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The Recalcitrance of Myth: The Conquest of the Americas in High School History Textbooks

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The European "discovery" and settlement of the Americas—both the acts and their aftershocks—have lately come under intense scrutiny. This is of course not an entirely new phenomenon. Each generation interprets anew the early European explorers of the Western Hemisphere, and Christopher Columbus in particular has proved to be a protean figure, sometimes a symbol of scientific progress and human advancement, sometimes a symbol of benighted superstition (Wilford 247-65). Given the recent quincentennial commemoration, it was natural that Columbus and those who followed in his wake would be examined afresh by the latest generation to tackle the fortunate/unfortunate encounter between Europeans and the peoples who were already resident in this hemisphere. Moreover, it was natural that the reexamination would encompass calls for the reassessment and revision of history curricula and textbooks. As a result of demographic and political changes, the reassessment already had been taking place, with both politicians and educators debating over what, if anything, should determine "cultural literacy" and whether "multiculturalism" and "pluralism" would be the bane or salvation of the nation. Still, the quincentennial has provided a focus for the argument, and its impact can be seen in the plethora of publications and position papers devoted to Columbus and the events that ensued as a result of his encounter with "the Indies." For example, the quincentennial and its aftermath are the subjects of a 1991 position statement by the National Council for the Social Studies, the text of which implies that educators need both to rediscover the facts of contact and settlement as well as to place the "discovery" within a new, more inclusive context. A similar approach is taken by the editors of the journal *Rethinking Schools*, who devote a special issue to *Rethinking Columbus: Teaching about the 500th Anniversary of Columbus's Arrival in America*. In this special issue, educators take a harsh look at what hitherto has been available in textbooks or children's literature about Columbus and other aspects of contact

and settlement. Falsehoods, distortions, and myths in high school textbooks likewise are documented in an article by James Loewen, "Columbus in High School," published in the anthology *Confronting Columbus*; and historian James Axtell examines the state of history textbooks written for college students in one of the essays in his *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America*. Other writers examine not only the what but also the how of teaching about contact and settlement. "Discovering Columbus: Rereading the Past," for example, by high school teacher William Bigelow, describes the activities he uses to encourage his students to probe a history that he characterizes as myth.

These examples represent only a small number of the literally thousands of documents, articles, and books that have been pouring forth. But is all this ferment having any effect? Are these calls for reform being heeded? If so, how and to what extent? If not, why not? To answer these questions, this paper will compare two sets of world history textbooks: five published in the seventies, six published in the late eighties or early nineties. Each was prepared for use by secondary students, each was published by a major supplier of textbooks, and a copy of each was deposited in the library at a medium-sized public university that was and is in the business of training high school teachers.

In general, the textbooks from the seventies do little to convey the complexity of the situation surrounding early encounters between Europeans and Native Americans. By necessity, design, or unconscious selection, the textbooks depict an orderly history, one which would never lead a reader to guess at the extent or variety of the early contacts between Europeans and Native Americans. Accounts kept by sixteenth and seventeenth-century explorers, traders, fishermen, and settlers, as well as narratives composed by the indigenous peoples themselves, depict a more muddled situation, one filled with mundane voyages and expeditions—routine fishing expeditions along the North Atlantic coast, for example—that did not qualify as epic events and so were omitted from the textbooks. Thus, it would never occur to a student assigned one of these textbooks that, as Axtell has pointed out, Europeans had been trading and fishing in the New England area for over a hundred years before the Pilgrims arrived in Massachusetts (Axtell 29). Similarly, the textbooks give little indication of how early the lives of Europeans—Spanish and French in particular—became interwoven with those of the Indians. In the textbooks, a clean line of demarcation is drawn between Europeans and Native Americans. They were usually lined up in battle order, and when one side—the Europe-

