



A SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE INDIES

BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS was born in Seville in 1484. At the age of eighteen he left Spain for the New World, where he participated in the conquest of Cuba and witnessed the first full-scale massacre of an Indian community. He became a priest and, after a 'conversion', entered the Dominican order. Thereafter he dedicated himself to the protection and defence of the Indians. After witnessing the ravages and atrocities of the Spanish colonists and the tragic failure of his own project for a peaceful colony in Cumaná, he wrote the *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* in 1542. The book was dedicated to Philip II and was, Las Casas claimed, intended to inform the Spanish crown of what was happening in America, as a warning that if the atrocities continued God would destroy Spain as a punishment. This astonishing work – a fierce, informed, deeply atmospheric anatomy of genocide – was immediately translated into every major European language and for three hundred years established the image of the Spanish conquest of America in the eyes of Europe. Las Casas wrote innumerable other works in defence of the Indies, including one of the earliest studies in comparative anthropology (*The Apologetic History of the Indies*) and a general *History of the Indies*. He died in 1576.

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BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS

A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies

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Previous page: Map of America (Basle, 1540) showing the standards of Spain and Portugal.

INTRODUCTION

I

The *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* was the first and the most bitter protest against the excesses of European colonization in the Americas, and its author, Bartolomé de Las Casas, ‘Defender and Apostle to the Indians’, the most controversial figure in the long and troubled history of Spain's American empire. In the four hundred years since his death he has been given many roles to play: the voice of a European Christian conscience raised against the casual slaughter of thousands of ‘barbarians’ in a remote, barely imaginable quarter of the globe; the creator of the ‘Black Legend’, a distorted Protestant-inspired record of Spanish atrocities and cruelties which was to darken every attempt to exonerate Spanish imperial ventures from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries; the distant, unwitting father of Spanish-American independence, ‘that friend of humanity’, in the words of ‘The Liberator’ Simón Bolívar, ‘who with such fervour and determination denounced to his government and his contemporaries the most horrific acts of that sanguineous frenzy’; and the equally unwitting progenitor of today's Liberation Theology. In Latin America he is still ubiquitous. Even in Spain, despite murmurings of protest from the Catholic reactionaries of the late nineteenth century, he has been hailed as the ‘authentic expression of the true Spanish conscience’, in an attempt to explain away the destruction of the ‘Indian’ peoples as a passing aberration in the nation's history. And for many, both in Spain and beyond, his presence seems, somehow, to redeem the inescapable complicity of all Europe in the Spanish conquests. The Abbé Guillaume Raynal, author, together with Diderot, of the *Philosophical and Political History of the Two Indies*, the fiercest and the most widely read condemnation of European colonialism to be written during the Enlightenment, looked forward to a more generous age when ‘these unfortunate lands which have been destroyed will be repopulated and acquire laws, customs, justice and liberty’. And he imagined a statue of Las Casas, ‘in which you will be shown standing between the American and the Spaniard, holding out your breast to the dagger of the latter to save the life of the former. And on the base such words as

these should be inscribed: IN A CENTURY OF FEROCITY, LAS CASAS, WHOM YOU SEE BEFORE YOU, WAS A BENEVOLENT MAN'. There are now, throughout the Americas, dozens of such statues.

Some of Las Casas's many identities have been devised to serve political and moral interests he would not have shared and may not even have understood. The 'Black Legend' was largely an instrument of Anglo-Dutch propaganda, and he would have been horrified at the uses to which the despised Protestant heretics had put his work. Independence from Spain was something he never contemplated even for the Indians, let alone the descendants of the conquistadores themselves. Liberation Theology's implicit claim that the 'poor of Christ' possess a privileged understanding of the human condition comes close to his self-conscious, prophetic, apostolic vision of the new American Church. Nevertheless, he would never have accepted any kind of revolt against the power of either the Church or the State. His attacks on the behaviour of the conquistadores, on the agents of the Crown, even on members of the clergy were relentless and uncompromising. But he was never once during his lifetime formally accused of heterodoxy, nor ever suspected of treason. Only his fiercest enemy, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (to whom I shall return) suggested that his writings were heretical and a threat to the interests of the Spanish monarchy. Las Casas, in fact, regarded all rebels as disrupters of 'the common reason of man'. Like many radicals, he was, in all respects but one, the staunchest of conservatives. Self-educated, his massive if erratic learning was directed only against those who argued that the conquest of America had conferred upon the Castilian Crown rights to the goods or the labour of the native inhabitants of the Americas.

