

HUMANIST CONQUISTADOR

▪ Just over two centuries ago, there was born in a small Peruvian seaport a man who was to become an enlightened physician, a naturalist, a mathematician, a brilliant writer, an educator and a wise statesman, one who was much before his time in many realms of knowledge.

He was José Hipólito Unanue, since recognized as the father of Peruvian medicine, and one of the most gifted men of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, admired by many of the leading scientists in the United States and Europe.

BACKGROUND. When Unanue was born in the seaport of Arica on August 13, 1758, Peru was the brightest jewel in Spain's colonial crown. In the two centuries since the first Spanish viceroy took control, the country had become the principal trading center for all Spanish possessions on the American continent, and its mines sent a steady stream of wealth back to the mother country. In the first ten years of Unanue's life, more than 70 million pesos worth of gold and silver

was shipped from the port of Callao to Cadiz.

The white population was divided into two sections, the Europeans newly arrived from Spain and the Creoles who had been established in Peru for generations, many of them claiming descent from the conquistadores who followed Francisco Pizarro. Both groups regarded each other with disdain, and there was constant and bitter rivalry among them for the highest administrative posts.

Lumped together under the name of Indian were numerous tribes of red men over which the Incas had once ruled. They lived in the country's rudest climates, performed most of the hard work in mining, sustained their strength by chewing the narcotic coca plant, nourishing their souls with nostalgic dreams about the past.

The progeny of a white man and an Indian woman was the *mestizo* (also called *cholo*), a complex character thus described by Salvador de Madariaga: "The mestizo has the energy of a conquistador, the calm pride of a colonial, the

Facing a portrait of José Hipólito Unanue, national hero of Peru and the father of Peruvian medicine, by Julio Vila Prades is a sketch by Unanue for the seal of the Royal College of Medicine and Surgery.

effective charity of the earlier religious men, the vicious and lascivious epicurianism of the brutal priest, the cupidity of a *corregidor*." These traits were in constant conflict with the mestizo's inherited Indian character. In Unanue's time, the mestizos were the majority of the town population, furnished soldiers, artisans and priests, but were excluded from higher posts or vocations.

A component of the population were the Negroes brought from Africa as slaves. From a miserable existence their condition gradually improved throughout the 18th century, until by the time Unanue was around forty, the king of Spain had granted them the right to occupy public posts.

The outcome of a white and black union were the mulattoes, long treated with contempt as the "fruit of sin," but who by the second half of the century had attained a fairly respectable social station, largely as artisans.

The ethnic *mélange* in Peru was further complicated by the miscegenation of Indians and Negroes, resulting in a rapidly growing class of *zambos*, who were obliged to live under the orders of a master and were not allowed to bear arms.

The capital city of Lima, where Unanue spent most of his life, had at the time of his birth a population of around 54,000, not counting slaves and Indians, of which about 10,000 were white. It was a beautiful city, rebuilt after the disastrous earthquake of 1746, in a rococo style influenced by French architecture of the Louis XV period, with touches of Spanish baroque.

All visitors to Peru agreed that the most enchanting women in the world were to be found in Lima. The white women were of medium height and naturally graceful. Many mestizo and Negro women displayed what one traveler described as "stupefying beauty."

In the higher social classes, the women of Lima were generally intelligent, endowed with a sprightly wit that coined epigrams. They loved flowers, perfume, music and dancing, were incurably coquettish. For street wear they had developed the *saya*, a heavy pleated skirt, and the *manto*, a large form of shawl generally made of black silk, in which they swathed head and torso, leaving only one eye peeping out (*tapada*). As the women all wore the same garb they were practically unrecognizable in the street, which made secret assignations all the easier.*

The highest society centered around the viceroy, generally a Spanish aristocrat appointed per-

*The *saya* and *manto* were found only on Lima women.



Drawing by Unanue, about 1794, of the coca plant which illustrated his scholarly essay on the subject.