an side—won, the other side gracefully faded out of view as history swept on. Yet ample evidence, easily accessible, can be found to demonstrate that Europeans were scattered all over the landscape, as slaves, as traders, as members of tribes. In North America, the Indian sojourn of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and his three companions is a notable example because it is so well documented (Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Adventures*; Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Relation*; Fernández), but there are many other cases of Europeans who became members of Indian communities, whether willingly or unwillingly. In 1519, for example, Jerónimo de Aguilar paddled with several Indians to an island off the coast of Yucatan, there to rejoin his compatriots who were traveling under the command of Hernán Cortés. Aguilar's Spanish was rusty from disuse, for he had spent eight years as the servant of an Indian master after having been lost from a Spanish expedition. Aguilar was able to provide information about another Spanish castaway, who, his face decorated with tattoos and his lip pierced, was now a *cacique* with an Indian wife and children and who declined to leave the people who had become his own and, indeed, reportedly had counseled the Indians to attack some Spanish ships that earlier had sailed into the region (Turner 148-49). Another Spaniard who spent years among the Indians was Juan Ortiz, whose decade-long captivity among Florida Indians is recounted by Garcilaso de la Vega (de la Vega 73). De la Vega also enumerates the men who deserted or were captured from the De Soto expedition: Diego Muñoz, Hernando Vintimilla (230-31), and Diego de Guzmán (477-81), as well as two African slaves and one Moorish slave, all left unnamed (333-34). And this version of the Colombian exchange ran in the other direction as well. A complex figure like de la Vega, son of an Incan mother and Spanish father, conversant with Spanish culture, a cavalier and courtier yet appreciative of the accomplishments of his Incan forbears and proud to denominate himself The Inca, did not exist in the world of the textbook of the seventies, from which, however regrettably, the Indian, barbarous or noble, crafty or innocent, simply vanished after serving as an unfortunate foil to the Europeans.

Instead of examining these complex interactions, the textbooks almost invariably focus on battle and conquest. In this preoccupation, the textbooks are adhering to the venerable tradition, familiar to any schoolchild of the sixties and seventies, of treating history as the iteration of the acquisition and loss of power and territory. But given that the textbooks focus on battles and conquest, what "spin" do these accounts give to these, the more violent encounters between Europeans and indigenous peoples? To answer this question, the remainder of

this essay will focus primarily on one discrete event, the military conquest of Mexico, which took place in the years 1519 to 1521. This event is extremely well documented, with narratives surviving in the voices of both conquerer and conquered. Given that it is so well documented, and that both European and Native American perspectives are readily accessible, what do the writers of textbooks choose to include and whose viewpoints are adopted?

The actual sixteenth-century accounts suggest a fact surprising to one educated in the 1960s and 1970s: that the conquest of Mexico in a sense was a joint venture of Europeans and indigenous peoples. The textbooks of the seventies, however, even those published as recently as 1979, fail to illustrate the indispensable role the Indians played as allies of the Spanish in Mexico. Instead, the textbooks emphasize the epic and heroic nature of the conquest: led by a Great Man, a small band of plucky Europeans, equipped with superior technology, faces down hordes of Indians.

The textbook *Men and Nations: A World History* is a fairly typical example of how a textbook can diminish, even ignore, the importance of Mexican Indians as allies of the Spanish—the practice of racism through omission, if you will. About the conquest, the authors write only this:

With 10 ships and 600 men, Hernando Cortés invaded Mexico in 1519. He defeated the Aztec ruler Montezuma, captured Tenochtitlán with its vast wealth in gold, and eventually conquered the entire Aztec Empire. Horses and guns, unknown to the American Indians, helped the small Spanish force overcome the much larger Aztec armies. (Mazour, 322)

This passage does not acknowledge the role of disease in reducing the city; nor is there acknowledgement of the role played by the thousands of Native American allies who seized what looked like an opportunity to cast off imperial rule. Perhaps the fact that the Spanish were assisted to victory by smallpox pustules and Indians is not as flattering an image as that of a heroic band overcoming formidable odds through pluck and those indispensable ingredients of our own frontier, the gun and the horse.

