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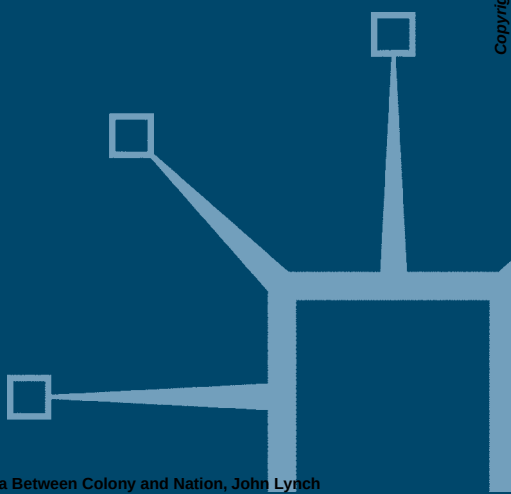
Latin America between Colony and Nation

Selected Essays

John Lynch



Latin America between Colony and Nation

Institute of Latin American Studies

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Selected Essays

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9. *The Quest for the Millennium in Latin America: Popular Religion and Beyond*. A previously unpublished paper.

Preface

The essays published here focus mainly on the late colonial and early national periods of Latin American history, a time of transition when colony yielded slowly to nation and the nation retained much of the colony. The years between 1750 and 1850 have long appealed to me as a useful chronological framework, either to incorporate the traditional sequence of the origins, course and consequences of Independence or to accommodate significant features of imperial history, state formation and religious policy during the age of democratic revolution. Beyond these confines the book opens and closes with examples of subjection and response in the American world. An early chapter looks again at the subject of conquest and conquerors, in a search for answers to the perennial question, how did so few overcome so many? And the book ends with an essay on the concept of popular religion and its manifestation in millenarian cults.

The essays have their origins in those moments and motives common to the experience of most historians: occasional lectures, conference papers, articles in journals, chapters in composite works and portions of books waiting to be written. The initiative to assemble them in book form came from others. I am grateful to James Dunkerley for his timely invitation to publish them in the series edited by the Institute of Latin American Studies in association with Macmillan, and to John Maher and Melanie Jones, who have skilfully seen the book through its various editorial stages. I am indebted also to Gonzalo Pontón and Carmen Esteban of Editorial Crítica, who have expertly organised the publication of the Spanish edition.

1
Passage to America

A desire for novelty, a moral concern or mere chance? The foreign historian of Latin America is often asked the question: Why do you study Latin American history? What made you become a Latin Americanist? The questions contain hidden assumptions. Why study the exotic, the remote, or even – in the minds of some – the less important? There is a lurking belief that Latin American history lacks the intellectual content of European history, that it is more important to know what was being decided in the courts of the Enlightenment than what was happening on the banks of the Orinoco.

I have long shared the conviction of the young Arnold Toynbee who, when asked why he spent his time in Oxford teaching the history of Greece and Rome, replied, 'My job in teaching history is to make people know a different life and civilisation from ours, from the bottom and with different openings for good.'[1] Latin America was unknown territory to me, and I began to study this other life and civilisation out of ignorance and curiosity. It was enough that Latin Americans had a different history to ours and that it could be discovered. Who were the people of Latin America? What public policies had first ruled their lives? How had they reacted to imperial control? When did they gain their independence? How did they identify their nations and organise their states? Historians in the United States had already begun to explore the archives of the subcontinent and they had also introduced the researches of Latin America's own scholars to a wider world. In Britain too there was a thin line of interest going back to Sir Clements Markham, Cunninghame Graham and F.A. Kirkpatrick. But it was a minority interest, and the obvious questions which students asked of the British and North American past were still waiting to be asked of Latin America. The same could be said, of course, for Africa and Asia, though in these

cases knowledge filtered through to the British consciousness by way of the imperial connection. Latin America, on the other hand, was the British blind spot, the last frontier for the historian. The lure lay in the mystery.

