THE WRATH OF GOD

The Wrath *of* God

Lope de Aguirre,
Revolutionary of the Americas

EVAN L. BALKAN

University of New Mexico Press
Albuquerque

Printed in the United States of America
16 15 14 13 2 1 1 2 3 4 5 6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Balkan, Evan, 1972–
The wrath of God : Lope de Aguirre, revolutionary of the Americas / Evan L. Balkan.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8263-5043-5 (cloth : alk. paper)
1. Aguirre, Lope de, d. 1561. 2. Insurgency—South America—History—16th century. 3. South America—Discovery and exploration—Spanish. 4. South America—History—16th century. 5. Explorers—Spain—Biography. 6. Explorers—South America—Biography. I. Title.
E125.A35B35 2011
980′.013092--dc22
[B]

2010051033

Design and compostion: Melissa Tandysh
Text composed in Dante MT St 11.2/14

. . . night is here but the barbarians have not come.
And some people arrived from the borders,
and said that there are no longer any barbarians.

And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?
Those people were some kind of solution.

—Constantine P. Cavafy

This traitor would sometimes say that he already knew for certain that his soul could not be saved; and that, even while he was alive, he was sure he would burn in hell. And, since the raven could be no blacker than its wings, that he must needs commit acts of cruelty and wickedness by which the name of Aguirre would ring throughout the earth, even to the ninth heaven.

—Francisco Vásquez

CONTENTS

PART II

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank the following people for their help as I wrote this book: principally, Frank Starr and Christine Stewart for their thoughtful critiques, as always. Thanks go to Carlos Stohr and Pedro Bellorin for meeting me and sharing their knowledge while I was on Margarita Island. Likewise, my gratitude extends to Dr. Carolina Acosta-Alzuru at the University of Georgia. Lastly, I need to thank Dena Ritter and Cheryl Brown at the Community College of Baltimore County library system.

INTRODUCTION

There is an old joke that goes like this:

"What do you call someone who speaks three languages?"

"Trilingual."

"What do you call someone who speaks two languages?"

"Bilingual."

"What do you call someone who speaks one language?"

"American."

When you grow up where I did, in the mid-Atlantic United States, it is a long trip to a foreign country. The desire to learn another language, or about another culture, is one driven not by necessity but rather curiosity. From my earliest memories, the desire has been there. When I was first able, I traveled. My travels took me across the Atlantic to Europe, the continent most congruous to my curiosities. The reasons for this were obvious enough: I grew up in Maryland, my home a mere twenty minutes from the colonial capital of Annapolis to the east and from Washington, D.C., that most European of American cities, to the south. The language I spoke was a European one; the people whose names lent themselves to the towns where I lived, the schools I attended, the fathers and mothers of my state—all were European. Indeed, my own family members a mere two generations removed were Europeans. But most significantly, the history and cultures I learned about in school were entirely European. It was as if no civilization ever existed in the Americas until Europeans arrived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The first time I visited Mexico—in my late twenties, I am embarrassed to admit—was a revelation. Of course, intellectually I knew that this neighbor to the south was a fascinating and colorful country with a

different language, national culture, traditions, and history. But the immensity of the place—its historical legacy mixed with its modern character—overawed me. The pull, from that moment on, was to points farther and farther south.

By this time I knew all about the Aztecs, the Mayas, and the Incas. But there were many more indigenous groups throughout Central and South America, ones I never learned about in school, many of them still speaking ancient languages and carrying on in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in ways similar to their ancestors' many centuries earlier. With each trip I took south, my fascination in Latin America grew—these were places relatively close but worlds away from where I grew up.

During my first trip to the Amazon, in southeast Peru, I stayed in a comfortable lodge on the Tambopata River, a few hours' journey from the Bolivian border. Each afternoon, the attentive staff at the lodge boiled water, let it cool, and then parceled it out in tall glass pitchers set in the bathroom of each of the huts. The staff smoothed squares of plastic wrap around the pitchers' necks and sealed them. When I went to bed at night, the water pitcher sat unmolested in the bathroom. When I woke predawn, I stumbled to the bathroom with my flashlight. The beam fell first on the pitcher. Through the prismatic glaze of the glass, I could see that a singular transformation had taken place during the evening: my water had grown fur. A centimeter-thick layer of mold or scum ringed the surface of the water even though the plastic wrap looked to be completely intact. I tapped at the glass and watched the scum move along the surface as if it was one single organism. It was fascinating, and it contributed to my impression of life pulsing all around in that jungle.

I do not want to overstate the matter or be too hyperbolic. After all, life pulses in my suburban Maryland backyard, too. In spring and summer, a riot of songbirds; rabbits, and red foxes prove adept at evading whatever barriers I erect to try and keep my strawberries and melons safe. But in the Amazon, the fecundity of life was something altogether different, like my backyard on steroids. All night long, the dissonance of whirring and chirping from the abundant insects kept me awake for long stretches. When dawn announced itself as a hint of struggling gray through the canopy, the insects largely clocked out and gave way to the birds and monkeys—twits, cheeps, howls, cries, caws: a cacophonous symphony of life and competition so intense and pervasive that after only a couple of days in the jungle you have to remind yourself to listen. Otherwise, it becomes mere backdrop, the way the whoosh of tires on wet roads outside your house can

become so much a part of your auditory experience that you do not hear it at all.

Back in the lodge, I had an hour to kill before breakfast, so I walked out beyond the collection of cabins along the river and followed a path into the jungle. As before, the overwhelming impression was of life: activity and movement. But apart from the furry black disjointedness of a tarantula, I could not catch up to any of it. Instead, it was the flicker of a tail, the beat of a wing, the plunge of detritus from a branch. All around me, things snapped and cracked. But it was as if I were a millisecond or two behind, even when I stopped by the crook of a massive lupuna tree and let the jungle pulse around me. Every time I thought I caught sight of something in the trees, massive banana fronds obscured it.

I turned instead toward the hollow cavern of the tree and saw a gargantuan wolf spider clinging inside. The length of this spider's legs from end to end roughly equaled the diameter of my head. I moved away, stricken—irrationally—with a feeling that this thing would leap from its perch and wrap itself around my face like starfish do to cartoon characters. It did not, of course, and the jungle continued to hide its secrets.

Back home, I read and read and read about the jungle, trying to crack its mysteries as best I could from afar. Over the years I often came across the name Lope de Aguirre. Invariably, each mention of Aguirre reduced him to a one-dimensional madman, the epitome of maniacal evil. Each mention was also abbreviated, part of a larger discussion of the pursuit of El Dorado or the rowdy early years of the Spanish Conquest. Naturally, my curiosity was piqued: who exactly was this man?

That question led to this book.

In my investigations, I first came across Fray Pedro Simón's *Expedition of Pedro de Ursua and Lope de Aguirre in Search of El Dorado and Omagua in 1560–1*, originally published in 1626. I was riveted. The story that came across in those pages not only helped to fill out a picture of Aguirre, the Tyrant, but also included an incredible cast of characters engaged in an extraordinary mission: to find the mythical El Dorado, believed to be located deep in the bowels of the Americas' greatest wilderness, a place I had visited, a place that had sunk its teeth into me and would not let go. It was an amazing story. And what made this amazing story unique was that in the annals of El Dorado quests, the pursuit of that legendary city was single-minded. But with Aguirre at the helm, the men involved in the expedition gave up their search for El Dorado and turned their sights instead on Peru, which entailed nothing less than a revolt against the Spanish king.

The reason for the consistently one-dimensional images of Aguirre became clear: the character within those pages was pure evil, without one redeeming quality. The question that tugged at me then formed the framework of this book: How was it that a man who was evil incarnate managed to lead more than a hundred others through some of the most unforgiving terrain on the planet for almost a year as they undertook an insurrection against the world's most powerful empire? Was it simply fear that motivated his followers? Were they powerless in the face of his menace? Or was there something else to the story, something the chroniclers were obscuring?

What follows is the full story of Lope de Aguirre, presented primarily as a synthesis of disparate sources. The intention is to draw the man in all his complexity, as opposed to the almost unanimous historical presentation of him as a megalomaniac. This is important because Aguirre, as much as any other man, can be seen as the Americas' first true revolutionary. His story has resonance for all Americans, in the hemispheric sense. It is thus important to situate Aguirre in his larger historical context and rescue him from flat and static characterization. This exercise heretofore has been undertaken almost exclusively by writers in Spanish, primarily twentieth-century Latin American writers of fiction.

Many of the scenes that follow are drawn or reconstructed from contemporaneous accounts; dialogue from these same sources has been inserted to lend immediacy to the scenes and action. As a result, some scenes have the feel of historical fiction—a look that Aguirre gives, a grimace as response, and so on. These are designed merely to fill out the historical narrative; none of the descriptions herein deviate from the historical record. As we shall see, however, the historical chronicle was recorded from particular angles and, it can be argued, the true and full story of Aguirre may be gleaned only through the novelist's pen. Indeed, this is precisely the agenda of six Latin American novelists I discuss in chapter 16, though such an operation is not the design in this text. In other words, I have invented nothing.

A Note: The story told here comes primarily from the Hakluyt Society's English translation of Fray Pedro Simón's exhaustive account of the Pedro de Ursúa–Lope de Aguirre expedition through the Amazon. As noted later in this study, Simón relied on the major accounts by men who participated in the expedition: those of Gonzalo de Zúñiga, Francisco Vásquez (with

Pedrarias de Almesto), Pedro de Monguía, and Custodio Hernández. Because this source forms the major narrative here, I have chosen not to continually cite it. All direct quotations without attribution come from Simón or the major sources he used to create his narrative. Because Robert Southey's work on Aguirre was the first English text on the subject, I have used it as well but not nearly as extensively. Accordingly, I have cited Southey for all direct quotations from his work. All other citations have one of two purposes: either providing supplemental information that I deemed interesting but potentially interruptive of the major narrative or crediting the source of the information. Such citations include the lesser-known Aguirre sources as well as scholarly translations from Spanish into English that used particularly lyrical or interesting phrasing without deviating from the meanings or assertions of the primary sources.

—Evan L. Balkan

PROLOGUE

Revenge in Bare Feet

It was 1551. The mule train of laboring Indians, lorded over by more than two hundred Spanish soldiers at Potosí, headed to the depository at Tucumán. Huffing, puffing, and straining at the twelve-thousand-foot altitude, the Indians struggled on.[1] Their legs quivered with each step, their backs buckling under their burdens of silver ore. Spanish authorities present at the scene could see at a glance that the Indians were terribly, and illegally, overburdened with silver. The chief magistrate of Potosí rode out to see for himself. One by one the Spaniards passed. He grabbed the unlucky one at the end of the line. This soldier was arrested on grounds that he had two Indian porters carrying his personal burden, a violation of the Leyes Nuevas, or New Laws, of 1542.[2] Because the soldier had no gold or silver to pay a fine, he received an alternate punishment: two hundred lashes.

The method of implementation was simple: the punished man would be stripped naked and then set atop an ass, which would be driven around a course called the *calles acostumbradas* while men stationed along the way lashed him.

The soldier asked the townspeople to intercede on his behalf, as virtually everyone agreed that the sentence was excessive. Francisco de Esquivel, the magistrate, or *alcalde*, remained undeterred and ordered the beast prepared. The soldier begged to be executed instead; the flogging would be a public humiliation, and the soldier was a gentleman. Indeed, his brother was a lord of vassals back in Spain. No deal; the sentence would stand.

Charles V used the New Laws as a tool to reassert control over the increasingly unruly colonies. But emissaries of His Majesty arbitrarily enforced the New Laws, straddling a fine line between exercising their power

and leaving themselves vulnerable to uprising. So the Spanish soldiers accompanying the Indian laborers from Potosí to the royal treasury depositories often broke the laws and only rarely paid the price for it.

More of the townspeople came forward and beseeched Esquivel to reduce the sentence. He acquiesced somewhat, ordering the punishment delayed for eight days, during which he would hear more pleas for mercy. He sent representatives to the prison to inform the soldier. But the soldier was already stripped and atop the beast. He would have preferred never to have been put in this situation, he told the people. But now that he had, he wanted to get on with it. "Let the sentence be carried out," he declared. "We shall save the trouble and pains there would have been for these eight days in searching for intermediaries and advocates who would probably have gained as little as the present ones." Waiting eight days for the same punishment would be a double sentence. And so the beast was driven on and the soldier received his lashes. For good measure, those charged with carrying out the punishment rubbed salt into his wounds.

When it was over and he was freed, the soldier refused offers of help from the citizens of Potosí. All the comfort he needed he could find in death, he explained. But his wounds healed, and then he evenly declared that he would seek his revenge on Esquivel by executing him.

When Esquivel's term of office expired, he went to Lima, some nine hundred miles to the northwest. Despite the distance and the terrain—the great chain of the Andes, the parched desert between the Andes and the Pacific Ocean—the soldier showed up in Lima to fulfill his pledge of revenge.

Esquivel fled again, this time to Quito, farther from Lima than Potosí was. No matter—the soldier traversed the mountains again and arrived in Quito fewer than three weeks after Esquivel's arrival. Esquivel then went farther still, inland, down, and then back up into the Andes, to Cuzco, the old Incan capital. The soldier was not far behind, making the fifteen-hundred-mile trip on foot and without shoes. Esquivel was terrified but weary of fleeing. So he stayed in Cuzco, where he took a dwelling opposite the new Spanish cathedral. Esquivel hoped that the city's size and importance and the rule of law that governed it would make him safe. Alonso de Alvarado, the *corregidor*, responsible for keeping the peace, was indeed stern and would not tolerate a scoundrel like the soldier pursuing a man of importance such as the alcalde. Still, Esquivel wore a shirt of mail under his doublet and never left his house without a sword or dagger.

Gómez de Tordoya, a friend from Esquivel's home region of Extremadura in Spain, tried to persuade Esquivel to accept protection, saying, "Let me come to your house and sleep, for if he knows I am with you, he won't dare to enter the house."

Esquivel refused to allow his friend to stay with him, thinking it would betray his fear—and why should a man of such stature as he be afraid of a two-bit thug, someone described by at least one contemporary as "a very little man, very ill-favored, and of no good repute"? Besides, Esquivel reassured his friend, "I never take off my mail and I never lay down my weapons. Do not worry, my friend."

Perhaps he would not have been so sanguine had he known that the soldier was at that moment making the last rise into town. There below the soldier lay Cuzco, nestled among the Andes and revered by the Incas as the "navel of the world." He inhaled and descended. It would not be long now.

It was a Monday, midday, the cathedral bells signaling the time. As each clang rang out, the soldier worked his way along a balcony above the street entrance to Esquivel's residence. He measured his steps until he found an opening. Dropping onto the cold stone floor in his bare feet, he worked his way through an empty hall and then a stable. He hoped he would not run into a servant, for he sought one man only. But anyone in his path would pay the ultimate price. The shafts of midday sunlight pouring through the open windows revealed no one, however.

The soldier pressed on, moving into an antechamber and then a study. Bookcases filled with leather-bound volumes lined the walls. The soldier could hear the rhythm of soft exhalations. There, draped over a desk and one of his books, Esquivel lay asleep, still clad in his mail. The soldier did not hesitate. He walked over, pulled his sword, and plunged it into Esquivel's right temple. He then stabbed at the body repeatedly, leaving dents in the mail as proof of his wrath.

The deed complete, the soldier cleaned his sword, returned it to its scabbard, and left the house. He leaned against the cool stone wall and breathed heavily. It seemed a new world; his nemesis was dead.

Shielding his eyes from the harsh sun, he began to make his way across the main plaza. Now what would he do? His business had been revenge and now it was over. Suddenly, he stopped. As if struck by a terrible realization, he turned on his heels and strode back into Esquivel's dwelling. In agitation, he retraced his steps through the house. Esquivel was still there, of course, now a motionless corpse, sword punctures still leaking blood

over his books and onto the floor. The soldier listened to the drip, drip of blood. He looked around the room. Frowning, he left.

He moved through the chamber and the corridor again and stopped at the hall. His mouth broke into a wide smile when he saw it: his hat lay on a chair. He snapped it up and left the house, satisfied.

The soldier's name was Lope de Aguirre, and his single-minded pursuit of Esquivel had covered more than thirty-seven hundred miles and consumed three years and four months of his life—broken only by his inclusion in a series of battles and insurrections.[3]

After Aguirre dispatched Esquivel, he strode across the plaza and down a street, toward the convent of Santa Clara.[4] When he encountered two young men, Santillán and Cataño, he cried out, "Hide me! Hide me. Please, hide me!" The soldier was a wanted man, a bounty placed on his head long ago, and his murder of Esquivel would only exacerbate the Crown's desire to punish him.

The men knew who he was; his arrival in Cuzco was hardly a secret. Santillán and Cataño guessed the truth immediately. "Have you killed Esquivel?" they asked.

"Hide me. Hide me," Aguirre pleaded.

The men hustled him off to the house of their brother-in-law, Rodrigo de Pineda.[5] They took him to the back yard and placed him in the pigsty. They told him to sit quietly and never leave. For forty days and nights, the two men took food from Pineda's table and delivered it to the wretched Aguirre.

During this time, Alvarado, the corregidor, shut down the city. He ordered the cathedral bells rung in honor of Esquivel's death, posted Cañari Indians sentry at all the city's churches and monasteries, and posted soldiers on every road and passage in and out of Cuzco. After thirty days of fruitless searching, Alvarado relaxed the posts except for those on the royal roads. Santillán and Cataño thought it best to get Aguirre out of town—for no other reason than to save themselves punishment for harboring the fugitive.

They shaved all the hair off Aguirre's head and face and dressed him in a black coat. They took the wild *uítoc* fruit and broke it into pieces, steeping them in water for three days to create a wash that turned the skin black with a few applications. The color would stay on the skin for more than a week. They gave Aguirre the wash on his hands and arms as well as his

face, neck, and legs. In this way, he could pass as a black laborer. Santillán and Cataño took him out at midday, showing no nervousness at all. The three formed a proper parade: Aguirre as a black laborer carrying a harquebus on his shoulder, Santillán carrying a saddlebow, and Cataño with a small Peruvian orange-breasted falcon on his wrist.[6] Santillán and Cataño led Aguirre through the crowded streets and main square, all the way to the road atop the hill at Carmenca, on the road to Lima. When the three men reached the sentry on the road, they told him they were walking out for a hunting excursion. The guard asked for a permit from the corregidor to leave the city. Santillán slapped his head in mock forgetfulness. He turned to the other two and instructed them, "Wait for me here or go on slowly, and I'll go back and get the license. I'll soon catch up with you."

Aguirre and Cataño carried on, the guard satisfied by this little charade. Santillán, of course, never did return. Meanwhile, Cataño and Aguirre continued toward Lima. When they got some ten miles out of Cuzco, Cataño bought Aguirre a horse, handed him a little money, and slapped him on the shoulder, saying, "Hermano, now you are in a free country and can go where you like." They clasped hands. Cataño turned back toward Cuzco, and Aguirre dug his heels into his steed's ribs and turned west, going as far as Huamanga (today's Ayacucho), where he took up with a rich relative who was also a leading member of the village. Here, he would be safe and cared for. This relative fed and clothed Aguirre and then sent him on his way fully provisioned.

Aguirre received succor because many people believed that Esquivel's punishment had been excessive. One can only guess that the effect of getting away with such a brash and illegal act only emboldened him, feeding the narcissism that would mark his career in the New World. The early seventeenth-century Spanish-Incan chronicler Garcilaso de la Vega wrote of Aguirre and the admiration he aroused in those of ill repute: "The unruly and swaggering soldiers used to say that if there were more Aguirres in the world and they went to such pains to avenge their wrongs, the investigators would mind their own business better and not be so high handed."[7]

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Aguirre's Place in the World

The story that unfolds over the following pages is a gruesome one, recounting what one historian called "the wildest, most romantic, most desperate, most appalling [expedition] in the annals of Spanish enterprise . . . a wild orgie of madness and blood."[1] Lope de Aguirre, its central figure and most notorious perpetrator, has been consigned to the history books as a madman, singularly representative of all the murderous excesses of the years that marked the Spanish Conquest of the New World. (In modern times, Werner Herzog's 1972 film *Aguirre: Wrath of God* has helped to solidify this view.) The reasons for this are simple. For one, he was indeed a murderous fellow (in a time full of murderous fellows). For another, his story comes to us through men who had a stake in painting Aguirre as an unrepentant lunatic, as I will discuss more fully in this book's last chapter. A full understanding of the genesis of the historical record should inform our view of Aguirre today.

People in the predominantly English-speaking portion of the Americas have largely ignored the history that swirls around Aguirre. Neighbors to the south of the United States occupy a mostly unexamined sphere in what *norteamericanos* call American history. Part of the reason for this, of course, is linguistic and onomastic, as the word "American" has come to be generally understood as relating primarily, if not solely, to the United States. But "American" rightly extends its adjectival reach from the northernmost tip of Canada to the southernmost stretches of Tierra del Fuego.

Native peoples and those of African descent populate the New World in great numbers, of course, but the collective American states are governed primarily by citizens whose ancestries stretch to Europe. As a result

of the colonial period, we speak English, as well as French and Portuguese. But more than any other language, we speak Spanish. The linguistic divide that separates the United States from its southern neighbor, Mexico, and sets off the north from the whole of Central and South America (excepting the old Guianas, Belize, and Brazil) has assured that people in the United States view American history as beginning roughly in the early 1600s. The more historically attuned allow for native "American" cultures that precede European arrivals by centuries. But Spanish colonial history is largely ignored as part of American history, despite the Spanish settlement of Florida in the mid-1500s.

It is a mistake to separate U.S. colonial history from the histories of Latin American states. If nothing else, much of what constitutes the present-day United States was once Mexican territory. More important are the parallels between the history of the United States and those of the countries of Central and South America. Just as the United States' forefathers waged a revolution to expel the Old World masters who ruled them unjustly from afar, so too did the fledgling nations in the rest of the Americas eventually throw off their colonial masters.[2]

According to an 1899 report from the U.S. commissioner of education: "There was . . . a class of men among the first [Spanish] emigrants who had no feeling of attachment or of grateful remembrance for the Spanish home they had left; but on the contrary felt only fear for everything that came from Spain—her officials, her heresy judges, and her laws."[3] These sentiments ultimately framed Aguirre's cause. Substitute England for Spain, and the opinion echoes sentiments in full flower in the colonial United States in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

Of course, it would be misleading to state that Aguirre's ultimate goals, and the reasons for them, mirrored exactly those of the Founding Fathers of the United States. What links them is a bit more nebulous, owing mostly to the very different conceptions of nation held by sixteenth-century Spaniards and eighteenth-century Americans. There is a definite link, however, even a causal chain. Aguirre renounced his Spanish citizenship, marking perhaps the first waypoint on the path to the development of a new American identity. To put it another way, Aguirre's identification becomes an American one; he is a Spaniard (or a Castilian, or a Basque) no more. His life, his toil, his identity, is no longer merely an adjunct of the power base across the ocean.

A revolution is usually a bloody business. But the victorious upstarts who topple the great colonial powers wend their way through the pages of history secure as heroes. General George Washington's military successes are seldom weighed against the loss of British and American lives; his crusade was an entirely justified and necessary battle to secure the freedoms of coming generations, freedoms still enjoyed more than two centuries later. Simón Bolívar's march through swaths of Latin America, liberating the enslaved from their Spanish overlords, rightly takes on mythical status in the story of the southern states; one would be hard pressed to find any large town in northern or central South America without a Plaza de Bolívar or an Avenida de Bolívar. Indeed, two entire countries—Bolivia and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela—borrow their very name from the Great Liberator. That Bolívar's campaign carried with it legions of killed and injured is immaterial—such is the cost of freedom.

Washington and Bolívar are rightly hailed as heroes. Aguirre, most definitively, is not. The primary reason for the difference comes down to this: Washington and Bolívar succeeded, Aguirre did not. And history rewards winners.

Aguirre's renunciation of Spain precedes and predicts that of Bolívar and the U.S. Founding Fathers. Of course, the Founding Fathers had no intention or design to deliver the democratic promise of the United States—or Bolivia, Colombia, Venezuela, and so on—to the natives who had been inhabiting the land for centuries. The design, from the start, was to deliver governance to the descendants of the English and Spanish who had arrived earlier and worked the land. They saw an inherent unfairness in a ruler an ocean away sitting on a throne and delivering arbitrary rules to colonists engaged in the business of making the new colony prosper. Aguirre recognized this centuries before independence movements took hold in the Americas, and he tried to do something about it. But his revolution failed, and those who sketched his story assured that his mark on history was but a blood-spattered stain.

Aguirre was a brutal man, but his brutality masked qualities worth examining in the pursuit of understanding the unique historical context and characters of the colonial Americas. Now, 450 years after Aguirre's rampage through the jungles and towns of northern South America, the madman, Lope el Loco, deserves a second look in English-speaking America.

CHAPTER 2

Arrival in the New World

Two decades before Aguirre hunted down Esquivel in Peru, he was living in Seville. He had moved from his hometown of Oñati, in the province of Guipuzcoa, where he was born sometime between 1509 and 1516. Oñati, its name translating as "place with many hills," sits in the middle of Basque country. Aguirre's family possessed no vast wealth, but they were not poor, either. Whatever money was in the family would have gone to Aguirre's older brother and not to him, however. So to make his name and his fortune, he moved to Seville in hopes of signing on to a ship bound for the New World.

Rodrigo Buran, the main accountant for the conquistador Pedro de Heredia—then in Cartagena in today's Colombia—probably took one look at the twenty-something Aguirre and shuddered.[1] There were, no doubt, hundreds of men clamoring for a coveted spot aboard ship, hoping to strike it rich in the New World. If Buran had dared to explain to Aguirre that all the spots were filled, Aguirre would have met the man's gaze with eyes that burned his displeasure. Early physical accounts of Aguirre often focus on his eyes. "When he looked someone over, his eyes moved deep in their sockets, especially when he was annoyed," wrote the chronicler Gonzalo de Zúñiga.[2] "[He had] eyes like a hawk's, and when he looked, he fixed them sternly, particularly when angry," wrote Francisco Vásquez, the earliest of Aguirre's chroniclers.

No doubt Buran heard Aguirre even before he saw him. Vásquez wrote, "I saw this Lope de Aguirre frequently sitting in a shop belonging to a Basque tailor and deafening the whole street with his loud voice." Vásquez also described Aguirre as "a great talker and curser." Probably wishing to

be rid of such a character—and perhaps recognizing Aguirre's deep physical strength—Buran squeezed him in among the 250 enlisted men.

The rush was on. These 250 sweating, stinking, fevered Europeans crammed into the vessel and made their way south along the Guadalquivir River to the Gulf of Cadiz and out into the Atlantic. Most of the men on board watched as Spain receded to a line in the distance. Excited about a fresh start, no doubt many of them felt at least a pang for the home they were leaving, a home few of them would ever see again.

