324-1493

The Line of Demarcation is one of those catchwords of history which are usually very confusing. Most of us assume that we know all about those common phrases—until we try to remember what they are and what they did. The Missouri Compromise is another (although one of the Conventions next June may throw another meaning on the phrase). There is also the Donation of Constantine, which is even more confusing because it was a fake, yet exerted a powerful influence over men and notions.

Let us recall to our minds some of the details of this famous forgery. Because he was grateful for his conversion to Christianity by Pope Sylvester I, the Emperor Constantine is supposed to have drawn up a Constitutum Constantini which granted to the Pope of Rome spiritual supremacy throughout the world and political control over Rome, Italy, and "the provinces, places, and civitates of the western regions." Although it was said to have been promulgated about 324 A.D., the document was probably composed during the last half of the eighth century; it appears in the so-called "False Decretals" of the ninth century and re-appears in later compilations. In the twelfth century, although a century earlier it had been used successfully for settling certain large territorial claims, it was attacked as spurious. In spite of this attack, the Donation of Constantine was a powerful weapon in the hands of the popes. It was used frequently in both temporal and spiritual matters. However, in the year 1446, Laurentius Valla attacked it in a critical blast which set in motion a controversy which was not silenced until the end of the eighteenth century.

Fifty-three years after Valla loosed his charge, an international situation developed which required delicate handling. Spain and Portugal (both of them strongly Roman Catholic countries) were headed toward a violent and bloody quarrel about national rights to newly found lands in far parts of the world. In spite of Valla's criticism of the Donation of Constantine, the popes had continued to claim their prerogatives and, in the case of the approaching collision of Spain and Portugal, Pope Alexander VI made excellent use of his "right." In a series of four papal Bulls between May and September, 1493, Alexander VI settled the impending dispute by granting Ferdinand and Isabella "all lands west and south of a line 100 leagues west of the Azores and Cape Verde Islands." The definition of the Line was so confusing that Spain and Portugal met the following year and drew up the Treaty of Tordesillas under which the Line was redrawn 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands, thus allowing Portugal the bulge of Brazil.

A bold action of the sort taken by Alexander VI was open to much criticism from many directions. The Donation of Constantine was probably vaguely familiar to most of the interested parties, but there was no printed copy right at hand. To supply this want, and as a kind of defense for the action of Alexander VI, Bartholomeus Pincernus de Montearduo translated the Constitutum Constantini into Latin, from a Greek codex found in the Vatican library and published it in Rome some time between 1503 and 1513. The printer was our old friend Stephan Planck, who had printed the first Latin edition of the famous Columbus "Letter." One of the recent gifts of The Associates is a copy of this earliest printed edition of the Donation of Constantine. The first page of our copy carries a large bookmark which reads as follows: "Soc. Reg. Lond. ex dono Henr. Howard Norfolciensis." [The Royal Society of London, the gift of Henry Howard, Duke of Norfolk.] Only one other copy owned in the United States is reported by Miss Stillwell in her census of incunabulal.

On the shaky foundation of an ancient forgery rested the claim of Spain to the principal part of the New World. This gift of The Associates has bridged another gap in our highway of history.

Publications

The best that can be said is that our intentions are good and that we try. The worst to be said we shall leave for others to say. We intend to issue two or three numbers of The Quarto each year and one or two bulletins. In fact, we try to maintain that rate, but we are currently disturbed to find that we are behind schedule. During the 1951-52 season, we shall have three numbers of The Quarto in your hands, but no new bulletins. Instead of the latter, all Associates as of October 1, 1951, received copies of the facsimile edition of Thomas Harriot's Briefe and True Report . . . of Virginia . . . London, 1588. Two bulletins which we try to keep on hand for visitors (The Clements Library: A Brief Description and The Visitor and the Clements Library) went out of print suddenly and we have had to use our small publication fund to reprint them. Incidentally, if you do not have these two little guides to the Library, let us know and we shall send you copies as soon as they are off the press.
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