

BOOK WORLD

The Church, Christian Soldiers and Popes

A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE CRUSADES

By Thomas Madden

Rowman & Littlefield, 247 pp. \$22.95

DEUS LO VOLT!

Chronicle of the Crusades

By Evan S. Connell

Counterpoint, 462 pp. \$28

Reviewed by James Reston Jr.

The crusader movement, as it is sometimes called, stretched over 200 years, unleashing a frenzy of hate and violence unprecedented before the advent of the technological age and the tirades of Hitler. The madness was initiated in the name of religion by a pope of the Christian Church, Urban II, in 1095 A.D. as a measure to redirect the energies of warring European barons from pointless and bloody local disputes into a "noble" quest to reclaim the Holy Land from the infidel. Once unleashed, the passion could not be controlled. The violence began with the massacre of Jews, proceeded to the wholesale slaughter of Muslims in their native land, sapped the wealth of Europe, and ended with an almost unimaginable death toll on all sides.

There were five major crusades (and a handful of minor effusions). Only the First Crusade was successful, in the sense that it managed to capture Jerusalem and in the process make the streets of the Old City run ankle-deep with Muslim and Jewish blood. All the others were failures. Three of the five got close to the object of the enterprise, the Holy City. The First Crusade succeeded in capturing Jerusalem only because of the disunity of the Arab world, and the Third Crusade failed to recapture it because of the unification of Egypt and Syria into a United Arab Empire.

In the Fifth Crusade Frederick II of Germany negotiated his way into the Holy City, only to leave Palestine weeks later, pelted with garbage by his own people. The Third Crusade is the most interesting. It represents the height of the crusading phenomenon, and its principals, Richard the Lion-Hearted and Time Magazine's Man of the Twelfth Century, Saladin, are fascinating.

In the 20th century the literature of the Crusades has been enriched by an explosion of work. The European historians Steven Runciman and Jonathan Riley-Smith and Rene Grousset tower over the field. Their multi-volume works are classics, but their colleagues are many. The primary sources for these books are the medieval chronicles, written from the viewpoints of both sides of the conflict. Some of these were written by participants in the Crusades and others by contemporaneous observers. Chronicles are written as both elegies to and as critiques of the leaders. They have the immediacy of eyewitness accounts. The diversity of perspective adds to their interest as a genre of literature. One such observer, William of Tyre (archbishop of Tyre in the latter 12th century), was a modern historian centuries before his time. His narrative of the birth and decline of the Crusader kingdom from the years 1098 to 1187, entitled "A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea," is a superb literary work.

In the past few months, the Crusades have



GUSTAVE DORE

Richard the Lion-Hearted and Saladin at the Battle of Arsuf.

roared back into the news. On the Sunday before his departure for the Holy Land this past March, Pope John Paul II issued a historic apology for all the sins committed by the Roman Church in the name of religion over the past 2000 years. In the litany of atrocities against Jews, Muslims, women and ethnic groups, the Crusades were specifically mentioned. For the Muslim population in the Middle East to whom Saladin is a modern, vibrant hero and to whom the First Crusade represents the collapse of the Arab world, the papal pronouncement was cause for celebration. How the pontiff might elaborate on his apology when he reached Palestine was much anticipated. "To this day," the chronicler in Evan Connell's new book says aptly, "Muslims draw strength from ancient memories of the Holy City splashed with gore." As it turned out, John Paul, ever the politician, did not elaborate at all. The Roman Church moves slowly in its apologetics.

NOW COME TWO BOOKS THAT INTRODUCE the reader to the nature of the church's sin. Thomas Madden, a professor of history at St. Louis University, is modest in his ambition. His book, "A Concise History of the Crusades," is intended as a brief overview of the entire phenomenon. But Madden is overmodest. In little more than 200 pages, in crystal-clear and economical prose, he does a superb job of exposition. As an introduction to the vast literature of the crusades, this is a jewel of a book. It has all one needs to understand the epic nature of the various mobilizations and invasions, who the important players were and how they operated, and why what was for centuries romanticized as chivalrous has today become odious.

Evan Connell's book, "Deus Lo Volt!" is a more ponderous exercise. It is billed as fiction, since it is imagined as a single chronicle of all the chronicles together. His chronicler is an elaboration of an actual one, Jean of Joinville, who did exist in the waning years of the movement, and did write. The real Jean took the cross and recounted the exploits of his king, Louis IX, on his second crusade between the years 1267 and 1271. Medieval scholars highly esteem the chronicle of the real Jean of Joinville for its insight into the military system of the time.

Instead of a slice of just five years,

Connell's fictional chronicler deals with the whole pie. The narrative simulates the medieval voice with arcane language (he made "bloody sport of the citizens." "For myself, I, Jean, do not pretend to know."). The prose is salted with the passion and the prejudice of the authentic chronicles. Muslims are pagan filth, infidels and devil worshippers. "Did not these black souls seethe with hatred towards Christians lighting the lamp of truth," we read of the enemy.

By chronicling the entire crusader movement with one fictitious voice from the European perspective, Connell homogenizes the crusades, flattening out their significant differences and personalities and ignoring the Muslim perspective. This flies in the face of modern scholarship, which has separated each of the crusades and has paid greater attention to the viewpoint of the natives.

Connell has done his homework well, but he is caught between the roles of historian and novelist. Because there are no quotations in the book, the reader is confused between what is history and what is made up. Does the author want us to take his facts seriously? If so, we can quibble with his errors, such as romanticizing the empty marriage of Richard the Lionhearted and his queen, Berengaria, when it's clear that Richard was a homosexual. Or does he as a novelist want to take us into the world of fantasy? Then why does he adhere so closely to the known history?

By calling this fiction, he avoids the exacting standards of history. By subtitled his book a chronicle, he avoids judgment as to whether it is good fiction or just embellished history. Rumor, folklore and gossip blend uncritically with the historical record. As in the real chronicles, a bewildering blizzard of minor characters and places appears unsifted and unexplained. To appreciate what Connell is trying to accomplish, one needs to absorb the solid mooring of Madden's book first. Perhaps Connell intends to demonstrate the excess and extravagance of Vatican-inspired madness. But after a while the voice of religious bigotry and heroic self-congratulation can become tedious and wearing. It's my guess that the fictionalized chronicle will not catch on as a new form of literature.

James Reston Jr.'s book on the Third Crusade will appear next year.