

The Decline and Fall of the Spanish Empire?  
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*Empire: How Spain Became a World Power, 1492–1763*. By HENRY KAMEN. New York: Harper Collins, 2003. 636 pages. \$34.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

*Rivers of Gold: The Rise of the Spanish Empire, from Columbus to Magellan*. By HUGH THOMAS. New York: Random House, 2004. 720 pages. \$35.00 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper).

*Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830*. By J. H. ELLIOTT. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 568 pages. \$35.00 (cloth), \$22.00 (paper).

*Modern Inquisitions: Peru and the Colonial Origins of the Civilized World*. By IRENE SILVERBLATT. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. 315 pages. \$84.95 (cloth), \$23.95 (paper).

*Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment*. By DAVID J. WEBER. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. 487 pages. \$35.00 (cloth), \$20.00 (paper).

*Women in the Crucible of Conquest: The Gendered Genesis of Spanish American Society, 1500–1600*. By KAREN VIEIRA POWERS. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005. 240 pages. \$45.00 (cloth), \$22.50 (paper).

*Weaving the Past: A History of Latin America's Indigenous Women from the Prehispanic Period to the Present*. By SUSAN KELLOGG. Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press, 2005. 350 pages. \$74.00 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

*Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico*. By CAMILLA TOWNSEND. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006. 302 pages. \$23.95 (paper).

*Go-Betweens and the Colonization of Brazil, 1500–1600*. By ALIDA C. METCALF. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005. 391 pages. \$55.00 (cloth), \$22.95 (paper).

At a time when the concept of empire is a political and intellectual battleground, the prompt for much soul-searching and navel-gazing in the Western world, perhaps it is not surprising to find historians returning to metaphors of empire that might have offended early modern Spaniards and delighted early modern Englishmen. Henry Kamen describes Spain's failure "to create an understanding among its peoples based on shared interests, communication and language" as "the silence of Pizarro" (497). Francisco Pizarro's compatriots were uninterested in other peoples and cultures, in learning their languages, and in reading what they wrote. Irene Silverblatt begins her new book on the Inquisition with reference to Hannah Arendt's exploration of the roots of modern fascism and totalitarianism, tracing this "subterranean stream of Western history" (3–4) back to seventeenth-century Peru by the top of the second page. These two different images of imperial Spain place a kind of barbarism at the heart of the empire and suggest that a phoenix may have risen from the ashes of the old anti-Spanish tropes of the Black Legend and Spain's interminable imperial decline.

Perhaps Gibbon is to blame. The notion of an imperial decline that is excruciatingly protracted has hardly been novel since 1777, when Edward Gibbon published the first volume of his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; that volume began three centuries before the sack of Rome,

and thirteen centuries elapsed before Gibbon deemed the fall to be final. Or maybe the fault lies with Las Casas. The Dominican friar's little book on how Spaniards destroyed the Indies became a big seller north of the Pyrenees for centuries. As has long been observed—by scholars ranging from William S. Maltby on the Black Legend to Felipe Fernández-Armesto on the Spanish Armada—the seventeenth-century development in England of a set of myths about the Armada encouraged a related myth about Spanish incompetence and an imperial decline dating as far back as 1588.<sup>1</sup>