Las Casas's understanding of the historical and eschatological significance of the discovery and conquest of America contrasted an early vision of peaceful settlement with the rapacious horrors of the conquests which followed. Columbus, whose diary he preserved and edited, had, in Las Casas's view, been chosen by God for his learning and virtue to bring the Gospel to the New World. It was for this, he wrote, 'that he was called Christopher, that is to say *Christum ferens*, which means carrier or bearer of Christ'. It was the Spanish settlers, men precisely like Las Casas as he had once been, who had transformed a trading and evangelizing mission not unlike that practised by the Portuguese along the coast of Malacca into genocidal colonization. Twice, once in Cumaná on the Venezuelan coast between 1520 and 1521, and then again between 1545 and 1560, in the optimistically named Verapaz ('True Peace'), a region in modern Honduras, Las Casas attempted to create peaceful settlements of the kind which the missionaries might have been able to build if the Spanish colonists had not got

there first: settlements of priests and honest farmers. Both experiments failed. The priests at Cumaná and the 'simple labourers' whom Las Casas had fetched from Castile for the purpose were massacred after a slaving raid on the area by Guayquerí Indians, who could not be expected to distinguish between one Spaniard and the next. (Las Casas gives a somewhat schematic account of this on pp. 88–9.) Verapaz lasted longer, but it, too, collapsed under pressure from Spanish settlers and from the often less than peaceable ambitions of the 'honest farmers' themselves.

But for all his insistence that the Crown had seriously mismanaged its colonies and that the behaviour of the colonists had 'given reason for the name of Christ to be loathed and abominated by countless people', Las Casas never once denied, as many of his fellow-Dominicans effectively did, that the Spanish Crown was the legitimate ruler of the Americas and he persisted until his death in the belief that the indigenous peoples had, in ignorance but in good faith, voluntarily surrendered their natural sovereignty to the King of Spain. In a treatise entitled *Comprobatory Treatise on the Imperial Sovereignty and Universal Jurisdiction which the Kings of Castile Have over these Indies*, printed in the same year as the *Short Account*, and probably in an attempt to deflect official criticism from it, Las Casas set out to 'silence those who say that, because I detest and severely abominate all that has happened in the Indies – and I do, and intend to do as long as I live – I thereby somehow impugn and detract from the aforesaid title'. The argument which ran through this and so many of his other quasi-legal works was simple: the kings of Spain are the legitimate rulers of the Americas; but they are so because – and *only* because – in 1493 Pope Alexander VI 'donated' to the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella sovereignty over all the newfound lands in the Atlantic which had not already been occupied by some other Christian prince.

There were many (many of them close associates of Las Casas) who denied that the papal claim to 'plenitude of power' over the entire world, and with it the right to give away the lands of pagan princes, was a valid one. Las Casas never questioned it. It was, as he said time and again, the only possible legitimation of the Spanish presence in the Americas. But although the papal grant might confer sovereignty over the New World upon the Catholic monarchs, it did not confer property rights over the persons or lands of its inhabitants. These, he insisted, remained theirs by natural right. Nor did it entirely deprive the native rulers of their political authority. As Las Casas stated explicitly in the very last work he wrote, *On Royal Power*, the 'kings' and 'princes' of the Americas enjoyed the same status as the nobility

in Naples and Milan, both of which also formed part of the Spanish Empire at this time. Furthermore, Alexander VI had charged the Catholic monarchs to 'induce the peoples who live in such islands and lands to receive the Catholic religion, save that you never inflict upon them hardships and dangers'. The Indians were not chattels or goods; they were subjects of the Castilian Crown – 'our subjects and our vassals', as Queen Isabella herself had phrased it. For the Spaniards to treat them like animals was thus against God's laws, the laws of nature, and a violation of the laws of Castile. It was also an abomination in God's eyes: a denial of the humanity which all men, whatever their beliefs or cultural preferences, shared. Las Casas was even prepared to argue, both in the *Short Account* (p. 70) and later and at greater length in *On Royal Power*, that the Indians now had sufficient cause, 'under natural, divine, and Roman law', for *them* to wage a 'just war' against the Spaniards.

