



History of the Conquest of Mexico

William H. Prescott , James Lockhart (Introduction)

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"It is a magnificent epic," said William H. Prescott after the publication of *History of the Conquest of Mexico* in 1843. Since then, his sweeping account of Cortés's subjugation of the Aztec people has endured as a landmark work of scholarship and dramatic storytelling. This pioneering study presents a compelling view of the clash of civilizations that reverberates in Latin America to this day.

"Regarded simply from the standpoint of literary criticism, the *Conquest of Mexico* is Prescott's masterpiece," judged his biographer Harry Thurston Peck. "More than that, it is one of the most brilliant examples which the English language possesses of literary art applied to historical narration. . . . Here, as nowhere else, has Prescott succeeded in delineating character. All the chief actors of his great historic drama not only live and breathe, but they are as distinctly differentiated as they must have been in life. Cortés and his lieutenants are persons whom we actually come to know in the pages of Prescott. . . . Over against these brilliant figures stands the melancholy form of Montezuma, around whom, even from the first, one feels gathering the darkness of his coming fate. He reminds one of some hero of Greek tragedy, doomed to destruction and intensely conscious of it, yet striving in vain against the decree of an inexorable destiny. . . . [Prescott] transmuted the acquisitions of laborious research into an enduring monument of pure literature."

From the eBook edition.

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From Reader Review History of the Conquest of Mexico for online ebook

erik d aker says

Insanely good. The most impossible-to-put-down history book I've ever held in my hot little hands. And it's over 100 years old.

Moloch says

Questo è un argomento su cui non mi stancherò mai di leggere: riunisce insieme così tanti aspetti affascinanti (viaggi, avventura, ignoto, incontro con l'altro, gusto del romanzesco, passione, caso, tragedia) da essere irresistibile. La mia collezione di libri è ancora piccola, ma sta crescendo.

Una delle aggiunte più "preziose" è questo *La Conquista del Messico* dello storico americano William H. Prescott (1796-1859), che forse compariva nella bibliografia dei saggi di Levy o di Miralles sullo stesso argomento. Se dovessi recensirlo in poche parole, direi che è tutto ciò che *Cortés* di Miralles non era: tanto quel libro era sì dottissimo ma arido, pedantesco e faticosissimo da leggere, quanto questo è una goduria per il lettore. Prima di acquistare o mettere in lista un libro, controllo sempre qualche recensione su Goodreads... In questo caso, per un saggio di quasi 1000 pagine scritto nel 1843, sono rimasta stupita di fronte al livello di *entusiasmo* dei lettori (per citare un po' qua e là: "Insanely good. The most impossible-to-put-down history book I've ever held in my hot little hands. And it's over 100 years old.", "This is the absolute best! What an exciting story.", "This book is astounding!", "Shakespearean. Biblical.", "This was written in *sit yourself down* eighteenfortythree and it reads brilliantly."). Diciamo quindi che i pareri erano molto incoraggianti... e, ho potuto verificare, assolutamente veritieri. Davvero, se volete far appassionare qualcuno alla lettura di saggi storici, dategli questo libro: 881 pagine che scorrono in un lampo (magari dategli di saltare l'introduzione con la biografia dell'autore: è interessante pure quella, eh, ma meglio non esagerare, come prima volta!).

Chiaramente, non è in un saggio del 1843 che si cercano le ultime novità in fatto di interpretazione storiografica dell'avvenimento. Non aspettiamoci da Prescott una lettura "terzomondista" o "antimperialista" della conquista del Messico. Il suo presupposto di partenza è che la storia sia un continuo progresso, e che le civiltà più evolute soppiantino "naturalmente" quelle rimaste a un grado inferiore di civiltà. Oltre tutto la civiltà azteca è stata, secondo lui, "giustamente" sconfitta e cancellata dalla storia per l'abominio imperdonabile dei sacrifici umani... Tuttavia egli non è mai del tutto indifferente di fronte alle conseguenze devastanti della Conquista di lì a venire per la popolazione americana, come non è privo di ammirazione verso le vette della civiltà azteca e il coraggio e l'irriducibilità degli ultimi resistenti (ad esempio l'ultimo imperatore Cuauhtémoc) e non nasconde, a parte l'evidente fascino per il protagonista della sua epopea, Cortés, gli eccessi più violenti dei *conquistadores* (d'altra parte neanche la cattolica Spagna era per lui, anglosassone e protestante, la vetta della civiltà, sebbene sia il paese che, da storico, più l'interessò), mentre stigmatizza con ironia gli eccessi trionfalistici e nazionalistici, o ultra-apologetici e agiografici, degli storici, soprattutto spagnoli, che l'hanno preceduto (accanto alle pagine piene d'azione e, come si dice, "appassionanti come un romanzo", non mancano approfondimenti sulle fonti consultate, criticamente vagliate, e schede biografiche degli autori).