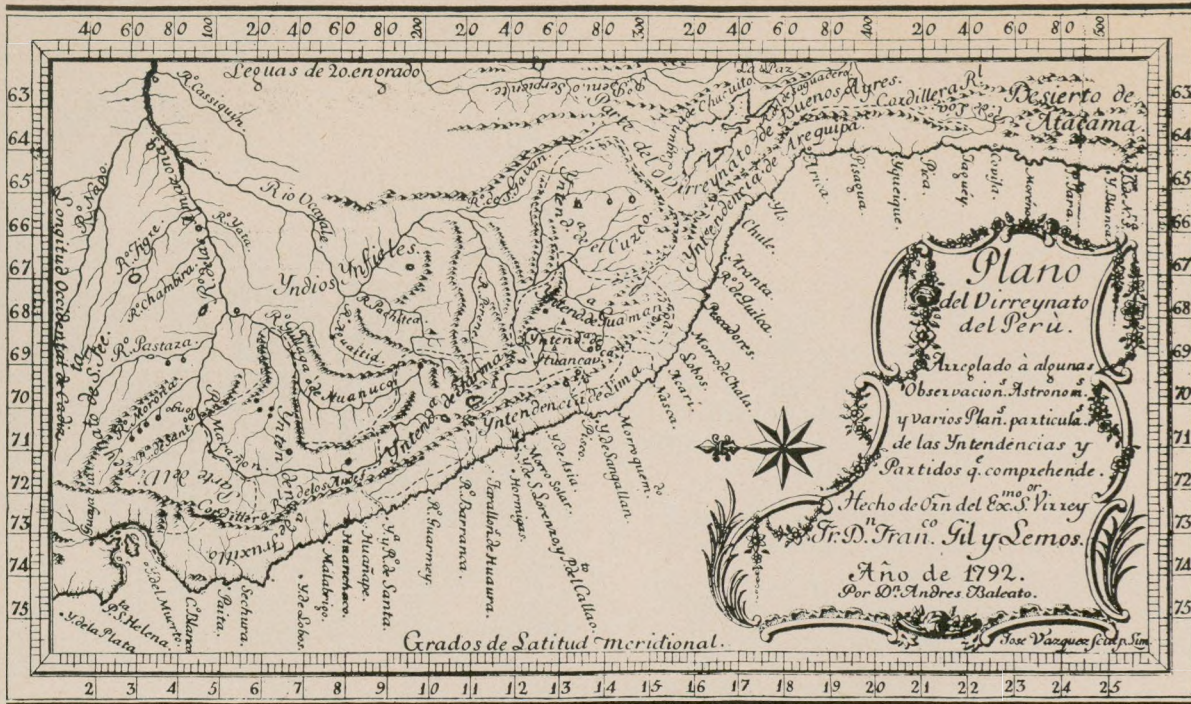
sonally by the king, who held his own form of court and enforced strict rules of etiquette. At about the time Hipólito entered the seminary, Lima society was agog at the 60-year-old viceroy's choice of a 19-year-old actress named Micaela Villegas to be his mistress. Their passionate and often stormy union lasted ten years, until Don Manuel de Amat ended his term as viceroy. Sometime during that period the vivacious actress acquired the nickname of La Perricholi,* and became one of the celebrated women of the 19th century.

YOUTH. Unanue's father, Don Antonio Unanue y Montalivet, was a moderately prosperous merchant who owned one ship. By an unhappy coincidence the vessel was destroyed by fire on the very day that Hipólito was born. His mother was Manuela Pabón, member of a good Arica family.

Hipólito's first teacher was a relative of his mother who had served for several years as parish priest in Arica. Under his influence the boy decided to embrace the Church as a career, was entered in the San Jerónimo seminary in Arequipa.

He was graduated in 1777 and traveled to Lima to consult his maternal uncle, Fray Pedro Pabón, an intelligent and distinguished friar, about the

*Origin of the term might be the unflattering *la perra chola*.



