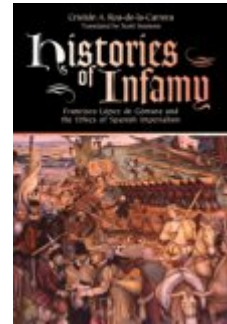


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Cristian A. Roa-de-la-Carrera. *Histories of Infamy: Francisco Lopez de Gomara and the Ethics of Spanish Imperialism*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2005. xvii + 264 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87081-813-4.

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Historiography and Empire-Building

The title of this review, borrowed from a sub-heading in the first chapter of Cristian Roa-de-la-Carrera's welcome examination of a key sixteenth-century account of the Spanish invasion of the Americas, could easily serve as an alternative title for the entire book. The author demonstrates that Francisco Lopez de Gomara's 1552 near-hagiography of Fernando (also Hernando or Hernan) Cortes, *La [h]istoria de las Indias, y conquista de Mexico*, is at least as useful to modern scholars for the study of history-writing in the service of imperial expansion as for the evidence it provides about the momentous events on which it focuses. Roa-de-la-Carrera is not, however, simply peddling a variant of the widespread notion that history is "written by the winners," that staple of undergraduate skepticism regarding the discipline's utility. Rather, he wishes to explain how a history that was in fact very much intended to laud the success of Spain's "civilizing mission" in the Americas ended up on the royal list of prohibited works shortly after its publication. His answer, in short, is that by "fail[ing] to reconcile the contradictions of Spanish imperialism," Lopez de Gomara's celebratory account of Cortes's genius alienated a readership that had already been disabused of the glories of empire by earlier "histories of infamy" (p. 13).

This argument exhibits its own contradictions, as we shall see, but in the course of making it Roa-de-la-Carrera nicely illuminates the political and historiographical contexts that may have doomed Lopez de Gomara's account almost from the moment it appeared. His observation that the account's emergence was "ill-timed" is certainly

on the mark (p. 19). It was published the same year as the *Brevissima relacion de la destruccion de las Indias*, whose author (the formidable "Defender of the Indians" Bartolome de las Casas) was perceived to have almost single-handedly turned Charles V against the conquerors at least a decade before Lopez de Gomara set out to praise them. In Roa-de-la-Carrera's estimation, the would-be chronicler of the glories of Spanish expansion failed to understand that a "changing discursive landscape" (p. 39) had already "changed the way authors could write about the Indies" (p. 42) during the 1540s. Worst of all, Lopez de Gomara made the crucial error of turning for justifications of Spanish actions to the *Democrates secundus* of Juan Gines de Sepulveda, the intellectual who drew on the Aristotelian notion of "natural slavery" in a largely unsuccessful attempt to counter Las Casas's claims of native equality at their famous 1550 debate in Valladolid. Sepulveda himself was unable to prevail because Las Casas and other critics "had already constructed a discourse that rendered slandering Indians ineffective" by consistently undermining the various rationalizations offered up for abuses committed against the indigenous peoples of the Americas (p. 123). As Roa-de-la-Carrera makes clear, ample evidence of those abuses had long been available to readers even in the histories of Peter Martyr and Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo, works that were fundamentally sympathetic to the project of Spanish expansion.

The bulk of the book is taken up with analysis of the (failed) textual strategies that Lopez de Gomara em-

ployed in order to construct a pro-conqueror case in the absence of “a dominant ideology in support of the conquistadors’ aspirations for hegemony” (p. 132). In successive chapters, Roa-de-la-Carrera picks apart the chronicler’s “providentialist” account of Spain’s actions in the Americas, his representation of conquest as a process of exchange, and, most importantly, his exaltation of Cortes as the “model conqueror” whose exemplary conduct could serve to offset criticism stirred by the admitted excesses of other Spaniards. The contradiction at the heart of this last crowning element of Lopez de Gomara’s narrative was the impossibility of eliding unpleasant incidents that were already common knowledge, such as Cortes’s torture and execution of Cuauhtemoc, the last Mexica ruler. In other words, because Lopez de Gomara “needed to work with the histories of infamy that were already recorded in public discourse,” he undercut his own efforts to glorify the imperial project (p. 199).

