PENGUIN CLASSICS

BERNAL DÍAZ

THE CONQUEST OF NEW SPAIN

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TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY J. M. COHEN

'He is among chroniclers what Defoe is among novelists' – W. H. Prescott

The defeat of the Aztecs by Hernan Cortes and his small band of adventurers is one of the most startling military feats in history. Fifty years after the event Bernal Díaz (*c.*1498–*c.*1580), who served under Cortes, wrote this magnificent account of the march from the coast, Montezuma's death, the massacre of the Spaniards and the eventual capture of the capital of Mexico.

Vivid, powerful and absorbing, Díaz inspired W. H. Prescott's *History of the Conquest* and has been rendered magnificently here by J. M. Cohen, the translator of *Don Quixote* and other Penguin Classics.

The cover shows *Cortes entering America* from a series of panels by Miguel Gonzales in the Museo de América, Madrid (photo: Arxiu Mas)

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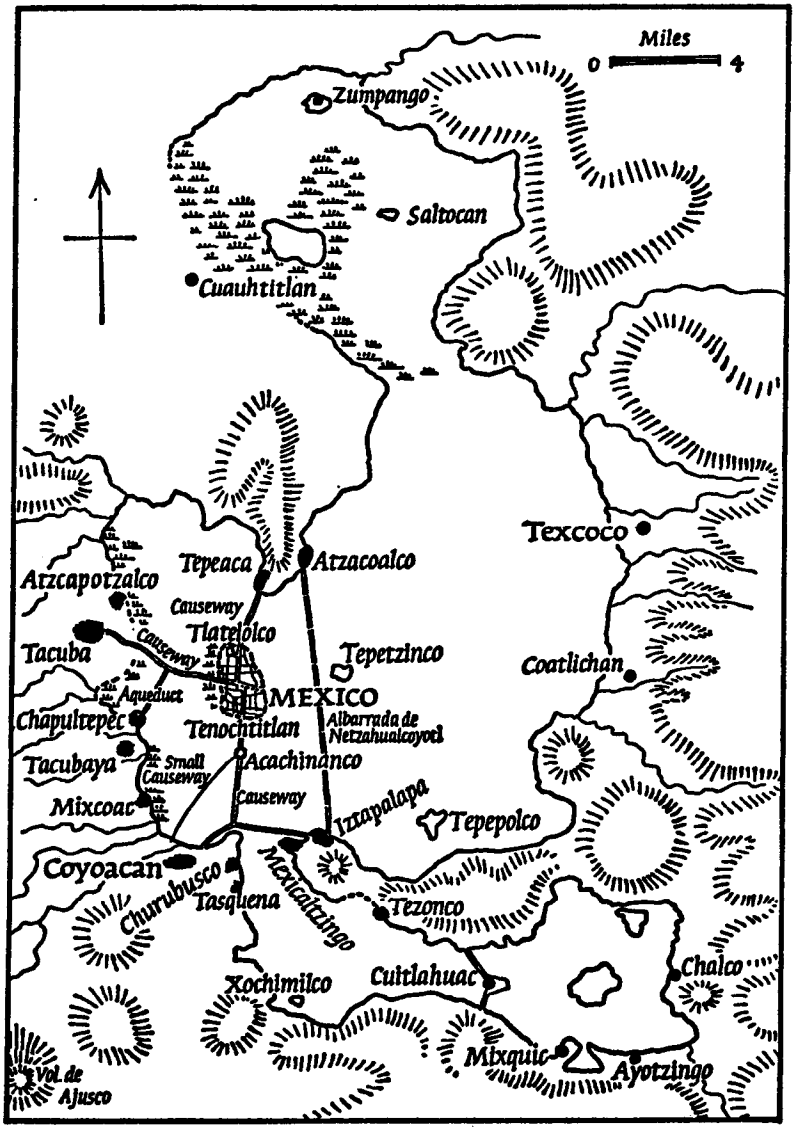

Map of Mexico City and Lake Texcoco at the time of the Spanish Conquest.

