical scholarship, the not-so-saintly archbishop will indeed have worked a miracle.

—LAURA ACKERMAN SMOLLER

GEORGE SANTAYANA:

Literary Philosopher.

By Irving Singer. Yale Univ. Press.

256 pp. \$25

For the dwindling handful of readers acquainted with the elegant, offbeat writings of the Spanish-born American philosopher George Santayana (1863–1952), the appearance of a serious publication about him is cause for celebration. It is both astonishing and tragic that the works of such a talented thinker should have fallen so quickly into obscurity.

Tragic, but indicative—and therefore not entirely unpredictable. Santayana was that rarest of beasts, a philosopher who was also a cultivated man of letters, with a superlative gift for producing vivid and evocative writing across the full range of forms—philosophical treatises, essays, sketches, dialogues, literary criticism,

poetry, the best-selling novel *The Last Puritan* (1935), and the three-volume autobiography *Persons and Places* (1944–53). By the standards of most contemporary philosophers, who seem to regard a commitment to impenetrability, abstractness, academicism, and inaccessibility as the badge of professionalism, Santayana would appear to be not only a lightweight but an impostor and a traitor to his class. How could a refined, playful, jargon-free writer who gives so much literary pleasure have anything profound to convey?

To his credit, Singer, a professor of philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the author of valuable studies of the philosophy of love, has little patience for such narrow perspectives. He has been a serious student of Santayana for many years, and with this small book he sets out to guide us to the heart of Santayana's achievement. In his view, the philosopher's flair is a matter of substance as well as style: Santayana, “more than any other great philosopher in the English language,” sought to “harmonize” literary and philosophical styles of writing, making the centrality of the humanistic imagination “a fundamental resource in his doctrinal outlook.” The magnificent prose was not mere ornamentation serving to soften the harsh lines of an otherwise unadorned philosophy. The literary and the philosophical components were inseparable for him.

The novelist Somerset Maugham lamented that “it was a loss to American literature when Santayana decided to become a philosopher rather than a novelist.” Maugham was paying tribute to the philosopher's prodigious gifts of imagery and metaphor, as well as hinting that the writing might have been even better had it not been so laden with ideas. But that, as Singer argues, misses the point of Santayana's work, which aimed to transcend the divide that both literati and professional philosophers have been intent on preserving. Singer applies this argument to some of Santayana's chief works, reinforcing the case for the creative imagination while weighing the strengths and weaknesses of the oeuvre.

Most of the book's contents have been published before, at different times and in diverse places, and so the text often has the unfortunate feel of a collection of fugitive