

Taino: A Novel

Jose Barreiro

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“Don Christopherens was a man who came alive on a ship. A thing to behold was his certainty of signal from wave and wind and cloud,” writes Diego Colon, a Taino native who as a boy accompanied Christopher Columbus as interpreter during his voyages of discovery. The great Admiral of the Ocean Sea, however, as Diego laments bitterly in this his presumed memoirs, was also “an arrogant man that renamed the world at will, changing the nature of everything, mixing what was ours with what was to be theirs.”

Jose Barreiro has taken the historical Diego and made him the author of a memoir written four decades after the Spanish arrival in the New World. Barreiro takes the oft-chosen course of pretending to have discovered and transcribed a tattered old manuscript, but to his credit *Taino* feels very authentic in its details if not in its language. If indeed a translation of the journals of an educated sixteenth-century Caribbean native turned friar, it is a very modern one, devoid of the flowery language of the age.

Allegedly written during a native uprising on Hispaniola, Diego's diary is an indictment of the Spanish, who, “as a people,” he writes angrily, “have been very cruel.” A supposed protégé of Father Bartolome de Las Casas, the chief defender of the rights of the “Indians,” Barreiro's protagonist is learned, literate, and filled with lamentation for what he and his people have lost. That he truly loved Columbus and admired and was befriended by the admiral, Father de Las Casas, and many other Spaniards only makes what Diego pens feel the more authentic. As the narrator admits, after having met Columbus on the beach at the explorer's first landfall in the islands, “I captured my own self that day, choosing to cast my lot with the Castilians. It was the last free decision of my life.”

Barreiro's book is historical fiction, but it is good, solid history and one where even the fictional parts ring true. While not the first to decry the evils of the Spanish empire (de las Casas gets that honor) nor the last, Barreiro does so from the perspective of the conquered, colonized, and forcibly Christianized Caribbean people.

While a justifiable indictment of the Conquistadors (there is a marvelous scene with Francisco Pizzaro in Peru that sums them up beautifully and chillingly), it is also a story of not just what they took but what was lost. Diego (or Guaikan, as he was named by his Taino parents) writes of his “pondering people” and the spirituality of their culture of which so little even in his time remains. Resigned to the inevitable, Diego tries to make peace between the Spanish and the rebel tribes, if only to preserve some small portion of his people and their heritage.

Sharply and lovingly written, and filled with philosophical insights and emotional musings from a life in a world turned upside down, *Taino* is an engrossing, illuminating, and heartbreaking look at the world of the conquered, a world that all but disappeared in the space of a single lifetime. “The wounds of these forty years,” the author's narrator sighs in his journal, “cut deep into my heart and so will mostly these pages.”

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (November 20, 2012)

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