Introduction

BERNAL DIAZ DEL CASTILLO, the last survivor of the Conquerors of Mexico, died on his estates in Guatemala at the age of eighty-nine, as poor as he had lived. Born in 1492, the year in which Columbus discovered the New World, he survived to see a great part of America subjugated by Spain. But despite the leading role he had played in the heroic overthrow of the Aztec Empire, he left his family no other riches than his 'true and wonderful' *History of the Conquest of New Spain*, of which he made his fair copy at the age of seventy-six, when he was, according to his own certainly exaggerated description, both deaf and blind, and to which he added his preliminary note at the age of eighty-four. He had been over seventy when he began it, and had at one point given it up. For on comparing the fine style of certain other chroniclers (who had told the story of Cortes' achievement with less first-hand knowledge than he had) with the roughness and lack of polish of his own language, he had been discouraged.

Certainly Bernal Díaz was not an accomplished stylist. He had, however, a graphic memory and a great sense of the dramatic. Moreover he was conscious of having taken part in a great achievement, unparalleled in modern history: the overthrow of a great Empire by a company of adventurers, inspired partly by a sense of mission and partly by a crude greed for gold. Their success, even their survival, could in his belief be accounted for only by the miraculous intervention of God and the Saints, who wished New Spain to be added to the realm of Christ and the Emperor Charles V.

So, when Bernal Díaz found the story misrepresented by Cortes' chaplain and official panegyrist, Francisco Lopez de Gomara, and also by Gonzalo de Illescas (who spoke the truth 'neither in the beginning, nor the middle, nor the end'), he decided to resume his work and carry it to completion. Many times in the course of his *History*, he refers to these chroniclers, setting

right their errors and often angrily accusing them of ignorance and malice. His purpose was by no means simply to vindicate his own part in the march on Mexico. True, he frequently informs the reader that Cortes consulted his captains and soldiers – including himself – at important junctures in the campaign, and did not, as Gomara asserted, make all his decisions alone. Bernal Díaz, however, never attempts to claim a bigger role for himself than for his fellows and for long passages of his narrative he describes events at which he was not present, sometimes because of wounds, or in which his part is indicated only by the use of *we* or of *us soldiers*, where the stay-at-home historian would have had to write a plain *the*.

The narrative here translated covers the two preliminary explorations of the Mexican coast under Cordoba and Grijalva, with both of whom Bernal Díaz served, the first march on Montezuma's city, the Spaniards' expulsion and flight, and their subsequent build-up of a new army, with which they captured the island-capital of the Empire which Guatemoc had now inherited from Montezuma. Bernal Díaz' *History*, however, is a much longer book than this. It covers the long tales of intrigue in Spain, Cuba, and Hispaniola, which almost succeeded in replacing Cortes by weaker leaders who would have been content to make a few modest settlements on the coast; and it continues after the final reduction of the Mexican capital to tell of further campaigns in search of the gold which had so far evaded the Conquerors. Bernal Díaz describes also the terrible march through the forest of Honduras, Cortes' final prosperity, and his own efforts on a visit to Spain to secure some better fortune for himself, 'the oldest Conquistador of New Spain', than what came to him from his estates and his magistracy in Guatemala.

By his own confession, as we saw, Bernal Díaz was a poor stylist, and a retranslation of his whole narrative would have filled almost two volumes of this size. I have therefore pruned his story of repetitions and digressions, among other things cutting away his scoldings of Gomara and the other chroniclers and his frequent lists of men, horses, weapons, and provisions, which hold up the story. Where the omitted chapters contain

facts essential to the understanding of events, I have given a brief account of them, in brackets, and I have ended my translation with Bernal Díaz' reflections on the capture of the Aztec capital. The rest can be read, by those who wish to know the tale of Cortes' later campaigns and final triumph, in W. H. Prescott's classic, *The Conquest of Mexico*.

