

BERNAL DÍAZ DEL CASTILLO

**THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF CONQUISTADOR
BERNAL DIAZ DEL
CASTILLO**

Bernal Díaz del Castillo

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE.

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The History of the Conquest of New Spain is a subject in which great interest is felt at the present day, and the English public will hail these memoirs, which contain the only true and complete account of that important transaction.

The author of this original and charming production, to which he justly gives the title of 'The True History of the Conquest of New Spain,' was himself one of the Conquistadores; one who not only witnessed the transactions which he relates, but who also performed a glorious part in them; a soldier who, for impartiality and veracity, perhaps never had his equal. His account is acknowledged to be the only one on which we can place reliance, and it has been the magazine from which the most eloquent of the Spanish writers on the same subject, as well as those of other countries, have borrowed their best materials. Some historians have even transcribed whole pages, but have not had sufficient honesty to acknowledge it.

The author, while living, was never rewarded for the great services he had rendered his country, and it is remarkable that, after his death, his very memoirs were pillaged by court historians, to raise a literary monument to themselves.

Most of the other writers on the conquest, particularly the Spanish, have filled their works with exaggerations, to create astonishment and false interest; pages are filled with so termed philosophical remarks, which but ill supply the

place of the intelligent reader's own reflections. Bernal Diaz differs widely from those writers, for he only states what he knows to be true. The British public, fond above all others of original productions, will peruse with interest and delight a work which has so long been the secret fountain from which all other accounts of the conquest, with the exception of those which are least faithful, have taken life.

In respect of its originality, it may vie with any work of modern times, not excepting 'Don Quixote.' The author seems to have been born to show forth truth in all its beauty, and he raises it to a divinity in his mind. Can anything be more expressive of an honest conscience than what he says in his own preface: "You have only to read my history, and you see it is true."

The reader may form a general idea of this work from the following critique, which Dr. Robertson, the historian, passes upon it: "Bernal Diaz's account bears all the marks of authenticity, and is accompanied with such pleasant naïveté, with such interesting details, with such amusing vanity, and yet so pardonable in an old soldier, who had been, as he boasts, in a hundred and nineteen battles, as renders his book one of the most singular that is to be found in any language."

One circumstance, and that very justly, he is most anxious to impress on your mind, namely, that all the merit of the conquest is not due to Cortes alone; for which reason he generally uses the expression "Cortes and all of us."

This is an allowable feeling in our old soldier, and it must be remembered that the greater part of the men who joined Cortes were of good families, who, as usual on such expeditions, equipped themselves at their own expense, and went out as adventurers of their own free choice.

With respect to our author's style of writing, it is chiefly characterized by plainness and simplicity, and yet there are numerous passages which are written with great force and eloquence, and which, as the Spanish editor says, "could not have been more forcibly expressed, nor with greater elegance." Some readers may at first feel inclined to censure our author for going into minute particulars in describing the fitting out of the expedition under Cortes; for instance, his describing the qualities and colours of the horses; but all this, it will be seen, was of the utmost importance to his history, and of the horses he was bound to take special notice, for they performed a conspicuous part in the conquest. The honest old soldier even devotes a couple of his last chapters to the whole of his companions in arms, in which he mentions them all by name, describes their persons, their bravery, and the manner in which they died.

To conclude these few remarks on this work, I must observe, that it not only surpasses Cortes' despatches in completeness, but also in truth and naïveté. He represents the whole to you with a simplicity truly sublime; at times he astonishes with a power of expressing his sentiments peculiar to himself, and with a pathos that goes to the very heart.

Bernal Diaz was of a respectable family, and born in Medina del Campo, a small town in the province of Leon. He was what in Spain is termed an hidalgo—though by this little more was signified than a descent from Christian forefathers, without any mixture of Jewish or Moorish blood. With respect to the precise year of his birth he has left us in the dark, but, according to his own account, he first left Castile, for the New World, in the year 1514; and as, on his first arrival in Mexico, in the year 1519, he still calls himself

a young man, we may safely conclude that he was born between 1495 and 1500. In the year 1568 he completed his work, at which time there were only six of the Conquistadores alive, and he must then have been about seventy years of age, but there is every reason for supposing that he reached the advanced age of eighty-six. Endowed with singular nobleness of mind, he had the happiness to enjoy an unblemished reputation.

