Encounter, Engagement, and Exchange

Wright, John B.

Published by Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/111660

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3429377
What this paper seeks to do, in a rather episodic fashion, is recount some of the experiences in writing what became a trilogy of historical novels about the major Pre-Columbian civilizations: the Aztecs, the Maya, and the Incas.

My story begins in the summer of 1978, after the publication of my first novel, Border Crossings, which was a love story set in the late 1960s about a draft-dodger. It was actually the third novel I had written, and I used up most of my stock of fascinating personal experiences in the process. As I cast about for where to go next, I got a call from my oldest friend, Dave Gregory, who was working on a graduate degree in archaeology at the University of Arizona. The ancient Maya were one of his specialties, and he suggested that I should write what he called a “prehistoric novel” about one of the major Pre-Columbian cultures. He had made this suggestion before, but this time I had a compelling reason to hear him.

My wife was then an Assistant Professor at the University of New Hampshire, so I took my faculty spouse card and headed over to the UNH library to see what they had in their card catalogue. Up in the stacks, by a process of elimination I can no longer recall, I decided to start with the Aztecs. There were more books on the Maya, but many of them seemed forbiddingly technical, and I think I sensed that the story of the Aztecs lay closer to the surface. Among the books I took home with me that first time were Diego Duran’s History of the Indies of New Spain, Miguel Leon-Portilla’s The Broken Spears, and Burr Cartwright Brundage’s A Rain of Darts. And what I discovered, as I went back and forth between them, reading about warriors, traveling merchants, shape-shifting sorcerers, and the composers of flower songs, was that this was a terrific story. There was no need to embellish the history and legend that had come down to us; if I could do that specific story justice, it would be enough.

My second response was to wonder why, in all my years of schooling, I had never been exposed to this story before. All I knew about the Aztecs was that they practiced human sacrifice and were conquered by Hernan Cortes, which was presented as a kind of cause-and-effect. Somehow, the full story never made it into the social studies curriculum, and even more astounding—given the possibilities for lurid exploitation—neither popular fiction nor Hollywood had ever given the Aztecs much play.
So now I had my subject, and I was so excited about it that I barely paused to consider if I was qualified to take it on. I had been an English major in college, with a total of one history course to my credit, and none in either Anthropology or Spanish. My one year as a graduate student had convinced me—I thought—that I was not cut out to be a scholar. I probably should have been more daunted by my deficiencies, but instead I set out to give myself a mini-doctorate in Aztec Studies. I pinned up a list of the Aztec gods on the bulletin board over my desk, and every day I’d try to memorize the next god’s attributes, and learn how to pronounce the name: Huitzilopochtli, Quetzalcoatl, Tezcatlipoca. I also learned how to scour the bibliography at the end of a text, and as I read through the books in the New Hampshire Library, I started ordering more through Inter-Library Loan, university press catalogues, and remainder houses. It would not be too much of a stretch to say that at the age of thirty, as a student, I was born again.

In the spring of 1979, I fly to Tucson to join my friend Dave for a trip to Mexico. We take a train out of the border town of Nogales and spend the next two-and-a-half days getting to Mexico City. We have a sleeper compartment in the old Pullman car, but most of our daylight hours are spent standing on the platform between cars, staring out at the incredible, ever-changing landscape of Mexico. I had written a few, very tentative chapters of my novel prior to this trip, and after half a day on the train, I realize that it will all have to be rewritten, simply to include all the sensory detail. There was no way I could have smelled the dusty air or seen prickly pear silhouetted against adobe walls or vultures circling overhead while sitting at my desk in New Hampshire.

As soon as we check into our hotel in Mexico City, we head off to the Museum of Anthropology, and I swiftly make my way to the Aztec Hall and find a diorama of the temple precinct of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capitol. It is big enough to walk around and I do so, looking for the key that identifies the various temple buildings. I am baffled when I cannot find one anywhere, in any language. Then I realize, as I stand next to the diorama and watch the tour groups come through, that the lack of a key is deliberate. The tour guides are being given an opportunity to earn their keep. I listen to the spiels being given in English, all of which turn their attention sooner or later to the round temple in the center of the precinct, the only round building in evidence.

