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Maria Antónia Pires de Almeida

Recensão do livro de Mark Molesky, 2015, *This Gulf of Fire: The Destruction of Lisbon, or Apocalypse in the Age of Science and Reason*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, por convite do Dr. Robin Conner, editor da revista *History: Reviews of New Books*, da Taylor & Francis, 45 (1), janeiro 2017, pp. 12-13.

Review:

Mark Molesky is an historian, PhD from Harvard University (2000), Associate Professor of History at Seton Hall University, specialized in the intellectual, cultural and political history of modern Europe. For his research he has received quite an impressive number of grants and awards.

This Gulf of Fire: The Destruction of Lisbon, or Apocalypse in the Age of Science and Reason is a book on the subject of the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, described by the author as “the most consequential natural disaster of modern times”. It starts with a prologue on the 1761 execution of Father Gabriel Malagrida, a Jesuit missionary, sentenced by the Inquisition as a heretic and considered by the Marquis of Pombal, King José’s Prime Minister, as “a fanatic and a fraud, a most dangerous and power-hungry priest”, who, together with his Jesuit colleagues, on the days after the Earthquake, delivered sermons that “increased the anxiety of the people”. This prologue serves as an introduction, followed by ten chapters:

Chapter one resumes the History of Portugal in detail, since pre-historic times, in forty-six pages, including everyday life, food, clothes and personal habits. Except for a few missing queens with significant roles, the author makes a very good effort to highlight the main events, including the importance of Moorish and Jewish people in Portuguese culture and science (for example the “solid foundation in the seafaring arts bequeathed them by the Moors”, and their contribution to the discovery of new ocean routes, p. 32), and the slave trade.

The description of the day of the earthquake, All Saints Day, November 1, 1755, with witness accounts and famous people who perished, spans chapters two, three and four: first the earthquake, then the tsunami and finally the great firestorm, as identified by the author (2012), not forgetting the “fourth punishment: a scourge of thieves” and arsonists (p. 179). To every catastrophe there are meticulous historical accounts and scientific explanations and descriptions of its consequences throughout Portugal and all over Europe, North Africa, the Caribbean Islands, Brazil and North America.

On chapter five we learn about the day after and Pombal taking charge of the situation and rising to power. Starting with burying the dead and taking care of the living (p. 187, line 20: the translation to “enterrar os mortos e cuidar dos vivos”, note 5, p. 405, not “cuidar nos vivos”, is “We must bury the dead and take care of the living”, not “feed the living”), in the first days after the tragedy Dom José’s minister Pombal created a military state to restore order, applied justice to thieves and villains, supplied food and fresh water and started clearing and rebuilding the city. In short, the earthquake had brought about a revolution (p. 212). Chapter six describes housing and caring for the injured and homeless. Wooden huts and burying the dead. Divine intervention by the Virgin Mary. On chapter seven word spreads. News of the tragedy

throughout European courts and economic consequences. The “first international relief effort in world history”, p. 225. Chapter eight: estimates of the material loss, victims and death tolls. Deaths were random. Chapter nine: Pombal’s reconstruction of Lisbon. The radical solution of building a new modern town, a model of health and hygiene, p. 311. “Royal geometry would now trump individual rights, and public aesthetics supersede private concerns”, p. 318. On chapter ten the author describes the philosophical and theological debate and the scientific explanations of the time. The most significant debate of the European Enlightenment, p. 322, from Voltaire, to Kant and Rousseau. Voltaire and the age of science and reason, p. 325. The Lisbon earthquake made Voltaire turn from optimism to “an affront to the natural order of things”, p. 328.

Very adequate illustrations, p. 247. Sources and references are extended and complete, both with Portuguese and foreign authors.

Not only does this book bring new research and divulges new sources, but, considering that not that many Portuguese historians have divulged Portuguese History abroad, because this book is written in English and it breaks the language barrier, it provides an excellent opportunity for such an important period to be studied by scholars all over the world, as well as general adult readers, because it can be read like a novel. The Lisbon Earthquake is generally recognized as an event that changed the course of European civilization, both physically and philosophically. Its consequences and impact on human history were a defining moment of the European Enlightenment (p. 19) and served as an introduction to modernity. Nevertheless, “the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of educated people in the West have never heard of it”. We can only hope this book may change this assumption.

My general review of the book is positive. However, I definitely do not agree with the conclusion that “Portugal was never the same after the earthquake”, p. 353, and that Pombal’s work on the reconstruction of Lisbon and creating a centralized state was a disappointment. Several modern cities were radically reconstructed because of great tragedies: London with the great fire of 1666, Lisbon with the 1755 earthquake, Chicago with the great fire of 1871 and San Francisco with the earthquake of 1906. Paris and Prague, on the other hand, had huge construction works with meticulous urban planning to build a modern city by the central government: Haussmann’s plan on the second half of the nineteenth century and Prague on its Jewish neighbourhood in the early twentieth century.

Pombal laid the foundations for a modern state and reconstructed its capital as one of the most modern, hygienic and civilized cities of the world in the eighteenth century. His work and strength was vastly appreciated by the general population, even though not by the nobility. The Estado Novo regime paid homage to Pombal by placing his statue on the most important location of Lisbon and even nowadays his Baixa Pombalina is shown to tourists as a wonder of early modernity. Even on the subway’s recent renewal there are statues of Pombal in the central station. Pombal’s actions are taught in school in a very positive way and most historians praise him as one of our most important rulers.