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Book Review

– *Death in the snow: Pedro de Alvarado and the illusive conquest of Peru*, by W. George Lovell. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022

The history of the conquest of Middle and South America is full of violence not only against the indigenous population but also among the conquistadors themselves. One of the more sinister figures in this kaleidoscope of men driven by ambition, quest for glory, and greed is Pedro de Alvarado (1485-1541). Familiar to most historians as the right-hand man of Hernando Cortés in the conquest of México (1519-1521), and later as the conquistador of Guatemala, this book tells a lesser-known story of Alvarado – that of his ill-fated intent to conquer the northern part of Peru and what later became the Kingdom of Quito. This seemingly peripheral episode of conquest is a fine example of several of the configurations of Spanish conquest in America, precisely because it tells the story of one of the most ruthless conquistadors and his eventual failure. It invites us to think about the importance of the personality of the conquistadors and of their relationship with Spain and the Spanish Crown as well as with indigenous soldiers, recruited by force, about whom we know so little.

The book is centred on the personality of Pedro de Alvarado, "the conquistador who never was" (p. 96). The first chapter introduces us to his personality and his role in the conquest of Mexico, where he already revealed his violent character. Due to this, he soon was considered a problem by Hernando Cortés, who sent him off to Guatemala. But the resources of Guatemala were not enough for an ambitious and avaricious man like Alvarado, so when word about the fabulous riches of Peru spread among the Spaniards in the New World, Alvarado soon invented a scheme to have his share in it. He went to Spain to enhance his personal networks and get permission from the Crown to explore the Pacific Ocean. Despite the fact that many officials in Guatemala and Spain had already started to warn about him, because of his violent acts against the indigenous population, and indeed saw him as a danger to the imperial project itself, the Crown approved of his plans, but with the explicit stipulation that he not intervene in any territory already granted to another Spaniard. Lovell describes in incisive detail the manoeuvres that Alvarado undertook to achieve his goals, even against such a powerful opposition.

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Upon returning to Guatemala from Spain, Alvarado immediately started to prepare the expedition, founding one of the first European shipyards on the Pacific coast, in Iztapa, and then shifting his operations to Realejo, Nicaragua, a fact that reminds us that we still know little about shipbuilding in the Americas in the early times, and the role of the indigenous population in this endeavour. What we do know, however, is that the shipbuilding as well as the later expedition to Peru cost the lives of many indigenous Mayas from Guatemala. The story goes on to tell the cheating and menacing of Alvarado until the fleet finally set sail, heading towards the region around Quito that, due to the interpretation of Alvarado and his pilot Juan Fernández, did not belong to any Spaniard yet. What followed was another bloodthirsty conquest. Given his reputation as a violent person, the "Peruvian" *adelantados* Francisco Pizarro and Diego de Almagro as well as Sebastián de Belalcázar, who was later to conquer what today is Colombia, negotiated with Alvarado in order to keep him under control and offered him an amount of booty to leave. But Alvarado erred on his way across the Andes, where he hoped to find the presumed riches of Quito. Additionally, the army got into a severe snowstorm and few of its indigenous conscripts made it to safety on the other side of the mountains. Under these circumstances, Alvarado had little to negotiate with his fellow conquistadors and, as a result, little of the riches of Peru that he had dreamt of went into his pocket and those of the Spaniards remaining in his army. Humiliated and shamed, he returned to Guatemala.

All the natural and human calamities are described vividly in this book. The author, who is a historical geographer, enriches our understanding of the expedition by historical and new maps, as well as contemporary drawings and present-day photographs. Lovell recounts the episode on the basis of a close reading of contemporary *crónicas*, mainly the long-lost third part of the one written by Pedro de Cieza de León, of letters between the conquistadors, and published documents, in addition to unpublished manuscripts from Spanish and Latin American archives. The story is told in less than 100 pages, but accompanied with exhaustive and informative notes (84 pages) and a commentary on the source materials consulted. In the appendix, there is a list of the Spanish men who enlisted in Alvarado's armada, a glossary, and a chronology.

The combination of all these myriad sources and their critical assessment affords us a fresh look at the events but, more importantly, at the motives of the conquistadors, their rivalries and suspicions, their quest for riches and glory, and their utter ruthlessness. Whenever possible, Lovell also notes the roles played indigenous peoples and enslaved blacks. Last but not least, the book reads very well and will fascinate scholars as well as undergraduates.

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