

JUAN DE TOVAR AND THE HISTORY OF THE INDIANS

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THE "HISTORY" of my title is a manuscript written in Mexico between 1582 and 1587 and now in the John Carter Brown Library in Providence.¹ It includes all the known surviving works of the Jesuit missionary Juan de Tovar: a history of the ancient Mexicans from their first migration into the central valley of Mexico, to their conquest by the Spaniards, with an appendix on their religious beliefs and practices; and an annotated Calendar, describing the ceremonies appropriate to each month of the ancient Mexican year.² It is a handsome manuscript, carefully written, probably a holograph (though with a trained formal hand of that period it is hard to be sure). It is illustrated by some thirty fresh and lively water-color drawings, clearly the work of a *tlacuilo*, an Indian scribe trained in the traditional methods of pictographic recording. The author, Tovar, was born in Mexico and lived there all his long life. He entered the Society of Jesus as a novice in 1573, being already in priest's orders. He may have been the first American-born Jesuit. He was certainly among the first two or three. In the Society he became noted for his work among Indians and for the eloquence of his preaching in Náhuatl. Admiring contemporaries called him the Mexican Cicero; but he was more than a gifted linguist and a popular preacher. He was a capable ethnologist and a sympathetic but clear-headed student of Indian tradition, who made critical use both of Indian painted codices and of oral evidence supplied by Indian informants.

Tovar was not alone, of course, in pursuing these researches; we know of about a dozen histories of pre-Conquest Mexico written in the sixteenth century, some by Spanish officials, some

by missionaries, some by Hispanicized Indians. They vary a good deal in literary merit, in sophistication of method, and in content. The differences in content reflect the fact that the authors worked in different parts of Mexico: Sahagún in Tlatelolco, Durán in Texcoco, Tovar in Tula, and so on; and that they employed different informants. But also, the authors wrote from different motives and with different purposes. The Indian writers wanted to preserve the memory of their forebears and to refute accusations of barbarism leveled against them. The officials were required by their instructions to apply Indian custom, where not repugnant to Civil or Canon Law, in judging suits between Indians, and in assessing tribute; so they needed to know what Indian custom was. The missionaries also had a practical purpose: "know your enemy." Ostensibly at least, they studied Indian religious beliefs and practices, the better to eradicate them; and since, in the mental world the Indians inhabited, gods and demons intervened in every human crisis, knowledge of traditional history assisted the understanding of traditional theology. Yet, in most of the authors, one senses intellectual curiosity taking charge. Tezozómoc the Indian chief, Zorita the Spanish judge, Sahagún the Franciscan, Durán the Dominican, Tovar the Jesuit, all studied Indian history because it fascinated them. In the best of these writings, respect and even affection for traditional Indian society, at least in its secular aspects, is combined with a remarkable scholarly objectivity in describing it. All the more curious, therefore, that—with the partial and indirect exception of Tovar, as we shall see—none of these works was allowed to be published. To be sure, they were controversial, even polemical in some respects; but none of them could, in any ordinary sense of the word, be deemed subversive. They all—including those by Indian writers—made the explicit assumption that the Crown of Castille ruled the Indies by a just title, and that in its support of Christian proselytizing it discharged a sacred duty. None was an incitement to rebellion,

¹ "Relacion del origen de los Yndios/que havitan en esta/Nueva Espana/segun sus/historias."

² The text of the two parts of the Tovar manuscript have been published separately in recent years: George Kubler and Charles Gibson, "The Tovar Calendar," *Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 11 (1951); Jacques La Faye, *Manuscrit Tovar; Origines et croyances des Indiens du Mexique* (Graz, 1972).

or even to discontent. What possible harm could be apprehended from the publication of such works?

