

# PAPERS

DISCUSSING THE COMPARATIVE MERITS OF PRESCOTT'S AND  
WILSON'S HISTORIES,

PRO. AND CON.,

AS LAID BEFORE THE

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

BY PROF. GEO. TICKNOR,

PRESCOTT'S PROPOSED BIOGRAPHER,

ALSO,

THREE LETTERS OF PRESCOTT,

COMMENDING WILSON'S HISTORICAL RESEARCH.

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ROBERT ANDERSON WILSON.

A NEW HISTORY OF THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO: IN WHICH LAS CASAS' DENUNCIATIONS OF THE POPULAR HISTORIANS OF THAT WAR ARE FULLY VINDICATED, ETC. By ROBERT ANDERSON WILSON. Philadelphia: 1859. 8vo.

A book with this striking title, recently published at Philadelphia, in a handsome and imposing volume of above five hundred pages, has been somewhat noticed in the newspapers, but has been received with a considerable feeling of distrust. Nor is this to be accounted remarkable. An author who, like Mr. Wilson, maintains that the civilization of Mexico came from Phœnicia before the time of Moses, and that all the accounts of the Spanish conquest, usually relied upon—from the many despatches of Cortez down to the marvelously learned and philosophical travels of Humboldt, and the brilliant and conscientious history of Prescott—are either wild fictions, or the results of belief in such fictions, can not himself, one would think, expect to find his path to general favor very smooth.

Of the curt and decisive way in which Mr. Wilson sees fit to contradict such illustrious predecessors as those just mentioned, or of the details of his narrative, and of the disquisitions by which he would sustain it, we do not propose to speak at all. That ground is well covered by two articles in the *Atlantic Monthly* for April and May, written with ample knowledge of the subject, and with pungent ability. But we wish to say a word about Mr. Wilson's general trustworthiness as a historian. The claims he put forth are very bold, and he will not, therefore, object to having them tested under the two heads of his *fairness* and of his *learning*—in other words, of his fitness to do what he has undertaken to do.

Many instances may be found of his want of fairness, but we shall confine ourselves to one—the case of Dr. Robertson, the author of the History of America and of Charles V.

Mr. Wilson tells us, in one of his notes, that his father had been adopted into the family of the head of the Iroquois Indians; and he elsewhere intimates that he regards himself, in some sort, as a party concerned in whatever relates to the honor of that remarkable nation of savages. He goes out of his way, therefore, to make an attack on Dr. Robertson for saying that the Iroquois, at an earlier period than that in which he wrote his History of America, were, like many other of the natives of this continent, accustomed sometimes to satiate their revenge by eating their enemies. Mr. Wilson's words are: "Dr. Robertson, Principal of the University (High School) of Edinburgh, has immortalized himself by informing the world that the Iroquois (the Six Nations) eat human flesh." And then he goes on treating the historian as if he had either invented this charge, or taken it lightly and without sufficient inquiry, on the authority of a "Jesuitical author." If he refers, as he probably does, to Charlevoix—a learned and excellent man, who was at one time a missionary in this part of the American continent—we can only say, the statements of Charlevoix are ample, and that we feel assured nobody can read his account of the horrors that accompanied the deaths of Father Brebenf and Father Lallemand, and their being eaten by Iroquois in 1649, without being assured of its truth. But there is no need of going so far, and to a book somewhat uncommon. It is only necessary to look into the "Relation," printed at Paris in 1666, and republished in 1858 at Quebec, under the auspices of the Canadian Government, in order to feel equally sure that, in 1661, the Sieur Brigeart was—with circumstances of atrocity too shocking to be repeated—roasted alive and devoured by a party of Iroquois, under no pretext of hunger, for they had just been making "grande chere de leur chasse." Indeed, there is no doubt of the fact

that, in the early period of our knowledge of the northern part of our continent, the Iroquois, like other of our fierce savages, sometimes became cannibals from an insatiable revenge. Mr. Wilson wishes to degrade Dr. Robertson for stating this fact in the very mild and cautious way he does, and would have us believe that this most respectable historian has asserted that the Iroquois had continued cannibals when they had been "allies of the British crown two hundred years," although both in his text and in his notes Dr. Robertson says that the practice had long ceased when he wrote, which was about 1775-1777. Now a person who treats history in this way is too prejudiced, or too careless, or too ignorant, or all three, to be trusted. He does not deserve the name of an historian. He is the calumniator—he would persuade us to think Dr. Robertson to be.