A longer yet equally unsatisfactory account of the Spanish conquest of Mexico is found in *The Pageant of World History*, the title of which itself suggests the bent of the author, for the word “pageant” has connotations of nobility and grandeur and creates an impression of history as a stately progression. A section heading in this book is if any-

thing even more indicative of the approach that this text takes. “Who Were the Heroes of the Age of Discovery?” this heading asks, and the text answers Columbus, Bartholomeu Díaz, Vasco da Gama, Balboa, Magellan, Ponce de León, John Cabot, Henry Hudson, Verrazano, and De Soto (Leinwand [1977] 185). (Apparently there were no heroic Native Americans at this time.) Of Cortés it is written that he “landed and made conquests in Mexico.” The author, subscribing to the Great Man in History approach, writes as if Cortés singlehandedly subdued the Aztec nation. In the section of the book devoted to the conquest of Mexico in particular, this impression is reinforced. Here is its account:

Cortez was a conquistador who took Mexico by military force. His soldiers willingly followed him to Mexico, where some met fame and fortune and some met death. With 11 ships and 600 soldiers armed with guns and gunpowder, cannons, and horses, Cortez set out from Cuba for Mexico. He landed at what is now Veracruz and set out in the direction of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, now Mexico City. He met large numbers of Indians who regarded Montezuma, the Aztec leader, as their chief. Some of the Indians had long suffered at the hands of Montezuma and were not unwilling to see him defeated by the newcomers. Montezuma, knowing that the days of his empire were few, first ordered, then bribed, and finally begged Cortez not to come to Tenochtitlán. But Cortez went to the capital and, in time, conquered the king, the people, and the capital. Tenochtitlán was burned, and Mexico city was built in its place. (Leinwand [1977] 250)

Cortés is the subject of this paragraph; thus, the conquest of an entire empire is narrated in terms of the adventures of one man. Moreover, notice the heroic implications of the words “some met fame and fortune and some met death.” The formulaic “fame and fortune” obscures the grittiness and grubbiness of the Spaniards’ greedy scramble for gold. Observe, too, how impressive it seems that it took only 600 Spaniards—600!—to subdue the Aztecs. Notice also that in the end it is Cortés who “went to the capital and...conquered the king, the people, and the capital.” Synecdoche—having the individual stand for the group—is a venerable rhetorical device, but it does have the effect of highlighting the leader, the Great Man, and obscuring other factors that had a bearing on the success of the Spanish. Above all, observe the passive role of the Indians, some of whom “were not unwilling to see him defeated by the newcomers.” This sentence does not even hint at the crucial role played by the Spaniards’ Tlaxcalan allies. In addi-

tion, these words could be interpreted as a justification for the Spanish overthrow of Moctezuma, for they were, after all, simply accomplishing what the subject peoples desired but could not effect on their own. Finally, the passage creates a feeling of inevitability: "Montezuma, knowing that the days of his empire were few, first ordered, then bribed, and finally begged Cortés not to come to Tenochtitlán. But Cortés went to the capital and, in time, conquered the king, the people, and the capital. Tenochtitlán was burned, and Mexico City was built in its place." The descending/ascending lists, which culminate in the erection of the city we know today, a modern city in place of the Aztec capital, make the progress of the Spanish seem inexorable, an impression in keeping with a common assumption that the Spanish, however nasty and regrettable some of their behavior might have been, were the irresistible harbingers of the future.

Similar observations may be made using the textbook *The New Exploring World History*, a revision of an earlier *Exploring World History*. The inclusion of the word "Exploring" in the title implies that exploring is a good thing, so one might expect that the Europeans basically will be portrayed in a favorable light. Thus, under the heading "How Did Spain Gain New World Riches?" is found this passage:

This was a glorious age for Spain as well as Portugal. Cortez had conquered the Indian civilization in Mexico and Pizarro, another Spaniard, had done so in Peru. From Mexico and Peru, the Spanish had taken great riches in gold and silver. De Soto had found the Mississippi River and Coronado had explored the southwestern part of North America. Spain's chief interest in the Americas was in getting gold and silver, but Spanish adventurers and traders also came to the colonies. Missionaries arrived and taught the Indians. Many Indians changed to the Catholic faith. A "New Spain" grew up in the lands south of what is now the United States. (Holt and O'Connor 223)

Here the phrase "glorious age" replaces the formula "fame and fortune," but with much the same implications for the reader. This textbook also adopts the Great Man in History approach. We don't even find mention of the soldiers who accompanied Cortés, let alone what role Indians played in the expedition. As for the impact of all these doings on the natives, we learn only that they were taught—presumably no prior teaching had been going on—and that "Many...changed to the Catholic faith," a rather mild way of representing the process of conversion.

