

Meddling With the Maya

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Who built the seven gates of Thebes?
The books are filled with names of kings.
Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?
And Babylon, so many times destroyed,
Who built the city up each time? In which of Lima's houses,
That city glittering with gold, lived those who built it?

Young Alexander conquered India.
He alone?
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Was there not even a cook in his army?
Philip of Spain wept as his fleet
Was sunk and destroyed. Were there no other tears?

Each page a victory,
At whose expense the victory ball?

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956)

Ever since the late 1830s, when John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood set out to explore the Mesoamerican tropics, the Maya of Yucatán have attracted and held public as well as scholarly attention.¹ How these secretive people are written about, in English-language publications, was advanced considerably when Nancy Farriss produced her *Maya Society under Spanish Rule* (1984). Building on an earlier essay that viewed the Maya as historical actors rather than pre-Columbian relics or colonial objects, Farriss's work did for one backwater region of the Indies what Murdo MacLeod's *Spanish Central America* (1973) had already done for

AMBIVALENT CONQUESTS: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán, 1517-1570. Inga Clendinnen. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987. Pp. xiii + 245. \$34.50.

UNFINISHED CONVERSATIONS: Mayas and Foreigners Between the Wars. Paul Sullivan. New York: Knopf, 1989. Pp. xxvii + 269. \$22.95.

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 Charles Gibson's magnificent account of *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule* (1964). The twenty years spanned by these landmark efforts have seen other important 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 an inspired 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 in our knowledge of land and life, gaps that a regional monograph or a community study may modestly fill.² 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.³ They may 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* by Tzvetan Todorov (1984) comes to mind. This latter strategy, in essence, is what Inga Clendinnen has opted for, and in *Ambivalent Conquests* she presents us with a compelling reconstruction of the confrontation between Mayas and Spaniards during the first half-century or so of Spanish colonial ambitions in Yucatán.

Curiosity about what to expect hits the reader at the outset, for Clendinnen opens with the assertion that "to offer interpretations without acknowledging their uncertain ground would be less than candid, while to state only what is certainly known would be to leave unexplored what matters most" (xi). Carl Sauer may have advocated that informed speculation and contemplation of the mystic form a vital part of academic inquiry, but less open, unimaginative minds would balk.⁴ 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 fictional realm of the novelist, for her analysis is grounded at all times in an impressive command of the literature and a warm sensitivity to cultural and environmental context. She does, however, allow herself the confidence to construct what Henry Miller, in his Preface to Haniel Long's telling of *The Marvellous Voyage of Cabeza de Vaca* (1987), 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 constantly undermined 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. Guerrero, unlike fellow survivor Gerónimo de Aguilar, declined to return to the Spanish fold after the arrival of Hernán Cortés at Cozumel (en route to bigger and better things on the mainland) presented a safe opportunity to do so. The decisions of Aguilar and Guerrero, both of them rather shadowy individuals, were of some import to the subsequent course of conquest history:

Aguilar, with his acquired Maya and his remembered Spanish, was to go on to be a crucial link in the chain of interpreters who permitted Cortés to talk rather than fight his way into Moctezuma's great imperial city of Tenochtitlán. Guerrero was to remain a peculiarly threatening figure to his fellow Spaniards. However gratified by indications of Indian "civility", however impressed by demonstrations of Indian courage, these Spaniards knew Indians to be irrevocably inferior. Indian "religion" was a filthy mixture of superstition and devil worship. For one of their own to acquiesce in such filthiness, and to choose it over his own faith and his own people, was to strike at the heart of their sense of self. In the defeats and baffling reversals they were to suffer through the whole of the wearisome conquest of the peninsula, they were to identify, wherever they were to occur and however implausibly, the mark of his baffling dark intelligence. (18)

Clendinnen continues:

What it was that held Aguilar to his Spanish and Christian sense of self, yet allowed Guerrero to identify with native ways, is mysterious. We know nothing of how Guerrero's remaking as a Maya came about; whether isolation and despair led to collapse, and then a slow rebuilding, or whether knowledge of many ports (he was thought to be a sailor), an ear quick for foreign sounds, a mind curious for foreign ways, allowed an easier transition. What startles is the tenacity and passion of his war against his erstwhile countrymen. It was not until 1534 or 1535, when the tattooed body of a white man was found among the Indian dead after a skirmish in the territory of Honduras-Higuera to the south of Yucatan, that Spaniards could be sure that Guerrero was dead, and his malice at an end. His hatred of his countrymen had been so compelling that he had led a canoe-borne attack far beyond his own territory, and had died for it. (18)

