

3 Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566)

Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies (extracts)

The following extracts (preliminaries, first five chapters, and epilogue), are taken from the first edition, *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (Sevilla: Sebastián Trugillo, 1552), of which John Rylands Library has one of only two copies in this country. *Brevísima relación* was accompanied by seven other texts by Las Casas; it was reprinted many times, and translated into many languages by Protestant polemicists concerned to blacken the name of Spain. The *Argument*, which tells why Las Casas decided to 'have it printed', was added by the printer or an editor.

Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies, Collected by Bishop Don Brother Bartolomé de Las Casas or Casaus, of the Order of St Dominic, 1552

Argument of the present epitome

All the things that have happened in the Indies since their marvellous discovery and the first arrival there of Spaniards who went to stay for a time, and later in their progress down to the present day, have been in every way so extraordinary and unbelievable to anyone who did not see them at first hand that it seems to have clouded over and imposed silence, and sufficient to wipe out the memory of those, no matter how heroic, ever seen or heard in the world in the past centuries. Among them are the massacres and ruins of innocent peoples and depopulations of towns, provinces, and kingdoms which have been perpetrated there, and all the others no less horrific.

While relating the former and the latter to various people who did not know of them, the bishop Don Brother Bartolomé de Las Casas or Casaus, at the time when he came to the Spanish court after becoming a friar to give an account to our lord Emperor as a well-informed eye-witness of all of them, and because his relation of them caused in his listeners a kind of mental fit or faint, was importunately begged to briefly write down a few of the most recent of them. He did so; and some years later, observing that many of the unfeeling men whom greed and ambition have robbed of all humanity and whose wicked deeds have dragged them into reprobate ways,¹ not content with the treacheries and wicked deeds they have committed in wiping out the inhabitants of that world with refined forms of cruelty, began pestering the king for permission and authority to commit them again or others still worse (if worse were possible), he agreed to present this summary of what he wrote about this matter to our lord the prince, so that His Highness would make sure that they should be refused. And it seemed to him suitable to have it printed so that His Highness would read it more easily. And this is the explanation of the following epitome or very brief account.

Prologue of Bishop Brother Bartolomé de Las Casas, or Casaus, to the most high and most mighty Prince of Spain, our Lord the Prince Philip

Most high and most mighty Lord,

Since Divine Providence has ordained in this world that, for the management and common utility of the human race, in all kingdoms and peoples kings should be set up as fathers and shepherds (so Homer calls them), and accordingly that they should be the noblest and most well-born members of their commonwealths, there is no doubt, nor could there in all reason be any doubt, that these kings entertain nothing save that which is morally unimpeachable. It follows that if the commonwealth suffers from some defect or damage² or evil, the reason can only be that the ruler is unaware of it; once the matter is brought to his notice he will work with the utmost diligence to set matters right and will not rest content until the evil has been eradicated. This seems to be the meaning of Holy Scripture in the Proverbs of Solomon: *Rex*

¹ Romans 1:28 'And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind.' The same phrase is used twice in Las Casas's own text (*A Short Account*, trans. Griffin, 69 and 74), from whence the publisher must have taken it.

² The Spanish word is *nocmentos*, a learned Latinism, like many explained in the notes below.

*qui sedet in solio iudicat, dissipat omne malum intuitu suo.*³ For the innate and natural virtue of the ruler leads one to suppose this; namely, that the simple knowledge that something is wrong in his kingdom is very sufficient to ensure that he will see that it is corrected and that not even for a moment, as far as he is able, will he tolerate it.

And so, as I contemplate (most mighty lord) the evils and damages, loss and waste, whose equal or like it would never have been imagined possible for men to commit, of such great and numerous kingdoms, or rather of that most vast new world of the Indies – granted and entrusted by God and His Church to the Spanish Crown so that they might be ruled, governed, and converted in worldly and spiritual prosperity –⁴ as a man with more than fifty years' experience of seeing at first hand the evil and the harm, I consider that, if your Highness were informed of a few individual deeds, you would not be able to contain yourself from entreating His Majesty with urgent insistence not to grant or permit those which these tyrants who invented, carried out, and perpetrated them call 'conquests', and which, if they are given licence to do so, will be committed again; and since they are of themselves, when committed against these peace-loving, humble and docile Indian peoples who hurt nobody, iniquitous, tyrannical, and condemned, detested and damned by all natural, divine, and human law, I decided, so as not to be guilty by remaining silent, to publish just a very few of the infinite losses of souls and lives perpetrated by these men which I have lately collected from innumerable true cases which I could tell, so that your Highness can read them more easily.

And although your Highness's tutor the archbishop of Toledo,⁵ then bishop of Cartagena, asked me for them and presented them to your Highness, nevertheless because of the long journeys by land and sea your Highness has undertaken and the frequent royal business which you have had,⁶ it may have been that your Highness either never read them or has already forgotten them. Meanwhile, the bare-faced and irrational greed of those who hold it nothing to unjustly spill such immense quantities of human blood and depopulate those very great kingdoms of their native inhabitants and owners by killing 1,000 million⁷ of them, and to rob treasures beyond compare, grows by the hour as they importune by different means and various pretexts to be granted or given licence for the said conquests (which could not be granted to them without infringing natural and divine law, and therefore the gravest mortal sins, worthy of terrible and everlasting punishments). I held it fitting to serve your Highness with this very short summary of a very extensive history which could and should be composed about the outrages and losses which have happened.

