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Introduction

"Biography is the only true history" is credited to Thomas Carlyle while "all history is biography" is usually ascribed to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Biography is not the only form of history, of course. Modern trends have almost displaced it as notoriously old fashioned, a curious relic from the past for antiquarians and popularizers.

Nonetheless, at the core of the human experience is, quite obviously, the human being. When all the interpretations and analyses are stripped away – as brilliant and penetrating as they often are – one is left looking at the lives of individuals. Most of those have passed through the eons leaving little impression on the world other than that remembered by God. On the other hand, a few have flashed across human history like comets. Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566) is one of those few. He not only left a distinguishing mark on the sixteenth century, but as you will read in the Epilog at the end of this book, also has continued to have an impact across the centuries.

There is nothing simple about Las Casas, known principally in the English-speaking world as the author of the Black Legend. This legend pillories the Spanish character for its allegedly unique combination of cruelty and insensitivity that characterized the conquest of the Americas.

In the Spanish-speaking world, and among the scholarly community of English-speakers, he is known as the most famous "protector of American Indians" of his times. He received this title from Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros in 1516 and Las Casas in fact fulfilled the mandate given to him by Cisneros to defend and protect the American Indians (conflated to Amerindian frequently in the narrative that follows) for the rest of his life. In this role Las Casas also turned into the most controversial character in the long history of Spain's conquest of the New World.

He is also known as a great friend of the Columbus family, the man who in his monumental *History of the Indies* preserved for us the log of Christopher Columbus's first journey in 1492. The original is lost.

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Las Casas was among the first, but not the first, who advocated the importation of the African slaves to the Americas to lift the burden off the dying Indians. The rich irony has not escaped his critics. The "protector of American Indians," the passionate advocate of human rights, is an early promoter of one of the most nefarious businesses in the history of the world, the African slave trade.

Who was this man who turned to the priesthood early in his life and eventually became the conscience of the Emperor Charles V, and later his son Philip II? Over the years he has been labeled, not without some justification: historian, proto-anthropologist, theologian, activist, imperialist, traitor, polemicist, self-aggrandizing, paranoid, and suffering from delusions of grandeur.[1] And those are just a sample of labels!

In fact Las Casas – conquistador/settler in the early Indies, Dominican friar, defender of the Indians, historian, and the conscience of an era – was the most controversial Spaniard to participate in the conquest of the Americas. The author of *A Brief History of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552), Las Casas wrote vividly about the brutality of the Spanish conquistadors, and thus gave Spain's rivals and critics the facts they needed to condemn that great Catholic nation that led in the conquest of the Americas.

Some Terms

Each generation of historians, biographers, and chroniclers recalls and analyzes the past differently, some merely tweaking past interpretations, some employing extraordinarily new approaches. In doing so, the language of history is also sometimes altered to reflect both new and old interests.

The older, more conventional, phrase usually associated with the European approach to the Americas in the fifteenth century after 1492 and throughout the sixteenth century is the "conquest." It is what the Spanish themselves called it and we have employed it often in this book in the aim to be faithful to the documents – especially of course the writings of Las Casas – of the period. Nonetheless, in the past several generations many modern scholars, for a variety of reasons, started to use the "encounter" for this same period in history. It is a less culturally loaded term, one that posits that Amerindian culture and civilization were not inferior to the European

[1] Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *El Padre Las Casas, su doble personalidad* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1963), pp. 394–395. Pidal's biography may be the most critical modern biography of Las Casas.

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one that rode in on the horses and lances of the conquistadors. We have employed the "encounter" as well where it seemed more appropriate in describing the sweep of Europeans across the Americas, and the concomitant resistance of the Amerindians.

American Indian has been contracted to "Amerindian" in the past several generations as well. It reads a bit awkwardly when first seen, but it makes sense. While all peoples of the Americas had their own names, from the Tainos of the Greater Antilles on the island of Española to the Incas of Peru in the heart of the continent of South America, we often have to refer to the whole of these peoples, and the contraction Amerindian subsumes them all, just like European or African covers those continents. So you will see American Indian and Amerindian frequently in the text that follows, each meaning the same.

The conquest/encounter has also been labeled the "contact" period in current usage among many scholars. It is a useful term, again draining the "conquest" of much of its meaning – implying the strength, virility, and superiority of the Europeans over the Amerindians – and instead substituting a more value-neutral term implying a contact between two equally endowed cultures and civilizations – the European and the Amerindian – who differed only in the nature rather than quality of their cultures. Las Casas would have approved of this approach, as you will easily note later in the book.

