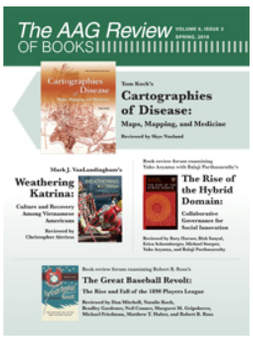

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The Manuscript Hunter: Brasseur de Bourbourg's Travels Through Central America and Mexico, 1854–1859

Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, Translated and edited by Katia Sainson. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press. xiii and 288 pp., illustration, maps, bibliography, index. $39.95 cloth (ISBN 978-0-8061-5502-9).

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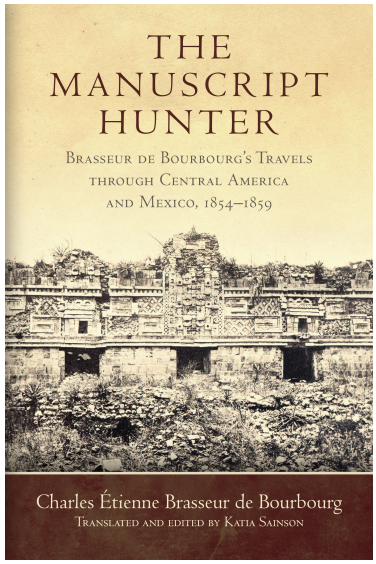

Fortuitous finds among the library holdings of the Hispanic Society of America, a venerable New York institution better known for its paintings by Spanish masters El Greco, Goya, Murillo, Sorolla, and Zurbarán, have taken two colleagues and me on a research trail that seeks to trace how so much Latin American patrimony has ended up in foreign repositories, for the most part in Europe and the United States (Kramer, Lovell, and Lutz 2013). The protagonist of *The Manuscript Hunter*, Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, is someone whose forays bear directly on our inquiries, his life and times, acquisitions, and adventures brought wonderfully alive in this captivating, page-turner of a book. Kudos to Katia Sainson not only for her prowess in translating so deftly three pieces by the eccentric French priest, but also her savvy work as tour guide, contextualizing the man and his mission in an engrossing introduction and dazzling set of endnotes, in which incisive commentary and astute discussion deliver far more than mere bibliographic citations.

Although Brasseur was a devout Christian and ordained man of the cloth, for him (asserts Sainson) "the Church was less a calling than a passport," a vocation that "allowed him to pursue his intellectual passions" (p. 5). Born near Dunkirk in northern France, the early years of his career were spent in Rome, Quebec City, and Boston before he made his way to Central America and then on to Mexico. Sainson bolsters her own estimation of him by invoking U.S. historian Herbert B. Adams (1859–1901). "I am an abbé in the Church," Adams recorded Brasseur telling him, "but my ecclesiastical duties have always rested very lightly upon me" (p. 5). Any lapses or shortcomings in his attending to pastoral affairs were more than compensated for by Brasseur's scholarly pursuits, although some of the conclusions he reached (e.g., that Native Americans might be the descendants of pre-Columbian invaders from Scandinavia) caused him to be dismissed as somewhat on the wacky side, if not completely out to lunch. He was, after all, a writer of pulp fictions, their commercial success furnishing him with the wherewithal to finance his travels and investigations, government sponsorship to do so eluding him.

Sainson's first selection, "Notes from a Voyage in Central America," records Brasseur's passage through Nicaragua in 1854 en route to Guatemala, his destination if not his destiny. From Greytown on the Atlantic/Caribbean littoral—a port "also known as San Juan de Nicaragua" (p. 29)—Brasseur traveled "up the river" (p. 32, despite Sainson, p. 7, having him go "down" the Río San Juan) as far as "the city of Granada on Lake Nicaragua," which he considered "one of the world's most beautiful sites" (p. 34). From there, having "bid farewell to my travel companions, who were going to California" (p. 38), Brasseur made his

