

Introduction

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THIS VOLUME DERIVES from a one-day Symposium organized by the British Academy and designed (like so many other conferences in 1992) to commemorate—though emphatically not to *celebrate*—the Quincentennial of Columbus's landfall in the Americas. 1992 was a year when passions ran high, and when history was often misused for political ends. Barcelona dedicated the Summer Olympics to Columbus, Spain commissioned three replica ships at a cost of about sixty times the amount paid for the original voyage of discovery, and the Dominican Republic built a lighthouse to celebrate the European conquest (Sale 1990:361). Meanwhile, in *Liverpool* the only statue of Columbus in Britain had to be removed to the shelter of a museum to keep it safe from vandalism (A. Hennessy, personal communication), and in many countries Native Americans and their supporters protested against injustices that can be traced directly back to European colonial rule. Each side in the controversy created its own mythology and demonology, based, more often than not, on misinformation or on a biased selection of the "facts".

The present survey does not take any political stance. By inviting scholars from different disciplines to give overviews of their chosen themes we hoped that the salient "facts" would emerge, but would be set in a broader historical context rather than considered in isolation. The aim of the book is not to be judgemental, but to provide information and ideas from which readers can form opinions for themselves.

In particular, we have tried to avoid the false logic of judging sixteenth century people (Indians and Europeans alike) in terms of today's attitudes and fashions. In one important way, this volume is a reaction against the popular view of the Quincentennial, with its hidden implication that the Conquest of the Americas was an event rather than a slow and gradual

process. As Hennessy's chapter demonstrates, the European takeover was prolonged, messy, disorganized, and in some places was not complete until the nineteenth century. The political and cultural shape of colonial America was influenced as much by the politics of Europe as by the conflicts between Native Americans and conquistadors. Things were often not quite what they seemed. Columbus himself was a Genoese in the service of Spain. The crew of Hieronymous Köler's ship, which sailed from Seville to Coro (Venezuela) in 1534, was described as "part Scots, part English, some Flemings, but a greater number of Biscayans, Spanish and Italians, about 30 persons who could hardly understand each other. There were also some orientals among them" (Bray 1978:107). There were displaced persons everywhere—not just Spanish, Portuguese and English, but also French in Canada, Danes in the Caribbean, Dutch and Irish far up the Amazon, and Africans all over tropical America. Native Americans, too, were uprooted to fight or to colonize on behalf of the occupying powers, and a surprising number of Amerindians visited Europe during the century after initial contact.

In the New World two conflicts were going on simultaneously, a generalized one between Europeans and Native Americans, and another one between the various European nations which were competing for the spoils of conquest. As Whitehead shows in his chapter, these conflicts were interdependent. Europeans needed Indians to provide supplies and military help, but Indian groups used these same alliances as a means to gain commercial or military advantage over their native rivals. In the long run the Amerindians lost the greater struggle, but in the early years of contact it is not always clear who was exploiting whom.

The early colonial period is too complex to be described, as it so often is by the politically motivated, in terms of simplistic opposites: winners/losers, good/bad, heroes/villains. America did not have a uniform culture in pre-European times, nor has it today. The arrival of Europeans and Africans in the New World created a new synthesis and also provided new kinds of opportunities for all parties.

The cut-off date of 1650 allows authors to explore the ways in which Indians and Europeans coped with the clash of cultures brought about by the invasions. Like any other period of history, the early colonial epoch was a time of constant change and development. Indian political power was broken and Christianity was imposed, but traditional Indian life did not suddenly come to an end. What took place was a process of adaptation and syncretism, with some blurring of the traditional cultural and ethnic boundaries. Amerindian caciques monopolized the transport of provisions from the ports on the Pacific coast to the Spanish silver mines of Potosí; forest Indians adopted steel tools and firearms; the independent mulatto

leaders of Esmeraldas, in coastal Ecuador, had themselves painted in Spanish costume but wearing Indian jewellery (Phelan 1967:8); Spanish kitchens in Hispaniola were equipped with Indian pottery; native Mexican craftsmen built churches and made European-style musical instruments and horse gear for hispanicized customers; European colonists learned to sleep in hammocks and to eat turkeys. And, eventually, mestizo races and criollo cultures emerged, which were neither purely European nor wholly Indian.

There was also a process of syncretism at the ideological level, and the intellectual qualities of native priests, philosophers and political leaders of the colonial period have not always received the credit they deserve. These were the people who led the psychological resistance to the conquest, adapting and manipulating Christian doctrine and hispanic institutions for Indian purposes (Farriss 1984 and this volume). When the military rebellions came, their leaders, too, had often received a Christian training, and they brought to their followers an amalgam of Christian and traditional beliefs (Bricker 1981). As Whitehead's essay makes clear, the native cultures of the colonial era were dynamic and creative, as authentically "Indian" as those of pre-Conquest times.

Those who know the Latin America of today will recognize many elements of the sixteenth century world described in this book. Many of the colonial power struggles form the basis of present day politics. There is still debate about how (or whether) Native American cultural identity should be maintained in the modern nation state. As always, the alternatives offered to many indigenous groups are those of the initial contact period: exploitation, extinction or assimilation (Wright 1989). The symbols of the pre-European past have been appropriated to serve the conflicting aims of nationalist politicians and militant Indian organizations. Five hundred years after the meeting of Europe and America the unfinished business of the conquest remains on the cultural and political agenda.

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