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Reflected Values: Sixteenth-Century Europeans View The Indians of North America

THOMAS D. MATIJASIC

We are all prisoners of culture. Marston Bates noted: "The outstanding peculiarity of man is the great control of custom, of culture, over behavior."¹ Small wonder that we are forced to judge people from other cultures by our own cultural standards. Western Civilization, in its twentieth-century form, prides itself on toleration. It has become, in effect, intolerant of intolerance.

How then, can we accept the observations of sixteenth-century Europeans as they met, interacted with, and sometimes conquered the Indian peoples of North America? Western Civilization, in its sixteenth-century form, did not pride itself on toleration. Sectarian violence typified the century as Protestant battled Catholic and all Christians on the Continent were forced to confront a mighty invasion by the Islamic Turks.

Historians had tended to be critical of sixteenth-century Europeans because they did not accept or fully appreciate North American cultures. William Graves reported that, "Ethnocentric European pride prejudiced his perceptions of other people. The 'uncivilized' Red man . . . was a 'barbarian' and a 'savage' both terms implying a moral judgment of culture and cultural status."² Gary B. Nash and James Axtell believe that European reaction to Indian cultures was somewhat more complex. Nash put forth the notion that Europeans quickly developed "a split image of the natives of North America." One stereotype portrayed Indians

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as noble and "gentle people." The other image "cast him as a savage, hostile, beastlike animal."³ In the case of the English, James Axtell has implied that practical matters dictated which image would triumph. The Indians "were noble as well as ignoble, depending on English needs and circumstances."⁴ Robert F. Berkhofer urges students of history to reject all European evaluations of Native Americans. "Whether evaluated as noble or ignoble, whether seen as exotic or degraded, the Indian as an image was always alien to the white."⁵

A closer examination of the chronicles written during the sixteenth century reveal that Europeans made a great variety of observations about the natives of North America. They found things to admire and to scorn as they attempted to evaluate these newfound peoples. Europeans of the Early Modern Period were certainly limited by their own cultural values but, within that context, many of their observations were astute, accurate, and, at times, sympathetic. Europeans who actually spent time in America during the sixteenth century tended to judge various Indian cultures on their own merits rather than lumping all native groups together. In a real sense, their perceptions of Indian life are no more distorted than those generally prevalent today.

This essay will consider the way in which Europeans reacted to a variety of native social customs. In particular, it will consider reports about the religions of North America, native dress, sexuality, courage and honesty. In addition to these societal manifestations, European assessments of the physical appearance, prowess, capacity for love and intellectual ability have also been noted.

Due to the importance of religion in the lives of sixteenth-century Europeans, the Caucasian invaders paid extraordinary attention to the religious practices of the North Americans. Gary Nash noted that, "religion was the organizing principle of life," for Europeans during this period.⁶ In a real sense, this was also true for the Indians they encountered.

Some of the religious practices found in North America were particularly offensive to Europeans. It should come as little surprise to anyone that many Europeans believed that Indian peoples worshipped idols, false gods or even the devil. "Reports that Amerindians had no religion were bad enough; worse were those that claimed they were devil-worshippers."⁷

Sixteenth-century Christians truly believed that Satan was an

active force in the world. As Don Juan de Oñate marched into New Mexico in 1599, he attributed discontent among his own soldiers to the devil, "who must greatly resent the big loss he is to suffer through the conversion of these provinces."⁸ Indeed, the forces of the devil seemed to be particularly strong in the New World.

As the Spanish conquistadores moved from the Caribbean islands to the mainland of North America, evidence of "idol worship" was readily apparent. The men who accompanied Juan de Grijalva were much impressed by the Mayan temples of the Yucatan. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo reported that, "inside there were certain cemís (devils) or idols which those Indians adored, as they are all idolators."⁹ As Cortez moved through Mexico, he frequently took the time to combat idolatry. On more than one occasion he ordered his men "to break up the idols and roll them down the steps." In place of the pagan idols he would erect "a very fair altar, on which we placed the image of Our Lady."¹⁰ Bishop Diego de Landa painfully noted that even after the natives of the Yucatan were introduced to Christianity, "they were perverted by their priests and chiefs to return to their idolatry."¹¹

