

As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.

— Psalm 103

THE GREATEST TRAGEDY that can befall any human group is to disappear, almost without trace, from the face of the earth they have lived on, never to return. What happened to the Guanches, the native inhabitants of the Canary Islands, relates directly to the fate of all indigenous peoples, unfortunate enough simply to be who they are, where they are, when outside forces innately unable to share space arrive and intrude, never to depart.

No Guanches exist anymore, not even to wait on the tables, to clean the rooms

Borders

By W. GEORGE LOVELL

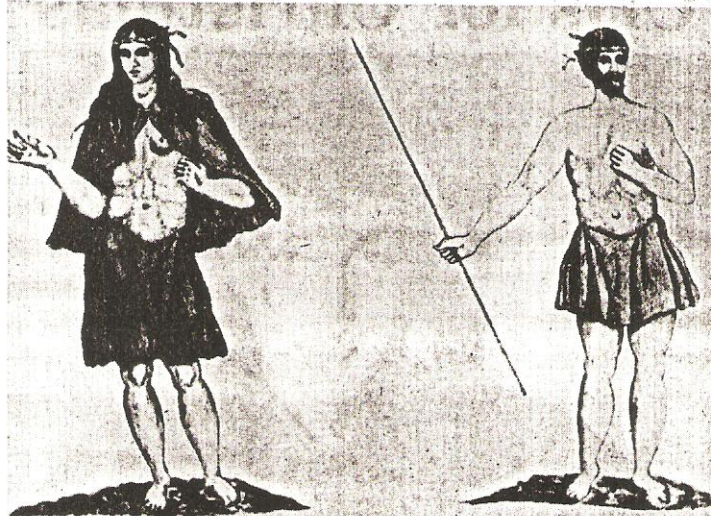
or even to arouse the mere curiosity of the tourist hordes whose conspicuous presence on the Canary landscape is but the latest manifestation of a foreign invasion that began in the early 15th century.

Before then, for over 3,000 years, the Guanches lived in Neolithic isolation, the descendants most likely of Berber migrants from Africa, the northwest coast of which lies only 115 kilometres from Fuerteventura, one of the seven Canary Islands. The Canaries had been known to Europeans ever since the time of Pliny the Elder, who, writing in the first century AD, referred to them somewhat fancifully as the Fortunate Isles, or the Isles of the Blessed. What the Guanches called their islands, or themselves for that matter, passed unnoticed into the great silence that began when Europe looked beyond its borders to other lands and other peoples ripe for conquest and colonization.

An expedition led by a Frenchman in the service of the Spanish monarchy established the first European foothold in 1402, when the Guanches of Lanzarote surrendered after months of fighting to forces led by Jean de Bethencourt. The Portuguese struck next, several times between 1415 and 1466, but never with any permanent territorial success. One incursion, that of 1424, saw 2,500 infantry and 120 cavalry move into action, no small deployment for the time. Portuguese interest in the Canaries, however, may have been geared more towards the acquisition of Guanche labor than possession of Guanche land, for on arrival they had found their own island colonies to the north and west, Madeira and the Azores, to be unpopulated. Guanche slaves especially helped transform the wooded slopes and shores of Madeira into profitable sugar plantations.

By 1475, Spanish designs had become serious enough to dispense with French mercenaries and to marshal their own troops into action. Three islands by that date still lay under Guanche control: La

The Guanches



Guanche woman and man, as imagined by Leonardo Torriani in the late 1500s

Palma, Tenerife and Gran Canaria. In 1478, the *Reves Catolicos* (Catholic monarchs) Ferdinand and Isabella ordered an assault on Gran Canaria. For five years the Guanches held out, fighting a guerrilla war in the rugged interior before surrendering to Pedro de Vera in April 1483.

La Palma's turn came next, when Alonso de Lugo led his men ashore in September 1492, securing Guanche capitulation the following year. (In the meantime, Christopher Columbus had harbored at another island, La Gomera, where he took on water before journeying to bigger and better things lying 30 sailing days farther west.) Only Tenerife remained, where the Guanches had twice before repelled Spanish intentions. Lugo, buoyed by victory on La Palma, invaded in 1494, only to be driven back following a crushing defeat at Acentejo. He tried again one year later, on that occasion in command of upwards of 1,000 men backed by horses and firearms. Guanche resistance was this time no match for such destructive persistence, and after 10 months of struggle they succumbed in September of 1496.