This is, I know, the Temple of the Plumed Serpent, Quetzalcoatl. He was also known as Ehecatl, the God of the Wind, and the round shape of his temple was meant to facilitate the flow of the wind. Yet, as I stand eavesdropping, I hear the round building described as the Observatory, the boys’ school, and the Temple of Tlaloc. None of the guides, in my hearing, gets it right; yet, the tourists all seem satisfied with what they have been told.

Part of the tentativeness of my writing, up to this point, has been due to the nagging sense that for all the books I have read, I still do not know enough. Now I am pretty sure I do, which is a liberating experience, though at the same
time, paradoxically, it seems to impose an obligation upon me. Because I feel very strongly that I do not want to add to the general fund of disinformation about the Aztecs. I want my readers to walk away from my diorama knowing exactly which house the Plumed Serpent calls home.

A few days later, we book a tour out to the ruins of Teotihuacan. On the way, we stop at the Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe and, since it is Good Friday, there are modern-day penitents fulfilling their vows by crawling to the shrine on their knees. As we drive toward Teotihuacan, the first clouds we have seen in a week begin to gather ahead of us, above a range of steep brown hills. At a certain point, Dave points and says, “There it is.”

Another moment passes before I realize that one of the hills is man-made. “The Temple of the Sun,” Dave explains, and at that moment the radio begins to play Linda Ronstadt’s version of the old rock-n-roll standard, “Just One Look.” And that is probably all it took, back in 300 A.D., to convince people that a ruling elite who could raise a temple as high as the hills probably had the gods on their side.

We pile out of the van to find a thunderstorm in full progress over the Temple of the Sun. But there is no way I am not going to climb to the top, so up we go, ducking our heads at every fresh crack of thunder. Halfway up the steep flight of stairs, Dave tells me about a Mayanist named Dennis Puleston, who was recently killed by lightning at Chichen Itza. Apparently, the bolt of lightning came right through the walls of the Castillo to strike him. I thank Dave for sharing that, recognizing that he has truly become a social scientist—someone whose desire to observe the phenomenon is greater than his fear of being fried by it.

We make it to the top of the temple where, in addition to a tremendous view in all directions, we see bolts of lightning literally flash by horizontally, both above and below us. The booming of thunder is virtually continuous, and I have assumed a walking crouch, trying not to stand out above the crowd of other foolhardy tourists. And then I see, at the very summit of the temple, a Mexican gentleman and his two sons, and this gentleman is actually flying a kite. It is way, way up there, a speck against the thundering clouds, and he and his sons are laughing. I feel, simultaneously, proud of my prudence and utterly chickenshit. It occurs to me that I come from a culture that has long ago stopped trying to approach the gods where they live.

Back in New Hampshire, with visions of Mexico still dancing in my head, I make some critical decisions. The first and most critical is that I have to cover the whole ninety-year history of the Aztecs, from their rise in 1428 to their fall in 1519. I had originally been trying to write a novel of reasonable size that began just before the arrival of the Spanish and flashed back to all the legendary and historical events that went before. But there were too many of those great events, and I could not make them resonate for the reader until I had solidly established the cultural context, which was itself a formidable
task. Since I could not count on the average reader to supply even the most mundane details of Aztec life—how they dressed, what they ate, where they lived—I would have to build my fictional world from the ground up. It made sense, then, to build my version of Aztec history in the same straightforward, step-by-step manner.

This decision gave rise to two rather contradictory impulses: to make a splash, and to get it right. The former came from the recognition that my modest novel had just turned into a multi-generational tale, with a huge cast of characters and a scale that was ninety years long and as far-flung as the Aztec Empire itself. Thinking small would not help me here, so my working title became *Towering Bestseller*, and I began to plot the novel out in blocks that were 100 pages long, rather than 25.

