



MONTEZUMA, CORTÉS,
AND THE FALL OF OLD MEXICO

HUGH THOMAS

A NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW "EDITORS' CHOICE" OF THE YEAR

"A fascinating work that will surely go down as a defining book on the era
and one of the best and most readable nonfiction books of the year."
—EDWARD SCHUMACHER, *The Wall Street Journal*

Conquest: Montezuma, Cortes and the Fall of Old Mexico

Hugh Thomas

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Drawing on newly discovered sources and writing with brilliance, drama, and profound historical insight, Hugh Thomas presents an engrossing narrative of one of the most significant events of Western history.

Ringing with the fury of two great empires locked in an epic battle, *Conquest* captures in extraordinary detail the Mexican and Spanish civilizations and offers unprecedented in-depth portraits of the legendary opponents, Montezuma and Cortés. Conquest is an essential work of history from one of our most gifted historians.

Conquest: Montezuma, Cortes and the Fall of Old Mexico Details

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From Reader Review Conquest: Montezuma, Cortes and the Fall of Old Mexico for online ebook

Hefronica says

Fascinating, if overly wordy account of Hernan Cortes' 'conquest' of Tenochtitlan and the empire of the Mexica.

I love this kind of stuff. I took a class on Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures in college... for fun. The idea of entering a strange land full of strange plants and animals and people and customs fascinates me. Unfortunately the conquistadors in this story weren't so much interested in documentation and anthropology as they were in collecting as much loot as possible (and converting everyone to Catholicism).

The main problem I had with this work was that there was almost too much detail. It becomes name soup and that's mostly on the Spanish/Castilian side. There were so many names being thrown at me, and not just the names of the specific player, but where he was from and who he was related to. It's great that so much historical detail has survived (about which soldiers accompanied whom to where), but it really was a bit much now and then considering these people are little more than names at such a far removed time in history. I think because we know so little about the Mexica side, the name soup here wasn't as prevalent, even if their names were quite the mouthfuls.

Another major problem I had was with maps. It would have been helpful if the maps of places (the valley of Mexico, including the cities; Cortes' overland trek to Tenochtitlan; the lake, showing the surrounding towns and causeways; etc.) were placed in some more easily accessible spot (ie, the front of the book). That way when another town name or causeway was being thrown at me, I didn't have to struggle to locate in some previous chapter the map showing this location in relation to others. I think it went the other way too (locations were mentioned with a map not appearing showing it until later). I could almost swear there was no map of Spain showing all the places mentioned (and many were mentioned). That would have been extremely helpful for someone pretty unfamiliar with the specific geography of the Iberian peninsula, though not necessary to the main story. But I'm a map fiend; I could stare at those kind of things, gleaning relationships, all day.

The writing was a bit dry, which I assume is a byproduct of the story taking place nearly 500 years ago. Events come off as far-removed historical happenings, not real things happening to real people. The author does the best he can in providing numbers for these things (in regards to troop strength, deaths, etc.) but the numbers vary wildly due to the participants' exaggerations. The grammar and comma use is also a bit wonky at times. Despite the author's name, I began to wonder if this book had been translated from Spanish to English.

Overall a fair and balanced view of both sides, showing both the awful and the good. I had either forgotten (college was, alas, not so recent a time) or never knew that the Mexica practiced so much cannibalism. Makes sense considering the lack of meat sources (??).

This is just one of those tragic historical events that are rife with 'what ifs?' What if Montezuma had decided to wipe out the Castilians? What if the Mexica gave up on trying to capture their enemies for sacrifice and fought to kill instead? What if Cortes had not left the city to head off a rival on the coast (thereby leaving the city in the hands of Alvarado, who went and massacred a bunch of people at a festival)? Would Tenochtitlan and the lake still be around today?