Las Casas's entire life was dedicated to demonstrating the truth of these claims, first to his king, then to the royal administration – the Council of the Indies – and then to the world at large. As he stated in the preamble to his will, 'I have had no other interests but this: to liberate [the Indians] from the violent deaths which they have suffered and suffer... through compassion at seeing so many multitudes of people who are rational, docile, humble, gentle and simple, who are so well equipped to receive our Holy Catholic Faith and every moral doctrine and who are endowed with such good customs, as God is my witness.' In pursuit of these ends Las Casas wrote a vast number of works. The bulk of these consisted of detailed and endlessly reiterated proposals for legal and institutional reform. They included, however, in addition to the *Short Account*, two further descriptive works: a massive *History of the Indies* and an equally immense work of comparative ethnology, significantly entitled *Apologetic History of the Indies*.

The *History of the Indies* contains most of the material to be found in the *Short Account*. It was, said Las Casas, 'a book of the greatest and ultimate necessity', and it had been written to demonstrate that there was no people on earth, no matter how seemingly 'barbarous' their condition, that could be denied membership of the 'Christian family'. The *History* can be read partly as a narrative, much of it first-hand, of the discovery and conquest of the Indies, partly as a record of the Spaniards' subsequent bloody exploits, and partly as an autobiographical account of the passage of its author from ignorance to enlightenment. In 1559, however, Las Casas forbade the printing, or even the circulation of the manuscript, until forty years after his death. Then, he said, it might be printed 'if it is thought to be convenient for the good of

the Indians and of Spain'. But by 1590 Spain's position was too perilous for it to be conceivable that any further condemnation of its agents could be thought to be 'for its good' and the text was not published until 1875.

II

Bartolomé de Las Casas – or Casaus, as he sometimes styled himself – was born in Seville in 1484, the son of a merchant from Tarifa and 'a woman from Sosa' who died when he was still a child. Although he has left a detailed account of his adult life in the *History of the Indies*, he is silent about his childhood and says nothing about his education. This is perhaps no accident. Las Casas had a clear idea of narrative purpose. Despite the pretence that it was nothing more than a factual record of events, the *History*, no less than the *Short Account*, was intended to persuade his king to act. Unlike the *Short Account*, however, it was also intended as a monument to Las Casas's untiring efforts on behalf of the Indians. The story of his life before his arrival in the Indies is thus irrelevant. For Las Casas, as for so many other Europeans, the crossing to America came to seem something of a rebirth. Although he was to cross and re-cross the Atlantic several times in the pursuit of his objective, it was the first voyage which ultimately determined what that objective was to be. It was, as he was to say later, God's decision that he should go to America. God had given to him 'the zeal and the desire to bring about a remedy to those wretched beings, and with these He had given him also great perseverance'. What had happened to him in the Old World before was thus of no significance. All he tells us is that he reached Santo Domingo in what is now Haiti on 15 April 1502, in the largest fleet ever to leave Spain for the New World, and that as he landed he was told, 'You have arrived at a good moment... there is to be a war against the Indians and we will be able to take many slaves'. 'This news,' he later recalled in bitterness, 'produced a great joy in the ship.' It was his first encounter, although it would be a long time before he came to recognize it as such, with the realities of the colonial experience.

A year later Las Casas was moderately well-off and the master of a number of Indians. He was also in minor orders and by 1510 he had become a priest. Throughout the account he gives of this part of his life in the *History* he refers to himself, half ironically, as 'the cleric Las Casas'. Why he chose the priesthood we do not know and he does not say. The secular clergy (as distinct from members of the monastic orders) were regarded at this time, often rightly,

as ignorant, poor and frequently polygamous. The narrative offered by the *History* aims to convey a sense of humility, doubtless quite genuine, and his position as a humble cleric may have seemed morally more compelling than that of the relative comfort of the monk. But there was another reason: as a member of the lay clergy he could come and go as he pleased. When in 1522 Domingo de Betanzos attempted to persuade him to enter the Dominican Order and to participate in the evangelization of the Americas he at first declined, saying that as his whole life until then had been dedicated to reform, he had to wait in the vicinity of the court until he had received his instructions from the King. Betanzos, who knew that those who wait on kings can wait for ever, asked him, 'And if you should die before then, who will receive the orders from the King?' These words, he claims, 'transfixed his heart' and he gave his previous life up for dead. It was, in its way, a conversion; one that would transform him from a self-marginalized agitator for reform into something greater and, for the Spanish colonist, far more menacing: the 'Defender of the Indians'. In his own estimation of his achievement, never slight, it was he who was subsequently responsible for 'moving all the religious of Castile, in particular those of the Orders of Saint Francis and Saint Dominic, to pass over here, where all that is required is good workmen to gather in Christ's corn'.