My second recognition was that in educating the reader, I was going to have to make a large number of educated guesses concerning the many gaps in our “factual” knowledge. Unlike the historians and anthropologists whose work I had read, I could not say, “We do not know what the Aztecs used for soap,” or, “We do not have reliable data on how they buried their dead.” My characters would certainly know every detail of their world, so if I could not find the desired fact in a book, I would have to weigh the possible alternatives and make an imaginative leap.

The question then became, “How educated do your guesses need to be?” Would I need to consult all the available sources, or should I just go ahead and fabricate? This is where the impulse to get it right reared its snooty little head. I remembered the diorama in the museum in Mexico City, and my unspoken vow not to mislead the tourists. I suspected that the readers of historical novels wanted to learn something while they were being entertained, and that they probably trusted the basic accuracy of the actual history they were getting in a fictional manner. So I decided that I would try to fabricate on the basis of the best information available to me—I would try to get myself out to the cutting edge of what was known, so that while the experts might quibble with my fabrications, they could not dismiss them out of hand.

Once I got going, the book seemed to have a momentum of its own, and the task of getting it right was made much easier by my discovery of Bernadino de Sahagún’s twelve-volume *General History of the Things of New Spain*, aka *The Florentine Codex*. The UNH Library had only two of the volumes, but the rest were easily ordered from the University of Utah Press. I also corresponded with historian Burr Cartwright Brundage, who became a friend and mentor and did his best to answer my obtuse questions. The working title of my novel, coined by my wife in a nod to getting it right while making a splash, became *Moteczuma’s Galoshes*.

When I completed what I thought was half of the novel, my agent sold it to an editor at Random House. Then I really had to go to work, in order to finish it and collect the second half of the advance, and toward the end I was
turning out pages at a rate worthy of Thomas Wolfe. On my 32nd birthday, my wife and I met my editor for lunch in Manhattan, so I could turn over the final chapter. His first words to me, as he accepted the manuscript, were, “Have you heard about the other Aztec novel?”

I had not, but he filled me in: another historical novel about the Aztecs would come out in just a few months and had already sold to paperback and a book club. The publication of my novel was at least a year away. I had just been scooped, big time. At that point, I still had not come up with a real title for the novel, which was about an Aztec named Huemac. For unexamined fictional reasons, I had given Huemac sensationally bad luck, the “greatness of misfortune,” as I called it. I had not thought I was writing an autobiographical novel, but as I staggered out of the restaurant, I had my title: The Luck of Huemac.

A year or so later, I sit outside the Peabody Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts, waiting to meet an art historian named Clemency Coggins. Against the advice of my editor, I have decided to write another historical novel, this one on the Maya. He was concerned that I might be pigeonholed by reviewers and dismissed as a genre writer. But I had discovered several advantages in writing novels that had a subject. One was having sources of inspiration outside myself—texts and notes I could turn to when my creativity flagged. Another was the freedom to address truly large themes, like war and conquest, religion and magic, the florescence and decay of entire cultures. A third was the unexpected pleasure I derived from tracking down the facts and putting them in coherent order, the essential task of research.

I made my research task more challenging by focusing on the Maya of the Classic Period, which lasted from about 250 to 850 C.E. These are the Maya who built their great ceremonial centers in the rainforests of Mexico and Guatemala, who kept track of time and astronomical events with obsessive precision, and who left us the most beautiful and sophisticated pottery and sculpture in Mesoamerica. These are also the Maya who abandoned their ceremonial centers some 600 years before the arrival of the Spanish, in what has been called the “Classic Maya Collapse.”

