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To the memory of France Vinton Scholes

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When the Spaniards discovered this land, their leader asked the Indians how it was called; as they did not understand him, they said *uic athan*, which means, what do you say or what do you speak, that we do not understand you. And then the Spaniard ordered it set down that it be called *Yucatan*. . . .

Antonio de Ciudad Real, 1588

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Preface to the second edition

Ambivalent Conquests is now fifteen years old, which is elderly in the academic world. I will not try to locate it in regard to new developments in colonial studies in Yucatan or elsewhere, partly because history, especially regional history, moves slowly; more because it is a discrete study that aimed to shed a sharp light on one particular territory, and only diffuse light beyond.

Instead I offer a short history of the transformation of a great deal of reading, thinking, and rethinking into the book you are holding in your hands. (We know too little about the biography of books.) *Ambivalent Conquests* was my first book. Each book teaches the writer something new, but the first teaches you the most. It grew out of a post-graduate history thesis: an inquiry into Spanish actions in colonial Yucatan a couple of decades after conquest, with the focus on the ferocious inquisition into Indian 'backsliding' by Franciscan missionary friars, and the Spanish settlers' attempts to stop it. The thesis ended with the prim observation that, as we have only Spanish records to work from, the world of the Mayan Indians was and must remain closed to us. One of my examiners, a man of much insight and few words, pencilled in the margin: 'Why?'. I was taken aback. Then I thought 'Why indeed?'; read a great deal of Clifford Geertz and other selected anthropologists; returned to those Spanish records; and, four years of happy thinking later, completed the book with a third section devoted to reconstructing what the Indians might have been up to. Since then I have roamed through a number of different geographic and temporal territories – Aztec Mexico, Nazi Germany, most recently the early contact history of my own country, Australia – but the central issue has remained constant: how to understand from whatever sources we happen to have what the participants in past events thought in good faith they were up to – what, in the widest sense, happened.

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Writing *Ambivalent Conquests* taught me the difficulties in subduing unruly evidence, analysis, and reflection into a coherent and readable whole. It took the failure of a series of ambitious structural schemes to make me see what I had been looking at all the time: that the sources clustered into three good-faith narratives of the same events. That recognised, the book organised itself into its triple-decker form.

These days 'narrative' has become a tricky term. Old-fashioned historians still like to think they are excavating some objective actuality when they arrange their own hunches regarding motive bolstered by selective snippets of evidence in close chronological sequence; new-fangled historians ridicule the possibility of objectivity and proceed to subject their readers to athletic displays of subjectivity unbound. A range of other ingenuities is exercised between these two poles. I was fortunate to read the writings of the psychologist Jerome Bruner at a crucial stage in my thinking. He taught me that we all are always constructing our own private narratives regarding our own and others' actions, and that these covert narratives powerfully influence what we think and do. Clifford Geertz and others had already shown me that we can best recognise what other people intend and desire from what they say, and even more from what they do; that the best available understanding of our subjects and their animating visions will come from close observation of their gestural and verbal language through changing contexts. Nowadays that is consciously my 'method', but I find it animating *Ambivalent Conquests* too. My pursuit of objectivity consists of a close attachment to surviving records, along with recognition of their gaps and silences, and in committing myself to critical awareness of my own predilections and making the reader aware of them too. That seems to me most directly done by engaging readers in an open dialogue regarding the potentialities and limitations of the sources I claim are relevant.

The difficulties were real and the strategies inspiriting, but my main pleasure in researching and writing the book, and in urging you to read it now, was the illumination – the 'serious joy', to quote a colleague – of seeing how three different accounts of the world, each authentic in its own terms, could, when placed in counterpoint, result in scarring damage and subtle change to all players. It is, at its core, a study of unintended consequences.

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Preface to the first edition

South and west of Cuba a great limestone peninsula thrusts into the warm waters of the Caribbean. The Maya Indians who lived there called it 'The Land of the Turkey and Deer', for they thought it a rich place. In the early years of the sixteenth century Spaniards came; some in search of a golden kingdom, some to extend the Kingdom of God. They found a harsh and stony land which they conquered and settled nonetheless. They named it 'Yucatan'.

This is a story of how the Land of the Turkey and the Deer was made into Yucatan. Proud of their exploits, the conquerors recorded them in detail, so the tale of exploration and war can be told, first, from their point of view, and in their terms – of courage, unabashed cupidity, and that extraordinary European conviction of their right to appropriate the world. Later we hear Spanish voices still, but Spanish voices raised in confused and bitter conflict, as settlers and missionary friars fought a dangerous battle for the power to determine the kind of Yucatan they would make. They fought not only over the use of land and control of labour, the conventional problems of colonial politics, but over contrary accounts of the conduct and the nature of the subject native people. In the course of that struggle about the nature of the alien and other, they were sometimes forced to unsought and profoundly disquieting discoveries about themselves – which is always a danger in the hall-of-mirrors world we make when we seek to possess the strange and make it part of ourselves.