But the task Mr. Wilson took upon himself is not only one that demanded fairness, but it is one that demanded learning. Had he, then, the learning he needed? We might, perhaps, safely leave the answer of this question to the articles in the *Atlantic Monthly* already referred to, where many instances of gross ignorance in great things as well as small are pointed out and exposed. But there is one case so decisive, that we wish to note it separately. It is that of Bernal Diaz del Castillo, the Chronicler of the Conquest. No book in relation to the early history of the Spanish invasion of Mexico has been more relied on than his; for it was written by one who claimed to have fought through all its battles, and who, in his old age, sat down and gave, in great detail, and with that genuine simplicity which is the seal of truth, a history of the whole of it;—one main purpose that he had being to correct the accounts of Gomara, which the clear-headed veteran deemed too favorable to Cortez, whose Secretary Gomara was. Such a work, of course, stood directly in the way of a person like Mr. Wilson, who, in order to maintain his theories about Mexico, was obliged to deny all the received accounts of that extraordinary event, and especially those of Bernal Diaz. After some consideration, he seems to have made up his mind that the cheapest and shortest way was to declare boldly that no such man ever existed;—or, to use his own words, he "with much deliberation concluded to denounce Bernal Diaz as a myth."

No doubt Mr. Wilson felt himself tolerably safe in this decisive assertion; for, to most persons who are in the habit of reading Spanish books, hardly anything is known of the sturdy old conquistador, except what he has himself told us; and this is testimony not to be accepted when the very existence of the person is called in question, for if Bernal Diaz never lived, he can never have written the book that bears his name.

But there is, happily, external testimony in the case, and enough of it. A fresh edition of the old Chronicler's work was published in Madrid in 1853, in the twenty-sixth volume of the "Biblioteca de Autores Espanoles," and was edited by Don Enrique de Vedia, a scholar who has heretofore interested himself in America and in American literature. In the preface to this edition, Don Enrique says, that, about the year 1689, Don Francisco de Fuentes y Guzman wrote a History of Guatemala, of which the first portion, in two manuscript volumes, was then before him (Don Enrique de Vedia); that in this history Don Francisco de Fuentes says, with many expressions of affection, that Bernal Diaz was his great-grandfather; and that the original manuscript of his History of the Conquest was still preserved, and showed differences in the printed copy, especially in chapters 164 and 171. These facts Mr. Wilson ought to have known; for they were published to the world six years before he had the hardihood to assert that no such man as Bernal Diaz had ever existed.

But this is not all. The Abbe Brasseur de Bourbourg, a French gentleman of much learning, has been long interested in the traditions of savage life on this continent, and especially those of its central portions. He was Professor at the Seminary of Quebec in 1845. In 1848 he went to Mexico, and became connected there with the French mission of Mons. Levasseur, and traveled much about the country and among the natives, studying their languages and manners till 1851. From 1851 to 1854 he was in Paris and Rome, and made careful researches connected with his American studies; and from 1854 to the beginning of 1857 he was in Mexico again and in Guatemala, making fresh and more elaborate local investigations. This gentleman, thus qualified for his task, printed in Paris in 1857 and 1858, the first three volumes, and in this year, 1859, the fourth and last

of his "Historie des Nations Civileses du Mexique et de l'Amérique Centrale, durante les siècles antérieurs a Christophe Colomb," which he brings down—so far as the native Indians are concerned—to the completion of the Spanish Conquest in Mexico. In this work, which is full of learning, drawn from original sources and unpublished materials, it is almost needless to say that the Abbe de Bourbourg concurs with the accounts to which we have heretofore trusted, from the time of Cortez to that of Prescott; carrying his investigations, however, much more into detail than anybody has done before him. Still he is not satisfied, and is now, probably, embarked anew for Mexico, in order to pursue still farther the subject which has so long been with him not merely an earnest pursuit, but a passion.