Insomma, bellissimo e, inutile dirlo, subito messi in lista anche *History of the Conquest of Peru*, dello stesso autore, e, perché no?, anche il suo *History of the Reign of Philip the Second, King of Spain* (si trovano tutti gratuitamente in lingua originale, in ebook).

4/5

<https://moloch981.wordpress.com/2015/...>

Stephen says

This book is astounding!

Like others, I suspect, I thought I had some decent grasp on the story of the conquest of the Aztecs by Cortés and his conquistadores. I was aware of the Aztec belief that a white god was returning in the very year that Cortés showed up, a belief that attenuated their response to his advent. And the fact that they were overawed by the horses and hardware. All that stuff. The truth, I found, was that I hadn't a clue until I read this splendid history.

It is an utterly fascinating, nearly unbelievable story told in an admirable style. Published in 1843, William H. Prescott's style takes a little getting used to. One is soon in the swing of it, however, and soon after that one begins to relish it.

Sira says

Consultato

Jeff says

"History of the Conquest of Mexico." William H. Prescott 1843. Although reputedly blind and having never traveled to the Americas, Prescott's seminal account of the conquest of the Aztecs is as highly respected by historians today as it was in the 19th century. Cortez's clash with the Aztecs is arguable one of the most dramatic histories of the age of exploration. Drawing from numerous first hand accounts from both the Spanish and the Aztecs, Prescott, like the majority of anthropologists of today, was quick to expound upon the high sophistication of Aztec culture. The curator of Chicago's Field Museum states that "Aztec civilization was as sophisticated as ancient Rome". This is a very bold statement indeed. The Aztecs never discovered the wheel. They did not possess a system of measurements. Their architecture was heavy, unsophisticated, their art work, especially in the representation of the human form was crude, garish, difficult to gaze upon. Their written language was, in actuality, simple, primitive pictographs. Hernin Cortez and a band of four hundred adventurers, without the luxury of support by the government of Spain, were able to manipulated Montezuma like a child, toppling a civilization with a population numbering in the millions. Although the Romans knew few bounds in the realm of cruelty to their fellow man, this is the one arena in which the Aztecs easily outclassed the ancients of the European world or even the Spanish conquistadors. Aztec armies were mustered in, not for territorial or economic gain, but for the sole purpose of capturing humans for sacrifice, of which incredibly, in the upward of twenty to forty thousand victims were butchered and cannibalized annually. Prescott's, graphic descriptions of captured men, women and children, having their beating hearts cut from their body and then consumed at banquet like festivals is not an easy read. Sixteenth century Mexico was clearly not Ancient Rome. Chicago's Field Museum does the public a disservice by disseminating inaccurate information.

Gerald Sinstadt says

Other reviews can be found of this book in other formats, but all agree that it is an astonishing achievement.

William H Prescott was an American historian whose sight had reduced him to near blindness, and who had never visited Mexico, yet researched and reconstructed original documents to produce a thrilling account of an epic series of events. The year is 1520. Cortes embarks from Cuba with the aim of claiming Mexico for Spain. Arriving in the capital, he is made welcome by the divine ruler, Montezuma, and the two men become friends. Montezuma comes to believe that Cortes is, in fact, the ancient Aztec god, Quetzalcoatl.

Cortes' attempts to convert Montezuma to Christianity fail. He takes his counterpart prisoner, but within chivalrous limits. The arrival of a new body of Spaniards, seeking to overthrow Cortes, whom they see as a vainglorious rebel, screws up the tension. Eventually, Montezuma dies and a fierce, bloody battle ensues.

Prescott told the story in five volumes, published in 1843. Professor Sir John Elliott has skilfully extracted the account of Cortes and Montezuma to present for modern readers a vivid portrayal that seems often like the scenario for a Hollywood blockbuster. We should be grateful to Prescott and to Sir John in equal measure.

Rebecca says

So beautifully written I hardly noticed it was a history book. What a journey Cortes took his followers on. What a determined man. The writing was poetic, absolutely unique. Thank you Feliks for recommending it to me.

