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# Empires of Blood and Sun

Travel writing differs from most other kinds of literature in the sense that it inevitably undergoes a metamorphosis, if it survives publication, in the minds of both writer and reader. All genres undergo changes in their relationship with the general culture; the misunderstood verse of the past can become the revered ancestral poetry of the present, as happened with Gerard Manley Hopkins or, even more, with William Blake. But I am talking in the case of travel writing not so much about changing tastes, as about the special potentiality of all travel writing—as of much autobiography—to become history within a generation.

When we read a new travel book, we are concerned largely with its subjective and impressionistic virtues: how well it can catch (through the writer's ear and eye and nose) an ephemeral pattern of human relations played out against a much more slowly changing backcloth of the natural and the manmade environment. True, the best travel books contain a good deal of reflection about the culture they portray; but this is not why most people read them. They read them for the assurance that there are other possibilities of life from their own. By offering us alternatives, they subtly reconcile us to our situations.

The life cycle of a travel book begins with its recognition as a true or at least agreeable rendering of the present seen through the eyes of a perceptive wanderer. After a period of popularity, it will often recede into temporary twilight because it is seen as merely out of date. Who read *Beyond the Mexique Bay* by the time Aldous Huxley died? But there is a time, rather

more than a generation after its first appearance, when a travel book can take on a new and more complex role. We no longer see it merely as an immediate representation of a strange but actual world other than our own. What was written as reportage, more or less sophisticated, becomes a presentation of life in a certain time and place, neither of which is ours.

The best of the old travel books, like Doughty's *Arabia Deserta* and Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle*, like D.H. Lawrence's *Mornings in Mexico* and Waterton's *Wanderings*, like Bates's *Naturalist on the Amazon* and Madame Calderon de la Barca's *Life in Mexico*, live as immediate experience in our minds and at the same time contribute to our awareness of the past. For myself, I know that I would not have fully understood whole periods of history if it had not been for the narratives of great travellers from Herodotus and Xenophon onwards, through whom I understood the complexities of that distant present which became the past.

I am interested in the life history of the travel book for personal as well as objective reasons. My own first travel book was written about British Columbia following on travels there in 1950, and was published in 1952. What I saw was still a frontier society battered by depression and war which seemed to live almost on sufferance of nature in a splendid environment. Shortly after the book was published, the era of Social Credit materialized, and all changed utterly. The province of decaying farms and decrepit towns and derelict roads receded into the past on a wave of post-war prosperity. *Ravens and Prophets* has been republished in 1993, more than forty years afterwards, and offers what even to me is a strange vision of a departed age. It has, in other words, become a document, a part of history, and whatever immediate charm it may have had in the 1950s is now revived because of that documentary role.

When I was invited to reflect on Canadian perceptions of Latin America, I realized that I could not write anything that involved immediate perception. I went to Mexico and Peru in the 1950s and never went back, largely because the experiences were so intense that I feared they could never be repeated, but I did write two books which at the time acquired considerable prestige. One, *To the City of the Dead* (1957), was about Mexico, and the other, *Incas and Other Men* (1959), about Peru. As journals of immediate experience, stiffened by historic awareness, I have always regarded *Incas and Other Men* as my best travel book (and one of the best of all my books) and *To the City of the Dead* as not far behind it.

Clearly much of the detail in these books is obsolete and became so soon after I published them. The growth of Mexico City and Lima over the past four decades had been enormous; urbanism is a problem in such countries that was only beginning to become evident in the middle 1950s. On the other hand, when I read contemporary Canadian writers on Latin America, I realise that in many striking ways life today is not much different in its social structure—a structure based on the equivalence of race and class distinctions—from what I saw when I travelled there in the 1950s.

I must say in background that I reached both Mexico and Peru in times of rural distress when the fissures in the social order were strongly emphasized. The winter of 1954 I lived through on the Mexican plateau was meagre because of the lack of rain in preceding months, and the Peruvian Sierra in the winter of 1956 was undergoing a severe drought in which the peasants killed off almost all their animals and survived only because of large American shipments of grain. These conditions emphasized in both countries the vast gap between the educated and prosperous creole minority, mainly of Spanish descent, and the large, illiterate and poverty-stricken Indian majority, with the mestizos, or cholos as they are called in Peru, occupying the precarious middle ground.

