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THE
OLD WORLD
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by
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of Modern History,
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TO THE MEMORY OF
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PREFACE

The impact of the New World of America on sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe is a large and ambitious theme, which should be discussed either in a very long book, or in a very short one. While I was pondering on it, I received the generous invitation of The Queen's University of Belfast to deliver the Wiles Lectures for 1969. One of the essential purposes of the Wiles Lectures is to encourage the discussion of broad issues which relate to the general history of civilization. The impact of the New World on the Old in the first century and a half after the discovery of America seemed eminently suited to this kind of treatment. This book, the text of my four lectures, is therefore very short.

The demands of time and space inevitably meant that my approach to the subject had to be highly selective. Some aspects had to be omitted, or could be only lightly touched upon; and I decided to concentrate almost exclusively on the Iberian world of central and southern America, at the expense of the Anglo-French world of the north. Although this is no doubt regrettable, my terminal date of 1650 makes the neglect of northern America less serious than it would have been if I had been examining the entire seventeenth century. While writing the lectures, I felt that the gain in unity and coherence of theme might go some way to compensate for the omission of much that would necessarily have been included in a large and comprehensive volume. The same consideration has guided my preparation of the lectures for publication. It seemed wiser to leave them very much in the form in which they were originally given, than to alter the general balance by expanding them into a book of conventional size.

One of the most attractive features of the Wiles Lectures is the special provision for the invitation to Belfast of a number of guests who join members of the academic staff of The Queen's University in the evening discussion which follows each lecture. The discussions on this occasion were both lively and interesting, and I have done my best to bear in mind the general tenor of our conversations

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when preparing the lectures for the press. I wish to record here my gratitude to the Astor, Leverhulme and Rockefeller Foundations for generous assistance towards travel and research in Latin America, which first opened my eyes to the historical possibilities to be found in the study of the relationship between the Old World and the New. I am grateful, too, to Mr Thomas R. Adams and the staff of the John Carter Brown Library in Providence, Rhode Island, for their kindness and help during all too brief an exploration of a collection which is brilliantly focused on the theme of this book. Above all, I am grateful to Mrs Janet Boyd and the Trustees of the Wiles Foundation for providing the inspiration and the excuse for this book, and to my friends and colleagues at The Queen's University of Belfast for ensuring that its trial run took place in the most pleasant and favourable conditions.

J. H. E.

King's College
London
December 1969

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PREFACE TO THE CANTO EDITION

The commemoration in 1992 of the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's landfall in America has given a new topicality to the subject of this book. The anniversary has, not surprisingly, prompted a vigorous debate over the whole record of European conquest and settlement, and a general reassessment of the historical relationship of Europe and America, the Old World and the New. The Western triumphalism that surrounded the 1892 Columbus celebrations has now been replaced by defensiveness, self-condemnation, and doubt. It is clear that a major change has occurred in Europe's perception of its relationship with the non-European world as the curtain is finally rung down on the age of empire, and a new and very different phase of world history is symbolically inaugurated.

Given the mood of the moment, it is natural that more attention is currently being paid to the impact of Europe on America than to the other side of the equation, the impact of America on Europe, which provides the theme for this book. But since its first appearance in 1970 this theme, too, has attracted increased interest, and has generated a growing body of valuable publications. In 1975 an international conference held in Los Angeles brought together a large number of specialists working on one aspect or another of the question, and revealed simultaneously how much was already known, and how much still remained to be done.¹ This was followed in the summer of 1991 by a conference on 'America in European Consciousness, 1493-1750', organized by the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University in Providence, whose superb holdings and intelligent direction have given it the pre-eminent position in the promotion of research on the topic.

It is the John Carter Brown Library, too, which has now provided scholars in the field with an indispensable instrument of research in the stately series of volumes now approaching completion, *European*

¹The conference proceedings were published in Fredi Chiappelli, ed., *First Images of America* (2 vols., Berkeley, 1976).

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Americana.² The first two volumes cover exactly the period 1492–1650 discussed in this book. Looking back on my own ambitious attempt to survey such a large theme in such a small number of pages, I realize how much I would have benefited from a bibliographical guide organized on a chronological basis, of the kind that has now been provided by *European Americana*. With its assistance historians can now study with some precision the degree of interest in America shown by Europeans at any given moment, in so far as this can be measured by the books they were reading and writing.

Without the advantage of having *European Americana* to hand, many of my impressions were necessarily subjective, and all too often I felt that I was groping in the dark. While it is gratifying that so much of the work published over the last twenty years has tended to confirm what were often no more than intuitions, no one is more conscious than myself of the fragility of some of the hypotheses that I have advanced. Although I have left the text unchanged for this edition, and have contented myself with bringing the bibliography up to date, if I had been writing the book now I might have handled rather differently my discussion of the extent to which sixteenth-century Europeans were interested in American themes. While I continue to believe that, after the initial excitement of discovery, America tended to recede from the consciousness of many Europeans, more might have been said about those who, for one reason or another maintained a close and continuing interest in it, just as more might have been said, too, about the ways in which growing familiarity blunted the shock of excitement.

In retrospect it is clear that the question of the whole process of ‘assimilation’ requires much more attention than I was able to give it.³ Although I was anxious to avoid creating the impression of a linear development from incomprehension to assimilation, my necessarily schematic treatment of the problem may unwittingly have helped to foster it. Different generations of observers will see, or not see, in accordance with the nature of their mental systems,

²Ed. John Alden and Dennis C. Landis (New York, 1980–).

³For a highly suggestive discussion of this general theme, see Michael T. Ryan, ‘Assimilating New Worlds in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23 (1981), 519–38.

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and, as Anthony Pagden pointed out in his important book, *The Fall of Natural Man*,⁴ it is the discovery of the internal incoherence of a system, rather than the impact upon it of some external 'reality', which leads to the discarding of a fixed idea. This takes us back again from the New World to the Old. It is in the shifting mental systems of Early Europeans that we shall find the key to shifts in their perceptions of the peoples of America.

Much work is at present being done on these perceptions, as they emerge from the writings of conquerors, explorers and chroniclers. In particular, it has become fashionable to discuss this subject in terms of Europeans' engagement with the 'other', and, more often than not, to find the Europeans wanting. But the 'other' has marked limitations as a conceptual tool, and its use tends to create a set of assumptions and expectations far removed from those of sixteenth-century Europeans themselves. In the process it is all too often these European writers and observers who in effect become the 'other', little understood and too easily condemned.

A justified, and often long overdue, sympathy for the victims of European conquerors and colonists should not of itself preclude a serious and dispassionate attempt to understand the mental world of these Early Modern Europeans. I have attempted in this book to give some indication of how they sought to come to terms with what, to them, was a new and alien world. Their intellectual wrestlings, their doubts and uncertainties, no less than the arrogance of their treatment of the indigenous peoples of America stemming from the conviction of their own innate superiority, constitute an important part of the story of the fluctuating relationship of the Old World and the New. In this short volume I have sought to convey at least an outline of this story, while remaining fully conscious of how much still remains to be told.

Oxford
July 1991

⁴Cambridge, 1982; revised edn., 1986.