Map of Peru, 1792. At the end of the 18th century, Peru was the brightest jewel in Spain's colonial crown, the principal trading center of its American colonies whence tons of gold and silver were shipped abroad to Spain.

first steps in his ecclesiastic life. The visit was a fateful one, as Fray Pedro immediately recognized that the youth's keen intelligence and curious mind would become stultified in the Church's strict routine and traditional forms. He advised his nephew to make his career in the sciences, and Hipólito chose medicine, at that time a somewhat despised profession because physicians and *curanderos* (healers) were accorded the same status.

Hipólito had the good fortune to be apprenticed to Dr. Gabriel Moreno, one of the most able physicians of his time, to whom he was later to dedicate his great work on the climate of Lima. He threw himself into his studies with enormous energy, became particularly proficient in anatomy.

Through his uncle and his medical mentor, Unanue gained entrée into some of the highest circles of Lima society, such as the wealthy family of Landaburu and the Count of Monte-Blanco, both of whom asked Unanue to be preceptor to their sons. With this social background, the young physician (date of his degree was probably 1785) built up a select practice.

During the next years Unanue cultivated the society of men of science and of letters, read widely in the works of the French Encyclopedists, most of which had to be smuggled into

En la Junta de guerra tendida en el
10 de Feb. de 1824 por el Sr. D. Manuel
Unanue con relacion a varias causas de
bienes y maltrato de personas. En el 8 de Feb.
de 1824 se acordó a que se yudara a los
amigos q. se traxeron. me conforme con el
poder del Sr. D. D. Juan G. G. G.
Lima Feb. 11. de 1824.

H. Unanue

An official document written and signed by Unanue during his brief tenure as president of the republic.

colonial America, frequently in false bottoms of wine casks.

In 1789, fateful year for France, Unanue competed for the university's chair of anatomy and won a brilliant victory. This was the start of the teaching years that were to bring him lasting fame as the regenerator of Peruvian medicine, then in a parlous position of antiquated theories and methods.

His first triumph in rehabilitating medicine was the foundation in 1792 of the Anatomic Amphitheatre in the Royal University, solemnly inaugurated by the viceroy, at which Unanue pronounced one of his most celebrated orations, keynote of the humanistic work he was to undertake.

He spoke of the lamentable condition of the hospitals, the shameless effrontery of quacks who preyed on the sick poor, the miserable living conditions of Indians. He broadened his range to include the entire social-economic situation of Peru at the end of the 18th century.*

What the viceroy thought of Unanue's gloomy picture of Peru is not known, but he and his successors subsequently gave him their support for the development of medical schools in the country and the improvement of hospitals.

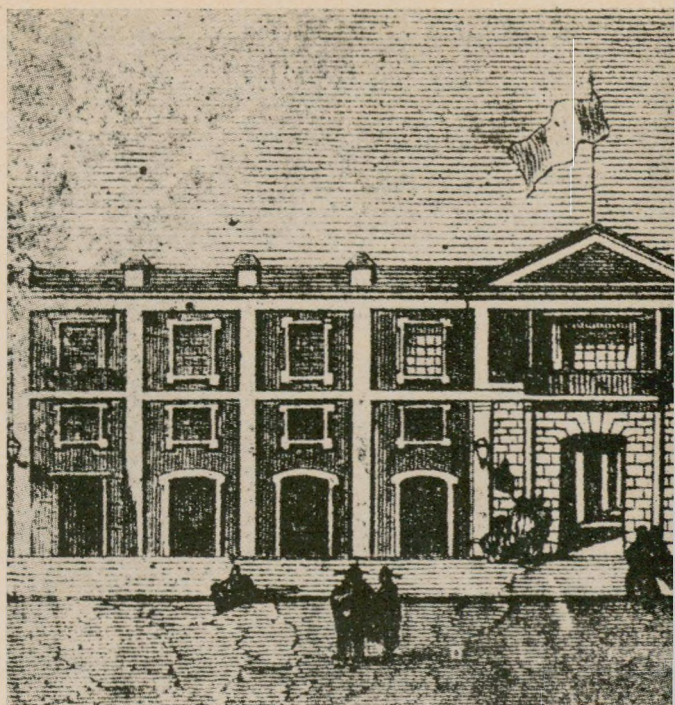
EDUCATION. The greatest creation in medical education of the eloquent doctor was the foundation in 1811 of the Royal College of Medicine and Surgery of San Fernando. He became its first president, and the curriculum he established cast aside reams of antiquated texts, some of them reaching back to the Middle Ages.

