

## 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 preoccupa-

tion 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 His last film made in America, the brilliant, self-referential *Limelight*, was withdrawn from theaters.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

leader in Chiapas, Subcommandante Marcos, assumes the mantle of the 1810 revolutionaries José María Morelos and Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla.

Krauze's Mexico is not one nation but a mosaic of societies, in which social and economic misery persists despite modernization, and which erupt periodically in fire and blood. The revolutions of Mexico are fraught with tragedy yet eventually come to signify nothing beyond the rise to power of a new strong man, or *caudillo*. The *caudillos*, or "men on horseback," dominate entire eras, from that of Santa Anna and Porfirio Díaz in the 19th century to that of the technocrats of today. Before 1940, Mexico's strong men shot their way to power; they have since employed the modern methods of electoral fraud and patronage.

Mexico has long had constitutions, parties, councils, and congresses. Yet Krauze's application of the term *tlatoani* (Nahuatl for "emperor") to the modern presidents rings dismayingly true. The Mexican president does not preside over a federal republic; he rules a centralized empire. He controls the budget, appoints judges, and makes all important state and municipal decisions. Each *sexenio* (six-year term) takes its character not from the nation's political institutions but from the biases, quirks, even the psychopathologies, of the man in the high palace. And that man is elevated by the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), not by the legislature or the people. The latter have no more say in the matter than the Roman Senate had in the choosing of its Caesars.

The value of this work, at least for American readers, lies in its incisive biographies of modern presidents since Miguel Alemán (1946–52). This history, both factual and gossipy, is little known north of the Río Bravo. Vividly alive even in translation, Krauze's narrative may contain more detail than many readers can digest, but there is no understanding modern Mexico without a feeling for its past.

Captured by none of the ideological abstractions that typically hijack academic historians, Krauze illuminates both the glories and the follies of his nation's past. Thus, he is believable when he states that since 1940 Mexico has been established "as a business and the business is power." When he discusses the prospects for reform within the PRI, there is something of Tacitus's gloomy warn-

ing of the danger of concentrating power in the hands of one leader, whether it be a Caligula or a Trajan. Or even a Marcus Aurelius. The author sums up by saying the "country needs democracy" and all that goes with it, such as honest police and incorruptible courts, without which the economic reform that justifies much of the modern authoritarianism will be "fragile and endangered." Amen.

—T. R. Fehrenbach

**REDEEMING CULTURE:  
*American Religion in an Age of Science,  
1925–1962.***

By James Gilbert. University of Chicago Press. 390 pp. \$28.95

In the opening pages of this fascinating history, we see William Jennings Bryan ponying up \$5 to join the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Several months before the eminent attorney defended fundamentalism against the teaching of Darwinian theory in Tennessee's infamous Scopes Trial (1925), he was inspired by the spirit of populism to believe that science should belong to everyone. "The preservation of democracy," writes Gilbert, a historian at the University of Maryland, "demanded that [Bryan] oppose the establishment of any elite: corporations, banks, corrupt politicians, and now scientists, who would impose their esoteric reasons and secret purposes on the world."

The book's final pages evoke a different scene: the Seattle Exposition of 1962, where, during the groundbreaking ceremony for the Christian Witness pavilion, a boy in a space suit joined hands with a girl in Pilgrim costume—a gesture meant to symbolize the belief that America was founded on something greater than technology and progress. Gilbert explains that "it was simply unimaginable that the federal government or scientists themselves could present a great public scientific spectacle without including religion in a prominent position."

Between these end pieces, Gilbert assembles a wealth of documentation that adds up to an implicit argument. Beginning with an account of how 20th-century science upset "the historic American tradition that science and religion were compatible," he notes that "the theory of relativity, the uncertainty principle, quantum physics, the principle of complementarity . . . described counterintuitive ideas. They contradicted common sense." To the question of whether religion was capable of