The history departments of British universities in those years, around 1950, taught the history of America, but this meant North America, and courses on the expansion of Europe tended not to venture too far into the interior of other continents. Yet the history I learnt at the University of Edinburgh was an apt preparation for my subsequent studies in that it was based on high standards of historical literature. I graduated with a knowledge of medieval history, modern British history, modern Europe and political ideas; and the Scottish system of subsidiary subjects enabled me to add philosophy and political economy. Already in the school classroom my young Jesuit teachers, James O'Higgins and Deryck Hanshell, had introduced me to historians and scholars – Namier, Feiling, Butterfield, Leavis – whose influence remained pervasive and whose methods were applicable to wider fields than their authors perhaps envisaged. At university a number of historians made a lasting impression. My favourite medievalists were J.E.A. Jolliffe, whose *Constitutional History of Medieval England* would challenge any reader to find a meaning among its rare scholarship and refined prose, and G. Mollat, whose *Les Papes D'Avignon* proved that there was life in French historians before *Annales*. Modern British history already generated a large and growing bibliography, but for me the star was G.M. Young, and I regarded his *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age* as a peak of historical writing and a model to be envied by all students of history who sought to unite style and learning. In economic history I became an admirer of John U. Nef, whose *War and Human Progress* remained an object lesson in bringing together research and generalisation and in building bridges between the past and the present.

The standards of scholarship and style among British and American historians of the mid-twentieth century were enduring influences and valuable points of contrast with the works on Latin America which I was now beginning to read. I was struck by a number of differences. The Latin Americanists were inferior not so much in quality of scholarship as in idiom and argument. This was not a field which had been cultivated by generations of historians who had acquired a corporate identity and a tradition of judgement and style. There was, too, an imbalance of interest and achievement: the historiography of colonial Latin America was superior to that of the modern period. Indeed for Spanish historians 'Historia de América' meant *only* colonial history. I found, moreover,

that Latin American historians were reluctant to study the history of countries other than their own: a Mexican rarely wrote on Venezuela, or a Chilean on Argentina. And few, if any, wrote general histories of the whole continent. Outsiders did not observe these rules: North Americans and a few Europeans boldly thrust their way where native Latin Americans hesitated to tread.

My own entry to the subject was through the colonial period and was self-directed. Could a world empire be unworthy of study or resistant to research? A young member of the History Department, Donald Nicholl, drew my attention to C.H. Haring's *The Spanish Empire in America*, equal in scholarship to anything I had read in other fields and an excellent guide to the work of Spain in America. Haring soon pointed me towards Lewis Hanke, Hanke towards Charles Boxer and John Parry, and I was on my way. So a young Latin Americanist was not lost in Edinburgh in 1952. Books and counsel were at hand. The next advice I received was decisive.

The head of the History Department was Richard Pares, one of the twentieth century's most distinguished historians, admired by his students not only for the brilliance of his lectures but also for his spirit and his courage. His formidable books on the Anglo-Spanish colonial wars and other aspects of West Indian history were stepping stones for me, as was his sympathy for my plans. When I explained to him my interest in Latin American history, desire to embark on research, and hope of an academic career, he gave me three pieces of advice. First, be prepared for adversity: there are about 40 applicants, most of them equally qualified for every job advertised in history. 'However,' he added, 'if you are not prepared to take risks for what you want to achieve, life is not worth living.' Second, begin your research by going through the *Handbook of Latin American Studies*, which will give you an idea of the field. You will find it in the National Library of Scotland. Finally, it is always advisable to seek out the most appropriate supervisor for your particular subject. For Latin American history this is Professor R.A. Humphreys at University College London. 'Don't worry, I think he will accept you. He is my brother-in-law.' After finals I resumed my reading in Spanish colonial history and prepared to go to London.

Robin Humphreys held the first, and at that time the only, chair of Latin American history in the United Kingdom, in a college whose founders had been closely concerned with the foundation of modern Latin America, and in a History Department which was distinguished not only for its quality but also for its initiative in promoting specialist subjects and areas.[2] A long way from Latin America, I felt I was at the

centre of things in discipline and resources, and the departmental culture was such that even Latin America appeared normal. Robin Humphreys was exceptional not only as a historian of Latin America and a modern pioneer in the subject since the 1930s, but also as a supervisor of students and director of theses. At a time when supervision of PhD students in British universities was perfunctory, to say the least, he gave time and care to his students beyond the call of duty. He held a regular seminar in Latin American history, in which visiting scholars gave papers, students read their chapters and research essays, and future teachers of the subject learnt their trade. He insisted on regular writing of papers and reports, which he carefully read and annotated and returned to the student in individual session.

All this in the early 1950s. And in my case he encouraged me to attend Professor Gerald Graham's seminar in British imperial history, and the seminar on historical method given by Professor J.G. (later Sir Goronwy) Edwards, then the Director of the Institute of Historical Research. From the latter I have always remembered the session, 'How to write a PhD thesis', which included the tactical advice:

> 'Do not begin your thesis (or article, or book) with a provocative or radical announcement, for readers are going to examine every page from then onwards to see if you justify your claim, and in the process they will discover all the defects of your work. Instead, begin modestly; readers will not be alerted along the way, and when you slip in your novel conclusion at the end they will say, yes, that's right, the author has proved his point.

