

RECENT WORKS ON THE
EXPLORATION AND SETTLEMENT
OF LATIN AMERICA

William D. Phillips, Jr.
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BREAKING THE MAYA CODE. By Michael D. Coe. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993. Pp. 304. \$24.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)

WILD MAJESTY: ENCOUNTERS WITH CARIBS FROM COLUMBUS TO THE PRESENT DAY: AN ANTHOLOGY. Edited by Peter Hulme and Neil L. Whitehead. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992. Pp. 369. \$65.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.)

THE DE SOTO CHRONICLES: THE EXPEDITION OF HERNANDO DE SOTO TO NORTH AMERICA IN 1539-1543. Two-volume set. Edited by Lawrence A. Clayton, Vernon James Knight, Jr., and Edward C. Moore. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993. Pp. 569, 588. \$50.00 cloth.)

NEW WORLD ENCOUNTERS. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993. Pp. 344. \$45.00 cloth, \$15.00 paper.)

THE MEETING OF TWO WORLDS: EUROPE AND THE AMERICAS, 1492-1650. Edited by Warwick Bray. (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1993. Pp. 336. \$39.95 cloth.)

READING COLUMBUS. By Margarita Zamora. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993. Pp. 247. \$42.00 cloth, \$18.00 paper.)

1492-1992, FIVE CENTURIES OF IMPERIALISM AND RESISTANCE. Edited by Ron Borgeault, Dave Broad, Lorne Brown, and Lori Foster. (Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Halifax, Nova Scotia: Society for Socialist Studies and Fernwood Publishing, 1992. Pp. 298. \$24.95 paper.)

THE EXPLORERS OF SOUTH AMERICA. By Edward Goodman. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992. Pp. 408. \$14.95 paper.)

PORTRAITS FROM THE AGE OF EXPLORATION: SELECTIONS FROM ANDRÉ THEVET'S LES VRAIS POURTRAITS ET VIES DES HOMMES ILLUSTRES. Edited by Roger Schlesinger. Translated by Edward Benson. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993. Pp. 159. \$24.95 cloth.)

THE CONQUISTADORS: FIRST-PERSON ACCOUNTS OF THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO. Edited and translated by Patricia de Fuentes. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. Pp. 264. \$17.95 paper.)

The five-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's voyage of 1492 was the occasion for a flood of publications related to Columbus and his encounter and more generally to the larger questions of European exploration and expansion, the contact and conflict between cultures, and the lasting legacies of relations between the Americas and the rest of the world. The works under review in this essay provide a cross-section of the kinds of material produced as original editions or reprints. They also reveal the reigning paradigm in studies of the encounter: the indigenous peoples are currently the preferred focus of study. In part, such a view arose as a reaction to an earlier scholarly tradition that tended to neglect native voices and actions and to emphasize those of Europeans. In an effort to redress this imbalance, many of the most recent studies concentrate on the non-European Other. Laudable as the initial aim may be, in many of the studies, the European intruders receive less attention and occasionally even dismissal.

Breaking the Maya Code by Michael Coe is a work unrelated directly to the Columbian Quincentenary and the scholarly work on encounters engendered by it. Coe's volume nonetheless is a work of major importance for pre-Columbian Latin American studies because it tells the fascinating story of the arduous efforts made by scholars around the world and in various disciplines to decipher the writing of the Mayas. An anthropologist at Yale, Coe is well placed to tell the story because he knew most of those involved in the later stages and was thoroughly familiar with the work of their predecessors. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Thomas Kuhn described how difficult it is for paradigms to shift. Scholars hold tenaciously to their cherished beliefs, and the more obstinate can block progress until they die. Such a character hindered the unraveling of the secrets of the Maya language for over thirty years by lobbing blunderbuss volleys at those who opposed his pet theories. Death removed him from the scene in 1975, and since then, scholars have gradually built up their ability to read Maya. With the greater linguistic knowledge gained, the resulting picture of Maya life has become sharper. Scholars now know the genealogies of the rulers and a good bit about their dynasties, conquests, and warfare. This knowledge confirms that the older image of Maya society as a peaceful world ruled by astronomers is far from the truth. Nevertheless (and inexplicably, as Coe presents it), a strong coterie of archaeologists refuse to accept the utility of what the linguistic scholars have found.

