

# INTRODUCTION

This book has been written for the general reader. It is intended to bring to life an important and fascinating historical period – the period known as the Spanish Conquest of the Americas. It is not an in-depth treatment of sixteenth-century Spain or its colonies, nor is it an exhaustive history of the so-called Conquest itself. Indeed many more pages would be required even to address adequately the tangled skein of events of Pizarran Peru.

What this two-volume work does is to sketch out the arc of the Conquest in terms of five narratives – narratives related to five high-profile men who participated in it, men who had set out across the sea from Europe at different times to make what they could of an opportunity. Its virtue is that they or their fellow participants are here allowed to speak extensively for themselves, with minimal help or commentary from a citizen of the twenty-first century. If it were a film about modern events it would be a documentary, a collection of film clips featuring the words and actions of protagonists and eyewitnesses, the clips being interconnected by the bare amount of narration necessary to create an engaging five-part series.

The selections appearing in these two volumes help us to see – to the extent possible – these invaders, explorers, and conquerors as they were, not necessarily as our school books might represent them to be. On the basis of their own words, then, how might we describe these men who ventured across the sea as initiators of, or participants in, this raw drama?

They were in the first place courageous and tough. They knew how to face death, and how both to endure and to witness enormous suffering and pain. They were in fact quite remarkable in this respect. They were for the most part self-righteously religious, their arrogance in religious matters – as in most other matters – difficult for many of us to grasp. Most were profoundly rapacious, driven by a lust for gold that the Indians found impossible to comprehend. Gold was in fact the principal reason for their flooding into this dangerous New World. Many, though not all, could be surpassingly, horrifyingly cruel. If they knew how to endure suffering, they knew also how to inflict it, and – like many colonizers – did so without compunction and frequently in monstrous fashion. Most were deeply exploitative of the Indians, not

least of Indian women, who were commonly treated as chattel. The leaders, finally, and a large number of their subordinates were quite intelligent, some outstandingly so.

Since the version of history that we inherit is normally the one written by the conqueror, the preponderance of what follows is from European sources. The lone exception to this is the Nahuatl account of Cortés's conquest of Mexico (Volume I), interspersed among European descriptions of the same events. Even this account, however, may not be free of Spanish influence.

Christopher Columbus, who began it all and whose story opens Volume I, was perhaps the most complex of the five men presented here, and certainly the least suited for leadership. Nevertheless his enormous self-esteem, his single-minded belief in an idea, his certainty of having been chosen by God to advance that idea, and his rapidly blossoming skill as a navigator made him ideally suited to the task at hand. His unavoidable foreignness, however, his lack of interest in administrative affairs, his deteriorating health, and his growing penchant for self-pity were his Achilles heel, and his death went all but unnoticed in the rush to colonize and ravish the lands that he had discovered.

Hernán Cortés was the most intelligent and deepest of the five. He was also one of the luckiest. Breaking away from Cuba with an expedition to the mainland just in time to avoid being arrested by the governor, he soon blundered upon two people whose language skills unlocked the mysterious Mexican empire, enabling him to contemplate actually bringing it down. After brazenly opening communications directly with the emperor in Europe, leapfrogging his superiors, he rallied thousands of Indians and many reluctant Spaniards to his cause by a combination of diplomacy, thinly veiled threat, and stunning violence. He showed enormous resilience in the face of devastating loss and defeat. Yet, like Columbus, he gradually lost hold over the land that he had conquered, and he met an old man's death in virtual oblivion.

Francisco Pizarro—whose story opens Volume II—was as uneducated and rude as his rudest follower. He was nonetheless as confident as Columbus, and as devious, ruthless, brazen, and lucky as Cortés. Abetted by his brothers, with a small Spanish force, and—at least at first—with no assistance from Indian allies, by valor and cunning alone, this illiterate man caused the fall of a kingdom, and was

ultimately responsible for fueling Spain's meteoric rise to prominence in Europe with the silver produced by Peruvian mines. His legacy, however, is marred by great barbarity—much of it Spaniard upon Spaniard—and he himself suffered a violent death at the hands of his own people.

Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, like the others, a man of these violent times, provides a breath of fresh air to the modern reader. No stranger to the excesses of the Conquest, he nonetheless learned of necessity what it meant to be an Indian, to be The Other. In the process, he turned himself into a monument to the Spanish capacity for simple endurance. He later became a monument to the Spanish capacity for vengeance, as he fell afoul of the colonists in his assignment as governor of today's Paraguay. To us it may seem ironic that this man, who had perforce acquired such empathy with the poverty-stricken denizens of the Americas, ended his career accused of their maltreatment.

Hernando de Soto is perhaps the most tragic of the five men presented here, a consummate leader of vast ambition, with solid powers of administration—capable, like most of the others, of great brutality—yet a man destined for ultimate failure. Returning home weighted down with wealth following a successful few years in Peru, he sought further wealth and aggrandizement as governor of the wilds of Florida, which, in the Spanish mind, extended from the southeast coast of today's United States into northern Mexico. In three years of starving and suffering—losing men regularly to powerful Indian resistance—he found nothing in Florida of the wealth he was seeking. His last months spent in seeming loss of purpose, he died ingloriously of fever on the banks of the turbulent Mississippi, his body unceremoniously dumped into its dark waters.

Because they portray riveting events, albeit somewhat outside the mainstream, the accounts of Gonzalo Pizarro's journey into the jungles of South America in search of cinnamon, and of Francisco de Orellana's odyssey across that mighty continent have also been included.

What you will find featured in these two volumes—to the extent consonant with good storytelling—is the voices of the participants. Some of these accounts were set down on paper during or immediately after the chronicler's participation in the stirring events reported. Some were written many years later, perhaps dictated to a non-participant.

The connecting narrative, with the assistance of many excellent resources, has been supplied by me. In a quest for a more modern-sounding translation of the primary-source material, I have translated a substantial portion of this material myself.

The narrative is in some places lengthy, in other places minimal. I have tried to provide only what has appeared essential for furnishing context, and for connecting what I feel to be the most revelatory “sound bites” of long ago. To add explanatory detail without disruption of narrative flow, footnotes have been supplied. Value judgments have been left to the reader.

You will, I hope, find this an engaging story.