In their place he established a plan of study that included mathematics and the natural sciences, medical science including the medical geography of Peru. In place of the medieval chair of peripatetic philosophy he created a chair of experimental physics and chemistry, revolutionary innovations for that period.

The principal virtue of the new medical school was that it was connected with a hospital, thus realizing Unanue's dream of giving Lima an institution similar to the famous teaching hospitals in Europe.

A German physician-naturalist who spent several years in Peru noted at the beginning of the 19th century that there were a great many hospitals in Lima, "but all are lamentably defective in internal arrangement, and above all in judicious medical attendance." He noted also that most of them dated from the 16th century, institutions

*Official title of the address was "Decadence and Restoration of Peru."



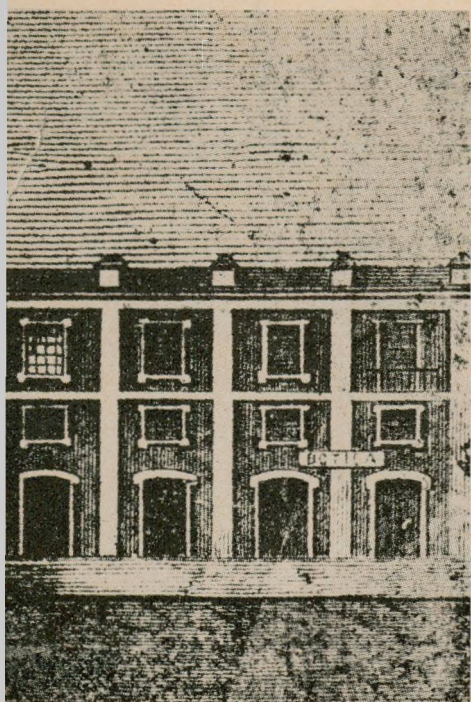
founded by the friars who accompanied the conquerors.

All the hospitals were overcrowded and understaffed: at two of the largest there were in attendance one physician, one surgeon, one male nurse. Unanue's new institution not only gave the patients the services of medical students, but also taught the students the clinical side of medicine.

PUBLIC HEALTH. In all his writings and orations, Unanue laid the greatest stress on preventive medicine. The country was periodically subjected to epidemics of typhus, dysentery, smallpox and what were called pernicious fevers which produced what an observer called "a dismal cortege of victims" from Quito in the north to Potosí in the south, sparing neither Peru's numerous valleys nor its mountain villages.

Unanue raised his eloquent voice against the archaic custom of burying the dead under church floors. He and several others created such a hue and cry about the danger of pestilence that a public cemetery was established outside the walls of the town.

He next turned his attention to the problem of smallpox vaccination. William Jenner had published his epochal paper on vaccination in England in 1798. News of this innovation reached Lima with some delay from Spain, where several physicians had become enthusiastic supporters of vaccination, notably Dr. Francisco Xavier de Balmis who took 22 inoculated children on a



Engraving, left, of the facade of the College of Medicine in Lima in Unanue's time. Daniel O'Leary, right, who was in Simón Bolívar's entourage, wrote of Unanue that he was of "unquestionable reputation."



vaccination tour around the world to demonstrate the safety of the method.