That was forty years ago, and I wrote of it as I saw it, but what I saw then was not in its essentials very much different from what Ronald Wright saw in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s and recorded in *Cut Stones and Crossroads* and *Time Among the Maya.* Perhaps the principal difference between his and my books as presentations of a time and place condensed into a writer's experience, is that in his notable history of racial relations in the Americas, *Stolen Continents,* he perhaps pays too much attention to Mexican nationalist propaganda in assuming that the country has in practice rather than in theory recognized the Indian strain of its heritage. At the moment when I write, in the beginning of 1994, I can hear the voices on the radio telling me that the native people of Chiapas have risen in armed rebellion to demand the restoration of their land rights.

When I went to Mexico in 1954, the country was fairly stable. The last of a series of revolutionary struggles was over, and the insurrectionary tradition had congealed into an authoritarian and corruptly bureaucratic regime under the oxymoronically named Party of Revolutionary Institutions. Tribute was paid to the old guerilla chiefs like

Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, and while I was in the country a celebration actually took place in honour of the old anarchist leader Ricardo Flores Magon at which the reigning President, Ruiz Cortines, declared that the anarchism of Flores Magon showed the direction in which Mexican society must go. In fact the distinguishing feature of Mexican public life had become *la Mordida*, which literally means "the bite," but in practice means graft in all its many kinds, from policemen exacting three pesos for an invented traffic offence and the customs officer accepting ten pesos to leave one's bags unexamined all the way up to the Presidents of that era. By a combination of brute force and corruption the Party controlled every level of authority from the village mayors to the government itself. It ruled over a realm of vast inequalities where freedoms were broad so long as one did not challenge the established order. I knew one man, the brother of a famous archaeologist, who had been thirty-five times behind bars as the spokesman of a minority that based its notions on peasant discontent. He clinched his argument about peasant grievances by telling me that one of his prison mates had been a man who had been jailed fifty-five times—always for stealing potatoes.

I imagine that even in the 1950s the tourists who frequented the Pacific Coast resorts like Acapulco, and the expensive hotels in Mexico City, were able to preserve without difficulty their unawareness of, their indifference to the plight of Mexican peasants and workers, and of Indians in particular. Some of the world's great tourist goals, like Kashmir and the Nile Valley, have also been places of dramatic poverty. I found this was also the case in Mexico among the Bohemian self-exiles, the writers and painters who had sunk into spectacular inactivity and whose anthem could have been George Orwell's favourite ditty, "Come where the booze is cheaper." They lived in cosy little expatriate societies, ignored by the authorities except when some special scandal resulted in a whole company of them being shipped to the border, and for many of them their criadas (housemaids) and the staffs of the local cantinas were their only contact with working Mexicans.

There was indeed a great difference between those who went to Mexico to enjoy and escape, and those who went with some intent of understanding the life that went on behind the splendid architectural facades. If one was sensitive enough to the social atmosphere, a single day in Mexico City, even in the 1950s, was enough to reveal to one the vast differences in the ways Mexicans lived.

They had been there almost from the Conquest, noted in the seventeenth

century by the renegade Dominican, Thomas Gage, in his book, *The English American, or a New Survey of the West Indies* (1648), which was probably the best English account of New Spain a century after the conquest. Gage was particularly impressed with Mexico City and its wide and opulent thoroughfares:

> The streets of Christendom must not compare with those in breadth and cleanness, but especially in the riches of the shops which do adorn them... It is a byword that in Mexico there are four things fair, that is to say, the women, the apparel, the horses and the streets. But to this I may add the beauty of some of the coaches of the gentry, which do excel in cost the beauty of some of the Courts of Madrid and other parts of Christendom; for there they spare no silver, nor gold nor precious stones nor the best silks of China to enrich them. And to the gallantry of the horses the pride of some add the cost of bridles and shoes of silver.