The research training I received in London, particularly the professional approach of Robin Humphreys, remained an inspiration and a model. These years included an amusing encounter with one of the elite. Students in the Institute of Historical Research could use an area for typing just outside the offices of the history of Parliament, and Sir Lewis Namier passed me most days when I was typing up my thesis, without giving any sign. Eventually he stopped and asked what I was working on and I explained that it was a thesis on the viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata in the late eighteenth century. 'Have you come across any of my chaps?' Assuming that he meant British MPs with trading interests in South America, I had to admit that I had not encountered any. 'In that case', he replied, 'we have nothing in common.'

I owed my subject to the advice of Professor Humphreys, who suggested that I should work not on the early colonial period, in which I

had begun my reading, but on the late eighteenth century, in particular the period of Bourbon reforms in America. He explained his reasons as the convenience of focusing on an understudied period and of situating my research at the point where colonial inertia was succeeded by colonial reform, and where imperial control began to give way to national independence. This could be usefully studied in the case of a region which had been previously marginal to Spanish imperial interests and which for the same reason had received little attention from modern historians; in the national period, moreover, it would become one of the major countries of Latin America. These were persuasive arguments. So I began to study the new method of government and political economy in the Río de la Plata: the intendant system. The subject provided me with the opportunity to work in the Archivo Histórico Nacional and the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, and above all in the Archivo de Indias in Seville. To speak of Seville in that time is to speak of a world – and an archive – very different from those of today, but this is not the occasion for a sentimental journey. Nevertheless, I cannot mention Seville of 1953 without recalling the kind reception given to me by Don Antonio Muro, subdirector of the Escuela de Estudios Hispano–Americanos, and the welcome afforded to an unknown student by Dr de la Peña y de la Cámara, director of the Archivo de Indias. These personal touches meant a lot to a foreign student, the more so as American studies in Seville had not then attained the development characteristic of subsequent decades, and vacant seats in the archive were easier to obtain than they are now. Nevertheless, progress was beginning, and the works of Guillermo Céspedes and Octavio Gil Munilla were indispensable to my own researches.

My stay in Seville, inside and outside the Archivo de Indias, compensated to some degree for the impossibility of consulting the Argentine archives, at least for that project. Thanks to the abundant documentation of the Archivo de Indias it was possible to observe the intendants in action, their economic, municipal and Indian policies, their relations with existing institutions, their place in the impending revolution for independence, and to estimate their importance not only in terms of official intentions but also in the light of practical results. The study situated the intendants within the imperial structure of Spain and in the context of the so-called Bourbon reforms. Institutional history, as a genre, was subsequently disparaged, while economic and social history became more fashionable among younger historians, who forgot perhaps that the creation of institutions is natural to men and women and an aspect of their life in society. But the subject has recovered some of its

credibility in recent years, fed by the growing interest in the state and in power and its bases. Now it is called the study of the *estado colonial*, the 'colonial state', a more exciting nomenclature for the 1990s than the traditional 'institutional history', even though in many parts of Spanish America the colonial state consisted of little more than a local official and a couple of militia men.

The crucial test of a thesis or a book written by a foreigner is its reception in the country studied. When my book on the intendancies in the Río de la Plata was taken seriously in Argentina and reviewed by a leading historian there, this was a mighty relief. My first visit to Argentina coincided with the publication of the Spanish version of the book in Buenos Aires and my election as a Corresponding Member of the Academia Nacional de la Historia; so I spent my first days in Buenos Aires not in the precincts of the Plaza de Mayo or the Calle Florida, but enclosed in my hotel room, writing a lecture for the act of entry to the Academy. Shortly after this, I had an opportunity to meet Jorge Luis Borges as he was giving a tutorial in the Biblioteca Nacional. He was intrigued by the idea of a historian coming from London to study the colonial history of Argentina while in Buenos Aires he was teaching students Anglo-Saxon.