We may never know for certain what caused this collapse, and when I entered the field in 1980, not much progress was being made in unraveling the mystery. This was partially due to the fact that no one could fully decipher the elaborate hieroglyphic inscriptions the Maya had left behind. To a larger extent, though, it was due to a peculiarly ahistorical view of the Classic Maya that had been promulgated by two of the giants in the field, Sylvanus Morley and J. Eric Thompson. They had insisted that the Classic Mayan sites like Tikal and Copan should not be regarded as cities, in the sense of centers of urban activity. Instead, they were ceremonial centers whose only permanent inhabitants were a cadre of astronomer priests. The bulk of the population supposedly lived out in the hinterlands, practicing slash-and-burn agriculture and visiting the
sites only on ritual occasions. According to the Morley/Thompson view, the Classic Maya, unlike those bloodthirsty Aztecs, lived in splendid and peaceful isolation, displaying little interest in wars of conquest or the glorification of kings.

This interpretation did not offer up much in the way of a real story, and I felt extremely frustrated until a new volume of recent scholarship entitled *Maya Archaeology and Ethnohistory* showed up in the UNH Library. I was immediately drawn to a pair of essays about Tikal that had been written by Dennis Puleston and Clemency Coggins, both of whom were making use of unpublished material from the Tikal Project. For the first time, I had a tentative dynastic genealogy, plus a cultural history that included the construction of pyramid complexes, long-distance trade in obsidian, cacao beans, and fine ceramics, and significant contact with the Central Mexican site of Teotihuacan. It was all enormously speculative, wrapped in a thick tissue of qualifications and scholarly disclaimers, but it was the closest I had come to a story in months.

So I sit down on a bench in the sun, outside a new library named for Alfred Tozzer, another famous Mayanist, and tell Clemency Coggins that I want to write a novel about Classic Period Tikal. Her immediate response is “It can’t be done. We don’t know enough.” I have not had a lot of experience with archaeologists and scholars at this point, so I am temporarily crushed. I have not yet learned that most of them—the good ones—are totally dedicated to getting it right. That means walking a fine evidentiary line, where the worst thing you could be accused of is fabrication.

But then Clemency, true to her name, goes on to help me in any way she can, giving me references to pursue and the names of other scholars to contact. She also gives me my first sense of what might be called the Evolving Past, as opposed to the Established Past, the past according to Morley and Thompson. She makes clear that this nascent view of the Classic Maya exists largely in unpublished form: in dissertations, site reports, journal articles still in press, papers offered at conferences, and the personal communications between the people who are doing the most current digging and deciphering. In other words, it is time to get out of the library and talk to some of the experts in the field.

There is still snow on the ground as I drive westward across New Hampshire and then north into Vermont, heading for Burlington and the University of Vermont. I find my way to the office of William Haviland, an archaeologist and member of the Tikal Project. He knows what I want and immediately pulls out the unpublished manuscript of Dennis Puleston’s settlement survey of the Tikal site, which would later appear as *Tikal Report 13*. Puleston had died in 1979, struck by lightning at Chichen Itza, but his survey shows clearly that the core area of Tikal had been densely populated in the Classic period. This means that Tikal was indeed a city, without the large tracts of uninhabited forest that would have been required for slash-and-burn agriculture. Instead, as Puleston suggested in his essay, the inhabitants must
have been practicing some form of intensive agriculture, perhaps farming on raised fields in the seasonal swamps.

Having brought me fully into the world of the Evolving Past, Bill Haviland takes me home with him and gets out his data sheets on the palace group he had excavated at Tikal, giving me a short course in Classic Mayan building techniques. He also spoke about the geography of the site, the climate and growing season, the flora and fauna, the kinship structure, and the distribution of pottery and luxury goods. Most importantly, he speculated on the collapse, suggesting that the city was a highly centralized system in which many people had specialized occupations and were accustomed to having the necessities of life supplied to them—and were, therefore, unequipped to fend for themselves if the larger system failed to produce the goods. This also meant that a failure in one area—a shortage of food or firewood, for example,would have a ripple effect through all the others, as people turned from their assigned tasks to scavenge for what they needed. The final result might have been a chain-reaction breakdown of the entire system.

Later that evening, Bill shows his home movies of his first season at Tikal and regales me with stories of life in the field, planting the seeds for Rising from the Ruins, a novel that will not be written for another twelve years. The immediate result of this scholarly encounter, however, is a decision to tackle the mystery of the Classic Collapse head on—to recreate the city of Tikal as it might have been at its height, and to imagine how that chain-reaction breakdown might have occurred.