Aguirre, on the other hand, kept his back to Spain. His beady eyes fixed firmly on the widening horizon, he would inhale the salt air and imagine himself in a New World, a place where merit, not political connection or nobility, mattered most. His brother could stay in Oñati with his inheritance and his sheep. Aguirre would go to Peru, where native labor, gold, and influence awaited. He was destined for greatness. He could feel it in his bones.

Francisco Pizarro was among the sixty men accompanying Vasco Núñez de Balboa in 1513 when they spotted the Pacific Ocean off Panama. By the end of the decade, their discovery had helped to establish a base of exploratory operations in Panama. In the coming years, exploration and conquest moved westward, into Nicaragua. Eventually, many of these men would begin heading south, along the Pacific coast. Initial explorations concentrated in present-day Colombia and northern Ecuador. Disease and mosquitoes effectively kept these exploratory teams from proceeding farther south, but the lust for wealth and the pull of adventure could be checked for only so long. Pizarro was undeterred, leading small teams onto Peruvian shores far enough to glean some sense of native riches. Commandeering llamas, Indians, pottery, clothing, and gold, Pizarro returned to Panama with his prizes to recruit men to launch a conquest of present-day Peru. Between 1528 and 1530, Pizarro was in Spain seeking a *capitulación*, a permission for conquest. His timing was impeccable. Hernando Cortés had also arrived in Spain, fresh from Mexico and his vanquishing of the Aztecs and their treasures.

Receiving his capitulación and securing the title of governor and captain-general of Peru, Pizarro returned to the New World with recruits, including his four half brothers. His partner Diego de Almagro had been busy financing the coming expedition in Pizarro's absence. When Pizarro

returned, he brought with him a much lesser title for Almagro: the governorship of the Incan city of Túmbez and a promise of the governorship of territory beyond Pizarro's. Though Almagro managed to move forward anyway, his resentment boiled; the seeds for a major civil war had been set. For now, however, there was still the business of the conquest to get to.

The party successfully attacked and occupied Coaque, in Ecuador, realizing great treasure in gold and silver. The men settled in and awaited reinforcements from the north. Some succumbed to disease, but a ship arrived from Panama with a few dozen replacements. When conquistador Sebastián de Belalcázar arrived with another thirty or so men, the party proceeded south. The Spaniards faced strong resistance at the island of Puná in the Gulf of Guayaquil. But Hernando de Soto soon arrived at Puná, bringing with him two ships, some one hundred men, and two dozen horses.[3] The reinforced party readied itself to head to the mainland, to the land of the Incas. It was early 1532.

Four years earlier, Pizarro had spotted the wealthy city of Túmbez, and the intention in 1532 was to make it the site of a future Peruvian capital. Incan civil wars had largely decimated the place, however. A dynastic war of succession occurred after the death of the emperor Huayna Capac, pitting his sons, half-brothers Huascar and Atahuallpa, against each other—a war Atahuallpa would eventually win. So the conquistadores headed farther south, to Piura.[4] Roughly forty men, either too sick or unwilling to go farther, settled in Piura and received *encomiendas*.[5] The rest of the party, led by Francisco Pizarro, headed to the plains of Cajamarca, where rumor had the Inca king Atahuallpa residing after his defeat of Huascar. There, the Spaniards invited Atahuallpa to come to the central square for a meeting. When he did, he came in the company of thousands of his subjects. With horses and cannons, the Spaniards secreted themselves inside long, low buildings fronting three sides of Cajamarca's central square, under the triple captaincies of de Soto, Belalcázar, and Hernando Pizarro.

Atahuallpa's arrival in the square was impressive: he was carried in a litter by his subjects, with a few hundred chanting nobles clearing the path before him and thousands of Incan warriors trailing. Many of the hiding Spaniards were terrified and awed. "I saw many Spaniards urinate without noticing it out of pure terror," Pedro Pizarro recalled. Francisco Pizarro's representative, Vicente de Valverde, went to speak with Atahuallpa, to convince him to give himself up without a fight. It did not go well, devolving to shouting after Atahuallpa tossed aside a breviary and, in the eyes of the Spaniards, rejected the word of their Christian God. Valverde decried

the act. Harquebusses went off; this was the signal. The Spaniards rushed the Incas, trampling them with their horses and easily routing them with their superior firepower, as the Incas carried only slingshots and clubs. The Incas carrying Atahuallpa fought to keep him aloft as the Spaniards chopped off their arms and hands. As the Incas ran to the outlying fields, the Spaniards pursued and massacred them, easily capturing Atahuallpa. Estimates put Incan deaths between six thousand and seven thousand men, while the Spaniards did not lose one life. They attributed their great success to God, for they had acted primarily out of absolute fear and had been desperately outmanned.

It was an extraordinary rout, aided in large part by Atahuallpa's missteps and his underestimation and miscomprehension of his adversaries' force and willingness to attack first. He had proved a brilliant tactician in defeating his brother and native tribes, but the Spaniards were a different kind of animal altogether. Because the Inca's power was divine and absolute, and because he continued to give orders while in captivity, no one sought to fill Atahuallpa's place. Assuming that the Spaniards would leave once they received sufficient treasure, the Incan king promised to fill a large room with gold, twenty-two feet by seventeen feet, in exchange for his release.

Pizarro agreed, and Atahuallpa believed the Spaniards would keep their word. He did not give any orders for his men to attack the Spaniards but told them to busy themselves collecting gold instead. Besides, his captains, who headed up large armies of tens of thousands of men, had to remain on guard over hostile populations due to the civil war. Over several months, as gold poured in from all over the Inca kingdom, the Spaniards grew restless. Pizarro dispatched his brother Hernando to Pachacámac to retrieve gold and silver, which he did successfully. Hernando also captured an even bigger haul at Jauja on the return trip. Three other conquistadores—Juan de Zárate, Pedro de Moguer, and Martín Bueno—secured an immense treasure out of Cuzco.

When Almagro and his men arrived from Panama, they realized to their chagrin that Atahuallpa's captors had consolidated the hoard of money for themselves; even the lowliest had accumulated fortunes far exceeding anything seen to date in the Indies.[6] Each of Pizarro's 168 men involved in the capture had been awarded a lucrative encomienda, raising many of them from their humble origins to the leading men of Peru.[7]

But the conquistadores were getting nervous. They heard rumors of Indian movements in the countryside. Almagro and other captains

persuaded a reluctant Pizarro to put Atahuallpa to death. When it was done, Pizarro himself led the mourning. The killing was an act of gross injustice even in the eyes of many Spaniards; ultimately, the king himself condemned it, as he wished his men to conquer with the moral high ground intact. "We have been displeased by the death of Atahuallpa, since he was a monarch, and particularly as it was done in the name of justice," he wrote to Pizarro.

The conquest continued unabated and, with the exception of some Inca resistance and skirmishes, was extraordinarily successful. When the Spaniards sought to take full control of the royal city of Cuzco, they were generally well received because the area was replete with the supporters of Atahuallpa's chief rival, the now executed Huascar, as well as Andean Indians who were largely indifferent to the fading Incan ruling class. The Spaniards could claim to have liberated the throne from Huascar's adversary. More encomiendas were granted in the conquered towns and, by the end of 1533, the conquistadores ruled Cuzco. Conquests to the north (Upper Peru and Ecuador) soon followed. By the end of the following year, Sebastián de Belalcázar ruled Quito, and the Incan kingdom was essentially destroyed.

In the end, the Spaniards benefited from extraordinary luck in timing. Pedro Pizarro wrote, "Had Huayna-Capac been alive when we Spaniards entered this land it would have been impossible to win it, for he was greatly loved by his subjects . . . [and] if the land had not been divided by the wars of Huascar and Atahuallpa, we could not have entered or conquered it unless over a thousand Spaniards had come simultaneously."

So Incan factionalism, impeccable timing, the settlement of Piura and the establishment of a permanent capital at Lima, and the conquest of Cuzco and Cajamarca all combined to set the stage for complete Spanish rule in Peru. Almagro and his men led southern forays into today's Bolivia and Chile. Still smarting from their failure to reap the Incan treasures of Peru, they were sorely disappointed by the lack of treasure there. The stage was set for the first major civil war among the conquistadores, which would culminate in 1537–1538 in the War of Salinas, where Pizarro would badly defeat Almagro.

Sporadic Inca uprisings would continue for years, but Spanish authority had been firmly established and would remain intact for centuries, threatened in the next two decades primarily by internal squabbling and battles. The original wave of conquistadores had become powerful, rich, and influential. Men such as Aguirre came to the New World in hopes of following in their footsteps.

With the Pizarros in firm control of Peru, Gonzalo took over as governor at Quito. While in Quito, he heard rumors of vast wealth in the jungle hinterlands. Later, reports filtered in of a land so rich that Indians smeared their chief in resins and then covered him with gold dust so that he shone like a golden statue. Sebastián de Belalcázar was the first to hear of it, from natives. It is Belalcázar whom historians generally credit for coining the term El Dorado (the Golden One), in the Spanish manner of naming kings: El Cruel, El Bravo, El Generoso.[8]

The Colombian explorer Joaquín Acosta described the most prevalent version of the myth making the rounds in the early days of the conquest:

> When the chief of Guatavitá was independent, he made a solemn sacrifice every year, which, for its singularity, contributed to give celebrity to the lake of Guatavitá, in the most distant countries, and which was the origin of the belief in El Dorado. On the day appointed the chief smeared his body with turpentine, and then rolled in gold dust. Thus gilded and resplendent, he entered the canoe, surrounded by his nobles, whilst an immense multitude of people, with music and songs, crowded round the shores of the lake. Having reached the center, the chief deposited his offerings of gold, emeralds, and other precious things, and then jumped in himself, to bathe. At this moment the surrounding hills echoed with the applause of the people; and, when the religious ceremony concluded, the dancing, singing, and drinking began.[9]

The sixteenth-century Spanish historian and writer Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés portrayed the golden king as somewhat haughty: "He continually goes covered with gold ground small, or as minute as well-pounded salt, because he considers that there is no vestment or ornament to compare with this; and that thin plates of gold are there cheap and common, and that other chiefs can and do array themselves in these when they please; but to dust one's self over with gold is a very singular and very costly thing, because every day he covers himself with it afresh, and at night washes it with oil and lets it go to waste." Oviedo then mused, "I would rather have the sweepings of the chamber of this prince than the great meltings of gold there have been in Peru."[10]

Modern historians have suggested that the story of Lake Guatavitá and its resplendent chief were largely exaggerations that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century chroniclers grafted on to the original El Dorado myths. But the stories were indicative of the mentality that attracted many of the first (and subsequent) waves of conquistadores; namely, that the jungles hid extraordinary wealth.

Exploration of the northern coast of South America, at Venezuela, began when Alonso de Ojeda "discovered" the land in 1499, though Christopher Columbus had landed there a year earlier. Ojeda gets the credit of discovery, however, largely because he gave the country its name. Seeing stilted houses natives built over Lake Maracaibo, Ojeda christened the area Little Venice, or Venezuela.

With Europeans firmly ensconced in the area shortly thereafter, slaving posts soon followed. Settlers established bases at Coro and Tocuyo, both cities among the oldest in the Americas. Soon after, in 1528, King Charles ceded the area to the Welsers, a consortium of German bankers, to help settle Spanish debts accrued in gaining Charles the title Holy Roman Emperor. The Germans' grant included the allowance of German-controlled slave labor. The Germans could search for gold in their area but were subject to the "royal one-fifth," a stipulation that they had to send one-fifth of all generated income to Spain. Germans Ambrosius Ehinger, who would become governor, and Bartholomäus Seyler, who became lieutenant governor, took the helm.[11]

The Germans did little to settle the area but instead focused their efforts on finding gold. On a 1530 expedition, Ehinger left Seyler at Coro and took roughly two hundred Spaniards and several hundred Indians with him into the Amazonian interior. Ehinger's men marauded, killed, slashed, and burned; they even managed to completely depopulate several villages. Occasionally, they reaped rewards: one Indian chief at Tamalameque gave up gold and other jewelry.[12] This, of course, only spurred on the explorers.

Going further into the Amazon was as deadly a proposition in the sixteenth century as it can be in the twenty-first. Eventually, Ehinger and most of his men suffered tremendously from the privations of the forest. He led them out into the eastern mountains, where most eventually froze to death. Moving into a warmer valley, Ehinger and his men fell prey to an Indian attack. Ehinger took an arrow in his neck and died. His

remaining followers pressed on, cutting a new swath of massacre and cruelty through the jungle, and eventually made their way back to Coro two years after they had set out.

The Ehinger expedition marked the first failure of the consortium but not the last. Several subsequent expeditions, some matching its brutality, others comparatively peaceful, failed to find the lusted-after treasure they were sure was buried deep in the jungle. During this time, increased interaction among Germans, Spaniards, and natives gave rise to further belief in rich kingdoms in the jungle. Spanish lust for gold, mixed with native reports of wealth, meant that more pushes into the jungle were not long in coming. This period saw the first forays into the western jungle, as opposed to the northern sections explored by the German Welsers.

It was into this world—unstable with impending civil war, hot in climate, and, and full of fevered fortune seekers—that Aguirre arrived, landing at Cartagena in 1534. His first occupation in the New World was grave robbing, plundering Indian tombs for gold.[13] Aguirre's discontent formed and grew during this employment, spawning a worldview that would follow him to the depths of the Amazon jungle and beyond. After digging in the heat of that tropical shore, he was not allowed to keep all that he found. Law and custom obliged him to divide his plunder in tribute to the Crown. Aguirre chafed against a system that had men like him toiling away only to have to share the spoils with royal emissaries. At every turn, Aguirre felt himself increasingly aggrieved at such unfairness.

At least one historian has Aguirre involved in an uprising early in his career in the New World. Demetrio Ramos Pérez places Aguirre aside Martín de Guzmán in the latter's uprising against the governor of Cartagena, Pedro de Heredia, after a failed expedition to Cenu in search of gold mines.[14] If accurate, this account suggests Aguirre was disenchanted with the established order from the start. His disenchantment would grow exponentially.

During this period, Aguirre also found steady employ in perhaps the only legitimate enterprise of his life. Named *regidor* (a councilman or alderman) in Nuevo Toledo, in Peru, he learned the trade of horse breaking.[15] Channeling naturally turbulent behavior into energy he could control was a skill he would later apply to his human followers. Indeed, few animals—equine or human—would find him an easy man to defy.

Aguirre moved on to Cuzco, where he continued to ply his trade in horse breaking. Though dangerous, it was good and satisfying work that Aguirre probably enjoyed. Wild forest dwellers, the horses would provide an extreme challenge for any man who approached seeking to lasso a neck as the beasts fled. Aguirre would have to hold on as the horse, far more powerful than he, kicked and bucked and snorted in rage and fear. After waiting for the horse to tire itself, Aguirre would walk to its side, stroking its neck before slowly climbing on, risking a buck and spill and perhaps a broken neck.

Back in Spain, though, the New World had promised Aguirre much more than simply taming horses. When the opportunity arose to "tame" humans and perhaps gain influence by serving the Crown, Aguirre jumped.

Like Aguirre, Diego de Rojas had come from Spain to the New World, but he was part of a force designed to beat down sporadic Incan uprisings. He traveled to what is today's Bolivia and aided in the conquest of the province of Charcas. After Ciudad de la Plata de la Nueva Toledo (today's Sucre, capital of Bolivia) was founded in 1528, Rojas became its first governor. At the close of the 1530s, Aguirre served with Rojas in an exploration of the jungle area in northern Peru, where Rojas's men pacified the Chunchos Indians.[16] The service won Aguirre no tangible reward or royal favors, and his disenchantment grew. His time spent in the jungle would provide invaluable experience in the years to come, however.

The restless Aguirre moved again, to the city of Collao, in Peru. There, he served with Captain Diego Alvarez Holguín in efforts to pacify the natives near the city. It was similar to his work in Charcas with Rojas. Aguirre acquitted himself well, serving admirably but, once again, with no tangible reward. When Holguín marched off to Cuzco to accept a new post, Aguirre was left behind, simply one of many who served. Even with his distinctive eyes and demeanor, he was faceless and nameless—this is not what he had anticipated upon leaving Spain.

Seeing more evidence of the system of patronage that ruled Peru, Aguirre grew increasingly disenchanted. When the second great war between the Pizarrists and the Almagrists began at Chupas, near Cuzco, on September 16, 1542, the royalists conscripted Aguirre to fight for their cause. He instead fled to Huamanga, knowing full well what little reward awaited if he fought. Although he successfully avoided the battle, he became a wanted man for deserting. He fled to Guatemala and then moved on to

Panama.[17] In Panama, he helped to conquer the town of Nombre de Dios for the king of Spain. In so doing, he earned an amnesty and was allowed to move freely once again.[18]

In 1544, Aguirre once again defended the royals, this time the regime of the first Spanish viceroy of Peru, Blasco Núñez Vela, whose charge from the king was to implement the wildly unpopular New Laws. Aguirre's fighting for Núñez is ironic, of course, considering it was his later violation of these rules that led to his whipping at Potosí. Once again, he received no recompense for defending the Crown. Whether out of irresolvable spite or because fighting was what he knew and did well, Aguirre immediately switched sides and fought with Gonzalo Pizarro and Francisco de Carvajal, who came to power expressly on the promise of ignoring the New Laws. Pizarro's rebel army defeated Núñez in 1546 at Añaquito. Aguirre fought for the winning side, but because Pizarro's reign was predicated in part on defying the Crown, he knew well enough to keep a low profile. This he managed for several years—until military machinations engulfed him once again.

CHAPTER 3

The Madman

Lust for gold had taken firm root before Aguirre's arrival in the Americas, and it continued unabated after. As Aguirre was establishing himself in the New World, three separate expeditions were scouring the northern jungles looking for new Perus or Mexicos to conquer—Sebastián de Belalcázar exploring east from Quito, Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada south from Santa Marta in Colombia, and Nicolaus Federmann southeast from Coro, in Venezuela.[1] Each expedition experienced great travail. Belalcázar's men, for example, faced a barrage of Indian poison-tipped arrows. The result was rather hideous. Expedition member Pedro Cieza de Léon observed, "It was only necessary to make a prick and bring out a drop of blood, when quickly the poison reached the heart and the victim, overcome by great nausea, biting his own hands, and abhorring life, longed to die. So fierce was the flame of that poison that it consumed the entrails, the vital spirit fled and the victims seemed to be distraught, crying out like madmen."[2]

In an extraordinary fluke, the three separate expeditions met at the plateau of Cundinamarca, in today's Colombia, in February 1539. Belalcázar's and Federmann's armies separately stumbled upon Quesada's army, which had been occupying the region for a couple of years. Though it seems too neat a detail to be credible, histories have it that after many years of awful slogs and many lost men and horses, the three armies straggled into their unexpected meeting with exactly 166 men remaining in each. Though they had gathered gold along the way, effectively emptying the province of Cundinamarca, none of the three discovered a rich kingdom to conquer.

Quesada, for one, still believed in the myth of El Dorado; it existed, but it must be elsewhere. As for the great Lake Guatavitá, Quesada's brother,

Hernán Pérez de Quesada, discovered it in 1545 and had his men attempt to drain it. Working during the dry season, Hernán Pérez assembled a chain of men with empty gourds, lowering the lake roughly nine feet in three months. Though they extracted between three thousand and four thousand pieces of gold in the process, it was nowhere near the amount they had envisioned.[3]

This strange consortium of starry-eyed men, this combination of German and Spanish explorers—men like Belalcázar, Geronimo D'Ortal, Ehinger, Federmann, Alonso de Hererra, Philipp von Hutten, Diego de Ordaz, and the Quesada brothers—found gold and cities, but nothing matched the dreamed of splendors of an El Dorado. The irony of all this was that the originators of the El Dorado story, the Guatavitas Indians, had already been exterminated by the Muisca Indians by the time the Spaniards arrived on the scene. The Europeans, then, were chasing a history that was already gone.

This did not stop more men from looking, of course; instead, each successive expedition failure caused the next to focus on a different location. Despite the horrors encountered by earlier expeditions, in 1559 authorities were forming a new expedition in search of El Dorado, and men such as Aguirre would soon arrive to sign on.

While in Panama in the late 1540s, Aguirre took an Indian concubine who bore him a daughter.[4] Aguirre named her Elvira.[5] Aguirre was especially devoted to Elvira, whom he affectionately called Cora.[6] He would even bring her along on his fateful Amazon expedition in 1560. Her presence there would provide one of the more sensational details of Aguirre's story. As for Elvira's mother, little is known. But her otherwise anonymous story was not an unusual one. Sexual contact between Spanish men and Indian women was commonplace. Concubinage was an accepted practice after the end of the Conquest. Because of their advantage in race and gender and the relative absence of Spanish women, Spanish men often kept an Indian woman in their house.[7] In the more remote areas, it was not uncommon for some men to keep several women, and there was little interest in discretion.[8]

Before Aguirre headed into the jungle on his fateful expedition, he moved to the mountains of Potosí, where he received his lashings at the hands of Esquivel. After his epic trek to find and murder Esquivel, the authorities sentenced him to death. He avoided punishment by remaining in hiding in Nicaragua during 1551–1552. When he felt it safe to return

to Peru, he once again fought against the royalist forces, clashing with the Crown when he sided with the revolt of don Sebastián de Castilla in Upper Peru in 1552–1553.[9] Castilla ordered the murder of General Pedro de Hinojosa, an early ally turned opponent of Gonzalo Pizarro, and chose Melchor Verdugo and Aguirre to undertake the killing, which they did in May of 1553. When don Sebastián himself was murdered, Aguirre, fearing retribution, fled once again.[10]

No question Aguirre was now a very wanted man, destined to be on the run the rest of his days. He had earned his reputation for ruthlessness and instability. Chronicler Francisco Vásquez wrote of Aguirre, "He was so turbulent and bad-tempered that no town in Peru could hold him." Fray Pedro de Simón, writing four decades after the events that would most define Aguirre, confirmed his outlaw status: "He mixed himself up in so many seditions in various parts, that he could not be tolerated in the country. . . . He was driven from one province to the other, and was known as Aguirre the madman." Another chronicler, Gonzalo de Zúñiga, claimed that Aguirre had been involved in no fewer than seven active rebellions and that the authorities in Peru "regarded him as a ruffian, a sorcerer, an incorrigible rebel. . . . No local magistrate allowed him to take up residence in his town and regularly he was expelled."[11]

But even in a world governed by swift and complete justice, Aguirre would get another chance.

Francisco Hernández Girón fought opposite Aguirre at the Battle of Añaquito. Girón sided with the royalist forces under Blasco Núñez Vela against Pizarro. When Núñez was deposed as viceroy, his post eventually settled to Melchor Bravo de Saravia. Girón immediately fell at odds with Saravia and led an uprising. Girón's revolt would mark the last of the major civil wars. He would be defeated, but he constituted a serious threat, controlling large swaths of the Peruvian highlands and even once advancing within just a few miles of Lima. Aguirre volunteered to fight against Girón again—and thus for the Crown. The peripatetic Aguirre headed back to the mountains, to Cuzco again, with his beloved daughter, Elvira, in tow. Now encamped on the royalist side under Alonso de Alvarado, the man who had previously declared Aguirre a public enemy in Cuzco, Aguirre fought valiantly in the Battle of Chuquinga in December 1554.

Aguirre was a warrior, and he knew how to fight. No doubt he acquitted himself well at Chuquinga. But whatever force—whether luck, or skill,

or some combination thereof—had kept him safe through so many battles failed him this time. In the heat of thick combat, he took a harquebus shot to his right leg. While the skirmish swirled around him, Aguirre fell to the ground, writhing and screaming in the dust. As the men and horses clomped near his head, he shrieked, the dirt clinging to his sweat-soaked face, the veins on his neck ready to burst.

He survived and eventually recovered. But he would forever after walk with a limp, possessed now of another distinguishing characteristic that the chroniclers dutifully focus on in describing him. Indeed, there is unanimity about Aguirre's corporeal ugliness. One anonymous chronicle introduced Aguirre as an "audacious monster . . . hideously ugly, and lame in one foot."[12] Simón continues the thread: "short stature, and sparely made, ill-featured, the face small and lean, beard black." Chronicler Francisco Vásquez wrote, "Lope de Aguirre was . . . small of stature and not much to look at, with a mean, small and gaunt face." The poet and preacher Diego de Aguilar y de Córdoba, who also served as a corregidor in Huamanga from 1603 to 1607, wrote of Aguirre in his only prose work, *El Marañon*, "He had an ill-shaped face, was lantern-jawed and had small beady, uneasy eyes which, when he was annoyed, flashed and moved restlessly."[13] Zúñiga described the "cruel despot" as a man of "small stature, [who] had an ugly face and limped badly, for one leg was shorter than the other, the result of having received an harquebus shot." The historian Reginaldo de Lizárraga wrote, "He was of medium stature, not at all good-looking, lame and limping and a great talker, forever swearing and possibly even a heretic."[14]

Aguirre's involvement in so many of the wars and uprisings of the turbulent period between 1537–1538 (the War of Salinas) and 1554 (the defeat of Girón) is significant. The many battles and rebellions during these years "were at first very largely personal and factional feuds . . . but they were also conflicts between the rich and the poor, the well established and the newly arrived."[15] A pattern had been established: select men gained favor and accrued riches; many more did not. Discontent grew. Juan García de Hermosilla, a veteran of the conquest of Peru, wrote, "Peru was not won, nor was any blood spilled here, by dukes or counts or people titled 'don' or relatives of royal judges, because they didn't come in the time of danger."[16]

With the last of the major uprisings, under Girón, Spanish Peru entered a comparatively serene period, due mostly to the leadership of viceroy don Andrés Hurtado de Mendoza Cañete (1556–1560). Cañete concentrated on building infrastructure, setting up official councils, and

promoting men obedient to the Crown. He also rewarded selected men with large encomiendas. But social conditions changed little, and the same men—the first wave of conquistadores, the captains in the civil wars, and courtly nobles newly arrived from Spain—retained enormous wealth and influence, consolidating riches and effectively preventing the second wave of Spanish arrivals from sharing in the spoils.[17] In the following years, encomiendas were often redistributed and reassigned based upon who fought with whom in the civil wars. In each case, Aguirre did not find himself a beneficiary, instead seeing continued consolidation in the hands of the well connected. By the end of the 1550s, the criteria for awarding encomiendas were: "seniority in the conquest of Peru, social background in Spain, military action in the civil wars, and connections with the governors or royal court."[18] In each category save conduct in the civil wars, Aguirre was out of luck. Because he had involved himself against the royals on more than one occasion, he could not hope for favor there either.