But the grandees who gained their wealth by exploiting the dispossessed Indians on their haciendas and in their mines, moved even then through a metropolis teeming with destitute beggars. Even in the nineteenth century when Madame Calderon was there, these leperos, as they were called, and their willingness to riot, made them an important element, even politically, in the life of the capital. Nowhere, except perhaps in Calcutta, has the channel between what Disraeli called the Two Nations been so deeply scooped.

Reaching Mexico City in the 1950s, I summed up to myself what I saw as a fatally divided city in metaphorical terms, likening the nation of the rich and powerful to Mexico City sitting on the bed of the vanished lake around which preColumbian Tenochtitlan had flourished. The buildings floated precariously in the quaking earth, some of the finest of them sinking downward year by year. In the same way, underlying the ostentatious glitter of the lives of the wealthy lay the great quagmire of Mexican poverty, which was largely identical with Indian poverty. On the edges of the city the poor people who had fled from an unkind countryside lived in appalling shack suburbs, made mostly of cane, cardboard, and flattened gasoline cans and perched on a marsh of ordure, and many of them filtered into the centre to live by menial work and begging.

Begging was in fact well organized by competent survivalists. There was one cafe where we went of an evening on La Reforma from which we could see a typical operation carried on from the porch of a local church, where a fat Indian woman sat quietly knitting. She herself never begged, but she had a little corps of children, none of them, I guessed, more than ten years old. She would survey the people taking the air on the pavements, and would

send the children out to make their wailing appeals—a boy if it were a group of women, a girl if it were a group of men, and sometimes a boy and a girl for a mixed party. I noticed that she never despatched one of her little attendants to waylay a man on his own. She had evidently realised that before one's friends it is harder to maintain a callous, ungiving attitude than if one is unaccompanied. I admired her simple professionalism and that of other beggar "mothers" whom I later observed elsewhere in Mexico. A gulf of poverty lay between the beggar and the begged, yet they were united in the mutual dependence of Mexico's Two Nations.

The personal effect I experienced in confronting Mexico and its ways of life was a powerful sense of detachment from my own past, from my customary preoccupations, even from my normal sense of values. There were times when this disturbing feeling became so strong that I felt as if my personality had emptied itself, as if the past life I began to remember so faintly had been that of another person, as if I were living in a kind of bizarre childhood. I had intended when we settled for a while in a small city of the plateau to start some serious writing in a place where I thought I could live peacefully, and I hoped to gain stimulus from the strangeness of the place. In fact I found it hard to write anything; the most I could do was to keep a few rough notes of observations and impressions. Only when I had got well away from Mexico and had let time pass was I able to turn the experience into my book, *To The City of the Dead.* I encountered at least two other writers who were similarly afflicted. It was, indeed, a kind of cultural shock so severe that it inoculated me against a repetition, so that, no matter how dreadful the conditions I encountered in my later travels in other lands might be, I never fell into the same kind of mental and creative paralysis.

What one perceived in those relatively distant days, and what some people perceive even today on reaching Mexico, was a kind of ruthless stripping down of life to the bones of existence. I have never seen a country or a society revealed in such elemental terms, and yet with such a complexity of negation.

It begins with the landscape of the plateau, the endless hills eroded to arid skeletons where the forests were felled by long dead silver smelters, the plains desiccated into sandy wastes, the lakes dried into alkali flats, the vegetable forms almost geometrical in their starkness, so that the very flow of sap seemed dried into a tortured angularity. A Mexican scene can be so severe that it takes on the neutral quality of an abstraction, and in such a

setting one has a curious double feeling of having no organic link with one's immediate surroundings, yet of being isolated by them from any more sympathetic world. Physically, it is a country without compromise, made for the direct confrontation of man and death, across a waste of challenging indifference.