Surely the notion of Spain as an empire in perpetual decline long ago became a paper tiger. Historians including Kamen himself have argued that the concept of Spanish imperial decline “ceases to have any meaningful place in the picture,” once “the mechanisms of empire are defined clearly” (xxv). Kamen deftly tackled Spanish decline as a myth many years ago and in his new book dismisses the “imaginary and now wholly superseded problems” (xxv) of Spanish decline as a trap that ensnared “historians of a previous generation” (xxiv). In *Empire* he argues that Spain did not create its empire but rather that, beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, “the empire created Spain” (xxv). Only by 1763 were “the factors that produced the fragmentation of the empire” (xxvi) fully in place. Hugh Thomas invites readers to see the genesis of empire even further back; his hefty tome on “the rise of the Spanish Empire” begins in the 1490s and ends in the 1520s. He resists the temptation to end on an ominous note, instead leaving readers to imagine Seville as “a city ready to be the capital of a New World,” to receive “thousands of ships over the next few hundred years” (536), ships that would bring wealth, commodities, and “astounding memories of conquests and improbable adventures” (536), all to make the newly created Spain “a great nation second to none” (537). Similarly, J. H. Elliott (who, like Kamen and Thomas, has been writing important, influential, and often astonishing books on Spain and its empire for four decades) has produced a comparative study of the British and Spanish imperial enterprises that does not use the former to make the latter seem doomed by decay and self-doubt (as was the English view for centuries). Elliott has been writing about “the old conundrum of the ‘decline of Spain’” with increasing skepticism since 1961, and his new *Empires of the Atlantic World* is in many ways the culmination of a lifetime's exploration of the riddle; he recognizes here that Spain sometimes stumbled and fell short of realizing its imperial goals not because of the old Black Legend reasons of poor government and poorer morale but because of the “scale and complexity” of its “grand imperial design” (409). His emphasis is ultimately on how much of that “imperial dream” was (surprisingly) realized.<sup>2</sup>

These three lengthy syntheses by the eminent trio of Kamen, Thomas, and Elliott thus give

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Gibbon later decided that he should have begun his history even earlier (Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Betty Radice and Felipe Fernández-Armesto [London, 1983], 1: 10). Among numerous editions, the best recent translation may be Bartolomé de Las Casas, *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies with Related Texts*, ed. Franklin W. Knight, trans. Andrew Hurley (Indianapolis, Ind., 2003). William S. Maltby, *The Black Legend in England: The Development of Anti-Spanish Sentiment, 1558–1660* (Durham, N.C., 1971); Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *The Spanish Armada: The Experience of War in 1588* (Oxford, Eng., 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Thomas's book is in effect the third in a trilogy of lengthy volumes on the colonial period. *Rivers of Gold* builds to some extent on the previous two, which tackled the Spanish conquest of Mexico and the Atlantic slave trade, and like them it is in part a synthesis, emphasizing narrative over analysis, and in part a monograph drawing on primary sources (Thomas, *The Conquest of Mexico* [London, 1993]; Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade: 1440–1870* [New York, 1997]). Arguably, its chief virtue is its focus on just a few decades, allowing Thomas to make an original contribution through the detailed narration that is his forte. J. H. Elliott, *Spain and Its World, 1500–1700* (New Haven, Conn., 1989), 216 (“old conundrum”). The historiography of the Ottoman Empire has been beset by a similar decline refrain; a grand synthesis comparing the Spanish and Ottoman empires (the way Elliott treats Spain and Britain in the Americas in *Empires of the Atlantic World*) is much needed.

the impression that historians no longer see Spain as an early modern equivalent of Gibbon's slowly declining Rome. A pair of new monographs, including (despite my previous comments) Silverblatt's, supports this impression. Her provocative new study of seventeenth-century Peru views the Inquisition as one of the modern world's ideological roots. In its structure, reach, procedures, and ideas, the Inquisition was "the most modern of Spain's bureaucracies" (6); by legitimizing judicial violence, this ultimate institution of the state made torture "intrinsic to our civilization" (75) and helped the "civilized peoples" of the modern West "to embrace barbarity" (3). At a time when the vice president of the United States states publicly that water boarding (a method of *tormento* employed routinely by the Spanish Inquisition for centuries) is not a form of torture, the Inquisition seems to anticipate the modern world and even, as Silverblatt suggests, helps to create it. In other words Silverblatt's Spanish America is not an empire in decline but an imperial state capable of developing an institution whose ramifications are dark and deep-reaching. The book's opening line contains the phrase "the rise of fascism" (3) and the final sentence is "This is a cautionary tale" (226).