This social order began to weaken only after the end of Viceroy Cañete's reign in 1560. But by that time, Aguirre would be in the jungle, a world away.

Five quiet years passed after Chuquinga, time Aguirre spent in Elvira's company and in anguish, ruminating over a failed life. He had spent nearly a quarter century in the New World, and he had little to show for it apart from physical scars and deep grudges and gripes against the Spanish royalty. In Aguirre's view, men like him did all the hard work of settling and populating the land while a few governors, nobles, and priests consolidated the treasure.

And so Aguirre's resentments multiplied—but they would soon enough have an outlet.

CHAPTER 4

The Discharge of the Land

By the end of the 1550s, Peru was rife with vagrants, young men who had sailed from Spain hoping to enjoy the spoils of the Spanish Conquest but had gotten nothing. They spent their time carousing drunkenly, fighting, molesting natives, and creating a constant headache for Spanish rulers in charge of the provinces. Headache though they were, these hungry treasure seekers were perfect for filling the ranks of expeditions and blind to the perils that stood between them and potential fortune. In an official response to all the discontented conquistadores populating the new lands, the Crown instituted a policy called *la descarga de la tierra* (the discharge of the land). The policy called for the many survivors of various rebellions and insurrections to be "rewarded" with a chance to join an expedition into newly discovered lands in search of wealth. Those who had fought against the Crown could earn amnesty by doing service in settling new lands.

Sending these men en masse into the jungle hinterlands proved a good way of both pursuing treasure and emptying the province of its worst ruffians. One chronicler summed it up this way: "[Rumors of El Dorado] so excited the minds of those restless spirits with whom Peru was full, and who were ever ready to credit those rumors, that the viceroy thought it prudent to seek some way by which to give employment to so large a body of turbulent men."[1] Indeed, the rate of homicide and swordplay in the province was rather shocking. After Pizarro's 1541 expedition, "The governors [of Peru] were frankly more interested in dispersing a turbulent mob than in developing new territories."[2] Men signed on in great numbers: they were often ill-informed, they lusted after adventure, and, frankly, they had little other opportunity. Only later would authorities

begin to question their own policy, realizing, after all, that congregating so many of these "turbulent men," so recently involved in all manner of uprising, might not yield the most favorable results.

The dashing young general Pedro de Ursúa represented the type of person Aguirre despised. Ursúa was all that Aguirre was not: young, handsome, a noble, universally well liked. He was also a logical choice to lead an expedition. Unlike the ruffians who would fill out his expedition's ranks, he was a *caballero hidalgo* (noble knight) from an old Navarrese family near Pamplona. He was appointed governor of New Granada, centered in modern-day Colombia, when he was only twenty years old. Along with don Ortún Velasco de Velázquez, he founded the city Nueva Pamplona del Valle del Espíritu Santo—today's Pamplona, Colombia—and he had led earlier expeditions in search of El Dorado in the jungles of New Granada. He was named chief justice of Santa Marta in 1551. He had served the Crown with distinction, in New Granada against the Tairona Indians and against the Cimarrones, escaped African slaves living on the Isthmus of Panama. He earned his laurels partly by building a reputation for deploying an iron hand when the situation called for it. After putting down the Cimarrones slave revolt, he allegedly turned his mastiffs on several of the captured Africans, allowing them to kill and eat the men as an example to others.

By the time of his El Dorado expedition, in 1560, he was a seasoned veteran in the New World, but he was still young—just thirty-three. Garcilaso de la Vega, the Incan chronicler and author of the indispensable Conquest history *Comentarios reales*, explained that Ursúa was "a very popular figure everywhere he went" due to his "great goodness and virtue."[3] The expedition's most thorough historian, Fray Pedro de Simón, wrote that Ursúa was "of middle size, slightly formed, but well proportioned, with the manners of a gentleman; light complexion and beard the same, courteous, affable, fond of his soldiers, and more inclined to mercy than to justice." Despite his high standing, Ursúa could relate to some of the rougher men of his expedition, men like Aguirre. Both Ursúa and Aguirre hailed from towns in Spain that were far from the prevailing power center in Castile. Also, both men could speak Basque as well as Spanish.[4] But it was not shared geography that would put these two men on a collision course with each other, and with history.

Early in 1559, Ursúa scoured the area around Lima looking for hooligans and willing men then causing trouble. Finding volunteers was not a problem; the lure of a chance at glory and gold proved irresistible. Chroniclers of the Ursúa expedition made a connection between the policy of *la descarga de la tierra* and the ruffians who populated the expedition. One of the expeditioners, Cristóbal Hernández de Chaves, for example, was a known traitor. Francisco Vásquez declared that "in Peru [Chaves] had himself practiced every known method of killing . . . [He was] a renegade and a bad Christian." The viceroy had once put a price of one thousand pesos on his head. Simón concurred, writing, "There were at [Ursúa's] camp . . . certain frustrated traitors who had taken part in several riots in Peru against His Majesty's service, some of whom had fled here as a last resort to hide from the authorities who were looking for them because of their crimes and treachery. Other would-be rioters had come because it was said publicly in Peru that Governor Pedro de Ursúa was gathering men together not for an expedition but to fall upon Peru, and that [Viceroy Cañete] supported this plan." It was this rumor that attracted Aguirre and at least one other expedition member, Lorenzo de Salduendo.

The two men met in Cuzco, sharing food and drink and salivating over the prospect of a new expedition. For Salduendo, it was a chance to make a fortune and wield power that he could hold onto for years. For Aguirre, much older, it was simply a last chance. Aguirre was forty-five to fifty years of age by the time the Ursúa expedition set off, not young for a man in the middle of the sixteenth century who had been exposed to oceanic journeys, New World illnesses, unfamiliar and dangerous terrains, and the tumults of uprisings and rebellions that marked the early years of the Spanish Conquest.

Aguirre would have seen a kindred spirit in the untamed and ambitious Salduendo. For his part, Salduendo would have seen an authority figure who knew his way around a rebellion. As they ate and drank and the candlelight reflected in Aguirre's expressive eyes, Salduendo would have certainly recognized a glimmer of mischief in them. One wonders if he considered that the glimmer might later turn its full and malevolent attention on him.

Expeditions, or *entradas*, cost money, and the funding for Ursúa's was scant, despite the number of participants.[5] The expedition required cattle and other livestock, powder, horses, rope, muskets, and munitions, including

harquebusses. The harquebusses and their weapons masters, the *harquebusiers*, proved useful in fending off Indian attacks out on the plains. But they were a suspect choice for jungle travel. The weapons could be fired only after allowing a smoldering light to ignite the gunpowder. If they had to be fired quickly, or in the rain, they were useless.

The viceroy's funds allotted to Ursúa did not cover costs, and only a year of cajoling interested investors in Lima finally allowed Ursúa to set off. His party was enormous: 370 soldiers, of whom one hundred were harquebusiers, and five hundred horses. There were three priests and a dozen women, including Aguirre's daughter, Elvira. She was perhaps thirteen or fourteen when she left with the expedition. Vásquez described her as "a young girl, of gentle disposition, and beautiful."

The most prominent woman on the expedition was the beautiful doña Inés de Atienza.[6] She hailed from Trujillo, Peru's major northern coastal city, the daughter of a man named Blas de Atienza and the widow of Pedro de Arcos of Piura. Ursúa met her when he came through Trujillo on his way to Santa Cruz to begin organizing his camp. Apparently he became so smitten with her that the viceroy himself had to urge Ursúa to get moving and not to tarry any longer in Trujillo on her account.[7]

Her disarming beauty helped to make her a central figure. A mestiza, she would have been among the first generation of such women in Peru. Opinions differ as to her personality—whether she was pure and innocent or a controlling woman who led Ursúa to disaster. One chronicler even suggested that her hold over Ursúa had to do with her practicing witchcraft; the word the men used to describe Ursúa was *embebecido* (distracted). But as to her physical allure, there is universal agreement. Custodio Hernández, another of the expedition's early chroniclers, wrote that doña Inés was "the most beautiful woman in Peru." Garcilaso de la Vega called her "a beautiful girl," and Simón described her as "a spirited and beautiful woman." The nineteenth-century British explorer, geographer, and writer Clements Markham decided that doña Inés was peerless. Echoing Simón in describing her as "young, beautiful, and spirited," he recounted her ultimately tragic story to suggest that her appeal had only magnified across the years: "Hers was no common love; it is not every woman, gently nurtured and accustomed to the comforts of civilized life, who would have willingly encountered the appalling hardships of a search for El Dorado, and a voyage down the great river. . . . The very sublimity of this noble creature's devotion, which no terrors could daunt, no hardships damp, ought to have protected her from the cowardly sneers of

dirty friars, and the calumnies of gold-seeking adventurers."[8] In short, his view was that this beautiful woman should have remained untouchable on a high throne amid the swirl of hundreds of woman-deprived, food-deprived, and increasingly desperate Spanish soldiers and criminals. Even a Victorian such as Markham, imbued with the chaste sensibilities of his age, could not have believed such a thing possible.

Doña Inés and Aguirre's daughter, Elvira, are the two women who received the most attention from the expedition's chroniclers and subsequent historians. There were, however, twelve Spanish or mixed-race women in Ursúa's camp at the expedition's start. Several of them were accompanying their husbands, while some had signed on in the hopes that they would find a husband on the expedition. Perhaps they would even become rich should the party locate El Dorado. One such woman, doña María de Sotomayor, married at the expedition's start, would eventually change lovers several times and watch as many of the men fought and killed each other in competition for her affection.[9]

The presence of these women is testament to their courage and audacity; there could be no illusions about the difficulties they would be undertaking. The two decades between the Conquest and the Ursúa entrada were certainly not easy years for the few hundred Spanish women in Peru. Continuing battles among men with oversize egos meant that most women were relegated to a cloistered existence. As the historian Luis Martín points out, however, women certainly changed the landscape during the early years of the Conquest: "They became secret plotters and vocal protestors, peacemakers and intercessors, as the occasion warranted. Some of them could not resist the allure of the expanding frontier and became itinerant campfollowers. Others, ignoring the rigid demands of their own society, openly became mistresses and 'women of love.'"[10] Women also raised the first generation of American-born children, teaching them about Spanish life and culture, and acted as teachers for Indian servants and black slaves. On the Ursúa expedition, many such tutoring opportunities existed among the six hundred Indian porters and slaves and the few dozen black slaves.[11]

The vast train of people left for the jungle in September 1560. Earlier expedition leaders had taken great pains to ensure that their Indian slaves would not try to escape. Indians were weighted down with provisions and forced to march in unison with long chains attached to their necks. But poor design dictated that unlocking one Indian required unlocking the whole row. On a long trudge through the jungle, this meant lost time and

a lot of effort. Instead, an Indian who fell and was unable to go on simply had his head cut off so that the rest could keep up the march. As the head and body fell away from the chain, the Indians in front and behind carried on, splattered with blood. Eventually, most of them died.

Ursúa instead offered employment as porters and servants for most Indians on his expedition. Those who were slaves were highlanders and knew that running off into the seething jungle was a certain death sentence. Besides, freedom was a better possibility if the expedition was successful in settling new lands than back in the cities of Peru.

Ursúa arrived in the town of Moyobamba, where he met with a priest, Pedro Portillo, a wealthy man in possession of some five or six thousand dollars. Ursúa knew him from an earlier stay at Santa Cruz. Portillo offered two thousand dollars to Ursúa in exchange for being named bishop of the lands to be discovered. Portillo would come along and act as vicar to the expedition. Ursúa enthusiastically agreed.

After thinking it over for a few days, Portillo began to change his mind. He told Ursúa that lending the money would prove a terrible inconvenience and withdrew the offer. Perhaps it was the ragtag band of men who populated the expedition. Perhaps it was the makeshift nature of the men's provisions. Or perhaps the very thing that allowed Ursúa to command so much attention and admiration put the priest off: though accomplished, Ursúa was young. Maybe he appeared too green and too quick to please to make a good expedition leader.

Whatever the reason, it proved awkward for Ursúa. Counting on the money promised him, he had already purchased provisions. Unsure what to do next, Ursúa called five of his most trusted men—Juan de Vargas; Fernando de Guzmán, a young nobleman from Seville; Juan Alonso de Bandera; Pedro Alonzo Casco; and Pedro de Miranda—and laid out his troubles. Ursúa appeared grave as he explained the money problem. The five men, described by one chronicler of the expedition as having "elastic consciences," sniggered to themselves. What problem was there? None that was not easily remedied.

Early the next morning, one of the men called on the priest, telling him he was needed most urgently. Juan de Vargas Zapata had been wounded in a knife fight and would soon die. Vargas rested in the church, and the priest should come straight away to offer final rites. As they hurried to the church, two more men grabbed Portillo and dragged him through town to a merchant's house at the shipyard, where they forced him to sign over the two thousand dollars. They were not done: the men

then took him to the church to see Vargas. When they arrived, Vargas and the remaining man stood waiting, harquebusses pointed at Portillo's chest. They hustled him off to the town of Santa Cruz de Capacoba, where the expedition would finally set its sights on the Amazon.

In Santa Cruz, they forced Portillo to sign over the rest of his money and then made him accompany the expedition even though he was old and sick and no longer wanted to go. Portillo had "lost in a single moment . . . all he had spent a lifetime acquiring."[12] This episode, before the expedition had even officially begun, marked the sentiments and thirsts typical of so many men who would be going along.

But the character who would emerge most villainous had not yet made an appearance in the official narrative. The madman had yet to make his mark.

CHAPTER 5

Models and Failures

Aguirre fought for and against the rebellions of Gonzalo Pizarro and Girón, respectively, and he could look up to them as models for his own rebellious fervor. After all, Pizarro once looked to be just another casualty of the jungle, an early failure in the quest for riches. But he had emerged from the Amazon, ragged though he was, and went on to take control of Peru for a period of four years, 1544 to 1548, a time in which all the riches of Peru stayed in Peru. Pizarro suspended the practice of *quinto real*, ceding one-fifth of all profit to Spain.[1]

Pizarro's demise began when the king's representative, Pedro de La Gasca, came to Peru bearing news of the relaxation of the New Laws, robbing Pizarro of his chief attraction. La Gasca wrote a letter to Pizarro informing him that his actions thus far had "been interpreted by his Majesty and everyone else in Spain not as rebellion or infidelity against the King, but as a means of claiming justice due you, as part of a petition put before your Prince."[2] Nevertheless, La Gasca explained, there is a natural order in the world, vassal subservient to king and king only to God. Pizarro's quest was upsetting the natural order, something the king, and reason, could not tolerate. Then, using his considerable skills at negotiation, he met with many of Pizarro's officers and won them over to his side.

By the time a military clash took place in April 1548 at Xaquixaguana near Cuzco, most of Pizarro's men had deserted him. Realizing impending defeat, Pizarro slashed at his fleeing men, even breaking his lance on one of them. But it was of little avail. The king's men captured him, and Pizarro spent his last day in confession. Garcilaso de la Vega recorded his end: standing at the guillotine, Pizarro addressed the crowd, saying, "I place hopes in God that by the blood and passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ,

His Son, and through the alms that your worships grant me, He will have pity of me and will pardon my sins." Pizarro kneeled before a crucifix while the executioner moved to cover his eyes with a bandage. Pizarro waved it off. He looked up at his executioner and whispered, "Do your task well, brother Juan."[3]

He was buried in Cuzco, and his head was displayed in Lima along with a placard that read, "This is the head of the traitor Gonzalo Pizarro, who rebelled in Peru against the sovereign, and battled in the cause of tyranny and treason against the royal standard." After Pizarro's execution, La Gasca redistributed many encomiendas, based upon who fought against Pizarro. Once again, Aguirre had fought on the wrong side.

Aguirre had other New World revolutionary models. Among them was Cristóbal de Olid, who was central in the conquests of parts of Mexico and Central America, fighting with Hernando Cortés in his defeat of the Aztecs in the early sixteenth century. Named the leader of an expedition to conquer Honduras in 1523, Olid turned on his patrons, declared independence, and set out to conquer Honduras for himself. Cortés sent his cousin Francisco de Las Casas to defeat his old fighting partner. Las Casas lost men and ships, but he managed to defeat Olid anyway, imprisoning him. Histories conflict as to whether Olid's own men murdered him or whether Las Casas had him beheaded. In either case, his brief campaign and insurrection ended unsuccessfully. The powerful Crown had won again.

Hernando de Contreras carried out another failed insurrection. After Rodrigo de Contreras ascended to the governorship of Nicaragua in 1534, the New Laws were promulgated through his land. Part of the laws stipulated that all governors and officers of the Crown were prohibited from retaining Indian slaves. Contreras quickly transferred all his property to his son, Hernando. A tribunal found the transfer illegal and ordered all the slaves made property of the Crown. Rodrigo left for Spain to plead his case. In his absence, Hernando led a revolt in his father's name. Hernando and his followers first murdered the province's bishop, Antonio de Valdivieso, and confiscated his treasury. As increasing numbers of disaffected men from Granada and Peru were drawn to Hernando's side, they made a plan to invade Peru and make Hernando king, shouting, "Liberty, liberty for Hernando de Contreras, Captain General of Liberty!"

The campaign began well: the rebels seized two ships and set sail for Panama. Along the way, they took possession of more ships and then seized the port at Panama, where they plundered at will. They then set off on foot for Nombre de Dios for more plunder. But the inhabitants of

Panama regrouped, and when one of Hernando's officers returned with his soldiers the next day, they defeated him in battle. Hernando got word of the defeat and sensed the end. Seeking to escape via the town of Nata, he drowned in a swamp.

There is an important distinction to be made between Aguirre's rebellion and most of the earlier New World rebellions. In the early cases, fighting between conquistadores centered on who would wield the most power or on replacing the Crown's representatives. There was little doubt they would remain subservient to the king. Aguirre was aware of these attempted insurrections. He would also have been aware of how these men met their end. However, like any man who believes himself a leader, he would have seen his revolutionary predecessors as much in terms of their shortcomings as their brief successes. No doubt he could do a better job of it than they.

Ursúa formed a plan to have a contingent go ahead of the rest of the expedition to the province of Tubalosas, where they would wait, settle the natives, and collect more provisions until Ursúa was ready to embark. He named two men to top posts of this contingent: Francisco Díaz de Arlés and the expedition's treasurer, Diego de Frías. These two men hated a third attendant, Pedro Ramiro, Ursúa's lieutenant general, a post both Frías and Arlés aspired to. When Ursúa made Ramiro the leader, Frías and Arlés seethed, and they grew bold in their mutual anger and commiseration.

Two friends of the dispossessed, Grijota and Alonso Martin, discovered Frías and Arlés after Ramiro allegedly dismissed them. Arlés and Frías told the other two that Ramiro intended to lead a revolt and kill Ursúa—would they be interested in doing the king's service and preventing the usurpation, by whatever means necessary?

The four traveled together a few miles before they saw Ramiro on the banks of a river, supervising his men crossing the waterway in pairs or groups of three. When all but Ramiro and his servant had crossed, Arlés, Frías, Grijota, and Martin greeted Ramiro, who was satisfied that they came in peace. In an instant, however, the four men seized him. The servant ran off in the direction of Ursúa at his camp on the Motilones River. Frías strangled Ramiro and then the others cut off his head. Whether by self-delusion or deceit, the men congratulated themselves as heroes and rowed to the other side of the river, where they told the contingent waiting there what they had done and why. No one issued even a murmur of protest.

When Ursúa heard the news, however, he set off immediately for the scene of the murder. The major players in this little drama (and it was miniscule, compared to what would unfold over the following months) then engaged in mental chess. Ursúa arrived without a strong contingent behind him, hoping this lack of force would show the murderers that they would be given an impartial hearing and be dealt with fairly. Accordingly, the four men did not flee, nor did they attempt to take up arms. Doing so would have betrayed guilt, and they were thoroughly convinced now of their righteousness. Ursúa sent the men back to Santa Cruz, where he promised a fair trial under the auspices of the governor, who arrived in town a few days later and had the men locked up.

Hearing all that had happened and hearing the case for the death of Ramiro, the governor pronounced sentence: beheading. The men received the news without shock or consternation. They reckoned it was for show, a necessity dictated by the governor's position and his need to set an example. They felt sure that what really lay ahead was a royal appeal at Lima, while the sentence would serve as warning and precedent. But the governor did not sway; neither did Ursúa intercede on their behalf. The men met the same fate as Ramos, the one they had beheaded, but at least they were spared the terror of being strangled first. The fifth head to roll only added to the sense that this expedition was doomed from the start. Coupled with the incident with Portillo, the entrada carried with it a sense of madness and disaster. And further warnings would soon arrive.

Ursúa's decision not to intercede on behalf of his two captains was probably a wise move, designed to show that any sort of rebellious activity would be dealt with swiftly and mercilessly. Strange, then, that when punishments were later required, Ursúa proved bland and irresolute.

His generosity would come back to haunt him, and history.

CHAPTER 6

Warnings and Omens

As the expedition progressed, Ursúa received a letter from a friend, a settler in Chachapoyas named Pedro de Linasco. Linasco had heard the news of Ramiro's murder. He was a veteran of such expeditions, and he knew what kind of men populated their ranks. Several of the men with Ursúa unnerved Linasco. "If you are unwilling to dismiss them because of their poverty," he wrote, "do not let that feeling of compassion prevent you, but send them to me; and I will support them to the best of my means, till you have advanced into your conquest and may recall them when you can safely give them employment and confer upon them whatever benefits you may be disposed to give." Linasco then named these men specifically: among them, don Martín de Guzmán, Lorenzo de Salduendo, Juan Alonso de la Bandera, Cristóbal Hernández de Chaves—and Lope de Aguirre.

Aguirre's inclusion in the list is hardly a surprise. He had already earned a reputation as a rascally sort, unstable, ill-tempered, and ill-mannered. However, there is begrudging respect from the chroniclers for other qualities that Aguirre possessed, notably his stamina. Vásquez, writing with Pedrarias de Almesto, noted, "He was possessed of an acute and lively intelligence though completely uneducated, . . . He was restless and energetic both as an individual and as a member of a team. He could sustain great hardships, forgo sleep, and we always found him up at the crack of dawn; he was rarely seen sleeping. He was a fine foot soldier, able to carry heavy loads on his shoulders as well as his arms."[1] Diego de Aguilar y de Córdoba wrote, "For a person without education he had an acute and lively brain, capable of rapid decisions and quick reaction in military matters; he was capable of enduring and prolonged hardship . . . very few ever saw him sleep, for he was always alert and on guard. He liked

walking and he did this often; he could carry heavy equipment as well as his weighty weapons."[2]

Ursúa may have seen this bodily fortitude as outweighing any potential rabblerousing. However, Aguirre's physical stamina, though a real asset on the El Dorado expedition, would be undone by his less appealing qualities, just as Linasco predicted.

Linasco also offered another warning to his friend: do not take your mistress, doña Inés de Atienza. It does not require hindsight to see the sagacity of Linasco's warnings about doña Inés. Whether she was an ideal woman or a sorceress, her presence on the expedition could lead to no good. But Ursúa ignored Linasco's advice. He replied to him, and other friends who voiced similar concerns, this way: "Señores, I fully understand what you are saying and that it is the advice of true and good friends, and I know that these gentlemen of whom you speak are much to be blamed for their part in the past rebellions in this kingdom. . . . I believe that they will distinguish themselves on this expedition, on account of the great obligation that they owe, since, as they cannot remain in this country, they must seek to discover and settle another . . . where they may live in all honor and repose."[3]

Ursúa did banish one of the men Linasco warned about, don Martín de Guzmán, but he offered no reply concerning doña Inés or Aguirre.[4] And the entrada continued.

Forty men from a colony established by Juan de Salinas on the nearby Zamora River reinforced the expedition's numbers; these men had heard about Ursúa's goal and wished to join. The expedition had eleven ships ready to go, these having been built somewhere in the vicinity of the juncture of the Saposoa and Huallaga Rivers during the year and a half Ursúa took to collect funds and support. They were brigantines, large ships designed to ferry the horses and loads of provisions.

Six of the ships sank the moment they hit the water. One can only guess at the despair the men felt watching all their hard work and their future prospects get swallowed up by the muddy river. It might have been time to call the whole thing off. But precisely because they had sunk so much time and effort into the enterprise already, Ursúa was determined to go on. Here he made a decision that belies the brilliance he had earlier displayed in rising to his current position: he told the men to abandon most of the remaining supplies. They would replenish farther down the river, he told them. The men unroped the livestock and left them to wander into the jungle. Of the five hundred or so horses they had brought with them from

Santa Cruz, they took only twenty-seven, watching as the rest fled into the forest after the pigs, goats, chickens, and sheep.

Ursúa sent thirty men, led by his friend García del Arce, down the river to collect as much food as they could. Owing to the hoods worn by the Indians in this part of the jungle, the men named the place Caperuzos (hooded people).[5]

Here, Arce was to collect provisions and await the arrival of a second group of men. Together, they would secure the area until Ursúa himself arrived and the entire expedition could proceed as one. But Arce did not follow directions, instead rocketing past the settlement of the Caperuzos, down the Huallaga, and straight into the main mouth of the Amazon, where he and his men stopped at a large island, García Island.[6] It would be four months before a reunion took place.

The journey had been a perilous one. Beyond the Caperuzos, the men traveled thousands of miles without encountering one Indian village where they might hope to barter for food or glean information to help them along their way. Pedrarias de Almesto wrote that "there were many who had nothing to eat but some reeds they found along the beach." Desperate for food, two of the men entered the forest, lost their way, and were unable to find the way back. The rest of the party did not go in search of them.

Once encamped on García Island, the men set up fortifications to defend themselves against frequent Indian attacks. Though badly outnumbered by the Indians, the Spaniards were able to hold their own by virtue of their firearms. Once, when the harquebusses were used up, Arce fired a cannon at an Indians canoe, immediately killing all five men on board. The remaining Indians, roughly thirty in all, then attempted to make peace, but the Spaniards spurned their offerings and took them all prisoner. Then the Spaniards slaughtered them. This proved a tactical blunder. News of these cruelties wound its way down the river. Any tribes thereafter disposed toward peace and barter now either fled at the Spaniards' approach or mounted fierce attacks.

Captain Juan de Vargas led the group of seventy men that Arce was charged to wait for. Aguirre remained behind with Ursúa. Vargas's instructions were to descend the Huallaga River as far as the Ucayali River collecting stores before linking up with Arce and awaiting the rest of the expedition. But Ursúa, like all other Europeans of his time, did not really know the contours of the river country and grossly underestimated the distance he was sending Vargas. It took the captain a week to make the Ucayali. And, of course, Arce and his men were nowhere to be found.