The attitude of the Council of the Indies, and of Spanish high officialdom in general, towards Indian studies was always ambiguous. It varied from decade to decade, with the political situation and with the personality of the president of the Council for the time being. There were periods of blanket prohibition, when anyone known to be engaged in such studies might have his papers seized. This happened to Sahagún, who lost the fruit of twenty years' work.³ Such prohibitions were never enforced for long. Usually the Council was guardedly sympathetic. It appreciated the potential value of researches into the Indian past; it often encouraged them; sometimes it actually commissioned them; yet when the resulting treatises were submitted, it locked them away. The history of the Indians was, so to say, a Pandora's box. The box tantalized the high officials, and now and then they peeped inside; but what they saw so alarmed them that they hastily closed the box again and sat on the lid. There was no scandal. The authors were not prosecuted, either by the civil authorities or by the Holy Office. Some manuscripts—Durán's, for example—never attracted official attention at all, and, apart from private circulation, remained unknown; but those which did come under official scrutiny disappeared into the limbo of the archives and were not seen again until our own day, some not even then; some have disappeared completely. What, then, were these clever, influential, conscientious bureaucrats afraid of? The Tovar manuscript suggests some answers to this question; or at least offers some clues.

In 1570 a new president of the Council of the Indies took office: Juan de Ovando, an outstandingly able administrator who constantly complained that his office was inadequately informed and constantly pestered colonial governors with questionnaires. One of his inquiries concerned the history of New Spain, and the viceroy was told to collect originals or copies of all significant documents.⁴

³Luis N. d'Olwer, *Fray Bernardino de Sahagún* (Mexico, 1952), pp. 96–102. None of Sahagún's works was published in his lifetime; but the manuscript of the *Historia general* survived, and has been published in recent years: Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, ed. A. M. Garibay Kintana (4 v., Mexico, 1956).

⁴*Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y colonización de las posesiones*

The viceroy, Martín Enríquez, also an able and energetic officer, interpreted this as including Indian records, and the archiepiscopal provisor, one Doctor Portillo, was set to work assembling codices. It is a little surprising, after the activities of destroyers and collectors over fifty years, that any considerable number of codices remained to be assembled; but the painting of pictorial records was still in the fifteen-seventies a living art, and the codices Portillo found were not necessarily pre-Conquest examples; some may have been quite recent. In any event, they seem to have formed a significant collection. By themselves, however, they would have been unintelligible to the Council's officials. The Mexican tradition of recording was an oral tradition, and the paintings were mnemonic devices to assist the memory of singers and reciters. An accompanying narrative and commentary was needed, and Tovar was appointed by the viceroy to compile one. It took him six years. In 1578 the result of his labors, a substantial book, with the supporting source material, was sent to Spain, where it disappeared. There was no explanation, no comment; only an impenetrable silence. Ovando was dead by that time; a new president, presumably, meant a new policy. We know that Sahagún's papers had been impounded in the previous year. Tovar must have suspected that something of the sort had happened to his own work; but he kept his counsel, resigned himself to his loss, and by his own account, dismissed the matter from his mind.

About five years later Tovar was approached again, this time by an eminent member of his own Order, José de Acosta, later known as the author of the *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*.⁵ This justly famous book was the most serious and comprehensive attempt, in the sixteenth century, to set the Americas as a whole within the framework of European knowledge, experience and belief; to assess the intellectual implications of a New World. Probably, though we have no evidence, Acosta wrote with official encouragement: probably, after many disappointments, the Council of the Indies saw the need for a comprehensive work which should be reliable, scholarly, and impeccably orthodox; and Acosta, with his learn-

españoles en América y Oceanía, sacados en su mayor parte del Real Archivo de Indias (42 v., Madrid, 1864–1884) 1: p. 361.

