

A Hero for the Americas: The Legend of Gonzalo Guerrero

Robert Calder

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The story of Gonzalo Guerrero has long been part history and part legend, with the sixteenth-century sailor treated as a hero or villain depending on who's telling the tale. In *A Hero for the Americas*, Robert Calder tries to put Guerrero in his proper historical context, contrasting him with his contemporaries and examining his presumed role as the father of the first mestizos and a key symbol of Mexico's past.

In 1512, Guerrero was among a group of Spaniards who shipwrecked on Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, only to be taken prisoner by the local Mayans, who sacrificed some of the Spaniards and enslaved others. Only Guerrero and shipmate Jeronimo de Aguilar were ever heard from by their countrymen again, and Calder does an expert job positioning these two men as opposite sides of the same coin.

When conquistador Hernan Cortes began his conquest at Cozumel, he met Aguilar, who told the story of the sailors' capture, and—having lived as a captive among the Mayans—became a key translator for Cortes during the takeover of the Aztec empire. But when Aguilar sought out Guerrero and tried to convince him to join the Spanish cause, the latter chose to remain among the Mayans.

Now a free man, he had married a Mayan woman, fathered children, and changed his physical appearance to fit in with his new family. And he has long been rumored to play a key role in helping the Mayans hold off Spanish invaders, helping to save them from the fate of the Aztecs.

Using primary sources from the time and the analysis of later writers, Calder offers several reasonable explanations for Guerrero's choices, avoiding the easy hero/villain narrative. He also does an excellent job describing the era of Spanish exploration of the new world, both the excitement that would have enticed Guerrero to sail to Mexico and the harsh consequences of that exploration for the Mayans and others. *A Hero for the Americas* is a strong portrait of both the man and his era, and a worthy biography.

JEFF FLEISCHER (November/December 2017)

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