I implore your Highness to accept it and to read it in that spirit of clemency and royal benevolence with which your Highness traditionally approaches the works of those of your Highness's subjects and servants whose only desire is to serve the public good and the interests of the Crown. It is my fervent hope that, once your Highness perceives the extent of the injustices suffered by these innocent peoples and the way in which they are being destroyed and crushed underfoot, unjustly and for no other reason than to satisfy the greed and ambition of those whose purpose it is to commit such wicked atrocities, your Highness will see fit to beg and entreat His Majesty to refuse all those who seek royal licence for such

³ Proverbs 20:8 'A king that sitteth in the throne of judgement scattereth away all evil with his eyes'.

⁴ This refers to Pope Alexander VI's Bulls of Donation of 1493, which gave Fernando and Isabel sovereignty over America in exchange for an obligation to convert their inhabitants to Christianity.

⁵ Juan Martínez Silíceo (1486–1557), bishop of Cartagena 1540, archbishop of Toledo 1546.

⁶ This probably refers to Philip's visit to the Netherlands in 1549, the last time he left Iberia.

⁷ Estimates of the pre-conquest Amerindian population are controversial. No one believes Las Casas's total of 1 billion mortalities; anti-Spanish opinion conjectures a population of 8 million for the Caribbean, and higher numbers for Mexico and the Inca empire. Archaeological and chronicle evidence and calculations based on the potential agricultural yield of the land make it probable the true figure was ca 500,000 in the Caribbean (which had dropped to ca 250,000–300,000 by the time Las Casas was writing, and almost zero by 1650), and perhaps 2 or 3 million in Mexico and Peru respectively; see David Henige, 'On the contact population of Hispaniola: history as higher mathematics', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 58 (1978), 217–37 (JSTOR).

evil and detestable ventures, and to put a stop once and for all to their infernal clamour in such a way that nobody will henceforth dare to make such a request nor even to mention ventures of this kind.⁸ This, your Royal Highness, is a matter on which action is both urgent and necessary if God is to continue to watch over the Crown of Castile and ensure its future well being and prosperity, both spiritual and temporal. Amen.

[Chapter 1: Preface]

The Indies were discovered in 1492. The Spanish Christians established settlements the following year, so that it is forty-nine years since Spaniards began arriving there in numbers.⁹ And the first land they entered as colonists was the large and most prosperous island of Hispaniola, which is 600 leagues in circumference.¹⁰ It is surrounded by other very large and infinite islands all around it, all of which we saw had as high a native population – that is, of Indians – as any inhabited land on earth. The mainland, which at its nearest point is just over 250 leagues from this island, has more than 10,000 leagues of coast so far discovered, and more are being discovered every day, all as full as a beehive with peoples in what has been discovered up to the year 1541, so it seems that God placed in these lands the whole mass or greater proportion of the whole human race.

All these universal and infinite peoples *a toto genero*¹¹ were created by God as the most simple, innocent of malice or guile, most obedient, most faithful to their native lords and to the Christians whom they serve; the most humble, most patient, most peaceful and quiet, without grudges or brawls, not quarrelsome, not fractious, with no rancours, no hatreds, no desire for revenge, to be found in the world. At the same time, they are among the least robust of human beings: their delicate constitutions make them unable to withstand hard work or suffering and render them liable to succumb to almost any illness, no matter how mild. Even the common people are no tougher than princes or than other Christians born with a silver spoon in their mouths and who spend their lives shielded from the rigours of the outside world. They are also among the poorest people on the face of the earth; they own next to nothing and have no urge to acquire material possessions. As a result they are neither ambitious nor greedy, and are totally uninterested in worldly power. Their diet is every bit as poor and as monotonous, in quantity and in kind, as that enjoyed by the Desert Fathers. Most of them go naked save for a loincloth to cover their modesty; at best they may wrap themselves in a piece of cotton material a yard or two square. Most sleep on matting, or at most sleep in sorts of hanging nets known in the language of Hispaniola as ‘hammocks’.¹²

They likewise have clean, unbiassed, and lively minds, very capable and receptive of all good doctrine, most suited to receive our holy Catholic faith and to be trained in virtuous customs; and the [peoples] with least impediments in this regard that God created on earth. And once they begin to get news of the things of the faith, they are so impatient to know them and to perform the sacraments of the Church and divine worship that, to tell the truth, the friars have to be endowed by God with a very exceptional gift of patience to put up with them. And finally, I have heard many Spanish laymen say time and again and for many years back, being unable to deny the goodness they see in them: ‘Surely these peoples were the most blessed on earth, if only they had known God!’

Upon these gentle lambs, , endowed with all the aforesaid qualities by their Maker and Creator, the Spaniards fell as soon as they knew them like most cruel wolves and tigers and lions ravaging with many days’ hunger; and in the ensuing 40 years up to today they have done, and still do even now, nothing else except cut them to pieces, murder them, distress

⁸ ‘Your Highness’ is the addressee, Prince Philip (later II); ‘His Majesty’ is his father Emperor Charles V (abdicated 1556).

⁹ *Very Brief Account* was written in 1542 (see *A Short Account*, trans. Griffin, Introduction, p. xv).

¹⁰ Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic) is ca 400 miles long and has an area of ca 30,000 square miles.

¹¹ Misprint for *a toto genere*, Latin ‘of every kind or race’.