⁵José de Acosta, S. J., *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (Sevilla, 1590); modern edition, ed. E. O'Gorman (Mexico, 1962).

ing, his clarity of mind, and his knowledge of official ways, was admirably qualified to write it. In dealing with the peoples of Mexico and their history, Acosta sought the advice of Tovar, and Tovar, doubtless flattered, hastened to oblige. In the interval since 1578 the Dominican missionary Durán had completed his own voluminous, well-informed, sensitive and somewhat naïve history. This work, happily, survived in manuscript and was published in 1967.⁶ In the sixteenth century it was almost unknown outside the small circle of the author's friends, except through the use made of it by Tovar. Tovar was Durán's kinsman. He borrowed Durán's manuscript, condensed it, supplemented it with material derived from his own Tula informants, and so produced the short "History" contained in our manuscript. This work, and almost certainly the very copy we are considering, was delivered to Acosta in 1587, Acosta being then in New Spain on a visitation to enforce the rules of the Council of Trent. Letters passed between them, Acosta enquiring into the validity of oral evidence, Tovar explaining his critical methods. These letters, in fair copy, are included in our manuscript as an introduction. Acosta was clearly satisfied, for he used the Tovar manuscript as the source—almost the sole source—of the sixth and seventh books of his own great work, incorporating long passages almost verbatim, with handsome acknowledgment.

Here, then, we have a clearly established sequence: Durán, Tovar, Acosta. We have more. Durán was a dedicated missionary. He had come to Texcoco in childhood and spent his whole adult life among the Indians he loved. He was a simple, trusting soul, and had no notion of the pitfalls that beset those who wrote books about Indians. Tovar, through his disappointment of 1578 and through his contact with Acosta and other prominent Jesuits, was more worldly wise. Prudently, he not only condensed Durán's work, but also expurgated it. As he told Acosta, he omitted certain *cosillas dudosas*, doubtful propositions. Tovar's own work then underwent further light expurgation at Acosta's hands. If, therefore, we set these three accounts side by side and trace these progressive excisions, we can compile a probable list of propositions that were unacceptable to Spanish high officials and which, if included, would have prevented publication.

⁶ Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e islas de la Tierra Firme*, ed. A. M. Garibay Kintana (Mexico, 1967).

The first proposition concerned the remote origins of the Indians. It was common ground among all our writers that the Indians were fully human; the contrary opinion, though prevalent in some settler circles, was patently absurd, and had been condemned in 1537 by no less an instrument than a papal bull. But if the Indians were to be considered a branch of the tree of Adam, questions arose about their origin in the Old World and the reason for their banishment to the New. Durán thought that they were the descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel, and to prove it adduced analogies between the Indian traditions with which he was familiar, and ancient Jewish customs and beliefs as described in the Old Testament. This was a popular and widespread theory, which cropped up repeatedly in discussions of the American Indians for more than two hundred years. It did not require much imagination to see that such a notion would be wholly unacceptable to Spanish officialdom. The Spanish government worried incessantly about the political loyalty and religious constancy of its *converso* subjects. "New Christians"—Jewish converts and their descendants—often reverted to Judaism, or were suspected of doing so. The Spanish authorities tried, though without much success, to prevent such people from going to the New World and leading the Indians astray. The last thing high officials wanted to be told, was that the Indians were Jews already; so Tovar cut it out. He took the origin of the Indians no further back than the old Toltec legend of the Seven Caves of Aztlán, or Teotihuacán, that mysterious region in the North where the seven lineages of Mexico were traditionally supposed to have originated. Acosta went further: he devoted several pages to exposing the Lost Tribes theory as frivolous and baseless conjecture, and he linked Aztlán to the Old World by insisting that somewhere there must be a land bridge connecting America with some remote and barbarous region of Asia. In this, of course, he was very nearly right.