A book can originate not only in pure research but also in routine teaching. After completing my PhD degree I secured an appointment in the University of Liverpool, where my teaching in the History Department was that of a general practitioner, not an Americanist. But, again, it was a relevant apprenticeship. A specialist in Latin American history can learn from the study of other histories, not only of the problems exercising his colleagues – at that time typically in the history of ideas and in social and economic history – but also in the development of new methods and new areas of research. Preparation of courses against the clock concentrates the mind, and I was forced to broaden my reading in the fields of British and European history, and at the same time to mine the rich seams opened by Braudel and Chaunu. Moreover, through the presence of a series of assistants in the Spanish Department, all from the University of Barcelona, my lodgings became a kind of Catalan colony. From these, especially from Josep Fontana, I learnt of a new wave of historical research in Spain, influenced by the French *Annales* school and inspired by the leadership of Jaime Vicens Vives, whose *Aproximación a la historia de España* became in turn an inspiration to me. This was the germ of my interest in Spanish history, which eventually bore fruit in books on Spain under the Habsburgs and later on Bourbon Spain.

One of the objectives of these books was to relate the history of Spain to that of Spanish America, a relationship inherent in Spanish policy and Spanish American experience but not adequately reflected in existing historiography, at least for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Richard Pares has written, 'The most important thing in the history of an empire is the history of its mother-country. Colonial history is made at home: given a free hand, the mother-country will make the kind of empire it needs.'[3] In the case of the Spanish empire, however, the moving force was the interaction between the metropolis and its colonies, and the key to understanding was the response of colonial peoples to imperial policy; there, among other things, the historian will discover the trends of social and racial relations, the reasons for colonial rebellion and the germs of future independence. The second Habsburg volume questioned the existence of an economic depression in seventeenth-century America and introduced the concept of colonial autonomy, ideas that were not the last word on the subject, but entered the field as hypotheses and speculations and remained part of the unfinished debate on crisis and change in the Hispanic world. I wrote the book on Spain in the seventeenth century without once using the word 'decline', much less the concept of *decadencia*, which is rather like writing a history of France in 1789 without mentioning the word 'revolution'. What began as a resolve to avoid received interpretations, and to invoke instead stages of economic recession, became a matter of pride and I lived in the hope that readers would draw attention to this curiosity. Alas, no one did, until 25 years later it was spotted by an observant reviewer of a subsequent edition.

My interest in the Independence of Spanish America arose partly from my previous research into the disintegrating effects of Bourbon reforms and the deeper roots of Independence in the colonial period. But it also derived from experience gained in teaching the subject. By now, at the invitation of Robin Humphreys, I had joined the History Department at University College London and there, from 1961, I shared with him the teaching of Latin American history to undergraduate and postgraduate students. One of our courses, offered in the London history syllabus as a special subject, was 'The Emancipation of Latin America, 1808–1826', studied by means of select documents and available monographs. It was a time when the historiography of the subject was expanding and improving; no longer concerned exclusively with the liberators and their military campaigns – though the singular actions and ideas of Simón Bolívar rightly continued to impress historians – it spoke now of population trends, social and racial structures, the economic life of

the area and other themes of interest to students in the 1960s. When Professor Jack P. Greene asked me to write *The Spanish American Revolutions* for his series 'Revolutions in the Modern World', he handed me a gift for the times. My approach to the subject benefited not only from the new historiography but also from the interest of my students. Throughout the decade I had heard their questions, learnt their priorities and noted their assessment of the existing literature; the course, and the book, sought to respond to these concerns. For me the experience was a happy combination of teaching and research.

The study of the Spanish American revolutions led me to cultivate the caudillos, the regional leaders who first raised their heads during the Wars of Independence. The phenomenon of caudillism presents the historian with one of the enduring problems of Latin America, the origins and meaning of dictatorship, and invites the scholar to identify the various modes of leadership since Independence and the successive stages of their development. A basic object of my research into Juan Manuel de Rosas, described by W.H. Hudson as 'one of the bloodiest as well as the most original-minded of the Caudillos and Dictators', was to clarify the meaning of authority and the nature of the dictator's power. In Argentina reviewers and others called attention to the special treatment which the book accorded to the function of terror in the Rosas regime and I was asked if, working on Rosas during the years of an infamous military dictatorship, I was influenced in my research on the past by observation of the present. It is true that I researched and wrote the chapter on *rosista* terror during the years 1977 and 1978, a time when the use of state terror as an instrument of government was more evident that in previous periods of Argentine history. I believe one learns from these experiences, if indirectly, and that in turn consciousness of past history enriches knowledge of the present. But it is only part of the story.

The Rosas terror, as seen by the dictator himself, responded to two dangers: the threat of external attack and internal dissent, a conjuncture and a pretext that were not so evident in the 1970s as they had been in the 1840s. Another influence on my interpretation was the example of the French Revolution, where the use of terror also corresponded to the relation between external threat to the revolutionary state and the internal threat posed by enemies of the regime. The French case was useful as a point of comparison and reflection. Nevertheless *rosista* terrorism seemed to be a special case which could only be explained in its own terms and by the mentality of its author, and underlined the element of singularity in Latin American history.