As the Spaniards moved northward from Mexico later in the century, they continued to be distressed by additional evidence of idolatry among other native peoples. While in Florida, Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca reported that native burial practices in that region appeared "to be a kind of idolatry."¹² John Ortiz, a Spanish captive liberated by Hernan de Soto, told members of de Soto's party that the Indians of Vcita were "worshippers of the devil" and that "he speaketh with them and telleth them that he is a thirst, and willeth them to sacrifice unto him."¹³ Pedro de Castañeda observed that the Tachus of northwestern Mexico "worship idols and make presents to the devil of their goods and riches, consisting of cloth and turquoises."¹⁴ A member of the de Sosa Expedition into New Mexico referred to the kiva at the pueblo of San Ildefonso as a "mosque where, on some days of the year, they meet to perform idolatries, because it contains many idols."¹⁵

Accusations of idolatry were not unique to the Spanish explorers and missionaries. The English and French adventurers made similar observations. When Sir Francis Drake visited California, he and his men "groaned in spirit to see the power of Sathan so farre prevaile in seducing these so harmlesse

soules."¹⁶ Arthur Barlowe maintained that the idol worshipped by the Indians on the coast of North Carolina was "nothing else but a mere illusion of the devil."¹⁷ When the Indians of the St. Lawrence River Valley told Jacques Cartier's Frenchmen about Cudruaigni, a native deity, they responded by telling the natives that Cudruaigni, "is but a divell and an evill spirit."¹⁸

Not all Europeans were willing to classify North Americans as devil-worshippers. "It was even conceded that they believed in immortality of the soul, and that not all the supernatural beings they believed in could be classed as devils."¹⁹ Hernando de Alarcon discovered that the Indians of the lower Colorado River Valley had no real conception of divine beings, but they "venerated the sun above all things."²⁰ Hernando de Alvarado believed that the inhabitants of Taos Pueblo in New Mexico "worship the sun and the water."²¹ Coronado believed that all of the Pueblo Indians worshipped water "because they say that it makes the maize grow and sustains their life."²² French settler Nicolas Le Challeux went so far as to state that the natives of northern Florida, "are not without some idea of Divinity."²³

Astute observers of Indian religions could not help but to notice strange parallels between Christian and native beliefs and ceremonies. Bishop de Landa was puzzled by the fact that the Mayans of the Yucatan practiced baptism, confessed their sins, and burned incense before their gods.²⁴ In addition, the Mayans also went on pilgrimage to holy places. "They held Cozumel and the well at Chichén Itzá in as great veneration as we have in our pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Rome; they visit them to offer gifts . . . and when they did not visit they sent offerings." . . .²⁵ Bishop de Landa went so far as to speculate that "all the inhabitants of the Indies must be of Jewish descent."²⁶

Roanoke colonist Thomas Hariot was aware that the Indians of coastal North Carolina shared similar religious sentiments with the Anglican settlers. "Some religion they have already, which although it be farre from the truth, yet beyng as it is, there is hope it may bee the easier and sooner reformed." Hariot was smart enough to realize that the Eastern Woodland Indians were practicing a form of urmonotheism. Although they recognized numerous supernatural entities, they had "one onely chiefe and great God, which hath bene from all eternitie." They also believed in the immortality of the soul and in the "perpetuall bliss"

of a heaven. Harriot believed that the natives showed an "earnest desire" to learn more about the religion of the English.²⁷

Bartolomé de Las Casas believed that the Indians of Mexico were, by their very nature, religious beings. He wrote that, "these people of New Spain were the most religious that there have ever been among the natives who had no knowledge of the true God."²⁸ Indeed, de Las Casas asserted that Indians generally were "very apt to receive our Religion, which when they have but once tasted, they are carryed on with a very ardent and zealous desire to make a further progress in it."²⁹

Evidence that some Indian peoples practiced human sacrifice, cannibalism and mortification of the flesh had a strong negative impact upon Europeans. Sixteenth-century Europeans were not squeamish people. Brutal massacres were frequently committed by Spanish, French and English soldiers, often in the name of religion. Yet prohibitions against blood sacrifices were deeply rooted in Christian tradition. Historian Olive Dickason believes that the "ritual aspects of cannibalism were missed at first."³⁰ In actuality, it was probably the ritual aspects of cannibalism that so horrified the European invaders.

