

From “A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies”

by Bartolome de las Casas

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America was discovered and found out Ann. Dom. 1492, and the Year insuing inhabited by the Spaniards, and afterward a multitude of them travelled thither from Spain for the space of Nine and Forty Years. Their first attempt was on the Spanish Island, which indeed is a most fertile soil, and at present in great reputation for its Spaciousness and Length, containing in Circumference Six Hundred Miles: Nay it is on all sides surrounded with an almost innumerable number of Islands, which we found so well peopled with Natives and Forreigners, that there is scarce any Region in the Universe fortified with so many Inhabitants: But the main Land or Continent, distant from this Island Two Hundred and Fifty Miles and upwards, extends it self above Ten Thousand Miles in Length near the sea-shore, which Lands are some of them already discover'd, and more may be found out in process of time: And such a multitude of People inhabits these Countries, that it seems as if the Omnipotent God has Assembled and Convocated the major part of Mankind in this part of the World.

Now this infinite multitude of Men are by the Creation of God innocently simple, altogether void of and averse to all manner of Craft, Subtlety and Malice, and most Obedient and Loyal Subjects to their Native Sovereigns; and behave themselves very patiently, sumissively and quietly towards the Spaniards, to whom they are subservient and subject; so that finally they live without the least thirst after revenge, laying aside all litigiousness, Commotion and hatred.

This is a most tender and effeminate people, and so imbecile and unequal-balanced temper, that they are altogether incapable of hard labour, and in few years, by one Distemper or other soon expire, so that the very issue of Lords and Princes, who among us live with great affluence, and fard deliciously, are not more effminate and tender than the Children of their Husbandmen or Labourers: This Nation is very Necessitous and Indigent, Masters of very slender Possessions, and consequently, neither Haughty, nor Ambitious. They are parsimonious in their Diet, as the Holy Fathers were in their frugal life in the Desert, known by the name of Eremites. They go naked, having no other Covering but what conceals their Pudends from publick sight. An hairy Plad, or loose Coat, about an Ell, or a coarse woven Cloth at most Two Ells long serves them for the warmest Winter Garment. They lye on a coarse Rug or Matt, and those that have the most plentiful Estate or Fortunes, the better sort, use Net-work, knotted at the four corners in lieu of Beds, which the Inhabitants of the Island of Hispaniola, in their own proper Idiom, term Hammacks. The Men are pregnant and docible. The natives tractable, and capable of Morality or Goodness, very apt to receive the instill'd principles of Catholick Religion; nor are they averse to Civility and good Manners, being not so much discompos'd by variety of Obstructions, as the rest of Mankind; insomuch, that having suckt in (if I may so express my self) the the very first Rudiments of the Christian Faith, they are so transported with Zeal and Furvor in the exercise of Ecclesiastical Sacraments, and Divine Service, that the very Religioso's themselves, stand in need of the greatest and most signal patience to undergo such extream Transports. And to conclude, I my self have heard the Spaniards themselves (who dare not assume the Confidence to deny the good Nature praedominant in them) declare, that there was nothing wanting in them for the acquisition of Eternal Beatitude, but the sole Knowledge and Understanding of the Deity.