Vargas immediately recognized the perilous nature of their situation. Disembarking at the mouth of the Ucayali, he left some sick men under the leadership of a man named Gonzalo Duarte and, together with another group of his men, ascended the Cocamá River on a three-week trip. They hit a prosperous Indian village where they pilfered food and canoes and captured several Indians. The return trip took more than a month, during which time some of the Indians and three of the Spaniards died.

Vargas's return did little to salve the increasing frustration, anger, and sentiments of mutiny now in full flower along the banks of the Ucayali. The men there had subsisted on scant supplies of turtle eggs and caiman meat. Several of the men had starved, and others talked openly of their suspicion that Ursúa had abandoned them just as Arce had. They flailed about in an eerie and alien world, full of relentless insects and crushing heat and humidity. All around them they could sense the flick of tails, the rustle of bushes, the great unseen world of the jungle waiting to feast upon them. At night, incessant insect whirrs; poisonous frog whistles; and the sudden, piercing screeches of monkeys interrupted their sleep. They tried to steal rest but constantly ran fingers over exposed skin and inside clothing for fear of biting ants, mosquitoes, deadly spiders, and poisonous snakes.

They had nothing to do now but return to Santa Cruz and call an end to it. Some of the men even muttered to themselves about killing Vargas. But Vargas, loyal to the end, rallied the men. He reminded them that Ursúa would not dare abandon them or the expedition; he had invested everything into it. And then Vargas played on their machismo: "It would be cowardice to return home," he said. "Let it never be said in the future that we have been the cause of the failure of so great an expedition." They could not have known then that turning around and heading back home would have simply meant omission from the pages of history; instead, they would be forced to take part in what one historian called "a series of tragedies without parallel in the annals of the conquest."[7]

Vargas was initially vindicated. After a few more weeks passed, a group of canoes slipped quietly down the Huallaga and arrived on the banks of the Ucayali where the restless men awaited the good word: Ursúa was on his way. And he would have reinforcements with him.

Back in Santa Cruz, the young and charismatic leader had rallied virtually all of the inhabitants, convincing them to part with the comforts afforded by the village and follow him into the jungle—there, he assured them, great riches and glory awaited. Those still with Ursúa, who had not gone with the Vargas or Arce parties, were dispirited by the loss of their

livestock and so many of the ships. Several of them, spearheaded by Aguirre, muttered about the futility of their expedition and the fact that what they were looking for was known to reside in the riches of Peru and not out in some mythical hinterland. Ursúa laughed them off, replying, "Gentlemen, you certainly seem to feel happier in Peru, but being here [in the jungle] may bring more wealth and happiness to you and your friends."

Ursúa's assurances did little to quell the growing discontent. Worse, out of the original eleven ships, only two brigantines and three barges remained. Ursúa ordered the removal of all metal from the sunken ships. This was stored in the remaining vessels, which were supplemented by a fleet of more than two hundred rafts and canoes assembled from jungle wood. "Raft" here requires a description; modern parlance assumes a raft to be a fairly small vessel, hastily lashed together and fairly flimsy. But these rafts were enormous, complete with canopies large enough to store provisions and provide a cookhouse.[8]

Unrelenting and maddening rain plagued the men thereafter. One chronicler, Gonzalo de Zúñiga, probably felt he was being accurate when he wrote, "We continued to have rain for the whole year we spent on that river and the weather never turned fine for us, scarcely even cleared, except for a few days." The river became so swollen that many of the rafts began to break up in midstream; the men on the vessels had to try and swim for it but, invariably, they drowned. "We had to restrain ourselves from not returning to dry land," Zúñiga continued, "but this would have meant losing our honor which we valued more than our life."

The men passed through a large settlement of more than two thousand natives, which they dubbed the Place of the Avocado Pears. These natives were friendly. The next settlement was no different. As the expedition entered, thirty canoes, each filled with ten to twelve Indian men, surrounded the brigantines and yelled, "Capito, capito" (captain) to the smiling Ursúa. The harquebusiers fired off shots and drums were sounded as the Indians presented Ursúa with "fifty canoes full of fish, maize, yam and mani [peanut]." Ursúa, feeling vindicated, distributed the booty to his men. Aguirre was unimpressed. He turned to Alonso de la Bandera and Cristóbal Hernández de Chaves and muttered, "I'd rather be in the Plaza Mayor in Lima than here now."

But there was no thought of turning around. Not only did the men receive food, but the eight-thousand-strong population of the native community of Caraco Indians assured Ursúa and the others that great riches lay just ahead. Others in the party argued that they should stay put and

strike out on exploratory teams right there in the jungle. This region, having sustained the Spaniards with abundant food and civilized natives, was their best bet for riches. Here the men had enjoyed maize, manioc, figs, avocado pears, yellow plum-like fruits called *jobos*, plums, lúcuma fruit, and an edible tree fruit called *mammey*. Ursúa argued the opposite: everything they had been told thus far had panned out and there was no reason to suspect that there would not be riches in great abundance ahead, as the Indians had said. The Indians told them that they were within twelve days of reaching the territory of the Omagua tribe, where they would find the riches they sought.[9] But, the Spaniards were warned, they would also find hostility. The warriors there were fierce and tireless.[10]

❁

Mention of the Omaguas was magic, the precise word Ursúa was waiting to hear. Ursúa's royally given title even before setting out on the entrada was governor of Omagua and El Dorado, with complete power over all the lands therein. The belief that El Dorado lay in—or through—the territory of the Omaguas had dominated treasure-seeking in Peru and Venezuela for more than two decades. In the late 1530s the German Philipp von Hutten set out from northern Venezuela and came to the northern section of the Omagua territory. Native Uaupé Indians told him that there was unimaginable wealth just beyond in the Omagua villages. As just one example of the riches, the Uaupés spoke of golden idols as large as children, with at least one as big as a full-grown adult.

With Uaupé guides, von Hutten advanced until he came to a hill overlooking an extraordinary Omagua village. Wide roads flanked by orderly houses crisscrossed the village. In the center of the village stood a hut—containing the gold idols, no doubt. Von Hutten rushed upon the village, but Omagua warriors quickly beat back him and his men. One report has the Omagua army numbering some fifteen thousand men. Von Hutten and his men retreated, badly defeated, with von Hutten himself barely surviving. He determined that there was no point in attacking again, so terribly outnumbered were his men.[11] He would return to Venezuela and assemble an army for a second foray. But by the time he arrived in the settlement of Coro, the Spanish contract allowing the Germans to explore the interior had been rescinded and von Hutten, along with Governor Bartholomäus Seyler, was beheaded.[12]

Soon after an entrada under the leadership of Gonzalo Pizarro set off from Quito, moving across the Andes to descend on the jungle from

the west. Initially, Pizarro's expedition had been organized to find *canela*, or cinnamon. One of Belalcázar's men, Gonzalo Díaz de Pineda, had first reported abundant cinnamon along the Marañón River, which would provide a natural byway to ship the prized spice to Europe.[13] Additionally, Pineda reported, east of the province of Canela was a "flat country, teeming with Indians who possess great riches, for they all wear gold ornaments." This flat country belonged to the Omaguas.

Pizarro tapped Francisco de Orellana to be his second in command. Orellana had long since proven himself a worthy and loyal commander, having helped in the conquest of Peru and the colonization of the coast of Ecuador, even losing one of his eyes in battle. Pizarro's expeditionary force would eventually swell to more than 340 soldiers, 140 of them on horseback; thousands of Andean Indian porters carrying axes, nails, ropes, and cables; a thousand hunting dogs; as well as a herd of four thousand livestock, including llamas, pigs, and Peruvian sheep. It was a force larger than the original wave of conquistadores that subdued the mighty Incan empire.

Later, Orellana broke off from Pizarro and had the first interaction with Indians familiar with the whole of the Omagua dominions.[14] These interactions fired the Spaniards' imaginations and led them to believe that they may have found the fabled city of gold. Because some of the tribesmen came to the Spaniards bearing gold trays, Orellana believed he was getting close to El Dorado. The friar and chronicler Gaspar de Carvajal was more impressed with the Omaguas' skills in porcelain pottery, declaring that the jars, pitchers, plates, bowls, and candelabra were "the best that has ever been seen in this world."[15] The Indians who met Orellana told the men that what they saw made of clay here was instead made of gold and silver a bit farther inland. The interior Omaguas were fiercely protective of their riches, however. Heading inland, Orellana and a few of his men were soon stupefied by what they saw: "roads . . . like royal highways and wider," calling to mind the riches of the Incas. But Orellana, perhaps already envisioning a return voyage, told the men to move on, afraid to rest in such a populated area. His decision proved correct, as the men saw fires all along the coast the whole night through as they traveled on. Ultimately, Orellana and his men would not locate El Dorado, but the belief that it was located in proximity to the Omaguas grew.

This belief strengthened a few years later, in 1549, when a group of roughly three hundred Tupinambá Indians arrived at Chachapoyas, the current capital of Amazonas State in northeast Peru. The Indians described a harrowing and dangerous ten-year journey from Brazil, made all the more

difficult by the fact that they were traveling upstream on the Amazon, and then into the Marañón and the Huallaga (also called the Motilones) Rivers to reach Chachapoyas.[16] The Indians told of terrible mistreatment at the hands of colonizing Portuguese, then on the Atlantic coast. Spanish soldiers took the chief of this tribe to Lima to meet the viceroy of Peru. The chief told the viceroy of the many tribes they met along the way and included details of one tribe in particular, the Omagua, who lived in a province named for them and who were very wealthy and powerful.[17]

The legend grew. And this time, if the men on Ursúa's expedition were lucky, they would find the Omagua, subdue them, and seize El Dorado. After all, Ursúa had already been named their governor.

❁

On October 19, Ursúa's party reached the Marañón, where Vargas and his men were waiting on an island. Ursúa, Vargas, and the men regrouped and rested for a week, enjoying the relative feast of fowl, turtles, and caiman that the island offered. While on the island, Ursúa named Fernando de Guzmán his second in command, giving him the position of *alférez-general*, and Juan de Vargas his lieutenant general.

Up to this point in the narrative, the chroniclers have Aguirre residing in almost complete silence, sniggering behind the scenes and awaiting his move. But here Custodio Hernández—and he alone of the early chroniclers—reports that Ursúa made another appointment on the island: he assigned Aguirre the title comptroller of the dead. If the report is true, it was an ironic portent of what was to come.

Still on the island, the men abandoned the rafts and transferred to the fleet of canoes that Vargas's men had retained. This move added to the expedition's overburdened state, which was exacerbated when one of their brigantines soon struck a log and foundered. Worse, the already disgruntled soldiers took note as Ursúa secured a large cabin for himself and doña Inés, even as the others had to increasingly squeeze together.

Ursúa had been shrewd in at least one matter, however. He expressly prohibited his men from abusing natives from any jungle tribes. Pizarro, during his search for El Dorado two decades earlier, had not been so wise. At each village he reached, Pizarro asked the Indians when they would find El Dorado. At each turn, the response was shrugs of ignorance. Either the Indians were lying, or—much more likely—they knew nothing of the fabled city because it was, after all, just a fable.[18] Pizarro was infuriated by what he saw as native intransigence. He had platforms built on which his

men stretched and tortured the Indians until they told "the truth" about El Dorado. He had some of the Indians burned alive and ordered others thrown to the dogs, who tore their bodies to shreds. When the Spaniards reached one particular village, they met the chief, Delicola, and told him they came in peace. But Delicola had already gotten news of what the Spaniards had done in the previous village. Not wishing to repeat others' mistakes, he told the Spaniards exactly what they wanted to hear. His reports of gleaming villages of gold to the east sent the Spaniards off in a fevered hurry. Arce's men, splintered from Ursúa's main expedition, had committed the same errors, treating the natives with hostility and violence.

Ursúa's efforts to make peace with the natives had so far allowed them to gain food through barter as well as information about the location of the Omaguas. As the Spaniards traveled through the province of Carari, for example, they were able to trade trinkets for food. But this policy further inflamed some of the expedition's men, "who were enraged and ill-intentioned because [Ursúa] did not allow them to rob the Indians, and to loot and kill to their hearts' delight," Vásquez wrote.

Ursúa also ordered one of his men, Pedro Galeas, to take a small party and march inland to find out what he could. During their march, the party came face to face with a few astonished Indians laden with cassava. The Indians threw down their food and fled. But Galeas and his men managed to capture a girl. Dressed differently than the other Indians in the area, she told the Spaniards through signs that her village was six days off and she was in the area to barter. Galeas brought the girl to Ursúa's encampment, where she communicated to him nothing that contradicted his belief that the land of the Omaguas was not too far off. According to Zúñiga, she told Ursúa that the Omaguas occupied a vast area of some two hundred leagues along the river.

Here another event occurred that may simply be apocryphal, reported as it was in only one of the chronicles, and this secondarily. Reginaldo de Lizárraga wrote that the Spaniards spotted a group of Indians on the high hills of a riverbank. The natives shouted down to them, "Omagua, Omagu!" Ursúa and the others, of course, took this as a good sign—they were getting close to their elusive goal. Lizárraga tells us instead that what the natives were actually shouting simply translated as "Get away with you!" If true, the anecdote offers another example of the hopelessness of the expedition.[19]

Among the next group of natives the expedition met, Simón wrote, "No gold was found, which produced dissatisfaction amongst the Spaniards, seeing that they had journeyed so far without meeting with the least sign of the precious metal." When Ursúa discovered that one of his men, Alonso de Montoya, had attempted to drum up support for a mutiny due to this lack of promised gold, he merely imprisoned the man and allowed him to live. Simón noted that Ursúa was "too merciful, and at times his acts savored of weakness." He should have been forceful in his punishment of Montoya; it would have set a fine example for the other wretches in the train, including Aguirre. Instead, he named no heavier punishment than forcing the would-be mutineer to wear an iron collar for a time.

Eight days after leaving Vargas's encampment, the men came to a large river that entered the Amazon from the north. Alonso Esteban, who had been a member of the Pizarro-Orellana expedition, was able to identify it as the Napo River, where Orellana had descended into the main body of the Amazon in 1542. The next day, the men reached an Indian settlement on an island. To everyone's shock, there was Arce's party, four months removed from their sally. The survivors there had given up, passing their time in a numbing existence. A typical day saw the men sitting near the water, battling innumerable swarms of biting insects, trying desperately to find relief from the sun, and staring down the river for any sign of anything. The arrival of Ursúa and the others caused unrestrained celebration on both sides. Ursúa's party disembarked and rested on García Island.

Here, Ursúa became increasingly erratic. First, he began taking all his meals away from the men. Most of the expedition soldiers at the time believed that their leader was lovestruck, according to both contemporaneous and subsequent chroniclers. Francisco Vásquez wrote that the soldiers believed that doña Inés "had worked her influence on [Ursúa,] that his nature had changed, and that she had bewitched him." The reference to bewitching takes on a sinister tone, indicating more than simply love, and it moves the onus of responsibility from Ursúa to doña Inés. Custodio Hernández echoes this: "Ursúa loved her so much that he clearly lost his head over her, and the soldiers said that he must have been bewitched." Lizárraga wrote that doña Inés "became the cause of [Ursúa's] perdition."[20] The change in their leader was obvious and terrible: "Where he used to be easygoing and sociable with everyone, he had turned rather grave and surly, hostile to all conversation. . . . he had become the friend of solitude," Simón wrote. Of course, his "solitary" moments were shared, out of sight of his soldiers, with doña Inés alone. He wished to be left alone with her

to "prevent anybody from disturbing his amorous proclivities." Custodio Hernández wrote that Ursúa "would govern only with doña Inés at his side, and he loved her so much that without doubt he was lost on her account."

Whatever it was that got to Ursúa, he had become hardly recognizable to those who had once admired him. Vásquez wrote that the men who had known him since the beginning "used to say to each other that it wasn't possible this could be Pedro de Ursúa." "Drunk with lecherous desire," Vásquez wrote, "[Ursúa] had forgotten military matters and the main objective of the expedition, a development totally out of keeping with his previous habits and character." Additionally, it seems that Ursúa abandoned his habit of calling upon the sick and needy in his camp. (Aguirre, for his part, found the sick simply weak, so Ursúa's generosity toward them would simply be another reason for Aguirre to despise him.)

Compounding matters was Ursúa's refusal to deliver any harsh punishments, as in the case of Montoya. Instead, he often punished the men by making them row the canoes. This had the effect of emasculating and humiliating them, lowering them to the same level as the Indian and black slaves who did that and other, more menial jobs. Indeed, it became practice for those Spaniards not rowing to jeer and taunt those who were. Several of the chroniclers noted this humiliation and suggested that the men would have rather been hanged. It did not help that the men soon considered this wicked idea to be the brainchild of doña Inés. Indeed, Zúñiga tells us that "doña Inés traveled in a special barge with six Spaniards as oarsmen." This could not have helped but inflame already simmering resentments. Whereas Ursúa had been so resolute in allowing the beheadings of Francisco Díaz de Arlés and Diego de Frías at the expedition's start, he now seemed to soften in all the wrong ways. Murmurings about Ursúa's fitness as expedition leader rippled among the men. Vásquez and Pedrarias de Almesto wrote of "tumultuous, licentious behavior and . . . the neglectful way in which the camp was governed." Ursúa issued orders through doña Inés, so that she, as much as he, became the symbol of royal mismanagement.

All that was needed now was a forceful personality to inflate those ripples of discontent into revolt. No doubt somewhere along the way, Aguirre was one of the humiliated men forced to row, and the ingredients for a foul brew continued to thicken.

Ursúa sent Galeas on another scouting trip. This time, he entered the small mouth of a river with water "so black that it terrified him." Considering the events that would soon unfold, it seemed yet another omen.

CHAPTER 7

Ursúa's Sepulcher

With Ursúa's hold on leadership slipping, he gave the order for the expedition to leave García Island. Their only remaining brigantine sank soon after. Traveling now on their two large barges and a fleet of canoes and rafts, the men on the smaller vessels tried desperately to keep up. Another week went by, and some of the men starved to death. What had once been a cavernous, menacing canopy of riotous green had turned into a wasteland. The land flattened out before them; the area was so barren that the men likened it to a desert. "The whole blame was laid on [Ursúa] for his improvidence," Simón wrote. "For had he informed himself of this long tract of desert, he might have laid in a stock of provisions." The only food the men had was whatever fish they managed to pull from the river, as well as a small number of freshwater turtles and wild purslane that grew on the banks. Zúñiga commented, "We expected to perish from hunger and felt that nobody would leave this river alive." Finally the Spaniards reached an Indian settlement, part of a vast area controlled by the Machiparo Indians that Zúñiga estimated to be some five hundred miles across.

Initially the Machiparo met the Spaniards with fear and hostility, hiding their goods and blowing poisoned darts from the banks of the river. But Ursúa played peacemaker. He came onshore waving a white handkerchief (and carrying a loaded harquebus just in case) and convinced the Indian chief that the Spaniards' intentions were peaceful. The Indians then allowed the foreigners to land. Custodio Hernández called the village the Pueblo de las Tortugas (Village of the Turtles) because of the native practice of turtle farming. Kept in large pools, the turtles numbered more than six thousand. The Spaniards, allowed to eat, fell on the turtles—and on anything else they could find—and had a gigantic feast (as Simón put

it, the men "took the belly of the evil year"), much to the horror and consternation of the natives. Worse, wrote Ortiguera, the highland Indians along on the expedition took all the Machiparos' maize and boiled it into alcoholic *chicha*, getting fabulously intoxicated.[1]

Ursúa, desperate to rein in his men, punished Fernando de Guzmán after he was discovered ransacking the Indians' hiding places. Ursúa forced the nobleman to spend a day in a makeshift wooden cage. This punishment of his second in command would soon come back to haunt him.

❁

If there was recompense for the foreigners' insatiable appetites, it came when the men involved themselves in a war between native tribes. Warriors from the Carari attacked the Machiparo, unaware that they were hosting a few hundred armed Spaniards. The Machiparo chief beseeched Ursúa for aid on account of all the hospitality the chief had offered. Ursúa was happy to oblige. He sent Juan de Vargas and fifty harquebusiers to the river to meet the Carari. Meanwhile, Machiparo warriors approached by another route and the two camps encircled the Carari.

Seeing this, the Carari made signs of peace. The Spaniards replied with fire. The Spaniards so routed the Carari that the survivors dove off their canoes and fled into the woods. With their escape route back home cut off and given the scarcity of food in the jungle, these Carari probably died of agonizing starvation. The Spaniards were, for the time, sated, having exercised their military might without suffering any casualties.

During the weeks the men spent at Pueblo de las Tortugas, Ursúa failed to correct his behaviors that the men found so offensive, and talk of revolt and mutiny gained strength. It was fed by two new events, the first occurring when Ursúa named one of the expedition's priests, Alonso Henao, to be vicar general, in charge of spiritual matters. The clergy argued incessantly amongst themselves, and Ursúa thought the best way to salve the situation was to elevate one above the others. Henao's first act in his new office was to declare that, under threat of excommunication, all men were to return any livestock, arms, tools, or munitions they had stolen from the expedition's load to Ursúa, their governor. The grumbling and resentment grew; some men openly questioned whether Ursúa even possessed authority in ecclesiastical affairs.

The second dispiriting event involved the return of Galeas, who had found out nothing definitive as to the whereabouts of El Dorado. The vision of Ursúa, Galeas, and the Machiparo chief trying to work out the location

of the golden city, each shrugging and pointing in different directions in the jungle, calcified the already hardening worries and concerns of the increasingly disgruntled men. They were now almost wholly convinced that an incompetent was leading them. Ursúa had become the embodiment of royal negligence and arrogance. This was typical of what the second generation of conquistadores had experienced in their time in the New World. Priests, bureaucrats, and the first generation of conquistadores had gobbled up the spoils of conquest and demanded tribute from those who followed. Now here those followers were, on a desperate expedition that demanded someone step up and take charge. All they needed was a bold voice to rally them to action.

The chroniclers often describe Aguirre as "agitated, boisterous," and "a friend of revolts and riots." There are repeated references to his bellicose nature—a man incapable of simply speaking in a level tone of voice. Aguirre was acutely aware of his own gifts; he could speak, he could manipulate, he could plan, and he could maneuver men to work for his ends without them being fully aware of it. This he did in his inimitable way. Vásquez pointed out that in an epoch heavy with religious piety and symbolism, Aguirre "never spoke without profanity, always swearing against God and the Saints. . . . one of his habitual vices was to commend his body and soul to the Devil." Aguirre was also aware of his liabilities: compared to the handsome and accomplished Ursúa, Aguirre was an old, distorted, lame man who had never risen to any New World heights.

While the first inklings of a mutinous plan involved simply stealing the two barges during the night and returning to Peru, Aguirre managed to convince a dozen men that this was a ridiculous and shortsighted idea. Instead, the expedition had to dump the increasingly ineffectual Ursúa and replace him with someone else.

"Gentleman," Aguirre told them, "You see what this expedition has come to under his leadership: We have made all the sacrifices asked of us, and we have nothing. We set out to discover and populate new lands, which would in turn make us rich. Instead, what do we have: hunger, sickness, disappointment." Aguirre looked at each of his twelve listeners in turn, fixing his fiery eyes upon them, the flames of a campfire bouncing in his pupils. "El Dorado is a myth. We have not reached the lands promised so many times. It would be wiser, instead, to return to Peru, where we know riches and alliances await." With one eyebrow slung low over an eye, he continued: "Ursúa needs to die. Let us not now leave this affair to others, for we do not know what may come of it. We will instead install effectual leadership, a man who knows the art of leadership."

Aguirre could not be that man—at least not yet. Better have someone who could be played like a marionette to give the illusion of legitimacy while Aguirre ran things behind the scenes. Aguirre chose Fernando de Guzmán. It was an inspired choice. For one thing, Guzmán and Ursúa had once been close friends. Vásquez wrote that Ursúa and Guzmán "would never eat without the other, and . . . often they would sleep together, even though each had his own bed." Ursúa had already been warned about Aguirre, and he had no doubt taken notice of Aguirre's surly and rebellious nature. But an overthrow involving Guzmán would be a total—and heartbreaking—surprise. Additionally, Guzmán was a noble, and in a world still governed by class hierarchy, a noble was an obvious choice to lead many of the lowborn. And, despite his elevated social status, Guzmán was "well disposed towards the soldiers."

Guzmán was a good choice for another reason—easily flattered and often described as effeminate, he could be manipulated by the more forceful and charismatic Aguirre. Zúñiga wrote of Guzmán, "He was a simple-minded man of little guile and easily led astray." Vásquez wrote that Guzmán was "gluttonous; a lover of eating and drinking, especially fruits and fritters and cakes, in search of which he was ever vigilant; and whosoever wished to be his friend could, by means of any of these, easily win him over."

It was not with a lure of fritters that Aguirre and several of his acolytes approached Guzmán and told them of their plan. Under cover of night, the would-be mutineers pulled Guzmán into a hut. They lit some candles and crowded around. Guzmán looked them over, waiting for the boom to drop. Aguirre eyed up the portly Fernando and went right for the tender spot; he used Guzmán's earlier punishment by Ursúa at the Machiparo village to salt his wounds. "Ursúa does not deserve your respect," Aguirre told him. "For he gave you none. That he should imprison his faithful servant was an insult, a want of respect." But killing Ursúa was shocking, and Guzmán initially opposed it. The men pressed on, telling Guzmán to accept the plan "for the service of God and the king." "Your birth and merits are worthy of great honors," they told him. "The miseries occasioned by the injustice of Ursúa" were notorious. Continuing any longer under Ursúa would mean the death of them all and damage to the king's service. Besides, they assured him, if Guzmán felt that it would be better to leave Ursúa alive in a village, then so be it.

The prospect of taking control of the expedition and being its unquestioned leader was too much to resist. Guzmán became convinced,

swept along in the flow of emotion—the fiery, beady-eyed Aguirre leading a dozen murmuring and nodding men, each looking to Guzmán for confirmation. It was more solidarity than he had recently known with Ursúa, who seemed to be drifting ever further from him. Guzmán's reaction was hardly a surprise. "Swelled up by the wind of ambition, he gave them thanks for what they had offered him, and assented to all their projects," Simón wrote.