Clendinnen then moves on to discuss the bitter internal conflict between rival Spanish factions for control of Maya communities, showing how Franciscan missionary zeal won out against both the authority of government officials and claims lodged by private settlers, *encomenderos* (Spaniards entitled to Indian tribute and labour) foremost of all. The three chapters that constitute this segment of the narrative are spun together with such dramatic flair that the reader is always anxious to find out what happens next. Part One draws to an end 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:

For Landa, the discovery of the canker of idolatry at the very heart of the missionary enterprise was deeply galling. As ruling prelate, he would soon have to render an account of his stewardship to the incoming bishop who must arrive within the next few months. Time was short. There is no hint that he flinched from what had been done by his brothers, or urged a gentler course, and he had as little concern for legal niceties as they. Then and for the next three months he maintained the procedures of mass arrest and savage unselective torture, extending the enquiry into two adjacent provinces, where the violence of the tortures and the invention of the torturers appears to have been even more extravagant. When, after sentence, Indian penitents were tied to the whipping-post to suffer their prescribed number of lashes, it was reported that their bodies were already so torn from the preliminary interrogations that "there was no sound part on which they could be flogged." More than 4,500 Indians were put to the torture, and an official enquiry later established that 158 had died during or as a direct result of the interrogations. (76)

So committed was the Franciscan Provincial to the breaking of Maya will that the unlikely situation arose of settlers petitioning the Crown for the protection of Indian lives, a reversal of the normal state of affairs that says much about Landa's obsession:

Settler anxiety, already intense, increased as the inquisition plunged on. The enquiry had begun in May, which was usually the time of the planting, but there was little planting in the central provinces that year, and *encomenderos* feared for their tribute. Labour supplies were disrupted: some Indians fled into the forest; most vanished into the friars' jails; and those released were not quickly fit for work. *Encomendero* claims to authority over their Indians were in tatters. Now it was

the settlers who had to face deputations of frantic Indians weeping, displaying their wounds, begging for protection; and had to admit themselves powerless to intervene. The Church had uncontested jurisdiction over sinners and apostates. (82)

It is to Landa that we owe an important, if one-sided, documentary record of Maya culture, the haunted, self-justified *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (1941). It must be remembered, however, that Landa spilled not only Maya blood but burned sacred Maya books as well. The blind rage that fuelled Landa's actions moved one of his translators, William Gates, to comment that he destroyed "ninety-nine times as much knowledge of Maya history and sciences as he has given us in his book." Landa himself discloses:

These people also make use of certain characters or letters, with which they wrote in their books their ancient matters and their sciences, and by these and by drawings and by certain signs in these drawings they understood their affairs and made others understand and taught them. We found a large number of these books in these characters and, as they contained nothing in which there was not to be seen superstition and lies of the devil, we burned them all, which they regretted to an amazing degree and which caused them great affliction. (169)

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" (134). 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" ("Three Perspectives" 34). How the Maya tended their corn fields, their preference at the community level for more dispersed than clustered spatial arrangements, and 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 terms of their own.

Her representation of Maya culture, of necessity, leans heavily on texts written by the conqueror. "The trick," Clendinnen contends, "is to strip away the cocoon of Spanish interpretation to uncover sequences of Indian actions, and then to try to discern the pattern in those actions, as a way of

inferring the shared understanding which sustains them" (132). The conquered, however, also composed their own forms of testimony, "magnificent, absorbing sources" (137) known as the *Books of Chilam Balam*:

The Maya conviction that all things have pattern, however little obvious that pattern may seem to be, provided the dynamic for the *Books of Chilam Balam*, as it had for the folded bark-paper codices which had preceded them. Knowledge was not a given nor a finite thing: it was arrived at through the patient recording of the events in the experienced world, and of any clues as to how to decipher those events, until through accumulation of data the pattern of recurrence behind occurrence could be discerned. So the careful men charged with the keeping of the books also added to them: chronicling events so that the pattern which underlay them would be made manifest in and through time; sometimes recording invocations or fragments of information culled from daily experience and judged to have the power to illuminate it. With constant use the books tattered, to be recopied as necessary, sometimes even by scribes ignorant of precise original meanings, but devoted to the same enterprise. The fragments of history, the echoes of local events, the incantations, the snatches of Spanish prayers or astrological lore they collected, however garbled and dispersed they seem to us, were selected and incorporated exactly because they were seen as apposite to Maya needs and meanings. (137)