This challenge is repeated in the existence of human and animal beings, and in the combination of an extraordinary preoccupation with death and a stubborn ability to survive on the edge of living. In Mexico the cruelty of the Spanish Conquest, with its introduction of the Inquisition to help subdue the Indians and their beliefs, replaced the harsh realm of the Aztecs with its obsession with death and its cults of human sacrifice. The Day of the Dead, with its sugar skulls and chocolate skeletons for sale in the markets and its graveside feasts for the spirits of the departed, is still one of the most important Mexican festivals, and the churches most frequented by Indians and the poorer mestizos are filled with gruesomely realistic images of the crucifixion and the flogging of Christ, with painted gore flowing everywhere. In real life there are manifestations like the flagellant cults which survived even during the days when the Church was banned in Mexico. Death is so familiar and ambivalent that the funerals of children in their white coffins are occasions to be celebrated with laughter and merry music, for are not these infants innocent and therefore privileged to be received as Angelitos into the realms of death? The other dead somehow continue and return on their feast day to join the feasts of the living. In such ways the presence and inevitability of death is kept in the minds of Mexicans, which may in the end be more healthy than our own efforts to exorcise and ignore it, but which creates a strain of morbidity in Mexican life that cannot fail to impress the aware outsider.

Yet all the time one perceives the spark of consciousness burning clearly yet meagrely in an existence so stripped of what we have come to regard as necessities that it assumes almost the character of a defiance of nature. In such a life nothing is wasted; everything is used down to the last thread and the last rusted edge. In such a life, also, nothing is concealed; everything that is negative and malignant is forced upon one's attention with merciless candour, as it was fatally on the attention of Lowry's Consul in *Under the Volcano*. Poverty, hunger, disease, inequality, injustice, violence, untimely death—all are there, and none can be ignored. The Mexicans can be fatalistic about such matters, as the Indians among them often are; they may

profit from them, as the more powerful and crafty have always done in this unhappy country; they may rebel in some terrible eruption of violence. But they rarely avoid their circumstances, rarely try—unlike so many people in our more sophisticated culture—to anaesthetize them out of their consciousness. They accept the existential tragedy of which circumstances daily remind them, and in doing so are often able to gain a great satisfaction from the rest of life; the man who is aware of being in the midst of death can begin to live his life more fully. Significantly, Mexicans may often kill each other, but they rarely kill themselves.

But while the Mexican is habituated from childhood to recognize and to deal in his own way with the necessities of his environment, the visitor from Western Europe or the United States, where social circumstances have cushioned most people from the outcropping of raw existence, could hardly avoid a sense of disturbance when, forty years ago as I did, he reached Mexico. It was partly a moral horror, and partly a feeling of guilt at the relative prosperity of one's own life in comparison with the privation one saw around one. After a while such feelings lose their acuteness, as longtime residents of Mexico have assured me, not because one ever accepts the vast injustice of Mexican life, but because on occasions like rural fiestas, one realizes that, even for the poor, life is not so abysmally dejected as one had imagined.

Perhaps the one virtue of Mexican society, as Ronald Wright has pointed out, is that it retains a degree of mobility and malleability not evident in other Central American states (with the exception of Costa Rica). What has been developing there since liberation from Spanish rule is a largely mestizo society, created by a second wave of revolution in the early twentieth century—in which a great deal of pre-Columbian mythology has been cosmetically incorporated. The last Aztec leader, Cuauhtemoc, who tried to reverse the Conquest after the death of Moctezuma, has been made a hero while Cortes has receded into the twilight of rejection. More than a century ago a Zapotec Indian, Benito Juarez, became the president of Mexico and coldbloodedly insisted on the execution of that hapless and idealistic Hapsburg princeling, Maximilian, who had tried to reimpose a European rule on the country. But in spite of the attempt to create a synthetic Mexican, the divisions have remained, and—particularly in the South—the Indian traditions have persisted, so that in a Oaxacan market in the 1940s one could distinguish the different tribal groupings, Zapotec and Mixtec and half a dozen

others, by their distinct garb as well as their distinct languages. Culture set them apart from their fellow Mexicans, the Latinos and some of the Mestizos, but so did poverty, as the present uprising among the Mayan peasants of Chiapas has shown. There is still no really homogenous culture in Mexico while the poor and aboriginal are neglected and exploited. Forty years ago I found no reason to respond to the concept of a united Mexico, and I have not changed my mind as I have watched the country in the intervening decades.