¹² On the Taino word *hamacas* ‘hammocks’, which has since passed into modern European languages, cf. Columbus, *Diario del primer viaje* 17 October & n17.

them, afflict them, torture them, and destroy them by strange, new, varied, and never seen or read of or heard of manners of cruelty, of which a few will be told below, to such a degree that in the island of Hispaniola, where we saw over 3,000,000 souls, there are today not so many as 200 natives. The island of Cuba is almost as long as from Valladolid to Rome; today it is almost entirely depopulated.¹³ The island of San Juan¹⁴ and that of Jamaica, large, beautiful and fertile islands, have been similarly devastated. As for the islands of the Lucayos to the north of Hispaniola and Cuba,¹⁵ which are more than sixty in number including the so-called Giant Islands and others great and small, the worst of them being more fertile and more beautiful than the Huerta del Rey in Sevilla,¹⁶ and the healthiest land in the world, which once had more than 500,000 souls, not a single creature remains today. They killed them all by carrying them off in order to carry them to the island of Hispaniola, after they saw that the natives of the latter island were all used up. After going there in ships for three years to search out the survivors after they had been harvested, because one good Christian was moved by piety to convert and win over for Christ any they could find, only eleven individuals were found, as I saw for myself.¹⁷ More than thirty other islands in the region of Puerto Rico are now uninhabited and desolated by the same cause. All these islands, which together must be over 2000 leagues of land, are now deserted and empty of people.

On the great mainland we are certain that our Spaniards have through their cruelties and unspeakable wickedness depopulated and laid waste, making a present desert of lands once full of rational humans, more than ten kingdoms each larger than the whole of Spain, even if one includes Aragon and Portugal, and an extent of land twice the distance from Seville to Jerusalem, which is more than 2,000 leagues.

We will give as a very certain and true count that there have been unjustly and tyrannically killed in the said forty years by the said tyrannical and diabolical acts of the Christians more than 12,000,000 souls, men, women, and children; and, in truth, that I believe, without I think deceiving myself, that they are more than 15,000,000.

There are two general and principal methods which those who have travelled there pretending to be Christians have used to uproot and wipe from the face of the earth those miserable peoples: the first, by unjust, cruel, bloody, and tyrannical wars; the second, after they have killed all those who might have longed for or sighed for or dreamed of freedom or escaping the torment that they suffer, such as all the native lords and adult men (because in the wars they normally spare only women and children), by oppressing them with the hardest, most horrible, and harsh servitude that has ever been endured by men or beasts. To one or other of these two methods of infernal tyranny can be reduced and resolved and subordinated as subspecies all the other diverse and varied ways that have been devised for exterminating these peoples, which are infinite.

The reason the Christians have killed and destroyed so many and so good and such an infinite number of souls has been solely because their ultimate aim is gold and stuffing themselves with riches in the shortest possible time and rising to very high estates quite disproportionate to their persons; that is to say, because of their insatiable greed and ambition, which has been the greatest the world has ever been equal to, because those lands are so fertile and so rich and the people so humble, so patient, and so easy to oppress; for which peoples they have shown no more respect nor taken any more account or care of them (I speak with truth from what I know and have seen through all this time), I do not say than beasts (would to God they had treated them and cared for them as well as beasts), but as dung on the pavements, or less than dung. And they have taken the same care for their souls as their lives, so that all the said numbers and millions have died without faith, without the sacraments. And this is a very notorious and well-proven truth, which all, even the very

¹³ The length of Cuba is ca 700 miles; the distance from Valladolid to Rome, ca 750.

¹⁴ Puerto Rico.

¹⁵ The Bahamas (cf. Columbus, *Diario del primer viaje* 11 October & n7).

¹⁶ The *Huerta del Rey* or 'King's Garden' was an extensive pleasure-ground outside Sevilla.

¹⁷ The 'good Christian' was Pedro de Isla, who later became a Franciscan friar (*Historia de las Indias* II.45).

tyrants and murderers, know and confess: that the Indians in all the Indies never did any harm whatever to Christians, but on the contrary believed them to have come from the sky until they or their neighbours had first repeatedly suffered many evils, robberies, deaths, violence, and vexations at the hands of the Christians themselves.

2. *Of the island of Hispaniola*

On the island of Hispaniola, which was the first, as we said, where Christians came in and began the great slaughter and destruction of these peoples and which they first devastated and depopulated, as the Christians began taking women and children from the Indians to use them and abuse them and started to eat the fruits of their sweat and toil, not content with what the Indians offered them of their own will according to what each could afford (which is always little, since they tend not to keep more than what they normally need and can make without much labour, and what is enough for three households of ten persons each for a month a Christian will consume and destroy in one day), and the many other forced and violent exactions which they committed against them, the Indians began to realize that those men could not have come from the sky, and some began to hide their foodstuffs, others their women and children; others fled the hills to escape such a hard and terrible relationship. The Christians hit them, punched them, and beat them with sticks until they laid hands on the lords of the settlements. And all this came to such a point of brazen shamelessness that one Christian captain raped the wife of the greatest king and lord of the entire island.¹⁸

It was then that the Indians began to look for ways of driving the Christians out of their lands; they took up their weapons, which are feeble enough in inflicting or parrying blows and even less use for defence, so that all their wars are little more than our tilting or even children's games. The Christians with their horses and swords and lances now begin to inflict slaughter and extraordinary atrocities against them. They went into settlements and left no children, old men, or women, whether pregnant or just delivered of their babies, whose bellies they did not slice open or hack to pieces, as if they were attacking lambs penned in their sheepfolds. They laid wagers on who could split a man open with one slash or cut off his head with a pike or disembowel him. They took babies by the feet from their mothers' teats and threw them headlong on the rocks; others threw them over their shoulders into rivers, laughing and joking, and as they fell into the water shouted 'Swim, damn it!'. Other babies they put to the sword together with their mothers, and everyone else they found in their path. They erected tall gibbets, leaving their feet just off the ground, and then put firewood, set fire to it, and burned them alive thirteen at a time in honour of our Saviour and the twelve Apostles. Others they tied up and wrapped entirely in dry straw; then they lit it, burning them that way. Others, and all those they chose to capture alive, they cut off both their hands, took some to hang round their necks, and told them: 'Take a message' (meaning, take the news to the people hiding in the hills).