The *Books of Chilam Balam* are but one of several problematical sources with which Clendinnen successfully wrestles. Trying to make sense of such



Diego de Landa,
Bishop of Yucatan
1571-79. From
Ambivalent
Conquests (67)

ambiguous, contradictory, incomplete, and subjective sources (ones which, at times, conceal as much as they reveal) is a challenge any historical researcher must confront.⁶ Clendinnen's ability to rise to the challenge, coupled with a formidable talent to recount a complex piece of Maya history simply but effectively, in elegant, captivating prose, stands in marked contrast to the mixed results of Paul Sullivan's *Unfinished Conversations*. Somewhat ironically, the more recent Maya he writes about have less clarity of form than Clendinnen's representation of their sixteenth-century ancestors. Sullivan toils, chapter after chapter, through a labyrinth of private correspondence, published works, taped interviews, and field observation, seemingly more content with vagueness or multiplicity of meaning than plausible elucidation. Why the Maya of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries should be more elusive to depict than those who lived and died over four hundred years ago is not addressed directly, but mysterious they appear in Sullivan's conjuring hands.

He starts off earnestly enough, asking the same kinds of incisive questions about the purpose and practice of ethnography as the recent critiques of James Clifford, James Clifford and George Marcus, George Marcus and Michael Fischer, and the oddly unreferenced Clifford Geertz.⁷ Like Eric Wolf, Sullivan sees little worth in an anthropology that does not situate people, wherever they happen to be, in proper global context:

In focussing upon the tribe, the peasant community, the urban *barrio*, and other well-bounded, small-scale human arenas, our discipline cultivated and defended a peculiar blind spot in its vision of the world beyond Europe and the United States. We long tended to study and write about the colonized but not about colonialism, about the new Third World recruits to an expanding capitalist system but not about capitalism or imperialism, about the impact of the West but not about the systematic connections between the West and the rest. We wrote about social change but not about the forces and patterns of change that are manifest only on a geographic and temporal scale greater than that encompassed by the standard practices of ethnographic research and writing. (xxi-xxii)

Sullivan's goal is to scrutinize relations between Mayas and foreigners from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, showing how the Other and the Outsider manipulated the circumstances under which they came in contact to suit their own, very different ends. Cross-cultural exchange is inferred, metaphorically, to constitute a conversation, one that began before both sides actually met and that lingers well beyond leave-taking. Sullivan states his basic premise as follows:

In my metaphorical long conversation, we must be less confident that there *are* answers. Each encounter between Maya and foreigner was an extraordinary experiment in cross-cultural experimentation. Many a Maya and foreigner had never met individuals of the other kind. They did not speak each other's language very well (if at all); were guided by very different motives; had different ideas about speaking and writing and the kinds of being who can use language; had different senses of place, time, causality, and different knowledge of what had gone on before. They could not share one set of answers to questions about their dialogues. Each side, in fact, would have quite different questions to ask about what had and was transpiring between them. (xxvi)

Conversation begins soon after Mexican troops re-established central government authority following the War of the Castes (1847-48), an uprising during which Maya insurgents at one juncture held sway over the entire peninsula of Yucatán, save for the cities of Mérida and Campeche and a narrow corridor between them to the sea.⁸ Uneasy containment was the order of the day, for Maya rebels who had retreated to forest strongholds in the remote southeast continued to raid periodically, and indeed resisted subjugation for another fifty years. Into this ominous, troubled land wandered an assortment of foreign travellers, American anthropologists and archaeologists foremost among them. These scholars, especially Sylvanus G. Morley, chosen by the Carnegie Institution of Washington to supervise excavations at Chichen Itzá, soon found themselves embroiled in myriad dealings with the Maya. No group more persistently engaged with Morley than did the rebels based at Xcacal Guardia, who took him for an intermediary they thought could either help them secede from Mexico (and become part of the US) or could supply them with arms powerful enough to launch another attack on the hated Mexican enemy. To one Maya leader, Pedro Pascual Barrera, Morley wrote:

I have received your friends, as well as the men who came with them, with all friendliness, and I have shown them my house here in Chichen Itzá and how I live. They will tell you all they have seen and how I have for you and your people only friendliness. These men will tell you what we talked about and how I want to help you in any way that is proper for me to help you.

