

# *Revolution and Renewal in Prescott's The Conquest of Peru*

Thomas S. Gladsky

UNLIKE HIS CONTEMPORARY James Fenimore Cooper, with whom he shared conservative social and political ideas, William Hickling Prescott (1796–1859) was relatively silent about those changes in American life that Cooper was criticizing in his novels, letters, and treatises of the 1830s. In fact, even when Prescott did comment, he praised the progress and blessings of the nation. For example, in 1831 he described the American and French revolutions as manifestations of God's guidance. Tempests like these, he wrote, are divinely inspired, "occasionally sent to clear the moral atmosphere, and renovate the face of society."<sup>1</sup> The arrival of the first British steamer in Boston harbor prompted him to say: "This is the go-ahead age certainly and the genius of our own people and institutions is remarkably well suited to that of the times."<sup>2</sup> Even as late as the writing of *The Conquest of Mexico* (1843), Prescott still had high praise for the American experiment.

But even then Prescott made it clear that he was at times "confounded and uncomfortable" with the direction of American life. This discomfort rapidly increased in the 1840s. The Harrison-Tyler administration provoked him to complain that "the Presidency had never reached so low a degradation."<sup>3</sup> By 1841 his enthusiasm for the spirit of revolution had so eroded that he could only cautiously state

that "revolutions in society . . . must be the slow work of time."<sup>4</sup> With the 1844 election of Polk, Prescott's hopes were again dashed. The leadership of the aristocracy, it seemed to him, had given way to mediocrity elected by a new majority. Of this, Prescott could only say that the millions sinned "more from ignorance than design. The design is in the knaves that duped them."<sup>5</sup> By 1845 Prescott was worrying about "our constitutional rights" and criticizing the annexation of Texas, which he labeled as "empire craving," "in contempt of constitutional law," "the most serious shock yet given to the stability of our glorious institutions."<sup>6</sup> At this time Prescott also began to fear for the preservation of the Union, a concern that echoes through his writings up to his death. The result of Prescott's increasingly critical view of the United States is that ultimately he could not resist the temptation to shape his history with an eye toward contemporary events.

Thus *The Conquest of Peru*, written in the mid-1840s, is quite different from its predecessors, *The History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella the Catholic* (1838) and *The Conquest of Mexico* (1843). In the broadest sense, *The Conquest of Peru* (1847) offers an analogy of sorts between sixteenth-century Spain and nineteenth-century America, where, as Jonathan Daniels observes, "the expansive concepts

of God, glory, and gold were inseparable and indivisible.”<sup>7</sup> In particular, Prescott’s history is influenced in part by his growing dissatisfaction with the social and political climate; by his fear of disorder, anarchy, and revolution; and by his desire to maintain an ordered, rational society, governed, like Cooper’s, by natural aristocrats.

At various times, for example, Prescott interrupts his narrative of *The Conquest* to offer comparisons between Incan and American society, often unfavorable to the United States. Describing the Inca’s perpetual crusade against the infidel to “impart to them the blessings of a well regulated government,” Prescott, alluding to manifest destiny, quickly compares this practice with that of his own country, sarcastically writing that “this, in the favorite phrase of our day, was the ‘mission of the Inca.’”<sup>8</sup> Of the legal system, Prescott says, “the law was simple, its application easy; and where the judge was honest, the case was as likely to be determined correctly on the first hearing as on the second” (pp. 55-56). Prescott compares this with the inextricable web of American jurisprudence, where “the complex and embarrassing litigation of a modern tribunal ‘stultified constitutional intent.’” At another time, Prescott draws attention to American economic and financial policies by praising at great length the Peruvian fiscal system, which was “the most remarkable feature in the Peruvian policy.” For his readers, many of whom would have been charged with the emotions of the New York Anti-Rent War, Prescott reviews the Incan land-holding system. He concludes that the Indians (unlike certain of his countrymen) labored “under the influence of that love of order and aversion to change . . . attached themselves to the soil, made improvements,” and became by deed “proprietors for life” (p. 58). Although Prescott is careful not to mention the New York affair directly, his appraisal could hardly have gone unnoticed by certain of his readers, especially since his position essentially resembles that taken by Cooper in the Littlepage

trilogy and even more especially since the Van Rensselaers, in the eye of the antirent storm, were among Prescott’s closest friends. As Prescott ends his introduction to Incan civilization, he provides an extended comparison of the systems. Quite naturally, Prescott chooses “our own free republic . . . where, in short, the government is made for Man.” More important for our purposes is the warning that Prescott offers. The experiment that is to solve the problem of man’s capacity for self-government is still in process; he says: “Alas for humanity, if it should fail” (p. 139).