One discovers a mixture of disgust and fascination as European chroniclers recorded descriptions of human sacrifice. Fernández de Oviedo reported that when the members of the Grijalva Expedition discovered a temple containing decapitated heads, "they were shocked, as they at once suspected what it was." A local inhabitant told them that the heads and hearts of the victims were offered to the pagan god. In addition to this "the flesh from the arms, the calves of the legs and the thighs" were hacked off and eaten by the participants of the ceremony.³¹ Indians on the east coast of Mexico also cut their ears and offered their own blood in a "ceremony to appease the devil."³² Bernal Diaz confirmed Fernandez de Oviedo's opinion that Grijalva's men were genuinely appalled by the Mexican practice of the blood sacrifice. When native priests attempted to honor the Spaniards by burning incense over them, the Spaniards refused to let them. "We were all too upset by the sight of those two dead boys (whose hearts were sacrificed), and too indignant at their cruelty."³³ Cortez firmly told Aztec officials at San Juan de Ulua "that our great Emperor's purpose in sending us to their lands was to abolish human sacrifices and other evil rites."³⁴ Bishop de Landa

recorded his disgust by stating that in times of distress the Mayans, "forgetful of all natural piety and all law of reason they made sacrifices of human beings as easily as they did birds."³⁵ John Ortiz told a member of de Soto's party that certain tribes in Florida, "are wont to offer up unto him (the Devil) the lives and blood of their Indians, or of any other people they can come by."³⁶

Although the Europeans were adamant in their condemnation of the blood sacrifice, they were clearly intrigued by it. Bernal Diaz wrote detailed descriptions of the manner in which the Aztecs and their Mexican neighbors performed their ceremonies. The following passage is typical of his accounts.

I have already described the manner of their sacrifices. They strike open the wretched Indian's chest with flint knives and hastily tear out the palpitating heart which, with the blood, they present to idols in whose name they have performed the sacrifice. Then they cut off the arms, thighs, and head, eating the arms and thighs at their ceremonial banquets. The head they hang upon a beam, and the body of the sacrificed man is not eaten but given to beasts of prey.³⁷

Bishop de Landa gave a graphic account of the manner in which the Indians of the Yucatan would pierce holes through their penises in order to collect blood to offer to an idol.³⁸ Such accounts were clearly designed to titillate the psyche of the European reader.

Occasionally Europeans would record instances of cannibalism for its own sake. Hernando de Alarcón noted that the natives of the lower Colorado River Valley would make war in order to eat the fallen bodies of their enemies.³⁹ Pedro de Castañeda wrote that the Acaxes of northwestern Mexico, "all eat human flesh, and he who has the most human bones and skulls hung up around his house is most feared and respected."⁴⁰ However, few sixteenth-century chroniclers believed that cannibalism was generally practiced by Indians throughout North America. It is also important to note that Europeans showed little interest in the subject when it was devoid of religious significance.

European chroniclers expressed a keen interest in native clothing or lack of it. Clothing was essential to Europeans because "dress indicated rank and authority." Olive Dickason has as-

serted that nudity was associated "with lack of social order."⁴¹ Most Europeans who visited North America did comment on the "nakedness" of the native populations. Castañeda wrote that Baja California was "inhabited by brutish, bestial, naked people who eat their own offal."⁴² When John Ortiz, a Spaniard, was discovered in Florida living among the natives, he "was naked" like his Indian companions.⁴³ Cabeza de Vaca pointed out that the people who lived on the coast of Texas all "go naked" except for the "damsels" who "dress themselves in deer-skin."⁴⁴ Bishop de Landa was certain that the Indians had carved the reliefs on the ancient Mayan temples because the "stone figures of men" were "unclothed but with the middle covered by certain long fillets."⁴⁵

Explorers from Northern Europe were even more conscious of nudity than were the Iberians. Arthur Barlowe was little impressed by the flimsy arrows of Roanoke natives but felt they were "sufficient enough to kill a naked man."⁴⁶ When Drake reached California, he bestowed upon the natives "necessary things to cover their nakednesse; withall signifying unto them we were no Gods, but men, and had neede of such things to cover our owne shame."⁴⁷ Jacques Cartier reported that the "wilde" men he met in Canada "goe altogether naked saving their privities."⁴⁸ He noted that along the banks of the St. Lawrence River "the inhabitants of the cuntry cloth themselves with the skines of certain wilde beasts, but very miserably."⁴⁹ René Goulaine de Laudonnière was very upset when he found Christians living among the Indians of northern Florida. He "gave them clothes, and ordered their hair to be cut."⁵⁰

Not all Europeans were critical of native dress. Hernando de Alarcon was both amazed and amused by the manner in which Indians of the Colorado River Valley adorned themselves.