Kyle Sullivan says

Exceptional. Easily one of the greatest accounts of the conquest of old Mexico ever written. Not only are there newly discovered sources shining an unexpected light on centuries-old accounts, not only does the author display a finely tuned sensitivity towards both the bias of past historians and the massive cultural gulf between the Mexica and the Castilians, but the author is also a damn fine writer. This book is a riveting tale, a page-turner. Hugh Thomas has done humanity a great justice here.

This book is about an INSANE, mind-boggling, unforgettable, dumbfounding, bizarre, heartbreaking event that will electrify you. You won't be able to put it down. It is difficult to comprehend that these events happened, that these people existed...that these two empires at their zenith hurled themselves into an alien void.

Witness the birth of the West.

Caroline says

Turgid! Obtuse! Better than two whiskies and valerian. (Eh, too soon to tell? Naw, couldn't be...)

...This is an acclaimed history? I'm on my second attempt. If nothing else, I *do* need the sleep aid these days. Here's hoping either it gets better or I wake up more refreshed. I'd take either outcome.

But seriously, folks, there's a reason my 9th-grade English teacher wouldn't let me get away with parentheticals like this:

"These allies helped to guarantee a mutually advantageous lacustrine economy of fifty or so small, self-governing city states, many of them within sight of one another, none of them self-sufficient. Wood was available for fire (as for carved furniture, agricultural tools, canoes, weapons, and idols) from the slopes of the mountains; flint and obsidian could be obtained for some instruments from a zone in the north-east; there was clay for pottery and figurines (a flourishing art, with at least nine different wares) while, from the shore of the lake, came salt, and reeds for baskets" (5).

Really? This is published? And celebrated? "A New York Times Book Review 'Editors' Choice' of the Year"? Because there are 600 more pages like this, and I'm pretty sure each one of them wants me to bash my head against the wall.

Mark Davis says

Hugh Thomas captures the riveting story of Cortes and Montezuma, the fall of the Mexica, and the birth of a new nation, with elegant prose and fine historical judgment. This was my second reading of this book, a minor masterpiece ... sorry to hear that Mr. Thomas, a life peer in Lords and former Thatcher advisor,

recently passed. I am encouraged to look at the rest of his works.

Jpp says

Encore un livre majeur de ce grand historien. Hugh Thomas décrit avec précision et objectivité l'extraordinaire aventure de Cortes. Puisant directement aux sources, il réussit à nous donner à la fois le point de vue des vainqueurs espagnols - en particulier le cynisme mais aussi la vision stratégique du Caudillo, et celui des vaincus mexicains dont la fascinante civilisation - et les traces qu'elle laissait dans la reorganisation et la culture de la Nouvelle Espagne - sont longuement rappelées... On comprend mieux en lisant le poète mexicain qui écrivait 'Je suis l'épée et la gloire de Cortès, je suis l'aigle et le serpent de la légende aztèque'...

Mark says

Thomas' book is a blow by blow, day by day account of the fall of the Aztec Empire. The author has thoroughly researched every detail on both the Spanish and Mexican side of the conflict. Apparently it took Hernan Cortes two years and about 2,000 dead Spaniards to defeat the Aztecs. Cortes' complicated era of the 1520's saw the election of Charles V to the Spanish Empire, Martin Luther challenging the Catholic Church at the Cathedral of Worms, and Magellan's expedition had just circumnavigated the world. Thomas' book does justice to the all of the personalities involved in both Mexico and Spain.

Nick says

This book asks a lot of you in terms of endurance but delivers a fascinating, well researched narrative that never fails to remind you of its global significance.

Jarrod says

This is a solid, well-documented and researched book about a topic that is intriguing and something I had always been interested in reading. The writing is a little 'old' and the English grammar can throw you off if you aren't used to it. I loved the clarity of the history and the way the author goes through the motion to explain what happened, how it happened and as many motives as possible behind the decisions of the Spanish and the Mexica.

Anyone interested in the discovery of new civilizations or the history of the Americas should definitely read this. This book answered several questions that I had always had about how the civilizations interacted and the thoughts and motives behind the conquerors. What were the motives of the Spanish? What was Cortez's legacy? Why did he do what he did? What really happened to the ships? What was the role of religion? How did the Spanish alter a distinct culture in so fast a time? These and more questions are answered and analyzed.