On his way to Mexico, the Abbe de Bourbourg lately passed through Boston, where we had already enjoyed the pleasure of seeing him in 1854. He stopped here only a very short time, and we did not know he was in town until he called upon us the day before his departure. But we at once spoke to him of Mr. Wilson's book, which he had not seen, and gave him a copy of it, desiring him, at the same time, to put on paper certain facts relating to Bernal Diaz, which he had mentioned in our conversation. The same evening he wrote us a note, which we received after he was gone, and from which the following is a translation of the portion relating to Bernal Diaz. It is dated Boston, 25th April, 1859:

"I have the honor to address you herewith what you asked of me this morning concerning Bernal Diaz. Not having my books or my notes at hand, I must content myself with putting down from memory what, at the moment, occurs to my recollection.

"Bernal Diaz del Castillo was among the soldiers who landed with Cortez at Vera Cruz, and remained afterwards with him. His name appears in a great number of official acts still extant. It was Bernal Diaz who stood sentinel at the entrance of the Spanish Camp when the envoys from Cempoalla presented themselves there. In the legal process instituted against Cortez by his enemies, some years after the taking of Mexico, the name of Bernal Diaz appears as one of the witnesses for the defence. Later he is to be traced among the Spaniards, who established themselves in Central America; and he was, for many years, Corregidor of the city of Guatemala. It was there that he wrote his History, and the *autograph manuscript*, signed by his own hand, is carefully preserved by that municipality among its archives, where I have seen and examined it more than once.

"His signature is often shown among the signature of the members of the *Cabildo* (the Corporation) of Gautemala, whose records still exist. He died in that city, old, and complaining of his poverty."

Our simple-hearted and picturesque chronicler, therefore, not only had a descendant in the third generation, who was fondly attached to his ancestor's memory; but the *autograph* manuscript of his ancestor's remarkable book, and many of his *autograph* signatures to official documents, *officially* preserved, have survived all the revolutions of the unhappy country, the affairs of whose capital city he long administered. This is certainly pretty well for "*a myth*."

But, to be serious, an author who, like Mr. Wilson, makes the boldest assertions and then is obliged to run for luck in order to find evidence that he may hope will support them;—who has so little fairness or judgment as is shown by his treatment of Dr. Robertson, and so little knowledge or spirit of inquiry as he has shown in the case of Bernal Diaz, can really have no claim to the character of an historian. Still less has he a right to speak in any tone except one of perfect deference, when he mentions such names as Baron Humboldt and Mr. Prescott.

T.

## PROF. T—, OF BOSTON.

“A NEW HISTORY OF THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO” By ROBERT ANDERSON WILSON.  
 London: TRUBNER & Co., 60 Paternoster Row; Philadelphia: JAS. CHALLEN &  
 SON. Third Edition. 1860.

NEW facts of history can only be settled by a full and fair discussion; yet thus far discussion has been confined to one side only, and that side the one anxious to suppress what the lamented Prescott styled “a great deal of matter quite original.” My real offence was that I had written “A New History of the Conquest of Mexico,” founded on direct and circumstantial evidence, with speculations on the fabulous ages, according to the rule laid down by Lord Bacon, (*De Augmentis*, b. 2, cap. 6). I had ventured, also, as an expert personally familiar with the country about which I wrote, to denounce the authorities, on which Prescott had relied, as physically impossible; as more intensely fabulous than the Arabian Nights or Munchausen’s Tales; as the religious romances and pious frauds of Spanish priests.