In writing his immortal history a hundred and twenty years ago, Prescott borrowed freely from Bernal Díaz, whom he praised in terms on which I could not hope to improve:

> Bernal Díaz, the untutored child of nature, is a most true and literal copyist of nature. He transfers the scenes of real life by a sort of *daguerreotype* process, if I may so say, to his pages. He is among chroniclers what Defoe is among novelists. He introduces us into the heart of the camp, we huddle round the bivouac with the soldiers, loiter with them on their wearisome marches, listen to their stories, their murmurs of discontent, their plans of conquest, their hopes, their triumphs, their disappointments. All the picturesque scenes and romantic incidents of the campaign are reflected in his page as in a mirror. The lapse of fifty years has no power over the spirit of the veteran. The fire of youth glows in every line of his rude history; and, as he calls up the scenes of the past, the remembrance of the brave companions who are gone gives, it may be, a warmer colouring to the picture than if it had been made at an earlier period. Time, and reflection, and the apprehensions for the future which might steal over the evening of life, have no power over the settled opinions of his earlier days. He has no misgivings as to the right of conquest, or as to the justice of the severities inflicted on the natives. He is still the soldier of the Cross; and those who fell by his side in the fight were martyrs for the faith. 'Where are now my companions?' he asks; 'they have fallen in battle or been devoured by the cannibal, or been thrown to fatten the wild beasts in their cages! they whose remains should rather have been gathered under monuments emblazoned with their achievements, which deserve to be commemorated in letters of gold; for they died in the service of God and of His Majesty, and to give light to those who sat in darkness – *and also to acquire that wealth which most men covet.*' The last motive – thus tardily and incidentally expressed – may be thought by some to furnish a better key than either of the preceding to the conduct of the Conquerors. It is, at all events, a specimen of that naïveté which gives

an irresistible charm to the old chronicler, and which, in spite of himself, unlocks his bosom, as it were, and lays it open to the eye of the reader.

It is not surprising that an American Protestant should suspect the honesty of the Spaniards' crusading spirit. Notwithstanding the horrible decadence of the Aztec religion, the deeds of the conquerors (which included massacre, torture, and forcible conversion) were not by nineteenth-century standards very much better. Yet as one reads Bernal Díaz, one credits him and his comrades with a true sense of mission. One sees that by their own standards they were often behaving with moderation. On several occasions the Mercedarian friar (Bernal Díaz seems to have forgotten his name) urged Cortes to restrain his proselytizing zeal; and it must not be forgotten, as Prescott points out, that disbelief in Christianity, whether by conviction or from ignorance, was in that age punishable by burning.

About the heroism of the Spaniards there can be no two opinions. The risks they took were enormous, since their superiority in weapons was often cancelled by lack of powder and by the inability of their cavalry to manoeuvre. As for Bernal Díaz' attitude to Cortes, I can only endorse Prescott's opinion that 'he endeavours to adjust the true balance between his pretensions and those of his followers; and while he freely exposes his cunning or cupidity, and sometimes his cruelty, he does ample justice to his great and heroic qualities'. The same may be said of Bernal Díaz' characterization of the other Spanish captains, of the chiefs of the various Indian nations, and of many less important members of the Spanish expedition. His portrait of Montezuma ably reveals the Aztec ruler's divided mind, and the very real qualities of nobility and generosity for which the Spaniards came to respect and even to love him. His successor Guatemoc, too, is shown as a brave man and a dignified leader, whose last defence of his capital earned his enemies' admiration, which however did not prevent them from torturing him, and finally executing him for allegedly encouraging a revolt among the conquered Aztecs. The *Caciques*, the Spaniards' early enemies, who afterwards became their allies, stand out as individuals as do also the Spanish captains, Pedro de Alvarado,

Cristobal de Olid – whose final rebellion and cruel execution by Cortes falls outside the scope of this narrative – Andres de Tapia, and Alonso de Avila. The fate of the last-named captain provides a note of heavy irony at the expense of the whole story of the Spaniards' search for gold. He was captured by a French privateer on his way back to Spain with the royal fifth – which was in fact the major part of the booty. So the much disputed spoils of Montezuma's empire finally arrived in the treasury of his most Christian Majesty of France. The only satisfaction which the Spaniards obtained was that they finally captured and executed the French pirate.