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way south to Rivas before heading back north to León, noticing everywhere (and commenting on) the destruction wrought by "unending civil war" (p. 39) throughout Central America. León itself, "once the rival of Guatemala City," he found a "heartbreaking sight," having been "ravaged by war and factional conflict for the last thirty years, a shadow of what it once was" (p. 43). Leaving León for Chinandega, the wayfaring cleric traversed "the city's vast outskirts," which were "inhabited by aborigines," territory he found "like the rest of the country . . . is in a terrible state" (pp. 44–45). Many would assert that Nicaragua has not gotten much better since.

On arrival in Guatemala City, Brasseur divulged what brought him to Central America in the first place: not, like his compatriot Désiré Charnay (1863), to explore and excavate its rich archaeological heritage, but to peruse and salvage its documentary treasures:

> I have done my best to gather all the documents that I could find on the ancient history and languages of the native peoples of this area. But I am not merely surveying them. I have been studying them diligently, making copies of several manuscript vocabularies and documents in the original dialects. I have in my possession several in Kaqchikel, K'iche', and Tz'utujil and am attempting to translate them. Soon, I will move to an Indian village in Vera Paz where they don't speak Spanish and where I intend to stay until I have been able to learn their language and customs. This will allow me to put into practice what until now have only been theories and abstractions. (p. 46)

Brasseur's move "to put into practice" what he was learning as a student of Mesoamerican languages in particular saw him advance his own "theories and abstractions" (p. 46), some of which drew dismay and disdain from notable contemporaries, among them the distinguished archaeologist, diplomat, and journalist E. G. Squier (1821–1888). "The strangest thing that I have come across thus far," Brasseur wrote, "is that the words that don't come from Maya in K'iche', Kaqchikel, and Tz'utujil seem to me to be of Germanic, Saxon, Danish, Flemish, and even English origin." He then asked, "Is it possible that pirates from the north made their way across the sea to the American continent?" Brasseur stated categorically that "a Tz'utujil manuscript"—it is actually penned in Kaqchikel—"seems to confirm these ideas," and referred to the *Padilla Codex* (p. 48) to rest his case. In this remarkable document, translated into English by Daniel Brinton (1885) as *The Annals of the Cakchiquels* thirty years after Brasseur first perused it, mention is made of an ancestral place of origin called Tullan, which Brasseur correlated with a lake by the same name in Sweden rather than attempting to locate it, mythically or otherwise, in Mesoamerica.

In Sainson's second selection, "From Guatemala City to Rabinal," we see the intrepid clergyman in full flight. Having met (and hit it off with) Conservative presidential strongman Rafael Carrera, and likewise, too, with Archbishop Francisco de Paula García Peláez, a "fellow enthusiast of literature and history" (p. 63), Brasseur buckled down to the task at hand:

> My three months in the capital were spent visiting [not only] its monuments but also its libraries. These precious depositories, where clergymen from different orders collected treasures related to the history and philology of the indigenous people of this region, unfortunately no longer contain within their walls more than scraps of their former glory. The dire effects of the [Liberal] revolution [led by Francisco Morazán and Mariano Gálvez] are everywhere. The country's archives and books . . . were piled into manure carts and brought to the University [of San Carlos] in complete disarray, only to be tossed on the floor in a dark, humid room. There they stayed for ten years until their legitimate owners returned to the country. Meanwhile, anyone was free to pillage and plunder. When the current president, Rafael Carrera, came to power, his first concern was to recall the clergy. . . . Their monasteries, libraries, and documents were all returned to them—but in what condition! Most of the works . . . were returned with pages missing or riddled with wormholes. Sullied manuscripts were falling to pieces covered in pungent dust. (pp. 8–9)