Among the works related directly to exploration and settlement, the logical starting place for understanding the representations made by the participants is the reality they experienced. In this category is an edition of original Spanish sources edited by Patricia de Fuentes, *The Conquistadores: First-Person Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*. Significantly, this volume is a reprint of a 1963 edition featuring the Spanish

voices of the powerful, Hernán Cortés and Pedro de Alvarado, as well as their not-so-powerful followers. But these excerpts from the Spanish chronicles will be read very differently in the 1990s than they were three decades ago when the volume first appeared. In his brief introduction, Ross Hassig explains just how the climate of interpretation has changed and offers a succinct guide to approaching the importance and centrality of these sources, Eurocentric as they may be.

These sources may be used to address current concerns. For example, the familiar story of how Cortés got his interpreters is well known, but a brief episode related by Andrés de Tapia reveals the complexities of personal identity at the beginning of the story of Spanish Mexico. In Yucatán, Cortés and his followers found a Spaniard, Jerónimo de Aguilar, who had been shipwrecked ten years before and had learned the local language. Later, on the Mexican coast near Veracruz, Cortés found Marina, or La Malinche, who became the famous (or infamous for many Mexicans) translator in Cortés's dealings with the Aztecs. She knew both the languages of Yucatán and Nahuatl from her life as a slave, but until she learned Spanish, she could communicate with Cortés only through Aguilar, the Spanish interpreter from Yucatán. The less familiar part of the story concerns adaptations made by some Spaniards to the customs of the Amerindians. The Spanish interpreter, Tapia related, had reached shore from the shipwreck with a dozen companions, all killed by the Indians except one other unnamed individual, who married a high-ranking Indian woman. When Cortés's expedition arrived, he chose to remain with his wife's people rather than rejoin his own. Like Aguilar, he dressed in a loincloth and wore his hair long and tied back, but he had gone farther in adapting to local customs. When Aguilar urged him to come along, he "refused, pointing out that his nose and ears were pierced, and his hands and face tattooed" (p. 21). Presumably, he felt the new image of his body would make him unacceptable or at least embarrassed among his fellow Spaniards.

The de Soto Chronicles: The Expedition of Hernando de Soto to North America in 1539–1543 is a handsome two-volume assemblage of the sources for his travels through the southern regions of what would later become the United States. Starting out with some six hundred men, he traveled from Florida to Texas for four years (1539–1543). De Soto died on the trip, as did about half of his companions. The accounts recording the venture provide some of the only written evidence about the last precontact stages of the Indian cultures and politics in the region. These *Chronicles* provide English translations of the sources. The entire second volume consists of an edition of the famous *La Florida* by Garcilaso de la Vega, son of an Inca princess and a conquistador, who wrote his study in Spain based on interviews with participants. The collection also features a massive scholarly apparatus, with essays by Paul Hoffman, Eugene Lyon, and Lawrence Clayton among others.

Literary critic Peter Hulme and anthropologist Neil Whitehead have assembled an anthology of sources written by Europeans on their encounters with Caribs entitled *Wild Majesty: Encounters with Caribs from Columbus to the Present Day*. The earlier part compiles familiar colonial sources from Columbus and his companions onward. But the most fascinating portion is the most recent one, in which filmmakers and television producers as well as scholars encounter the surviving Caribs of the late twentieth century.

Another edition of a primary source is *Portraits from the Age of Exploration: Selections from André Thevet's Les vrais portraits et vies des hommes illustres*, edited by Roger Schlesinger. Thevet's book originally appeared in 1584, presenting a number of brief biographies, each one illustrated by an engraved portrait. For this edition, Schlesinger selected twelve biographies, six of European explorers and six of Native American rulers. The Europeans are familiar figures: Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci, Francisco Pizarro and Hernán Cortés, Ferdinand Magellan and Affonso de Albuquerque. The six Indians include famous as well as unfamiliar leaders, and their biographies were, according to the editor, the first of Native Americans in European literature. The famous are Montezuma and Atabalipa (Atahualpa). The less-known are Nacol-absou, the South American "King of the Promontory of the Cannibals"; Paracoussi, "King of the Platte" (the Río de la Plata region in South America); Quoniamec, a Brazilian ruler; and Paraousti Satouriona, "King of Florida." Aside from the accounts of the Aztec emperor and the Inca, Thevet's biographies of Native Americans are based in part on his own experiences. In 1555 he traveled with a French expedition to Brazil and fell ill shortly afterward. He then left for France as soon as possible, following a trajectory that he claimed took him to Mexico, Florida, and Canada. His portraits of the American native kings are thus not only early examples in European representation but also based at least in part on first-hand observations.