For all the roughness of his style, Bernal Díaz could sometimes be picturesque. How graphically he calls up the moment in which the Spaniards first saw from the summit of the sierra de Ahualco the valley of Mexico with its lakes and lakeside towns, its maize-fields and stone causeways, and the distant towers of the capital itself riding like a second Venice on the waters. But his writing is generally on a more pedestrian level. His narrative is not skilful, and his choice of words is restricted. Often he gossips, and often he resorts to clumsy tricks of style. But however much we may criticize his *History*, it will, in Prescott's words, 'be read and re-read by the scholar and the schoolboy, while the compositions of more classic chroniclers' – of Gomara, for instance, who wrote briefly in a polished style – 'sleep undisturbed on their shelves'. For Bernal Díaz was singularly free from the temptation to pervert his story in the interests of affections or feuds or personal vanity. To have marched with Cortes was for him sufficient glory. He did not need to increase his reputation or self-esteem by tricks of the pen.

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Taking as my authoritative text the edition of the *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la nueva España* of Joaquín Ramirez Cabañas (fifth edition, Editorial Porrua, 1960), I have translated the greater part of Bernal Díaz' first 157 chapters, omitting only certain extraneous incidents (which I have in some cases briefly summarized) and the very frequent repetitions which mar his narrative. Ignoring his chapter-divisions, which are uneven and

arbitrary, I have given each campaign or principal incident a separate section. As for the names of persons and places, I have departed from Bernal Díaz' often haphazard transliterations in favour of those most familiar either from Prescott's narrative or from present-day maps of the country. Where Bernal Díaz was in actual error as to a locality or a date, I have generally corrected him in a footnote based on the observations of Señor Ramirez Cabañas or some equally reliable scholar.

Any reader who wishes to know the subsequent story of Mexico cannot do better, as I have said, than turn to Prescott, who, for all his inevitable bias against Catholic and Aztec alike, wrote a first-rate narrative based on the best authorities he knew, and chief among them, on Bernal Díaz himself, who now for the first time is able to tell his own story to a wide English-reading public. Of previous translations, that of A. P. Maudslay is the best. Printed for the Hakluyt Society (1908–16), it is complete and fully documented. It is, however, ungainly in style and to be found only in a few libraries. The *Life of Bernal Díaz* by R. B. Cunninghame Graham (Eveleigh Nash, 1915) is in effect a résumé of the *History* made by an able writer who was an enthusiast for the deeds of the Conquistadors. It is most valuable when its author allows Bernal Díaz to speak for himself, but hardly a substitute for his *History*. Recent years have seen a great development in our knowledge of early Mexican civilization, of which the Spaniards found relics among the Toltecs of Cholula, but which was in a general state of decadence, especially among the savage Aztecs, who had only recently conquered the valley of Mexico. An able account of the thought and religion of early Mexico is given by Laurette Séjourné in *Burning Water* (Thames and Hudson, 1957), and a study of the Poetry and Symbolism of the Aztecs and their predecessors is provided by Irene Nicholson's *Firefly in the Night* (Faber and Faber, 1959).

London
May 1963

J.M.C.

THE CONQUEST OF NEW SPAIN

Preliminary Note

I HAVE observed that before beginning to write their histories, the most famous chroniclers compose a prologue in exalted language, in order to give lustre and repute to their narrative, and to whet the curious reader's appetite. But I, being no scholar, dare not attempt any such preface. For properly to extol the adventures that befell us, and the heroic deeds we performed during the conquest of New Spain and its provinces in the company of that valiant and enterprising captain, Don Hernando Cortes – who, as a reward for his heroism, was afterwards created Marques del Valle – would require eloquence and rhetoric far greater than mine. What I myself saw, and the fighting in which I took part, with God's help I will describe quite plainly, as an honest eyewitness, without twisting the facts in any way. I am now an old man, over eighty-four years of age, and have lost both sight and hearing; and unfortunately I have gained no wealth to leave to my children and descendants, except this true story, which is a most remarkable one, as my readers will presently see.