Although these references are perhaps enough to show that Prescott was consciously drawing parallels between sixteenth-century Peru and nineteenth-century America, his response to his own times was more effectively presented through his art. Unwilling or unable to alter the formula that had proved so successful in his earlier works, Prescott retained the five-book format, viewed events through the eyes of the Spanish, and once again employed the literary devices of romantic art. By the middle of the work, however, the Incan empire has fallen, and soon after Prescott shifts his interest from the Pizarros to Pedro de la Gasca, an ecclesiastic sent by Philip II to represent the Crown. Given these differences, it is apparent that Prescott, even as he indicates in the preface,<sup>9</sup> had something else in mind during the writing of *The Conquest of Peru*.

As he had done in *Mexico*, Prescott begins with an overview of Indian civilization; but his design produces a secondary effect. For over a hundred pages, he records numerous examples of a stable, mathematically ordered, almost Edenic society. He praises its “logical” system for training future leaders, the regular survey of the resources of the empire, the system of distribution, the construction of highways, the “order in their military organization as in all things, and the efficiency of assigning work to those best qualified to execute it.” Prescott reinforces this seemingly utopian social

system with an equally Edenic portrait of the landscape. "Everywhere," he writes, "the land teemed with evidence of agricultural wealth, from the smiling valleys along the coast to the terraced steeps of the Sierra, which glowed with all the splendors of tropical vegetation" (p. 116). On the surface, Peru is the South American equivalent of the New World paradise hailed by American writers from John Smith to Cooper. In reality, Peru's garden was flawed by the tyranny, barbarity, and pagan practices of the Incas. Nonetheless, the simplicity and order of the Incan society and the pristine landscape provided an analogy with an earlier, purer North America as it had been presented in American romantic art.

Representing a second social and political stage in Peru's history, Pizarro and his band single-mindedly turned order into chaos, and books 2, 3, and 4 illustrate the consequences of ineffective leadership and anarchy. Prescott's catalogue of acts of avarice, ignorance, barbarity, and tyranny speaks for itself. More important is Prescott's association of these actions with revolution. On one occasion, Prescott explains that "the country . . . was in that state in which the old things are passing away and the new order of things has not yet been established. It was in a state of revolution" (p. 138). More to the point, he observes that revolution is a punishment, a sentence of sorts for crimes committed. To underscore this contention, he calls upon the reader to recall the pre-conquest Peru earlier described and concludes that "the paradise was converted into a desert" (p. 145). Later, in his letters and essays, he would condemn the European revolutions of 1848 and express his fear of the awesome consequences to the Union were the southern states to secede. Thus Prescott's description of revolution in Peru must be viewed in the context of these comments as well as his earlier enthusiastic support for the French and the American revolutions.

Prescott's broad analogy between Peruvian and American history is further developed in his portrayal of Pizarro, a far

different protagonist from the hero of *The Conquest of Mexico*. When he compares the two, Prescott makes his preference clear. "We have no means," he complains, "of knowing his [Pizarro's] intentions . . .; unfortunately he could not write, and he has left no record, like the estimable *Commentaries of Cortes*, to enlighten us as to his motives" (p. 267). Pressed by convention, Prescott tries at times to present his protagonist as a kind of Ferdinand and Cortes, a heroic ideal; but more frequently he is described as merely the head of the band of ruffians led by "an illiterate and cruel commander."

Donald Darnell is correct in pointing out that history in this case caused certain problems for Prescott<sup>10</sup>; that is, the personal qualities of Pizarro prevented Prescott from presenting him as an epic hero. But it is also true that Prescott did little artistically to embellish his protagonist with the romantic qualities he had ascribed to Ferdinand and Cortes. Actually history in this particular case was on Prescott's side. Times had changed and so had Prescott. New leaders like Harrison, Tyler, and Polk guided American policy. As they represented to Prescott the decline of the role of the natural aristocrat, so too Pizarro does in the history of Spain in the New World. For someone like Prescott, conscious of his role in society, the importance of family, and the place of breeding and education, Pizarro must have resembled in some ways the kind of leaders that Prescott had been criticizing. Like his American counterparts of the 1840s, Pizarro had neither breeding nor greatness. Prescott makes much of this. At every opportunity, he emphasizes Pizarro's lack of education, breeding, family. Prescott introduces him by telling us that "he was an illegitimate child . . . left as a foundling . . . taught neither to read nor write and his principal occupation was that of a swine herd" (p. 160). He characterizes him further as an "outcast, without home or shelter, a father to own him, or a friend to lean upon" (p. 233). Prescott indicts Pizarro's character most severely in a letter to a friend: "Pick

us some family arms of the Pizarros for an ornament to my next volumes. They were I fear such unmitigated ruffians that they should have no arms but a butcher's cleaver."<sup>11</sup>

True to his own background, Prescott in book 4 offers a Brahmin alternative to the ineffective Pizarro, to political disorder and to social deterioration in Peru, and by extension, to America at mid-century. With Pizarro dead, the Incas defeated, the country torn by revolution, and Paradise apparently lost, Prescott turns to renewal and restoration, the re-creation of an ordered, stable society led this time by a natural aristocrat, Pedro de la Gasca, who had been appointed by the Spanish king as the new administrator for Peru. As Prescott contrasts the person of Gasca and his achievements with the character of Pizarro and his exploits, the history achieves a structural symmetry. Thematically, he at the same time provides a symbolic return to those principles cherished most by the Brahmin class and the Prescott circle specifically. The result is that Prescott politicizes history, redefines his notion of progress, and implies that the task of the historian is to rediscover the natural order in the universe and to present and construct social models that reflect that order.