In a different way, David J. Weber's *Bárbaros* also offers a picture of a Spanish Empire that is far from declining. The book's title might be taken to indicate that Weber is concerned, as Silverblatt is, with colonial-era manifestations of race thinking among Spaniards, especially Spanish state officials. In fact, on the contrary, the Spanish world Weber discovers in the imperial borderlands of the eighteenth century is different from the world Silverblatt finds in seventeenth-century Peru. The enlightened administrators in *Bárbaros* sought accommodation with, not persecution of, native groups. Violence was rejected as counterproductive and espoused only as a last resort, a far cry from the judicial violence enshrined in the Inquisitional procedures of midcolonial Peru (the partial title of Weber's fourth chapter is taken from the 1786 comment by the viceroy of New Spain that "a bad peace" with indigenous rebels "will be more beneficial to us than the efforts of a good war" [186]). Weber's analysis is too nuanced to be taken as an apologia for late-colonial Spanish frontier policy, and he concedes that many seemingly enlightened decisions were made primarily for pragmatic reasons; "power . . . more than the power of ideas . . . determined how enlightened Spaniards would treat 'savages'" (278). Yet it is significant that Weber does not allow the 1820s to overshadow the previous half-century. Independence and the subsequent slaughter of indigenous peoples in the borderlands come despite, not because of, the policies and practices of the empire.

And yet there remain in all these books elements of what might be seen as a kind of updated version of the old decline and decay view of the Spanish Empire. Such perceptions are partly rooted in the reality of the challenges that Spain faced and partly rooted in a perception of empire as reprehensible by its nature and definition. With respect to the former, even Thomas, whose book ends around 1522, cannot resist lightly peppering his final chapters with hints that the empire's rise has not long to last; Spain's American claims were "already being contested" (516) in 1522, fortune would continue "to throw roses to Spain" for only "several more generations" (537), and so on. Elliott and Kamen, covering most of the empire's existence, give as much attention to its difficulties and defeats as to its survival and successes.

The perception that empires are by definition instruments of violence and moral depravity is fed by contemporary political sensibilities, yet it has had the effect of resurrecting and repackaging many of the old views of the Spanish Empire, most notably those once perpetuated by the twin notions of protracted imperial decline and the Black Legend. Kamen's concluding judgment on the cultural failings of Spaniards is not meant as a commentary on the empire as a whole but is aimed primarily at Castilians and intended to round off his thesis that it was non-Spaniards who mostly created and sustained the empire. Yet one gets the impression that the uncultured Castilian set the tone for an empire that everybody loathed. Kamen rightfully points out that all empires beget such responses ("Like Americans and Russians of the twentieth century, the Spaniards had to learn to live

with universal hatred” [509]), but his closing catalogue of “military savagery” (512) suggests that this hatred was well deserved. As for Silverblatt’s thesis, beneath its artful argumentation and provocative originality, there lies an indictment of the Spanish Empire that a seventeenth-century English reader of *Las Casas* would have grasped and appreciated.<sup>3</sup>

A final example of a new book tinged with the old stains of the Black Legend is Karen Vieira Powers’s volume on women in sixteenth-century Spanish America. The chief virtue of her book is the unwavering, unflinching clarity with which its thesis is presented. The volume is in the University of New Mexico’s superb *Diálogos* series aimed in part at advanced undergraduates, yet students of all levels will have little difficulty grasping Powers’s central argument. Her trenchant phraseology begins with the title (women are “in the crucible of conquest” and the “genesis of Spanish American society” is “gendered”) and the introduction (her “hypothesis is that the sixteenth century saw the demotion in status of all colonial women” [2]). It continues in the first chapter, which summarizes “Pre-Hispanic Gender Roles under the Aztecs and the Incas” and is the setup for the onslaught on gender equality that comes with the Spanish invaders. The final page of this chapter should leave the reader in no doubt as to how much better life was for Aztec and Inca women than it was for Spanish women (or for all women in Spanish America).