The excellent Torquemada, in speaking of him in his voluminous work entitled '*Monarchia Indiana*,' says, "I saw and knew this same Bernal Diaz in the city of Guatemala; he was then a very aged man, and one who bore the best of reputations." Quoting him in another passage, he has, "Thus says Bernal Diaz del Castillo, a soldier on whose authority and honesty we can place reliance." He was a man devoted to his religion, and it must be particularly borne in mind that the Catholic faith was never stronger than at that time; yet we find him the least superstitious of all the Spanish historians on the Conquest, and, in the 34th Chapter, he has shown a mind superior to the times in which he lived.

If we contemplate the period in which the conquest of New Spain took place, we can easily imagine that Cortes considered it imperative on him to plant his religion among the Indians by the power of the sword, if he could not by kind remonstrances; and we are often reminded of Joshua in the Old Testament. The Spaniards themselves certainly entertained that idea; for in the edition of Cortes' despatches published at Mexico in 1770, his sword is termed, "*Gladius Domini et Gideonis*:" yet the Spaniards were not the cruel monsters they have generally been described during those times. As far as the conquest of New Spain is concerned, they were more humane than otherwise; and if at times they used severity, we find that it

was caused by the horrible and revolting abominations which were practised by the natives. We can scarcely imagine kinder-hearted beings than the first priests and monks who went out to New Spain; they were men who spent their lives under every species of hardship to promote the happiness of the Indians. Who can picture to his mind a more amiable and noble disposition than that of father Olmedo? He was one of the finest characters, Dr. Robertson says, that ever went out as priest with an invading army!

We may have become exceedingly partial to a work which has now been constantly before our eyes for the last two years, yet we can scarcely imagine that any one could take up a volume, whether a novel or a history, which he would peruse with more delight than these memoirs.

With regard to the translation, which is from the old edition printed at Madrid in 1632, we have acted up to the author's desire, and have neither added nor taken anything away, and have attempted to follow the original as closely as possible. To the original there is not a single note, and particular care has been taken not to overburden the translation with them. In the spelling of the names of the Indian chiefs, the townships, and of the provinces, we have mostly followed Torquemada, who is considered more correct on this point, for he lived fifty years in New Spain, was perfect master of the Mexican language, and made the history of that country his peculiar study.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE.

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I, Bernal Diaz del Castillo, regidor of the town of Santiago, in Guatemala, author of this very true and faithful history, have now finished it, in order that it may be published to the world. It treats of the discovery and total conquest of New Spain; and how the great city of Mexico and several other towns were taken, up to the time when peace was concluded with the whole country; also of the founding of many Spanish cities and towns, by which we, as we were in duty bound, extended the dominion of our sovereign.

In this history will be found many curious facts worthy of notice. It likewise points out the errors and blunders contained in a work written by Francisco de Gomara, who not only commits many errors himself in what he writes about New Spain, but he has also been the means of leading those two famous historians astray who followed his account, namely, Dr. Illescas and the bishop Paulo Jovio. What I have written in this book I declare and affirm to be strictly true. I myself was present at every battle and hostile encounter. Indeed, these are not old tales or romances of the seventh century; for, if I may so say, it happened but yesterday what is contained in my history. I relate how, where, and in what manner these things took place; as an accredited eyewitness of this I may mention our very spirited and valorous captain Don Hernando Cortes, marquis del Valle Oaxaca, who wrote an account of these occurrences from Mexico to his imperial majesty Don Carlos the Fifth, of glorious memory; and likewise the corresponding account of the viceroy Don Antonio de

Mendoza. But, besides this, you have only to read my history and you see it is true.

I have now completed it this 26th day of February, 1568, from my day-book and memory, in this very loyal city of Guatemala, the seat of the royal court of audience. I also think of mentioning some other circumstances which are for the most part unknown to the public. I must beg of the printers not to take away from, nor add one single syllable to, the following narrative, etc.