As the above example indicates, Roa-de-la-Carrera’s method consists largely of discourse analysis. The scholarly literature with which he engages most intensively includes work by literary critics like Edmundo O’Gorman (if the term can properly be applied to him), Jose Rabasa, and Walter Mignolo, on the one hand, and by historians who have attended to the rhetoric of empire such as Lewis Hanke, Anthony Pagden, and Patricia Seed on the other. Rolena Adorno’s work at the nexus of literary criticism and historical analysis clearly serves as an important model for the author; his extended discussion of documents like the *Requerimiento* (the offering of peace in exchange for submission to Church and Crown which Spaniards were expected to read out before doing battle with unconquered native peoples) reflects Adorno’s preference for “reading conquest accounts in light of the legal discourse” (p. 129 n. 19). Ironically (at least in the eyes of an archivally oriented historian), Roa-de-la-Carrera is somewhat less critically astute in his use of more conventional historical scholarship to provide background “facts” about the period in question. He tends to reproduce without comment the findings of dated classics that remain useful but might have been read more carefully in the context of recent literature and debates. It is surprising, for example, to find no reference to a prominent 2001 study by Jorge Canizares-Esguerra, whose own discussion of Lopez de Gomara and his contemporaries helps set the stage for a sophisticated and far-reaching reappraisal of Enlightenment-era historical commentary on Spanish America that would have been both theoretically and thematically relevant to the analysis undertaken by the author.[1]

Less attributable to the vagaries of scholarly taste are problems that appear to have arisen in the process of translating the book from Spanish, the language of the author’s 1998 Princeton dissertation. While dense prose is to be expected and is sometimes warranted in a work of this nature, a few obvious errors in translation raise flags about the reliability of the narrative in other passages that lack clarity. For example, Roa-de-la-Carrera’s important efforts to illuminate the world of royal hangers-on, to which Lopez de Gomara sought entry, are marred by numerous references to “courtesan culture” or “the courtesan world,” a usage probably stemming from a mistranslation of *cortesano*, which the author surely intended to carry the meaning of “courtly” or “courtier.” Elsewhere, an archaic construction clearly meant to invoke “polygamy” in sixteenth-century Spanish commentators’ litanies of the sins of native peoples is translated several times as “herding women.” In the latter case and others like it, fortunately, the reader benefits from the decision to publish the many quotations from historical and philosophical literature which are incorporated into the text in both the original language and English.

A final criticism returns us to the book’s argument. While its dismissal of the role of interest as opposed to ideology in the fate of Lopez de Gomara’s account may be tenable, the author’s eventual confusion of historical and moral explanations for the chronicler’s “failure” is less convincing. A praiseworthy effort to explore closely the tensions created by the account’s “critical dimension” (p. 214)—notably its acknowledgement of Spanish cruelties with all the attendant interpretive complications—is largely undone a few pages later by the facile assertion that “history contradicts Gomara’s sanitized image of colonial institutions” (p. 233). Indeed, the unwary reader might be forgiven for coming away from the book with the notion that the moral superiority the author openly attributes to Las Casas’s writing makes that writing by definition better history (and a more reliable historical source) than Lopez de Gomara’s. It is easy enough to find reasoned viewpoints to the contrary in modern historiography, which merely reflects the fact that historical judgments are and always have been made by historians and other commentators rather than by an abstract and ill-defined entity called “history.”[2] The judgments Roa-de-la-Carrera himself makes are often judicious and enlightening, even if the methods of the literary critic are not always equal to the task of addressing adequately the evidentiary and interpretive issues that many historians find compelling. His book is sure to enrich the field of

colonial studies, and it will also be of interest to any student of the early Atlantic world's historiography.

Notes

[1]. Jorge Canizares-Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 80-87 and *passim*.

[2]. Lesley Byrd Simpson, "Introduction," in *Cortes, the Life of the Conqueror by his Secretary Francisco Lopez de Gomara*, trans. and ed. Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), xv-xxv; and Franklin W. Knight, "Introduction," in Bartolome de las Casas, *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies, with Related Texts*, ed. Franklin W. Knight, trans. Andrew Hurley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), xlvi-xlix.

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