The study of Rosas led me into research on the comparative history of caudillos in Spanish America in the first half of the nineteenth century, in an attempt to identify these rulers, seek their origins, establish their character and roles and explain the differences between them. And the study of caudillism directed my attention towards Venezuela, a country generous in its reception of foreign scholars, whose history together with that of Argentina became one of the two poles of my research interests. For me the political theory of dictatorship in Latin America, if it had one, would conform closely to that of Thomas Hobbes, who conceived his *Leviathan* as a study of human nature rather than of contemporary events and expounded principles rather than politics. 'During the time that men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man against every man.' Assertion of individual or group rights becomes anarchy, and this reaches a point where no man or his property is secure from the attacks of enemies. The only way to defend themselves from the injuries of one another and the invasion of outsiders is to give up their rights of government and to confer all their power upon one man. 'For by this authority, given him by every particular man in the Commonwealth, he has the use of so much power and strength conferred on him, that by terror thereof, he is enabled to form the wills of them all, to peace at home, and mutual aid against their enemies abroad.'[4] These ideas were pointers to an interpretation of the government of Rosas, its absolutism, and its ultimate sanction of terror. And in examining the origins and development of caudillism in Spanish America, and the social forces that sustained it, the ideas of Thomas Hobbes seemed to me to be more relevant as an explanatory device than those of more recent times.

In an age of postmodernism it is not superfluous to affirm that history is a process of discovery, that truth is a matter to be ascertained, not invented, discovered rather than constructed, observed as well as imagined. In the last decades of the twentieth century historical method and content underwent profound changes, which also affected Latin Americanists. As techniques of measurement improved and new areas of study were incorporated, as demographic, economic, urban, Indian, family and women's history increased our understanding of the past, those of us brought up in traditional narrative and conventional themes could only stand and acclaim the skills and virtuosity of our colleagues as they pushed back the frontiers of the discipline. And the efforts of colonial specialists to perfect the measurement of trade and treasure had to be seen to be believed, as numbers spilled out like newsprint from a

press. But all was not progress: quantification is one thing, conceptualisation another. From about the 1960s reviewers began to admonish authors: their books might contain good research but they 'lacked conceptual structure'. Young historians submitting articles strong in argument and evidence were advised by editors to take them back and place them in a kind of conceptual sandwich. It was dubious advice.

Traditional historiography does not in general place much emphasis on the *marco teórico*, the conceptual framework favoured by many historians in recent decades. The methods that I learnt and followed were strongly empirical, and did not encourage historians to enclose their work, whether book or article, in a conceptual structure. As I see it, theoretical concepts and models, far from clarifying history, distort it. They deform reality by pressing it into a mould created prior to the evidence. Dependency historians, for example, first state the theory then look for the proof. Psychobiography devalues the story of a life by forcing it into a structure determined in advance of its actual course. In history events count and the historian has to follow the evidence, not precede it. Why should there be a problem with *l'histoire événementielle*, or a conflict between study of facts and analysis of structures? History without facts is unimaginable, while facts without analysis and interpretation are meaningless; each on its own is a partial form of history, and total history needs both. Every research project, of course, has to employ a methodology and ask questions appropriate to its subject. But these are specific to that particular research. Each article, each study, each book needs its own concept, its own interpretative strategy and not conformity with pre-existing models.

The Marxist interpretation of history, pervasive among Latin Americanists and dominant in much of Latin America itself outside the academies, was not an influence on my research. This was not from want of study. Political theory is, or was, a compulsory course in history degrees and I read avidly in the subject, 'from Moses to Lenin', to quote an Edinburgh economist. I found that Marxism led only to textual exegesis, false prophecy and calls to action, none of which was helpful in reconstructing the past. It was flawed, moreover, by its insistence on historical inevitability *and* moral choice, a contradiction fatal to historical analysis. If ever there was a theory that rewrote the past and anticipated the future that theory was Marxism. The Marxist interpretation of historical change in terms of economic determinism and dialectic materialism was a blind alley for many scholars. As Evan Durbin argued, to accept the existence of a class struggle is not to see the course of history dominated only by class and conflict. People are social animals;

societies and economies, in Latin America no less than in Europe, have developed as much by cooperation as by conflict. To argue that transition from feudal to bourgeois to proletarian power was the inevitable course of history, achieved at each stage by violent revolution, was to place a theoretical construct before hard evidence. Applied to Latin America the theory made a bourgeois revolution out of Independence before a bourgeoisie actually existed. Marx knew little of Latin America and his works are marginal to its history. When I notice that theses or books on Latin American subjects place works of Marx in their bibliographies I see it as a triumph of faith over reason. Religionists tend to be more reticent.

