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Aztecs: An Interpretation (Canto Classics)



Synopsis

In 1521, the city of Tenochtitlan, magnificent centre of the Aztec empire, fell to the Spaniards and their Indian allies. Inga Clendinnen's account of the Aztecs recreates the culture of that city in its last unthreatened years. It provides a vividly dramatic analysis of Aztec ceremony as performance art, binding the key experiences and concerns of social existence in the late imperial city to the mannered violence of their ritual killings.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Breakthroughs in historical topics most often come from discoveries of new texts or archaeological finds. Not so in this case. Here, rereading existing indigenous and Spanish documents (particularly the Florentine Codex of de Sahagun), as well as current scholarly literature, has yielded a riveting, fresh perspective on a seemingly exhausted topic, the pre-Columbian culture of the Aztecs of Mexico. Where previous authors have seen chronicles of empire building, the workings of economic systems, or reconstructions of social organization, Clendinnen finds tonalities of everyday life. How did the ordinary people of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital destroyed by Cortez, make sense of their world? How did the warriors, women, priests, and traders understand the brutal practice of human sacrifice for which Aztec society is notorious? The author's answers to these and other questions provide the general reader and specialist alike with a powerful, elegantly written interpretation that goes further than any yet in getting inside this extinct culture. It deserves a place on the shelf next to Jacques Soustelle (Daily Life of the Aztecs , 1961) and Nigel Davies (The Aztecs: A History , LJ

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'... a fascinating, thought-provoking book. Aztecs offers a gripping account of an alien society and thus enlarges our apprehension of the sheer diversity of human culture.' London Review of Books'This is an outstanding book ...' The Times Higher Education Supplement

"Aztecs" is a book which changed my life. Here, she says, is what the Aztecs did, without coloring it, without blame, no white man, no red man, just people led by compulsions Clendinnen explores, finds inexplicable, continues to explore, in a dense and gorgeous prose style that becomes its own jungle with all the beauty and terror that implies. I myself find the downfall of great civilizations compelling on any terms (Jared Diamond's "Collapse", for instance), but this is the real thing. And if a reader says, "well, those Aztecs were certainly driven by bizarre, clearly false metaphors", I think that might be a useful thing for that reader to contemplate.

While based on scholarship the book is written in a poetic tone. Rather than give a dry description of the Mexica(the Aztecs name for themselves) she tries to get inside their head and describe how they felt about the world and human existence. The book gives an accurate and alternative picture of this culture as opposed to the Spaniard's view of them as blood thirsty monsters.

OK, I'm not an academic, but I've read many books on Mesoamerican archeology and history. While there's good information here, it just about kills me to read more than a dozen pages in a sitting. The author's writing is filled with prose that adds little to the discussion. Check this out:"Among their putative descendants the Mexica had marked themselves out by their early ferocity and their success in the savage game of war, but as the city grew they also, more tremulously, sought to identify themselves as the heirs of these men [Toltecs] who had made a world through art."There's enough value here to fight my way through to the end, but it's going to take awhile. A lot more accessible text will be found in "Aztec Thought and Culture" by Miguel Leon-Portilla

This is an excellent study. the product was received as advertised, good condition and on time.

Two things are striking about this work. One is just how much information has survived about a society which was virtually eradicated soon after the Spanish encounter. It turns out that interviews

were conducted with Aztec nobles long after the Conquest and, as slanted as these may have been, yielded a wealth of details on the social organization, the rituals, the values, the daily life, etc. of a stunningly rich and varied society. Personally, I compare it to the Japanese in earlier times - a focus on the warrior class with an exquisitely formalized and ritualized society which often, to European eyes, seems cruel and violent yet has a compelling internal logic and beauty. The mere wealth of surviving details is striking in itself. Then there is Clendinnen's point of view which extracts layers of nuance and resonance from what is known, often drawing on more solidly documented information on the Plains Indians for insights. The more critical responses here are not entirely wrong in that some readers will find this analysis too dense and too extensive, almost Jamesian in its complexity. Personally, I found it compelling and enlightening. The result is a very thick and layered work on a culture which was eradicated in a few years and might well have left only hints and glints of its former complexity. One finds oneself walking colorfully peopled streets, gripped by the dramas of status and sacrifice, fully engaged in a culture that again comes alive. The book really is a remarkable accomplishment.

It's difficult to find anything on the Aztecs that goes far beyond material goods, titillating sacrifices, and the names and dates of the eventual conquest. This is the only book I've found that explores what it meant and what it felt like to live as a real person in such a culture: how mythical monsters recalled population-wide guilt, how the exchange of material goods influenced personal relationships, and how belonging to different groups may have shaped the ways that people saw themselves within the world. I can't recommend this book highly enough to anyone with an interest in history. The only drawbacks I found were the few short detours into more specifically Freudian topics. The academic language seems to bother some people, but this is an academic text, not fiction. It's still very readable for a layperson.

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