Some wore masks of the same color, shaped like their faces. On their heads they wore a deerskin about two spans in size, worn like a helmet, and on it a small crest with some feathers. . . . They have their noses pierced, and from them hung some pendants, while others wore shells. They have their ears pierced with many holes in which they place beads and shells.⁵¹

The gentleman of Elvas reported that the natives of Toalli, in what is now the southeastern part of the United States, were well

dressed. The women wore long mantles made of inner bark and grass "with their right arme out, like unto the Egyptians." The men also wore a mantle over their shoulders "and have their secrets hid with a Deeres skin, made like a linen breech, which was wont to be used in Spaine."⁵² The chronicler of the de Sosa Expedition was very impressed by the dress of the people of Pecos Pueblo in New Mexico.⁵³ Father Fray Francisco del Spiritu Sancto reported that the people of New Mexico were "white like the Spaniards and very well dressed."⁵⁴

If Europeans were rarely impressed by Indian dress, they generally found the physical appearance of the North Americans to be pleasing. Barlowe referred to the Indians on the coast of North Carolina as "very handsome and goodly people."⁵⁵ Le Challeux described the Indians of Florida as being "straight and well proportioned, of a somewhat ruddy color."⁵⁶ Fellow Frenchman le Moyne noted that local chieftan, Saturiba, came to their settlement "with seven or eight hundred handsome, strong, and well-built men."⁵⁷ Alarcon had little good to say about the natives of the lower Colorado, but he did report that they "were large and well formed, without being fat."⁵⁸ De Landa wrote the Mayans of the Yucatan "are people of good physique, tall, robust and of great strength."⁵⁹ Coronado found the women of Quivira "comely, with faces more like Moorish than Indian women."⁶⁰ Giovanni da Verrazano, the gentleman of Elvas and Cabeza de Vaca, also praised the beauty and physical appearance of various Indian groups.⁶¹

Commentators who did not find Indians universally attractive would sometimes overcome their prejudice and acknowledge the beauty of individual Indians. Bernal Diaz remarked that the daughter of a Mexican chieftain "was very beautiful, for the Indian."⁶² Diaz was very impressed with Montezuma, the great Aztec leader.

The great Montezuma was about forty years old, of good height, well proportioned, spare and slight, and not very dark, though of the usual Indian complexion. He did not wear his hair long but just over his ears and he had a short black beard, well-shaped and thin. His face was rather long and cheerful, he had fine eyes, and in his appearance and manner could express geniality or, when necessary, a serious composure.⁶³

Many Europeans were in awe of the strength and physical prowess of some Native American groups. Vincente de Zaldibar Mendoza reported that Plains Indians "grow up healthy, strong, and brave."⁶⁴ Fletcher revealed that the natives of California displayed extraordinary strength and swiftness.⁶⁵ Cabeza de Vaca took a page from Tacitus when he wrote that the people on the Texas coast "see and hear better, and have keener senses than any other in the world. They are great in hunger, thirst, and cold, as if they were made for the endurance of these more than other men, by habit and nature."⁶⁶ Cartier noted that the Indians of Canada were "more able to resist cold than savage beasts."⁶⁷ Only Father de Las Casas dissented. The Spanish priest believed that Indians generally "are most delicate and tender, enjoying such a feeble constitution of body as does not permit them to endure labour."⁶⁸

The mating habits of the natives of North America drew more than a little attention from European chroniclers. The Spanish seem to have been particularly interested in commenting on Indian sexuality. Marital fidelity and female chastity drew praise from Europeans. Evidence of homosexuality, prostitution, and incest were vigorously condemned.

In one of his most bitter tirades against the American Indians, Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo stated that, their "marriages are not a sacrament but a sacrilege. They are idolatrous, libidinous, and commit sodomy. Their chief desire is to eat, drink, and worship heathen idols and commit bestial obscenities."⁶⁹ Fernandez de Oviedo actually believed that because the Indians practiced the "dreadful sin of sodomy," God punished them and "they have been forgotten by His mercy for so many centuries."⁷⁰