Derivatives of Marxism have appeared in recent decades. The most popular among Latin Americanists has been 'dependency theory', designed by sociologists, manufactured by political scientists and bought by historians. A whole school of *dependentistas* came into being, numerous enough to organise conferences among themselves and to harangue history seminars for two decades. There is, of course, a sense in which we are all dependent on each other; and it is part of the human condition, in nations as well as in individuals, to rely on others, to divide labour, to collaborate with neighbours, even to borrow money and lend goods. But the dependency theorists went beyond common sense. For them 'dependency' became the key to unlock the history of Latin America's underdevelopment. The superior capital, industrial and commercial resources of the metropolitan powers, it was argued, enabled them to exploit their inferior trading partners and to control the local elites in the periphery; thus they were able to siphon off the surplus produced in Latin American economies and remit the profits to London or other economic centres. The growth of underdevelopment, therefore, followed inherently from the advance of capitalism. National obstacles to change – existing social structures, political corruption, weak internal markets for local industries – were ignored or discounted. Dependency theory had a short run, though it seemed an eternity. Now it has little influence on academic disciplines and is no more than a museum piece.

One of the flaws of dependency theory was to confuse moral reproach with historical analysis and to allow indignation to overcome investigation. Anyone studying the history of Latin America will experience shock and anger: poverty and injustice have increased with the passage of time rather than diminished, and historians would not be human were they to evade the issues of cruelty and oppression as they unfold before their eyes. In making value judgements it is all the more

important to establish the facts. But there is a further question, posed for me by a visit to Peru in 1991, a year of cholera and terror. Does proximity to poverty and awareness of wickedness convey a special insight into history? It was instructive to observe a country, once moderately stable and endowed, fall apart into misery and near-chaos. But in looking at the fate of Peru and searching for reasons for historical change, stagnation, and regression, my scepticism towards academic answers – conceptual models, arguments from structures, appeals to long-term conditions – has become only stronger. As for ideology, it is part of the problem. I concluded that poverty, injustice and violence in Peru was due above all to the failure of the state, the mistakes of political leaders, the policies of terrorist chieftains. Infirmity of purpose, errors of judgement, malice and deceit, these modern scourges of Latin America are the faults of governments and their enemies, the consequence of human decisions, and historians will find their origins in the near, not the distant, past. If there is any conceptual category relevant to Latin American history it is that of 'the willed human agency'.

My various research projects, especially those concerning dictatorship, had a particular interest for some of my students. These projects coincided with my years at the Institute of Latin American Studies, in the directorship of which, along with that of the history seminar I had succeeded my teacher, colleague and friend, Robin Humphreys. Postgraduate ranks were reinforced in the years from 1973 when students from Chile and Argentina, academic and political refugees, joined the seminar and widened its horizons. Usually the first seminar paper of the term is short of volunteers, so I tended to insert my own papers for trial runs, trials no doubt to the long-suffering audience, but I profited from the response. There were other changes. A number of students working on Andean history happened to come together and so the theme of Indian history developed. The Chileans founded a review, *Nueva Historia*, while the Argentines created a workshop of Argentine studies. My history seminar meetings were followed by the 'informal seminar' at the New Inn, Tottenham Court Road, where, amidst *pintas* and politics, research was reviewed and history rewritten.

Political, economic and social conditions explain many things in Latin America's history, but not everything. In the aftermath of Rosas there were echoes of *rosismo* in the southern pampas of Argentina, which culminated in 1872 in a bloody massacre of foreign settlers by a gaucho gang, who appealed not to their own destitution or marginalisation, both of which were real enough, but to religious justification. The history of religion in Latin America had not been a research interest

of mine until my colleague Leslie Bethell persuaded me, *faute de mieux*, to write a chapter on the Church in the period 1830–1930 for his major historical enterprise, *The Cambridge History of Latin America*. This project taught me that originality can reside not only in the discovery of unknown facts and presentation of new interpretations but also in the creation of a chronology, a framework, and a thematic organisation in a hitherto conceptual desert. The Cambridge chapter also introduced me to the subject of popular religion which, I later discovered, was an ingredient of the Tandil massacre. In reconstructing the economic and social circumstances of the massacre, and creating a synoptic view of a single event, I was driven back to the personal objectives of the killers, the mentalities of the actors, the presence of a millenarian theme and the impulse of popular religion. Then, to study one group of millenarians was not enough. As is the way of research, further routes opened and I was led to seek the meaning of popular religion, to distinguish between culture and religion, and to follow the spiritual anxieties of Latin Americans as expressed in millenarian cults. The quest for the millennium, it seemed, began in the sixteenth century, was revived in the eighteenth century, and erupted in a number of bloody confrontations in the nineteenth century. This was a melancholy history, which brought neither justice nor peace to the millenarians and appeared to bring out the worst in their opponents.