The first official vaccination was performed in Lima in 1802, with poor results, but three years later it was commonly practiced and Unanue campaigned to make it an obligatory public health measure. In 1806, while conferring doctoral degrees, he eloquently reminded his audience that smallpox had come to the Americas from Africa, a form of vengeance for the cruelty that had been inflicted on the black man.

LITERATURE. In 1785, there had been formed in Lima a circle that comprised men of many talents. It eventually became the Society of Lovers of the Nation, of which Unanue was secretary. He was also cofounder of *El Mercurio Peruano*, to which under the pseudonym of Aristio he contributed numerous articles on natural sciences, medicine, archeology, including notes on monuments from ancient Peru. An outstanding botanic contribution was his essay on the ubiquitous coca plant, the mainstay of the undernourished Indians.

In 1794, there appeared his *Political, Ecclesiastic and Military Guide to the Viceroyalty of Peru*, the most comprehensive survey of the entire nation ever undertaken in this period.

Peruvian literature at this time was divided into two distinct branches: the urbane, social, satiric literature of Lima's cultivated classes; the *serrana* literature, bucolic, elegiac, Virgilian, based on the

old Hispanic tradition that humble people take revenge for their miseries or oppressors by mocking them. Most viceroys were remarkably indulgent toward satire.

A third class of literature that developed in Unanue's lifetime was a mixture of science, description of natural beauties, flavored with lyricism and touches of enlightened thinking.

To this class belongs Unanue's great work, *Observations on the Climate of Lima*, a deceptively simple title that proclaimed one of the most ambitious attempts of the period to correlate environmental conditions with the physical characteristics of a region's inhabitants, following in the footsteps of Hippocrates' *Air, Water, Places*.

The climate of Lima was described by the German physician-naturalist Dr. von Tschudi as "agreeable, but not very healthy." From April to October, a heavy damp mist overhangs the city. The summer is hot but not oppressive.

The great humidity was blamed for fevers (*tercianias*) and dysentery, a commonly held view at that time. In the first part of his book, Unanue related climatic changes with physical changes in plants and animals, using measurements of temperature and barometric pressure in a thoroughly scientific way. He also concerned himself with the influence of the moon and of eclipses on the vegetable and animal reigns, also on human illnesses.

In one section of the book, he tried to relate

climate to intellectual capacity, from which he predictably concluded that American man had a natural disposition for culture and civilization.

His observations on the influence of climate on illness were drawn from his wide experience in clinical teaching and supported by copious factual notes from his own archives, correlating certain climatic conditions with the incidence of phthisis, nasal catarrh, asthma, pneumonia.

In the realm of psychology he was well ahead of his time in his studies on the efforts of climatic variations on psychic health, what he simply called the soul. He theorized that melancholia (to which many Peruvians were prone) was the result of physical debility, which would be aggravated at night when the body's strength was at its lowest. Sunshine restored bodily energy and thus lifted the melancholia.

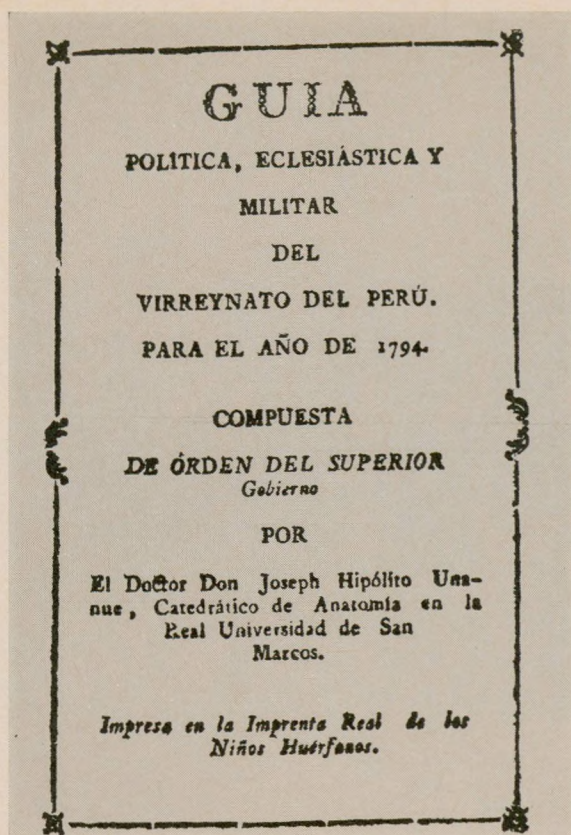
One section of the book was devoted to sensible advice on what to eat and drink, what to wear in different seasons. He was a resolute enemy of shuttered windows, recommended fresh air in hospitals. He also preached moderation and plenty of physical exercise, much needed advice for so many of his countrymen who were indolent and overindulgent.