The Americas as a whole were called *las Indias*, or the Indies, by the Spaniards since they thought Columbus had discovered the islands off the coast of Asia in his first voyage. The term stuck, even after it became clear that the true Indies lay a whole ocean away from the Americas to the west across the vast Pacific. We still refer to the islands of the Caribbean as the West Indies to distinguish them from the East Indies off southeastern Asia. So, again being consistent with the documents, we have employed "the Indies" often to refer to what in fact are the Americas, a term more recognizable to most readers. Another term that came into currency at the time of Columbus was the "New World" to describe by the end of the fifteenth and very early sixteenth century what was quite apparently *not* the islands off of Asia, but something quite different, a new world.

Of course, this world was not truly new, but as old as most of the rest of the world geologically. But it was new to the Europeans since it had not existed in European notions of geography or cosmography of the time, nor had it been described or even alluded to with any degree of exactitude in the two great sources of knowledge at the time – Scripture and the ancient

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Greeks and Romans, especially Aristotle.[2] Be that as it may, the term "New World" has been around since at least the very earliest sixteenth century and it has been used occasionally in this book when appropriate and in the context of the times. The "Americas" was basically a term invented by a German map maker early in the sixteenth century who thought the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci was as much responsible as Columbus for finding and framing the "New World," and so he put "America" on his map of 1507 (America being the Latinized word for Amerigo) as a descriptor for the islands and dim outlines of the American continents known to then.[3]

Finally, a term that came into currency in the second half of the twentieth century to describe the often unheard of voices in history – those cultures without written languages, slaves and women deprived of education and literacy, the "silent" voices of those who did not contribute to the documentary record – has been the "other." Again, it is one Las Casas would have approved of, since he often felt he was giving voice to the Amerindians – the "other" – in the forums of power in Spain.

The Man

Like the Genoese-born Christopher Columbus, Las Casas has been extolled, vilified, magnified, debunked, and celebrated now for almost five hundred years. He stood at the center of the greatest clash and crisis in the history of man – how to incorporate a "new" world into the context of European culture and civilization as the conquest of America unfolded rapidly after the Colombian voyages. For the Amerindians, the challenge was simply to survive this invasion and onslaught that brought destruction, death, and Christianity all in the same package. It was a bewildering and disorienting nightmare for most.

When a small number of the Spanish invaders turned on their own and defended the Amerindians, small pockets of hope sprung up like oases in

[2] Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) is an especially good study of this subject. See the two earlier studies of Pagden's, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) and *Spanish Imperialism and the Political Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) for the first two pieces in this brilliant trilogy.

[3] See Library of Congress, Map Collections, for more on Martin Waldsemüller's famous map of 1507. This 1507 Waldseemueller map was bought by Library of Congress for $10,000,000. It is the only known copy to have survived of the 1,000 printed. See Toby Lester, "Putting America on the Map," *Smithsonian*, volume 40, number 9 (December, 2009), pp. 78–96, for how "America" came to be associated with the New World.

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their paradise turned to desert. The most prominent defender of Amerindians, and the one who drew the most fire from his fellow Spaniards, was Las Casas. He became the iconic protector of Indians, the leader of the anti-conquest, those who stood in the face of the conquest and challenged the Spanish claims to sovereignty and dominion in the Indies at every step.

How does one approach such a monumental figure? The mountain of documents he produced over a lifetime is intimidating: fourteen volumes were published in Spain between 1988 and 1998 labeled the *Obras completas*, or *Complete Works of Bartolomé de las Casas*. Some of the tomes are genuine doorstops, a thousand pages or more of text.[4] All are in Spanish, some in the original Latin which Bartolomé wrote with equal ease. A Spanish translation of all Latin treatises is included.

If one is not intimidated by the documentation, how about Las Casas's character and historical legacy? Almost megalomaniacal in his devotion to the American Indians, he even explained away human sacrifice in some Amerindian cultures at one point in his career. Chapters Twelve and Thirteen cover this bizarre episode in his life when convoluted reasoning overcame the usual scriptural basis he drew upon for much of his thinking.

His legacy is so controversial that while some admirers stretch for hagiographic tools to extol his virtues, others almost choke on his shameless self-promotion, as just one example of execrable behavior.[5] Who is the real Bartolomé de las Casas?

"All mankind is one," Las Casas argued, long before the theory that all men were equal drove the eighteenth century American and French revolutions. Propelled by his reading of the ancient philosophers, by a deep and frequent reading of Scripture, and by Christian philosophers and theologians such as St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas Aquinas, Las Casas framed the conquest of the New World into a different perspective than that of his contemporaries. He contemptuously dismissed the notion that the pope had the right or jurisdiction to endow the Spanish monarchs with sovereignty or jurisdiction over the Indies. The claim by "discovery" was equally junked in the evolving political and theological architecture of Las Casas's defense of the Indians. He argued instead – along with some of the greatest minds of Spain in the sixteenth century such as Francisco de

[4] *Obras completas de Bartolomé de las Casas* (Madrid: Edición Preparada por la Fundación "Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas," de los Dominicos de Andalucía: Alianza, c1988–c1998).