Ari Markou says

What an amazing voyage this book took you on. It may take a little while to pick up, but when Cortes steps foot in Mexico the story just consumes you to the point where you just can't put the book down. Cortes has to be one of the most interesting characters in history. Whether you want to call him a monster, manipulator, genius, or Hero, there is no denying that he had an enormous impact in the shaping of the modern world. Even more, This is an amazing book for insight into how the Empire of the Mexica collapsed like a house of cards. Much recommended!

El-Jahiz says

So good!!

JoséMaría BlancoWhite says

Spanish review

Este libro de casi 900 páginas es uno de esos que lees a lo largo de la vida y no se te olvida nunca la experiencia. La forma de contar esta aventura, si se puede definir todo lo que ocurre aquí en una palabra, es insuperable. Permanecemos a lo largo de todo el libro muy, muy cerca de Cortés, el alma y el corazón de toda la empresa; le seguimos los movimientos y hasta los pensamientos, las motivaciones, las vacilaciones. El autor no pierde el tiempo con teorías ni valoraciones históricas de ningún tipo: es mucho lo que hay que contar, de por sí ya es casi increíble, y no se necesita teorizar ni adornar en lo más mínimo este relato que es de cabo a rabo la aventura más apasionante que ha protagonizado ser humano alguno en lo que va de historia del mundo.

Lo que sí es aconsejable, como aperitivo, es leerse antes el relato en primera persona de Bernal Díaz del Castillo, en la edición de Planeta, en bolsillo, de caso mil páginas. Igual de apasionante, pero desde el punto de vista del soldado raso, acompañando al héroe Cortés muy de cerca, recibiendo órdenes y bregando en la lucha diaria, pero que estaba, como es obvio, a verlas venir. Luego leer el libro de Hugh Thomas y contemplar todo el paisaje histórico, todo lo que había detrás de la conquista guerrera: desde el punto de vista de los mexicanos y de los españoles. Semejante empresa daría a un mediocre historiador muchas oportunidades de dejar opiniones o teorías, de apuntar datos estadísticos o de otro tipo, de interés colateral al tema en cuestión. Hugh Thomas, no. Este autor acertadamente se da cuenta de la envergadura de lo que tiene entre manos, y de la relevancia histórica que tiene, pues significa ni más ni menos que apenas unos cientos de hombres y unos caballos se adentran procedentes de un continente remoto en un continente desconocido donde los jefes ejercen una tiranía totalitaria con métodos más bárbaros que los nazis, y cuyo deporte mayoritario y obsesivo son los sacrificios humanos. Sacrificios que se cuentan por millones: pueblos, naciones enteras que son vencidas, sometidas, y sus incivilizaciones destruidas.

¿Qué hizo posible la conquista de Cortés? La determinación, astucia y valor de un hombre. Y la suerte de hallarse a muchos pueblos que antes preferían apoyar a Cortés que seguir siendo los esclavos y víctimas de los aztecas. Cortés fue una bendición comparado con lo que tenían aquellas gentes.

Ya digo: independientemente de los gustos de lectura que usted tenga, este libro querrá leerlo de un tirón una vez que lo empiece.

Torgo says

Conquest is a gigantic book about Montezuma, Cortes and the fall of old Mexico, as it states in the title. This book is huge and detailed; it's over 1000 pages long with tiny writing, and the footnotes/appendix make up another couple hundred pages, and then there's references, tables, diagrams, etc.

In terms of world history, the grand tale of Cortes is probably my favourite. The mischief, the swashbuckling adventures, the clash of these civilisations, these two men are incredible heroes; men of such bravery and intellect don't exist any more in our modern world. So, the underlying story is good, in fact it's one of the greatest true tales of all human history. But what of **this** book, and **this** storyteller?