Having portrayed the experience of native women in this way—not all native women but women under the rule of the two great pre-Hispanic empires—Powers then devotes the bulk of her book (five chapters of some 130 pages) to the “gender collision” (39) that was the sixteenth century. Spanish invasion, conquest, and colonial rule stripped native women of previously held rights and subjected women to multiple forms of sexual abuse and economic exploitation. Iberian society, whose operating principle was “male privilege” (41), transformed indigenous political “organization from gender parallel to male-centric . . . in one fell swoop” (42). The policies and practices of Spanish conquistadors, priests, settlers, and administrators were “degrading to the status of indigenous women” (58), referring to the abolition of polygamy, and exacted heavy “psychic costs” (75), referring to the pattern of native women marrying Spanish men who had killed their relatives. All women were “the targets of grotesque acts of unbridled violence” (93) and all were subject to “unwanted cruelties, rape, and unfair treatment in their homes” (111), yet indigenous women in particular were vulnerable to “labor exploitation . . . [and] sexual abuse” (149). The clarity and passion of Powers’s writing and her selective use of examples make for a grim history offset only sporadically by cases of women triumphing over adverse living and working conditions. The final chapter is devoted to examples of women who “disregarded and manipulated the rules of patriarchy” (168) and “were able to carve out spaces in which to empower themselves” (186).

Colonial Latin Americanists will note that Powers has done an expert job of sorting and combining information from the many works on women and gender in Spanish America, and they will recognize that her jabs at sexist “general textbooks” (1) and this or that noted historian are aimed at earlier generations. Historians of other fields, however, may find a synthesis of secondary literature whose declared purpose is to fill a gap in the secondary literature to be conceptually contradictory. They may wonder whether the preoccupation with gender that has informed their own fields has yet to reach historians of colonial Latin America.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Of the books on Spanish America discussed in this review essay, the most consistently revisionist is David J. Weber’s *Bárbaros*, in the sense that it argues unequivocally against neo-Black Legend caricatures and offers detailed, original evidence against the idea that the empire was in inexorable decline before the 1790s and, in some ways, before the 1810s (decline being distinct from incompleteness).

<sup>4</sup> A glance through Powers’s bibliography suggests that gender did become an important subject for historians of Latin America beginning in the 1980s, and has subsequently flourished for some twenty years. During the 1990s it was common for one-half or more of the papers given by colonial Latin Americanists at

Such historians may compare Powers's synthesis with a similar treatment by Susan Kellogg. A more ambitious undertaking (and one more challenging for some student readers), Kellogg's *Weaving the Past* tracks the history of indigenous women through three phases of the Latin American past: the precolonial centuries, given twice as much attention by Kellogg than by Powers; the colonial period, to which Powers devotes four times as many pages, though focusing only on the sixteenth century; and the modern period, covered only by Kellogg. The two books do not tread identical ground, but they do overlap significantly and both are works of synthesis aimed at larger academic and student audiences. Furthermore Kellogg likewise faces the challenge of encapsulating the experience of indigenous women before 1492 and summarizing how it changed after that date. In contrast to Powers, Kellogg finds "a surprisingly varied picture of gender relations" in preconquest times; some societies developed "parallel gender institutions," others were characterized by a "flexible [male] dominance," and most blended "complementarity and subordination" (51). Was this complex picture destroyed by the onslaught of Spanish conquest and culture? Not entirely: Kellogg recognizes that the colonial period was one of "gendered transformations for indigenous populations" (86), and she details the "diminished public roles" (53) of native women under colonial rule, examining the same themes of sexual and economic exploitation to which Powers devotes much of her book, yet Kellogg also "highlights a historical counterpoint, one in which native women demonstrated an admirable capacity to survive, adjust to, or resist myriad changes, barriers, and problems" (53). Ultimately, Kellogg's "book is a history of women's agency" (6); this theme, which is a muted undercurrent in Powers's book until the final chapter, is the predominant analytic leitmotif of Kellogg's synthesis.