Ursúa was aware of the simmering discontent affecting his camp. Travel had been hard, and thus far there had been no rewards. But his men had had few illusions about what they were getting into when they signed on to the expedition. They knew about earlier, failed attempts to locate El Dorado. One expedition ran through areas so replete with jaguars that the great cats would emerge from the woods and drag off horses in broad daylight. Biting ants, flies, and fever-inducing mosquitoes were a given, as were large and potentially lethal snakes and spiders. Simón mused, "It is a matter of wonder how the [jungle] Indians live, by reason of the myriad of mosquitos, which they call noisy *zancudos*, and it appears that nature has created these animals to punish and torment sinful man." Constant attacks from understandably hostile Indians were inevitable. The jungle Indians had inherited from the Incas a facility with the *estolica*, a flattened pole affixed with a bone in which nine slivers of palm wood were embedded. Thrown like a javelin, when it found purchase in a human being, all nine slivers of wood lodged in the body as the victim flailed hideously about. One expedition was so desperate for food that the men ate only by placing heads of corn into ant nests until enough insects covered the corn to make a meal; they supplemented this meager cache with grubs and beetles. This same expedition eventually stumbled upon a grove of wild fruit, which they ate greedily. Within days, all their hair fell out. During his expedition, Quesada "saw his numerous troops diminished by fevers and sores from the plagues of travel, ticks, bats, mosquitoes, serpents, crocodiles, tigers [jaguars], hunger, calamities, and miseries with other ills which pass description," one Amazon chronicler wrote in the sixteenth century.[2]

Of course, all the men on Ursúa's entrada would have known all about the terrors that befell their predecessors in the Pizarro-Orellana expedition. Just days into that expedition, a terrible earthquake struck the village where the Spaniards were staying. Many of the houses fell to the ground. Angry thunder, violent lightning, and torrential rain followed, and the expedition had not even crossed the cordillera into the jungle. The storms lasted nearly two months. The men, lashed by downpours and framed by

constant lightning strikes, suffered badly. Then came a crossing over the snowcapped Andes. Most of the Indians died of exposure. There was little choice but to abandon most of the provisions to make the climb possible, but they assumed they could resupply at villages closer to the jungle. It did not happen that way. The relentless rain and humidity of the jungle tattered and rotted the men's clothes and skin and their provisions dwindled before the expedition even began the jungle portion. When they did reach the jungle, the Spaniards had to fight natives for food and sustained themselves on roots and vine shoots. Soon, they were reduced to eating the leather of their own sandals. Some of them mixed the shoes with jungle herbs; the unlucky ones unintentionally poisoned themselves. Indian tribes harassed them constantly. In one skirmish, the friar Carvajal lost an eye to an Indian arrow. He wrote, "Our Lord permitted them, because of my faults, to plant an arrow in one of my eyes, the arrow passing through my head and sticking out two fingers' length on the other side behind my ear." [3]

At least Ursúa's men were already in the jungle interior, more or less intact. Compared to other expeditions, they were in great shape.

Ursúa gathered his men and reminded them of all this. "No Indian province would have ever been discovered or settled without hardships in getting there," he told them. "Perseverance will overcome all difficulties. If it is necessary to search from youth to old age, this is nothing in comparison with the attainment of the vast riches that await us."

Ursúa's speech convinced most of the men. Aguirre, Montoya, Salduendo, and the other principal mutineers were not swayed, however. Being reminded of how miserable previous expeditions had been did little to encourage them to continue. One by one, the disaffected began to work on those men still loyal to their governor. "Remember how he made you row like a slave," they said. "See how he runs the camp only through doña Inés. He detests the company of soldiers; you see how he keeps his hut apart. He is an enemy of giving away and a friend of receiving. He is ignorant in the affairs of war and government. You heard him: we should all grow old and gray on this fool's errand!"

Enough men were convinced; most of the others became indifferent. The principal mutineers remained: Aguirre, Montoya, Salduendo, and Bandera. They were joined by Miguel Serrano de Cáceres, Martín Pérez, Pedro Fernández, Diego de Torres, Alonso de Villena, Cristóbal Hernández de Chaves, and Pedro de Miranda.[4] Assembled on the black fringes of the jungle, the men chose New Year's for the murder and clasped hands in agreement.

The expedition stayed in the village for thirty-three days, until Christmas Day 1560, when they had thoroughly exhausted the food supply and earned the enmity of the natives, who were shocked by the Spaniards' rapaciousness. Ursúa gave the order to move out. It would be one of his last directives.

Two days later, the expedition stopped at a place called Mozomoco. There, Portillo, the priest whose money had been taken from him, beseeched Ursúa to give him food. He was ill and dying. Ursúa shrugged; he had no food to give. At the end of his tether, Portillo gathered his strength and shouted, "May justice from heaven, since there is none in this world, come upon him who has so cruelly used me." He cursed and spat, furious at Ursúa for having made him accompany the expedition to such a godforsaken place.

Another portent occurred. Juan Gomez de Guevara, an Ursúa loyalist and a knight commander in the order of San Juan, was out for a walk late one evening when he passed by Ursúa's hut and saw a floating ghost, shimmering above the dwelling. The specter moved past, but not before muttering, "Pedro de Ursúa, governor of El Dorado and Omagua, may God pardon you." Guevara rushed to the spot, but the form had disappeared. Guevara and his friends decided against telling Ursúa, He had been acting out of sorts, and this would probably exacerbate his condition.

Ursúa probably would have done little about it anyway. In fact, here he was guilty of two more big mistakes. First, as he had done with the warning letters from his friends at the expedition's start, he shrugged off suggestions from those still loyal in camp that he post sentries at his door. Second, he sent a group of devoted soldiers to investigate a wide, inland road said by one Indian to lead to a land of riches. Thus, many of his would-be protectors were out of camp. The time was perfect for the strike.

At least one opportunity to spare Ursúa did occur, but it got bungled somewhere along the line through machinations and motivations that were known only in the hearts and heads of those who were party to them. One of Bandera's slaves, Juan Primero, got wind of the coming mutiny and ran off to tell Ursúa. But because Ursúa was in his hut with doña Inés, Primero was not allowed entry. Instead, he imparted the plot to one of Ursúa's slaves with instructions to tell his master. Perhaps the slave was afraid to do so, or maybe he viewed his master's murder as an opportunity. Whatever the case, the message was never delivered.

After midnight of the new year, 1561, caverned in the liquid darkness of deep morning, the conspirators set their plan in motion. They gathered at Guzmán's residence and sent a slave to Ursúa's hut to collect some oil. The slave returned, reporting that Ursúa was without protection. Accompanied by unremitting insect calls, Montoya and Chaves led the way. Entering Ursúa's lodging, they found him in his hammock talking with his page, Lorca. The two men saluted their governor.

"What seek you here, caballeros, at this hour?" Ursúa asked them.

The answer was immediate: they ran to him with swords drawn. Ursúa leapt from the hammock and grabbed his sword and buckler. But the rest of the mutineers were immediately at hand and burst in, hacking Ursúa to shreds. The bubbling of blood in his throat prevented Ursúa, just thirty-five years old, from calling for confession. His leadership had lasted barely three months.

The killers ran through the camp, waking everyone with shouts of, "Long live the king! The tyrant is dead!" Juan de Vargas, hastily donning his *escupil*, an armor of twilled cotton, and grabbing his sword and shield, rushed to the scene.[5] Loyal to Ursúa, he, too, was a quick target. Two men grabbed Vargas and tore off his escupil. Martín Pérez then thrust his sword into Vargas with such force that it passed through Vargas and wounded one of the conspirators who stood behind him. Vargas dropped to the ground and the other conspirators, giving free reign to their blood lust, continued to stab him long after he was dead.

The men continued with their shouts: "Long live the king! Freedom, freedom, freedom!" The conspirators distributed and drank Ursúa's stores of wine in celebratory excess.

The reaction to the death of Ursúa among those not connected to the conspirators was muted. They had felt genuine respect and love for the man when the expedition set off. But as the months progressed and the men faced more and more hardships without reward, while Ursúa continued to separate himself from their company, his death seemed a necessary and hardly lamentable matter. The events of the next months, however, led at least one witness to call the location of Ursúa's murder "the place of our undoing."

Vásquez blamed the whole sordid chain of events on doña Inés, calling her "the principal cause of the death of the Governor and our total destruction." Simón's final analysis of Ursúa was that "he was too confiding and had but little precaution, and his great goodness was the main cause which brought him to so sad an end."

CHAPTER 8

El Traidor and the Prince

Don Fernando de Guzmán was now in charge. He got to the ceremonial business of handing out offices. One of the men observed that more offices were doled out than there were soldiers in the camp. Virtually everyone got a new title, rendering many of them essentially meaningless. Don Fernando made Bandera captain of the guard, while Salduendo, Chaves, and Caceres were made captains of infantry. Montoya became captain of horse, Villena became standard-bearer, Miranda, paymaster, and so on. Some of the appointments bordered on the absurd: there, deep in the jungle, Sebastián Gómez was made a sea captain; another, Alonso Enriquez Orellana, was nominated "to be in charge of war-like stories." Each of the men accepted his new post, as failure to do so might arouse suspicions of non-allegiance. But one appointment proved more than mere ceremony. Because Aguirre had been instrumental in don Fernando's promotion, he was made *maestro del campo*, Fernando's second in command.

Diego de Belalcázar was named *justicia mayor del campo*, or chief judge. Offered the staff that signified this important position, Belalcázar took it and said defiantly, "This staff of office I take in the name of King Philip our lord, *and in no other*." It was a bold, perhaps suicidal, stand. The mutineers allowed it to pass for the moment, desperate to maintain the camp's tenuous order.

The new council distributed Ursúa's slaves, clothing, and weaponry among themselves. Twelve harquebusiers would attend and protect don Fernando at all times. Their true function, however, was to spy. Anyone heard plotting or complaining about the turn of events would receive death. For now, there was also one more consideration. The scouting party sent by Ursúa the previous week, led by Sancho Pizarro, had not

yet returned.[1] They, of course, would have no idea what had happened in camp in their absence.

Pizarro's party indeed seemed to have stumbled upon something that would have given Ursúa heart, had his still been beating. They discovered wide and well-planned roads through the forest before they reached an Indian *tambo* (an inn or rest house). There, they met two native women cooking food for travelers passing through the area: members of neighboring tribes who had come to barter with the Machiparo. Every ten miles or so stood another tambo stocked with abundant food for the weary traveler, each a station on the way to a fantastic city. The two women led the Spaniards, showing them various trinkets and objects covered with gold leaf.

One of the women stopped the procession, however. Scooping sand, she let them understand by pouring piles that the population of this city was immense compared to anything they had seen along the river. The people there were very rich and powerful; they walked around covered in gold ornaments. They were fiercely protective and the Spaniards, if they entered, would never escape with their lives. Here, finally, was El Dorado, or its equal. Pizarro decided to turn back to the river with his thirty men. He would inform Ursúa of their discovery and the entire contingent could return to conquer the land. The men hurried back, never suspecting that their general was dead, replaced by the buffoonish don Fernando with the puppeteer Aguirre holding the strings.

To cut off a potential threat, don Fernando sent men to intercept Pizarro's return and tell him of the necessity of what had been done. Whether truly accepting of the deed or simply smart enough to know that resistance would have been futile, even deadly, Pizarro declared that he was satisfied with their explanations—indeed, even happy for it. He accepted the men's appointment of his new position: *sargento mayor del campo*; in essence, third in command after don Fernando and Aguirre. His acceptance also meant, however, that the exploration in search of an enormous city from whence he had just come would remain a distant dream. Instead, don Fernando informed them, they would continue downstream to the Omaguas, Ursúa's original destination.

At daybreak, doña Inés requested she be allowed to bury her dead lover. Don Fernando assented, placing the body of Juan de Vargas next to Ursúa in a pit. Aguirre and some other principals gathered as many men as they could, pressuring each to take part in the burial and thereby implicate themselves in the deed. After Ursúa was buried Aguirre sneered at him, dismissing the caballero. "Frenchman," he hissed, spitting on the freshly

disturbed dirt. Ursúa's ancestral home had been close to the French border, and considering the decades-old war between Spain and France, calling someone a Frenchman was a deep slur.[2] It was ironic: one of the reasons Ursúa felt himself safe even in the face of increasing anxiety among his men was that he was surrounded by so many Basque countrymen, men he assumed would defend him to the death. He often boasted that just one word in Basque would be enough to get these Biscay warriors to sacrifice themselves for his leadership.

Of course, Aguirre was a Basque from Oñati, so his ancestral home was not much farther from France than Ursúa's had been. But there was more at play here in any case: Ursúa had been a nobleman, young, respected, and attractive. The contrast with Aguirre could not have been greater—he was already fifty years old, ill-tempered and physically unattractive, with his beady and blazing eyes and lame leg. Of this, there can be little to quibble with in the chroniclers' descriptions.

Don Fernando got down to more business. He saw the murder of Ursúa for what it was—no less than a strike against the king himself. He ordered the production of a document spelling out the reasons it had been necessary to kill the king's emissary and continue the expedition in better hands, from which there was greater chance of success and glory for Spain. He drew up the document outlining the expedition's options. At the top, he put his desired plan: the expedition would continue on in search of El Dorado. In so doing, the men could count on riches and subsequent pardon from the king for the deaths of Ursúa and Vargas upon delivery of these riches. Several men signed the paper. When it came to Aguirre, he signed his name as well but, famously, added *traidor* (the Traitor).

The men dissembled, murmured, and shifted uncomfortably, exchanging nervous glances. Was this some sort of joke? Aguirre stood firm, awaiting the opportunity to explain himself. He fixed his eyes upon them, as if to say, "We are all traitors, you understand." In turn, the men repeated the seed that Aguirre had been so instrumental in planting into their heads—they did what they did for the betterment of everyone involved, including the royal sponsors back in the Old World. Absurd, Aguirre told them, and then he delivered a remarkable speech that helps to explain how this "madman," this no-good rapscallion, could lead so many willing men for months and months toward a severe challenge of the most powerful empire in the world.

"Caballeros," he began.

> What madness and gross ignorance is this into which some of us have fallen? You have killed the king's governor, one who represented his royal person, one who was clothed with royal powers; and do you pretend that with documents concocted by ourselves, we shall be held blameless? Think you that the king and the judges will not understand how such papers were got up? This is madness; and well is it known to all, that if those who sign it should be asked questions against themselves, it will go against them, if they have said so much in their own favor. Yes, we have all killed the governor, and the whole of us have rejoiced at the act; and if not, let each man lay his hand upon his heart, and say what he thinks. We have all been traitors, we have all been a party to this mutiny, and have agreed that the country shall be sought for, found, and settled. Now should it be ten times richer than Peru, and more populous than New Spain, and should the king draw more profit from it than from all the Indies together, yet as soon as the first person comes with powers from his majesty to take up his residence amongst us, and to take note of what has been done by us, I tell you it will cost us all our heads: thus our exertions and services will have been in vain, and fruitless, for ourselves and successors.

A few of the men began to nod and whisper to each other. Why had none of them considered this before? How was it that Aguirre had so easily convinced these men of their righteousness before killing Ursúa but now spelled it out plainly: they would be murdered for the act? The chroniclers here understandably shift their focus from telling of the travails of the expedition to focusing almost entirely on Aguirre: he becomes the principal actor and his leadership in the plot to murder Ursúa becomes evidence of his wickedness. What they fail to point out, however, is that he seems to have been the only clear-eyed man among the expedition's hundreds. He had no illusions about what they had done, and this, for better or worse, paved the path to his eventual leadership. Indeed, at least initially, the men "loved [Aguirre] and held him in esteem because he argued well in favor of war," wrote Custodio Hernández.

Those who took in the full weight of Aguirre's words would soon recognize the speech for what it was: more than simply a plan to change the leadership of the expedition. Heading off to Peru, overthrowing the governor there, and installing don Fernando as ruler was nothing less than

a recipe for national revolution. Even those as of yet unconvinced listened rapt as Aguirre continued, shifting now to a new plan of action.

> My opinion is—and I hold it to be more to the point than what you have conceived—that we should abandon these intentions of searching for these new lands; for if we discover them and people them, our lives will be sacrificed. Let us therefore anticipate the evil time, and let us settle ourselves well in a good land known to you all, which is Peru. There all are friendly to us, and, on hearing that we are approaching, they will come out and meet us. They, having the same views as ourselves, will open their arms, and will assist us with their lives. This is what we ought to do, and this is the reason why I signed myself "traitor."

Aguirre here acknowledged and counted on the general discontent shared by the dispossessed among the second wave of conquistadores.

Seemingly paradoxical, it had become clear that Aguirre possessed a clearheadedness in his madness and diabolism. Add to this his persuasive speaking ability, and such traits would make him a natural leader. The reaction to his speech proved as much. First, Villena spoke up: "What the Señor Lope de Aguirre, maestro del campo, has spoken, appears to me to be the best to be done, and must suit all, and I confirm it with my vote; and I believe that his reasons are good, and any one who counsels the Señor general otherwise is no friend of his, but wishes his ruin and that of the expedition, and is his enemy."

Many others readily agreed. After all, some of them had incurred serious debts just to finance their inclusion in the expedition. The prospect of returning home empty-handed spelled economic ruin. Heading instead to Peru, where riches lay, might have seemed preferable to pursuing the increasingly elusive goal of El Dorado, even considering the revolutionary implications.

But Bandera moved forward, discomfited by the proceedings. He bristled at the characterization of himself as a traitor. Repeating the very reasons given for Ursúa's murder in the first place, he challenged all before him: the death of Ursúa was no treason because he was no longer carrying out the king's service. Ursúa's death better served his majesty. When the men discovered and peopled new lands, the king would indeed reward them. He concluded, "He who says that I am a traitor in this matter, I tell him that he lies, and I will make good my words, and I now dare him to mortal combat."

Aguirre's supporters yelled at Bandera, charging that he gave this false speech only because he feared the king would cut off his head. Aguirre and those closest to him reached for their swords. Bandera did the same. Don Fernando and a few of his captains rushed between the men, holding them from each other and quashing, for now, any further bloodshed. Bandera sheathed his sword. "Do as you please," he shouted, beating his chest. "And that you may not think that what I have said is from any fear that I have of death or to save my life, I will act like the rest, and let it be understood that I have as good a neck for the gallows as any one here." Even those who had been ready to kill Bandera just moments earlier chuckled at this parting shot. He had won new respect. However, this did not stop Aguirre and his men from trying to win over as many of the others as they could to support the plan to give up on El Dorado and return to Peru.

Don Fernando ordered the men on the move again. They came to another village, "the inhabitants of which wore clothes and were intelligent," wrote Vásquez. The Spaniards questioned the natives about the Omaguas and El Dorado. As usual, the natives prodded the Spaniards farther downriver. Tired of the same answer, tired of the same disappointment, Bandera, stressed by his confrontation with Aguirre, snapped. He took several Indians, as well as their interpreters, and tied them all up in a hut. Aguirre arrived to see Bandera waving his sword and screaming at the lot of them, telling them that he would execute them if they did not cease telling lies. The interpreters swore they were telling the truth. Aguirre pushed Bandera aside and slew them all. "They have all misled us enough," he murmured, and left, a dozen bloodied and stilled bodies at Bandera's feet.

The expedition traveled downriver some seventy miles before arriving at an abandoned Indian village. It had been five days since they left Machiparo, Ursúa's resting place. Here, a place they would dub the Village of the Brigantines, they remained for two and a half months, engaged in rebuilding the large ships. A promised restock of their fleet was no match against the pure misery of staying in the village for such a long period. The direction of the expedition, paradoxically, suited Aguirre. He knew that the men could not struggle back up the Amazon, with its mighty current. They would have to continue east until they reached the Atlantic, then hug the coast around Guyana and Venezuela to the Isthmus of Panama. There, they could travel overland to the Pacific and sail down the coast to Peru. To

accomplish that, they would need larger, seaworthy ships. Don Fernando had already ordered their construction. Aguirre, no doubt, was pleased.

Despite his pleasure, the usual pests would have tormented him just as they would the other men: rain, mosquitoes, wasps, flies, biting ants. Worse, they could find virtually nothing to eat. Several of the Indian porters, brought from the Andes, ate raw manioc and were poisoned. They could find yucca, but it grew on the other side of the river, some three miles distant. They choked down bitter wild fruits such as *caymitos* (star apple) and wild strawberries, described as "more suited for monkeys [than] for men." All the chickens had been consumed. The men butchered the remaining horses, and when they were gone, they ate their dogs. This, too, pleased Aguirre. Without dogs and horses, means for escape dwindled. Further, without domestic livestock, settlement would be impossible. In other words, when the ships were complete, the men would have to be on the move again. And every day on the move brought them closer to the realization of Aguirre's desires.

But Aguirre still needed to rid the camp of Ursúa loyalists. According to the chroniclers, it was here that Aguirre's homicidal tendencies came to full flower. And had there been any doubt, don Fernando was either unwilling or unable to stop him. Aguirre's first victim was García del Arce, the man Ursúa had sent to scout lands early in the expedition who wound up with an eponymous island. As Arce leaned against a tree watching the shipbuilders construct a brigantine, Aguirre and a few others approached him. One of them, a Portuguese named Anton Llamoso, produced a weapon fashioned from a shoemaker's thick and weighty needle and thrust it into Arce, impaling him to the tree. This was excruciating, but it did not kill him. For that, Llamoso disimpaled Arce and then hanged him from the same tree. Aguirre affixed a note across his neck that read, "For services to king and governor." There Arce remained as warning to others in the camp. Arce's offense was his earlier independence. Given orders to wait for Vargas, he had gone on ahead. Such a man could not be counted on to follow orders. Llamoso's involvement in the murder presaged much. He would remain until the very end Aguirre's most loyal henchman, earning opprobrium from an anonymous chronicler who described Llamoso as "the most cruel, most fiendish traitor men have ever seen, the minister of Satan."[3]

Diego de Belalcázar, the man who had been defiant upon taking his staff, was the next target. His earlier loyalist showing had doomed him from the start. Aguirre and two of his companions visited Belalcázar in his lodging one night and dragged him out, intending to take him into the

forest to strangle him. But Belalcázar broke loose, screaming, "Long live the king! Long Live the king! Señor general, help me! They are trying to kill me!" assuming that his shouts would rouse others to come to his aid. In fact, no one did. Seeing this, he flung himself into the river, where he laid for a time, injured but alive. In the darkness, he slowly made his way to the bank and hauled himself out, hiding in the forest until daybreak. A soldier found him there in the morning and was so moved by the pathetic sight that he went to don Fernando to plead for Belalcázar's life.

Don Fernando responded kindly. He fetched Belalcázar. The pitiable man, so bold earlier, stood before him now covered in blood from the thorns in which he had passed the night. Don Fernando handed him his mosquito swatter as a token of safety and placed him within the prince's own guard, thus saving him—for the time, at least.[4] Aguirre, enraged by this but as yet unwilling to publicly usurp his handpicked leader's authority, attempted to salve his anger by searching out fresh victims.

The opportunity presented itself in the form of new rumors. The expedition's paymaster general, Pedro Hernández, and the camp's *alguazil mayor* (chief policeman), Pedro de Miranda—two of the original group of conspirators, who had both been present at Ursúa's death—were rumored to be plotting to kill don Fernando and several of his captains. Acting out of apparent zeal for the safety of his handpicked commander and without seeking to find truth in the rumors, Aguirre arrested both men and had them garroted, a grotesque but common method of execution at the time. An executioner would place a garroting victim against a solid object, such as a tree, and a man on the other side would pull a cord around the neck. Another man would insert a stick into the cord and twist it until the victim was strangled. The killers in this case adorned Hernández and Miranda with a note that read, "por amotinadorcillos" (for being dirty little traitors).

The victims' posts went to two other mutineers, Juan Lopez Cerrato and Juan Lopez de Ayala. But neither man—indeed, no man in camp—could feel reasonably secure. If a mere rumor was all it took to deprive one of his life, each would thereafter have to ingratiate himself with Aguirre, who was gathering influence—or join a plot to murder him.

Don Fernando, meanwhile, continued to enjoy the spoils of leadership, doling out appointments and reveling in the men's obsequiousness, which Aguirre encouraged, even being deferential himself. But Aguirre's could not abide don Fernando's next act: he gave the office of lieutenant general to Juan Alonso de la Bandera, the man who had opposed Aguirre

after his "traitor" speech. Bandera's directives contradicted and superseded those of Aguirre, and the tension increased. The men broke into two camps. Those loyal to Aguirre claimed that his office, maestro del campo, was superior to Bandera's. The others backed Bandera, and simmering discord turned to open enmity. To quell the tumult, don Fernando made an extraordinary move: he took Aguirre's office from him and gave it to Bandera, so that Bandera held two offices. Aguirre was demoted to captain of horse. Though it is doubtful don Fernando meant to insult Aguirre rather than simply end the row, captain of horse was a particularly offensive appointment, as by this point all the horses had either been set loose or butchered, rendering his position dependent upon a successful return to Peru.

For days afterward, as Aguirre sulked around camp, gathered soldiers would watch him pass and whisper among themselves about the insult. Finally, Aguirre could take it no more. Spotting a couple of soldiers conferring, he exploded with rage: "From this point forward," he screamed, unsheathing his sword, "any man caught whispering will suffer a penalty of death!"

Later, when Aguirre ran the expedition without any pretense otherwise, the rule stayed: If Aguirre could not hear the words, there was a chance the speech concerned a plot to murder him. Thus, anyone heard speaking sotto voce was immediately executed. This rule would eventually spawn adjuncts. One of Aguirre's men later heard an officer not whispering but committing another apparent proscription: speaking Latin. He was strangled, a placard placed round his neck that read, "por hablador" (for being too chatty).

For now, however, don Fernando was still governor. Sensing trouble, several of his closest confidants suggested to him that he have Aguirre killed; they even offered to do the deed. He should have taken them up on it. Instead, Simón reported, "the good feeling of the General (which, at times, was more than requisite for the post he held) did not allow him to kill Aguirre, or consent to his death." Don Fernando tried his best to appease Aguirre by making him several offers. First was to reinstate Aguirre to his old position before they returned to Peru. More importantly, don Fernando promised to marry his brother, Martín de Guzmán, the man whom Ursúa sent back home at the expedition's start, to Aguirre's beloved daughter, Elvira, when the expedition returned to Peru.

As a show of good faith, don Fernando paid a visit to Elvira, presented her with a silk robe that had once belonged to Ursúa, and told

her that her position would improve due to her impending marriage to a noble. No doubt this had quite an impression on the young lady, still barely a teenager. She was a mixed-race girl with little patronage. Now, because of her father's influence, she would become a noble by marriage. Don Fernando even began to refer to her as "doña" and treated her as a sister-in-law. This unquestionably thrilled Aguirre, considering the intense love he held for Elvira. For now, it seemed, don Fernando had soothed the storm. But Aguirre still did not travel without guard or armor, fully expecting an attack by Bandera's men.

Blunders by Bandera gave Aguirre his chance to rid himself of his rival. Bandera began to act haughty, annoying most of the men. First, he sought another prize: the beautiful doña Inés. He publicly stated his intention to steal doña Inés from Ursúa's old compatriot Lorenzo de Salduendo, with whom she had taken up after Ursúa's death.

