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978-0-521-09990-5 - Letters and People of the Spanish Indies: Sixteenth Century

Edited by James Lockhart and Enrique Otte

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22

LETTERS AND PEOPLE OF
THE SPANISH INDIES
SIXTEENTH CENTURY

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LETTER ILLUSTRATED OVER

señora hermana

en otra sin esta e suplicado a v. md me haga md de me mandar aca a su yerno y a vna de sus hijas la donçella pues v. md sabe que yo no tengo a quien pueda dejar en esta tierra lo que tengo sera justo que para que no goçe dello quien no es suyo que v. md lo anime a que venga y trayga a su muger que yo lo quedare con que biva muy descansado y si se quisiere bolver bien puede que yo le dare con que se pueda mantener en esa tierra y si determina de venirse procure por marcos de sandoval en sevilla en casa de don jorje de portugal que de alli lo encaminaran y le daran lo que vuere menester v. md no haga otra cosa porque en ello me hara muy gran md de la muerte del señor andres perez me peso muy mucho nro s^{or} perdone su anima y v. md de salud para que por ella y las demas haga bien — de la nueva españa i de la puebla de los angeles seis de diçiembre de iMDlxxv años

a serviçio de v. md

ana maçias

Lady sister:

In another letter aside from this one I have implored you to do me the favor of sending to me here your son-in-law and one of your daughters, the unmarried one. Since you know that I have no one in this land to whom I can leave what I have and it would be just that someone should not enjoy it to whom it did not belong, encourage him to come and bring his wife, and I will see to it that he lives in great repose, and if he should want to return, he can very well, for I will give him the means to maintain himself in that land there (Spain). And if he decides to come, let him arrange it through Marcos de Sandoval in Seville, in the house of don Jorge de Portugal; they will set him on his way from there and give him what he should need. Don't do differently, because therein you will be doing me a great favor.

I was grieved by the death of Mr Andrés Pérez; may our Lord pardon his soul and give health to you to do good for it and the souls of others. From New Spain and Puebla de los Angeles, 6th of December of the year 1575.

At your service,

Ana Macias

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señora persona

En otra vez de la de su caso a lo m.
me haga no se manan para ca que por no va
una de su fin por la don a la que. V. m. en
de que yo no tengo a quien que sea de la en
esta para lo que tengo sea justo que pa
ra que no go a de lo que no de suyo que
V. m. lo que me a que venga y traiga ga
muyez que yo lo que sea en que si va
muy del can ca se se que se se se se se
bien puede que yo lo que sea en que se que
sa man tener en esta tierra y si de ter
mi ha de venir se procure por mas ovi
de don de vna. En si me da en ca se don
por se se putugal que se a lo de en cam.
naran de la ca ran lo que de me me re por
V. m. no ha ga otra cosa porque en el
materia muy gran no de la muer te de
se an ovi se se se se se se se se se se
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para que de la y la de la de la de la de la
de la muer de la de la de la de la de la
an ge los se se se se se se se se se se
se se se se se se se se se se se se se

Letter by Ana Macías, in Puebla, to her cousin María Deza in Talavera, Badajoz, 1575. (Published in Otte, 'Cartas privadas de Puebla'.)

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PREFACE

I have written you so many times and sent so
many letters by whoever has left here . . .

Melchor Verdugo, in Trujillo, Peru,
to his mother in Spain, 1536

Letters abound in the records of early Spanish America. Or at least, public correspondence does. Members of all of the different official hierarchies were constantly writing to higher authority, and especially to the Spanish crown, petitioning, proposing, polemicizing. All corporations and interest groups did the same, and so did individuals when aggrieved or desirous of favors. The strident texts produced by this activity were long the main corpus with which historians of the Spanish Indies worked, first taking them at face value, then learning to appreciate their conventions, their propagandistic nature, their systematic distortions when compared with other types of evidence. New evidence emerged in many forms, from tax lists to notarial records, but rarely indeed, until recently, in the true counterpart of official correspondence, that is, private correspondence.

Were there no private letters? Scholars were long inclined to think so, and they even incorporated the supposed lack of intimate written expression into theories of the Spanish character. But in fact there were, and today's scarcity is only the result of the vulnerability of private correspondence to loss. From the examples that have been coming to light one can deduce that letter-writing among private individuals was a well-established custom in both Spain and the Indies (as the Spaniards persisted in calling America). Correspondents acknowledge previous

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letters, complain of lack of mail, speak of the cheapness of paper and ink, and in other ways betray that it was customary to write letters to absent relatives and friends. The genre was mature, with a complete set of salutations and courtesy endings, and certain conventions of vocabulary and structure, such as for example the frequent use of the word *razón* ('right,' 'reason') somewhere in the beginning sentences.

Letters must have originated in all areas and gone in all directions, but in general only those which found a place in some official repository have been preserved. Most to appear so far were written from the Indies to relatives and associates in Spain. Of letters directed from Spain to the Indies we know little more than what we can deduce from the replies of the settlers, namely that they contained frequent appeals for money. As to the settlers' letters, they are often written with an eye to recruitment; they praise the opportunities and plenteousness of the new land in terms that would do justice to a Pole or Italian in the United States of 1910. Stereotypes and bias are no less evident in letters like these than in official reports, and must be equally discounted, or rather taken as such. Even so, there is much immediacy, reality, sobriety and simple informativeness in them. They are very human documents, in which the Spaniard of the Indies appears in roles intuitively familiar to us, as son, brother, immigrant, tradesman, European, anything but some exotic 'conquistador' 'thirsty for gold.'

