

# Maurice Rowdon : Author and Philosopher

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## The Spanish Reign of Terror

### Excerpt

'The sixteenth century was for Europe an epoch of fervent business, persecution and war. In that time the modern world as we recognise it came into being. Things changed faster than ever before and perhaps ever since. Even the industrial nineteenth century was less original in its changes; the basis of the work had been done three centuries before. For some people 'the sixteenth century' means the beginning of Christian civilisation proper. They see the Middle Ages as a kind of passive incubation period, dominated and repressed by the Church, before the great liberating forces (called the 'Renaissance') which brought about renewed trade, voyages of discovery, new techniques of manufacture and the chastening of Rome.

But there is little evidence that a civilisation was created, though a quite new society was. Compared with the Middle Ages the sixteenth century had nothing tranquil and nothing wholesome about it. Smallpockets of civilization had arisen — Florence, Antwerp, Venice — but were swallowed up in military occupation or affluence. They were piecemeal, brief and interrupted attempts at a civilization for which Christendom as a whole did not seem ready.

The question arises, was a sustained Christian civilization ever achieved, comparable to the great (and certainly sustained) civilizations of the Orient or the Mediterranean, where the smallest details of life seemed to refer to a divine illumination?

Certainly mediaeval life was sustained; one generation saw much the same world as the one before it. But then Europe was still nursing its wounds after the chaotic dismemberment of the Roman Empire by barbarian tribes. There was something too guarded, too numbed about mediaeval life to call it civilized. Compared with the ancient civilizations the mediaeval world was starved of light; it never translated — it did not dare to translate — its deep sense of the divine into the outwardly marvellous. It knew little about ancient Greece.

But at the time of the Renaissance, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Europe did begin to look back---and to compare itself unfavourably with the ancient past. That was what produced the pockets of civilization---notably Florence under the Medici. But they were soon engulfed in war and persecution. The result was a disturbed society which still today fails to solve its problems or even to offer agreed definitions as to what these problems are.

The problems certainly came into being in the sixteenth century. They were insoluble then, by their nature. And since they remain the basis of the world we live in now, there seems no more hope than there ever was of resolving them, except by the disintegration of the whole system of life adopted at that time and consolidated, with growing chaos, ever since.

Violence became basic to life in the sixteenth century. It even seemed an essential condition of Christian survival. Yet thirty years before that century opened violence was neither expected nor thought necessary.

When in 1479 Federico of Urbino shattered some of the roofs of Colle Val d'Elsa near Siena with his cannons, in the war between Florence and the pope, the local population made a great cry about it being 'unfair'. Of course pillaging had gone on, but it had usually been the work of an eccentric when not an accident. Niccolò Vitelli of Città di Castello, who devastated much of the Romagna during the same war, was known for his brutality, and everyone prophesied a sticky end for him.

Less than half a century later there were new standards of violence which were more reminiscent of the barbarian period than anything else. Men became strangers to each other over trifling definitions of words---men in the same camp, the same court, the same Church. The divisions were so great that only one factor held sixteenth-century life together at all and that was the threat of a Turkish invasion. Without this Europe might very well have reverted to its tribal condition of a millennium before. Yet by this time the Middle Ages were something to laugh at, presumably for having achieved a common and basically

peaceful life throughout Europe. Present-day society---whether we are talking about medical science or the printing of vast numbers of books in vernacular languages or communications or the banking system or exploration or racial and religious persecution or the arts and literature or state debts or techniques of war or espionage or the ‘whitewashing’ of human minds — was developed at that time.

One factor underlay all these activities, a new factor for Christendom: money. Of course money had always been used. But now it had an unprecedented role. The fact that it went far beyond a mere symbol of exchange to become the *sine qua non* of power had a great deal to do with the violence. Great sums of money were borrowed by states at fantastic rates of interest, sometimes 50 percent. This was for the financing of war, though it was still largely the polite war of mercenaries who hesitated to engage the enemy for fear of winning their battles and ending their contracts too soon. Now the armies had to do something highly impolite, and increasingly by fair means or foul; and that was to win sufficient territory and markets to pay back the loans plus the interest, in an escalating activity that created one empire after another.

These empires began with aggression and ended in inflation. The first great empire of this kind (quite different from the empires of Greece and Rome) was the Spanish. And it arose more clearly from the borrowing principle than from any factor of simple self-aggrandisement. The gold and silver bullion that poured into Spain from the newly won Americas financed Spain’s hold on Europe, and through inflation it also reduced Spain to a secondary power in less than a century after its heyday. This new type of empire clearly rose and fell with remarkable speed.

Since then other empires have gone through the same process with varying degrees of speed. And they continue to do so. In this process the mother-country becomes overburdened with its far-flung responsibilities and in the end cannot compete with the

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power it has necessarily created (under viceroys and puppet rulers and in satellite states) in every part of the globe'.