Winning doña Inés would be no easy trick. After Ursúa's death, the battle for doña Inés's affections had sparked an internal war. Salduendo fought Juan Alonso, Baltasar de Miranda, and Pedro Hernández for the beautiful mestiza. Initially, the prize fell to Alonso after he murdered Hernández and Miranda. Salduendo settled for one of doña Inés's companions, doña María de Sotomayor. But he could not contain his longing for doña Inés; unable to control his jealousy, he assassinated Alonso and claimed the spoils. Salduendo proved no different from Ursúa, soon finding himself so thoroughly smitten that he too found it impossible to leave doña Inés's side.[5]

Aguirre was no doubt sickened by Salduendo's sudden ineffectualness. He had already witnessed the many obstacles conquistadores faced in attaining their deserved spoils. He had seen firsthand how doña Inés's sorcery had paralyzed Ursúa, too. Nevertheless, Aguirre suffered Salduendo a little longer so he could use him to aid in his elimination of Bandera. Aguirre went to don Fernando and told him that Bandera was planning a coup. Don Fernando brushed off the concern. But Salduendo, furious at Bandera for tempting doña Inés's affections, corroborated Aguirre's claims "by a thousand oaths." The governor was convinced. He consented to the murder not only of Bandera but also of Bandera's chief follower, Cristóbal Hernández de Chaves.

Bandera was usually on his guard. He failed to take the necessary precautions, however, when don Fernando invited him and Chaves to cards. With the game in full swing, the governor gave some clandestine sign, and within moments Aguirre and his men, armed with muskets, lances,

and daggers, rushed the unfortunate victims. Others, hidden in the dark corners behind don Fernando, joined the spree. Chaves probably would have wished for the garrote. The chronicler Zúñiga wrote that he was given death "by a thousand forms." The men repeatedly stabbed him with knives and daggers and pelted him with stones and rocks. But they could not kill him. Ultimately, Chaves leapt into the Amazon, drowning as the men fired their harquebusses at him from shore.

❁

After Bandera's death, don Fernando restored Aguirre to his old post. The men continued to suffer on their island. On one occasion, a group of Indians approached, wishing to trade food for trinkets. Prudence would have dictated the Spaniards keep good relations in hopes of securing provisions. Instead—mirroring the spiraling madness of the camp—several of the Spaniards enticed the Indians out of their canoes and then quickly seized them. They held the Indians prisoner, forcing them to act as servants, and seized the Indians' canoes. This was the last of the visits from friendly natives.

Food ran out, and six men—Sebastián Gómez, Pedro Diaz, Anton Rodriguez, and three others named Molina, Villareal, and Mendoza—went off into the jungle to search for food. Hostile natives intent on revenging those who had been seized quickly killed them. Captain Pedro de Monguía wrote that four of them were even cannibalized. He recounted that others, intent on finding their comrades, found hunks of charred flesh and spotted Indians wearing the Spaniards' clothes. Though this is not very likely (none of the other chroniclers mention it, the Spaniards had long since shed most of their clothes, and hungry Indians intent on cannibalization probably would not have left flesh behind), what cannot be disputed is that the Spaniards' ill behavior, freed as they were from Ursúa's inept but calming influence, squelched whatever benevolence the Indians might have offered.

While rumor had it that "devious and thieving" local Indians were responsible for the alarming rate of canoes going missing, others assumed—rightly, no doubt—that Aguirre and his closest followers were untethering them or sinking them at night. They had come to the island with more than 150 canoes and now fewer than two dozen rotted or leaky ones remained. Aguirre's motivation would have been to prevent anyone from escaping while he firmed up his power.

The heat was intense, and many of the men had shed all of their clothing. But Aguirre endured it. Vásquez and Almesto noted that he "often wore

two heavy coats of mail, always a sword, a dagger and a steel helmet, as well as a harquebus or a lance. Sometimes he wore a breastplate." Bearing up against the heat, beads of sweat forever dripping from his head and beard, he surrounded himself with a phalanx of Basque bodyguards, a group that Zúñiga called men "of little honor, a most wicked and accursed people."

Aguirre, holding his old post and soon to be related to the governor by virtue of his daughter's impending marriage, consolidated his power and continued to give orders that most of the men hastily obeyed, gaining him more and more adherents in camp. All the while, Aguirre continued to flatter the easily manipulated don Fernando, who seems to have regarded Aguirre with a mixture of fear, subservience, and respect, tempered by the occasional reassertion of his own power.

This weird admixture found its full flowering when Aguirre one day pulled don Fernando aside and told him that he needed to get a better sense of who was with him and who was against him. To this end, he should call a general meeting and ask the men directly. In so doing, he should ask if they wished to continue having him as their leader and whether the best path was really to continue in search of El Dorado. "It is a path without fruit," Aguirre told don Fernando. Aguirre gripped don Fernando's elbow, sinking his fingers heavily into the soft flesh of his nominal leader. "El Dorado is a myth. We know where the riches lay—in the storehouses of Peru. It is there where we lay siege."

The stated goal of conquering Peru was nothing less than an open revolt against the king of Spain. Don Fernando understood this. But he shrank under Aguirre's withering gaze. As don Fernando tried to look away, Aguirre increased his grip, bending his neck so that he met don Fernando's attempts to look to the soil for answers. Powerless and frightened, don Fernando agreed to everything—to the ceremony to determine who was with him and who was against, and to the unthinkable: abandoning the search for El Dorado and turning instead to Peru, to revolution. In the end, don Fernando knew that he owed his high position to Aguirre. He also knew that he was an unskilled leader and would not be able to survive without Aguirre's patronage.

Don Fernando, carrying a partisan (a two-handed pole-like weapon), left his lodging and strolled to an open space where the men had gathered. "Caballeros and noble soldiers," he began, Aguirre at his side.

> For days past I have desired to speak with you, the more particularly as I have heard that some of you are not satisfied, in

> consequence of not having taken part in my election as general. My intention has never been to offend those who belong to this expedition, and if I accepted the office of general, it was because I believed I was administering to the general good. I was also warmly solicited by many, and rather against my own wishes; for you well know how difficult it is to act so as to content all, and the great care necessary in all things, particularly in warlike affairs; thus it is well that the general, who has to govern a camp, such as this, wherein there are so many cavaliers and good soldiers, should be elected by general consent, so that all may work willingly in war, being commanded by one whom they have chosen.

He stole a quick look at Aguirre, who nodded almost imperceptibly. Then he continued:

> It is for this that I have summoned you, for it is my desire that you should look around this camp, and see if you cannot find any one more eligible than myself, who, by reason of his greater sagacity and prudence, might take upon himself this office of general. I wish you to look well around, and to elect whom you please. You have entire liberty to do this, and that you may have greater freedom of action, I promise to give up and resign my office to any one you may elect, and I will obey him cheerfully, as a soldier in the ranks. In token of this resignation and renunciation, I place this partisan upright in the ground, as if it were the staff of justice.

Don Fernando's officers, Aguirre included, repeated the action. Those remaining looked at each other and at the self-confident Aguirre with his increasing number of adherents, saw the charade for what it was, and concluded that a protest of don Fernando's governance would make no difference anyway. So they voted to keep him as their governor. Now don Fernando had a patina of legitimacy because of this solemn ceremony orchestrated by Aguirre, and the governor was more indebted to his second-in-command for delivering him to power a second time.

The kingling don Fernando, puffed up anew, addressed his men and told them of the change in plans. They would abandon the present expedition and return to Peru. After such futile searching for El Dorado, many of the men were happy to abandon the quest. But a siege against Peru? That

was another matter. The men murmured to themselves, under Aguirre's watchful eye.

After a few moments, they shrugged and generally agreed to the plan. After all, had a similar rationale not been delivered upon Ursúa's death? Why not go all in? Well, there was the matter of punishment for traitors to the king: beheading, quartering, and complete surrender of all property to the Crown. Feeling especially solicitous after his election, don Fernando told the gathered crowd that whoever was against the latest enterprise could openly say as much. They would be allowed to leave the expedition at the first friendly Indian village with whatever food and munitions could be procured and make the best of it they could. Or, if they preferred, they could wait until the men reached Spanish settlements in the Indies and debark there, no hard feelings. Three men stated such a desire. There is little doubt that out of the remaining hundreds of men, many felt inclined to desert, but they also no doubt calculated the difficulties involved in staying in the jungle. Why not, they may have reasoned, continue all the way out of the jungle and then desert, claiming that they had been forced to participate? (Indeed, virtually all of the later chroniclers on the expedition would do almost precisely that.) For now, those who wished to stay on had to sign their names to an oath declaring as much.

The three dissenters—Francisco Vásquez, Juan de Cabañas, and Juan de Vargas Zapata—proclaimed that their only king and lord resided in Spain, not here along the banks of the Amazon River. Thus, these men would not follow don Fernando into war. They wished to be excused from taking the oath of allegiance. Aguirre and the others treated them as they said they would. The three were not killed, but Aguirre's partisans seized their weapons. If these men were not going to take part in the insurrection, they reasoned, they had no use for weapons.

Don Fernando ordered Padre Alonso Henao to say mass. He told the assembled crowd that it was necessary to consecrate the proceedings so that "in the most solemn manner in use among Christians . . . there might be greater unanimity and friendship that they might have true faith in each other." Henao held the Host in his hands. And so, in a clearing in the suffocating thickness of the great jungle, black water snaking through impenetrable forests, one by one, the men touched the sacred instrument and declared their loyalty to one another and to the expedition's revolutionary goal:

> We swear by God and by his most glorious mother Santa Maria,
> and by the holy works of the Evangelists, and by the consecrated

> host, that we are unanimous in the war we are about to prosecute against the kingdoms of Peru. There shall be no difference of opinion between us. We swear to faithfully aid one another without considering feelings of affection, relationship, loyalty or any matter that might retard the fixed plans of this operation. In all that appertains to this war, we recognize as our general don Fernando de Guzmán. We shall obey him and do all he and his ministers command under penalty of being perjurers and infamous men.

"If necessary, we shall die in the enterprise," they added.

They had left the comfort of Peru months earlier in search of El Dorado and in the service of the king. Now, they had declared war on that king, killed his royal emissary, and set in motion a plan to seize the royal treasuries of Peru. It was a bold, even insane act, and it required a bold, perhaps even insane, leader.

❁

Don Fernando signed the document of revolution first, then Aguirre and the other officers in order of rank. The men all came forward, but some took the opportunity of the crush to give only the appearance of signing or protested that they were illiterate and could not sign their names. These men probably harbored hopes that if their name was not on the list they might be spared the inevitable punishments to follow. But by leaving their name off the list, they also took the chance that Aguirre would notice the omission and rectify matters as he saw fit. Indeed, as the men approached to sign the oath, Aguirre looked each in the face, trying to ascertain who came willingly and with enthusiasm and who hedged. Then he and don Fernando set to work trying to win over the vanquished Bandera's followers. In appearance, they seemed to succeed. In the end, only the three original dissenters—Vásquez, de Cabañas, and Vargas—offered any public resistance. After surrendering their weapons, the three men "knew what would be their doom, and said so ere they determined how they would act, but death was preferable to a life of treason to their king," Simón wrote.

Aguirre staged yet another ceremony in hopes of identifying anyone else who was not fully committed to the revolution. In what would become a familiar pattern, he told don Fernando of his plan and then usurped him by taking center stage. Performing an act that would increasingly define his

remarkable character, Aguirre gave yet another speech, dutifully recorded by the chroniclers:

> Cavaliers, we have not forgotten, for it is not many days since, that we named for our Captain General don Fernando de Guzmán, of our own free will, and without any force, for all were duly informed that full liberty was given to elect whom they considered most fit; and, after the election, the General repeated to all that they might select the road that best pleased them, to follow or not the war in Peru, and those who did not wish to do so have not on that account been slighted, as is well known; and we who determined to do so, promised, on oath, to comply with our vow; but since that time some may have changed their minds and determined to do something that appears to them better, or some may have had the oath forced upon them and may say that they are compelled to follow this war against their inclination. From this moment, I, in the name of the General my lord, and as his maestro del campo, make known and exhort every one of you to examine into what you have done and sworn to, and if you feel you have not the wish to comply, from this moment you shall be released from your oath, and permission shall be given to you—without your incurring any pain—to declare and follow what may appear best to you; for which I give my word and honor, and promise to keep it with all, as has been kept with those cavaliers who said that they did not wish to follow the war, nor fight against the king, whom we have treated as brothers.

Several of the men stepped forward and defended their honor: they had agreed to the expedition's new goals, they were men, and they certainly would not go back on their word now.

Aguirre addressed them: "Yes, I perceive you are indeed firm in your views, and that such valiant souls are not only able to subject Peru—for it is only a single province—but all the provinces of these Indies, which cannot have a good and proper government without a king at their head to govern; it having been the custom in them, since they have been discovered and conquered, that the lands should belong to him who conquered and subjected them. For this object we have elected don Fernando de Guzmán our General and lord, to whom by right these kingdoms belong." Aguirre looked to don Fernando and with a solicitous smile on his face, added,

"And when we arrive in Peru, we will give him the kingly crown, which will so well suit his brow. And from henceforth we will hold, recognize, and obey him as our Prince and lawful lord: to which end it is absolutely necessary that we forswear our allegiance to the kingdoms of Spain, our birthplace; and declare that we will not obey the king don Philip; for it is clear that no one can serve two masters."

This was an extraordinary moment. Not only had the men agreed to undertake a revolt against the king, but Aguirre suggested that they forswear their very citizenship as well. Some historians have pointed out that this may not have been as revolutionary as it seems. Aguirre used the word *desnaturar* in his original speech; traced to its usage in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the word referred to a process by which vassals could break from their lords and lieges.[6] But considering the events that followed and Aguirre's dream of a complete break from what he saw as a corrupt and undeserving kingdom, this action could be viewed as the earliest call for total revolution in the Americas. Had the end of this story turned out differently, Aguirre and his ragged band of men might very well have been lauded through history as the first brave souls of the free New World to throw off the oppressive colonial yoke. Indeed, *in spirit*, there is much to connect these men to their American successors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Even after the United States had secured independence, there was still a sense among several Founding Fathers that a sweeping tide of denaturalization was soon to engulf the entire planet, beginning with the simmering popular discontent in France. Alexander Hamilton entertained dreams of taking an army and marching through Virginia to rout the hated Republicans; but the march would not stop there. He would continue south, all the way through the newly acquired Louisiana Territory and into Mexico and Peru, everywhere throwing off French and Spanish command.[7] Of course, Hamilton's vision did not include returning the land to the original inhabitants, despite his relatively enlightened views on both slavery and Native Americans. Instead, he would bestow sovereignty on the "new natives," men born in the New World but newly arrived in historical time. Aguirre shared this vision. Natives were, in his view, largely part of the landscape, a group of people subject to control by European men who would create new countries in the New World. The Spanish, the French, the English, the Dutch: they could squabble back in Europe. Men of European stock transplanted to the American continent and working the land were to be the new and true masters.

Nevertheless, Aguirre's view reflects a certain enlightenment: his stated goals would come to include not only the overthrow of corrupt officials but redistribution of the land, emancipation of slaves, and protections for the class of conquistadores like himself who had heretofore gained little in the New World.

Aguirre continued,

> In order that there may be no delay in such an important matter, and for the benefit of all, I will commence, and I say that I denaturalize myself from the kingdoms of Spain, where I was born; and if I have any rights there in consequence of my parents being Spaniards, and vassals of the king don Philip, I give up all my rights, and I deny that he is my king and lord; and I repeat that I know him not, neither do I wish to know him, nor obey him as such; but rather, being in possession of my own liberty, I elect from this time for my prince, king, and natural lord, don Fernando de Guzmán; and I swear and promise to be his faithful vassal and to die in his defense, as he is my lord and king.

Aguirre approached don Fernando and took his hand. "In sign of my recognition," he continued, "and of the obedience I owe to him, I kiss his hand, with all those who choose to follow and approve what I have said in this election of don Fernando de Guzmán, as Prince and King of all Tierra Firme and he who does not do this will clearly show that his thoughts are not like his words and oath."[8]

Aguirre, followed by his officers, addressed don Fernando: "All these cavaliers and myself have elected Your Excellency to be our Prince and King; and as such we come to tender you our obedience, and to kiss your hand, supplicating your acquiescence." All the men thereafter addressed don Fernando as "Your Excellency."

This had the effect Aguirre hoped it would. Don Fernando became increasingly self-aggrandizing, even ridiculous. He embraced all his new subjects but did not shake their hands, "for royalty never shakes hands." He promised enormous salaries to all his officers, down to the lowliest pages, to be paid once the men recovered the royal treasury of Peru. Zúñiga observed that "the new 'prince' acquired much authority, was popular with all and a lively person, except that he lacked the slightest knowledge of how to command and how to protect his own person." Don Fernando seemed to be aware of this; he ceded all military matters to his second

in command. Aguirre took advantage of this arrangement by identifying those he deemed necessary to eliminate.

Meanwhile, don Fernando began to take all his meals alone, separating himself in much the manner Ursúa had done. He issued many decrees, each preceded by the beating of drums and each signed with the heading "don Fernando de Guzmán, by the grace of God, Prince of Tierra Firme and of Peru, and Governor of Chile." All men in camp were now required to remove their head coverings when they saw him. When eating, according to Simón, don Fernando "was served at table with all the ceremonies, like unto a king; and this proud prince was so puffed up in his representation of majesty, that it looked like a comedy, or child's play."

The expedition's new leaders now settled on a specific plan of action. They would await the completion of the brigantines and then sail until they reached the North Sea, or Caribbean.[9] There they would lay siege to the island of Margarita. Because of Margarita's relatively sparse population, the men figured that they could provision themselves there with little resistance. In fact, they reckoned, there might very well even be people on Margarita who wished to join their cause. Restocked and revictualed, the men would then sail for Panama and the town of Nombre de Dios. Making landfall there, they would proceed overland, through the Sierra Capira, the central cordillera of Panama, where they would control the pass south to Panama City, effectively cutting off communication between the north and south. This done, they would move south, plundering each town in succession, taking what they felt rightly theirs, and harassing the population to such a degree that resistance would be futile. In Panama City, they would take possession of the ships in port.

While encamped in port at Nombre de Dios, they would recruit men from Veragua, Nicaragua.[10] The area was replete with enslaved blacks from Africa. By offering the blacks their freedom if they would join the cause, Aguirre had every confidence that he could swell his ranks.[11] With so large a force and in possession of the plundered artillery and ships from Panama City and Nombre de Dios, they would sail for the coast of Peru and invade. The defenders of Peru would have a force smaller than Aguirre's. Additionally, Aguirre felt confident that their arrival would attract even more men in Peru anxious to join their righteous cause. In possession of the riches of Peru, the men would lord over it and take their pick of the women there. The men laughed at this, imagining the chivalrous and respectful exchanges between them: "I wish to have doña Elise." "I, too, was thinking of claiming her. However, since you have chosen her first, I

will defer to you. There will be many to choose from, of course. I can have my pick of the many *chapetonas*."[12]

After a three-month stay in the Village of the Brigantines, they finally set sail with their improved vessels. It was April 1561. Their two new brigantines, captained by don Fernando and Aguirre, respectively, were christened the *Victory* and the *Santiago*. They slept that evening at another Machiparo village. The next morning, they came to a divergence of the river. Several of them believed that rich provinces lay to the right. Aguirre was aware of the men's ambivalence; despite their recent oath to return to Peru, many still held out hope of finding riches at an El Dorado here in the jungle. To avoid encouraging their dreams, Aguirre ordered the fleet to take the left branch, moving northward, away from the presumed location of El Dorado.[13]

The men who wished to stay in the "moderately fair province" of the Machiparo were surely disappointed at the northwest detour. For three days, the fleet sailed through abandoned villages in a wet and flooded region where mosquitoes tormented them. Soon after, don Fernando ordered Alonso de Montoya to take some men and search for food. They found some dried fish and maize left behind by fleeing Indians. Don Fernando then ordered the men to stop so that they might replenish stocks and celebrate the eight days of Passion Week and Easter. The men caught fish and received more in barter with the few Indians who dared to approach them.

It had been some time since there was bloodshed, a situation soon rectified. A soldier named Pedro Alonso Caxco, who had been an Ursúa loyalist and had failed to show don Fernando the same deference as the others, complained to another soldier named Villatoro that the mutineers had shown him little respect by denying him the post he desired. He tugged his beard and recited lines from Virgil: "Audaces fortuna juvat, timidosque repellit" (Fortune favors the bold but abandons the coward). One of the men overheard and made the protest known to Aguirre, who ordered both men arrested. Don Fernando, increasingly helpless, learned of the arrest and ordered the two men spared. His order came too late, however, as Caxco had already been garroted, with Villatoro awaiting his turn. Don Fernando's intercession spared Villatoro's life, much to Aguirre's chagrin. But he was able, for the time, to choke down his anger.

The men camped and soon friendly natives approached, offering food for barter. Seeing that the Spaniards were initially friendly, the Indians hired themselves out to do rowing, grinding corn, and baking bread. Even after some of the more unscrupulous Spaniards mistreated

them, they remained in service and in good temperament. Considering that the Spaniards owed them for their services, the Indians came at night and took the Spaniards' possessions from their sleeping places. Some were caught were imprisoned, and others came to barter for their release, offering manatee, dried fish, turtles, and other food. All in all, it was an arrangement that served both sides adequately.

The Indians had a store of solid timber, and don Fernando thought this a good place to rest and build another vessel. So the men set up a semipermanent camp. Instead of placing governor don Fernando in the middle of the encampment, as would have been custom, the increasingly powerful Aguirre occupied that position. From this vantage point, Aguirre could keep a better eye on the movements of the entire camp. Further, he ordered the brigantines moored near him, so he could keep watch over them, too. This arrangement pleased Aguirre, but the delay caused him another worry. No movement meant time to idle, and idle time meant more opportunity for reflection.

Indeed, some of the men were becoming increasingly uncomfortable with what they had done to Ursúa and their subsequent pledge to revolt. Not only did they have to worry about royal retribution, but some began to consider what divine punishment awaited them. Suddenly, the plan to attack Peru seemed nothing more than a death sentence. They had two other options: they could retrace their steps, hand themselves over to the authorities, and plead mercy. Or they could continue on their original path, searching out treasured lands. If they could succeed, they might reasonably expect some lenience from the king, whom they would be further enriching.

Enough of the men made these feelings known that don Fernando thought it wise to call a council to once again discuss the sagacity of attacking Peru. Here he made a gigantic error. Seeking to assert his position, he did not tell Aguirre of the council and held it without him. The men present realized that any change in plans would be fruitless so long as Aguirre held sway over a great number of men in camp. They resolved to carry out a bold plan: they would kill the Traitor, Aguirre. Don Fernando agreed and asked one of the men to send for Aguirre. They would do it now.

Just as the soldier was about leave, Montoya stood up. "Stop!" he commanded. "We should reconsider. If Aguirre is sent for now, he will surely arrive with many of his followers, and as they never move without being armed, there will be major bloodshed. Many of us sitting here now might die along with the Traitor." The councilors murmured in agreement.

"Instead," Montoya argued, "let us wait until the fleet is on the river. Then we will ask Aguirre to come on board the prince's brigantine alone, and the deed will be done then—without a fracas."

Because don Fernando had a much more insatiable appetite for fritters than for warfare, he enthusiastically agreed. The loyal council concurred. This was don Fernando's second mistake. Aguirre, meanwhile, increased the number of followers on his side. This he did by making periodic walks through camp and, after locating men whose loyalties were suspect, approaching them and snatching the weapons from their hands under some pretext that they did not know how to take good care of them. Feigning indignity, he would then thrust the confiscated weapons into the hands of those he felt he could trust, saying that they knew how to take care of them, that these were real warriors. The newly possessed would be so flattered that they readily gave themselves over to Aguirre.

Next, Aguirre broke up the soldiers into groups of forty, placing one of his partisans in charge of each. He also made sure to stock don Fernando's party with Aguirre loyalists, so that he had influence over every segment of the camp. As Aguirre's power increased, don Fernando's lessened in proportion. Seeing that don Fernando had little appetite for leadership compared to Aguirre, the mutineers felt more secure in their choice of chief.

Seeing this consolidation of power, Gonzalo Duarte, don Fernando's *mayordomo mayor* (butler), beseeched his prince to make it a rule that Duarte would be answerable only to him, not to Aguirre. With a camp full of Aguirre loyalists, it was not long before this news came to Aguirre. An even shorter time elapsed before Aguirre had Duarte imprisoned, awaiting strangulation.

For the second time don Fernando interceded, securing Duarte's release. This time, however, Aguirre was not quick to let it go. He was furious. Simón relates what happened next: "Aguirre's diabolical rage knew no bounds when he was informed that his prey had escaped his hands; he rushed to don Fernando's dwelling, and, with ferocious language, throwing himself on the ground before him, fire flashing from his eyes, and foam from his mouth, supplicated that the prisoner might be given up to him, for that he wanted to punish him for many atrocious crimes he had committed." Aguirre drew his sword and told don Fernando, "I will not rise from the ground until with this sword I am allowed to cut off Duarte's head."

Don Fernando managed to remain composed. He approached Aguirre and helped him up. "Please. Rise and be calm. I promise to examine Duarte's offense. I pledge that if I find him guilty of some crime, he will be

punished." The officers nearby offered soothing words as well; it seemed, for the time at least, that they succeeded in placating Aguirre. Duarte himself arrived. He reminded Aguirre that he had been an ally in the plan to kill Ursúa. He had also agreed to the election of don Fernando, and he agreed to the plan to return to Peru. "I never breathed a word of the conspiracy to anyone. And for my silence, you would take my life?" Duarte asked.

Aguirre nodded. He sheathed his sword. Those present encouraged the men to embrace. They did so. For the time, a crisis had been averted. It was perhaps don Fernando's crowning achievement. Unfortunately for him, however, the peace would not last.

CHAPTER 9

"Birds mourned on the trees"

Doña Inés continued her relationship with Lorenzo Salduendo. Though she had once been attached to the expedition leader, here at least was a man still in a position of power, as he served as don Fernando's captain of bodyguard. Maria de Soto, her mestiza servant and a mistress to another man on the expedition, all the while attended her. Already having endured the murder of her lover Ursúa, doña Inés also witnessed many subsequent murders. When one of her servants died naturally, she buried her and uttered, "God pardon thee, my child; before long you will have many companions with you in the grave." One of the men made Aguirre aware of these comments; already ill disposed toward her, his hatred for doña Inés grew.

Ready for the next phase of the voyage, Salduendo sent for straw and sack mattresses to be put aboard the brigantines for the comfort of the ladies. Aguirre was stupefied. He forbade the loading of the mattresses, arguing—rightly—that there were far more important items to put on the already overburdened ships. Salduendo stalked away and returned to the hut where the ladies were waiting. As he broke the news to them, a rage overtook him. He threw a lance to the ground and yelled, "What? Am I to beg for favors from Lope de Aguirre at these my years?"