Unlike his reception in the Dominican Order, Las Casas's ordination seems to have had no immediate impact on his life. Like other unordained colonists, he lived from the labour of the Indians who had been 'given' him by the governor of Hispaniola, Nicolás de Ovando. In an attempt to prevent the settlers from creating feudal fiefs in America, the Catholic monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, had decreed that, while all land would remain the possession of the Crown, the Indians would be compelled to work it on behalf of the colonists. In exchange for their labour they would be offered the protection of the Castilian Crown, instruction in the Christian faith and a small wage. In practice, however, although they did not actually live in the colonists' households, such Indians were virtual slaves. This institution was known as the *encomienda*, because the Indians had been 'encommended' into the care of their Spanish overlord who was thus known as their *encomendero*. Las Casas came to abominate the system – a 'mortal pestilence,' he called it, 'which daily consumes these people' – and was to dedicate most of his life to its abolition. Nevertheless, at this stage, although of a 'compassionate nature' and, as he is at pains to point out, more gentle in the treatment of his Indians than most of the colonists, he had not given much thought to the matter. On the Sunday before Christmas 1511, however, the Spanish population of Hispaniola received a rude shock, which

marked the beginning of Las Casas's brief and dramatic conversion from colonizing priest into Indian apostle.

The story is now a famous one. That morning a recent arrival on the island, the Dominican Antonio Montesinos, delivered a sermon in the church of Santo Domingo. Taking his text from St John, he drew an analogy between the natural desert in which the Evangelist had chosen to spend his life and the human desert which the Spaniards had made of the once fruitful, 'paradisiacal' island of Hispaniola. He then turned upon the colonists. 'With what right,' he demanded of them, 'and with what justice do you keep these poor Indians in such cruel and horrible servitude? By what authority have you made such detestable wars against these people who lived peacefully and gently on their own lands? Are these not men? Do they not have rational souls? Are you not obliged to love them as yourselves?' The last three questions were to become the referents of every subsequent struggle to defend the rights of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. For Las Casas, in particular, the third – 'Are you not obliged to love them as yourselves?' – was to guide his actions for the rest of his life.

The immediate response of 'the cleric Las Casas' to Montesinos's sermon was, nevertheless unremarkable. He did not share the indignation of the rest of the colony, which demanded Montesinos's recantation and immediate repatriation to Spain. But neither does he seem to have grasped immediately that the full implication of what Montesinos had said was that 'one could not in conscience possess Indians' and still claim to be a Christian. Later that same year he accompanied Diego Velázquez to Cuba, where he witnessed, seemingly for the first time, the massacres which he was to describe so vividly in the *Short Account*. Although Las Casas was careful to point out how much better his behaviour was towards the Indians than that of any of his fellow-conquerors and how they came to him because of 'the great pain and pity' with which their plight filled him, and although – or so he tells us (p. 29) – he remonstrated furiously against the atrocities committed by Pánfilo de Narváez in Caonao, he served Velázquez well enough to be granted a large *encomienda* in Canarreo, near the port of Xaguá.

Las Casas's conversion did not come until three years later and, significantly, it was the consequence not of an encounter with an individual, nor of the divine illumination which had struck Paul to the ground on the way to Damascus (he was too humble to claim that, although there are unmistakable analogies between his conversion and Paul's), nor even of direct experience of the misery of the Indians, although, as he says, he had seen much of that. It was the consequence of an encounter with a text. Paul had been struck directly by the

voice of God. Las Casas, who could make no such claim, was struck by the written word, Ecclesiasticus 34: 21–2, which he ‘began to consider’ in preparation for his Easter sermon. ‘The bread of the needy is their life,’ he read, ‘he that defraudeth him thereof is a man of blood. He that taketh away his neighbour's living slayeth him, and he that defraudeth the labourer of his hire is a bloodshedder.’ It was this that led him ‘to consider the misery and slavery that those peoples suffered’, and which drew his mind back to Montesinos's sermon. He spent, he says, many days agonizing over the issue until he had ‘determined within himself of the same truth, that everything which had been done to the Indians in the Indies was unjust and tyrannical’. This conclusion, too, possessed textual authority and could be checked against ‘every book’ he had read ‘in either Latin or the vernacular, which in forty-four years were infinite’. None of these, he now noticed, could provide any legitimation for ‘the condemnation and the injustice and the harm that they, the Indians, have been done’. He then announced to the astonished Velázquez that he intended to renounce ‘his’ Indians, although, as he admits, this could hardly have been in their interest since he was a far better master than any they were likely to acquire subsequently. Las Casas spent a further year in Cuba and in September 1515, together with Antonio Montesinos himself, he returned to Spain, determined to inform the King of the evils which his agents were perpetrating in his Indies.