The 1992 commemorations may well be remembered in the future as the period in which literary critics sailed into unfamiliar waters and invaded history. One of the most successful has been Margarita Zamora, whose *Reading Columbus* contains five of her essays on problems in criticism of Columbus. With only a few slips, she avoids jargon and writes accessibly. Much of her effort is spent in determining the extent to which it is possible to separate the words Columbus actually wrote from those that Bartolomé de las Casas preserved in his summary of the diaries. Zamora considers the prologue to the account of the first voyage and concludes that at the least, Casas plucked it from some other location in the admiral's oeuvre and placed it at the beginning. Overall, she succeeds in sifting through the many layers of Columbus's intellectual background (which included scripture, prophetic traditions, and geographical lore)

and in piercing the fog arising from the lack of holographic documents. Historians have always known that these documents require interpretation and have read them in a variety of ways. Zamora provides an excellent guide for interpreting the Columbian sources from a literary perspective, an exercise that yields new insights.

The occasion of the quincentenary provided many groups with a forum for reflecting on their perspectives on the long-range impact of the encounter between Europeans and Native Americans. The response of members of the Society for Socialist Studies at the University of Winnipeg was published as *1492–1992, Five Centuries of Imperialism and Resistance*, edited by Ron Bourgeault, Dave Broad, Lorne Brown, and Lori Foster. The second half contains essays “devoted to analyses of the ‘New World Order’ which has emerged since the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War” (p. 4). The contributors were almost uniformly pessimistic about the present they viewed in 1992 and the future they foresaw. As Broad expresses this perspective, “the world capitalist system, which began five hundred years ago, retains its essential character of social and imperial domination and exploitation, based on accumulation of capital by a few, and continuing—in a global sense *worsening*—exploitation and inequality” (p. 4, Broad’s emphasis). With even China gingerly treading the capitalist road, the only faint glimmers of hope for the authors’ ideology were found in Cuba and peripheral parts of the capitalist world. According to Broad and Foster, “While the current situation of Third World revolutions may not be as bright as it was a decade ago, these struggles are not over” (p. 263). The historical projection of the editors’ contemporary concerns can be sampled in their choice of essays for the first half of the book. These cover the late fifteenth to the late twentieth centuries, including Jalil Sued-Badillo’s “Christopher Columbus and the Enslavement of Amerindians in the Caribbean” and Michael Stevenson’s “Columbus and the War on Indigenous Peoples.” More contemporary reflections are provided by Carol Smith’s “Marxists on Class and Culture in Guatemala” and R. H. Barlow’s “The Regional Impact of the Cuban Revolution.” The unifying theme of the volume is “the recuperation of history for and by aboriginal peoples” (p. 2).

The same theme is shared by other collections of essays, although the theoretical scaffolding differs. *The Meeting of Two Worlds: Europe and the Americas, 1492–1650*, edited by Warwick Bray, contains contributions by an array of scholars (mainly archaeologists and anthropologists) brought together at a symposium organized by the British Academy. Although the editor piously claims that “the present survey does not take any political stance” and that its aim “is not to be judgemental,” the volume reveals an underlying assumption of the superiority of indigenous American cultures and peoples. Beyond that, the first essay by Alistair Hennessy even resounds with an old-fashioned echo of European rivalries in

its obvious hostility to things Spanish and Catholic: the subtext of his article reminds readers that the Black Legend is far from dead. The most blatant example is Hennessy's use of the first generation of conquistadores to represent the Spaniards and the New England Puritans to stand for the English, with no mention of English planters in the Caribbean and only one parenthetical phrase referring to the English settlers in the southern colonies. The method seems to be to emphasize the worst in those one dislikes and the best in those one favors.

Luckily, the other essays in *The Meeting of Two Worlds* are less polemical. A series at the end of the essays deals with biological exchanges (Don Brothwell), demography in the aftermath of the conquest (Linda Nelson), and early European impressions of the Americas (Warwick Bray). These are preceded by two important essays: one by anthropologist Samuel Wilson on the social, cultural, and political complexities of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean; and another on the changing material culture of Hispaniola following the European contact as revealed by archaeology and reported by Kathleen Deagan and José María Cruxent.