CONQUEST OF MEXICO AND NEW SPAIN.

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CHAPTER I.

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The time of my departure from Castile, and what further happened to me.

In the year 1514 I departed from Castile in the suite of Pedro Arias de Avila, who had just then been appointed governor of Terra Firma. At sea we had sometimes bad and sometimes good weather, until we arrived at Nombre Dios, where the plague was raging: of this we lost many of our men, and most of us got terrible sores on our legs, and were otherwise ill. Soon after our arrival, dissensions arose between the governor and a certain wealthy cavalier, named Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, who had brought this province to subjection, and was married to one of the daughters of Avila. As, however, suspicion had been excited against him, owing to a plan he had formed of making a voyage to the South Sea at his own expense, for which he required a considerable body of troops, his own father-in-law deposed him and afterwards sentenced him to decapitation.

While we were spectators of all this, and saw, moreover, how other soldiers rebelled against their superior officers, we learnt that the island of Cuba had just been conquered, and that a nobleman of Quellar, named Diego Velasquez, was appointed governor there. Upon this news some of us met together, cavaliers and soldiers, all persons of quality who had come with Pedro Arias de Avila, and asked his permission to proceed to the island of Cuba: this he readily granted, not having sufficient employment for so great a number of men as he had brought with him from Spain.

Neither was there any further conquest to be made in these parts; all was in profound peace, so thoroughly had his son-in-law Balboa subdued the country, besides which it was but small in extent and thinly populated. As soon, therefore, as we had obtained leave, we embarked in a good vessel and took our departure. Our voyage was most prosperous, so that we speedily arrived at Cuba. The first thing we did was to pay our respects to the governor, who received us with great kindness, and made us a promise of the first Indians that might be discharged. Three years, however, passed away since our first arrival in Terra Firma and stay at Cuba, still living in the expectation of the Indians which had been promised us, but in vain. During the whole of this time we had accomplished nothing worthy of notice: we therefore, the 110 who had come from Terra Firma, with some others of Cuba, who were also without any Indians, met together to concert measures with a rich cavalier named Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba, who, besides being a person of wealth, possessed great numbers of Indians on the island. This gentleman we chose for our captain; he was to lead us out on voyages for the discovery of new countries, where we might find sufficient employment.

We purchased three vessels, two of which were of considerable burden; the third was given us by the governor, Diego Velasquez, on condition namely, that we should first invade the Guanajas islands, which lie between Cuba and the Honduras, and bring him thence three cargoes of Indians, whom he wanted for slaves; this he would consider as payment for the vessel. We were, however, fully aware that it was an act of injustice which Diego Velasquez thus required at our hands, and gave him for answer: that neither God nor the king had commanded us to turn a free people into slaves. When he learnt our determination, he

confessed that our project for the discovery of new countries was more praiseworthy, and he furnished us with provisions for our voyage.

We had now three vessels and a sufficient supply of cassave bread, as it is there made from the juca root. We also purchased some pigs, which cost us three pesos a piece; for at that time there were neither cows nor sheep on the island of Cuba: to this I must also add a scanty supply of other provisions; while every soldier took with him some glass beads for barter. We had three pilots; of whom the principal one, who had the chief command of our vessels, was called Anton de Alaminos, a native of Palos; the two others were, Camacho de Triana, and Juan Alvarez el Manquillo of Huelva. In the same way we hired sailors, and furnished ourselves with ropes, anchors, water-casks, and other necessaries for our voyage, all at our own expense and personal risk.

After we had met together, in all 110, we departed for a harbour on the north coast of Cuba, called by the natives Ajaruco. The distance from this place to the town of San Christoval, then recently built, was twenty-four miles; for the Havannah had then only been two years in our possession. In order that our squadron might not want for anything really useful, we engaged a priest at the town of San Christoval. His name was Alonso Gonzalez, and by fair words and promises we persuaded him to join us. We also appointed, in the name of his majesty, a treasurer, called Beruardino Miguez, a native of Saint Domingo de la Calzada. This was done in order that if it pleased God we should discover any new countries, where either gold, silver, or pearls were to be found, there might be amongst us a qualified person to take charge of the fifths for the Emperor.¹ After everything had been thus properly ordered

and we had heard mass said, we commended ourselves to God, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the virgin Mary his blessed mother, and set out on our voyage, as I shall further relate.

