

Thomas Gage's vision of the New World

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Two kinds of travellers have wandered the Americas: men of science like Humboldt and La Condamine, and men of imagination, like Gage and Stephens. The former have left a wealth of information and serious research on man and his natural environment in this hemisphere; the latter have done the same, although in their own way.

One can never tire of reading Thomas Gage, that mixture of pleasure-seeker and adventurer, liberal and monk, anthropologist and spy. Much, in fact almost all of what he wrote is what a well-informed European in a strange land could, in good faith, discover and observe about a continent that for Europeans, was still cloaked in distorted myths.

Although Gage was ordained in Spain, his childhood was shaped by the views prevailing in his native England, in direct opposition to the interests of the Spanish Empire. One should not forget that the Europeans came upon Romanticism by imagining the Americas as a land of strange beings, fountains of youth, Amazons and cities of gold; a land of enchantments and hidden paradises, monstrosities and nightmarish visions. The Spanish chroniclers themselves—Bernal Díaz, among others—associated what they began to see with their own eyes in the empires of the New World with the most wildly imagined tales of the Middle Ages.

Some—a fair amount—of what Gage wrote is deliciously false; this is sometimes due to a lack of information, while at other times it is the product of an over-active imagination. We will leave aside the names put down incorrectly, as the logical consequence of an ear which could not perceive the phonology of indigenous tongues and a language which could not translate these sounds. However, together with the unintentional distortion of these names, as part of the automatic tendency to associate them with what writers knew of their own world, there is even more erroneous information.

Gage maintains that there were salt mines in the Tenochtitlan lakes, and after a complicated description, states that these lakes had two kinds of water that did not mix together. He says that the Alvarado River which (according to him) flows into the Gulf of Mexico, also ran practically under the gates of the city of Oaxaca, while boats arrived at the city by sailing up river. He states that the city of Santiago de los Caballeros de Guatemala was destroyed as the result of a curse cast upon it, due to the blasphemies of a Spanish woman, María de Castilla, who had lost her husband. (This Spanish lady is none other than Doña Beatriz de la Cueva, wife of the conquistador of Guatemala, Pedro de Alvarado.)

Curiously, Thomas Gage always noted military information referring to distances, coasts and cities. It may

have been that even in the 17th century, when Gage wrote, the monasteries were constructed a bit like forts, while the monks felt themselves at war with the infidels who surrounded them. It may also be that Gage was what so many have called him: an English spy.

Gage made numerous observations of this type: with a handful of men one could take this fort; such-and-such a city is not fortified, and would practically fall by itself into the hands of an enemy; all of the colonists of a given zone could not raise an army of more than this number of men; that river lacks forts along its course, and enemy ships could penetrate inland and take control of this or that zone.... We, of course, share the first hypothesis, because it would be childish to assume that such confidential information as this would be included in a book destined for publication.

An area that does not reflect errors on Gage's part, but rather unmistakable English national pride, is the treatment he affords the pirates. He calls Francis Drake and John Oxenham "gentlemen." However, this is not totally irrational if we consider that, in those days, England officially promoted piracy, decorating pirates with medals for their massacres of Spaniards in the New World. Thus it makes sense that Gage saw such indiscretions as legitimate "services rendered to the nation" ❧

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