Some months later, after a trip to the Yucatan with my wife, I write a first chapter, setting it near the end of Katun 18 Ahau in the Mayan calendar, or around 790 C.E. In it, my character Balam Xoc, the religious leader of the Jaguar Paw clan, enters one of the temple shrines on Tikal’s North Acropolis. After days of solitude, fasting, and ritual blood-letting, he has a vision in which he experiences the demise of his people, and he sees that the cause of their downfall lies in the distant past, when the foreigners from Teotihuacan came to Tikal. Balam Xoc emerges from isolation to utter a dire warning about the future, and to urge his people to defy the authority of the current ruler of Tikal.

Uncertain that I am on the right track, I send a copy of the chapter to Bill Haviland, hoping for a little reassurance. He writes back to say, with a certain astonishment, that I have described a perfect example of what the sociologist A.F.C. Wallace had defined as a “revitalization movement.” The attribution sends me back to the library to find Wallace’s article on the Iroquois, which in turn leads me to Max Weber’s essay on charisma. With Wallace and Weber providing the intellectual underpinning, I proceed to write the story of Balam Xoc’s attempt to revitalize his people, calling it, simply, Tikal.

The novel that followed the trilogy, Rising from the Ruins, was inspired by Bill Haviland’s home movies and stories of camp life at Tikal, so naturally when I set out to create a fictional archaeological site, I made it a Mayan site.
Yet, when I went to the library to refresh my knowledge of the Maya, even though only ten or twelve years had passed since I first researched them, I found that the field of Maya Studies had undergone a remarkable transformation. The inscriptions the Maya had carved in stone and painted on pottery were now being read for more than just royal names and dates—now they gave dynastic records, historical events, and the details of religious rituals. The Evolving Past had taken over so completely that Mayanists were now writing narrative accounts of the wars between the major Classic sites, as if they were novelists, not scholars.

This transformation was due in large part to a singular achievement: the decipherment of the Maya hieroglyphs. Epigraphers had long suspected that the glyphs might function as parts of speech, but there was no agreement about which Mayan language was spoken or what kind of grammar was employed in the inscriptions. It was this agreement that had finally been reached, and while it seemed like a sudden breakthrough to me, it was actually the culmination of a long and arduous collaboration over many years, in which field archaeologists, iconographers, epigraphers, and art historians regularly crossed the boundaries of their disciplines to share their discoveries, hunches, and insights. Using colonial-era Mayan dictionaries as their language source, they were able to wring fresh meaning from artifacts that had been in our possession—as drawings or photographs—for many decades.

The decoding of the Mayan glyphic system demonstrates that it is still possible to advance our knowledge of human history and culture in meaningful ways. Given the slipperiness of the past—especially the ancient past—it is heartening to think that we can come to know it—and thus ourselves—better.

But the process of unraveling and re-evaluating the past is intrinsically slow and painstaking, and the requisite materials have to be kept intact and available, however long it takes. I remember how grateful I was to find the old Carnegie Institution volumes of Sylvanus Morley’s *The Inscriptions of Peten* up in the stacks of the University of New Hampshire library. No one else had taken them out of the library in over thirty years, but at that point in my research I needed to examine the original source, and there it was.

This is where the members of an organization like SALALM come in—because the kind of scholarship I talk about cannot flourish without the resources provided by libraries, museums, archives, manuscript collections, and the purveyors and publishers of rare books and documents. These holdings are the ground and foundation, the reservoir of past and current knowledge that will nourish the scholarship of the future. So, clearly, this work is vital to the entire scholarly enterprise. You may even supply the inspiration for a novel or two, or perhaps a play, or a poem or a film or a folk song. And while you may find—as I have—that it is very hard to make a significant splash, I hope you’ll take some solace and satisfaction in the knowledge that you have done your best to get it right.