As the statute of limitations does not run against history, I will, at this late day, proceed to defend, not myself, but the truth of history—not from the travestie, caricature, and libel, of Prescott’s publishers, as contained in their own magazine, the *Atlantic Monthly*; but from Prof. T—’s article in *Littell’s Living Age*, for June, 1859—heading my article as the Professor headed his, only substituting his name for mine, and writing my own in full at the bottom of this article, instead of the Professor’s “T;” for I hold it to be only fair, that a person who assails another by name should also give his own.

The conflicting romances of Spanish priests, written from 50 to 250 years after the events they celebrated, had been moulded by the plastic hand of Prescott into a history, constituting what Barnum would style a happy family of discordant elements; rather we should liken them to a pyramid of hearsay standing on its apex, to which Prescott’s writings constituted the inverted base. Conflicting with all the rest, yet a leading authority, was a putative narrative attributed to Bernal Diaz, a companion of Cortez. As an expert acquainted with that country, and with the peculiarities of its priests and its soldiers, I pronounced that book spurious, and its Bernal Diaz a myth—the invention of a priest ignorant of the country through which it was alleged the writer had marched, in company with Cortez. On this point I could not be mistaken. My reasoning might be fallacious, but my conclusion alone was testimony. The rule of evidence presupposing that experts do not always know the processes by which their own minds arrive at correct decisions. “Give me your conclusions, not your argument,” said Coleridge to an old woman; and so say all men to experts, who have any practical knowledge of the world. Yet the Professor is not more satisfied with my judgment than the innocent holder of a spurious note is, ordinarily, with the bank officer who pronounces it bad. He cites against me a Guatemalian priest, to prove—1st, That there was a genuine Bernal Diaz. Who disputed it? 2d, That he died at Guatemala. Who denied it? 3d, That the MS. I pronounced spurious was among the public archives of that city within ninety years of the conquest. Did any one fix the date at which the pious fraud was consummated? or deny that the public officers of Guatemala were scamps? This course of proof the Professor introduces, is the one resorted to in courts of Justices of the Peace, when the real issue can not be met.

It may be that “T” is as well known a signature at Boston as “Prof. T—;” but I confess that when I read the article in the *Living Age*, at Fort Riley, Kansas, I supposed it to be the work of a Jesuit Superior, both from its citing such a witness to prove irrelevant matter; and, second, from the Romish tone of the article, while my name was placed in large capitals over the ordinary heading of a book notice, for the apparent purpose of exciting prejudice by its broad Scotch look. As, though a Scotchman was less likely than a Spaniard to speak the truth! I was, therefore, not a little astonished, the other day, to learn that the author was not a Jesuit, but Professor T—, of Boston.

The only way to overcome the testimony of an expert is by other experts. If Prof. T—— wishes to counteract the effect of my testimony, let him qualify himself by the severe process I adopted. But this attempt to suppress evidence by crushing a witness, has met with its just deserts. The publisher who directed the persecution against me has himself gone into bankruptcy; while Prescott's books, which were that man's property, have been crushed out of Boston, and a publisher in a distant city has bought them for what they were worth, while my history has gone to a third edition. It is not becoming me to rejoice over the fallen, or to sneer at "the Mutual Admiration Society of Boston." But I did think it cruel—when I was made a laughing stock in every corner of the Union by the *Atlantic's* false quotations from my book—for the whole literati of Boston to join in the hue and cry against me; and to see a Professor, even, descend from his chair to write what the law designates a libel, and that, too, against a witness for bearing undesired testimony. How different is such conduct from that of the noble-hearted Prescott. When I published a small volume of "adventures and researches in that country [Mexico,] during parts of the years 1851, '52, '53 and '54," he was the first one to congratulate me on my performance; and, when he learned that the publication of his letter would aid my publisher's sales, he generously consented, though, as he expressed it, the establishment of my theory would convert what he had "hitherto done into castles in Spain." Such was Prescott's disinterested love of truth. Yet he was a Bostonian. Other men have mourned in him the loss of a friend. But I have suffered more than they all by his death. I have lost a generous adversary; one who stood between me and the Ishmaelites. That his books are the most fabulous in our language is not his fault; for the means of testing the inaccuracy of his authorities did not exist when he wrote, and without evidence on the other side he was not authorized to reject them. But when I brought to light a higher grade of evidence, he was the first to admit its force. He even suggested the ground on which my history rests when he wrote—"Your strong ground, therefore, must consist in the contradiction afforded by present appearances, to the statements of the conquerors."

