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0521627303 - Born to Die: Disease and New World Conquest, 1492-1650

Noble David Cook

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DISEASE AND NEW WORLD
CONQUEST, 1492-1650

NOBLE DAVID COOK

Florida International University



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To
Cuitláhuac and Huayna Capac
and the millions
who fell not to the sword
but to the
unseen foe within

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Great was the stench of the dead. After our fathers and grandfathers succumbed, half of the people fled to the fields. The dogs and the vultures devoured the bodies. The mortality was terrible. Your grandfather died, and with them died the son of the king and his brothers and kinsmen. So it was that we became orphans, oh my sons! So we became when we were young. All of us were thus. We were born to die!

Annals of the Cakchiquels, ca. 1559–81

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The excitement of historical research and discovery creates a bond linking an international scholarly community. My initial investigations into the relation of epidemic disease to the demographic collapse of Amerindian America began many years ago, as I searched for the causes of the total disappearance of some groups while others survived. Dobyns's conference "Native American Historic Demography," held at the Newberry Library in Chicago in December 1983, forced me to rethink my arguments on the role of disease in the conquest of the Americas. At that time we were working independently on developing epidemic disease models to estimate aboriginal population size. Dobyns's enthusiastic encouragement was and is always appreciated. At the Newberry conference I first met historical geographer W. George Lovell. A common intellectual curiosity centering on the European's impact on Amerindian people – his on the Quiche Maya of Guatemala, mine on the Quechua and Aymara of highland South America – soon led to an enriching academic relationship. In 1986 we participated in a symposium on colonial migrations organized by David J. Robinson at Syracuse University, where, during evenings of stimulating and often heated discussions with specialists Elsa Malvido, David Robinson, John Kicza, and Robert McCaa, Lovell and I decided to chair jointly a symposium on disease in Hispanic America for the 46th International Congress of Americanists, scheduled to meet in Amsterdam in July 1988. There, presentations by regional specialists representing several disciplines provided the foundation for an edited volume, *Secret Judgments of God*, confined chronologically and spatially to colonial Spanish America. Yet epidemics cannot be geographically restricted to one part of the New World, for at the time move-

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ment through normal exchange networks between ethnic entities was continuous. Furthermore, even after the arrival of the Europeans, quarantine was imperfect and remedies for disease were ineffective.

The seeds of several of the chapters of the present work were planted at regional and international conferences. Martin S. Kenzer's invitation to participate in the 19 March 1989 Annual Meeting of the American Geographical Society in Baltimore, Maryland, and to review William M. Denevan's paper "Carl Sauer and Native American Population Size in the New World" compelled me to focus attention on the subject of Hispaniola's pre-contact numbers and on the reasons for the virtual disappearance of the island Taino. Research for the abbreviated comments on Denevan's paper finally evolved into Chapter 1. An incomplete early version was published in *Colonial Latin American Review* 2(1993):213–45. Many of the themes developed in Chapter 2 took form during investigations for participation in Verena Stolcke and Juan Martínez-Alier's Spring 1990 conference "New Anthropological, Demographic and Ecological Perspectives of the Conquest of America" held at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. A small part of Chapter 3 stems from research for a paper on epidemics in the Andean area prepared for a November 1989 Smithsonian Institution conference on "Disease and Demography in the Americas" that was chaired by Douglas H. Ubelaker and John W. Verano. The remainder of the text is fresh.

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B O R N T O D I E

The biological mingling of the previously separated Old and New Worlds began with the first voyage of Columbus. The exchange was a mixed blessing: It led to the disappearance of entire peoples in the Americas, but it also resulted in the rapid expansion and consequent economic and military hegemony of Europeans. Amerindians had never before experienced the deadly Eurasian sicknesses brought by the foreigners in wave after wave: smallpox, measles, typhus, plague, influenza, malaria, yellow fever. These diseases conquered the Americas before the sword could be unsheathed. From 1492 to 1650, from Hudson Bay in the north to southernmost Tierra del Fuego, disease weakened Amerindian resistance to outside domination. The Black Legend, which attempts to place all of the blame for the injustices of conquest on the Spanish, must be revised in light of the evidence that all Old World peoples carried, literally though largely unwittingly, the germs of the destruction of American civilization.