CHAPTER II.

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Of the Discovery of Yucatan, and the battle we fought there with the Natives.

We sailed in the year 1517 from the harbour of Jaruco and left the Havannah. This harbour lies on the north coast of Cuba, and is so called by the natives. After twelve days' sail we had passed the coast of Saint Antonius, which in Cuba is called the country of the Guanatavies, a wild tribe of Indians. We now made for the wide ocean, steering continually towards the west, totally ignorant of the shoals and currents or of the winds which predominate in this latitude. Certainly most hazardous on our part, and indeed we were very soon visited by a terrible storm, which continued two days and two nights, in which the whole of us had nigh perished.

After the storm had abated and we had changed our course, we came in sight of land on the twenty-first day after our departure from Cuba, which filled every heart with joy and thanks towards God. This country had never been discovered before, nor had any one ever heard of it. From our ships we could perceive a considerable sized town, which lay about six miles from the sea shore. On account of its magnitude, and because it was larger than any town in Cuba, we gave it the name of *Grand Cairo*.

We resolved that our smallest vessel should near the shore as much as possible, to learn the nature of the spot and look out for a good anchorage. One morning, the 5th of March, we perceived five large canoes full of men coming

towards us as swift as their paddles and sails could bring them from the town just mentioned. These canoes were hollowed out of the trunks of large trees, after the manner of our kneading troughs. Many of them were big enough to hold from forty to fifty Indians.

As these Indians approached us in their canoes, we made signs of peace and friendship, beckoning at the same time to them with our hands and cloaks to come up to us that we might speak with them; for at that time there was nobody amongst us who understood the language of Yucatan or Mexico. They now came along side of us without evincing the least fear, and more than thirty of them climbed on board of our principal ship. We gave them bacon and cassave bread to eat, and presented each with a necklace of green glass beads. After they had for some time minutely examined the ship, the chief, who was a cazique, gave us to understand, by signs, that he wished to get down again into his canoe and return home, but that he would come the next day with many more canoes in order to take us on shore. These Indians wore a kind of cloak made of cotton, and a small sort of apron which hung from their hips half-way down to the knee, which they termed a maltates. We found them more intelligent than the Indians of Cuba, where only the women wear a similar species of apron made of cotton, which hangs down over their thighs, and is called by them a nagua.

But to continue my narrative. Very early the morning following, our cazique again called upon us: this time he brought with him twelve large canoes and a number of rowers. He made known to our captain, by signs, that we were good friends and might come to his town: he would give us plenty to eat with everything we wanted, and could go on shore in his twelve canoes. I shall never forget how he

said, in his language, *con escotoch, con escotoch*, which means, come with me to my houses yonder. We therefore called the spot Punta de Cotoche, under which name it stands on the sea charts.

In consideration of all these friendly invitations from the cazique to accompany him to his village, our captain held a short consultation with us, when we came to the resolution to lower our boats, take the smallest of our vessels with us, and so proceed together with the twelve canoes all at once on shore, as the coast was crowded with Indians from the above-mentioned village. This was accordingly done, and we all arrived there at the same time. The cazique seeing us now landed, but that we made no signs of going to his village, again gave our captain to understand, by signs, that we should follow him to his habitation, making at the same time so many demonstrations of friendship, that a second consultation was held as to whether we should accompany him or not. This was carried in the affirmative, but we took every precaution to be upon our guard, marching in close order with our arms ready for action. We took fifteen crossbows with a like number of matchlocks, and followed the cazique, who was accompanied by a great number of Indians.