This textbook does devote a section to answering the question, "What Were Some of the Bad Effects of Colonization?" but this passage only reemphasizes the limitations of the authors' vision. They mention only two bad effects. First, they observe that the worst result of colonization was "the evil of the slave trade" (225); however, they are writing with reference only to the traffic in Africans, with nary a hint that Indians, too, were the victims of the commerce in human beings. The second "bad effect" is hinted at in this passage:

Europeans had different ideas about the people of Asia than they had about the Indians in America and the blacks in Africa. Europeans respected the civilizations in India and China. But the people of India and China had little interest in Europeans. (226)

Notice that after the brief mention of the "different ideas" the authors do not explore the effect these ideas had on European behavior toward either the Africans or the Indians. Instead the passage serves to introduce a discussion on the difficulties the Europeans faced in their attempts to trade with India and China. What starts out as a section on the bad effects of colonization in the Americas will turn into a lament about obstacles faced by European traders. After the briefest of allusions to European racism toward Africans and Indians, the subject is immediately changed to the trade barriers faced by Europeans as a result of Asian biases. To portray the Europeans as victims in a passage on the bad effects of colonialism seems little short of perverse. Flawed structurally and logically, this section reveals how difficult it was for the writers to perceive that an issue that needed to be covered was being slighted. It is as if they had a glimmering that something of importance had happened to two groups of people, Native Americans and Africans, but these people were too peripheral to the writers' concerns for them to pursue the topic.

Not all the textbooks made the Indians disappear quite as thoroughly as the above ones do. The authors of *People and Our World: A Study of World History* note that the Spanish under the command of Cortés were assisted by "an attack force of thousands of Indian allies" (Kownslar and Smart 448). This account also states that "up to 120,000" Indians were killed in the effort to take Tenochtitlán, a rare acknowledgement of the human cost of the conquest. This text also includes translations of several primary documents in a section designed to promote student inquiry—for example, the *Requerimiento* (454-55) and Juan de Sepúlveda's justification of the wars of conquest (460). Curiously though, the text states that "Cortez accepted Montezuma's

invitation to visit the Aztec capital city." This statement is followed by some more odd language: "A battle took place soon after his arrival, and Cortez had to flee Tenochtitlán. Shortly thereafter, Montezuma died of unknown causes" (448). These statements are vague to the point of being disingenuous. There is no explicit acknowledgement that the Spanish might have somehow had a hand both in precipitating the battle that led to their flight and in creating the crisis that led to the death of the Aztec leader. Moreover, the introduction to the *Requerimiento*, even while acknowledging that the document would be read to the Indians in a language they would be unable to understand, states that it would be read to "enemy Indians," thereby ironically accepting Spanish assumptions about the rightness of their actions even while (presumably) encouraging students to question those assumptions.

Another textbook, entitled simply *A World History*, also make a flawed attempt to acknowledge the role of Native Americans, either as participants in or victims of the conquest. At first it prints merely the following:

In 1519, Cortez led an expedition of 533 men and 16 horses from Cuba to Mexico. In less than three years, he succeeded in destroying the mighty Aztec Empire and conquering all of Mexico for the Spanish Crown. (Linder, Selzer, and Berk 290)

Again we see the omission of the role played by the Tlaxcalans, whereas the role of Cortés is placed in high relief. The Spanish, of course, must have been brave and indomitable, since "destroying the mighty Aztec Empire and conquering all of Mexico" required only 533 men, 16 horses, and three years. However, despite this cursory account, the role of one Indian *is* acknowledged, that of La Malinche, known as Doña Marina, interpreter for and mistress of Cortés. The authors of this textbook try to engage the interest of students by periodically introducing individuals, sometimes historical, sometimes fictional, and telling anecdotes about them. Here are some of the words put into the mouth of La Malinche:

My lord Cortez was a brave and skillful general. He was also a fair and honorable man. He respected the Indians. But after he returned to Spain, cruel and dishonest officials took his place. They looted and burned Aztec cities. They destroyed many fine works of art because they considered them works of the devil. They melted down the statues of gold and silver, and shipped the metal to

Spain. They forbade Indians, under penalty of death, to worship the old gods. They burned almost all the old scrolls containing Aztec laws and history. Indians were forbidden to speak their own language. (292)

In this invented speech by La Malinche, the authors at least acknowledge the severity of the consequences of conquest for the indigenous population. Yet they insist on preserving the Great Man in History by displacing all blame for what transpired on the heads of a second wave of Europeans, the administrators and bureaucrats. The conquest itself is preserved in all its epic purity.

