

Out of the Flames, by Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone

reviewed by [William C. Placher](#) in the [January 25, 2003](#) issue

Michael Servetus's *Restitutio Christianismi* is quite a book. One of the first attacks on the doctrine of the Trinity, it also described for the first time the circulation of the blood--and led to Servetus's being burned to death in Calvin's Geneva. Only three copies of the original edition survive. The Goldstones, authors of popular works on book collecting, tell the story of Servetus and of his book.

Servetus was a Spanish physician, scientist, theologian and any number of other things. Already a published author at 19, he impressed and annoyed nearly everyone he met. Early in life he concluded that the doctrine of the Trinity is contrary to scripture, and, once he published his views, had to live in hiding or on the run. Passing through Geneva, he was caught, imprisoned and then burned (Calvin favored execution but opposed burning). Servetus's ideas parallel (and may have influenced) Unitarianism, whose later history the Goldstones trace. His book's casual mention that the blood circulates through the body anticipated William Harvey's "discovery" of that principle by 75 years. Calvin and others sought to destroy all the copies of Servetus's heretical volume. That only three survive, each with its own interesting history, makes it one of the world's rarest printed books.

The Goldstones know how to tell a good story, though they sometimes slow the narrative down by including the life history of nearly everyone who ever owned a copy of the *Restitutio* or had anything to do with Unitarianism. Some of their historical conclusions miss the mark, and their bibliography shows a puzzling preference for 19th-century works. Why would one draw on the 1914 edition of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*'s article on Calvin and ignore everything written about Calvin during the past 25 years? William Bouwsma's Calvin (portrayed in his 1989 biography), a tortured soul, would have made a more interesting (and more accurate) opponent for Servetus than the cardboard tyrant here described.

This year will mark the 50th anniversary of the publication of Roland Bainton's *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus*, still a model of how to combine solid scholarship and vivid prose and still in print, at less than half the price of *Out of the Flames*.