As we were thus marching along, and had arrived in the vicinity of several rocky mountains, the cazique all at once raised his voice, calling aloud to his warriors, who it seemed were lying wait in ambush, to fall upon us and destroy us all. The cazique had no sooner given the signal, than out rushed with terrible fury great numbers of armed warriors, greeting us with such a shower of arrows, that fifteen of our men were immediately wounded. These Indians were clad in a kind of cuirass made of cotton, and armed with lances, shields, bows, and slings; with each a tuft of feathers stuck

on his head. As soon as they had let fly their arrows, they rushed forward and attacked us man to man, setting furiously to with their lances, which they held in both hands. When, however, they began to feel the sharp edge of our swords, and saw what destruction our crossbows and matchlocks made among them, they speedily began to give way. Fifteen of their number lay dead on the field.

At some distance from the spot where they had so furiously attacked us was a small place in which stood three houses built of stone and lime. These were temples in which were found many idols made of clay which were of a pretty good size; some had the countenances of devils, others those of females: some again had even more horrible shapes, and appeared to represent Indians committing horrible offences. In these temples we also found small wooden boxes containing other of their gods with hellish faces, several small shells, some ornaments, three crowns, and other trinkets, some in the shape of fish, others in the shape of ducks, all worked out of an inferior kind of gold. Seeing all this, the gold, and the good architectural style of the temples, we felt overjoyed at the discovery of this country; for Peru was not discovered till sixteen years after. While we were fighting with the Indians, the priest Gonzalez ordered the gold and small idols to be removed to our ships by two Indians whom we had brought with us from Cuba. During the skirmish we took two of the natives prisoners, who subsequently allowed themselves to be baptised and became Christians. One was named Melchior and the other Julian; both were tattooed about the eyes. The combat with the natives now being at an end, we resolved to re-embark, and prosecute our voyage of discovery further along the coast towards the west. Having dressed the wounds of our men we again set sail.

CHAPTER III.

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Discovery of the Coast of Campeachy.

Continuing the course we had previously determined upon, more westward along the coast, we discovered many promontories, bays, reefs, and shallows. We all considered this country to be an island, because our pilot, Anton de Alaminos, persisted in it. During daytime we proceeded with all caution, but lay to at nights. After sailing in this way for fourteen days, we perceived another village which appeared to us of considerable magnitude. Here was a bay with an inner harbour, and it appeared to us that there might also be some river or small stream where we could take in fresh water, which latter had become very scarce, as our supply in the casks, which were none of the best, was fast diminishing; for, as the expedition was fitted out solely by persons in poor circumstances, we had not been able to purchase good ones. It happened to be Sunday Lazari when we landed, and we therefore named this place in honour of this day, although we were well aware that the Indians called it the land of *Campeachy*.

In order that the whole of us might land at the same time, we determined to go on shore in our smallest vessel and three boats, all of us well armed, to be ready in case we should meet with a similar rencontre as at the cape of Cotoche. The sea in these bays and roads is very shallow, so that our vessels were forced to anchor at more than three miles distance from the shore. Thus precautions we landed near the village, but were still a good way from the place

were we intended to fill our casks. From this spot the natives also had their water; for we now found that there was no rivulet in the neighbourhood.

When we had brought our casks on shore, filled them with water, and were about to embark again, about fifty Indians from the village came up to us. They all wore stately mantels made of cotton, appeared friendly disposed, and to be caziques. They asked us, by signs, what our business was there? We told them to take in water, and that we were about to re-embark. They further pointed with their hands to the rising of the sun, and asked us whether we came from that quarter, at the same time pronouncing the word *Castilan*, *Castilan*; but at that moment we did not pay any particular attention to the word *Castilan*. In the course of this interview, however, they gave us to understand that we might go with them to their village.

We held a consultation amongst ourselves as to whether we should accept the invitation, and at length unanimously agreed to follow them, but to use the utmost circumspection. They took us to some large edifices, which were strongly put together, of stone and lime, and had otherwise a good appearance. These were temples, the walls of which were covered with figures representing snakes and all manner of gods. Round about a species of altar we perceived several fresh spots of blood. On some of the idols there were figures like crosses, with other paintings representing groups of Indians. All this astonished us greatly as we had neither seen nor heard, of such things before. It appeared to us that the inhabitants had just been sacrificing some Indians to their gods, to obtain from them the power to overcome us.

