

INGA CLENDINNEN, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán, 1517–1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987 Pp. xiii + 245. £30.00 and £10.95 paperback).

How, in English-language scholarship, the Maya of Yucatán are written about was advanced considerably when Nancy Farriss published her *Maya Society under Spanish Rule* (Princeton 1984). It was clear immediately that what Farriss had done for one Mesoamerican periphery ranked alongside what Murdo MacLeod's *Spanish Central America* (Berkeley 1973) had already done for another. Both mapped out, with lucid organizational skill, the contours of a colonial experience quite unlike that which prevailed in the Mesoamerican core, best delineated by the work of Charles Gibson on *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule* (Stanford 1964). The twenty years spanned by these three volumes have seen other significant contributions made to the field of Mesoamerican studies, but anyone writing on the colonial period in English knows that the trinity represented by Gibson, MacLeod, and Farriss is what a good piece of research will be measured against.

If one cannot produce a classic tome, what can one produce? There are several options. Painting a canvas in broad, bold strokes leaves all sorts of gaps that a regional or community study can modestly fill. If, respectively, geographers and anthropologists elaborate in this way, historians have any number of temporal, topical, or biographical lacunae to which they can channel their attention. They can also choose not to devote themselves to primary archival investigation but instead subject well-known sources to critical reappraisal, coming up with an original interpretation of events, reshaping the passage of time to reflect more recent scholarly concerns, in the end writing a different kind of history than a previous generation. The account of *The Conquest of America* (Paris 1982) by Tzvetan Todorov springs to mind. This latter strategy, in essence, is what Clendinnen has opted for, and in *Ambivalent Conquests* presents us with a compelling reconstruction of the confrontation between Maya and Spaniard during the first half-century or so of Spanish colonial ambitions in the Yucatán.

Curiosity about what to expect hits the reader at the outset, for Clendinnen opens with the assertion that "to state only what is certainly known would be to leave unexplored what matters most". Carl Sauer might have had no problems with well-informed speculation being a vital component of academic inquiry, but less-open minds would balk. Clendinnen is decidedly of the former cast, and proceeds to squeeze fresh, new life from tired, old texts by allowing her creative faculties free reign. This is not to suggest that Clendinnen, in a flight of artistic fancy, takes off into the novelist's fictional terrain, for her analysis at all times is grounded in an impressive command of the literature and a warm sensitivity to cultural context. She does allow herself, however, the confidence to construct what Henry Miller, in his Preface to Haniel Long's telling of *The Marvellous Voyage of Cabeza de Vaca* (1939), called an "interlinear", a carefully-designed space into which the writer moves evidence so as to impart a quality of understanding beyond the mere provision of hard facts. It is not a move one makes without risk, but in the gifted hands of Clendinnen it works to dazzling effect.

Drawing especially on the earlier work of France Scholes, Robert Chamberlain, Ralph Roys, Eleanor Adams, and Eric Thompson, all of whom wrote with insight on sixteenth-century Yucatán, Clendinnen divides her study into two parts. In Part One, "Spaniards", she summarizes patterns of exploration, conquest, and colonization, making the reader aware of how Indian resistance undermined constantly Spanish intentions, even to the extent of a shipwrecked Spaniard, Gonzalo Guerrero, being persuaded by the Maya to take up their side of the struggle, which he did with disconcerting resolve. She then moves on to discuss the bitter internal conflict between rival Spanish factions for control of Maya communities, showing how Franciscan zeal won out against both the authority of government officials and claims lodged by private settlers, *encomenderos* foremost of all. Clendinnen puts these chapters together with such dramatic flair that the reader is always anxious to find out what happens next. She ends

Part One with a chilling account of the idolatry trials of 1562, in which Fray Diego de Landa, employing barbarous acts of torture, exacted confessions from allegedly Christian Indians of all kinds of pagan behaviour, including acts of human sacrifice. These confessions may have been as much a product of Landa's frenzy to justify his inquisitorial excesses as truthful admissions of Maya guilt. Anyone wishing to keep lit the flickering flame of the Black Legend will find in Landa's repulsive procedures a ready supply of combustible material. So committed was the Franciscan Provincial to the breaking of Maya will that the unlikely situation arose of *encomenderos* petitioning the Crown for the protection of Indian lives, a reversal of the normal state of affairs that says much about Landa's obsession.

If, by the close of Part One, native resistance appears to be crushed, it resurfaces in Part Two, "Indians", in diverse cultural ways that demonstrate Clendinnen's contention that "the Maya innovated in order to remain the same". This notion, arrived at independently, reinforces the concept of Maya "strategic acculturation" so nicely articulated by Farriss, that changes were made and accommodations reached "in order to preserve essentials". How the Maya tended their *milpas*, their preference for more dispersed than clustered group associations, their patterns of religious and social organization all reflect the native hand quietly and subtly at work. Clendinnen thus joins the ranks of a growing number of scholars who, when depicting Indian colonial experiences, stress elements of survival as much as manifestations of conquest, portraying the vanquished not just as victims or vestiges but as subjects who respond, who adapt, who come through to lead a meaningful life on their own terms.

Some scholars may quibble with Clendinnen's decision to work with published sources rather than attempt to generate her own raw material by archival research. Others may find peculiar omissions in her Bibliography, among them the fine monograph by Christina Garcia Bernal, *Yucatán: Poblacion y encomienda bajo los Austrias* (1978). Any minor carping, however, must be viewed in relation to a formidable talent to put wonderfully into words the seething tensions which charged the first fifty years of Spanish endeavours to create a colonial society in Yucatán.

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NEIL L. WHITEHEAD, *Lords of the Tiger Spirit: a History of the Caribs in Colonial Venezuela and Guayana, 1498-1820* (Dordrecht-Holland, Providence-U.S.A.: Foris Publications, 1988. Pp.x+250. Dfl. 35).

Looking at Latin American history in the long term, it is possible to draw a contrast between the densely settled, politically hierarchical, highland indian areas such as the Inca and the Aztec empires, and the more sparsely settled, less politically hierarchised lowland indian areas. In the former areas, the indian population survived in large numbers, despite demographic decline, and formed the basis of a labour force exploited by the Spanish through various systems of forced and bonded labour. In the latter areas, the drastic collapse of the indian population resulted in the importing of large numbers of African slaves. While this is a rough and ready contrast, there are notable exceptions to it. In some areas of these lowland zones, Spanish colonial influence was weak and patchy, and large tracts remained under indian control for several hundred years. One such area is the one covered by Whitehead in this book, the area of eastern Venezuela around the lower Orinoco and stretching down into what is now Guayana.

In this revised version of his 1984 social anthropology PhD, Whitehead traces in great detail the history of the Carib indians (now called Karinya) of this area and their staunch resistance to colonial domination until they were finally brought under missionary control in the eighteenth century. In doing so, he accomplishes several things. Firstly, he demonstrates the importance of an historical understanding for contemporary studies. He shows how the current isolation of some Carib communities today is precisely a