As these five examples demonstrate, secondary world history textbooks of the 1970s systematically select—or create—material that depicts the conquest of Mexico as a heroic, epic event. Information to the contrary is either not included or is glossed over. Even the deliberate attempts to inject the point of view of Mexican Indians miscarry on (probably) unexamined assumptions about the heroic nature of the conquest. But, as we have seen, for the past decade educators have been trying to reexamine and retell the story of contact between Europeans and Native Americans. Given the fact of the quincentennial and the debate surrounding it, does the most recent crop of textbooks depict the conquest of Mexico with more attention to Native Americans, whether as agents or victims? To a certain extent, the answer is yes—but a very qualified yes. Most of the textbooks try to depict the conquest as a complex event that involved many factors. Textbooks published in the late '80s or early '90s typically at least make mention of the significance of all or some of the following: the supposed importance of the legend of Quetzalcoatl; horses; guns and armor and swords; small pox; Cortés's leadership ability and diplomatic skill; La Malinche's linguistic talent; Moctezuma's personality; and the role of luck. Moreover, the Native Americans, both as victims of and participants in the conquest, are much more a presence in the newer textbooks.

The 1990 version of *The Pageant of World History* demonstrates a push—though a rather slight one—toward a more inclusive history of the conquest of Mexico. Most sentences in the brief account are virtually identical with those of the version published during the late 1970s, but there is one small yet significant change. The earlier textbook contained the following sentence: "Some of the Indians had long suffered at the hands of Montezuma and were not unwilling to see him defeated by the newcomers." As noted above, this sentence assigns the Indians a passive role, and the Spanish could almost be viewed as lib-

erators of poor downtrodden Indians rather than as their conquerers. The 1990 version replaces this sentence with the following: "Some Indians...had suffered at the hands of Montezuma and were willing to join the Spanish against him" (Leinwand [1990] 250). Brief as this sentence is, it does transform the indigenous peoples into actors in their own history rather than onlookers in someone else's.

Other textbooks likewise try to recapture the role played by Indians during the conquest. One account, for example, includes the observation that "[t]he coastal Indians and other subject peoples joined forces with Cortés as he moved inland and fought against various groups" (Wallbank *et al* 455; cf. Stearns, Schwartz, and Beyer 356). Yet another textbook, *Living World History*, even goes into slightly more detail, briefly describing the character of the Aztec empire as a factor in the relative ease with which the Spanish conquered Mexico. The authors argue that the Aztecs never integrated subject peoples into Aztec society but simply treated them as sources of tribute. They then observe that the Spaniards were able to

subdue the Aztec Empire completely...with comparative ease because they had the help of many Indian tribes who had been conquered by the Aztecs. These tribes welcomed the opportunity to turn on their cruel Aztec masters. (Wallbank and Schier 260)

The newer textbooks therefore do tend to acknowledge that Native Americans participated in the conquest of Mexico; simultaneously they pay more attention to the toll that the conquest took. For example, one author writes,

By the time the Spanish defeated the Aztecs and reduced Tenochtitlán to rubble in 1521, more than 100,000 Aztecs had died from warfare and starvation. Engulfed by an epidemic of smallpox, a disease new to the Americas, thousands more Indians died. (Stearns, Schwartz, and Beyer 356)

Given these examples, why must we give only a qualified yes to the question of whether textbooks now provide a completer picture of the conquest of Mexico? First, not all textbooks reveal a concern with conveying the complexity or the brutality of conquest. Witness the textbook entitled *World History: People and Nations*, which is simply a dressed-up version of *Men and Nations: A World History*, a textbook published in 1975. In spite of a more inclusive title (at least in terms of gender), the passage on the conquest of Mexico is virtually the same

as that of the earlier text, with only minimal rewording: the focus continues to be on Hernán Cortés, the Great Man; on the smallness of his force—10 ships and 600 men; and on the technological superiority of the invaders. No role is given to the Indians, who are simply on the receiving end of the action (Mazour and Peoples 367).