Shortly before Christmas 1515, Las Casas was granted an audience with the ageing Ferdinand the Catholic and, by his own account, lectured him at great length of what ‘he had seen’, in the language of loss, destruction and greed which was to dominate all his later accounts. ‘He informed the King of the perdition of these lands and violent death of their native inhabitants and the manner in which the Spaniards in their greed slew them, and how all died without having been baptized or having received the Sacraments and if, in brief, His Highness did not remedy the situation everything would become as a desert.’

Ferdinand, for whom the Americas were still a remote and insignificant part of his political burden, referred the matter to the president of the Council of the Indies, Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca, bishop of Burgos, a man for whom Las Casas was to conceive an abiding hatred. Fonseca, on being told of the slaughter in Cuba of seven thousand children in three months, replied, ‘and how does that concern me?’ For Las Casas this was a significant moment. For the rest of his very long life (he died in 1576 at the age of 92), although he collaborated with the Council wherever possible and, after 1543, was permitted to attend Council meetings, he

directed all his moral energy at the members of the missionary Orders, at the Crown and, in the *Short Account*, at the international community – the Christian ‘congregation of the faithful’ – in the hope that the moral indignation of decent men, if sufficiently aroused, could be made to counter political and economic interests of ever-increasing complexity.

It was a naive project and, despite a vast body of legislation aimed at curbing the excesses of the settlers and for which Las Casas was at least partially responsible, it did little in the long run to alleviate the burden of the Indians. If Cortés in Mexico and Pizarro in Peru were ultimately less destructive than Velázquez had been in Cuba, this was because these self-styled conquistadores had come not merely for gold but for land. They had come to create a feudal society over which they could rule, and a feudal society required a labouring class. But if Las Casas's efforts were largely ineffectual in practice, few of those who listened to him were so deaf as the bishop of Burgos had been. He had, indeed, throughout his life a large and powerful audience. In 1543 he was created bishop of Chiapas in southern Mexico after having, characteristically, refused the see of Cuzco, ‘the richest in all the Indies’. He had, too, friends who were as powerful as his detractors. On one occasion no less a person than the archbishop of Toledo, the primate of Spain, Bartolomé de Carranza, had to be forcibly separated from the jurist Pedro de Castro ‘because of the book which the bishop of Chiapas had written about the affairs of the Indies’

Las Casas was always able to play upon a deep moral unease within royal and ecclesiastical circles. The Spanish Crown had a long history of anxiety over the legitimacy of its military ventures and ever since the twelfth century Castilian monarchs had sought the advice of jurists and theologians as to how to conduct, or to seem to conduct, their affairs. They may not have always taken this advice too literally for, as the greatest of the Spanish theologians of the sixteenth century Francisco de Vitoria once observed, kings are necessarily pragmatic beings forced ‘to think from hand to mouth’. But the Spanish monarchs, the self-styled champions of Christendom, lived in constant fear of finding themselves out of favour with their God. It is not surprising, then, that even before Montesinos had delivered his famous sermon there had been questions asked about the legitimacy of Spanish activities in the Indies.

In 1513, in an attempt to silence any further protest, the jurist Juan López de Palacios Rubios, one of King Ferdinand's ideologues, drew up a document known as the ‘Requirement’ (or *Requerimiento*). This began with a history of the world since Adam. It then moved swiftly

on to the grant made by the Pope to the Castilian Crown and the obligation of every Indian to pay homage to the agents of the Crown and to obey their orders. It finished with a gruesome account of what would befall any Indian who refused to obey. Every conquistador was to carry a copy of this document with him and to read it, in the presence of a notary, before making an attack. The facts that the document was in Spanish, a language no Indian could then understand, that it made no attempt to explain the complex legal and theological terms in which it was expressed, and that it was frequently read at night to sleeping villages or out of earshot of the Indians (see pp. 33 and 56) were disregarded. What mattered was the act. Once the Europeans had discharged their duty to inform, the way was clear for pillage and enslavement. When asked what he thought of this, surely one of the crassest instances of legalism in European history, Las Casas replied that he did not know whether to laugh or to cry. But the *Requerimiento* was taken seriously enough. Pedrarias Dávila's expedition to Tierra Firme in 1513 (see p. 31) was held up for months while the document was drafted.