Kellogg begins her chapter on the colonial period with a brief discussion of Malintzin (Hernando Cortés's famous Nahua interpreter, also known as Malinche and doña Marina). This choice may seem at first to be obvious and uninspired, but it is significant and justified for a couple of reasons. Powers chooses to avoid Malintzin, mentioning her only in passing, mostly as a victim and symbol of modern Mexican misogyny, perhaps because Malintzin's complex story would have hindered the smooth, clear trajectory of Powers's thesis and narrative. And though Malintzin has become a stock character in textbooks, the historical Malintzin is seldom given insightful attention; Kellogg rightfully sees her as representative, even iconic, of the female agency that is at the heart of Kellogg's own interpretation of Latin American ethnohistory.

In doing so Kellogg anticipates Camilla Townsend's milestone new study of "Malintzin's choices" during her short adult life in the 1510s and 1520s. Townsend cleverly turns a disadvantage, the paucity of archival documentation on Malintzin, into an advantage by having this work center on her times rather than her life. The success of this study (a *Diálogos* volume, like Powers's book) lies in its being, as she declares at the start, "a book about contexts" (8). To some extent Townsend brings Malintzin to life; more significantly, she brings those around Malintzin to life, thereby making sense of the tough choices that were forced on her. It may seem counterintuitive to argue, in a book devoted to Malintzin, that she may not have been so important after all. But Townsend convincingly suggests that Malintzin was a product of her times in numerous ways and that Mexico in the early sixteenth century was "a world in which there were many potential Malinches" (6).

The point is widely applicable. Not just in Mexico but throughout colonial Latin America there were numerous potential Malintzins, whether scholars take Malintzin as symbolic of women's experiences during the period (Kellogg and Townsend) or not (Powers), as a piece of good luck

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professional meetings to be focused on women or issues of gender (various analyses and comments have appeared in *Perspectives* and the *Hispanic American Historical Review*); my quick survey of programs from four conferences in 2006 revealed that one-third to one-half of papers in this field still indicate, in the paper titles, a focus on women or gender.

relevant to a conquest moment (Thomas and Elliott) or as someone indicative of the role of non-Spaniards in the making of the Spanish Empire (Kamen).<sup>5</sup> People caught in the middle of the process of imperial expansion—interpreters, intermediaries, interstitial victims, and success stories; women and men; natives, Spaniards, Africans, and others; those at the heart of sixteenth-century invasions and those navigating late-colonial frontiers—are found all through these books, and it seems that historians tell readers most about empire when they are able to focus and contextualize such people.

We might call them “go-betweens.” The one book under review that treats Portuguese colonization offers a perspective on them that is potentially of considerable relevance to understanding the Spanish colonies. In a highly engaging and original monograph, Alida C. Metcalf argues that the Portuguese “possession” (55) of portions of the Brazilian coastline in the sixteenth century—that is, the existence of early colonial Brazil—was only made possible “through the agency of go-betweens” (12). She identifies three types of go-betweens: the physical or biological, who brought plants and animals to Brazil, spread disease, or gave birth to mixed-race children; the transactional, who interpreted, mediated, or negotiated among groups; and the representational, who drew maps or wrote accounts. Such categories of people, Metcalf argues, characterized and guided the outcome of the Portuguese-indigenous encounter of the sixteenth century. This encounter thus soon ceases to be “a dyadic relationship” (2) between two groups, becoming a multifaceted tale of interaction with crucial roles played by the mestizo or “mameluco go-betweens who ‘won’ the sertão for the Portuguese colony” (274).<sup>6</sup>

Metcalf includes scare quotes on the verb “won” because this strategy, though ultimately leading to the loss of independent native communities in Brazil, came at the expense of absolute Portuguese control over the colony. Just as Spain could not, as Elliott states, realize the “imperial dream” (409) that its rulers imagined, so “Portugal could claim Brazil as a colony, [but] that did not mean,” explains Metcalf, “that Portuguese authority reigned supreme” (13).<sup>7</sup>