[5] See Helen Rand Parish's many works cited in later chapters of this book for a good example of the hagiographic school; Ramón Menéndez Pidal's biography of Las Casas, also cited often below, for the critical assessment.

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Vitoria – that the Amerindians possessed certain natural rights endowed by God which entitled them to liberty and freedom. From this premise there flowed the theological, philosophical, and legal framework of his defense of Amerindians. He dove deeply into some of the greatest issues of his times: just war; the nature of the American Indians; the justification of force in evangelization; the "natural" rights of all people, Christians or pagans; the obligations of Christians; faith and works and their proper relationship within Christian worship; and many others.

Yet his early presence in the Indies argued for another trajectory. He was on his way to becoming a famed and rich settler, an *encomendero* himself, based on his life on the island of Española where he first went in 1502 as a young man of seventeen or eighteen. Then his God, his conscience, Scripture, and the terrible consequences of the European exploitation of the New World that he witnessed firsthand on Española among the Taino people convinced him otherwise. Later – based on his experiences on that enchanting island turned into a hell for the Tainos – he wrote the book that he is best known for, *A Brief History of the Destruction of the Indies*, first published in his hometown of Seville in 1552. It became the source of the "Black Legend" among Spain's critics who found Las Casas's graphic descriptions of the horror inflicted on the Tainos by the Spanish settlers as *prima facie* evidence of the cruel and callous nature of Spain's conquistadors, piously and often hypocritically invoking Christianity to justify the carnage wrought on the Tainos.

Las Casas was a Christian, albeit as I discovered, not a very loving one. More prophetic and cut in the mold of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, he nonetheless passionately argued his position from Scripture, as well as from a myriad of other sources, both pagan and Christian. He was, even with all his warts and shortcomings, a man of immense conviction and faith. And he put it into practice. I think that alone makes him a subject deserving of deep and continuing study over the ages. But Las Casas can be intimidating.

The fourteen volumes of Las Casas's *Obras completas* (or *Complete Works*) alone can be overwhelming, but they serve as comprehensive testimony to the friar's erudition and breadth of experience and interest. They comprehend, indeed, his life's story.

The secondary literature, on the other hand, is almost equally massive, and growing. There is no way to comprehend it all, although one can make fruitful ventures in certain well-defined areas – human rights, Thomism, Las Casas as historian, anthropologist, biographer, missionary, cleric, bishop, prophet, or Liberation Theologian.

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I choose to write this biography largely from Las Casas's own works, in the main included in the *Obras completas*. This meant that the engine driving this book was Las Casas himself, his own words, his impressions, his opinions, his loves, and his – all too often – hates. Prior biographies give the outline and many of the principal details of his life, and they provide structure. But the content of this biography has been driven by the friar himself.

Secondary sources provide depth, breadth, and context, not to speak of balance. Some students of Las Casas, for example, have been highly critical of the man for his obsessive, unbalanced prejudice towards the American Indians, with the concomitant critical view of his own fellow countrymen from Spain, pillorying them without mercy for their hypocrisy and greed. Others have written about him hagiographically, extolling his virtues uncritically. Las Casas's own words can be misleading and prejudiced sources of information, for he was a passionate advocate, not given to recognizing the merits of his opponents' arguments or actions.[6]

Where controversies have spilled out into the larger forums of history, such as Las Casas's advocacy of the introduction of African slaves to relieve the suffering of the Amerindians, I expanded my research to cover those issues.[7] Another issue that drew me deeply into modern secondary literature not necessarily focused on Las Casas was Indian agency, or how the Amerindian peoples adapted to the Encounter, retaining and adapting much of their culture to the imposition of Spanish sovereignty and Christianity.

The Old and New Las Casas

One area that Las Casas touched in his long life has been the source of much study by legal scholars, by philosophers, by social scientists of all stripes. This is the modern implication of his defense of Amerindians. He built his defense on a number of principles that have remarkably modern echoes: liberty, freedom, self-determination, sovereignty of the people, equality of all men, and the notion that Christian evangelization could only be pursued in a peaceful, non-violent way, for example. Twentieth

[6] See L. A. Clayton "Teaching Bartolomé de las Casas through the Lens of the Historian," in *Approaches to Teaching the Writings of Bartolomé de las Casas*, edited and with introductions by Eyda Merediz and Santa Arias (New York: Modern Languages Association, 2008) for an exploration of this issue.

[7] See L. A. Clayton "Bartolomé de las Casas and the African Slave Trade," *History Compass*, vol. 7, Issue 6 (September, 2009), pp. 1526–1541. Published online.

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century Liberation Theologians have often credited Las Casas with being a true precursor of the movement that stressed the liberation of the poor and oppressed. Constitutional scholars see in Las Casas some of the origins of modern constitutional principles based on the consent of the governed for any government to be truly legitimate. There is a tendency to see much that is "modern" in the life and actions of Las Casas. This "presentist" tendency is, in certain instances, I argue, quite valid, and, in others, probably reading Las Casas out of the context of his times.