Well, this book is excellent, but not for the right reasons. As I've stated, it's detailed and huge, heavier than a phonebook, and reads a bit like one. It and has around 300 main characters and no detail is spared. This isn't really a page-turner, it's more like a reference book. If you want to know what Cortes wrote in his journal on a certain date, or how many sacks of grain Montezuma delivered to someone, or an intricate description of the provinces and culture and architecture of the various hundreds of different villages, then this would be an excellent reference book for a scholar or historian. But it's not light reading. In fact, as much as I am obsessed with this story, I found much of the book to be a painful slog. It's not an action-packed narrative, it's more like reading a 1000 page wikipedia page, complete with references, quotes and without any embellishment or spice. It's excellent because this book is the definitive history, but the author has favoured detail and accuracy over storytelling.

In conclusion, if you're a student studying history and you need a reference book on this topic, or if you're just obsessed with this topic (like I am), you've already read several books about it and you want to know more details, sure, grab this book.

But if you're unfamiliar with this part of history and you want a good primer, or if you're looking for something to read for leisure, then I would suggest to avoid this and read Buddy Levy's "Conquistador" instead. That book is excellent, well-researched but it's well-told, lean and written like a good storyteller, a page-turner, a true swashbuckling adventure. Afterwards, when you've read that and you're desperately thirsting for more of Cortes, then you could consider giving this behemoth a try.

Raymond says

Long, exhaustively detailed and written by a well-established Hispanist scholar, I picked this one up because I wanted a comprehensive yet approachable take on a subject I'm not overly familiar with. By and large the book delivers on that premise; it takes its time setting the scene by describing both the Aztec (or more appropriately, the Mexican) and Spanish societies prior to contact, with an emphasis on the settler societies in the West Indies in the case of the latter. It then tells the story Cortes, Montezuma and the conquest in painstaking detail - this is the kind of book that introduces characters by starting with their parents - and the final campaign against Tenochtitlan is related on an almost day by day basis.

My main grievance and the reason I deduct one star is what I perceive as an imbalance between how Hugh Thomas on the one hand loves to add anecdotes and little details about even peripheral actors in the story, while on the other hand certain major topics are done with very quickly. This is especially true for the aftermath of the Fall of Mexico; once Tenochtitlan has fallen the narrative speeds up considerably and the

subsequent developments in Mexico as well as the final years of Cortes are dealt with in disproportionately few pages. In an 800 page book that has time for the personal details of individual conquistadors in Cortes' following there should also have been room for a chapter dedicated to post-conquest Mexico and the later years of Cortes. It would also have made for the most natural conclusion seeing as how the book opens with in-depth assessments of the Spanish and Mexican societies before the conquest.

Ste J says

The Conquest of Mexico was a historical event and also a book I have been reading, handily enough I recommend the book as a way into a fascinating subject. Here be the review.

Don't let the huge number of pages(848) put you off, this is a very readable and thoroughly researched account of the events leading upto the conquest and the inevitability of the action of conquest. But first to the beginning. Parts 1 and 2 of the book involve the backgrounds of the two civilizations. For the Mexica(Aztecs) the focus is on the subjugation of and subsequent trade with other people in and around the valley of Mexico and also the domestic classes of people and the Gods which they worship. The religious set up is especially fascinating if you like your myths, as the stories mentioned in the book rival anything from ancient Greece or Mesopotamia.

The Spanish chapter focuses more on the capture of the outlying island of the Caribbean, the brutality with which the indigenous populations were treated and the ruthless commercial opportunism that abounded, and the first explorations and meetings with the indigenous Peoples of the Yucatan and the Totanacs of Mexico.

The next six parts of the book are a tragic essay on the ignorance, greed and violence that seems to perforate human society. The clash of cultures, the sheer naivety(don't know how to do an 'I' with two dots over it) from both sides and the show of colonialism on a new continent show an age that has messages that still resonate today but have seemingly not be learnt. Of course hindsight helps to judge this.

