

Mixtli impressions

By Gordon Brotherston

GARY JENNINGS:

Aztec

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The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V was hardly renowned for his curiosity about American Indians. Yet there is no inherent reason why in 1529 he should not have issued to Zumarraga, then bishop of Mexico, the request which prompts Gary Jennings's novel: "That we be better acquainted with our colony of New Spain . . . we order that you shall inform yourself from ancient Indians as to their country's history, their governments, their traditions, their customs etc." To satisfy this curiosity Zumarraga employs an old Aztec, Mixtli, to tell all he knows, sending the results back to Spain in twelve instalments along with explanatory letters of his own. In fact the whole of *Aztec* consists of ostensibly authentic documents, pieced together to provide a first-person account of

Mexican life between the years 1466 and 1531 AD – Years 13 Rabbit and 13 Reed in the Aztec calendar.

Over this period, and at the leisurely pace afforded by the book's seven hundred-odd pages, we follow Mixtli through the most various estates and conditions, in "The One World" (an Aztec name for their empire). Born the son of a quarryman on the island Xaltocan, Mixtli gains the privilege of an education at Texcoco ("the Athens of Mexico"); then, after serving the Aztec emperor across the lake at Tenochtitlan, he travels as a *pochteca* along the eastern tribute road to Oaxaca and Xoconochco. After marrying he travels as a trader in his own right, crossing the western frontier into Michoacan and on up into the northern fastnesses of the Tarahumara. He also goes off on an archaeological search for the old Aztec homeland Aztlan (invoked nowadays, though with scant geographical precision, by the Chicanos). In the final two instalments of his narrative Mixtli encounters the Spanish invaders, first as an ambassador and then as the dispossessed citizen who ends up telling his story to Zumarraga.

The Mixtli/Jennings narrative does not always update the highly-coloured version of the Aztecs and their invader Cortes, first propagated in English by W. H. Prescott. In the highland valley we find the same opposition between "civilized" Texcoco on the last bank of the lake and the "upstart" Tenochtitlan on the west; and we catch the same whiff of nostalgia for the noble religion of the "vanished" Toltecs. Yet for the most part the perspective in *Aztec* is quite new, like that of Carlos Fuentes, whose no less weighty historical volume *Terra nostra* focuses on the same epic encounter with Cortes. Throughout, Jennings has drawn heavily on recent research on Mesoamerica and the Aztec world, the better to show how its peoples once lived, talked, ate, worked, coupled, cleaned their teeth, travelled, smoked, hallucinated, fought and died. As if to compensate for the dearth of his kind of detail in the past, we are regaled with a mass of domestic and regional minutiae.

In terms of how Jennings has chosen to narrate and structure his novel, the most interesting thing about Mixtli is the fact that he is a poet-scribe, one trained at Texcoco in the rhetoric of spoken Nahua or Aztec, and in the iconography and syntax of native script. For much of the novel's power stems from Nahua sources transcribed into the alphabet after the Spanish invasion, not just the direct quotations from Nahua poems and of set pieces (like the midwife's prayers for the new-born), but the whole range of devices used by Mixtli to keep his audience alert. With "But now, what am I to say? What should I cause your ears to hear?", he echoes the mincing courtesy of the Aztec priests who defied the Twelve Franciscans sent by Charles V in 1524 ("And now what? How is it, what are we supposed to say, what shall we present to your ears?"). And in telling each episode of his story, Mixtli offers us brilliant and clear-contoured images that are shown to derive from the Mexican script he once wrote in and which can be seen in the native screenfold books that survive in libraries today.

As a result, we begin to acquire Mixtli's verbal-visual vocabulary, and to learn the professional language and etymologies according to which his world actually functioned. And if it is true that Jennings occasionally strays into didacticism, most of the time he succeeds in exerting a fascination he assures us was initially felt by Charles V.