Normally they killed lords and nobles in the following way: they made some griddles consisting of bars resting on trestles, tied them to them, and then placed a slow fire underneath so that little by little, howling with agony in this torture, in a state of despair, their souls left them. Once I saw that, having four or five leaders and lords roasting on the grills (and I also think there were two or three pairs of grills where others were burning) and because they were howling so loudly that it was upsetting the captain or keeping him awake, he gave orders for them to be strangled; and the sergeant who was burning them, a man worse than any hangman (I know what he was called and even met his relatives in Seville), not wanting to strangle them, put wooden bungs into their mouths with his own hands to stop them making a noise and then stoked the fire under them until they roasted slowly, as he wanted.

I saw all the things described above, and infinitely many others. And since all the people who could flee hid in the forests and went up into the mountains to escape these pitiless and inhuman men, these ferocious beasts, exterminators and mortal enemies of the human race, they trained and exercised hounds, the wildest of dogs, who would tear an Indian to pieces in a twinkling of an eye as soon as they saw him, and leaped on him and ate him better than

¹⁸ The reference is probably to Guarionex; see below, Ch3 & n22.

if he had been a pig. These dogs wrought great havoc and carnage.¹⁹ And because on some few rare occasions the Indians killed some Christians with just reason and holy justice, they made a law among themselves that for every Christian the Indians killed, the Christians would kill 100 Indians.

3. *The kingdoms which existed in Hispaniola*

On Hispaniola there were five main kingdoms, each very extensive and each with its own king; most of the infinite number of local nobles paid allegiance to one or other of these five powerful leaders, although there were a few backwoodsmen who recognized no authority above and beyond their own. One of these kingdoms was called Maguá, with the stress on the last syllable, which means Kingdom of the Plain.²⁰ This plain is one of the wonders of the world, extending, as it does, for some eighty leagues, right from the southern coast of the island to its northern shore. For the most part it is some five to eight leagues wide and as much as ten in places, and is confined by high mountains on either side. Over 30,000 streams and rivers flow into it, a dozen of them every bit as big as the Ebro, Duero, and Guadalquivir, and those that come down from the mountains to the west (and there are 20 or 25,000 of them) are rich in alluvial gold. Among those mountains lies the province of Cibao and its mines, famous throughout the region for their very high-quality gold.²¹ The king of Cibao was called Guarionex²² and he had as vassals several extremely powerful local leaders; one of them, for example, had 16,000 men under arms and these he placed at the service of Guarionex. I met some of these men myself. The king himself was dutiful and virtuous, a man of placid temperament much devoted to the King and Queen of Spain. For a number of years, every householder throughout his realm made, on his orders, an annual gift of a hollow gourd completely filled with gold. The natives of Hispaniola know little of mining techniques and later, when there was less gold available, the king reduced this offering to half a gourd filled with gold. In order to put a stop to the Spaniards' incessant demands for gold, Guarionex suggested that he might better serve the King of Castile by putting a great area of his kingdom under cultivation, especially as his subjects had, as he himself quite correctly asserted, little or no notion of how to mine for gold. Such a plan was feasible, as I can vouch, and the king would have been quite happy to see it put into effect. The area involved would have stretched from Isabela, the site of the first Christian settlement on the island, as far as Santo Domingo, some fifty or more leagues distant, and it would easily have produced an annual income of over three million *castellanos*²³ and, had such a scheme been put into effect, it would have led to the establishment of fifty or more cities on the island, every one of them as large as Seville.²⁴

The wicked Christian commanders rewarded this good and great man by dishonouring him when one of their number²⁵ took and raped his wife. To this the king could easily have reacted by biding his time and gathering an army to exact revenge, but he elected instead to abdicate and go into voluntary exile, alone, to an area called Ciguayos, where the powerful

¹⁹ These dogs, here called *lebreles* 'greyhounds' and elsewhere *perros bravos* 'wild dogs' (e.g. end of **Ch4**), were probably *mastines*, Spanish mastiffs, which proved one of the conquistadors' most feared weapons. The only dogs known to the indigenous inhabitants of the Antilles were the ancestors of the small and edible modern chihuahua.

²⁰ See Las Casas, *History of the Indies* III.1.

²¹ Cf. Columbus, *Diary of the First Voyage* n13, 47, which identifies Cibao as Chipangu; *History of the Indies* I.60.

²² In Las Casas's account – the only one we have – Guarionex was one of four kings on the island, the others being Caonabó, Behechio, and Higuanama. All were drowned with Francisco Bobadilla and Francisco Roldán in the storm of 1502 (n25, below; *History of the Indies* II.5). A different and far less sympathetic account of Guarionex is given by Fray Ramón Pané, who learned Taino and spent two years living with him, in his *Relación acerca de las antigüedades de los indios* (1496–98), the first ethnographical account of Amerindian culture and religion.

²³ The *castellano* was a gold coin worth ca 480 *maravedís* and weighing 45.4g.

²⁴ The population of Seville has been estimated at 60–70,000 in 1500 and ca 100,000 in 1565.