One of the fruits of Brasseuer's foraging was his coming across the *Popol Vuh,* the so-called "Bible of the Americas," a K'iche' Maya text transcribed in the early eighteenth century—not (p. 9 and endnote 23, p. 241) "in the seventeenth"—by the trusted parish priest of Chichicastenango, Francisco Ximénez (1666–1729). Brasseur embarked on translating "the Book of Counsel" into French, eventually publishing it in Paris with the subtitle *Le Livre Sacré et les Mythes de L'antiquité Américaine* (1861). With the *Popol Vuh* and several other "important manuscripts he had discovered tucked in his knapsack" (p. 9), he set off from Guatemala City to serve as parish priest in Rabinal, solicited to do so by Archbishop García Peláez, with whom he concurred that "the only way to become well-versed in indigenous languages and to understand their customs and traditions was to go live among them while in a position of authority that would be respected by them" (p. 63). This was quite the challenge, but one Brasseur relished.

It was in Rabinal, where Ximénez had also served as parish priest (1704–1714) a century and a half before, that Brasseur heard about a ceremonial dance drama known as the Rabinal Achi, which he not only saw performed "over a period of approximately twelve days" (p. 107), but claimed he had the opportunity to record as it was dic-

tated to him, "the most arduous diction I ever did, even when I was at school" (p. 11). Brasseur's claim, however, is compromised by a disclosure that he "discovered another manuscript here in the possession of the uncle of one of my young servants," which turned out to be "the text of the dialogue and story of the ancient Rabinal Achi" and which "also refers to the same figures found in the Ximénez, Padilla, and other manuscripts [that I have with me]" (p. 10). Regardless of in what form, oral or written, it was delivered him, we have Brasseur to thank for retrieving "the only such work in the Mesoamerican corpus to survive from the pre-conquest era" (p. 9). As he declared, excitedly, in a letter written to a close friend and colleague, "C'est une bonne trouvaille" (p. 10)—a lucky find, indeed. It was, however, by Virgil's maxim, "improbus labor omnia vincit: steady work conquers all," that the dogged investigator accomplished what he did.

Sainson's third selection, Brasseur's account of his "Voyage across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec," is a more conventional travelogue, a genre as popular then as now, or perhaps even more so. His keen eye recorded Mexico beset by internal upheaval (he was there during the War of the Reform) but also in the throes of external speculation that a railway or even a canal might one day traverse terrain linking the Atlantic with the Pacific, with all the bounty that would entail—for the Louisiana Tehuantepec Company, or some other foreign consortium that is, not a nation so torn that Brasseur believed it "headed towards dissolution" (p. 20). He rescued from oblivion "indigenous spiritual beliefs" by engaging "accounts of native informants driven underground as a result of conquest and colonization" (p. 22) and while in Chiapas "was able to collect some unique and extremely precious manuscripts related to the languages and history of the area" (p. 23). His year-long trip ended with an emblematic return to Rabinal. Although he had occasion to visit Mexico and Central America yet again in 1863, 1864, and 1871, these trips were not written up and published. Instead, Brasseur focused his energies on getting into print two of his greatest finds, the *Popol Vuh* (1861) and the *Rabinal Achi* (1862), as well as scouring archives and libraries in Spain. There he unearthed another two gems, Diego de Landa's *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (1864) and the *Manuscit Troano* (1869), the latter a pre-Columbian Maya treasure today known as the *Madrid Codex*, a screen-fold manuscript with fifty-six leaves painted on both sides.

After his death, in Nice in 1874 aged fifty-nine, the manuscript hunter's remarkable collection was purchased by Alphonse Pinart, who saw fit to sell it ten years later, whereupon items were scattered. Some were acquired by Edward Ayer, Hubert Howe Bancroft, and Daniel G. Brinton, documents housed now in the Newberry, Bancroft, and Kislak Center Libraries in Berkeley, Chicago, and Philadelphia, respectively; others were acquired by the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris. Few, if any, have been repatriated from whence they came, a matter that would not have troubled Brasseur, given the perilous state of many when he first found or was shown them.

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