The first two parts were a bit of a challenge to get through but after that it's an epic read, the sheer amount of facts that are included coupled with the high readability and extremely well researched subject matter make this an authoritative book that anyone with a passing interest(and a bit of time) would do well to read.

Daniel Cunningham says

This is as complete a telling of Spanish conquest of the Caribbean islands and Mexico as I have ever read, with a heavy emphasis on Cortes and those around him and a lesser emphasis on Montezuma, the Mexica, their allies, vassals and enemies. I will say, as a lay person, this actually may have been *too* much detail, as there were definitely times while reading where I felt bogged down minutiae.

That said, if you are in fact interested in the subject, I highly recommend. Both Cortes and Montezuma are represented as people (as opposed, as sometimes happens, as "villain" and "tragically defeated"), and their motives, methods, and cultures put in some context, even if from a modern perspective both seem, at times, downright vile. The endless intrigues and maneuverings of Cortes, allies, enemies, and, dare I say it, frenemies, does, again, get old; real life, in its double crossings, grudges, and oversights, seems downright

hackneyed compared to a soap opera's plot.

Ed Mestre says

Since the age of 12 I've devoured whatever I could about the Mayans & Aztecs. Naturally this included fantastic tale of Cortes & his conquest of Mexico. From Bernal Diaz' eyewitness account to Prescott's classic 19th century tome it was a story well worth revisiting. But was there anything really new to learn? The cover of this book said there was. The research of this book, including newly discovered documents, is simply awesome. The Shakespearean like drama of the fall of the Mexica (Thomas refuses to call them Aztecs for they never knew themselves by that name) at the hands of a few hundred Spaniards & their vengeance minded native allies unfolds anew. He brings a multi-sided perspective that is not just the European point of view. Details, details, details that continued to have me saying to myself "I never knew that". My God, the man knows the names some of the horses & dogs that sailed with Cortes from Cuba. Thomas is not shy to say when he thinks some source is biased or exaggerated. When is Hollywood finally going to make a epic film of this wondrous story with it's complex, but deeply flawed & human characters? This may be a good start for the source material.

Kevin says

Wow! Really impressive work of scholarship. This account of the conquest of Mexico is so well-detailed and so well-researched! It gives us a firm grasp of the widely divergent characters who had both starring and supporting roles in this tragedy. It also puts things in perspective very well, dispelling a lot of stereotypes about conquest of the Americas. For instance, it is interesting to note that when Cuban governor Diego Velazquez appointed Cortes to go to the Mexican coast, Cortes very brazenly exceeded his mandate by initiating a conquest of the Mexican interior, rather than just making an exploratory trip as he was supposed to. Cortes comes out seeming more ruthless and amoral than was typical of Spaniards of his generation. It also shows how situations sometimes got out of hand, forcing Cortes to be more brutal than he intended, as in the utter destruction of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital city, which Cortes would have preferred to preserved intact for his emperor, Charles V. It is ultimately a rather chilling portrait of the kinds of characters which the frontier experience in many different times and places tends to attract: the ruthless, unruly adventurer that lusts for power and fame and wealth at that can be gained in the hinterlands far from the restraining influence of government. On the other hand, the book describes in gruesome detail the horrific practices of human sacrifice practiced by the Mexica (i.e., the Aztecs) and their neighboring tribes. Really rather sickening, and while I am disgusted at the greed, arrogance and violence of the Spanish conquistadores, I also found myself sickened by the abominable practices of the native Mexicans. Yet on the other hand, we get a well-drawn portrait of pre-Conquest Mexican culture. Much in it to admire, actually, despite their nasty habit of ripping still-beating hearts of living men's chests. Very sad story of the destruction of a civilization.

Dan says

From watching The Hunt for Red October I knew that Cortez burned his ships when he got to the new world. And since they speak Spanish in Mexico, I figured the Spanish won out in the end. But I was a little short on the details. I read this book to try and learn what happened. And I did!