In the riveting final chapter of *Go-Betweens*, titled “Power,” Metcalf describes a conflict in the Salvador of the 1590s among three Spanish and mixed-race protagonists: Heitor Furtado de Mendonça, the Inquisitor from Lisbon; Fernão Cabral, a rich sugar planter; and Domingos Fernandes Nobre, a *mameluco* with one foot in Portuguese Salvador and another in the indigenous backlands or *sertão*. There are others too, including the Jesuits, who initially emerge as the winners of the conflict, and the native leaders of a nearby *santidade* (millenarian messianic movement), who are bludgeoned to death by a *mameluco* sugar planter working under the authority of the Portuguese governor. There is, in other words, no shortage of violence and exploitation: the violence of conquest, the procedural violence of the Inquisition, and the systematic abuse of native peoples as a labor source are core facets of the Portuguese and Spanish empires. But the story told in “Power” is also one of compromise and the space where compromise occurred, the space in which power was contested and the colonial system remained subject to endless negotiation.

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas states that “the part of . . . Marina, was also critical” (488) yet only devotes two passing lines to her, whereas Elliott mentions her once, playing down her role; Kamen devotes more attention to her, stating that “Cortés owed the success of his expedition in large measure” (240) to her. My characterizations of Malintzin’s treatment in these books are thus somewhat rhetorical extensions of what these authors actually write.

<sup>6</sup> Metcalf cites L. P. Hartley’s novel, *The Go-Between* (New York, 1954), as the inspiration for her use of the term, though colonial Latin Americanists will be reminded of the work of Frances Karttunen, which Metcalf also cites (Karttunen, *Between Worlds: Interpreters, Guides, and Survivors* [New Brunswick, N.J., 1994]).

<sup>7</sup> Weber’s book is also a detailed testimony to the partial control Spain exercised over its empire (“Clearly, Spain had not completed the conquest of America in the Age of Conquest” [12]).

It was such a space that Malintzin was able to occupy in a life that was neither simply about her own status as victim nor agent or simply about the changes wrought by Spanish invasions. Such a space permitted *mameluco* men in early colonial Brazil and indigenous women in early colonial Mesoamerica to empower themselves and facilitate the flawed, partial possession of American places by Iberian colonists. It allowed communities of Africans to develop in sixteenth-century Mexico City and eighteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, whose coherence and self-consciousness we are only just beginning to grasp. It also allows Silverblatt to describe the Inquisition's persecution of crypto-Jews in Lima in the 1630s as something particularly local and disturbingly more significant and Weber to show convincingly how nineteenth-century extermination campaigns against indigenous groups were both a continuation of and a sharp break with late-colonial policies and practices.<sup>8</sup>

Does this diversity also mean that the silent Pizarro of Kamen's metaphor can exist alongside the enlightened administrator found by Weber on the late-colonial frontier? And, if so, does that make the Spanish Empire different from other empires? Elliott offers one way to answer this question. The virtue of his book lies in its comparative approach. For example the decidedly retrograde depiction of Cortés that begins Elliott's first chapter is soon validated by his comparison with Christopher Newport; the latter's portrait is no more novel, yet within twenty-five pages Elliott has used this comparison as a launch board into a simple but elegant and effective opening thesis. The first Spanish and British settlers in the Americas were "confronted by similar problems and challenges," their empires were born of "many of the same aspirations," and both were "liberated and constrained by their American environment," but at the same time "accidents both of environment and of timing would do much to ensure that [the two empires] developed in distinctive ways" (28).<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Elliott's comparative focus is central to his treatment of the "series of convulsions" that "transformed the political landscape of the Americas" (325) from the 1770s to the 1820s. By moving deftly between the Spanish and British experiences, simultaneously showing how the two were interrelated, Elliott persuasively articulates an important point: the loss of colonies was not "a foregone, or even initially a desired, conclusion" (325) and the fact of independence in the

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<sup>8</sup> Two recent, ground-breaking studies on communities and spaces of contesting colonial dominion are Herman L. Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570–1640* (Bloomington, Ind., 2003); James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003). Weber declares his interest in "the spaces between" (1), quoting Barbara Kingsolver.