The Spaniards first assaulted the innocent Sheep, so qualified by the Almighty, as is premention'd, like most cruel Tygers, Wolves and Lions hunger-starv'd, studying nothing, for the space of Forty Years, after their first landing, but the Massacre of these Wretches, whom they have so inhumanely and barbarously butcher'd and harass'd with several kinds of Torments, never before known, or heard (of which you shall have some account in the following Discourse) that of Three Millions of Persons, which lived in Hispaniola itself, there is at present but the inconsiderable remnant of scarce Three Hundred. Nay the Isle of Cuba, which extends as far, as Valledolid in Spain is distant from Rome, lies now uncultivated, like a Desert, and intomb'd in its own Ruins. You may also find the Isles of St. John, and Jamaica, both large and fruitful places, unpeopled and desolate. The Lucayan Islands on the North Side, adjacent to Hispaniola and Cuba, which are Sixty in number, or thereabout, together with those, vulgarly known by the name of the Gigantic Isles, and others, the most infertile whereof, exceeds the Royal Garden of Sevil in fruitfulness, a most Healthful and pleasant Climat, is now laid waste and uninhabited; and whereas, when the Spaniards first arriv'd here, about Five Hundred Thousand Men dwelt in it, they are now cut off, some by slaughter, and others ravished away by Force and Violence, to work in the Mines of Hispaniola, which was destitute of Native Inhabitants: For a certain Vessel, sailing to this Isle, to the end, that the Harvest being over (some good Christian, moved with Piety and Pity, undertook this dangerous Voyage, to convert Souls to Christianity) the remaining gleanings might be gathered up, there were only found Eleven Persons, which I saw with my own Eyes. There are other Islands Thirty in number, and upward bordering upon the Isle of St. John, totally unpeopled; all which are above Two Thousand miles in Length, and yet remain without Inhabitants, Native, or People.

As to the firm land, we are certainly satisfied, and assur'd, that the Spaniards by their barbarous and execrable Actions have absolutely depopulated Ten Kingdoms, of greater extent than all Spain, together with the Kingdoms of Arragon and Portugal, that is to say, above One Thousand Miles, which now lye wast and desolate, and are absolutely ruined, when as formerly no other Country whatsoever was more populous. Nay we dare boldly affirm, that during the Forty Years space, wherein they exercised their sanguinary and detestable Tyranny in these Regions, above Twelve Millions (computing Men, Women, and Children) have undeservedly perished; nor do I conceive that I should deviate from the Truth by saying that above Fifty Millions in all paid their last Debt to Nature.

Those that arriv'd at these Islands from the remotest parts of Spain, and who pride themselves in the Name of Christians, steer'd Two courses principally, in order to the Extirpation, and Exterminating of this People from the face of the Earth. The first whereof was raising an unjust, sanguinolent, cruel War. The other, by putting them to death, who hitherto, thirsted after their Liberty, or design'd (which the most Potent, Strenuous and Magnanimous Spirits intended) to recover their pristin Freedom, and shake off the Shackles of so injurious a Captivity: For they being taken off in War, none but Women and Children were permitted to enjoy the benefit of that Country-Air, in whom they did in succeeding times lay such a heavy Yoak, that the very Brutes were more happy than they: To which Two Species of Tyranny as subalternate things to the Genus, the other innumerable Courses they took to extirpate and make this a desolate People, may be reduced and referr'd.

Now the ultimate end and scope that incited the Spaniards to endeavor the Extirpation and Desolation of this People, was Gold only; that thereby growing opulent in a short time, they might arrive at once at such Degrees and Dignities, as were no ways consistent with their Persons.

Finally, in one word, their Ambition and Avarice, than which the heart of Man never entertained greater, and the vast Wealth of those Regions; the Humility and Patience of the Inhabitants (which made their approach to these Lands more facil and easie) did much promote the business: Whom they so despicably contemned, that they treated them (I speak of things which I was an Eye Witness of, without the least fallacy) not as Beasts, which I cordially wished they would, but as the most abject dung and filth of the Earth; and so sollicitous they were of their Life and Soul, that the above-mentioned number of People died without understanding the true Faith or Sacraments. And this also is as really true as the praecedent Narration (which the very Tyrants and cruel Murderers cannot deny without the stigma of a lye) that the Spaniards never received any injury from the Indians, but that they rather revered them as Persons descended from Heaven, until that they were compelled to take up Arms, provoked thereunto by repeated Injuries, violent Torments, and unjust Butcheries.

Of the Island HISPANIOLA.