That same year, in an attempt to regulate the relations between the colonizer and the colonized, the Crown drafted its first major legislation, the Laws of Burgos. These, in addition to forbidding Spaniards to address Indians as 'dogs' attempted to limit the number of hours local people might be required to work, ensure that they were adequately fed and provide them with proper instruction in the Christian faith. Although Las Casas welcomed these laws as evidence of the Crown's 'kindly intentions' towards its new vassals, they clearly did not go far enough. The Indians still remained bound to their masters, deprived of what not only Las Casas but most of the missionaries considered to be their natural rights to property. Worse still, the laws made provision for the creation of new Indian settlements close to the Spanish towns. This forceful disruption of the older tribal lifestyles was thought necessary because the Indians, whose 'sole aim and pleasure in life is to have the freedom to do with themselves exactly as they please', not surprisingly showed little pleasure in the company of Spaniards and would otherwise 'forsake conversation and communication with Christians and flee into the jungle'. Although it is never mentioned by Las Casas, his gaze forever fixed upon atrocities that could be rendered arithmetically, the dissolution of tribal unity and of the group's sense of its own social cohesion which these moves inevitably created, together with the crude attempts to impose such things as Christian marriage, European dress, and Spanish eating-habits, contributed significantly to the dramatic decline in the population of the Indies. The cultural and social demands of the *encomienda* may indeed have been responsible for

many of those features of Indian life which the Europeans found most reprehensible, suicide, infanticide and induced abortion, and for what another of Las Casas's enemies, the chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, referred to as the Indians' 'lack of charity' – their apparent willingness to abandon the sick and the old and to mock the sufferings of the dying. Extreme of cultural dislocation can lead to terrifying reversals in human relations. Similar behaviour was observed on the Franciscan mission stations in California in the eighteenth century – places more reminiscent of forced-labour camps than of centres of Christian instruction – and were noted again in the 1960s among the Ik, an East-African people displaced from their tribal homelands and their traditional means of subsistence by the creation of a game reserve.

The Laws of Burgos led to the disruption of Indian life, but they achieved little else. Unpopular legislation was always impossible to enforce in the Indies. The coercive powers of the Castilian Crown were over-extended and the problems in Europe – the need to defend Spain and southern Italy from infiltration by Protestants and attack from the Turks – always took first place. The Americas also attracted the kind of settlers who wished to set themselves up in imitation of a society to which they had had no access in Europe. For them the Indians were a crucial part of their social reconstruction of themselves. Men, they knew, became masters only when they had other men to command. If the Crown threatened to deprive them of the substance of their dream, they could, as Cortés's lieutenant Cristóbal de Olid had done in Honduras (see p. 54) and Lope de Aguirre was to attempt to do in the Amazon, create independent kingdoms in the jungle for themselves – those hallucinatory empires which still haunt much modern Latin-American fiction. Faced with the serious possibility of a full-scale rebellion of this kind, the Crown was always ready to back down.

The next, and the final, attempt to regulate the behaviour of the colonists, and to confer some measure of political rights upon the Indians, met with a similar fate. The New Laws of 1542, unlike the Laws of Burgos, owe something to Las Casas. These, he said of them in the *Short Account*, 'provide, in the most efficacious manner the drafters have been able to devise for the eradication of the evils and godless crimes perpetrated against Our Lord and our fellow-human beings' (p. 128). Had they been in any lasting sense effective, they would have constituted the legislative expression of his endless programmes for reform, for they went far further than the Laws of Burgos had done. They revised and extended the judicial system in the Americas, they limited the amount any Indian could be asked to carry, and they freed all but a small number of Indian slaves. Crucially, they stipulated that as each current holder of

an *encomienda* died, his grant would revert to the Crown. Within a generation the Indians would have become full subjects of the Castilian Crown, the bearers of the same rights as the Spaniards themselves, and the loathed *encomienda* would be at an end. However, as Las Casas himself records, the New Laws were met at first by disbelief – ‘Is this,’ one colonist conventionally demanded, ‘how the King rewards his loyal subjects?’ – then by the threat and in Peru by the reality of revolt and finally, in 1545, by their partial repeal.