<sup>9</sup> The British Empire in the Americas did not really exist before 1660 (as Daniel J. Hulsebosch argues in *Constituting Empire: New York and the Transformation of Constitutionalism in the Atlantic World, 1664–1830* [Chapel Hill, N.C., 2005]) and peaked a century later, whereas the Spanish remained the predominant imperial power in the hemisphere into the nineteenth century. Elliott tends to rely more on colonial chroniclers, classics, and older works, with uneven coverage of recent historiography; some points, often based on a single secondary source, are a tad off target. Most relate directly or indirectly to the indigenous and African experiences in Spanish America and their related literatures. But Elliott's breadth of knowledge and his well-honed historian's instincts prevent him from producing outright errors. Moreover he never misconceives the larger picture; rather, his grasp of it is extraordinary and made all the more significant through his interweaving of the two imperial narratives. Another example of useful comparison is Elliott's treatment of what colonial Latin Americanists call the spiritual conquest. Taken alone, Elliott's discussion of the battle in the Spanish colonies over "America as sacred space" (as he titles chap. 7) is well-written textbook material (the historiographical gaps are substantial, the general gist solid). But by discussing early Spanish and early English conversion goals and efforts in a single framework, formed in part by the chapter's opening and closing use of comments by Cotton Mather, Elliott produces a comparative synthesis that is engaging and original.

1820s should not be projected back to show Spanish imperial decline. The rebellions and other crises of the 1780s were not so much ominous signs of future collapse but indications of “the continuing strength and resilience of the imperial structure” (365). Just as Robert W. Patch showed how late-colonial Maya revolts exposed not the weakness but the functional, flexible fortitude of the Spanish colonial system, so does Elliott use this far larger scene to emphasize the centrality of the empire’s “self-correcting mechanism” of “checks and balances” (365).<sup>10</sup> He sees how negotiation was at the heart of the imperial system, explaining the durability of the “drama of confrontation followed by accommodation that had enabled Spain to retain its empire of the Indies for nearly 300 years” (368).

In other words the Spanish Empire was so many things at once that it can indeed accommodate multiple and varied interpretations of seemingly contradictory individuals and events. No event, from the winning of Mexico in 1521 to the loss of Mexico in 1821, was inevitable, and the empire was more like the empires of its European rivals than they cared to believe and historians have taken the trouble to explore. This similarity supports Kamen’s claim: the notion that the Spanish Empire’s condition was one of decline is, “put simply, meaningless” (443). In Kamen’s words, “Spain was no worse off in 1700 than it had been in 1600 or in 1500; indeed, its economy and population were now in better shape than ever” (443). He does not address the state of the empire in 1760 or 1790, yet a case could be made that it was as healthy at that point as it was earlier. The Spanish Empire was always fragile and dynamic, vulnerable and expansionist. The imperial collapse of the independence decades was the result of proximate causes, not an inevitable result of a centuries-long downward slide. The moral decay and intellectual decline that Gibbon found in Rome as early as the second century (and in the second chapter of his book) were not ominously apparent in Pizarro’s day or in the Spanish Empire of 1588, the 1640s, or 1763 any more than they were evident in other European empires. As Kamen puts it, the “unrelieved desolation” (512) of how millions experienced Spain’s empire was particular not to Spain but to the world forged by European nations from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Finally, Spain itself was never “a great power, for its power was neither more nor less the sum of the capacities of its collaborators”; “it was aided at every turn by the capital and expertise and manpower of other associated peoples. It is a story that has never been fully told, and some day the historians will get round to doing it” (489). That this is the story of all empires makes it all the more odd that it has not yet been fully told. Perhaps it is simply that, as Silverblatt reminds readers, “life is messier than the story” (65). Or perhaps these books show that the fuller story is finally being told.

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<sup>10</sup> Robert W. Patch, *Maya Revolt and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 2002).