Moreover, even textbooks including information about the role of indigenous peoples contain language that betrays a fundamental bias. Consistently language is chosen that softens the brutality of the conquest and its aftermath, as the following passage illustrates:

After several days of sight-seeing in Tenochtitlán, the Spaniards boldly took Montezuma prisoner and kept him in their quarters. Despite his apparent success, however, Cortés was still in an explosive situation. While he was out of the city, one of his lieutenants interfered with an Aztec religious ceremony. An uprising broke out against the Spaniards. (Jantzen, Neill, and Krieger 365)

First, the word "sight-seeing," with its innocuous connotations, hardly calls up the image of rapacious, gold-greedy invaders. The Spanish were not tourists, however much they marveled at the city they would then plunder without compunction. Second, the author has chosen to describe the Spanish as having "boldly" seized Moctezuma. From another point of view, would not "treacherously" have been just as appropriate? Finally, the statement that the lieutenant "interfered" with a religious ceremony disguises the undisputed fact that what is being referred to here was the unprovoked ambush and massacre of unarmed celebrants. Witness an Aztec account, which reads in part:

At this moment in the fiesta, when the dance was loveliest and when song was linked to song, the Spaniards were seized with an urge to kill the celebrants. They all ran forward, armed as if for battle. They closed the entrances and passageways, all the gates of the patio...They posted guards so no one could escape...

They ran in among the dancers, forcing their way to the place where the drums were played. They attacked the man who was drumming and cut off his arms. Then they cut off his head, and it rolled across the floor.

...They slashed others in the abdomen, and their entrails all spilled to the ground. Some attempted to run away, but their intestines dragged as they ran; they seemed to tangle their feet in their own entrails. No matter how they tried to save themselves, they could find no escape.

Some attempted to force their way out, but the Spaniards murdered them at the gates. Others climbed the walls, but they could not save themselves. Those who ran into the communal houses were safe there for a while; so were those who lay down among the victims and pretended to be dead. But if they stood up again, the Spaniards saw them and killed them. (León-Portilla 74-76)

The statement that "one of his lieutenants interfered with an Aztec religious ceremony" hardly seems adequate.

Perhaps more fundamental, however, is the fact that underlying these accounts is a myth unchanged from the 1970s: Following a pattern that would do Vladimir Propp proud, Cortés is depicted as the hero who sets out on a quest and, through courage and cleverness, triumphs after overcoming numerous obstacles. In keeping with this myth, the authors of these textbooks emphasize the vulnerability of the tiny Spanish expedition by reiterating its numbers like a mantra.

...with 10 ships and 600 men... (Mazour and Peoples 367)

...with 11 ships, a few horses, and 600 soldiers... (Leinwand [1990] 378)

...with about 700 soldiers and 16 horses... (Stearns, Schwartz, and Beyer 356)

With 11 ships, 16 horses, several small cannons, and about 600 troops... (Wallbank *et al* 454)

The most revealing use of this motif of the small band is found in the textbook *World History: Perspectives on the Past*. It contains the usual formula: "with about 600 Spaniards, 11 ships, 16 horses, and a few brass cannon" (Jantzen, Neill, and Krieger 363-4); in addition, the account is peppered with reminders of the vulnerability of the invaders:

...a small force of Spaniards...Cortés's little group of Spaniards was approaching the vast Aztec empire with its 11 million people...Cortés's small force...Never in history had so small an army planned to topple so great an empire...The Spaniards were overwhelmingly outnumbered...his small force..." (364 ff.)

The authors of this textbook do acknowledge that the Spanish had assistance from Native Americans. At one point they observe that, with the help of the interpreter La Malinche, Cortés is able to find allies among disaffected subject peoples. At another point they write that Cortés, having been driven out of Tenochtitlán, returns with a "huge

army of Aztec-hating Indians" (365). The authors are nevertheless able to write in another passage that "[h]is handful of Spaniards destroyed the Aztec empire" (364).