But if Las Casas's labours had no lasting impact upon colonial legislation, his influence at a less immediate level was immense. He was and remains to this day the moral conscience of the ‘enterprise of the Indies’. Not only did he agitate for the rights and better treatment of the Indians but he also defended their claim, which in the Spain of the mid-sixteenth century was constantly under surveillance, to be regarded as human beings. Ever since 1513, Las Casas had fought against the suggestion that the Indians might be some species of sub-human, the ‘natural slaves’ which Aristotle had suggested might exist somewhere in the world for the benefit of civilized men. His longest and most original work, the *Apologetic History of the Indies*, a vast comparative ethnology of the Americas, is precisely an extended attempt to demonstrate, beyond all shadow of empirical doubt, that the Indians were fully rational beings with a culture which, though certainly ‘primitive’ in its technology and in a large number of its cultural practices, was equal to anything which the Old World had produced. The *Apologetic History* was also the product of the most famous – if also still the most ill-understood – moment of conflict between Las Casas and his opponents, which took place just one year before the *Short Account* was printed.

In 1548, two of Spain's most prominent theologians from the University of Salamanca, Melchor Cano and Bartolomé de Carranza, together with the jurist Diego de Covarrubias, were asked by the Crown, which frequently employed theologians and jurists for this task, to examine a work in dialogue form entitled *The Second Democrates; Or, The Just Causes of the War against the Indians*. Its author, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, was one of Charles V's chaplains and his official chronicler. Its cryptic title referred, significantly, to an earlier work, *The First Democrates*, which had attempted to justify the sack of Rome in 1527 by Charles V's mutinous armies. It was one of the most virulent onslaughts on the Indians ever written. The Indians were, said its author, ‘*homunculi* in whom hardly a vestige of humanity remains’. They were ‘like pigs with their eyes always fixed on the ground’. Their brutish behaviour, absence of any recognizable culture, their cowardice (had not Montezuma, reputed to be ‘the bravest among

them', capitulated to Cortés without protest?), their supposed cannibalism and their paganism, all clearly indicated that God had intended them to be slaves to those whose 'magnanimity, temperance, humanity and religion' – by whom Sepúlveda meant the Spaniards – made them their natural masters. The theologians claimed that the book was doctrinally unsound, the work of a man who, while he was probably a good Latin stylist, was a poor logician and a worse theologian, and they recommended that it should be denied the royal licence without which no book could legally be printed in Spain.

Their reasons for condemning Sepúlveda's work were several. Its tone clearly offended them, as did most of the arguments it employed, and they believed that the circulation of such an obviously inflammatory text could only have exacerbated the running battle between the colonists and the religious orders. But both Carranza and Cano were, like Las Casas, Dominicans, and both were acquaintances of Las Casas. Sepúlveda, therefore and not unreasonably, assumed that it was Las Casas who had been ultimately responsible for his humiliation. His book, he told Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle, who was then Charles V's first minister in Augsburg, 'had been approved by all those learned men who read it without passion before the bishop of Chiapas took it upon himself to weave the web he wove in Salamanca'. Sepúlveda pressed his case with the Council of the Indies which, in August 1550 organized a 'debate' between the two men under the aegis of, among others, Cano, Carranza and another eminent theologian, Domingo de Soto. It was a curious event. Las Casas clearly had not read Sepúlveda's original text but only a later summary, and, oddly for a 'debate', on no occasion did the two participants actually meet. Each contestant read his objections to the panel and of these Soto compiled, somewhat against his will, a faithful record. Las Casas began by reading, for days on end, a long rambling text, the *Apologetic Argument against Gines de Sepúlveda* in which he set out to refute not only the substance of *The Second Democrates* but, as Soto drily observed, 'everything that the doctor Sepúlveda had ever written'. In April of the following year Sepúlveda countered with twelve replies to this, and Las Casas then replied with twelve objections to the replies. That was all. There was no outcome to the affair – unless the theologians' refusal to change their minds about the subversive nature of Sepúlveda's original text can be considered an outcome. But then no outcome was expected. The purpose of the exercise was almost entirely ceremonial. Like the meetings (*juntas*) of theologians and jurists which the Crown frequently convened to discuss delicate political matters and which in so many ways it resembled, the 'debate' had allowed full and exact

expression to be given to the views of both sides. It was up to the Council of the Indies to ac