A tragic history, this country, and the Mexicans rose up against the Spanish with such dignity and power. It was a perfect back drop for my travels through Yucatan and Mexico (City). And especially for my understanding of this country when I walked through the Anthropological Museum.

I could not put the book down. Gripping and intriguing story for me, who knew nothing of the conquest. Prescott - gosh what a writer - I didn't realise till I was half way through (and he mentioned "the aborigines of our country" - I wanted to know more about him right then and there because I thought only Australians referred to their native indigenous peoples as aborigines) That he was American in fact - a 19th century historian! Died in 1859 or thereabouts. That really surprised me. His writing was indeed classic but also very modern. Clearly a man beyond his time

Bettie? says

read by Kerry Shale

See also The Royal Hunt of the Sun by Peter Schaffer

Those chief Aztec bods wore gold shoes with pearls studded on, even the soles were made of gold.

This was written in *sit yourself down* eighteenfortythree and it reads brilliantly.

Such a gruelling part of history; no matter how many times I come across Montezuma's incarceration and death it is still very hard to take. sad, sad, sad.

As all adherents of history have to have a sturdy stomach by default I have no problem in recommending.

Charles says

This is the absolute best! What an exciting story.

Katherine says

Výborná v?c! :)

R.J. Wheaton says

Loving these C19th sentences.

Alex says

This is a great read. It was written in the early 19th century and so has a charming archaic feel to it. But it is not so old as to read as if it were written in Olde English. The author strikes a nice balance between the demands of epistemic responsibility and vivid prose. At many points it reads like a novel, with excited descriptions of this battle or that, but it is also pretty scrupulous about evaluating its source material.

It is also animated by a dramatic ambivalence. Prescott is not afraid to pass judgment on both the conquistadors and their future subjects. Additionally, he has a kind of protestant distaste for Catholicism and Spaniards. Thus the question of the justice of the conquest (and of particular actions that were part of the conquest) is frequently on his mind. It is pretty clear that Cortes is the hero of the story, though. And, moreover, the Aztecs (and other future subject peoples) don't look very good -- viz. their prodigious human sacrifice and cannibalism.

The events portrayed are amazing. Cortes, with only several hundred Spaniards, conquered an empire defended by many thousands. There are great successes, sudden set-backs, betrayals, near disasters... the works.

Finally, the book is rich with material on the history and culture of the pre-Columbian Mexicans. Among this material is an interesting appendix full of very primitive speculation on the origins of human occupation and civilization in the Americas. It is state of the art, 1820.

Tom says

This book is incredibly interesting both from the standpoint of the author, a man from 1841, and the history of the conquest of the Aztecs. In most modern history books written nowadays, the Aztecs are portrayed as victims and the conquistadors as villains. Prescott is able to show the good and bad of both group from a Euro-centric viewpoint, which is how the conquistadors also thought. Prescott's use of European references and American (USA) stereotypes, makes the conquistadors into a news story of real people, and NOT a story of purely evil men.

The conquistadors had a worldview that we today can't 100% recognize, because of two things

1. Their unwavering belief in their own superiority.

And

2. That Christianity is the only way.

The second one is clearly shown by Prescott by how he explains how even when the conquistadors would benefit from not pushing Christianity on the Mexicans, they rarely didn't push.

Sadly, I doubt that many modern historians can convey the conquistador mindset as well as Prescott did.

P.S.

Prescott also made a point of writing how bad slavery is, and he lived in the US before the Civil War. He clearly had some morals and they show in his writing.

William2 says

The thing I like about this book is both its strong narrative, almost novelistic, thrust, and its heavy footnoting throughout (at the end of most chapters there's a little bibliographic essay). Prescott's familiarity with his sources seems exhaustive. Reading him is a little bit like reading Gibbon. One has to make provision for the passage of time and the change of values. "Conquest" is hardly the word we would use today. Today the word is the neutral contact--pre-contact, post-contact.

The book to my mind does not really begin until chapter 6 (p. 122 in this edition) when we learn about the golden age of Tezcucan civilization. This was one of three affiliated Aztec city states living in close allegiance in the Valley of Mexico. All that precedes this is a rather patchy look at state religion (hideous, of course), law, regional politics, astronomy, the famous calendar, etc. I don't recommend skipping the beginning though for it contains essential information you'll need in later reading.