Historian Nancy Farriss provides an exemplary study of the efforts of the Maya of Yucatán to preserve the spirit and elements of their indigenous religion in the face of Spanish proselytizers for Christianity. She shows their efforts to blend traditional features with the new religion, even to the extent of crucifying babies as sacrifices to their traditional gods. Anthropologist Frances Berdan offers a fascinating view of the alterations in the social patterns of the lives of the peoples of the central valley of Mexico following the conquest. She reminds readers that the Aztecs were one group among many and that "ethnic pride was of considerable importance" (p. 165). Berdan's main point is that many of the changes following Spanish conquest were not abrupt ones but slow transitions in political and territorial organization, social stratification, economic production and exchange, religion, and language and writing.

The contributors to *New World Encounters*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, show the same concern with indigenous voices but treat them mostly from a literary perspective. The volume consists of essays that previously appeared in the journal *Representations*. Many of them were inspired by the work of French thinker Michel de Certeau, whose inquiries frequently confronted the question of how scholars should approach the Other, until his untimely death in 1986 at the age of forty-one. Among the most successful of the essays are Inga Clendinnen's piece on the conquest of Mexico, in which she illustrates the failure of Aztecs and Spaniards alike in trying to understand each other; Rolena Adorno's masterful analysis of the problems of survival and cultural interchange encountered by Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and his efforts to overcome them; and Anthony Pagden's deciphering of the writings of Casas. The themes are similar in the remaining essays: how scholars should interpret European texts to

show the context in which they were written, and how to untangle the understanding of the Other enmeshed in them. A fine piece of criticism is Margarita Zamora's article on Columbus's "Letter to the Sovereigns."

The most dated book under review is Edward Goodman's *The Explorers of South America*. It originally saw light in 1972 but reflects an even older scholarly tradition in presenting a detailed chronological narrative of the non-native explorers of South America from Columbus to the early twentieth century. Goodman follows their paths and recounts their deeds, paying little attention to wider concerns or the reactions of those people they encountered. The book's virtue is its synthesis of vast printed primary sources and an array of secondary accounts.

The impetus of 1992 and the eagerness of scholars to expand their concerns beyond the initial Columbian moment inspired an astounding amount of sound scholarship that will give future generations a much fuller picture of the encounter between hemispheres that began in 1492. Scholars from a range of disciplines have provided advantageous insights for those in different fields. Their overriding concern with the indigenous peoples has enriched their scholarship and made it impossible to forget the inescapable polarities of the encounters.

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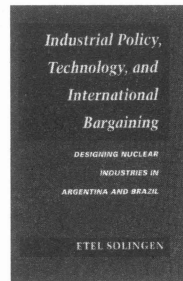
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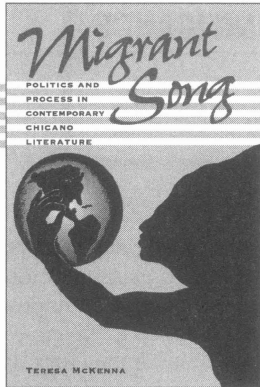
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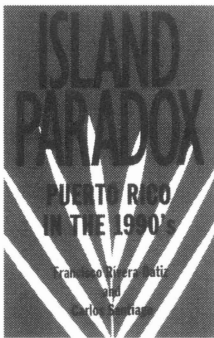
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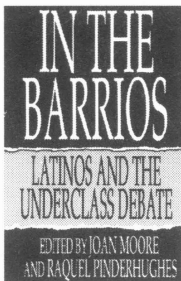


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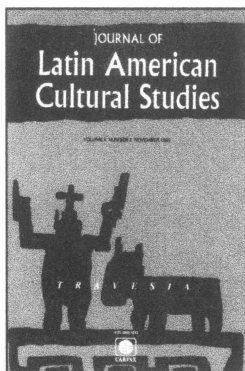
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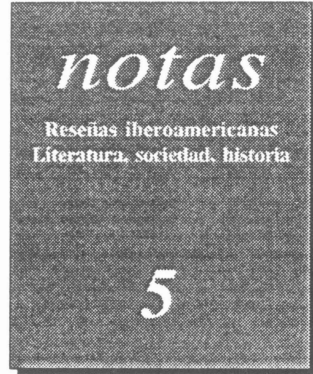
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