Inconclusive though it was in all other respects, the Valladolid debate was an important event in Las Casas's life. It was his last major encounter with his intellectual opponents, and may also explain why he decided to publish the *Short Account* the following year. For one of the major themes which dominate his objection to Sepúlveda's text is its persistent and malignant distortion of the nature of Indian society. This, Las Casas argued, was due to personal ignorance of the place and to Sepúlveda's reliance on that 'cruel enemy of the Indians', Fernández de Oviedo who, although he had lived in America, had only ever seen what he, Indian slaver and *encomendero* as he was, wished to see. For, like all of Las Casas's writings, but more strikingly, more urgently than any other, the *Short Account* was an attempt to press upon the reader the immediacy of the American experience, the importance of 'being there', and of being there with innocent intentions.

III

The *Short Account* is, as Las Casas claims (p. 4), an epitome, suitably re-worded for a popular audience, of the records of Spanish brutality given in the *History*, together with some gory details of its own. The purposes of the two works were, as he made clear in the prologue to the *History*, identical. Both were true and unembellished records of what had been seen by him and by those he knew. Unlike the *History*, however, the *Short Account* is, by implication at least, a *relación* – the name given to the official report, witnessed and authenticated by a notary, which every royal officer in the Indies was expected to provide of his activities. Hernán Cortés's massively over-extended letters to Charles V were described by their author as 'letters of account' (*cartas de relación*), thus suggesting that, despite their narrative structure and epistolary form, their *content* possessed all the accuracy of a legal document. Las Casas's title was intended to convey the same impression. The aims of Cortés and Las Casas could not have been more different, but their rhetorical strategies were, unsurprisingly, perhaps since both men inhabited the same political and literary culture, very similar. Like Cortés's *Letters*, the *Short Account*, in its final printed form, was meant in the first instance for a royal reader, in this case the future Philip II, before whom it would have been unthinkable to lie. Like Cortés's *Letters* it was intended not merely to inform but to persuade. It was in the most immediate, most transparent sense of the word, an exercise in propaganda. Many of the

stories which Las Casas told may, indeed, have literally been true. Some of them, the numbing round of killings, beatings, rapes and enslavements, certainly were. But others, such as the story of the Spaniard who stopped the mouths of the prisoners he was torturing with wooden bungs so as not to disturb his commander's siesta (p. 16), have classical antecedents and constitute part of a recognizable rhetorical strategy for arousing wonder in the reader. The same is true of Las Casas's figures. These begin as precise accounts – the population of the Mexican town of Cholula, for instance, is given as ‘some thirty thousand inhabitants’ (p. 45), – balanced estimates – ‘at a conservative estimate... more than twelve million souls, women and children among them’ (p. 12) – and then slide, as the work reaches its conclusion, into the indeterminacy of ‘teeming millions’ (p. 127). A lot of energy, most of it wasted, has been spent on verifying (or falsifying) the number of the dead given in the *Short Account*. But quite apart from the fact that *all* such figures in the sixteenth century were, of necessity, very approximate, Las Casas's figures, always rounded up to the nearest thousand, were not offered as a factual record. As with the Roman historian Flavius Josephus's account of the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, which Las Casas cites at length in the prologue to the *History* (and as, indeed, with Cortés's own account of the size of the native armies he had to face), the inflation of numbers was meant only to impress upon the reader the literal magnitude of the event.

Like Cortés's *letters*, Las Casas's *Short Account* also constituted a petition. But whereas Cortés's was a petition for honours, Las Casas's was a petition for justice. His motive for writing the work was, as it was with the *History*, ‘the very great and final need to make known to all Spain the true account and truthful understanding of what I have seen take place in this Indian Ocean’. He was, he claimed, the only reliable witness to what had occurred in the Americas ‘wherever Christians have set foot’, for only he had been willing to break the ‘conspiracy of silence about what has really been happening’. ‘It has become the custom,’ he complained, ‘to falsify the reports sent back to Spain about the damaging nature of Spanish actions in the New World.’ Those few who, like himself, were prepared to risk official disapproval and, more dangerous still, the fury of the settlers, found that their ‘reliable eye-witness accounts’ were ‘totally discounted’ by indifferent royal auditors who returned statements which were at best ‘hazy and unspecific’ and were always more concerned with any financial loss to the Crown than they were with the ceaseless haemorrhage of human life. Only his own *Short Account* was true, not only because it did not fudge the facts but because

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