Bernal Diaz was shocked when he entered a Mayan temple on the Isla Mujeres and saw "many idols of baked clay, some with demons' faces, some with women's, and others equally ugly which seemed to represent Indians committing sodomy with one another." He noted that Cortez admonished the Cempoala Indians of central Mexico to "give up sodomy, for they had boys dressed as women who practised that accursed vice for profit." One of the reasons that Diaz held Montezuma in high esteem was that the Aztec leader "was quite free from sodomy."⁷¹

Alarcon and Cabeza de Vaca both made reference to transvestites who lived among the natives of the southwestern portion of the present-day United States. Cabeza de Vaca noted that

while among a group of Indians in Texas, "I witnessed a diabolical practice; a man living with another, one of those who are emasculate and impotent."⁷² Alarcon was amazed when an Indian in the Colorado River Valley showed him "a son of his dressed as a woman and used as such."⁷³ Bishop de Landa hinted at what he saw as the effeminate characteristics of Mayan males, but he stopped short of accusing them of homosexual behavior.⁷⁴

Pedro de Castañeda wrote more than any other European chronicler about the sex lives of the American Indian. As he marched with Coronado from central Mexico to the Rio Grande Valley, he studied the native groups along the way with a keen eye for sexual perversion. He was particularly harsh on the Indians of Culiacan province in Mexico. Among the people of Petlatlan there was much sodomy. Among the Tachus "there are men dressed like women who marry other men and serve as their wives." The Tachus also held a great celebration during which the local chiefs dance naked around a consecrated woman, adorning her with fine jewelry, "and then the chiefs go in one by one to lie with her, and all the others who wish, follow them." The Pacaxes were even worse. They committed sodomy and "have many wives, even when these are sisters." Castañeda considered the Pima of southern Arizona to be "great sodomites" and he criticized the people of Baja California for coupling "like animals, the female openly getting down on all fours." It must be noted, however, the Castañeda did not accuse all Indians of perversion. He had praise for the inhabitants of Tiguex Pueblo because "Sodomy is not found among them."⁷⁵

In addition to homosexuality, other North American mating customs were frowned upon by Europeans. Alarcon discovered that a class of prostitutes "who lived apart from the married women" existed among the natives of the Colorado River Valley.⁷⁶ Cartier was disgusted by the fact that unmarried women among the natives of Canada were housed "in a common place, as harlots free for every man that will have to do with them, until such time as they find a match."⁷⁷ Bishop de Landa listed divorce and public orgies among the vices of the Mayans.⁷⁸ Cabeza de Vaca reported that the natives of Texas had rather loose marriage bonds until a child was born. Husbands "who have children remain with their wives and never abandon them."⁷⁹

The Europeans readily bestowed praise on Indian mating customs when they conformed to Christian standards. Bishop de Landa gave credit to Mayan women for their chastity.⁸⁰ Le Challeux wrote that the Indians of Florida "keep their marriage bond with all rigor."⁸¹ Cabeza de Vaca found that usually in Texas a man had but one wife. However, physicians were allowed to "have two or three wives, among whom exist the greatest friendship and harmony."⁸² Among the Mariames of Texas, daughters were often killed at birth out of fear that they might grow up to have sexual relations with a relative or with a tribal enemy.⁸³ Cabeza de Vaca did not criticize this practice, for dishonor was a greater sin than murder to a sixteenth-century Spaniard. Alarcon liked the marriage rules among the Indians of the Colorado because they closely conformed to the marriage principles common in Europe. Incest was strictly forbidden. Women were expected to be virgins before marriage. If a woman "had relations with men before she married, her husband abandoned her and moved to another nation." If a man committed adultery, he was executed.⁸⁴

Sixteenth-century Europeans were aggressive and a militant ethic dominated their mind-set. They admired bravery, valor, and ferocity. They loathed the cowardly, the passive and the lethargic. There were, of course, a few exceptional individuals who recognized the discrepancy between the message of the Christian gospels and the violent spirit of the age. However, most chose to ignore the notion that the meek would inherit the earth. It was the fighter who won praise from most Europeans.

It seems almost ironic that the Spaniards most admired Indian nations that fiercely resisted their armies. Fernández de Oviedo displayed little sympathy for Indians, but he complimented the "very splendid people" of southeast Mexico who launched war canoes "with the determination to attack the ships of the (Spanish) fleet."⁸⁵ Bernal Diaz praised the warriors of Tabasco who met Cortez's army "face to face, fighting most valiantly and persistently." Even when the Indians of Mexico gave way in battle they "kept their ranks and fought well for a considerable time." Diaz actually believed that poor leadership on the part of Indian captains saved Cortez's army during an especially fierce encounter fought on September 5, 1519.⁸⁶ A Portuguese soldier in de Soto's army reported that the Indians of Florida were "so warlike and so nimble, that they care not a whit for any footemen." At

Manilla, the inhabitants "fought with such courage, that many times they drove our men out of the towne."⁸⁷ The chronicler of the de Sosa Expedition into New Mexico was astonished by the bravery of the defenders of Pecos Pueblo.