My personal quest as a historian, from intendants, via revolutionaries and liberators, to caudillos, religionists and visionaries, has been less compulsive but, as ignorance receded and curiosity grew, it has followed where opportunity occurred and the subject led.

2
Arms and Men in the Spanish Conquest of America

Balance of power

The Spanish conquerors entered Tenochtitlan on 8 November 1519 without firing a shot. Moctezuma welcomed Cortés and his men as lords returning to claim their own, and he chose to ignore their latent aggression: 'Now that I have seen your horses, which are like our deer, and your cannon, which are like our blowguns, I know that what I have been told about you is jests and lies and hold you to be my kinsmen.'[1] Were these indeed his words, these his sentiments? The Spaniards, for their part, remained tense, and, as their vulnerability increased, so did their violence. During the absence of Cortés on the expedition against Pánfilo de Narváez, Pedro de Alvarado decided to make a pre-emptive strike. While the Aztecs were celebrating a religious festival in the main temple, the Spaniards broke in and blocked off the exits. An Aztec chronicle records the sequel:

> Those whose task it was to slay them went only afoot, each with his leather shield, and each with his iron sword. Thereupon they surrounded the dancers. Thereupon they went among the drums. Then they struck the drummer's arms; they severed both his hands; then they struck his neck. Far off did his neck [and head] go to fall. Then they all pierced the people with iron lances and they struck them each with iron swords. Of some they slashed open their backs: then their entrails gushed out. Of some they cut their heads to pieces; they absolutely pulverised their heads; their heads were absolutely pulverised. And some they struck on the shoulder; they split openings, they broke openings in their bodies. Of some they struck repeatedly the shanks; of some they struck repeatedly the thighs; of

> some they struck the belly; then their entrails gushed forth. And when in vain one would run, he would only drag his intestines like something raw as he tried to escape. Nowhere could he go.[2]

The massacre illustrates some of the chief features of the conquest: the basic weapons of the conquerors, the sword and the lance; their shock tactics, a mixture of total surprise and terror; and, among the Indians, the indifference towards security and the priority given to religious ceremony over military action. In the event Alvarado's attack, 'an atrocious and tyrannical cruelty' as the Dominican chronicler Diego Durán described it, induced not submission but outrage, and the Aztecs first expelled the enemy and then put up a long and bitter fight to defend their capital.[3] But they succumbed in the end, and Cortés, who had landed in Mexico on 22 April 1519 at the head of some 600 men, received the surrender of the Aztec capital and seat of power just over two years later, leading 900 Spaniards against a vast host of Mexica. A decade later in Cajamarca, Pizarro defeated the Inca and inaugurated the conquest of Peru with 168 men facing an army numbering tens of thousands. So few against so many, 'all the natives of these kingdoms wondered how it could be'.[4] 'A great miracle', commented Pizarro.

The conquest of America and the rapid overthrow of the Aztec and Inca states in the face of enemies numerically superior, organised, courageous and, with some exceptions, secure in the loyalty of their troops, is not inexplicable, though the explanations are complex. The negative factor lies in the defencelessness of American societies in the face of attack from outside. The political tensions within the Aztec and Inca empires, their total self-absorption, their military deficiencies and relatively modest technology, these and other factors made them particularly vulnerable to external shock, while their top-heavy government structures meant that, without the head, the body lacked the will to resist. In the case of Peru, disease had struck even before the Spaniards arrived, and smallpox depopulated and demoralised the native inhabitants. More positively, Spain possessed a combination of assets, political, technical and ideological, which particularly equipped her for the role of conqueror. To these Bernardo de Vargas Machuca, distinguished captain of colonial wars, added the tenacity and will power of individual conquerors, which he called *fortaleza interior* (inner fortitude), founded no doubt in their ambition, religious faith, knowledge of past victories over the infidel and mutual solidarity in battle. 'In the Indies everything depends on the leader: it is he who rules, punishes, mediates, and above all pays.'[5]