Another doubtful proposition concerned the identity of that mysterious god-hero-king of Toltec mythology, with many names and attributes, most commonly known as Quetzalcóatl, whose symbol was a feathered snake. Durán thought that the Quetzalcóatl legend arose from a hazy folk recollection of a Christian apostle, analogous with St. Thomas who was supposed to have evangelized India. Like many of his contemporaries, Durán found it difficult to accept that a whole branch of

the human race could have been left isolated, cut off from the possibility of salvation, for fifteen hundred years. To believe this would be to impute ignorance or injustice to God. Durán preferred to think that Christianity had reached the Indians in ancient times and subsequently had been forgotten or debased. In support of this theory he cited a number of apparent similarities between Indian and Christian beliefs and rituals, and pointed out that old Indian drawings showed Quetzalcóatl, or a priest impersonating him, with a headdress somewhat similar to the triple tiara worn on ceremonial occasions by the Pope. This was at best a daring and dangerous syncretism, at worst a diabolical parody; it was partly for advancing similar ideas that Fray Alonso de la Cruz, that ill-fated mystic, had been arraigned before the Peruvian inquisition in 1577. Tovar, accordingly, omitted all reference to St. Thomas, though, surprisingly, he retained the allusion to the triple crown. Acosta—who had been present at Fray Alonso's trial—removed that too. For him Quetzalcóatl—feathered serpent, patron of wisdom and learning, introducer of maize—was merely a demon of cupidity, worshiped because he was supposed to give riches to his devotees, "like a new Pluto or another Mammon."

Quetzalcóatl was suspect for other reasons. About forty years after the Conquest, a story began to circulate to the effect that Indian tradition had foretold the coming of the Spaniards, even that Cortés had been received as a reincarnation of Quetzalcóatl. This story is unsupported by contemporary evidence; neither Bernal Díaz nor Cortés himself makes any reference to it; it probably originated with Sahagún, or with informants telling Sahagún what they thought he wanted to hear. Obviously the Crown could not accept a story which conferred on Cortés an authority, in Indian eyes, independent of royal commission and of the powers granted to the Crown by the bulls of Alexander VI. Cortés had been the very type of overmighty subject, never fully trusted, and since his death the political activities of his descendants had deepened royal suspicion. In 1566 a settler rebellion in the name of his son Don Martín had been bloodily put down. Thereafter, any publication which tended to glorify Cortés or to support the claims of his successors

had been liable to suppression. This had been the fate, for example, of the *History of the Conquest* written by Cortés's secretary, Gómara. Cortés, whether from piety or policy, had been a good friend of the friars, and most of the missionary-historians wrote glowing tributes to his memory. Durán expatiated at length on the significance of the Quetzalcóatl prophecies, and wrote a full and dramatic account of the capture of the city of Mexico, presenting Cortés as the man providentially selected to open the way for the conversion of the Indies to the Faith. Tovar was too skeptical or too cautious to fall into this trap. His "History" presents Cortés as a capable, successful and sometimes ruthless military conqueror. There is no reference to the identification with Quetzalcóatl. His detailed narrative ends with the massacre of unarmed Indians by Alvarado's men at a ceremonial dance in the temple courtyard, and with the *Noche triste*, the ignominious retreat along the causeways in which Cortés lost a third of his men and most of his baggage, and in which his Tlaxcalan allies were cut to pieces. Only a few curt and colorless sentences at the end describe the return of the Spaniards and the final successful siege of the city. Tovar's narrative is repeated, with only a perfunctory tribute to Cortés's courage, by Acosta.

Acosta's *Natural and Moral History* was triumphantly published in 1590. This brief paper is, first, an attempt to trace how the information about ancient Mexico in that great work was collected and transmitted; secondly an attempt to render justice to Juan de Tovar, the forgotten man, so to say, in the sequence. One day, perhaps, we may find in some remote corner of the archives his first big history, and be able to appreciate him at his full worth. Thirdly, and perhaps most important, this is an attempt to illustrate and explain the extraordinary paranoid suspicion with which Philip II's advisers regarded a wide range of apparently harmless academic studies. Of course the Spanish Realms were beset with enemies within and without; but even so this degree of suspicion would be hard to credit, were it not that we have become all too accustomed to similar paranoia in some parts of the world in our own day. For the paranoid, History is dangerous stuff.