You must know, as I have told the men from your place, that I am a stranger in this country and that I must obey the laws of this country, just as you and your people must obey these same laws in order to live in peace and love. The good Lord desires that we all live in friendliness and peace with one another, and that is what I counsel you to do. (88-89)

Sullivan explains that the message Morley conveyed in this letter would not have fallen on Maya ears quite as the writer intended:

In translation Morley's words to the Maya priest were anything but unambiguous, however. "I want to help you in any way that is proper" was rendered in Yucatec Maya as "I want to help you in any way I can." Where Morley wrote of the "country" in which he was a stranger and whose laws he felt obliged to obey, officers unsocialized in the abstractions of modern nationalism and citizenship would have instead read "village" or "town." Straining toward an overcorrect Maya rendition of the English word "law," Morley's translator wrote *almahthan*, a word that the officer would read as "divine commandments." (Unsure if they would read this correctly, the translator inserted a parenthetical Spanish gloss, *leyes*. But to these Mayas *ley* meant flogging or execution, the combination of that word with *almahthan* suggesting, therefore, divine commandments and a harsh punishment for their violation.) Similarly, the hoped-for peace of which Morley wrote was inexplicably rendered by an unusual compound word, *homanolal*, one of whose roots suggests "open roads" and the other, "spirit, will"; together they might be read as an openness of peoples to one another. So, as the letter was read aloud back in Xcal Guardia, what Barrera likely heard was that Morley would help the officer in any way he could; that Morley, like them, felt that people ought to obey the commandments of True God, which regulate town and village life, as it is God's will that they do; and that as a result there could be openness of people toward one another (including the freedom of communication and commerce that the officers sought and the Mexicans were impeding). The officers would have been quite pleased. (89)



Sylvanus Morley and
his wife, Frances, 1931.
From *Unfinished
Conversations* (27).

For his part, Morley used the overtures of friendliness and cooperation not only to further archaeological excavations at Chichen Itza but to pave the way for Alfonso Villa, field assistant to anthropologist Robert Redfield, to enter rebel Maya territory and conduct ethnographic research there. Morley's letter of introduction, addressed to Captain Concepción Cituk, reads as follows:

After wishing health to you as well as to all my good companions in Xmben, Señor, La Guardia, and all the remaining villages in your land, with so very much love.

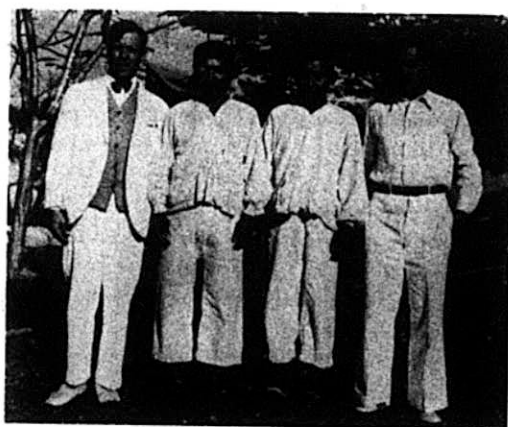
This letter is to introduce him, the foreigner who delivers it to you, Mr. Alfonso Villa R., who has joined himself to my work here in Chichen Itza, under the Carnegie Institution of Washington.

I want Mr. Alfonso Villa to go there to do some work for me there in your villages.

I want him to take your fame [record life histories?] for a printed-paper (Libro [Book]) that I am writing, therefore it is necessary then that you explain everything to Mr. Villa so that he may serve me.