The book was published in Lima in 1806 and again in 1874; a Spanish edition was produced in 1815. Although Unanue's literary output was considerable, this was his greatest work, the merit of which was not recognized, even in Peru, for many years.

STATESMAN. In the lifetime of Unanue, Spain underwent momentous changes: the 18th century, although it could not compare with the Golden Age, was still one of the most brilliant periods in the nation's history. The French Bourbon princes brought with them a breath of fresh air, vivified by the currents of liberal thought that were blowing throughout Europe.

Under great viceroys such as Amat and O'Higgins, the New World brought in riches, which enabled Spain to build roads and public works worthy of the Romans. But the success of the American Revolution and the destruction of European despotisms by Napoleon created a ferment among the Creoles. Why should they be ruled by the viceroy of a distant king when they might rule themselves, and thereby obtain the important official positions which were unjustly reserved for Spaniards from the peninsula.

Dr. Hipólito Unanue was no fiery revolutionary, but when a group of liberals in 1812 drew up a manifesto in favor of independence, he signed it. His public life began rather modestly



when he was elected to represent the province of Arequipa in the Cortes of Cadiz.

He sailed for Spain in 1814 where he found the country still in turmoil after the Napoleonic invasion, the savage Peninsular War and the heroic resistance of the guerrillas.

His first task was to have his old friend Landaburu rehabilitated and some measure of his wealth restored. He was received by many distinguished scientists in Madrid, who helped him in his efforts to obtain wider royal support for Lima's College of Medicine. The king gave his approbation by naming Unanue Physician of the Royal Chamber. The decree referred to Unanue's "lofty love for humanity, the enlightenment and happiness of his country which is classified as one of the most meritorious of vassals."

Unanue returned to Peru in 1816, after being almost shipwrecked in rounding Cape Horn. He was received by the most sumptuous gala the university could display.

In the north, Simón Bolívar had meanwhile raised a rebellion in Venezuela, and a fleet under Sir Thomas Cochrane brought an Argentine and Chilean army under the command of José de San Martín to Peru in September, 1820.

Two months later, Unanue was entrusted with

Opposite, the title page of Unanue's Political, Ecclesiastic and Military Guide to the Viceroyalty of Peru, 1794, the most comprehensive survey of the entire nation ever undertaken at the time. Below, a view of the Cathedral of Lima as it appeared in the early 19th century when Unanue was at the height of his career.



a delicate task as secretary of a diplomatic mission to confer with emissaries of the viceroy at Miraflores. Terms were eventually agreed on and the independence of Peru was proclaimed on July 28, 1821, with San Martín as protector. On the declaration document Unanue's signature heads all the others.

One of San Martín's first tasks was to name Unanue, who was, among his many talents, a distinguished mathematician, Minister of Finance. He gave up his medical practice and teaching and devoted himself wholeheartedly to the task of reorganizing the economics and finances of the new nation.