²⁵ Francisco Roldán, originally a companion of Columbus (*History of the Indies* I.118).

local leader was one of his vassals.²⁶ Once the Christians realized he had gone, there was no chance of keeping his whereabouts secret, and they got up an army and attacked the local leader under whose protection the king was sheltering. The carnage was terrible and, eventually, they tracked down the fugitive, took him prisoner, put him in chains and shackles and bundled him on to a ship bound for Castile. The ship was lost at sea, and with him were drowned many Christians and a fortune in gold, among which perished the Great Nugget, which was as big as a loaf of bread and weighed 3,600 *castellanos*, so that God might take vengeance on such great injustices.²⁷

Another of these original kingdoms occupied the northern end of the plain where the royal harbour is today. Known as Marién, it was a rich region, larger than Portugal, although a good deal more fertile and far better suited to human habitation, criss-crossed as it is by several mighty mountain ranges and seamed with productive gold and copper mines. The king of this area was called Guacanagarí, with the stress on the last syllable, and he numbered among his vassals many men of high standing, several of whom I knew personally.²⁸ This was the first place where the old Admiral who discovered the Indies landed; ²⁹ he was received the first time by the said Guacanagarí, when he discovered the island, with such great humanity and charity, as were all the Christians in his crew, and he gave them such soft and gracious welcome and help and provisions, when even the flagship in which the Admiral sailed was lost, that he could not have received better in his own country and from his parents. I know this from the account and words of the Admiral himself.³⁰ This king himself died up in the mountains, broken and destitute, after he had fled to escape the massacres and the cruelty inflicted by the Spaniards, and all the other local leaders who owed allegiance to Guacanagarí perished as a direct result of the despotism and slavery to which they were subjected and which I shall in due course set out in detail.

The third of these kingdoms was the sovereign state of Maguana, another strikingly beautiful and fertile area and one which enjoyed the healthiest of climates. It is this area that nowadays produces the best sugar on the whole island. The king, Caonabó, who outdid all others in strength, majesty of bearing and court ceremonial, was captured by an underhand trick and taken from his own house. He was put on board one of the Spanish ships bound for Castile; but the Almighty determined not to allow this act of duplicity and injustice to pass unnoticed and, that night, sent a violent storm in which all six of the ships, still in harbour and on the very point of setting sail, sank with the loss of all hands. Caonabó, shackled and chained as he was, perished along with them.³¹ He had three or four brothers, all of them as valorous and as brave as he was himself, and, when they saw how their brother and lord had unjustly been taken prisoner and learned of the devastation and the massacres the Christians had set in train in other parts of the island, they took up arms, determined, all the more so when they got wind of their brother's death, to attack the Christians and take revenge upon them. But the Christians, several of whom were on horseback (and the horse is the deadliest weapon imaginable against these people), attacked instead, slaughtering them to such effect that they destroyed and depopulated a good half of the kingdom.

²⁶ Cf. Columbus, *Diary of the First Voyage* 13 January & n54. The 'king' of the Ciguayos was Mayobanex (*History of the Indies* 1.120); below we are told that he was drowned in the same storms which drove Columbus off course during his fourth voyage in 1502 (*Account of the Fourth Voyage* n2; *History of the Indies* 1.123).

²⁷ *Hogaça*, 'loaf of bread', normally referred to a large round loaf weighing ca 1kg; 3,600 *castellanos* weighed ca 150kg (see *A Short Account*, trans. Griffin, Introduction, pp. xxxi-xxxii).

²⁸ On Guacanagari, whose story Las Casas tells in *History of the Indies* 1.57, see Columbus, *Diary of the First Voyage* 23 December & n46.

²⁹ That is, Christopher Columbus.

³⁰ For this episode, Columbus's founding of Navidad after the shipwreck of the flagship Santa María on Christmas Day 1492, see Columbus, *Diary of the First Voyage* 26 December & n48, to which source Las Casas here refers.

³¹ For the capture of Caonabó by Alfonso de Hojeda and his drowning in 1502 see Las Casas, *History of the Indies* 1.102 and Columbus, *Account of the Fourth Voyage* n2.

The fourth kingdom was known as Xaraguá, and was really the heart and core of the whole island. In no other part of the island was the language as refined as here nor the court discourse as cultivated; nowhere else were the people of such quality and breeding, the leading families as numerous and as liberal – and this kingdom boasted many nobles and great lords – nor the inhabitants as handsome and easy on the eye. Chief among them were the king, Behechio, and his sister, Anacaona, both of whom rendered great service to the Spanish Crown and gave every assistance to the Christian settlers, on occasion even saving their lives; after Behechio's death, Anacaona ruled in his stead.³² Over three hundred local dignitaries were summoned to welcome the then governor of the island when he paid a visit to the kingdom with sixty horse and a further three hundred men on foot (the horsemen alone were sufficient in number to ravage not only the whole island but the mainland as well). The governor duped the unsuspecting leaders of this welcoming party into gathering in a building made of straw and then ordered his men to set fire to it and burn them alive. All the others were massacred, either run through by lances or put to the sword. As a mark of respect and out of deference to her rank, Queen Anacaona was hanged. When one or two Spaniards tried to save some of the children, either because they genuinely pitied them or perhaps because they wanted them for themselves, and swung them up behind them on to their horses, one of their compatriots rode up behind and ran them through with his lance. Yet another member of the governor's party galloped about cutting the legs off all the children as they lay sprawling on the ground. The governor even decreed that those who made their way to a small island some eight leagues distant in order to escape this bestial cruelty should be condemned to slavery because they had fled the carnage.

The fifth kingdom was called Higuey, and its ruler was an old queen called Higuana.³³ Her they hung, and infinite were the people I saw burned alive and hacked to pieces and tortured by new and different methods of death and torture, and all those they took alive enslaved. And since there are so many details of what happened in these murders and destruction of those peoples that they could not fit in a large writing (because in truth I believe that however much I were to say, I cannot explain a thousandth part of it), all I wish to conclude with on the matter of the aforesaid wars is to say and affirm that in God and my conscience I hold it to be certain that the Indians never gave any more cause or had any more fault for committing all the said injustices and evils and the others that I omit and which I could tell, than a monastery of good and disciplined monks might have given or had for being robbed and killed and those who escaped death alive to be placed in perpetual captivity and a servitude akin to slavery. And I further affirm that, up to the time when all the multitudinous peoples of that island were dead and destroyed, as far as I can believe and conjecture, they did not commit against the Christians a single mortal sin of a kind punishable by men; and those which are reserved to God's punishment alone, such as the desire for vengeance, hatred, and rancour which those nations might have had against such capital enemies as the Christians were to them, these I believe occurred in very few individuals among the Indians, who were little more impetuous or hard-hearted, from the great experience I have of them, than children or boys of ten or twelve. And I know by certain and infallible knowledge that the Indians always made the most just war against the Christians, and the Christians never made even one single just one against the Indians; instead they were all diabolical and most unjust, more so than can be said of any tyrant in the world, and I affirm the same of every war they have made in all the Indies.