There were great numbers of Indians with their wives who received us with pleasing smiles, and otherwise made

every show of friendship; but their numbers gradually increasing we began to entertain fears that it would end in the same hostile manner as at Cape Cotoche. While we were thus looking on, a number of Indians approached us clad in tattered cloaks, each carrying a bundle of dried reeds, which they arranged in order on the ground. Among them we also perceived two troops of men armed with bows, lances, shields, slings, and stones, having their cotton cuirasses on. At the head of these, and at some distance from us stood the chiefs. At this moment ten Indians came running out of another temple, all dressed in long white robes, while the thick hair of their heads was so entangled and clotted with blood that it would have been an impossibility to have combed or put it in order without cutting it off. These personages were priests, and in New Spain are commonly termed *Papas*.² I repeat it, that in New Spain they are termed *papas*, and I will therefore in future call them by that name. These *papas* brought with them a kind of incense, which looked like resin, and is termed by them *copal*. They had pans made of clay filled with glowing embers, and with these they perfumed us. They also gave us to understand, by signs, that we should leave their country before the bundles of reeds, which had been brought and were going to be set fire to, should be consumed, otherwise they would attack and kill us every man.

Upon this they ordered the bundles to be lighted, and as soon as they began to burn, all were silent, nor did they utter another syllable. Those, on the contrary, who had ranged themselves in order of battle, began to play on their pipes, blow their twisted shells, and beat their drums. When we saw what their real intentions were, and how confident they appeared, it of course reminded us that our wounds

which we had received at Cape Cotoche were not yet healed; that two of our men had died of the consequences, whom we had been obliged to throw overboard. As the number of Indians continued to increase, we became alarmed, and resolved to retreat to the shore in the best order we could. In this way we marched along the coast until we arrived at that spot where our boats and the small vessels lay with the water-casks. Not far distant from this place stood a rock in the midst of the sea; for, on account of the vast numbers of Indians, we durst not venture to re-embark where we had at first landed, as they would no doubt have fallen upon us while we were getting into our boats.

After we had thus managed to get our water safe on board and re-embark at the small harbour which the bay here forms, we continued our course for six days and six nights without interruption, the weather being very fine. But now the wind suddenly veered round to the north and brought stormy weather, as is always the case with a north wind on this coast. The storm lasted twenty-four hours, and indeed we had nearly all of us met with a watery grave, so boisterous was the sea. In order to save ourselves from total destruction we cast anchor near the shore. The safety of our ship now depended upon two ropes, and had they given way we should have been cast on shore. Oh, in what a perilous situation we were then placed! had we been torn away from our anchors we must have been wrecked off the coast! But it was the will of Providence that our old ropes and cables should preserve us. When the storm had abated we continued our course along the coast and kept in as much as possible, that we might take in water when required. For, as I have before stated, our casks were old and leaky; nor was the best economy used with the water, for we thought

by going on shore we should be certain either to meet with some spring or obtain it by digging wells. Thus coasting along we espied a village from our ships, and about three miles further on there was a kind of inner harbour, at the head of which it appeared to us there might be some river or brook; we therefore resolved to land here.

The water, as I have above mentioned, being uncommonly shallow along this coast, we were compelled to anchor our two larger vessels at about three miles distance from the shore, fearing they might otherwise run aground. We then proceeded with our smallest vessel and all our boats in order to land at the above-mentioned inner harbour. We were, however, quite upon our guard, and carried along with us, besides the water-casks, our arms, crossbows, and muskets.

It was about midday when we landed. The distance from here to the village, which was called Potonchan, might be three miles. Here we found some wells, maise plantations, and stone buildings. Our water-casks were soon filled, but we could not succeed to get them into our boats on account of an attack made upon us by great numbers of the inhabitants. I will, however, break off here and relate the battle we fought, in the next chapter.