Like many of his generation, Unanue had been influenced by the French group of economists called physiocrats. They believed that all wealth originated in the land, which was a suitable doctrine for Peru, where most of the wealth came from agriculture.

In his first commercial decree, Unanue promised that the nation's economy would be based on the most liberal principles; he proceeded to abolish many tariffs, freed shipping from numerous restrictions, allowed machinery to be introduced for agriculture.

Unanue himself painted this dreary picture of

the economy when he took over his first ministry: the treasury was exhausted, once cultivated fields within 30 leagues of the capital were deserts, the enemy occupied the mines, commerce was impeded, and on all parts the land presented a picture of desolation and misery.

When San Martín mysteriously gave up his protectorate to Simón Bolívar, Unanue was appointed Minister of Finance and Education. In 1826, he was named to be President of the Council of Ministers, and when Bolívar departed to greener pastures, Unanue was given supreme power.

But the political turmoil that was to plague the independent Latin American nations for more than a century had already begun. Unanue was now over 70 and he prudently retired from public life. In his last message to the public announcing his retirement he said, in speaking of his long years of labor:

"Over such a long period, how many troubles and annoyances have oppressed my soul, how many dangers have threatened my being! But it has all been for the good. I consider my mission a success when I realize that on renouncing the duties bestowed on me by the two most illustrious soldiers America has borne, San Martín



Lima women in their traditionally coquettish costumes, which include the saya skirt and manto, black silk shawl, worn to allow only one eye to peep out.

and Bolívar, my country emerges victorious and free, the road to peace and glory open before her.”

He spent his last years on his estate at Cañete, writing, seeing old friends, educating his children. He died peacefully in Lima on July 15, 1833, and was buried in the public cemetery in Lima; in 1927, his remains were solemnly reburied in the city's Pantheon and he was officially declared to be the father of Peruvian medicine, the title he will bear through history.

THE MAN. José Hipólito Unanue came closest to being the universal man in the Peru of his time. He had a natural strength of character and a strong inner morality, based on religion, which allowed him to maintain an integrity in any field

in which he worked and any social level in which he moved, even the most corrupt.

In a society where licentiousness was winked at, and everyone in office was expected to bribe or be bribed (from the viceroy down), the fundamental honesty of the well-mannered physician must have seemed to some to be like a lighthouse in a storm.

He was married twice: first to Manuela de la Cuba, who died, and then to her niece Josefa by whom he had four children. He was a devoted husband and father, took great pains with the children's education and regularly gave time to their studies and recreation.

San Martín once paid tribute to him in the Council of Ministers, calling him “the most honorable and virtuous” Unanue. An impartial British observer named Daniel O'Leary, who was in Bolívar's entourage, said that Unanue was a man of “unquestionable reputation.”

O'Leary noted further that by the time Unanue met Bolívar he was an elderly man who still clung to old ideas. He added: “Anxious to fight for his country's prosperity, he felt that the surest way to achieve it was to follow in Bolívar's footsteps, but his ability was not on a par with his purpose and it was thus quite impossible for him to take the gigantic strides of his model hero.”

From his youth, Unanue had great personal charm with a natural elegance of manners. He was a brilliant *causeur* and his style in writing and oratory was both limpid and concise, a change from 18th century pomposity.

In his political views, he was the moderate liberal so frequently found in the intellectual milieu of 18th century Europe. To this cerebral approach to the problems of society, Unanue added a profound sense of humanism that transcended the somewhat impersonal attitudes of the French Encyclopedists.

In his medical thinking, Unanue swept aside the cobwebs of sterile medical theories and asked his students to return to the true Hippocratic tradition of regarding the patient as a whole man, the product not only of his physical and mental state but also of his environment. In his writings and orations there are numerous appeals for compassion for the poor and oppressed, and his work is throughout imbued with a strong Christianity and an unquestioning faith in God.

SUMMING UP. A Renaissance man aided the *risorgimento* of Peru's medicine and liberty.