After the fighting was over and all the men had been killed, the surviving natives – usually, that is, the young boys, the women, and the children – were shared out between the victors. One got thirty, another forty, a third a hundred and two hundred, depending on the

³² The story of Queen Anacaona is told in *Historia de las Indias* II.9; the governor of Hispaniola mentioned below was Nicolás de Ovando (1451–1511), who reached Hispaniola in April 1502; Las Casas arrived in the same fleet, and it was from Ovando that he received his first Indian slaves (*A Short Account*, trans. Griffin, Introduction, p. xix-xx). Las Casas refrains from identifying individuals by name (*A Short Account*, trans. Griffin, Introduction, p. xl; there is an exception on 77 n 97).

³³ In *History of the Indies*, I.100 Las Casas refers to Higuana as 'king' (see n21, above), but in II.8 he calls her 'an old and great queen'.

favour which each obtained from the chief despot, whom they called 'governor'. Parcelled out to each Christian in this way, they were given under this pretext: that they should teach them the facts of the Catholic faith, all of them normally being illiterate laymen and cruel, very greedy, and vicious men, making them curates of souls.³⁴ And the curacy or care they took of them was to send the men to the mines to dig for gold, which is unbearable work, and putting the women in the ranches, which are farms, to till the fields and cultivate the land, work for the strongest and toughest men. Both women and men were given only wild grasses to eat and other unnutritious foodstuffs. The mothers of young children promptly saw their milk dry up and their babies die; and, with the women and the men separated and never seeing each other, no new children were born. The men died down the mines from overwork and starvation, and the same was true of the women who perished out on the ranches. The islanders, previously so numerous, began to die out as would any nation subjected to such appalling treatment. For example, they were made to carry burdens of three and four *arrobas* for distances of up to 100 or 200 leagues, and were forced to carry their Christian masters in 'hammocks', which are like nets slung from the shoulders of the bearers.³⁵ In short, they were treated as beasts of burden and developed huge sores on their shoulders and backs as happens with animals made to carry excessive loads. And this is not to mention the floggings, beatings, thrashings, punches, curses and countless other vexations and cruelties to which they were routinely subjected, so that in truth much time and paper would be insufficient to tell of it and it would be enough to shock mankind.

And it is to be noted that the loss of these islands and lands began to be wasted and destroyed from the time when news arrived of the death of the most serene Queen Isabel, which was in 1504, because up to then only a small number of provinces had been destroyed through unjust military action, not the whole area, and news of even this partial destruction had by and large been kept from the queen. Because the queen – may her soul rest in peace – had very great care and admirable zeal for the salvation and prosperity of those peoples, as those of us who saw it and touched examples of this with our eyes and hands well know.³⁶

One other rule in this should be noted: that wherever in the Indies Christians have gone or passed through, they always subjected the Indians to all the aforesaid cruelties, and those innocent peoples to murders, tyrannies, and abominable oppressions; and they added many more and greater and more novel sorts of tortures, and became ever crueller, because God thus allowed them to fall more completely and plummet headlong towards reprobate judgment and remorse.

4. *Of the two islands of San Juan and Jamaica*

³⁴ Las Casas here attacks the abuses of the *repartimiento* ('sharing' of conquered fiefs and vassals as a reward for military service) and *encomienda* ('entrusting' of prisoners of war to an *encomendero*, who owned their labour in return for protection and instruction in the Christian faith; see also n41 below), practices derived from the customary law of the medieval frontier-war with Islam in the Iberian peninsula. The sentence plays on a contrast between the technical terms *idiota* ('illiterate layman', lit. 'one ignorant of Latin, able to speak only *idioma*, the vulgar language') and *cura* ('curate', an ordained priest qualified to have *cura animarum*, 'care of souls'), which is further taken up in the next sentence by a pun on *cura*, 'care'. As a professional, Las Casas objected to the subjects of his missionary work being placed under the spiritual jurisdiction of uneducated slave-owners.

³⁵ The *arroba*, an old Arabic measure used in Spain, varied in value from region to region; it was commonly a weight of ca 12kg or capacity of ca 1.5 litres.

³⁶ The first sentence of the paragraph is ungrammatical ('loss' is followed by verbs in the plural agreeing with 'lands', anacoluthon), a typical example of Las Casas's careless style. It was doubtless untrue that exploitation of the Indians only began after Isabel I's death (26 November 1504), and at all events this was too early for Las Casas to have 'touched examples of it with his eyes and hands' (a typically surreal exaggeration). He must have been thinking of the fact that in 1495 she prevented Columbus from selling Amerindians as slaves, in 1501 instructed Ovando that the Taino of Hispaniola were 'to be well treated as our subjects and our vassals', and in a codicil to her will ordered her successors to look after the welfare of her Indian vassals 'as if they were Spaniards' (*Historia de las Indias* II.12-14; Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indians and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology*, 2nd edn, Cambridge: CUP, 1986, 41-42).