Typically, Prescott's method was to use symbolic characters. For example, Cortes is Spain and Montezuma is Mexico.<sup>12</sup> Prescott does the same in *Peru* except that this time the focus is on the two Spaniards, Pizarro and Gasca. This contrast allows Prescott to make an even broader statement on the quality of leadership in the 1800s. An aristocrat in the mold of Washington, Adams, and other Federalists admired by Prescott, Gasca is everything that Pizarro is not. From an ancient and noble lineage, erudite, suave, perceptive, humble, of the highest moral integrity, Gasca reminds Prescott of George Washington. Both men, Prescott notes, were "so wonderfully adapted to the peculiar crisis in which they appeared that they seem to have been especially designed for it by Providence (p. 325, II). Whereas

Pizarro, for example, resorted to force, trickery, and threat, Gasca appealed to reason, patience, morality. Prescott strikes at the major difference when he describes Gasca's victory over the Pizarros as a triumph of moral over brute force. Whereas the Pizarros brought disorder to a peaceful kingdom, Gasca restored order and thus provided the only kind of progress that is permanent and true. Describing the achievement of Gasca, Prescott writes, "It was the triumph of order, the best homage to law and justice" (p. 301, II). Book 5 is therefore primarily concerned with the restoration of stability to a society in turmoil.

Part of a tradition of public service, Gasca immediately dedicated himself to the improvement of the country. After suppressing the revolution, he proposed a uniform system of taxation, improved the natives' conditions, abolished slavery, made municipal reforms, redistributed the wealth, restored integrity to the government, punished wickedness, rewarded loyalty and virtue. So effective was Gasca that "when he landed he found the colony in a state of anarchy." When he left, "the country was now in a state of tranquillity" (pp. 318-19, II). As a final tribute to Gasca and as a clarification of his own conviction, Prescott praises "the slow insensible manner in which Nature works out her great changes in the material world, that are to endure when the ravages of the hurricane are passed away and forgotten" (p. 326, II). Nature is a healing force, and Gasca, nature's agent, imitated nature's pattern. Prescott thus ends his history with a redefinition of progress and a reaffirmation of Brahmin social and political values. Progress is no longer synonymous with the go-ahead age he had celebrated years earlier, nor is it merely the inexorable movement of Christianity and democracy westward, the theme of *The Conquest of Mexico*.

As *The Conquest of Peru* shows, Prescott, by the mid-1840s, had altered somewhat the traditional themes he had employed in earlier works. Surfacing in *Peru* are Prescott's Brahmin conservatism,

his irritation with contemporary events, and his continuing reappraisal of the American experiment. All of this influences the structure, theme, and direction of *Peru*. Revolution and anarchy can never be progress, Prescott says. Disorder, mobocracy, ineffective leadership can never serve the interests of a country. Prescott's history provides the

same kind of warning, but with a greater faith in the possibility of renewal, that Cooper offered in his political novels. Thus, *The Conquest of Peru*, like all great works, is at least two histories, perhaps three if we see, as we might, the kind of analogy it provides with our times that Prescott saw with his own.

<sup>1</sup>"English Literature of the Nineteenth Century," *North American Review*, 35 (July 1832); rpt. in William Charvat and Michael Kraus, *William Hickling Prescott* (New York, 1943), p. 403. <sup>2</sup>Cited in C. Harvey Gardiner, *William Hickling Prescott: A Biography* (Austin, Tex., 1969), p. 172. <sup>3</sup>*The Correspondence of William Hickling Prescott*, ed. Roger Wolcott (Boston, 1925), p. 500. <sup>4</sup>"Bancroft's *United States*," *North American Review*, 42 (January 1841); rpt. in Charvat and Kraus, p. 455. <sup>5</sup>*Correspondence*, p. 513. <sup>6</sup>"Bancroft's *United States*," p. 455. <sup>7</sup>*Prince of Carpetbaggers* (Philadelphia, 1958), p. 30. <sup>8</sup>*History of the Conquest of Peru* (New York,

n.d.), p. 81. All subsequent references will be to this edition. <sup>9</sup>The action "terminates long before the close of the narrative," he complains. The reader must fix his eye on a remoter point, the supremacy of the Crown. "How far this has been effected must be left to the judgment of the reader" (p. 9). <sup>10</sup>Darnell makes this point in determining that "history itself precluded the possibility of *Peru* being an epic." *William Hickling Prescott* (Boston, 1975), p. 87. <sup>11</sup>*Correspondence*, p. 448. <sup>12</sup>Donald Ringe, "The Artistry of Prescott's *The Conquest of Mexico*," *New England Quarterly*, 26 (1953), 463.