Hearing these comments, and still burning at doña Inés's comments from the day before, Aguirre had had enough of the both of them. He began to mutter about killing them. Salduendo ran to don Fernando, as Gonzalo Duarte had done, and begged for interference. Still bloated with confidence from successfully arbitrating the earlier dispute, don Fernando told Salduendo not to worry, that all would be well. Don Fernando sent Gonzalo Guiral de Fuentes to tell Aguirre that Salduendo should be left alone.

The approaching fury was like a cloud of angry hornets. Guiral met Aguirre and several of his armed men, including a Basque named Martín Pérez, on the path to don Fernando's. Guiral delivered the news and then watched in stupefaction as Aguirre stormed past, not giving the slightest indication that he heard a word. Without stopping, Aguirre and his men burst into don Fernando's. Pérez yelled out, "Long live don Fernando de Guzmán! Death to all traitors!" The men fell on Salduendo and stabbed him repeatedly with their swords and lances. Don Fernando begged the killers to stop, but to no avail. His captain of the guard now lay slain in front of him. Aguirre was sending a message as much to him as to the helpless victim Salduendo, a man who had once been Aguirre's conspirator in arms back in Cuzco.

"Campmaster," don Fernando pleaded, "Why have you killed my guard captain without informing me? Why have you done this?"

"My prince and lord—I have slain Lorenzo de Salduendo, one who to me was like a brother and the most precious person on earth," Aguirre replied. "Your Excellency must understand that all who harbor intentions on your life must suffer this fate," he said.

Don Fernando pointed out that Aguirre should have made Salduendo's intentions known to him, his superior. "After all," he said, "If you kill first and publicize the offense after, any person can be killed in this irregular manner." Of course, that was precisely the point. But Aguirre could not concede it just yet.

"It is apparent that Your Excellency has little experience in such matters," Aguirre said. "Lorenzo de Salduendo intended to kill both of us. If something happens to me, who will vouch for your safety?" He wiped the blood off his sword and returned it to its scabbard as don Fernando considered the truth in that. "I found Salduendo in bed with doña Inés de Atienza again," Aguirre added.

At this, Aguirre turned to two of his accomplices, the grisly named Francisco de Carrion and Anton Llamoso, and instructed them to find doña Inés and kill her, too. The two men wasted no time. They hurried to her lodging and, finding her there, set upon her without saying a word. Carrion and Llamoso stabbed her repeatedly until she drowned in her own blood. It was a particularly brutal display. They continued to stab her even after she died, "as if they took an unnatural delight in mangling what had been so beautiful," wrote Southey.[1] Her lodging was transformed into a gully of crimson, her degraded corpse a mockery of the beauty and vitality she had held in life.

The murder of doña Inés had a deep effect on many of the men in the camp. While there were certainly those who resented her presence and the "bewitching" effect she had on Ursúa, the ferocity with which she was killed stunned them. Zúñiga claimed that Llamoso and Carrion "enjoyed the slaughter and prolonged her agony." Simón wrote that the murderers "took her life in such a barbarous manner that after her death, even the most hardened men in the camp, at sight of the mangled victim, were broken-hearted, for this was the most cruel act that had been perpetrated." And Simón, it must be remembered, was completely unfeeling about doña Inés, blaming her for much of the misery that befell the expedition. Clements Markham, far more sympathetic to doña Inés, wrote of her death: "If she was guilty of any fault, after the death of Ursúa, which Simón asserts, and which I do not believe, let it be remembered that the poor broken-hearted girl was utterly helpless, and in the hands of incarnate fiends, with hearts harder than the nether mill stone."[2]

Of all the bloodshed perpetrated during the expedition, the murder of doña Inés proved a touchstone for many. It seemed to sum up all the cruel barbarity of men who hated life and beauty so much that they would snuff out the embodiment of both: doña Inés. The contemporaneous poet and priest Juan de Castellanos wrote a ballad about doña Inés's death:

The birds mourned on the trees;
The wild beasts of the forest lamented;
The waters ceased to murmur;
The fishes beneath the waters wailed;
The winds execrated the deed
When Llamoso cut the veins of her white neck.
Wretch! wert thou born of woman?
No! what beast could have such a wicked son?
How was it that thou didst not die
In imagining a treason so enormous?
Her two women, 'midst lamentation and grief,
Gathered flowers to cover her grave,
And cut her epitaph in the bark of a tree—
"These flowers cover one whose faithfulness
And beauty were unequalled,
Whom cruel men slew without a cause."[3]

The murderers paid little heed to the lamentations for doña Inés. As the women performed their solemn ceremony for her, the killers busied themselves divvying up her considerable property.

Don Fernando asserted himself, upbraiding his inferior in rank for having the temerity not only to ignore his order to leave Salduendo be but also to murder the man right in front of the governor. Aguirre would not stand for it. Realizing that the men who followed him had more power among them than those who remained subservient to don Fernando, Aguirre threw back an insult. "You have no sense in governing affairs of war," Aguirre spat at him. "Had I been wise, I would never have put my trust in a rascally race, the Sevillano, that double-dealing lot."

The nationality shot was ostensibly directed at Salduendo, but Aguirre knew it would have a double effect: don Fernando, also a proud noble of Seville, took great insult. But whatever he might have wished to retort, he instead remained silent, frightened by the ominous tone of Aguirre's next words. "Your Excellency," he began, "I beg you take great caution in your person, as I do mine. Men in your position should take more care than you seem to. The next time you wish to have a council of war, sir, have with you fifty well-armed men in your train. Your servant Duarte is a useless man, fattening you up. You would do better with the pebbles of Pariacaca than the pancakes of Duarte."[4]

Whether through cool calculation or driven by something more sincere, Aguirre soon returned to don Fernando and begged his pardon. He had killed Salduendo, he explained, because Salduendo wished don Fernando dead. And if His Excellency was to lose one friend, better Salduendo than Aguirre, for Aguirre would defend him better than anyone else in camp.

This speech did not pacify don Fernando. In fact, it seemed to show in full force the two-faced nature of his second in command. While Aguirre took his own advice and continued to build his closest defenses, don Fernando did just the opposite. He began to sulk around camp; it seemed that he knew that his death was only a matter of time and his "best defender's" will. After Aguirre's speech, don Fernando "never lost the deadly paleness which then came upon him, nor ever again smiled or made a show of cheerfulness, but had the countenance of one aghast," wrote Southey.[5] Simón wrote that don Fernando "became fearful and changed in appearance; but he did not protect his person with more care, nor take Aguirre's life, nor did he seek to rally more friends round him for protection; for he had become so timid and listless that for care of his own life he took but little note. . . . It seemed that he carried death in his eyes."

By contrast, sixty well-armed men now attended Aguirre. He gave out that this contingent was formed for the continued protection of the prince, but no one believed that. Seeing the great dissimilarity between the official and nominal leaders of the camp, the defections increased. Gonzalo Guiral de Fuentes and Alonzo de Villena, both members of the council that decided to kill Aguirre, went to Aguirre and informed him of the meeting, explaining that he was alive only because of Montoya's objection and the plan to commit the execution later upon the brigantines. Aguirre decided he would kill don Fernando—and all the other members of the council for good measure. There would be no more pretense; this was his expedition now. So the second in command sent for the first. But don Fernando sensed something wrong; he replied that the time was not right for councils. He begged to be excused.

Aguirre secretly prepared his friends for the murder of the councilors. However, he told only two of his closest confidants—Juan de Aguirre (no relation) and Martín Pérez—of his decision to kill don Fernando. Next, he set about taking care of logistics. He first ordered all the canoes brought up to his area of the camp. In this way, there could be no communication between don Fernando's area of the camp and Montoya and his men. From the middle, Aguirre could oversee the actions of everyone. He also secretly told his friends to load their clothes onto the brigantines. In case their plan was discovered, they could jump on board and be ready to sail.

The first strike came at night. With Aguirre's guards posted along the narrow road to don Fernando's, Aguirre and several of his men went to Montoya's hut, as well as to the admiral Miguel Bovedo's. Their murders were swift. With two dead, Aguirre collected his men and planned the next step. They would head to don Fernando's and kill him. Additionally, they would need to murder the captains assembled near don Fernando. Aguirre named those who were to be murdered, and he created teams of ten men for the murder of each captain. It was a somewhat ridiculous number, but one that matched Aguirre's zeal. He would leave absolutely nothing to chance.

But the others halted the plan. They convinced Aguirre that in the thick darkness, so many men attempting to stab one might in fact stab each other. Aguirre and the others then retired to the brigantines to wait the first light of dawn. They also stood ready to cut the cables of the brigantines and set sail should don Fernando find out about the plan or the two murders already committed.

When dawn arrived, Aguirre and the men—except the few left guarding the brigantines—marched straight to don Fernando's dwelling. Along

the way, Aguirre collected as many men as he could, (keeping them ignorant of the plan to kill don Fernando the leader), by telling them that they were on the way to chastise some mutineers.

The first unfortunate victim was the priest Alonso Henao. Seeing the approaching band, he stepped to the road to see what the commotion was. There is some dispute about the identity of Henao's murderer. Some chroniclers assign it to Aguirre, others to a soldier named Alonso Navarro. At least one claims that Aguirre murdered Henao while he slept, thrusting a sword into his chest and pinning him to his mattress. Whoever it was, the end result was the same: the third murder in the last few hours, with more to come immediately after.

It seems that for all the mutineers' worry about don Fernando finding out their plan, he was quite unaware of anything. Lying on his couch when the men arrived, he rose in his nightshirt and took them in all in turn. Seeing Aguirre, he asked, "What is all this, my father?" Since making the marriage arrangements for Elvira, don Fernando had taken to calling Aguirre "father," a rather absurd and ironic term coming from the "prince of all Tierra Firme."

Aguirre reached his hand to don Fernando and soothed him: "Do not be alarmed, Your Excellency," he said. Then, brushing past him, Aguirre led his men to Gonzalo Duarte, Miguel Serrano de Cáceres, and Baltasar Toscano Cortes and ripped them to shreds with their swords, lances, and harquebusses. Amidst the grunts, groans, and shrieks of the killers and the killed, the stunned and horrified don Fernando trembled in the corner, watching the vicious murder of his closest allies as he sat mere feet away. Aguirre's two henchmen, Juan de Aguirre and Pérez, had not forgotten their particular charge. While the confusion reigned, they turned and fired upon the stunned prince with their harquebusses. He died instantly. The men gathered up his corpulent body and dragged him outside. Then they threw his remains into the river.

Just twenty-six years of age, don Fernando de Guzmán—"slow to action, more kind than otherwise"—was dead. At least one chronicler, Toribio de Ortiguera, hoped that at least "it may please God to have granted [don Fernando] true contrition, so that his soul might not be lost by cause of that same infamy which made him lose his life."[6] Southey summed up the man this way: "He was in his twenty-sixth year; his person was fine, his manners good, his nature not evil; but his want of principle and intellect made him first the tool, and then the victim of worse men than himself."[7]

With the second expedition leader assassinated, the charge fell completely to Aguirre, both in order of rank and in unquestioned power. Aguirre emerged from don Fernando's hut spattered in the blood of the newly murdered. As the stunned men gathered around him, he struck a triumphant, sanguine pose before he strode off to his dwelling, trailing behind him a sense of excited but grim inevitability.

Madman or no, homicidal maniac or no—Aguirre was now the undisputed leader of the expedition that had begun in search of El Dorado to enrich the king and now had as its ultimate goal the overthrow of that same king's power.

CHAPTER 10

The Wrath of God

If there were any men left inclined to oppose Aguirre, they might have reconsidered after seeing their new leader as he called everyone together to explain the murder of don Fernando. Covered from head to toe in armor and surrounded by eighty men also arrayed like him, Aguirre addressed the camp:

> You all know gentlemen and friends, the efforts I have made for this expedition and how I have served don Fernando de Guzmán and his captains who last night and this morning have been killed. There ought not to be surprise at these late and necessary events. Nor should you be tumultuous at what you have witnessed. On many occasions I have risked my life as his good and faithful servant and I have made many enemies by acting in his behalf and interest. You all know the debt he owed me and the obligation under which he was. It would have been right and proper for him to regard me as a friend and treat me as such. But he chose not to do so; he planned an atrocious death for me, something I did not deserve. Those of you who were present at the consultations held about the manner of my death know all this. I considered the situation very carefully and did not like it. God knows, and he is my witness, that it is not my intention to make excuses for what you have seen, a deed done to protect myself and my person. Do not work yourselves up on account of it or be scandalized. Leave the matter alone, both in public and in private, for I have simply received compensation for a wrong inflicted on me. Don Fernando, our prince, and his officers have,

> as you have seen, died for having proved themselves incapable of commanding and ruling, behaving like underlings; they never asked for my advice. Until now our affairs have been conducted in the most childish manner, simply because our commander behaved like a boy.

Even those who feared or mistrusted Aguirre could not help but nod at this. The slaying of don Fernando did little to pluck the strings of their sympathies. Those who felt otherwise owed it more to don Fernando's childish innocence than his abilities as a leader. Vásquez, for one, found him completely unworthy of pity: "He was extremely ungrateful to [Ursúa] . . . he killed him out of sheer ambition. He remained in his tyrannical position of command first as General and then as Prince for almost five months. And this was not long enough to gorge himself on fritters and other such things on which his happiness depended."

Aguirre continued,

> As I do not wish to dwell on this any longer, I ask you to accept these facts and be my friends, for I promise to be yours. I forgive those who have taken part in don Fernando's conspiracy against me. I shall take steps to prevent, from now on, factional strife and differences in our army. All military matters will be handled with fairness, diligence, and care. To ensure good morale, all who have a complaint or have a difference with another man shall come to me to enable me to arbitrate and turn opponents into friends and to allow all of us peace and friendship. From now on we must conduct our moves seriously, for there is nobody else to help us. It is my intention to see you all prosperous and place Peru in your grasp. Leave all to me and I shall arrange for Peru to be governed by men, by Marañones.[1]

The assembled men chuckled. The nod to this new nickname, Marañones, was a nice touch. The men of the time called the Amazon River the Marañón. Taking the name of the river they were descending, playing on the pun of *marañon*, meaning entanglement, the men were now a club, a revolutionary band of warriors seeking to wrest from corruption what was rightfully theirs to take. Most of the men were moved. Many more of them feared Aguirre and knew better than to resist. The noblemen in the camp surely began to worry; if there was a pattern emerging, it was that

Aguirre's targets were not only those who made their resistance known but any man of noble blood. It was increasingly obvious that Aguirre preferred the company of men of humbler origin like himself. He promoted them to positions of high authority and demoted the rest. He also surrounded himself with an even larger contingent of guards. Zúñiga observed that "[Aguirre's] men all came from Biscay, were sailors and coastal residents of the most dubious reputation, always ready to rob and commit criminal acts, which Aguirre amply provided. In short, they were a despicable crowd; under Aguirre's writ they became ruthless butchers."[2]

In any case, the "Prince of Tierra Firme and of Peru, and Governor of Chile" was dead, replaced by Aguirre, self-anointed with a starker moniker: Prince of Liberty. In full, Aguirre was now head of the "Kingdom of Tierra Firme and the Provinces of Chile, Lord of all South America, from the Isthmus of Panama to the Strait of Magellan, where the North Sea joined the South." He soon added to this title the one that would help define him for centuries thereafter: Ira de Dios (Wrath of God).[3] Aguirre saw no self-contradiction in being both the Wrath of God and the Prince of Liberty. He would deliver his men—by whatever means necessary—to a righteous world where merit trumped patronage and where bloodshed was a necessity. His self styled image as the Wrath of God reflected his belief not in a benevolent God bestowing all his grace on the kingdom of Spain but rather an angry God, one who would purge the corrupt and institute a new order, with Aguirre at the helm. The belief seems messianic on the surface; Aguirre often railed against a hopelessly corrupt and imperfect world, one needing godly intervention—or, more accurately, human rectification perhaps bubbling up from a wellspring of divine intervention.

Aguirre's relationship with religion and God was a complicated one. He seems at turns to have believed deeply in God, but when he felt that God, like the king of Spain, had turned his back and treated him without fairness, then God might just as well be a lowly peasant, worthy of contempt. While at turns invoking God and his saints, he showed no compunction in blaspheming. When he caught his soldiers praying, he would snatch their rosaries and break them, telling them that he did not want Christian soldiers, "that such occupations were only fit for monks and nuns," and that the soldiers should "feel free to play at dice with the Devil for their souls." Indeed, Aguirre told his men that they could live according to whatever law suited them, so long as it allowed them to rob, kill, maim, and destroy. He once wrote, "Now that we no longer believe in

God, the man who is worth no more than the next is worth nothing at all." While often professing himself to be a deep and abiding Christian, he also told his men that he did not care whether they called themselves Jews, Muslims, or pagans, for each was to him the same (though he did associate Lutheranism with corruption).

Considering Aguirre's relationship with God and religion, it is difficult to argue that he suffered from a messiah complex, but he likely would have believed that he had been anointed, whether through God's good graces or, more probably, by the force of his own will, to lead his men toward a righteous cause. Aguirre's emergence from the chaos of the entrada signaled to many of the Marañones as well that their new leader would, paradoxically, deliver them from the decadence of the colonies and return them to a more virtuous past. As we will see, Aguirre used as his idealized model the Goths, who defeated the Moors in southern Spain after almost eight centuries, delivering the Iberian Peninsula back to the Christian Spaniards. Many Spaniards who engaged in that earlier effort often spoke of it as God's work—the destruction of the enemy was as much the point as ultimate victory, which took so long to achieve.

As don Fernando had once done, Aguirre doled out new offices to his men. There could be no more pretenses about who ran the camp. Martín Pérez became Aguirre's camp master. Others given high posts included Juan Gonzalo, Diego de Trujillo, Diego Tirado, and Nicolas de Susaya, "a Biscayan, and a very little mean fellow." Sancho Pizarro and Pedro Alonzo Galeas, given their posts by don Fernando, were allowed to keep them. The leadership immediately disseminated new rules: no man was to whisper or "speak in private with his companions," soldiers should not walk about camp in groups, and soldiers in Aguirre's presence should never lay hands on any weapon. All these indiscretions were punishable by death.

With his new and heavily armed bodyguard, Aguirre spent all his time on board his brigantine before he gave the order to leave. They would, finally, head for the coast and Margarita Island beyond. Soon, he promised, Peru would be theirs. They left the island several of the men would thereafter dub the Town of Butchery or the Village of the Massacre (Pueblo de la Matanza). Aguirre ordered the men to stay on the left side of the wide river; in this way they would remain clear of native settlements, clear of the Omagua, clear—incredibly—of El Dorado.

And so Aguirre once again stands out as unique in the annals of exploration during the Conquest. While all others displayed a sometimes

suicidal single-minded focus on obtaining the mythical riches of the jungle—always traversing one more pass, rounding one more bend of the river, encountering one more hostile village—Aguirre turned away.[4] There is also symbolic importance in Aguirre's decision. Choosing the other branch of the river marked a final severance from the past and a new direction for the future: Aguirre's intention to revolt, to upset the old order and bring forth a new era, could no longer be denied.

CHAPTER 11

Emergence from the Jungle

For eight days and seven nights, the Marañones navigated the river. At each divergence they headed left, which eventually took them north-northeast. On at least one occasion, the Spaniards spotted low mountains fronted by open savannahs. All day they could see smoke, and fires glowed brightly at night; these were the far reaches of the territory of the Omaguas. Aguirre issued clarifications of his earlier rules: from now on, any man caught speaking with the Brazilian guides who had earlier identified this area as Omagua, or any man caught speaking of Omagua, period, would be killed.

The next time the Marañones came across natives, Aguirre gave the order to capture them and procure food. By 1561, enough expeditions had traveled through the Amazon for natives to be skittish. Predictably, they fled. The Marañones raised their lit harquebusses and fired, cutting down several of the natives. They also managed to capture one man and one woman. One of Aguirre's men, Juan Gonzales Serrato, picked up an arrow shot by an Indian who had fled and, wishing to ascertain whether it held poison, pricked the skin of the captured Indian man. Over the next day, the poisoned native writhed in agony, knowing full well what lay ahead. He cried out, snatched at imaginary saviors, wretched, and seized, his organs slowly shutting down, one by one, until his life flickered away from him.

Keeping to their new northward route, the expedition soon came to an area noted for the existence of a tribe of natives that Simón called the Arnaquinas.[1] If in fact this is the Carib tribe that other explorers alternately called Arekainas or Arequenas, Aguirre and his men had ample reason to avoid them, for they were reputed to be "voracious for human flesh." Southey's description of them is blunt: "They were naked, excellent

archers, and cannibals."[2] During war, they would capture prisoners for food. The Spaniards who went onshore found unorganized huts, some filled with pieces of metal, others with an assortment of food. But two sacrificial temples and chopping blocks pocked with butchered flesh spooked the Marañones. One of the temples had engravings of a sun and a man; the other had a moon and a female. Each was bloodstained. Even the sanguinary Aguirre was unsettled. He gave the order to move out—quickly.

Back on the ships, the men stared intently at the passing water. Soon they perceived currents and conjectured that they were not far from the sea. Under Aguirre's orders they stopped for twelve days while they constructed sails to hasten the trip and make the vessels seaworthy. Perhaps inspired by the blood witnessed in the Arnaquinas village or perhaps simply bothered by the relatively long lapse in bloodletting, Aguirre ordered the assassination of a Flemish Lutheran named Monteverde because Monteverde just was not warlike enough. Aguirre had taken his measure and did not like what he saw. A man so lukewarm in warfare was no use to him, Aguirre claimed, settling his steely gaze upon the ill-fated man. After Aguirre ordered Monteverde garroted, he smiled and playfully decorated his neck with a placard reading, "amontinadorcillo" (poor little mutineer). More murders came in quick succession.

First up was Juan de Cabañas; this was little surprise as he had been one of the three to boldly proclaim his independence from the entire affair and that he would be loyal to no one except his king. De Cabañas soon had two companions in death: Diego de Trujillo and Juan Gonzalo. Though these two men had been assigned high posts after don Fernando's murder, Aguirre had them eliminated because they were universally liked and could eventually wield power and influence. Should they decide upon mutiny, many would willingly follow these popular men—that, of course, was enough to merit their murder. As was becoming custom, Aguirre gave as reason for their murder that they wished to assassinate him. Then he doled out the offices of the newly deceased to Christoval García and Juan Tello.

At this time, a pair of soldiers named Madrigal and Juan Lopez de Serrato got into a feud with one another. Madrigal had somehow insulted Serrato, so Serrato came behind him and struck him down with his sword. Aguirre pretended to be affronted by this maliciousness and had Serrato arrested, promising to punish him. But as Madrigal slowly healed from his wound, Aguirre pulled aside the two doctors attending him and whispered, "Put poison in his wounds." Madrigal soon died a hideous death,

but Serrato was freed. The precedent—if it had not been clear already with the death of Monteverde—was surely clear now: the more bloodthirsty a man showed himself to be, the more secure he would be in Aguirre's camp. Serrato had done well.

While the men continued to make repairs to the ships, the Brazilian guides who had earlier spotted the Omaguas fled under cover of darkness. Aguirre shrugged it off; he did not need guides for El Dorado anyway. Now satisfied that his brigantines were adequately provisioned and their sails sufficient, Aguirre ordered the men off down the river. But not before he seized weapons from any man he felt was not sufficiently loyal. Snatching their arms, Aguirre had the men bound on the foredecks; no one was to go near them under penalty of death.

Aguirre decided that another man, Juan Gomez de Guevara, needed to be murdered as well on the charge of being involved in Trujillo and Gonzalo's alleged mutiny plot. He called on his trusted lieutenant Anton Llamoso—the murderer of doña Inés—to do the deed. Llamoso was only too keen; grabbing a broken and dull sword, he attacked Guevara mercilessly while Aguirre shouted, "Away with you, traitor; you shall never plot against me again." Guevara pleaded to be executed with a sharper sword so as not to prolong the agony. Llamoso, showing some compassion, grabbed Guevara's own sword and sunk it between his shoulder blades. As Guevara's thrown body pierced the river waves, some of the other horrified men could hear his bubbled pleas of "confessio, confessio" before he sank away. This last image so pleased Aguirre that he left his brigantine and traveled to the other in order to tell Martín Pérez, his second in command, all about it. The two laughed heartily. Aguirre turned to his men and repeated what had become something of a signature phrase following each new murder: "Forward, my *macheteros*," he shouted, arms raised, smile on his face. As a machetero was one who cleared the way through a jungle with his machete, the joke was meant to suggest that each new murder would clear the way for the next. No doubt even those who chuckled at the joke wondered if theirs would be the next head off.

The Marañones encountered more natives, first at a village and then on the water. In the first case, the villagers shot arrows at the Spaniards, wounding four of them before fleeing into the forest. These were the Venezuelan Indians Simón wrote of, naked except for deerskin sandals that protected their feet from forest hazards and overheated ground. They wore their hair cut in concentric circles rising to the tops of their heads. The river Indians presented a frightening curtain of warriors, with

more than a hundred canoes loaded with armed natives. But sensing the Spaniards' superior firepower, these Indians fled as well.

The men then passed through a meandering maze of canals, inlets, and streams. The humidity pressed on them mercilessly. Aguirre's patience grew threadbare. Claiming that they were merely a burden to him, he ordered off the brigantines many of the remaining Indian slaves, some 170 of them by one account, consigning them to certain death on the miserable land: if the elements did not finish them off, hostile natives surely would. Zúñiga conjectured that "the Caribs soon ate all these poor Indians." Vázquez wrote, "It is impossible to describe the great suffering of these Indians who cried to heaven, shedding tears, for they were now exposed to cruel cannibals, the notorious Caribs, the eaters of human flesh. They asked if this was the reward for the years they had served us in war, in deserts and in Peru, helping us, providing food and drink; they had left their homeland to serve us."[3] Several Spaniards watched this unburdening with great, but muted, sadness, for some of the Indian women were carrying their children.

