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Renato Beluche: Smuggler, Privateer, and Patriot, 1780-1860

Jane Lucas De Grummond

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Renato Beluche played many roles in the turbulent world of the nineteenth-century Caribbean. He was a merchant sea captain as well as a successful Privateer. He was Simón Bolívar's favorite admiral as well as an active partner in the affairs of the Laffite brothers. He fought both as a revolutionary and as a defender against revolt. He was a patriot in the eyes of eight American nations and a brigand in the eyes of England and France.

In tracing the course of Beluche's chameleonlike career, this biography by Jane Lucas De Grummond gives us a panoramic view of the complex affairs of the Caribbean during one of the most volatile periods in its history. Renato Beluche is the product of the more than forty years that De Grummond has devoted to the history of the United States, the Louisiana Gulf Coast, and Latin America. It draws together her knowledge not only of Beluche's exploits but also of the wars, revolutions ,and treacherous allegiances that shaped the development of the Caribbean.

Renato Beluche was born in New Orleans in 1780, the son of a recently emigrated Frenchman whose wig-making business was a front for smuggling. In 1802 Beluche went to sea as a pilot's mate on the flagship of the Spanish fleet, and by 1805 he was master of a merchant schooner. By this time, the Laffite brothers had established a smuggling base at Grande Terre on the Louisiana coast. Flying the French flag, Beluche captured Spanish and English ships and sent them to Grande Terre, Cartagena, and New Granada.

In 1813, Beluche became associated with the Venezuelan patriots who were rebelling against Spanish rule, and with their leader, Simón Bolívar. Beluche would spend the next decade in the service of the Venezuelan revolution, interrupted only by a brief period when he joined with Jean Laffite and the Baratarian smugglers who had come to the aid of General Andrew Jackson during the British invasion of the Gulf Coast.

After serving as an artillery commander beside Dominique You in the Battle of New Orleans, Beluche was drawn back into the liberation of Venezuela. He participated in the Aux Cayes Expedition, the Battle of Los Frailes, the Battle of Lake Maracaibo, and the Siege of Puerto Cabello. In 1824, Beluche settled his family in Puerto Cabello, and after independence was finally won, he worked as a coastal shipping captain.

In 1836 Beluche fought on the losing side of a rebellion against the Venezuelan government and was exiled for nine years. He returned in 1845 and helped crush another revolt that raged from 1848 until 1850. For the next decade he led an uncharacteristically quiet existence, and he died peacefully in Puerto Cabello in 1860. Renator Beluche's vigorous career on the sea had taken him to nearly every corner of the Caribbean; he had lived a life intertwined with the history of his world.

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