As far as narrative histories goes, this one is pretty impressive. The first 100 pages or so introduce the Aztec and Spanish civilizations as they existed before they discovered one another. And then it's off to the conquering, as Cortez reaches Mexico and sets about toppling the Aztec empire. The really interesting part of the book is learning how heavily Cortez relied on the Aztecs' enemies in his efforts. I suppose it was all over for pre-contact Mexican civilizations once smallpox shows up, but it's interesting to wonder what would have happened had the various groups of Indians not been so focused on short term gain.

Anyhow, this book is really informative if, like me, you know nothing about the subject. I'd give it four stars for context, but I docked it a star because I found the writing dry at times and it was a bit hard to get through in parts (Oh Bookface! Why don't you let me give half stars?) For anyone interested in the subject it's well worth the effort.

Manuel says

This is one of those books I'd seen on the shelves of my library and bookstore for years. The thickness of the book was the most intimidating factor which prevented me from ever picking it up. It's really silly to admit this, but the girth and title of the book reminded me of those dull volumes propped up in a dusty scholar's office.

The kind of book you pick up to enduce yawning.

Nothing could be further from the truth. I lost count of the nights I lost sleep because I could not put the book down to get a good night's rest.

I had just seen Michael Woods' documentary on the conquest of Mexico and I was anxious to learn more. I picked up Hugh Thomas' book and told myself I would put it back if the first page didn't engage me. Needless to say I was hooked from the first paragraph.

Hugh Thomas has done an amazing job, showing us an almost day by day account of Cortes's conquest of Mexico. He provides an incredible amount of background knowledge of both Ancient Mexico and the social, political situation in Spain.

The result is a wonderful portrait of the two main characters as their world's are about to collide.

Montezuma is the scholarly Emperor, unsure of himself as he begins to hear rumors of bearded strangers making their way along the Eastern seas. This man clearly has the best interests of his people in mind, but in the end; his melancholy nature and his inability to inspire his people, will lead to the ultimate disaster for his entire civilization.

Cortes is the ultimate "wanna be"; born on the lower tiers of Spanish nobility, he is hungry to improve himself. Consequently he is quick to make decisions and exploit the weaknesses of others. With only a few hundred soldiers, he managed to recognize that not all is well with the Aztec Empire. He is quickly able to gather native allies and convince them to join him in to overthrow the Aztec masters.

I was constantly surprised at how adaptable Cortes would become. After his most discouraging set back, in which his treasure and more than half his men are captured or killed; he had the audacity to gather more allies and supplies to mount yet another campaign for the ultimate prize.

The third character to emerge from these pages is Tenochtitlan itself. Hugh Thomas presents the Aztec capital as a truly wonderful place. He introduces the metropolis neighborhood by neighborhood, palace by palace and street by street, canal by canal. During the Spanish siege and in the heavy street fighting we get a sense of how this city of 300,000 people is slowly dying. Cortes wanted to present this city as the jewel in the crown to Emperor Charles V, but even he and his men weep when they see what has happened to the city set in the middle of a lake, like another version of Venice.

I found the book incredibly rich in detail, to the point we even get to know the name of Cortes' dogs and horses.

A great book by any imagination. I suppose because I'm descended from both sides of this conflict, I felt I wanted both to win; or rather, I didn't want either to lose. At one point I found tears streaming down my face. Yes I already knew what was going to happen, but the book made it all come alive again.

Steve Bennett says

Fascinating history of the destruction (or more accurately sharp decline) of the Aztec culture brought on by Cortes' invasion. Fortunately the book depicts all persons involved (whether Aztecs, Spanish or Tlaxcalian) as fully human, with both good and bad attributes. The book just as powerfully depicts the beauty that was lost with the downfall of the Aztecs. I absolutely loved this book--one of my favorite history books ever. To be honest though, the book is very long and loses its compass (and interest) in a couple places, but overall, excellent times five. Gains a point or two because a woman who saw me with the book was amazed that I read such books for pure enjoyment--she thought I was reading it for college or something. So well worth reading--or just carrying with you on the subway.