In Peru, which I reached two years later, in 1956, there was never even a myth of homogeneity. The control of the country was in the hands of people of European descent (creoles or mistis), and the land was divided dramatically by natural barriers that coincided with social divisions. The social divisions had been fairly rigidly fixed during the eighteenth century, when the cholos or people of mixed blood appeared as a separate group that ceased to marry with the Indians, while the mistis ceased to marry with the cholos, who became a class of craftsmen and merchants.

The three great regions of Peru in the mid-century largely corresponded with the social divisions. The desert strip of the coastline, with its large cities like Lima and Trujillo, was dominated by the creoles and largely inhabited by the cholos who formed its working class. There, in Lima, the tomb of the conqueror Pizarro was still honoured, while in Mexico it was uncertain where the bones of Cortes had actually found refuge. The Altiplano, the high mountain region of the Andes, was essentially the land of the Indians, divided mainly between two great traditions, whose who spoke some form of Quechua, the tongue of the Incas, and those who spoke Aymara, the language of the founders of the pre-Inca Tiahuanuco civilization that once flourished around Lake Titicaca. The whole mountain chain from Ecuador formed the core of the great Inca Empire, which extended also to the coast and into the Amazonian jungles to the east, and its traditions, of light and sun worship, had never included a death cult like that of the Aztecs; the conquered were turned into subjects rather than sacrificial corpses. Even as conquerors, the Incas were as non-violent as they could be; the great kingdom of Chimu, whose capital of Chan Chan covered eight square miles in the north of Peru, was not reduced by military means but by cutting the aqueducts that provided it with water; the Incas were great manipulators of the politics of need. If they made the kingdom of Chimu

die of thirst, they kept their own people from hunger by taking a proportion of the crops in the name of the Inca and the sun god, and storing it in granaries from which it would be released when shortage threatened. There is no mention of famine in the traditions of Inca rule.

It was an intrusive but largely benevolent despotism and its heritages remained on the Peruvian Altiplano; the Inca terraces that scored the high mountainsides were still in many places cultivated by twentieth century peasants; the ancient stone roads straggled over the ranges from Quito southwards, and still one saw them being travelled by llama trains; the cyclopean Incas' walls in Cuzco and other places still stood against the earthquakes while the Spanish structures that used them as foundations crumbled away.

Perhaps most important as a living heritage of Inca society were the ayllus, landsharing communes that in many Andean villages had survived the Conquest, and had evaded the grip of the creole and foreign hacendados and mine owners who employed many of the Indians of the Altiplano in conditions not much different from those of colonial slavery and considerably more oppressive than anything that existed under the Incas. The ayllus lay in areas that the big land-grabbers did not find it profitable to appropriate, the rougher mountain areas higher in the ranges, but there were still five thousand of them left in Peru, and the people would come down in their thousands to the great weekly markets—of which the one at Huancayo was the greatest—carrying their produce, which consisted largely of potatoes in an amazing variety of colours, on the backs of llamas or on their own backs. They wore traditional dress in which large belling skirts, worn one on top of the other, characterized the garb of the women. A woman with ten skirts was not considered over-dressed, and they would lift their skirts at the front as they walked, to show the variety of colours, which seemed like a spectrum of sun-worshippers' tints, the range from vermilion through orange to clear yellows being that preferred.

I was never aware of the Two Nations of Peru so strongly as when we sat at lunch in the hotel in Huancayo and these brightly dressed but never too well-washed people would be standing several ranks deep before the big windows watching the mistis eat. Racial distinctions were sharp on the high plateau. The working and enduring majority were the Indians. The cholos ran the stalls in the markets, their women wearing big panama hats with wide black ribbons. And the state was represented by the Guardia Civil, tall,

strutting men with their scabbarded sabres clattering on the cobblestones who once held me as a suspect journalist for a short time in one of their guardhouses, and who were clearly of a different race from the small Indians whom they chivvied off the buses to poke in their bundles, and whom they sometimes shot when there was trouble on the haciendas. In those days the Guardia were the main peril of the highways. As yet, in 1956, there were none of the resistance movements like Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) or the Tupac Amaru guerillas who in recent years have given a special danger to travel in Peru which we did not experience.