There are several reasons that an awareness of the Guanche experience is instructive. All relate, in varying degree, to the fact that their fate as a vulnerable, non-European people was to be shared by countless groups across the Atlantic in the New World, from the time of Columbus on.

The first common historical denominator is that conquest and colonization

was preceded by other disruptive forms of contact, none more damaging than slavery and disease. Guanches are known to have been abducted by the Portuguese to Madeira and the Azores in the first half of the 16th century, but raids organized even earlier than that saw them carried off and sold in the slave markets of southern Europe. Indigenous tribes in the western Caribbean suffered likewise following the fourth voyage of Columbus, when the Admiral of the Ocean Sea sailed south from the Bay Islands, then along the Atlantic coast of Honduras and Nicaragua in 1504. Soon thereafter, incursions organized by colonists in Cuba and Hispaniola, whose pools of native labor were fast drying up, sacked both island group and mainland settlements for Indians to enslave, years before Central America figured formally in the Spanish scheme of empire.

The disease parallel is similarly striking. Debate concerning the numbers involved still persists, but scholars now agree that sicknesses brought inadvertently from the Old World to the New served as a key variable in weakening Indian resistance to foreign invasion. Epidemics pruned native populations quite drastically in size and thus paved the way for successful encroachment, whether attained by the Portuguese in Brazil or the Spanish in Mexico and Peru. The pestilential allies that took millions of Aztec, Maya and Inca lives, however, first worked their fatal way through the Guanches, at times preceding the act of armed confrontation on the field of battle

itself. The Italian engineer Leonardo Torriani, who inspected military fortifications on the islands in the late 16th century, tells us that a plague "which in a few days destroyed three-quarters of the people" raged among the Guanches of Gran Canaria before the conquest actually began. Lugo's eventual success on Tenerife, so Alonso de Espinosa informs us, "would have taken much longer if it had not been for the pestilence, the people being warlike, stubborn, and wary." The chronicler refers to the pestilence as *modorras*, which may have been typhus, a disease apparently unknown in the virgin-soil environment of the Canaries prior to European penetration. A Guanche population of perhaps 100,000 at contact was recorded by Girolani Benzoni to be "nearly all at an end" when he visited the Canary Islands in 1541.

There is also the unfortunate common circumstance of not being united against the aggressor, which lessens the chances of winning any war of attrition. The empowering principle of divide and rule was one Spanish conquistadors adhered to instinctively, shrewdly exploiting internal rivalries to suit their own ends, whether setting the Cakchiquel against the Quiche in Guatemala, the Tlaxcalans against the Aztecs in Mexico, or the followers of Atahualpa against those of his half-brother, Huascar, in Peru. The Guanches, as distinct groups of island peoples, had their geographical insularity work against the forging of any collective alliance. In the case of Tenerife, in fact, some Guanches were actually persuaded to fight alongside the Spaniards against neighboring communities considered to be enemies, mistakenly thinking that by casting their lot with the invaders they might afterwards increase their own authority and prestige. The ability to capitalize on local divisions paid off for the Spaniards not only in Tenerife but also later on in campaigns of conquest that saw them manipulate as much as fight their way to remarkable victories over native peoples from Chile in the south to California in the north.

The Guanches, then, warrant more consideration than a passing reference in a blind, Eurocentric telling of history. They were likely not the first people to be made extinct by the desire of others to dominate and enjoy the fruits of hegemony. What their experience represents, however, is one of the earliest recorded casualties of European expansion, the beginning of a process of cultural confrontation enacted still on the shores of the St. Lawrence River, in the heart of the Amazon rainforest, on the Queen Charlotte Islands and throughout the blood-soaked highlands of Guatemala. □

W. George Lovell is a member of the Queen's University geography department. He is co-editor, with Noble David Cook, of the book *The Secret Judgments Of God: Native Peoples And Old World Disease In Colonial Spanish America*, to be published by the University of Oklahoma Press next year as part of their *Civilization of the American Indian Series*.

'A Guanche population of perhaps 100,000 at contact was recorded by Girolani Benzoni to be "nearly all at an end" when he visited the Canary Islands in 1541'