The Expedition of Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba

I, BERNAL DÍAZ DEL CASTILLO, citizen and governor of the most loyal city of Santiago de Guatemala, one of the first discoverers and conquerors of New Spain and its provinces, and of the Cape of Honduras and Higueras, native of the most noble and famous city of Medina del Campo, and son of its former governor Francisco Díaz del Castillo, known as the Courteous – and his legal wife Maria Diez Rejon – may their souls rest in glory! – tell you the story of myself and my comrades; all true conquerors, who served His Majesty in the discovery, conquest, pacification, and settlement of the provinces of New Spain; one of the finest regions of the New World yet discovered, this expedition being undertaken by our own efforts, and without His Majesty's knowledge.

My ancestors having always been servants of the Crown, and my father and one of my brothers being in the service of the Catholic Kings, Don Ferdinand and Doña Isabella, I wished in some sort to emulate them. When, therefore, in the year 1514 a gentleman named Pedrarias Davila went out as Governor of Tierra Firme,[1] I agreed to accompany him to the newly conquered country, and after an uneventful voyage we arrived at Nombre de Dios, as it was called. Some three or four months, however, after the settlement was made, there came an epidemic from which many soldiers died, and all the rest of us were ill with bad ulcers on the legs. In addition, there were disputes between the Governor and a rich gentleman named Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, who had conquered the province and was then commander of the army. Pedrarias Davila had given him his daughter in marriage but had afterwards been suspicious that his son-in-law might raise a rebellion and lead a body of soldiers towards the Southern Sea. He had therefore given orders that Balboa should be beheaded and certain of his soldiers disciplined.

As we were witnesses of these events, and of other revolts

1. The Spanish Main, a settlement on the coast of Panama.

among the captains, and as news had reached us that the island of Cuba had lately been conquered and settled, under the governorship of a kinsman of mine named Diego Velazquez, some of us gentlemen and persons of quality who had come out with Pedrarias Davila decided to ask his permission to go there. This he readily gave us, since he did not require all the soldiers he had brought out from Spain, the province being a small one and now entirely conquered.

Once we had received permission we boarded a good ship, and with fair weather reached the island of Cuba. On landing we paid our respects to the Governor, who was pleased to see us and promised to give us Indians as soon as there were any to spare. I was at that time twenty-four.

After spending three fruitless years in Tierra Firme and Cuba, about a hundred and ten of us, settlers from Tierra Firme or Spaniards who had come to Cuba but received no grant of Indians, decided to make an expedition to seek new lands in which to try our fortunes and find occupation. We arranged with Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba, a rich man who owned a village on the island, that he should be our leader, and he was well fitted for the post.

With this expedition in view, we purchased three ships, two of them a good capacity and the third a barque bought on credit from the Governor Diego Velazquez, who let us have it on condition that all three vessels should go to some islands, lying between Cuba and Honduras, and now called the Guanaxes Islands, and there fight the natives, whom we could then sell to him for slaves and thus pay for the barque. Realizing the wickedness of the Governor's demand, we answered that it would be against the laws of God and the king for us to turn free men into slaves; and when he learnt our plans, he decided they were better than his. So he helped us with provisions for our voyage in quest of new lands. Certain interested persons have asked me why I have recorded this proposal of Diego Velazquez, since it is discreditable to him and has nothing to do with my story. My answer is that it is in keeping with his subsequent persecution of us, in alliance with Juan Rodriguez de Fonseca, Bishop of Burgos.

We found ourselves in possession of three ships loaded with