

CHARLIE CHAPLIN AND HIS TIMES.

By Kenneth S. Lynn. Simon & Schuster. 604 pp. \$35

The title phrase “and his times” gives fair warning: this is a biography full of digressions. Some are rewarding, as when Lynn, a professor of history, emeritus, at Johns Hopkins University, explores the symbolism of Chaplin’s silent-screen persona, the “Little Tramp.” It’s a reversal, he says, of the negative stereotype of tramps that was prevalent in the late 19th century. Other digressions, such as the one equat-



ing the Little Tramp’s popularity with that of Hitler, are more of a stretch.

Chaplin (1889–1977) was the son of English music hall performers, though the identity of his father was never absolutely confirmed. His formative years were darkened by poverty and his mother’s mental illness. She was institutionalized in 1903, and young Charlie never got over the shock, at least in Lynn’s view. This childhood calamity set Chaplin on an independent path that would carry him not only to America but, by 1915, to the pinnacle of cinema stardom. It also, as Lynn sees it, doomed Chaplin’s relationships with women. With some 57 pages cited under the index entry “Chaplin, Charlie, sexual history of,” the book’s preoccu-

pation with the subject can seem excessive. And while intriguing, Lynn’s Freudian interpretations of Chaplin’s films can seem overly conjectural.

Still, there is the matter of Chaplin’s three marriages to underage women (the first two at the point of a shotgun), as well as his tendency, not just in his films but in his public and private lives, to show scant regard for the consequences of his actions. In 1952 the United States government, gripped by anticommunist hysteria, lost all patience with the star who, in the words of one official, took a “leering, sneering attitude” toward his adopted country. When Chaplin departed for Switzerland with his family, the government barred his return on the grounds of moral turpitude. His last film made in America, the brilliant, self-referential *Limelight*, was withdrawn from theaters.

Chaplin spent the rest of his life in exile—except for a visit in 1972, when he was granted permission to return to accept a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Lynn captures the moment beautifully: as Chaplin received the longest standing ovation in the history of the Academy, “a look of wonderment, edged with infinite regret, was in his eyes.” A fitting moment for a Hollywood-style fade-out—both for Chaplin, who would die five years later, and for Lynn, who in the end manages to convey, at least, the enigma of his subject. Chaplin has assumed his proper place in the screen pantheon, but to judge by this noble attempt, we will never really know who he was.

—James Carman

History

MEXICO: BIOGRAPHY OF POWER: A History of Modern Mexico, 1810-1906.

By Enrique Krauze. Hank Heifetz, trans. HarperCollins. 704 pp. \$35

Born in Mexico City in 1946, Krauze is a child of Tlatelolco—Mexico’s 1968 version of Tiananmen Square, in which hundreds of protesting students were gunned down by the regime. As editor of the prestigious journal *Vuelta*, Krauze represents the new breed of Mexican journalist: well educated (history and industrial engineering), with an incisive style and a loyal following among Mexico’s small intellectual readership, an audience increasingly restive over the nation’s painful-

ly hesitant advance toward open government and democracy.

Despite its subtitle, this massive history (published in three volumes in Mexico) delves frequently into the Spanish conquest and the colonial era. Krauze’s approach is traditional in the sense of envisioning Mexican history as a struggle between liberals who would expunge a tyrannical past and *continuistas* who would restore it. That history is sacred scripture for Mexico’s intellectuals (with different versions sacralized at different times), as well as a drama continually being restaged: Bishop Samuel Ruiz of Chiapas reprises the role of Bartolomé de las Casas, protector of the Indians, and the insurgent