Although the Indians saw how much we were hurting them, they did not give way. And in spite of all this, there were none who left their houses or passages, but rather each one managed to defend what was in his care without fleeing—a thing not to be believed, that uncivilized people should be so clever.⁸⁸

Even though Bishop de Landa believed the Spanish conquest of the Yucatan was in the best interest of all concerned, he did state that "the Indians were right in defending their liberty and trusting to the valor of their chiefs."⁸⁹ Cabeza de Vaca noted that the Indians of Texas "have as much strategy for protecting themselves against enemies as they could have were they reared in Italy in continual feuds."⁹⁰

There were a few Europeans who believed the North Americans to be cowardly. Ralph Lane showed contempt for the military prowess of the Indians of North Carolina when he asserted that ten armed Englishmen "would be a match for a hundred of their best men."⁹¹ Thomas Hariot was not very impressed by Indian warfare. He noted that set battles were rare and that surprise attacks and ambushes were common.⁹²

Bartolomé de Las Casas approached the question of bravery from a different perspective than most of his contemporaries. True to his Christian convictions, he felt that a passive nature was preferable to an aggressive nature. He saw the Indians of Mexico and Central America as God's finest children because they were "patient, meek and peaceful, and who, laying all contentions and tumultuous thoughts aside, live without any hatred or desire of revenge."⁹³

A few Europeans recognized that Indian peoples were capable of love as well as bravery. Cabeza de Vaca believed that the natives of Malhado on the coast of Texas "love their offspring the most of any in the world and treat them with the greatest mildness."⁹⁴ Father de Las Casas wrote that the Mayans of the Yucatan loved their children "as dearly as the apples of their eyes."⁹⁵

The chroniclers were divided in their opinion as to the honesty

of the North American peoples they encountered. Arthur Barlowe noted that Granganimeo, the brother of an Indian king on the Atlantic coast, always kept his promises.⁹⁶ Castañeda felt that the nomadic Indians of the southern Plains were "faithful friends."⁹⁷ Marcos de Niza reported in 1539 that "he had never caught the Indians in a lie."⁹⁸ Subsequent events may have altered his viewpoint.

Other Europeans were more cautious in evaluating the North Americans. Fletcher believed that the people of California were "without guile or treachery." However, the members of the Drake Expedition "thought it no wisdom too farre to trust them."⁹⁹ Cabeza de Vaca was generally positive in his evaluation of Indian character but he did criticize the Yguazes for being great liars, thieves and drunkards.¹⁰⁰

Many visitors from the Old World had no trust in the native inhabitants of the New World. The Spaniards who accompanied Cortez to Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, warned their leader "that the hearts of men are very fickle, especially among the Indians."¹⁰¹ Ralph Lane reported that when the Indians of Roanoke Island believed that an armed band led by Lane had been defeated by a tribe on the mainland, they began to treat the English "with contempt, and also to blaspheme against our God."¹⁰² Jacques Cartier felt the French must not trust the Indians of Canada "for all their faire ceremonies and signs of joy."¹⁰³ Two Spaniards warned Frenchman René Goulaine de Laudonnière "not to put any faith in" the Indians of Florida "since they invariably behaved most amiably when they are plotting some treachery and were by nature utter traitors and deceivers."¹⁰⁴

As with everything else, the European writers and explorers failed to agree on the mental capacity of the North Americans. Most found the natives they encountered to be very intelligent. The English settlers on Roanoke certainly came to respect the intellectual abilities of the Woodland Indians. Thomas Hariot wrote that "they seeme very ingenious" and "they shewe excellencie of wit."¹⁰⁵ The paintings of John White "reveal a genuine appreciation of the Indians' ability to control their environment through their methods of hunting and agriculture, their family and communal life, and other aspects of their culture."¹⁰⁶ Even the critical Ralph Lane was forced to admit that Indian King Menatonon "is, for a savage, unusually grave and wise."¹⁰⁷