In 1509 the Spaniards passed to the islands of San Juan and Jamaica, which were each a garden and a beehive, with the end and purpose they had when they went to Hispaniola.³⁷ Here they perpetrated the same outrages and committed the same crimes as before, devising yet further refinements of cruelty, murdering the native people, burning and roasting them alive, throwing them to wild dogs and then oppressing, tormenting and plaguing them with toil down the mines and elsewhere, and so once again killing off these unfortunate innocents; because there was a population of the two islands was certainly over 600,000 (and I believe more than a million), fewer than 200 survive on each of the two islands, all the others having perished without ever learning the truths of the Christian religion and without the benefit of the Sacraments.

5. *Of the island of Cuba*

In 1511 they passed to the island of Cuba, which is, as I said, as long as from Valladolid to Rome, where there were great provinces of people.³⁸ They began and ended in the ways already described, and many more, and more cruelly. Extraordinary things happened here.³⁹ A *cacique* and very leading lord called Hatuey, who had emigrated from Hispaniola to Cuba with many people to escape the calamities and inhuman deeds of the Christians, having arrived in Cuba and being informed by certain Indians that the Christians were coming there, gathered most of all his people and said to them:

'You already know the rumour that the Christians are coming here, and you have experience of what they did to lords such-and-such and such-and-such and such-and-such. And those people from Haiti (i.e. Hispaniola) are on their way to do the same here. Do you know by any chance why they behave in this way?'

'No,' said they, 'unless it be that they are innately cruel and evil.'

'Not only for that reason,' says he, 'but because they have a god whom they worship and love very much, and in order to get him from us so they can worship him they strive to subjugate and kill us.' He had beside him a basket full of gold jewellery, and he said: 'Behold the god of the Christians. If you agree, let us perform *areitos* (that is, fiestas and dances) for him, and perhaps we shall please him and he will order them not to harm us.'

They all shouted: 'So be it, so be it.'

They danced in front of it until they were all tired. And then Lord Hatuey said:

'Look, however this may be, if we keep him, in the end they will kill us in order to get him off us. Let us throw him into this river.'

They all voted that this should be done, and so they threw it into a great river nearby.

This same *cacique* and lord was continually on the run from the Christians from the moment they arrived on that island of Cuba, because he knew them only too well; and when he ran into them he defended himself, and eventually they captured him. And for the sole reason that he tried to escape such cruel and iniquitous people and defended himself against those who wanted to kill and hound to death him and all his people and descendants, they were going to burn him alive. When he was tied to the stake a Franciscan friar, a saintly man who was present, began to tell him a few things about God and our faith, all of which he had never heard, as much as the little bit of time the executioners gave him permitted, and that if

³⁷ Juan Ponce de León's expedition to San Juan (now Puerto Rico) and Juan de Esquivel's to Jamaica are discussed in Las Casas, *History of the Indies* II.46-55. The expression 'each a garden and a beehive' (*unas huertas y unas colmenas*) contains a hint of paradise; the beehive metaphor alludes either to swarms of native inhabitants ('full as a beehive with peoples', **Ch1**) or to the biblical Promised Land of milk and honey.

³⁸ 'As I said': see **Ch1** n13, above. The following chapter describes incidents from the pacification of Cuba by Diego Velázquez (*A Short Account*, trans. Griffin, Introduction, p. xxi).

³⁹ The expression 'extraordinary things' (*cosas señaladas*) alerts us to the fact that the following story of Hatuey is a literary invention in the tradition of the 'savage critic' (see Pagden 1983); see also *History of the Indies*, III.21-25. On the Arawak-Taino term *kasike* see Columbus, *Diary of the First Voyage* 17 December & n45; it designated a Taino tribal leader, but the Spanish administration in the Americas later used it to describe any Amerindian chieftain below the rank of king or prince (*principal*); *caciques* were frequently employed as tax-gatherers.

he was willing to believe what he was telling him he would go to heaven, where there is glory and eternal rest, and if not he would go to Hell to suffer everlasting torments and punishments. He thought for a while, and asked the friar if Christians went to heaven. The friar replied yes, but only the good ones went there. The *cacique* immediately said, without stopping to think, that he did not want to go there but to hell, so as not to be in the same place as they were and have to see such cruel people. This is the fame and honour that God and our faith have earned with the Christians who have gone to the Indies.

Once, when they came out to greet us with provisions and gifts ten leagues from a large settlement, and on our arrival gave us a great quantity of fish and bread and food with everything they could possibly provide, suddenly the Devil got into the Christians and they put to the sword in my presence (without the slightest provocation) more than 3,000 souls who were sitting in front of us, men, women, and children. There I saw cruelties greater than any living man has ever seen or thought to see. Again, a few days later, I sent messengers, assuring them not to be afraid, to all the lords of the province of Havana, as they had all heard that I could be trusted, telling them not to run away but to come and meet us, and that no harm would be done to them (because the whole land was still shocked by the past massacres). I did this with the agreement of the captain; and when we arrived in the province twenty-one lords and *caciques* came out to meet us. Immediately the captain seized them, breaking the promise I had given them, and wanted to burn them alive the next day, saying it was as well to do so because sooner or later those lords would do some evil. I found myself in great trouble to keep them from the bonfire, but in the end they escaped.⁴⁰

Once all the Indians of the land of this island were placed in the servitude and calamity as those of Hispaniola, seeing themselves dying and perishing without hope, they all began to flee into the hills; others committed suicide by hanging themselves. Husbands and wives hung themselves, and hung their children with them; and as a result of the cruelties of one Spanish tyrant whom I met more than 200 Indians hung themselves. Infinite people died in this way.

There was a royal official on the island who, when he was allotted 300 natives, worked them so hard that, at the end of three months, only thirty – that is to say, just one tenth of the original number – were still alive, the other 270 having perished down the mines. Later, he received another consignment of much the same number, or even more, and he saw them off too. The more he received the more he killed, until eventually he himself died and the Devil took his soul.