Yours, truly,

R. A. WILSON.

[N. B.—I omitted to state, in my reply, that in a country where few can write an "autograph MS.," is one that bears the autograph scrawl, or *rubrica*, of its alleged author; and a forged MS. is one that has a spurious rubrica.]

2d. The transfer of the Prescott books to a Philadelphia house, extensively engaged in the Southern trade, would have the effect of increasing, at first, the sales. Priest Santillan's factitious *claim* to the mission lands of San Francisco, found a ready market in Philadelphia; and the smallest shareholder in that stupendous fraud stoutly insisted on the genuineness of his "authorities," until a judgment of the highest tribunal in the land burst the bubble. Can it be expected that the purchasers or sellers of Prescott's books will readily credit the evidence of the forged and factitious character of his authorities? R. A. W.]

Dansville, N. Y., Feb., 1861.

"Boston, Dec. 8th, 1855.

"MY DEAR SIR:—I am very much obliged to you for your new work on Mexico and its Religion. In an unpretending form it contains a good deal of matter quite original. That portion of the work relating to the exaggerations of the early conquerors, is particularly deserving of attention by the student of our early North American annals. You have dealt with a bold hand, stripping off the fine robe of romance, and in some cases, indeed, the flesh beneath it—reducing it to an unsightly skeleton. The skeleton, however, may be nearer the truth; but yet it will be hard to prove it. There does not appear to be much inconsistency in the various testimony of the old chroniclers. Your strong ground, therefore, must consist in the contradiction afforded by present appearances, to the statements of the conquerors. However, this is a subject which I shall examine more at leisure—having been able, from pressing avocations of late, to take only a superficial glance at your volume.

"Repeating my thanks for your favor, I remain, dear sir,

"Very sincerely yours,

WM. H. PRESCOTT.

"To R. A. WILSON, Esq., Rochester, N. Y."

"BOSTON, Dec. 14.

"MY DEAR SIR:—What I wrote to you was honestly said, and if it can be of any service to you to publish it, you are at perfect liberty to do so. I am sorry, but not surprised—since it is your first publication—that the book should not meet, at once, with an extensive sale. *Pazienza*, as the Italians say, is the only resource when a new book comes into the world.

"Hoping that good times are in store for it, I remain,

"Very truly yours,

WM. H. PRESCOTT.

"To R. A. WILSON, Esq., Rochester, N. Y."

"BOSTON, March 11, 1857.

"DEAR SIR:—I have had the pleasure of receiving your note of the 9th inst., enclosing the preface to the new edition of your work. I am very sorry to learn that your health is so delicate as to make it necessary for you to make another excursion to the South. I should think that in Peru you must find the favorable climate that you want.

"From your preface, as well as your note, I see you are making clean work of the Aztec civilization. If you do as much with the Peruvian, there will be little left to stand on upon this continent but a myth.

"I don't see why you should hesitate in regard to the prosecution of your labors, when a third edition shows them to have been so favorably received by our countrymen. Truth is mighty, and will prevail; and if you can furnish the means of arriving at it in this fair historical question, you are certainly bound to do so. If I should not become a convert to your views, it would not be strange, considering that I have been so long accustomed to look only on one side of the matter; and that your theory, moreover, if established, would convert what I have hitherto done into mere *chateaux en Espagne*.

"With my sincere wishes for your restoration to health, and that you may be enabled to prosecute your interesting researches,

"I remain, dear sir, very truly yours,

"WM. H. PRESCOTT.

"To R. A. WILSON, Esq., Rochester, N. Y."

[The above letters are all in the hand-writing of the same secretary, though they exactly contradict statements of the *Atlantic Monthly*.]









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