

membership of the 'Christian family'. The *History* can be read, partly as a narrative, much of it first-hand, of the discovery and conquest of the Indies, partly as a record of the Spaniards' subsequent bloody exploits, and partly as an autobiographical account of the passage of its author from ignorance to enlightenment. In 1559, however, Las Casas forbade the printing, or even the circulation of the manuscript, until forty years after his death. Then, he said, it might be printed 'if it is thought to be convenient for the good of the Indians and of Spain'. But by 1590 Spain's position was too perilous for it to be conceivable that any further condemnation of its agents could be thought to be 'for its good' and the text was not published until 1875.

II

Bartolomé de Las Casas – or Casaus, as he sometimes styled himself – was born in Seville in 1484, the son of a merchant from Tarifa and 'a woman from Sosa' who died when he was still a child. Although he has left a detailed account of his adult life in the *History of the Indies*, he is silent about his childhood and says nothing about his education. This is perhaps no accident. Las Casas had a clear idea of narrative purpose. Despite the pretence that it was nothing more than a factual record of events, the *History*, no less than the *Short Account*, was intended to persuade his king to act. Unlike the *Short Account*, however, it was also intended as a monument to Las Casas's untiring efforts on behalf of the Indians. The story of his life before his arrival in the Indies is thus irrelevant. For Las Casas, as for so many other Europeans, the crossing to America came to seem something of a rebirth. Although he was to cross and re-cross the Atlantic several times in the pursuit of his objective, it was the first voyage which ultimately determined what that objective was to be. It was, as he was to say later, God's decision that he should go to America. God had given to him 'the zeal and the desire to bring about a remedy to those wretched beings, and with these

He had given him also great perseverance'. What had happened to him in the Old World before was thus of no significance. All he tells us is that he reached Santo Domingo in what is now Haiti on 15 April 1502, in the largest fleet ever to leave Spain for the New World, and that as he landed he was told, 'You have arrived at a good moment . . . there is to be a war against the Indians and we will be able to take many slaves'. 'This news,' he later recalled in bitterness, 'produced a great joy in the ship.' It was his first encounter, although it would be a long time before he came to recognize it as such, with the realities of the colonial experience.

A year later Las Casas was moderately well-off and the master of a number of Indians. He was also in minor orders and by 1510 he had become a priest. Throughout the account he gives of this part of his life in the *History* he refers to himself, half ironically, as 'the cleric Las Casas'. Why he chose the priesthood we do not know and he does not say. The secular clergy (as distinct from members of the monastic orders) were regarded at this time, often rightly, as ignorant, poor and frequently polygamous. The narrative offered by the *History* aims to convey a sense of humility, doubtless quite genuine, and his position as a humble cleric may have seemed morally more compelling than that of the relative comfort of the monk. But there was another reason: as a member of the lay clergy he could come and go as he pleased. When in 1522 Domingo de Betanzos attempted to persuade him to enter the Dominican Order and to participate in the evangelization of the Americas he at first declined, saying that as his whole life until then had been dedicated to reform, he had to wait in the vicinity of the court until he had received his instructions from the King. Betanzos, who knew that those who wait on kings can wait for ever, asked him, 'And if you should die before then, who will receive the orders from the King?' These words, he claims, 'transfixed his heart' and he gave his previous life up for dead. It was, in its way, a conversion; one that would transform him from a self-marginalized agitator for