What cannot be denied is his engagement with issues that truly transcend time: justice, truth, and morality to name but three that have no temporal boundaries. I think that is his appeal. He wrestled with the great problems and challenges of his age and produced novel and sometimes radical solutions, drawing on a vast erudition (mostly self-taught) and firsthand experience in the New World. He filtered his answers largely through the screen of Scripture, of the Christian message contained therein. I offer this biography not as an apology of his life, but in the spirit of truth, seeing his life for what it truly represented. It was marred by character flaws and actions of astoundingly defective dimensions as he sought his ends with a driving ambition that brooked no contradictions, but it was also imbued with a nobility of purpose that still elicits our admiration five centuries later.

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1

Seville and Early Modern Spain

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"
And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"
He said, "Go and tell this people:
'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'

Isaias 6:8,9

Christopher Columbus returned to Spain from his historic first voyage in early 1493 and headed for Seville where he arrived on Palm Sunday, March 31, 1493. In his entourage marched eight or ten Taino Indians captured in the Caribbean. Dressed in their native feathers and fishbone and gold ornaments, they drew curious stares from the gawking onlookers, as much impressed by the parrots as the strange "Indians." Young Bartolomé de las Casas, born in Seville and then about nine years old, may have witnessed the procession into the city.[1] Did the boy feel a compassion for these awkward savages who seemed so out of place in Seville?

The procession could hardly have been missed. The news of the Admiral's return from his voyage, less than two weeks earlier, spread rapidly through the many kingdoms of medieval Spain – Castile, Léon, Aragon, Valencia – united by the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabel of Castile in 1469. Modern Spain was just emerging under their powerful dual monarchy, but a Spaniard from hundreds of years earlier would have recognized his land and its people easily. Change came about slowly in the medieval world. But the first voyage of Columbus detonated an explosion of knowledge that transformed the world. And young Las Casas was there.

[1] We know his date largely from Helen R. Parish and Harold E. Weidman, S.J., "The Correct Birthdate of Bartolomé de las Casas," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 56, no.3 (1976), pp. 385–403. The best probable date that Parish and Weidman give is November 11, 1484.

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Young Bartolomé's uncles speculated on what the Admiral would do next.[2] One of the uncles, his father's brother Juan de Peñaloso, already was tied in with the Admiral, as Columbus was now being called. The Genoese explorer's star rose rapidly through the ranks of Spanish sailors and merchants ever since the king and queen had summoned him to Barcelona and addressed him as Admiral of the Ocean Sea and Viceroy and Governor of all the islands discovered in the Indies.

Las Casas's father and uncles were all soon involved with the activities triggered by Columbus's first voyage.[3] That voyage was but an extension of the growing Spanish and Portuguese commercial and maritime exploration and trade beyond the Iberian peninsula down the African coast, west into the Atlantic island archipelagos of the Maderias, the Azores, the Canaries, and the Cape Verdes, and north to ports on the European continent, to England, and even as far as Iceland. The age of the "Atlantic world" was dawning, replacing the relatively static and provincial Europe of the medieval age, and Sevillans were excited about the possibilities of new voyages, new discoveries, new fortunes perhaps to be made in trade and commerce, and, as in the case of the Canary Islands over the past century, new conquests.

Columbus continued from Seville on his triumphant trip to Barcelona, mobbed by curious sightseers and well wishers, not to speak of potential gentlemen adventurers seeking favor and a place on the next voyage. In a land where changes – compared to today – took place in glacial terms, the recent conquest of Granada, and the Admiral's voyage, shot like lightning across the plains and mountains of the many kingdoms of Spain.[4]

Only the year before had the queen and king brought the last Muslims (called Moors in Spain) to their knees in Granada and raised the cross in the Alhambra. To be a knight in the queen's army, to hurl into battle with the standards of Santiago and the Christian saints unfurled in the wind, to slay the infidels in the name of the true Holy Faith, that is what the youth of Castile dreamed of. While the world into which Las Casas was born was transformed by the discoveries of Columbus, the last decade of warfare against the Moors imbued Spain even more deeply with fervor for the

[2] Manuel Giménez Fernández, "Fray Las Casas, A Biographical Sketch," in Benjamin Keen and Juan Freide, *Bartolomé de las Casas in History: Toward an Understanding of the Man and His Work* (DeKalb, Illinois: University of Northern Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 67ff.

[3] Pedro de las Casas, Bartolomé's father, took the surname of his mother, "Las Casas," rather than that of his father "Peñalosa," but his brothers, Francisco, Juan, Diego, and Gabriel kept their father's name.

[4] William D. Phillips and Carla Rahn Phillips, *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

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