In this Isle, which, as we have said, the Spaniards first attempted, the bloody slaughter and destruction of Men first began: for they violently forced away Women and Children to make them Slaves, and ill-treated them, consuming and wasting their Food, which they had purchased with great sweat, toil, and yet remained dissatisfied too, which every one according to his strength and ability, and that was very inconsiderable (for they provided no other Food than what was absolutely necessary to support Nature without superfluity, freely bestow'd on them, and one individual Spaniard consumed more Victuals in one day, than would serve to maintain Three Families a Month, every one consisting of Ten Persons. Now being oppressed by such evil usage, and afflicted with such greate Torments and violent Entertainment they began to understand that such Men as those had not their Mission from Heaven; and therefore some of them conceal'd their Provisions and others to their Wives and Children in lurking holes, but some, to avoid the obdurate and dreadful temper of such a Nation, sought their Refuge on the craggy tops of Mountains; for the Spaniards did not only entertain them with Cuffs, Blows, and wicked Cudgelling, but laid violent hands also on the Governours of Cities; and this arriv'd at length to that height of Temerity and Impudence, that a certain Captain was so audacious as abuse the Consort of the most puissant King of the whole Isle. From which time they began to consider by what wayes and means they might expel the Spaniards out of their Countrey, and immediately took up Arms. But, good God, what Arms, do you imagine? Namely such, both Offensive and Defensive, as resemble Reeds wherewith Boys sport with one another, more than Manly Arms and Weapons.

Which the Spaniards no sooner perceived, but they, mounted on generous Steeds, well weapon'd with Lances and Swords, begin to exercise their bloody Butcheries and Strategems, and overrunning their Cities and Towns, spar'd no Age, or Sex, nay not so much as Women with Child, but ripping up their Bellies, tore them alive in pieces. They laid Wagers among themselves, who should with a Sword at one blow cut, or divide a Man in two; or which of them should decollate or behead a Man, with the greatest

dexterity; nay farther, which should sheath his Sword in the Bowels of a Man with the quickest dispatch and expedition.

They snatcht young Babes from the Mothers Breasts, and then dasht out the brains of those innocents against the Rocks; others they cast into Rivers scoffing and jeering them, and call'd upon their Bodies when falling with derision, the true testimony of their Cruelty, to come to them, and inhumanely exposing others to their Merciless Swords, together with the Mothers that gave them Life.

They erected certain Gibbets, large, but low made, so that their feet almost reacht the ground, every one of which was so order'd as to bear Thirteen Persons in Honour and Reverence (as they said blasphemously) of our Redeemer and his Twelve Apostles, under which they made a Fire to burn them to Ashes whilst hanging on them: But those they intended to preserve alive, they dismiss'd, their Hands half cut, and still hanging by the Skin, to carry their Letters missive to those that fly from us and lay sculking on the Mountains, as an exprobaton of their flight.

The Lords and Persons of Noble Extract were usually expos'd to this kind of Death; they order'd Gridirons to be placed and supported with wooden Forks, and putting a small Fire under them, these miserable Wretches by degrees and with loud Shreiks and exquisite Torments, at last Expir'd.

I once saw Four or Five of their most Powerful Lords laid on these Gridirons, and thereon roasted, and not far off, Two or Three more over-spread with the same Commodity, Man's Flesh; but the shril Clamours which were heard there being offensive to the Captain, by hindring his Repose, he commanded them to be strangled with a Halter. The Executioner (whose Name and Parents at Sevil are not unknown to me) prohibited the doing of it; but stopt Gags into their Mouths to prevent the hearing of the noise (he himself making the Fire) till that they dyed, when they had been roasted as long as he thought convenient. I was an Eye-Witness of these and an innumerable Number of other Cruelties: And because all Men, who could lay hold of the opportunity, sought out lurking holes in the Mountains, to avoid as dangerous Rocks so Brutish and Barbarous a People, Strangers to all Goodness, and the Extirpaters and Adversaries of Men, they bred up such fierce hunting Dogs as would devour an Indian like a Hog, at first sight in less than a moment: Now such kind of Slaughters and Cruelties as these were committed by the Curs, and if at any time it hapned, (which was rarely) that the Indians irritated upon a just account destroy'd or took away the Life of any Spaniard, they promulgated and proclaim'd this Law among them, that One Hundred Indians should dye for every individual Spaniard that should be slain.