

Retrospective Views

By the middle of the seventeenth-century the Spanish Empire in the New World was over a century old. Indigenous peoples and cultures survived, to be sure, but a new mestizo society had evolved with an identity of its own. By the middle of the century, most of the battles over the Indian peoples had been decided, at least in the eyes of the secular and religious authorities. By mid-century, too, the veil of secrecy that had surrounded Spain's earlier years in the Americas was largely gone. Europeans had access to a wide variety of accounts of the New World, its peoples, cultures, and fate under Spanish rule. It was now possible for armchair ethnologists and gentlemen historians to cobble together their own portraits of the Indians and their own histories of the New World from extant sources without having to leave their estates or hôtels.

Spanish writers continued to write about the past and present of the New World, occasionally shedding new light on indigenous peoples and their cultures, but just as often following in well-defined historiographical traditions that sung the praises of the conquerors and their missions to the conquered.

Lucas Fernández de Piedrahita
(1624-1688).
*Historia general de las conquistas del Nuevo
Reyno de Granada.*
Antwerp: Juan Baptista Verdussen, 1688.



Lucas Fernández came from the new mestizo class. Born in Bogotá, he was supposed to have descended on his mother's side from Incan ancestors. He became a cleric and was promoted to various offices in the hierarchy, eventually becoming Bishop of Santa Marta. His history of New Granada—what is today known as Colombia—was written while Fernández was defending himself before the Council of the Indies on charges brought by the local “visitador.” It is in many ways a work symptomatic of the new native-born elite. Written in Spain, it seeks to carve out a distinguished place in the national epic for the conquest of New Granada. Most of the book is given over to the twin mission of civilization and Christianization, and to the Providential role played by the Spanish in subduing and converting the gentiles. The Indians are pagan idolaters, corrupted by the Devil, and their ghoulish rites and ceremonies betray their diabolical origins. However, Lucas Fernández cannot afford to leave the Indians simply as miserable gentiles. The mestizo had to shine a favorable light on them as well. Thus he is quick to show the many ways in which they had glimpses of “the truth” without denying their paganism. They believed in God, the resurrection of the body, the existence of the soul; their myths had familiar echoes of Biblical stories; and they may have been evangelized long ago by one of the original Apostles. In other words, here was a wretched people waiting to be “recalled” to a faith their ancestors had once gleaned dimly.

Antonio de Herrera (1559-1625).
Historia general de los hechos de los Castellanos en las islas e tierra firme del mar oceano.

Madrid: Imprenta Real, Juan Flemenco, and Juan de la Cuesta, 1601-1615.



Unlike most who wrote histories of the Indies, Herrera actually was an accomplished historian whose resumé included works on Portugal, Mary Stuart, the Turks, the wars of the Spanish in Flanders, and a history of the world. He held the post of Cronista Mayor de las Indias, a lucrative royal appointment. In this capacity he followed some illustrious predecessors: Peter Martyr, Las Casas, Lopez de Gómara, and José Acosta. Thus too the nature of his project: a history of the deeds of the Castilians in the New World. This is imperial history in the Roman mode at its most exacting and detailed. The cronista's gaze is firmly fixed on the discoverers and conquerors rather than on the indigenous peoples. Like those of his predecessors his lengthy account is organized by decades. Herrera was not shy about wholesale borrowing from the works of others; since it was all for the greater glory of the monarch the story needed to be as complete as possible, regardless the source. This massive history is guided at every turn by Providence, which has singled out the Spanish for a special vocation to the peoples of the Indies.

Antonio Solís y Ribadeneyra (1610-1686).
Historia de la conquista de Mexico.
Madrid, 1684.

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Of an old and noble family, Solís was educated at Salamanca and became a renowned poet and dramatist. On the strength of his literary achievements, Philip IV made him one of his secretaries. But it was his elevation by Marie-Anne of Austria to the position of Cronista Mayor that turned him from poet to historian of the Indies. The results were in some sense predictable. He styled himself successor to Herrera, whose chronicle left off in the mid-sixteenth century. Solís tells us early on that he undertook this work in part to fill a gap left by his predecessors, in part to correct some of their more egregious errors, and in part to counteract the libelous poison spread by Spain's enemies about her conduct towards the Indians. This was a book that would substitute grand, historical drama for the treacherous lies of the Black Legend. And the *Historia* was nothing if not drama on a large scale: a modern epic in which heroes confront each other relentlessly in battle. If Herrera was the self-conscious historian, Solís was the skilled dramatist. More than his predecessors, Solís takes pains to portray the Aztec forces as if they were the armies of France and England, worthy opponents indeed for the valorous Cortés. The apotheosis of Cortés was meant as a justification of royal policy and a vindication of

Spain's conduct in the New World. As the actual fortunes of Spain began to decline precipitously, writers such as Solis served up memories of a glorious past. The present copy is the first edition.

Juan de Torquemada (1557-1624).
*Los veinte y un libros rituales y
Monarquia Indiana.*
Seville, 1615.



If Herrera and Solis focused on the Spanish, Torquemada was the first, and probably the best, historian of the Indians themselves. Torquemada was another of those remarkable Franciscans who tried to come to grips with the richness and fullness of indigenous cultures and institutions in a comprehensive way. Not only was Torquemada interested in indigenous languages and religious ceremonies, but he attempted to reconstruct the distant past of native peoples. Unlike most of those who speculated on the origins of the Indians, Torquemada actually tried to gather what evidence he could from extant monuments, art, and codices, as well as from interviewing Indians themselves. What is so impressive about the friar's three massive tomes is their contribution to a documentary base for research into the history of the Indians. Torquemada took the Indians and their institutions seriously, and he described them in careful detail. He was also concerned, however, to document the nature and impact of the Spanish presence in the New World for about one century. How had contact with the Spanish changed Indian culture? As a Franciscan and missionary, Torquemada was intensely interested in the progress of the gospel and the labors of his fellow Franciscans. Much of the third volume of the work is given over to chronicling the history of the order in the New World and to writing the biographies of his predecessors. Torquemada envisioned the Aztec world as a grand monarchy, and in so doing he gave coherence and shape to the disparate aspects of its society. Torquemada's history and description of the Indians is virtually without precedent, and it articulates the outer limits of understanding and assimilation possible on the uncertain frontiers of the Spanish Empire.