

Henry Charles Lea Biography

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Biography

Henry Charles Lea (1825-1909), American historian, focused his research on the Catholic Church and wrote the definitive history of the Spanish Inquisition.

Henry Charles Lea was born in Philadelphia on Sept. 19, 1825, the son of a well-known publisher and amateur scientist. Henry was educated at home with the aid of tutors and by independent study. He had wide intellectual interests and, between 1841 and 1848, wrote scientific papers and poetry and translated classics.

Lea entered the family publishing firm in 1843 but continued to pursue his other interests until he suffered a breakdown in 1847. During his recovery Lea became interested in the study of history. In 1850 he married his cousin, Anna Caroline Jouden. The next year he became head of the family publishing house, which under his guidance, began to specialize in medical and scientific books.

During the Civil War, Lea joined the Union League, supported the Republican party, and wrote pamphlets against slavery. At war's end he returned to historical study. His first book *Superstition and Force*, appeared in 1866. The following year he published *An Historical Sketch of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church* and, 2 years later, *Studies in Church History*. In 1867 Lea had embarked upon the study of the medieval Inquisition, a project which was to occupy him for 20 years. For the enormous task he utilized the services of scholars and researchers in Europe.

Despite the demands of business and historical writing, Lea was active in civic affairs. In 1870 he helped found the Citizens' Municipal Reform Association. He also helped found the National Republican League to block U.S. Grant's third presidential term. In 1878 he again suffered serious illness and became nearly blind. He retired from business in 1880 and devoted himself to history.

Lea's research culminated in the publication of *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages* (3 vols., 1887-1888). In subsequent years he produced *Chapters from the Religious History of Spain* (1890), *A Formulary of the Papal Penitentiary* (1892), *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences* (3 vols., 1896), *The Moriscos of Spain* (1901), *A History of the Inquisition of Spain* (4 vols., 1906-1907), and *The Inquisition in the Spanish Dependencies* (1908).

As a philanthropist, Lea endowed several institutions and chairs, including the Lea Laboratory of Hygiene at the University of Pennsylvania. He died on Oct. 20, 1909, in Philadelphia, leaving unfinished a study of witchcraft (published posthumously).