

Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest, by Matthew Restall

It is a familiar story. In the year 1521, a vastly outnumbered handful of Spaniards led by the exceptionally daring Hernan Cortés, and blessed by Providence, overwhelmed hoards of superstitious Indians to conquer an entire nation with stunning rapidity. It is so familiar in fact that aside from the extreme post-colonial version of the Discovery and Conquest of the Americas, few have bothered to deconstruct the legend to find the truth in the middle ground. Few that is until this book.

Matthew Restall, Professor of Latin American History and Director of Latin American Studies at Pennsylvania State University, has achieved a remarkably balanced view of the Discovery and Conquest in a history that is thoroughly researched and refreshingly revisionist. Informed by both Postcolonial readings of the events as well as by numerous traditional accounts, Restall dissects every myth large and small and shows how they developed out of early accounts of the events that were later embellished in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He helps us to understand how early chronicles, such as those by Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, were framed by the concepts and language of their own time and culture, and how the resulting set of interrelated perspectives grew into the version of the Conquest unchallenged until recent decades. As Restall explains early on, this is a book not just about what happened but one that compares two forms of what is said to have happened – the historical interpretations in context of the times they were written, and the contemporary versions influenced by the concepts and language of our own culture. “There are always multiple narratives of any historical moment,” Restall says in the introduction, “but that does not mean that as interpretations they cannot tell us something true.”

Having laid out his premise in the introduction, Professor Restall delves into the myths themselves. Using a framework of seven chapters, he traces the seven myths, all of which are present in the legends surrounding the “icon of the Conquest,” Cortés. Some of the myths are familiar, indeed taken for indisputable truth after being repeated virtually unchanged for five hundred years, such as the version of the Conquest that sees, in the words of the eminent nineteenth-century historian, William Prescott, “the subversion of a great empire by a handful of adventurers.” Others however are more difficult to trace if just as casually taken for fact, such as the idea which Restall refers to as the “myth of Native desolation,” or the “myth of completion.” Each myth is systematically and painstakingly researched, related, deconstructed and ultimately debunked, and while Restall gives a nod of approval to a few scholars along the way, he more often than not takes them to task for perpetuating the same old myths. Not even Carlos Fuentes or Barbara Tuchman escapes his admonitions.

The frequent references to other interpretations, past and present, is one of the elements that makes this book so rich and provocative. Not only does the reader revisit the well known versions of scribes such as Díaz, Prescott, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas and the mestizo Garcilaso de la Vega, but we are also treated to a vast selection of other historical and revisionist views of what happened. Restall acknowledges the work of historians such as Sarah Cline, James Lockhart and Hugh Thomas; the eminent historian of the colonial period in Latin America, Charles Gibson; and experts in related fields such as the scholar of Latin American literature, Margarita Zamora and literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt. He also delves into obscure texts such as the 1599 *The Armed*

Forces and Description of the Indies by the Spanish Captain Bernardo de Vargas Machuca, “Called by one prominent military historian the first manual of guerrilla warfare ever published.” Nor does Professor Restall ignore Native American sources; the epilogue, in particular, provides a fascinating lesson in interpretation when Restall compares accounts of Cuauhtémoc’s death from the viewpoint of the Spaniards, a Nahuatl nobleman accompanying Cortés’s troops, and the Chontal Maya through whose lands the excursion traveled.

As he does throughout the entire book, Restall leaves no stone unturned when interpreting the various and often contradictory accounts and examines the motives of the chroniclers as well as the rhetorical conventions of the period in which the account was written. The result is a wonderfully scholarly and exhaustive exploration of an event that employs different historical approaches, from the quantitative use of charts such as that tracing the occupations of the conquistadors to the reading of individual contemporary narratives. Most importantly, far from seeing the Discovery and Conquest of the Americas as a closed event with a distinct beginning and end, he places it in the vast context of world history. “Looking at history over thousands of years,” Restall writes, in a social science vein similar to anthropologist Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs and Steel*, “the Spanish Conquest is a mere episode in the globalization of access to resources of food production.” It is not a question of the superiority of one group over another; nor is it a process that is complete. As Restall concludes, “We are still living through the long period of uneven encounters and the gradual globalization of resources.” Seen in this context, the full impact of the Conquest is yet to be seen, and its history yet to be written.

This book is an important contribution to the vast scholarship on the Conquest and would be a valuable resource for students and teachers of Latin-American history. With thirty pages of notes and fourteen of references, it is as a superb jumping-off point as well as a guide for those who wish to explore this fascinating period of history in greater depth.

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