Beyond the Altiplano, spilling down the slopes towards the Amazon valley, was the Montaña, not mountains so much as the parallel courses of forested tributaries flowing down to join the great river. Here, climate and disease marked out the social boundaries. The Indians of the Altiplano feared the malarial lands, and preferred if they could not survive on their highlands, to filter down into the great shack settlements of the coast. The Montaña was inhabited by Indians of many small tribes, speaking many languages, whom the Incas had not subdued, with an exploitative superstructure of white speculators which included many Americans, Germans, and even English, running plantations and mines. Again, there was a deceptive feeling of harmony, as there was at that time in the neighbouring jungles of Brazil. Neither Indian resistance nor the great plague of rapacious miners had appeared. Neither neo-Maoist teachings nor Kaleshnikoff guns had yet reached into Peru, as they had not reached into Mexico where the few bandits at that time were mostly machete-and-pistol men. In Peru, the southernmost of the two great imperial lands of pre-Columbian America, the great creole rebellions of the early nineteenth century had left a society in which a native-born class of European and mostly Spanish descent took the place of the hated rulers exported from Spain (the *Gachupines* or spur-wearers). The creoles used the Indians as cannon fodder in their wars against the Spaniards and with each other, and never gave them a share in the power or the spoils. Occasionally a cholo might rise through the ranks and stage a military coup, as General Odria did in Peru (he had just stepped down as dictator when I got there in 1956), but never an Indian. The structure was solid and found its allies among the foreign speculators who flocked to Peru from the mid-nineteenth century, taking over the mines and building the railways to serve then, astonishing railways like that built by Honest Henry Meiggs which clambers sixteen thousand feet from Lima into

the copper-mining country of La Oraya and Cerre de Pasco. The break with the pre-Columbian past was complete, except that the Indians stayed to be exploited; the care for the land and its resources and for the life of the people that was central to Inca concepts of rule had ended. Land and people were now only to be exploited, and that situation continued in the 1950s. I doubt if, several decades and regimes later, it has come to an end. And what I have been saying of Peru serves for the Central American republics where to this day corrupt creole governments use Indian conscripts to oppress the Indian peasants. Nowhere is Disraeli's vision more fully achieved.

Mexican society was not, as I remember it, as closed as that I encountered in Peru. True, we had to bribe our way in and out of the country, but we never encountered the kind of obtrusive oppressive presence the Guardia Civil had been on the roads and in the towns of the Peruvian Altiplano.

Where Mexico differed from Peru was in the fact that the revolutions of the twentieth century had left not a rigid social system, but an all-powerful institutional system. The attempts to take over the Mexican past have perhaps been spurious, but the Party of Revolutionary Institutions—with its sinister paradox of a name—was a reality in the 1950s as it is today, however much it negated the aims and ideals of genuine peasant revolutionaries like Emiliano Zapata (in whose name rebels still act in the 1990s!)

In this sense the Mexican system has been predominantly political rather than social, based on the "Institutions" of the Party's title, rather than a traditional social system of caste and race, as in Peru. The Party of Revolutionary Institutions is "a house with many mansions"—its left, centre, and right wings having in common mainly the will to keep power by any means, corrupt or otherwise. On every level *la Mordida* bites deep. A parody of democracy occurs within the party; it is possible for an Indian village mayor to become a parliamentarian and eventually a power broker, though it rarely happens. It is this offer of opportunity, as much as crude ballot stuffing, which explains why in elections the PRI always wins, following the quasi-monarchical tradition by which every President handpicks his successor. In this perverted sense, Mexico when I saw it four decades ago, was a highly imperfect democracy, whereas Peru was an imperfect autocracy. They have not changed.