Regardless of the historical truth, huge army or no huge army, the epic myth is central to this retelling of the conquest of Mexico. The Great Man, accompanied by his few but doughty retainers, confronts the hordes, and against all odds, prevails. This disparity between the writers' awareness of the importance of the Indian allies and their ability to integrate them into the narrative could be explained as a result of a "Eurocentrism" that tries to justify our past and, thereby, our present. Though they are intellectually aware that thousands of Native American allies were present at Tenochtitlán, at core the textbook authors are writing an "our" history that is fundamentally hostile to treating indigenous peoples as essential parts of the narrative. Writing about Columbus, James Loewen argues,

Our texts treat Columbus as an origin myth: he was good and so are we. They can say nothing bad about Columbus without reflecting badly on us, so they omit any untoward detail, no matter how important, that might undermine the moral and technical superiority of Europeans. (Loewen 99)

Columbus, moreover, sets the pattern by which we view subsequent explorers and settlers; he is "the first of many brave empire builders" (99). Thus, just as Columbus can do no wrong, neither can Cortés.

Conflated with this "Eurocentric" origin myth may be something else: the myth of progress. As Chellis Glendinning has observed,

If we are, as a society, unquestioning devotees of linear progress, then we assume we can expand into infinity. We can march across land, into other people's territories, into seemingly limitless markets...with no attention to the infringements on the rights of people, cultures, animals, and ecosystems perpetrated in the service of our belief.

The idea of progress becomes invisible and inviolable, surrounding us and informing our perceptions of human evolution and "the good life." We come to think of ourselves as occupying the pinnacle of civilization. (Glendinning 151)

The power of the myth of progress as a shaper of the tale we call 'history' is powerfully illustrated by Jeffrey Burton Russell in *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians*. Scholars have long

known that educated people during both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance understood that the earth was round. Yet in the nineteenth century the myth took shape that Columbus had had to overcome the opposition of contemporaries—educated ones, at that—who feared that his ships would sail off the edge of the world. “[F]ixed in modern folklore,” writes Russell, is “[t]he story of Christopher Columbus, the bold young rationalist who overcame ignorant and intractable churchmen and superstitious sailors” (Russell 5). Columbus had “[t]he courage of the rationalist confronted by the crushing weight of tradition and its cruel institutions of repression... (6). In the particular case of the United States, underlying the acceptance of the flat earth myth

was a chauvinism that wanted to believe that before the dawn of America broke the world had been in darkness. Columbus's first voyage, for American patriots, was rather like a new day of creation in the freshness of Eden. (51)

In the history textbooks herein examined, Cortés is cast in this role of the bringer of light, bearer of progress. His heroic stature must be protected not only because he is a European, but also because the writers of history textbooks have embraced the changes he brought about as representing progress. That those changes meant the destruction or absorption of Native Americans creates the paradox that, try as they might to be progressive, the Indians represent what the writers, as progressives, believe themselves to have transcended. Trying to insert that which represents non-progress into a myth of progress creates an intractable problem for these textbook writers.

One can argue that the discussions that have taken place in the decade leading up to the quincentennial have led to good-faith attempts to rediscover the peoples of America lost to history as a result of their “discovery” by Europeans in 1492. At the same time, these attempts to write inclusive histories have led, and will continue to lead, to inconsistent results because the basic underlying myth, that of change and progress, inevitably relegates indigenous peoples to the sidelines. Children in the 1990s are more likely than children in the 1970's to learn that hundreds of thousands of Native Americans died of wounds, disease, hunger, and maltreatment. But it will take more than a dollop of facts such as these to counter the overwhelming impression created by the assumption that, whatever the Native American point of view, the conquest was a good thing—as it must be, for it, and events like it, led to the creation of the nation whose students are reading the history. The niblets of information (or sidebars and boxed anecdotes, marginal-

ization both literal and figurative) that have been inserted into the textbooks will do nothing to change the paramount impression that Native Americans were, at best, a sideshow, at worst an impediment, in the great epic of human (read European) progress. Until fundamental re-vision takes place in our very concept of history, sixteen horses and a few hundred Europeans will always loom larger in the imagination than numbers, even huge numbers, of rebellious Native Americans.

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