Spain's human assets were found in more than mere numbers. The conquerors were not professional soldiers but unpaid fighters in expeditions in which they had a share and from which they expected profits of various kinds. So their social origins were not of the lowest. Bernal Díaz famously observed that they were all hidalgos but some less obviously than others. From a sample of 682 people drawn from five groups – those of Cortés, Pizarro, Heredia, Durán and Valdivia – we know that 34.3 per cent were hidalgos, 50.5 per cent commoners of substantial status and only 14.3 per cent lower plebeian.[6] Pizarro's band was dominated by marginal hidalgos and upper plebeians, and contained numerous craftsmen and artisans.[7] The conquerors, therefore, were not a representative cross-section of Spanish society. Poor people did not have the means to go to the Indies except as servants or dependants of hidalgos. The majority of conquerors, hidalgos and commoners, came from Castile, Andalusia and Extremadura in that order. Most of these, 60 per cent, were of rural origin as against 40 per cent urban. The percentage of plebeians increased in the course of time; poor Andalusians and Extremadurans had gone to the Indies as the dependants of hidalgos, but once there everyone seemed to move up a social grade. In the Cortés expedition less than 5 per cent were plebeians. This seems to be because the majority of those who joined Cortés were from groups who were already in the Caribbean, and since leaving Spain they had improved their status upwards. In Pizarro's band plebeians amounted to almost one-third of the total; he had recruited in part directly in Spain, in part from veterans of Central America. Pizarro recruited by preference in Extremadura, in Cáceres and Trujillo, favouring his family and compatriots. These common roots sustained them in adversity and gave them solidarity in the years of conquest.[8] No Spaniard was readily abandoned or left to the mercy of the enemy. Fear and desperation increased their sense of equality. As Cristóbal de Mena says of Cajamarca, 'On that day we were all lords'.[9] In the hour of battle they were all *gente de guerra*, but at the time of booty distribution they reverted to social status, though contribution to the expedition and record of service were also criteria for judging rewards. The average age was 27, and 62 per cent were wholly or partly illiterate, most of these Andalusians and Extremadurans. Only one in three would live to die from natural causes.[10]

Gain and glory, these were the spurs. The conquerors wanted to improve their social status: booty was the first step, land the next. Between them the 168 men of Cajamarca received 1.5 million pesos. In addition to land and loot they wanted offices which would enable them to escape from the subordination they had experienced in Spain

and create their own hierarchy in America. But the crown too had learnt some lessons in recent decades; it had acquired experience of controlling and neutralising a feudal nobility, and was determined to avoid a similar threat in America. So there was a clash of interests between crown and conquerors, many of whom in any case were not qualified for high office. The most prized appointments were governorships, municipal offices, treasury posts, judgeships and *corregimientos*. In the event only 26.7 per cent of the conquerors succeeded in obtaining public office, and only a few hidalgos managed to become governors and judges; even these were quickly replaced by officials sent from the peninsula, appointed precisely to impose the king's jurisdiction. The conquerors and their heirs had to be satisfied with posts in the *cabildos*, which enabled them to dominate towns and localities. Perhaps the greatest prize was to become an *encomendero*, owner of Indians, who would be commended to individual conquerors and settlers as tribute payers or workers in return for protection of some kind. To be an *encomendero*, lord of many Indians, was a high status symbol as well as a means to wealth. From lords of vassals, the *encomenderos* became lords of lands, again according to previous social rank, war effort and experience. Land and labour, these became the greatest assets and the supreme signs of rank and power in the New World, and it was these that raised the conquerors from impoverished or humble beginnings to membership of a new colonial elite. Their military equipment helped them on their way.

Among the many imperial qualifications of Spain, the key that unlocked the door to America was undoubtedly the capacity to assemble and focus appropriate military power in the right place at the right time. The role of firearms in the causal spectrum is open to discussion: some historians have assigned them a decisive influence, others a marginal one. Nathan Wachtel argues that Spanish technical superiority was of limited importance: 'The Spanish possessed few firearms at the time of the conquest and these were slow to fire: their impact at the beginning was, like that of the horses, primarily psychological.'[11] Yet the fact was that the Spaniards had them and the Indians did not.

Relative levels of civilisation as between Europe and America are difficult to measure. While it may be granted that the American Indian lived in no less harmony with his environment than did the European Spaniard, in a situation of encounter between the two there is a presumption in favour of Spanish dominance. The sixteenth-century Spaniard had no doubt that his technology was superior to that of the Indian, and as an instrument of power it manifestly was. The Mexicans, who had no hard