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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

Inga Clendinnen has written a definitive guide to the Aztecs that attempts to view this somewhat enigmatic peoples in a manner that doesn't attempt to classify the ritualistic society that emerged from the Mexica Empire, but rather understand the roles of each social strata within the microcosm. There is an inevitable tendency to look at the religious perspective, focusing acutely on the human sacrifice and also on the Spanish conquest but the author shifts away (whilst having an opinion on the role of the victim) from these well-trodden paths to discussing the greater mores and individual experiences of the society. There is an extremely interesting chapter discussing the roles of wives, in particular the ascribing of fertility and maternal aspects and the circumscribing of any 'political' role. This, in turn, leads to a further discussion on the role of the mother and the 'growing' eidetism that permeates cultural perception. The text concludes with a brief chapter on the final destruction of Tenochtitlan rounding off a work that brilliantly analyses Aztec ceremony and the individual's place within this society at the end of an Empire.

A lot of books are available about Precolumbian civilizations, especially mesoamerican; Aztecs and Mayas are the most learned of all. BUT, we read always the same informations for a long time. Inga CLENDINNEN gives us "An Interpretation" : what kind of civilization has risen on the plateau of Mexico-Tenochtitlan ? How to explain Aztecs's power in a region where so many people had developed cities and values such as Olmecs (in TEOTIHUACAN) or Toltecs (in TULA) ? We discover first the City and its meaning. Then, we enter the mentality of the peoples who entertain LIFE by their Death (the Victims), their Work (Warriors, Priests, Merchant) or their personal place in the society (Males, Wives, Mothers). Third, we enter the Sacred and we begin to understand how the Rituals may consolidate the society with the Fear of others... before being the plea of a revolt of vassal populations. AZTECS were strong by their military organization but weak by their believes : an entire world fearing the sun could not been able to born another day, organizing war to provide their temples with victims to their Gods, such a world had to find its limits. When the Spaniards came with their "magic"... Aztecs resist, but only two years. The Death of the Empire is to find in its structures self. The same, with other contexts, explains the fall of the Ancient Indian Worlds, facing the Spaniards, the French or the Englishmen. Understanding how to be strong meant to become weak, for Native Americans old civilizations, may permit the Renaissance of New Indian worlds; but here, I go beyond the Interpretation of the Author. The Book tells us how to enter in Aztecs Civilization Construction, as we visit an Architecture, a Mecanism... Thanks to Inga CLENDINNEN for this initiation (please, excuse the bad english of a natural french writer).

There is really no other book quite like this on the subject. To get into it, you should have already read a book about everyday Aztec life (Soustelle or Bray for example), and have a basic knowledge of the Aztec gods, who Montezuma II was, and about the Spanish conquest. If you now know the basic facts, Clendinnen's book will make the ancient city of Mexico come to life. She doesn't explain so much what the Aztecs did and said, but why. Human sacrifice, ceremonial cannibalism, a macabre pantheon- these alien aesthetics are given a human face. We begin to see the local young warrior carrying the same small-time glamor around his neighborhood as a high school quarterback. Refreshingly, as much ink is spilled over women and children as men. Certain insights of hers are unforgettable (e.g., unlike British boarding schools, Aztecs had no use for the gentlemanly loser, winning was all.) Her writing is above a high school level, but is generally clear and direct. If you know who Tezcatlipoca and Malinche are, you will love this book. If not, come back to it when you do, to take it to the next level.

"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.

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