Castañeda readily conceded that the Hopi of Tusayan "were very intelligent people."¹⁰⁸ Although Cartier believed the people of the St. Lawrence River Valley were savages, he acknowledged that it was easy to "make them learne what one would."¹⁰⁹

Of course a few Europeans were blind to the evidence of Indian ingenuity. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda could "scarcely find traces of humanity" among the Indians of the Yucatan. He asserted that they "not only lack culture but do not even know how to write," and they kept, "no records of their history except certain obscure and vague reminiscences of some things put down in certain pictures."¹¹⁰ Bishop de Landa recognized that the Mayans of the Yucatan were literate and had their own science. However, de Landa ordered that Mayan books be destroyed because "they contained nothing but superstitions and falsehoods of the devil."¹¹¹

Some Europeans showed little respect for the medical knowledge of the Indians. When the Indians of Texas explained their method of casting out infirmity to Cabeza de Vaca, he laughed at them and told them "it was folly." Later, however, he did come to recognize that some Indian cures were surprisingly effective.¹¹² Hariot believed that Indian physicians were charlatans who hid their ignorance with hocus-pocus.¹¹³

What probably impressed European visitors to North America more than anything else were the architectural achievements of the Indians of the Yucatan, Mexico and the Rio Grande River Valley of New Mexico. The Indians of these regions were among the greatest builders on earth. Bishop de Landa wrote that in the Yucatan there were "many edifices of great beauty." More important, he acknowledged that these magnificent structures were "not the work of other peoples, but of the Indians themselves."¹¹⁴ As Bernal Diaz marched with Cortez into the heart of the Aztec Empire he was awestruck. "These great towns and cues and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision from the tale of Amadis." When the Spaniards compared the great market in Tenochtitlan to those in Constantinople, Rome and other European cities, they concluded that "they had never seen a market so well laid out, so large, so orderly, and so full of people."¹¹⁵

As the Spanish conquistadores pushed northward into New Mexico, they were impressed by the Pueblo cultures. The Pueblo Indians did not achieve the wealth and splendor of the Indians

of central Mexico. In that sense, the Spanish were disappointed. By the same token, the Spaniards could not help but to notice that Pueblo villages looked remarkably like towns in southern Europe. Gary B. Nash observed that "Pueblo society on the eve of Spanish arrival was not radically different from peasant communities in most of the Euro-Asian world."¹¹⁶ Coronado was so impressed by the towns of New Mexico that he could not believe the Indians had the ability "to build these houses in the way in which they are built."¹¹⁷ Juan de Oñate reported back to Spain that the Pueblo Indians "live very much the same as we do, in houses with two and three terraces, each an estado and a half high."¹¹⁸ A member of the de Sosa expedition felt the irrigation system of New Mexico was so sophisticated that it was "a thing (which would) not (be) believed if we had not seen it with our own eyes." He also commented that the earthenware of Pecos Pueblo was "very elegant."¹¹⁹

It is clear that the Europeans who wrote the chronicles of the sixteenth century did not see the American Indian as a one dimensional figure. They judged Indian nations by European standards, but they did recognize both positive and negative features within various native cultures. Europeans were critical of North Americans who practiced idol worship, human sacrifice and cannibalism, but some did recognize similarities between Christianity and Indian religions. Many Europeans were distressed by the lack of clothing found among many North American groups, yet most felt that the Indians were physically attractive and displayed remarkable physical prowess. Cultures which tolerated homosexuality and/or promiscuity were vigorously condemned by Europeans, but native peoples who practiced monogamy or who valued female chastity were applauded. Some North Americans were viewed as brave and honest while others were considered cowardly and deceitful. While North Americans were given little credit for literacy (even in the Yucatan), some Europeans were impressed by the ability of the natives to control their environment.

The sixteenth-century European visitor to North America tended not to issue general condemnations of Indians as a people. By the same token, Father de Las Casas was exceptional in characterizing the Indians as savage innocents. The "good Indian" was typified by the peasant farmer of New Mexico. Castañeda reported that among the Zuni of Cibola "there is no

drunkenness . . . nor sodomy or sacrifices, neither do they eat human flesh nor steal, but they are usually at work."¹²⁰ The Pueblo Indians gained the admiration of the Spanish because they shared many of the same values. The same was true of any North American Indian group encountered by Europeans during this early stage of interaction.

NOTES

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