About halfway through, when Cortés and his men climb from the buggy, malarial gulf coast, up to the tableland (7,500 feet) on which the Valley of Mexico sits, the writing becomes incredibly vivid. How Prescott, a partly blind man, was able to do this — it couldn't have been easy for a sighted person — makes his achievement all the more astonishing. He's particularly good at showing us the pristine-looking Aztec state as it sits among its network of lakes from the surrounding cordilleras. Along the way the Spaniards are welcomed by a jubilant public which line the road and celebrate their progress.

Unfortunately for the Aztecs, a myth told the story of Quetzalcoatl, god of the air, who, incurring the wrath of one of the principal gods:

. . . was compelled to abandon the country . . . When he reached the shores of the Mexican gulf, he took a leave of his followers, promising that he and his descendants would revisit hereafter . . . The Mexicans looked confidently to the return of the benevolent deity and this remarkable tradition, deeply cherished in their hearts, prepared the way . . . for the future success of the Spaniards. (p. 53)

A few favorite quotes. The first on Aztec religious practices:

Scarcely any author pretends to estimate the yearly sacrifices [of captive pow's] throughout the empire at less than twenty thousand, and some carry the number as high as fifty. (p. 64)

And about the early career of Hernando Cortés:

He became familiar with toil and danger, and with those deeds of cruelty which have too often, alas! stained the bright scutcheons of the Castilian chivalry in the New World. (p. 174)

And on the forced conversion of the Indians:

The sword was a good argument, when the tongue failed; and the spread of Mahometanism had shown that seeds sown by the hand of violence, far from perishing in the ground, would spring up and bear fruit to after time. (p. 196)

The picture drawn here of Aztec religious practice and its attendant cannibalism is appalling. At one point Cortés' small force comes upon several priests at a local ziggurat or *teocalli* smeared black with blood from head to toe. The inner sactum held a tray under a depiction of the god of war *Huitzilopotchli* containing human hearts ripped from the chests of unfortunate victims. At another point they come upon a cache of 130,000 human skulls. In light of such revelations, the prostelitizing Christianity they force feed the natives seems tame. And much as I dislike the depredations of Christianity, its hard to deny that part of what Spain did here -- in addition to enriching itself enormously, and enslaving millions -- was to stop a carnage that may have been without precedent in human history.

I have to admit that I think Prescott was something of a naïve puppy. The worst depredations of the Spanish he never believes and argues away. He hagiographizes Cortés. His was the Great White Male school of historiography, which is not to be entirely disdained because of its great literary merit. One wonders though if this good man, Prescott himself, wasn't simply too good to believe in the great evil perpetrated by Cortés et al. Sometimes he does not hesitate to question claims of past historians, but then he'll produce a quote from one of his fellows like this, with regard to the "conqueror's" desperate fighting retreat from the Mexican capital:

"There was no people so capable of supporting hunger as the Spaniards, and none of them who were ever more severely tried than the soldiers of Cortés." (p. 607)

Really? How about the Greeks at Thermopylae?-- to chose the first example that springs to mind. And then again:

The period which we are reviewing was still the age of chivalry; that stirring and adventurous

age, of which we can form little conception in the present day of sober, practical reality. The Spaniard, with his nice point of honor, high romance, and proud, vainglorious vaunt, was the true representative of that age. (p. 715)

But knights as a class, as Steven Runciman and others have shown, were predacious and murderous beings who used the cross as the ultimate justification. I mean, it's not as if examples of this don't occur in the present text. Such teeming cognitive dissonance seems bizarre at times, especially in a scholar of the Spanish Empire.

By the way, you may also wish to consult Nigel Davies' *The Aztecs: A History*. Moreover, I would lay odds that Euclides da Cunha's *Backlands: The Canudos Campaign*--about a late 19-century millenarian revolt in Brazil--was at least in part inspired by Prescott, whose history was translated into ten languages not long after its 1843 publication.

Charles says

Shakespearean. Biblical. The somewhat archaic sounding language only adds to the oomph of this story. Due to the publication date, 1843, there's some un-pc wordage like "savage", but overall this is a surprisingly balanced (for the time) look at the clash of two cultures, i.e., the Spanish and Aztec empires. The story spans about two years, and focuses upon the machinations of Hernan Cortez as he undermines the Aztec power structure and eventually destroys the capital city of Tenochtitlan. A good introduction to the story that still defines Mexico. I think I'll follow it up with something more recent to see how the accounts compare.