I want to know everything about you; my companions, how do you make your living there, how many are you in the village of La Guardia, and how many of you are there in each of the remaining villages; how do you make your corn fields, how much corn do you gather from each of your cornfields? (61)

Some Maya were rightly suspicious of the stated objectives of the foreigners in their midst. One of them, Lieutenant Evaristo Zuluub, sought



Sylvanus Morley,
Florentino Cituk,
Evaristo Zuluub, and
Alfonso Villa Rojas at
Chichen Itza, 1935.
From *Unfinished
Conversations* (81)

to advance his own position by informing Mexican authorities that Concepción Cituk "was a subversive, who with Americans had planned a Maya secession from Mexico, and that one of the Americans, a fellow named 'Silvano', was supplying Cituk with weapons through an intermediary, Alfonso Villa" (131). Zuluub's allegation, in this instance, was as spurious as it was self-serving, but his hunch of duplicity had some concrete basis, for Morley had in fact worked for United States Naval Intelligence in 1917-18 while "posing as one engaged in archaeological research for the Carnegie Institution" (132). Villa apparently had no inclination towards such overt double-dealing, but actively involved himself in issues pertaining to Maya land claims, for he believed that "to live among those Indians without demonstrating interest in their vital problems is a thing impossible to achieve" (138). When he finally published the fruits of his ethnographic investigations, however, Villa glossed over discussions of land rights and other sensitive political matters, thus excluding from his finished work what Sullivan considers "the very substance of Villa's everyday interactions with Maya officers" (154). Villa's omission of politics was matched by his mentor's omission of the role history played in shaping Maya culture, for the "folk society" Robert Redfield found in Yucatán had "no historical sense, such as civilized people have", since "what one person does is what another does" and "what one man knows and believes is the same as what all men know and believe" (156). Redfield's failure to deal with the varying forces of history is characteristic of most early Mesoamerican anthropology, and is a trait that unfortunately plagues the discipline still.⁹

Sullivan is at his best either when dissecting the imperfections and inconsistencies of his anthropological predecessors, or when exposing the hidden agendas behind the activities of such men of science as Morley. His authority becomes less convincing, the terrain he asks us to walk across decidedly shaky, when he explores the Maya inner world. Immeasurably difficult of access, the fears, feelings, religious practices, and spiritual beliefs of the Maya constitute a heart of darkness few penetrate with lucidity. Sullivan may be at ease with his subjects while engaging and conversing with them in the field (but one wonders). Their presence in his writing, however, is spectral and opaque, their hazy outline that of figures in a mist. When they speak through him they sound altogether too poetic and stately, ethereal beings more of Sullivan's creation than their own. Stories of their origin and prophecies of their end, in a millennial war not too far away, furnish Sullivan with the substance of his text, but Maya reality seems singularly out of place in the awkward, belaboured, distancing language – the chic "academese" of the New Ethnography – in which he

chooses to write. In a dust-jacket blurb, Sullivan is described in glowing superlatives as "the Cousteau of the Mayan culture," so laureated by Sidney Mintz, who declares he knows of "no anthropological work that allows the Outsider so successfully to peer Inside." How people like Oliver La Farge and Maud Oakes undertook field-work and set about the depiction of Maya culture may no longer be in fashion, but their efforts are still worth remembering. In the case of the latter, her candid day-to-day account of living as a foreigner among the Mam people of Todos Santos sparkles from beginning to end without academic pretension, as does the animated sweep of Ronald Wright.¹⁰ These writers, like Inga Clendinnen, succeed precisely where Sullivan stumbles most, in the simple art of clear communication, in putting judiciously and succinctly into words the fascinating ways of the Maya.

NOTES

- 1 Stephens did all the writing, but Catherwood's illustrations lend the finished product enduring appeal.
- 2 Lovell (*Conquest and Survival*) is an example of the former, Hill and Monaghan an example of the latter.
- 3 The range of options is reflected in the work of Sherman, Van Oss, and Vigil.
- 4 The two works cited are but a fraction of the literature left behind by geography's most radical twentieth-century scholar.
- 5 Gates gives an honest appraisal of the life and legacy of the unrepentant Franciscan.
- 6 See Roys and Lovell ("Mayans") for elaboration.
- 7 A sampling of what these writers champion is listed below.
- 8 Reed remains the best summary of the conflict available in English.
- 9 Redfield and Villa epitomize the mind-set of the time. Jones represents a more grounded way of dealing with history. On the persistence of ahistorical anthropology, see Lovell and Swezey.
- 10 La Farge and Oakes focus specifically on Maya peoples living in the Cuchumatán highlands of Guatemala, whereas Wright deals with the vicissitudes of life throughout the entire Maya realm.

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