Then, finally, I turn to the Maya: to discover, through analysis of deeply partisan Spanish accounts, what they did, and from their own few and fragmentary writings what they meant by what they did. It takes patience and perseverance to hear those faint long-ago Indian voices at all, speaking as they do from an unfamiliar world and an unfamiliar experience. The attempt also requires from both reader and author a

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tolerance of ambiguities, and of inherently contestable judgments. But to offer interpretations without acknowledging their uncertain ground would be less than candid, while to state only what is certainly known would be to leave unexplored what matters most.

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Acknowledgments

Any study which has migrated between bottom drawer and desk top as often as this one picks up many obligations along the way. I think others will understand if I single out June Philipp, Greg Dening and Rhys Isaac for special thanks. Each read all of an earlier draft, and through the cogency of their distinctive criticisms forced the rethinking of large parts of it. They will recognise their influence in many passages, and regret its absence in others. I am deeply grateful to them. John Horacek, Margot Hyslop and the rest of the staff at the Borchardt Library have been ingenious in the pursuit of hard-to-get material, and Merelyn Dowling and Shirley Horton have chosen to accept my messy manuscripts as a happy challenge, instead of the disgrace they are, converting them into elegant typescript with sunny good humour. And somehow, through all the years, my husband John has contrived to find the doings of friars and bishops and Indians perennially interesting. These people, and many others, have made work a steady pleasure.

I owe a special debt to the magnificent team of Carnegie Institution scholars who worked on sixteenth-century Yucatecan material in the 1930s and 1940s: France Scholes and Robert Chamberlain on Spanish documentation; Ralph Roys on Maya writings; Eric Thompson ranging everywhere. Without their heroic labours we would know little of that first crucial fifty years of Spanish–Indian contact on the peninsula. Among them I met only France Scholes, in the last years of his life. I'll not forget his magisterial scholarship, nor his extraordinary kindness to a stranger. Increasing years and cares prevented the completion of his own massively researched biography of Diego de Landa. This small study is not the book France Scholes would have written, but it is, in an important sense, of his making, and in affection and admiration I dedicate it to his memory.

Melbourne, 1986 INGA CLENDINNEN

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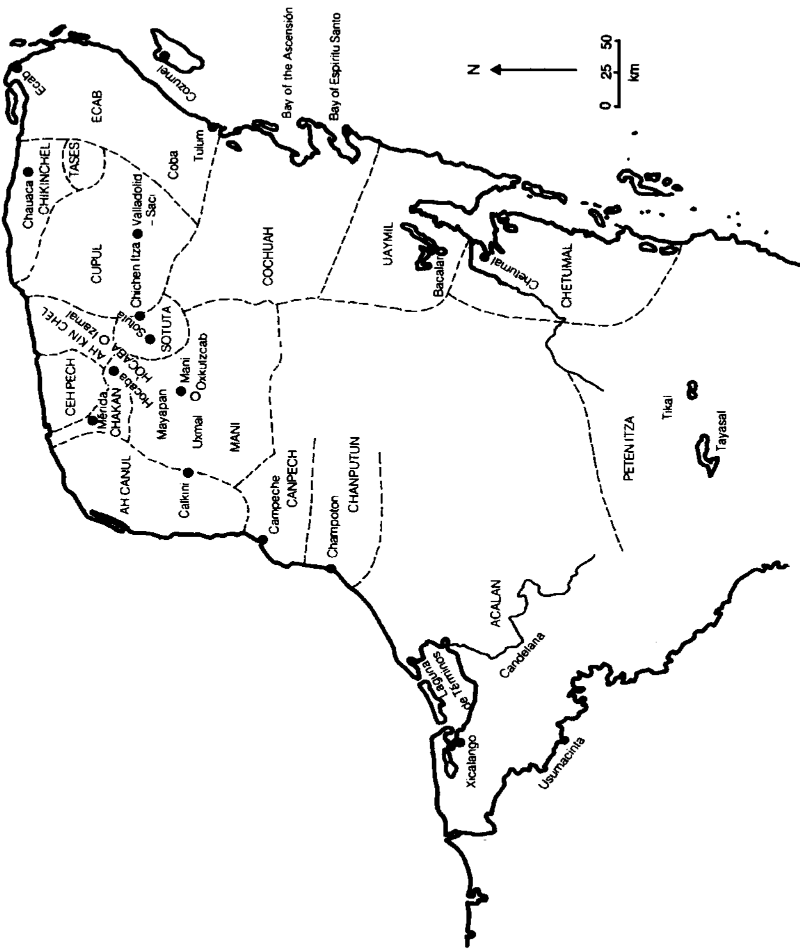

Map 1 Yucatan in the conquest preiod.

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