During the three or four months I was there, more than 7,000 children died of hunger, after their parents had been shipped off to the mines, and I saw many other horrors also.

Later they decided to go and hunt the Indians who were in the forests, where they made amazing carnage. And so they devastated and depopulated the whole of that island; which we saw not long ago, and a pitiful and heart-rending sight it is to see it deserted and all turned into a barren wasteland.

[...]

20. *Of the kingdom of New Granada*

[...]

Consider now, by God, those who read this, what work this is, and whether it exceeds every cruelty and injustice that can be imagined, and whether the name 'devils' well fits such Christians, and whether entrusting the Indians to the Christians in the Indies would not be more like entrusting them to the devils of Hell.⁴¹ [...]

With that I wish to end until news arrives of more egregious acts of evil (if there can be any more so than these), or until we return there to see them anew, as we have seen them with

⁴⁰ Further details of this massacre at Caonao, the most anguished personal reminiscence in *Very Brief Account*, are given in *History of the Indies* III.29–30. The captain was Pánfilo de Narváez (ca 1480–1528), a partner of Diego Velázquez in the conquest of Cuba who later attempted to wrest control of Mexico from Fernando Cortés (1520), led an ill-fated expedition to Florida (1527), and was the first European to land on the coast of Texas (1528).

⁴¹ The reference is, once again, to the *encomienda* system (see n34 above).

our eyes for forty-two years without cease,⁴² swearing by God and by my conscience that, as I believe and hold certain, that the curses, harms, destructions, depopulations, atrocities, deaths, and very horrible great cruelties and most hideous forms of cruelty, the violence, injustices, robberies, and massacres that have been done against those peoples and lands (and are still being done today in every part of the Indies) are so great that, in everything that I have here said and all that I have emphasized, I have not said or emphasized, in quality or quantity, out of ten thousand parts of what has been done and is done today, a single one.

And so that any Christian may have more compassion for these innocent nations and take more pity on their destruction and condemnation, and may further condemn and abominate and detest the greed and ambition and cruelty of the Spaniards, let all recognize as true the following truth, along with the others which I have affirmed above: that since the discovery of the Indies until today, never anywhere in them have the Indians done any harm to the Christians without having first suffered harm and robberies and betrayals from them. Instead they always esteemed them immortals and come from heaven, and they welcomed them as such until their actions proved who they were and what they were looking for.

There is one other thing worth adding: that until today, from the very outset no more trouble has been taken by the Spaniards to try to preach the faith of Jesus Christ to these peoples than if they had been dogs or other beasts. Instead they have done their best to prevent members of religious orders, by the many afflictions and persecutions they have caused them, from preaching, because this appeared to them to be an impediment to acquiring the gold and wealth which their avarice promised them. And today in all the Indies there is no more knowledge of God, whether He is made of wood, or from heaven, or from earth, than a hundred years ago among those peoples, unless it be in New Spain, where friars have gone, which is very small little corner of the Indies; and so they have all died and are dying without faith and without the sacraments.

I, Brother Bartolomé de Las Casas or Casaus, was persuaded, as a friar in the Dominican Order who by the mercy of God spend my time at this court of Spain seeking to rid us of the hell of the Indies, and that those infinite multitudes of souls redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ should not perish without remedy for ever, but that they should find out about their Creator and be saved, and out of pity for my country, which is Castile, for I do not wish that it should not be destroyed by God for the great sins against its faith and honour committed against our fellow-men, by a number of notable men zealous for the honour of God and moved by compassion for the afflictions and calamities of others who reside at this court [to write this *Very Brief Account*], although it had always been my intention and had not put it into practice due to the constant pressure of my other business.⁴³

I finished it in Valencia on 8 December 1542, at a time when the violence, the oppression, the despotism, the killing, the plunder, the depopulation, the outrages, the agonies and the calamities we have described were at their height throughout the New World wherever Christians have set foot. It may be that some areas are worse than others: Mexico City and the surrounding territories are a little better than most, for there, at least, outrages cannot be committed so publicly, as there is justice of a sort, despite the crippling taxation unjustly imposed on the people. Yet I do see hope for the future, for, as the Emperor and King of Spain, Charles V (whose person and whose Empire may God preserve), learns of the crimes committed against his will and against that of God by his servants in the New World and of their treachery towards the people of the continent (for, until now, there has been an effective conspiracy of silence about what has really been happening), he will, as one wedded to the concept of justice and avid to see it prevail, put a stop to the wickedness and undertake a total reform of the administration of that New World that God has bestowed upon him.

⁴² Las Casas arrived in Haiti in 1502, though he did not have his conversion until later.

⁴³ This sentence, so typical of Las Casas's emotional style, is ungrammatical; it has no complement to the main verb 'I was induced ...', so we must supply a phrase such as '... to write this *Brevísima relación*', picked up by the feminine object pronoun of the main verb of the next sentence, which presently lacks a referent: *Acabéla*, 'I finished it [i.e. the *Relación*]'. The anacoluthon may have been due to a printer's error; it is clear that some editing has occurred, since Las Casas himself could hardly have been uncertain whether his name was Casas or Casaus.

Whose glorious and happy life and imperial estate may God Almighty, for the help of all His universal Church and the final private salvation of his royal soul, may God prosper for long ages.⁴⁴ Amen.

[...]

The present work was printed in the very noble and very loyal city of Sevilla, in the house of Sebastián Trujillo, printer. For Our Lady of Grace. In the year MDLII

⁴⁴ The second 'God' is a careless repetition (pleonasm). The whole conclusion bears the hallmarks of having been very hastily composed for the printed edition.