The greatest cache of such letters is in the records of the Casa de la Contratación, the clearing house in Seville for departures to the Indies, where emigrants brought the correspondence as proof that they had connections at their declared destinations.¹ Other letters are incorporated as evidence in litigation, as when there was a dispute over inheritance, or the investigation of an official's conduct. Among such papers one often comes upon a somewhat different kind of private correspondence, the letters that merchants wrote back and forth across the Atlantic. These appear going in both directions, for the headquarters of the exporting firms was in Seville, which in some senses was almost a part of the Indies and was drawn into the latter's judicial-

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documentary web. Merchants' letters lack some of the biases of other settler correspondence, but have their own predispositions; though quite technical in vocabulary, in the end the commercial letters are as fresh, personal and informative as the others, covering somewhat different ground.

In this volume we bring together a structured selection of these three types of letters, with unabashed emphasis on the more personal ones, trying to give as nearly complete a panorama of sixteenth-century Spanish American settler society and its genres of correspondence as we can achieve. The wide spread of social types and functions will speak directly to the reader. The humanity and the familiar sentiments of the writers will also readily make themselves felt. But these people were deeply embedded in a complex and rapidly evolving society, at a specific point in time; now removed from us by some centuries, that society calls for a certain amount of explanation. With an understanding of the context, the regularity and universality of the processes come home to us even more (a universality not at all inconsistent with the unique flavor of the individuals, the time and the culture). Rather than supply this context in disembodied form in a long introduction, we have adapted it more specifically to the letters themselves, arranged in three large sections – Conquest, The Variety of Life in the Indies, and Officials and Clerics – which we imagine as best read consecutively, in the same order as presented, since the comments are cumulative, and there is structure in the arrangement of the letters as well.

In this preface, then, we will make only a few very general remarks on early Spanish America. The letters in this book throw light on many trades, functions, offices and social mechanisms, but one might not get from them a sufficient sense of the overriding importance of cities, unless perhaps by noting that most are written *from* cities. Spanish America was built on an Indian base, and without fail more Spaniards went where there were more Indians, but the great majority of Spaniards themselves resided in widely dispersed cities that they would found almost as soon as they set foot in a country. In these all the

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elements of Spanish life soon took root, and there all Spanish organizations, whether commercial, governmental, or ecclesiastic, had their center. Even the estate structure centered on the cities. There all Spanish people of rank, wealth and influence were to be found, only subordinates and recent arrivals being stationed in the country, and they principally to channel things towards the cities.

Cities were also the units into which entire regions were divided. Each city included a vast district stretching all the way to where the jurisdiction of the next began. Where Indian provincial organization would allow it, and in all the more densely populated areas it did, the district was subdivided into *encomiendas*, ideally one *encomienda* per Indian provincial unit, the labor and tribute of which was assigned for a lifetime to one Spaniard, the *encomendero*. Though the *encomienda* was in the countryside, the *encomendero*, following the general principles of the organization of the society, was a citizen of the city and maintained his principal establishment there. The *encomenderos* indeed long dominated Spanish city society, as heads of retinues, members of town councils, and the chief patrons of merchants, artisans and clerics. During the sixteenth century and long after, most parts of the Indies could be described as consisting of Spanish cities and Indian towns which formed their hinterlands.

The first area of Spanish impact was the Caribbean, where many lasting patterns were set, but that area itself soon faded to relative insignificance with the exhaustion of precious metals and catastrophic demographic loss among the Indian population. The Spaniards proceeded from Hispaniola and Santo Domingo, the main Caribbean center, towards the mainland in two roughly simultaneous streams, one to Cuba and then Mexico, the other to the area of the Isthmus of Panama, then called *Tierra Firme*, and from there on to Peru. Peru and Mexico, with their large Indian populations, rich agriculture, strong provincial structures, and vast silver deposits, constituted the real substance of sixteenth-century Spanish America. The rest of the mainland was a fringe and dependency, conquered and to some

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extent ruled from these two truly central regions, with their capitals of Lima and Mexico City, which quickly became the seats of the only two viceroys of Spanish America. Our letters, mainly from Mexico, Peru, and the approaches thereto, reflect this situation.

As the central regions became consolidated, with substantial Spanish immigration and continuing productivity in silver, there grew up a fleet system which figures in some of the correspondence here. With a regularity which was something less than mechanical, a fleet would leave Seville carrying merchandise and people. Following the precedent of the original conquest, it split in the Caribbean, one part going to Mexico's port of Veracruz, and the other to the Isthmus. Here things were a bit more complicated. From the Caribbean port of Nombre de Dios (and later Portobello), a mere shell most of the time, goods were carried to the more developed center of Panamá on the Pacific side, and thence to Peru. Essentially Tierra Firme was Peru's port as Veracruz was Mexico's. The fleets then returned to Seville carrying silver, some Spaniards on their way home to a wealthy retirement, and letters like the ones which make up our book.

The reader will encounter quite a few unfamiliar terms in succeeding pages. In almost every letter appear the denominations of the money of the time. In the Indies, the primary unit was the peso, containing eight silver reales or gold tomines. In Spain, one spoke more often in terms of ducats. Both were reducible to the pure denomination of account, the maravedí, used especially by merchants and treasury officials in keeping records. The usual 'peso of good gold' of the sixteenth century was worth 450 maravedís, the ducat 375; thus the ratio was 6 : 5. In fact, in view of inflation in the Indies, there was some tendency to think that a peso there was equivalent to a ducat in Spain, a view in which one of our correspondents (Letter 17) concurs.

¹ A much more detailed statement on the nature and origin of the letters is in Otte, 'Die europäischen Siedler und die Probleme der Neuen Welt,' *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas*, VI (1969), 1-40.

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Map: The Spanish Indies, Sixteenth Century