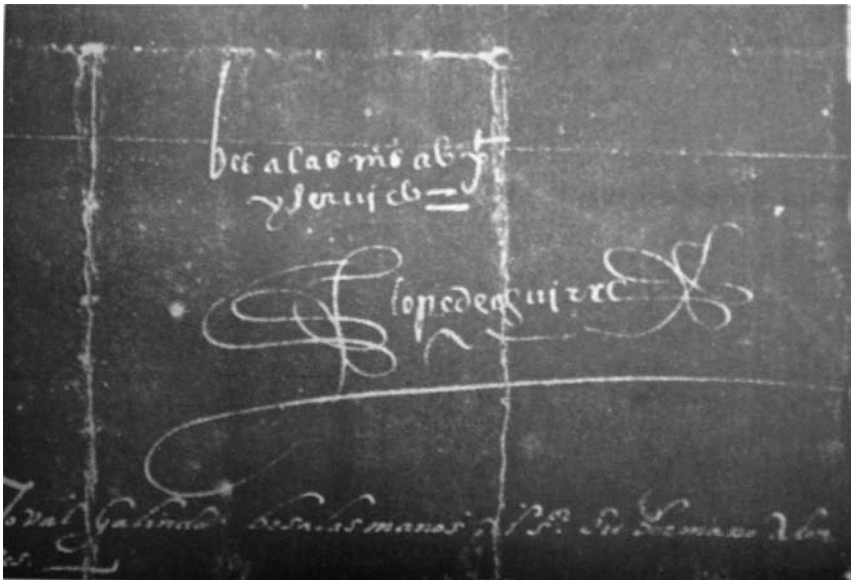
Two unfortunate Spaniards also died here. Pedro Gutierrez and Diego Palomo, seeing that the slaves were going to be left behind, were overheard muttering that they would now be left to do all the work. Whether a complaint or a casual remark, the result could have been no different, and it was another lesson to be learned. Palomo, for his part, begged to be left, alive, with the Indian slaves so that he could teach them to become Christians. Ortiguera observed that Palomo begged with a "humility . . . that would have softened a heart of steel." But his impassioned supplication had no effect on the hardened Aguirre. He listened, said nothing, and walked off, leaving the murders to trusted lieutenants.

Mirroring the tempestuous nature of the leader of the Marañones, the weather soon turned violent, blowing the men all about and threatening to wreck them upon the river shoals. Three unlucky Spaniards and their accompanying Indians who were out in a canoe were pushed so far from the brigantines by the wind-whipped current that they were never seen again. When the falling tide exposed riverbanks, several of the Indians would head out and search for shellfish. On several occasions, the tide rose again with such force and such high rollers that the Indians, scrambling for their piraguas, were sent reeling downriver, drowning in a torrent of brackish foam. Vásquez reported that the tides were so immense and powerful that they "can be heard more than four leagues [fourteen miles] away, with a crest of water towering upwards higher than a house."

But on July 1, 1561, the men entered the Caribbean Sea (the Sea of the North). They had been nine months in the jungle; Aguirre's reign had been twice as long as Ursúa's. Estimates put forty dead Europeans along the river, either by murder, drowning, disease, or Indian attack. No more than fifty of the original thousand plus slaves survived the voyage.

The expedition was on its third leader. The mission had been altered. And now this band of low- and middle-born survivors was ready to set its sights on the mainland, on Peru, where they would lead a revolt and wrest the spoils of the land from the noblemen, the priests, and the remaining men of the first generation of conquistadores.

1. Twentieth-century Peruvian painter Gérman Suárez Vértiz's portrait of Aguirre.



2. Lope de Aguirre's autograph, as it appears on his famous letters.

3. Modern Cusco, Peru. The Incan capital is where Aguirre spent much of his time in the New World before joining the expedition into the Amazon.

4. The Amazon River in northeastern Peru.

5. The Orinoco River between Ciudad Bolívar and Puerto Ordaz, in Venezuela, along the probable route of the Marañones.

6. The coat of arms of Margarita Island. Unknown artist, 1600.

7. Aguirre's landing point on Margarita Island, July 21, 1561.

8. Modern-day Playa El Tirano, on Margarita Island.

9. A municipal marker at the edge of Puerto Fermin, Margarita Island, formerly named Paraguachí and still unofficially known as El Tirano.

10. A sign pointing to Playa El Tirano.

11. The town of El Tirano.

12. The lighthouse in Porlamar, site of the original fort of Pueblo Porlamar, where the Marañones locked up and then murdered Governor Villandrando and other prominent citizens of Margarita Island.

13. Modern Punta de Piedras. Its primary function today is as the location of Margarita Island's main ferry terminal to and from mainland Venezuela. Here is where the provincial Francisco Montesinos tried to harass Aguirre from offshore in 1561.

14. A statue of Aguirre made in Genoa, Italy, in 1956, commissioned by Marcos Evangelista Pérez Jiménez, president of Venezuela from 1952 to 1958, and Heraclio Narvaéz Alfonzo, governor of Margarita from 1949 to 1958. It stands today in the courtyard of the Casa de la Cultura on the Plaza Bolívar in La Asunción, the capital of Margarita Island.

15. The sign that accompanies the Aguirre statue at the Casa de la Cultura.

16. The site where the Aguirre statue was originally placed, next to Playa El Tirano.

17. 1660 map of Margarita Island. Courtesy of the Museo Marino de Margarita, Boca del Río, Venezuela.

1. Northern South America

2. Margarita Island


Caribbean Sea
Margarita
Island
TABAGO
TRINIDAD
Coro
Burburata
Valencia
Barquisimeto
North
Atlantic
Ocean
VENEZUELA
Mérida
GUYANA
COLOMBIA
BRAZIL

3. Venezuela

PART II

CHAPTER 12

The Sack of Margarita

With his ships breaking the waves of the Caribbean, Aguirre ordered his men to steer for Margarita Island, to the west. The island was first sighted by a European on August 14, 1498, when Christopher Columbus spotted it. But he did not linger. The island's discovery resonated only after Cristobal de la Guerra and Pedro Alonso Niño discovered abundant pearls in its sea beds, a year later. Settlement of Nueva Cadiz, on the nearby island of Cubagua, followed in 1500. But the city did not last, soon destroyed by hurricanes and heavy seas. Settlement then moved to the nearby and much larger island. It was named La Margarita, Spanish for "pearl." The name was later altered to Isla Margarita in honor of an Austrian princess who was to marry a Spanish prince.

Aguirre seized the compass and all other navigational tools from the second brigantine, so that they would be forced to follow his vessel and not attempt to break off. Though his Marañones were following, Aguirre had trouble shaking his fear and suspicions of mutinies and desertions. Such concerns were not unfounded, of course. In the highly volatile world of the Conquest, revolts and insurrections were commonplace. Had Aguirre's men perished in the jungle or on the sea, their insurrection would have been lost to history. But the moment the Marañones landed on Margarita, their insurrection would distinguish itself from all others before and every one to come for centuries.

The men were seventeen days in crossing the Gulf of Paria to Margarita Island.[1] The voyage to Margarita took so much longer than expected that they had to ration food and water, rendering them so desperate, dehydrated,

and despondent that when they sighted the island, "they thought more of dying than of landing on its shore." By the time they spotted land, they had been reduced to less than a quarter-pint of water a day, and their maize had been apportioned in kernels.

The principal port on Margarita was called Pampatar.[2] Aguirre and his men, ignorant of its location, sailed past it; the brigantines were separated and landed six miles from one another. Second-in-command Martín Pérez landed north of Pampatar and Aguirre embarked at a beach near Paraguachí, which in the language of the native Guaiqueri Indians meant "place of abundant lobsters."[3]

Before the men even descended, Aguirre had two more of his own murdered. Fearing a lack of loyalty from Gonzalo Guiral de Fuentes and Diego de Alcaraz, who had both been loyal to don Fernando, Aguirre ordered them strangled before they could denounce him to the authorities. Guiral begged for confession, but Aguirre's henchmen looped the cord around his neck. Guiral begged louder, choking and sobbing. Fearing that his desperate cries would alert townspeople on Margarita, the men stabbed him repeatedly until he was stilled.

On July 21, the feast day of St. Magdalene, in the stifling equatorial heat, Aguirre went on shore. He sent a soldier named Rodriguez, together with some Indians, to find Pérez and the others. Rodriguez was also given another charge: strangle Sancho Pizarro along the road—Aguirre was not fully convinced of his loyalty either. Diego Tirado was to head to the closest city with the story that the Marañones had gotten lost coming out of the Marañón River and were desperate for provisions. Meanwhile, Pérez had sent Roberto de Susaya, Francisco Hernandez, and several black slaves to visit neighboring farms in search of food and Diego Lucero to meet Aguirre. Around midnight, Susaya, Hernandez, and the others returned with food, and all began the march to rejoin forces.

Juan Gomez and some other men sent by Aguirre to find farms and food lost their way and almost perished. They eventually met some island Spaniards and begged them for food, which they supplied. Thus far, no one suspected the Marañones of malevolent intentions. When day broke and the inhabitants of Margarita spied the brigantines, they assumed they were French vessels bent on conquest. But seeing the relatively small size of the ships, they next guessed they were simply pearl fishers. When the islanders sent some Indians in a piragua to try and ascertain who the new arrivals were, Aguirre seized them.

Next to try and figure out who these people were was a group of Spaniards who met Tirado on the road. But all they could get out of Tirado and his men was that they were simply thrown upon shore by contrary winds and faulty navigational tools. So the Spaniards went to one of the brigantines. There, Aguirre had shuffled the healthier and the well armed below decks. Their impending feelings of suffocation were immediate. In the close and stifling quarters, the men pressed their lips and noses to the cracks between slats and waited. "Endure it well, my Marañones," Aguirre instructed. "Your rewards shall come soon."

When some islanders arrived, Aguirre stood on the bow of the ship and saluted. Despite the spilled blood, the ravages of the jungle trip, and the desperate crossing to Margarita, Aguirre pumped himself up like the ship's figurehead and boomed across the shoreline,

> My good gentlemen . . . We have come from Peru. We have heard that there are great treasures and discoveries to be made on the lower part of the Marañón. But we have been lost under adverse circumstances. It pleases God that we should land here on this island, so that we might not perish, as surely we would have had our voyage continued any longer. I beg of you, kind gentlemen, for the love of God, please favor us with meat and other provisions to meet our present necessities. We have money to pay. We should not loiter here long, as we will soon set sail for Nombre de Dios on the way back to Peru.

The townspeople were sympathetic. They immediately ordered the slaughter of two bullocks for Aguirre and his men. In exchange, Aguirre offered a scarlet cloak trimmed with golden lace to a man named Caspar Hernandez, as a sign of his riches and good faith. He also handed over large dishes of gold and silver, as well as some jewels; all this he planned to take back once the seizure of the island was complete.

Hernandez was impressed. Adding to this, Aguirre gave Hernandez a silver gilt cup and a golden cup, formerly the property of doña Inés. Had there been any trepidation on the part of the townspeople, it melted away with this show of wealth. They sent a letter to the island's governor, Juan Gómez de Villandrando, then at the fort in Pueblo Porlamar, roughly thirteen miles south along the contours of the coast, explaining that these lost men had come merely to buy provisions and would pay for whatever they

took before they departed for Peru.[4] Judging from the gifts of the cloak and the cup, they obviously possessed great riches.

Villandrando had secured his position of leadership on Margarita through marriage. Governorship on the island was hereditary in the family of Marcelo de Villalobos, who had served as a judge on the supreme court of Santo Domingo but died in 1526 without any male heirs.[5] Villandrando had married one of Villalobos's female descendants and so assumed the post.[6] But he was young and inexperienced in matters of good governance; indeed, he would make a series of costly blunders that would soon lead to the capture of his island and the loss of his life as well as the lives of many others.

Within hours, the governor—along with an alguazil named Manuel Rodriguez, a regidor named Andres de Salamanca, and a few more of the island's leading citizens—set out north to visit the wealthy strangers. They left at a little past midnight to avoid the oppressiveness of the midday sun. By the time they reached Aguirre's landing place at daybreak, more curious islanders had joined them on their march.

Aguirre welcomed the delegation with great ceremony, full of respect and submission. Simón wrote that had the governor permitted it, Aguirre would have kissed his feet. Several of Aguirre's attendants came on shore as well. They, too, clasped the islanders, showing them the greatest respect and thanks. As a token of their service, the Marañones took the horses from the islanders and tied them up to nearby trees. Governor Villandrando was impressed. He addressed the new visitors: "You shall be well received and the inhabitants of this blessed island shall open our doors to you." He performed a ceremonious bow. "My own personal services—my very home and all within it, shall be yours."

Aguirre smiled. He bowed and addressed the governor: "Señor, the soldiers from Peru, who are so much attached to a martial life, and interested in these Indian campaigns, are more desirous of being well armed than of dressing in fine clothing, although they always have more than they want; so I beseech you to allow them to come on shore with their arms and harquebusses to exercise, and at the same time they can purchase some things they require from your people."

This was a serious breach of protocol. Any show of martial force was an immediate threat in a place and time where schisms were constantly forming and internecine squabbling between conquistadores routinely led to full-pitched battles. But apparently the governor was not unlike many otherwise anonymous men who did not make it onto the pages of history.

Simón wrote, "The governor was a young man, and desiring to see them and their firearms, he replied that he granted the request."

Aguirre quivered with expectation. He had come so far and gone through such trials to get to Margarita, the launching point for the assault on Peru. He excused himself from the governor's presence and ran back to the brigantine. Sweating profusely from the heat and anticipation, he lowered his head below decks; with dozens of filthy faces peering back at him, Aguirre addressed his readied men: "Mark me well, my Marañones, sharpen your swords and clean the harquebusses, for they must be damp from being at sea. You have the governor's permission to go on shore armed." Aguirre smirked, and then added, "If he had not given it, you might have taken it."

The Marañones rushed the shore, firing off their harquebusses and stunning the assembled crowd. Where had all these men been hidden? Where had the solicitousness of a few moments earlier gone? The Marañones began to march as if in a military exercise, ending in a position that surrounded the governor and his men. This initially disquieted them; finally, the governor made some show of resistance, pulling aside his aides to discuss how they might disarm these suddenly threatening intruders. But it was too late—even their horses were tied up and not within easy reach. With a fully armed army at his back, Aguirre again addressed the governor:

> Señor, in my dealings with you I do not intend to conceal anything from your lordship. For you should know the full truth. We departed from the kingdom of Peru with the governor Pedro de Ursúa to conquer the Amazon and the land of El Dorado. We have killed the governor because it suited us no longer to work for the king, nor to respect or to receive awards as his servants. He failed to send judges to deal with our grievances. For this reason I have assumed jurisdiction and the robes and trimmings of a judge in order to castigate them for the misdeeds they have committed on all of us.

The governor looked about him, at his own fellow citizens, at the smiling Marañones, poised to fire off their weapons. This was unprecedented, and the governor was, no doubt, dumbstruck. Aguirre continued, "It is for this and other reasons that we have rebelled against His Majesty. . . . I know . . . what awards those who serve the king merit; I defy the judges he sends; they carry no weight with us. We are totally unrepentant, and

we shall be so even when they take our lives for having rebelled against the king. Fortunately, men like ourselves are worthier and more dignified without titles."[7]

The governor and his men absorbed the weight of what they were hearing. They backed away, hands scrambling for swords, muttering, "What is all this? What is all this?" But before any of them could draw a weapon, some of the Marañones tightened the circle—swords, lances, and harquebusses at the ready.

Aguirre finished his address: "We, Señores, as already stated, are returning to Peru, where tumults and wars are not wanting, and we are informed that you wish to stay our voyage and take our arms from us. Also, that it is certain you do not intend to treat us with hospitality; so, Señores, you will consider yourselves our prisoners, and you must be active in ordering all we may require to be given to us for our voyage."

A few of the Marañones grabbed the horses and rode off to seal the roads and prevent reinforcements from coming to the governor's defense. Unsuspecting islanders in the area were disarmed, had their horses seized, and were made to march toward Porlamar.

In both a practical and symbolic move, Aguirre mounted the governor's horse. He reached behind him and extended a hand. "Sir, it is my wish that your grace be my prisoner; your companions will have to keep you company in my and my men's custody until we have obtained our necessities in your island and city." He prodded the governor to hop on and ride behind him, but Villandrando refused. "Well, then," Aguirre replied. "We will all go on foot then," and he hopped off to walk beside the governor. En masse, they began the march to Porlamar. The first phase of ransacking the island begun. Within a few minutes, Pérez and his men showed up on the road, so the Marañones were reunited and at full strength. They marched together. They were not long on the march before the day's heat seared relentlessly down on them. It soon became intolerable. Aguirre climbed back on the horse. The governor, seeing that he gained nothing by his protest, mounted as well. It was an emasculating scene, the governor heading to his de facto capital holding on to the waist of this bearded, scruffy usurper. As they pressed on, the Marañones continued to disarm and seize, forcing all those they came into contact with to return to town on foot.

Pérez and his band went on ahead and began the sack of the city of Porlamar and its fort. It was a Monday at noon, just as it had been when Aguirre found and killed the alcalde Esquivel, more than a decade

earlier. Running through the streets shouting, "Long live Aguirre! Liberty! Liberty! Long live Aguirre!" Pérez and the others sacked houses and the central fort, seizing weapons and booty. Porlamar was now in a "fearful tumult."

Back on the road, Aguirre made his plodding way. One can imagine what must have been running through his head. After all the machinations, all the dreams of usurpation, the past defeats and failures: now, finally, he had overthrown some royal emissaries, taken the helm, and led his men out of the jungle. The fools, he must have thought, who threw themselves time and again *into* the jungle on false pursuits. He had emerged intact, with a band of revolutionaries behind him, and now he was ready to seize his first prize. Here, at Margarita Island, he would reprovision and stage his assault on the mainland. Along with the birth of his daughter, Elvira, and his revenge on Esquivel, it must have been among the happier moments of his life.

Aguirre arrived in town to the chaos and surveyed the successful detention of prisoners, adding the governor and those seized at the port. He marched to the town fort and presented his men with an axe. In the middle of the town stood the *rollo*, a tall column of wood the Spanish erected in conquered towns to serve as an emblem of jurisdiction. Aguirre's men began to hack away at the rollo, a clear sign to everyone of the Marañones' revolutionary intent. It was an act equivalent to burning the national flag. But the rollo was made from very hard guayacan wood, and the axes were useless. The men hacked away, flailing pointlessly and to little effect. The axe chops barely registered on the column. Other Marañones banged away with hatchets, but the hard wood damaged these, too. The citizens watching worked to restrain their smiles as the impervious rollo still stood, a beacon of justice and honor. The Marañones were not immune to symbolism either, and they momentarily stopped and looked warily at each other and their leader; it seemed a bad omen. But Aguirre shrugged it off and told them to leave it.

He grabbed one of the intact axes and headed to the treasury, which housed the royal fifth, awaiting delivery to Spain. Aguirre obliterated the door with the axe and burst inside. His men smashed the royal treasury coffer and tore up the royal charter. While his men destroyed the treasury's books, Aguirre helped himself to gold and pearls. Heading back to the fort, he issued a citywide proclamation: all men were to come and deliver their arms. The penalty for refusal was instant death. Likewise, anyone caught trying to leave the city would be executed. Aguirre ordered his men

to make a house-by-house accounting of all possessions and uncover any potential hiding places. The Marañones emerged from the houses loaded with fine silks and linens, guzzling wine, and shoveling food down their throats. They located a pipe of wine weighing a thousand pounds and brought it to the fort, where they emptied it in two hours. Here was the El Dorado they had sought, just as Aguirre had said. No doubt, the bulk of the Marañones' fealty increased.

Before the day was done, Aguirre ordered that all canoes and piraguas be brought on shore and destroyed to prevent anyone leaving by boat. This done, the men settled down for an evening respite, satisfied with the complete possession of the city—it was, in all, not a bad day's work.

CHAPTER 13

Llamoso's Fidelity

The Marañones chose their target well. The island was flush with wealth derived from pearls. "Aguirre had certainly been lucky to find this rich town, so well equipped with merchandise and wine, for apart from the wealth of individual citizens, the king's depot contained cloth worth 20,000 pesos," Zúñiga estimated.

By morning, the islanders looked with anguish on what had become of their once prosperous city. Cattle had been slain, houses had been burned, women had been raped. Wives were imprisoned in the fort to prevent their husbands from trying to escape. But interestingly, under Aguirre's control, as opposed to the general ranks of the Marañones, the married women enjoyed some scant security. "He never raped or molested women," Zúñiga wrote, "and his female prisoners were safe from injury. He regarded it as an honor to protect innocent and decent women, but he was ruthless with those of bad repute" (including, of course, doña Inés).

The chronicles are resoundingly silent on the subject of Elvira, Aguirre's daughter, until the final scene, in which she plays a major—and memorable—role. Elvira operates between the pages, a ghostly figure haunting the background as her lunatic, but devoted, father pulls strings, the two of them dancing closer to their rendezvous with history. But Zúñiga includes an interesting detail in his account, writing that the women were "placed under the supervision of [Aguirre's] daughter . . . who had accompanied him from Peru and whom he loved dearly." Elvira's supervision of the women suggests a far more active role than one would assume from reading the other chronicles. But because she's not given a voice in the narratives until the end, historians can only guess how she felt about all

this; was she an eager participant, believing in the righteousness of her father's crusade, or was she a powerless girl, forced to obey her authoritative father and calm any internal misgivings she might have had? We shall never really know, and her presence in the narrative is reduced almost entirely to the crazed ending.

But one can guess that Elvira was a willing, if passive, supporter of her father. After all, he doted on her with deep and sincere affection. And she would have enjoyed a privileged place on the expedition. No doubt she had caught the eye of most of the sex-starved men on the expedition, as she was, the chroniclers tell us, exceedingly fair.[1] None would have been so bold as to make any advances on her, of course, seeing that her father was more than willing to order executions for much lesser offenses.[2] Elvira would have appreciated being made something of the expedition's princess by her self-appointed kingly father.

One does wonder, however, what conversations had earlier passed between Elvira and doña Inés; as the two most privileged women on the expedition, they would have had ample opportunity to converse, and there was little question that doña Inés reviled Aguirre from the first. He felt the same about her, as well. Did doña Inés hide her revulsion for the sake of the girl's feelings? Did she make her hatred known, and if so, did Elvira see her father's distaste for the highborn lady as justified? It is entirely probable that Elvira very much enjoyed her position as the expedition's queen after doña Inés's demise and was thus content to see her go. She was still barely a teenager, after all, and it is easy to think that, as the apple of her powerful daddy's eye, she was at least reflexively supportive of her father's grand plans. If nothing else, not one of the chroniclers ever suggests that Elvira was a poor and powerless pawn in her father's machinations at any point in the journey until the very end.

In addition to blaming Aguirre and the Marañones, many inhabitants of Porlamar also blamed the governor for their plight; had it not been for his covetousness in wanting to see the riches of the strangers, he might have been able to muster a defense force by staying in town. But not all on Margarita burned with indignation. Indeed, more than a few men stepped forward and offered their services to Aguirre. Those who most loudly proclaimed their hatred for the king were most treasured. Any man who publicly disassociated himself from the Crown risked facing royal retribution; thus, such men would be even more dependent upon Aguirre for their

protection. These men also aided in uncovering hiding places known only to residents and so were even more valued. Aguirre gladly took them in, advancing their pay from the royal treasury.

The men repaid him with some extremely valuable and intriguing information; they let Aguirre know that in the port of Maracapana, on the mainland, there was a priest employed by the Crown in the service of missionary work.[3] His name was Francisco Montesinos, and he possessed a well-armed ship that could take the Marañones to Nombre de Dios, in Panama. Montesinos, a provincial in the Dominican order, was then deeply engaged in evangelization efforts up and down the northern coast of South America and had been planning a trip with twenty-five men to Guiana to work on "civilizing" the natives there.

Under different circumstances, Aguirre might have even relied upon the aid of islanders in seizing Montesinos's ship, for the inhabitants of the island despised the provincial for his unbending imposition of the laws stripping them of their Indian slaves. After a breakdown in negotiations with the island's governor over the issue of slaves, Montesinos had even threatened to burn down Margarita's citadel.

Aguirre wasted no time; he ordered Pedro de Monguía and eighteen soldiers to capture the ship and bring it back to Margarita. For good measure, Aguirre added, Monguía should kill Montesinos, flay him, and bring the skin back so that it could be made into a drum. That would set a fine example. Monguía seized a canoe belonging to a coastal trader named Niebla and set off.

During the seventy-five mile journey, an amazing thing happened. Aguirre, wary of flagging loyalties among his men, had taken great pains to keep them all together where they could be better observed. Now, free of their leader, Monguía and the others realized Aguirre's greatest fear. According to Monguía's later account, he and his men sailed along Margarita's southern coast to Puerto de Piedras, where they swapped the canoe for a larger boat and then headed on to the mainland port of Maracapana, across the Gulf of Cariaco. As Maracapana came into view, Monguía turned to the others and suggested a radical plan: they should inform Fray Montesinos of Aguirre's intentions and offer themselves to his mercy. If they stayed with Aguirre, their end would be cruel and miserable; there was no precedent of leniency with traitors to the Crown.

The men were evenly divided—some agreed with Monguía, others wished to continue on their treasonous path. But Monguía steered straight toward Montesinos and informed him of what was going on at Margarita,

adding for emphasis that Aguirre "was the greatest monster any mother had ever produced."

Not unreasonably, Montesinos reacted with caution. He first had the men disarmed. None of them dared to protest; doing so would have suggested something other than the innocence they now professed. Next, Montesinos brought the men to church, where he donned his vestments and made them swear on the consecrated altar that all they said was true. With the Marañones accompanying, Montesinos determined to sail immediately for the port of Nuestra Señora de la Concepcíon de Borburata (today's Borburata), a few hundred miles to the east, where he could inform the authorities of the treasons on Margarita. On the way, he would first head north to see if an attack on Aguirre's forces was feasible.

Aguirre, of course, was unaware of this turn of events. He readied his forces for the ship he was sure would be arriving anytime under Monguía's charge. To prepare, he had the inhabitants of Porlamar bring him bullocks and several hundred head of sheep to be salted down and readied for food for the voyage. The men, meanwhile, entered whatever houses they liked, demanding to be fed and clothed. Owing to the intense heat, they slept outside in front of the fort or, inebriated, wherever they curled up. At the close of each day, dozing Marañones littered every doorstep and open space in the settlement. Looming over them stood the rollo, still intact.

After several days on the island, Aguirre ordered all the principals of the town into the main plaza and offered a speech to calm and reassure the disaffected and the terrorized. "My very dear friends," he began,

> Be it well known to you that my arrival in this island with my companions is not with the object of settling here, neither to offend any of you, but rather to render you good service; for, God is my judge, that I did not intend to remain here more than four days, but my ships came in such a bad state that it was impossible to continue my voyage with them, and, not finding here any other vessels to meet my wants, I am obliged, now that Providence has proportioned me the ship of the Reverend Father Provincial [Montesinos], to await its arrival, rather than build others, which would detain us here a much longer time than if we waited for that of the Provincial. But be you sure that, as soon as the ship arrives, we will leave your country and continue our voyage, for which I have begged of you to prepare, without loss of time, the necessary provisions for us; and this has likewise been the reason,

> as I will explain to you, why I have imprisoned the governor and other caballeros, so that there might be greater facility and security that we could supply our wants with our money; for, as I have already often said, I do not wish that either my soldiers or myself should take these things without paying the highest prices for them . . . and I give my solemn word and honor that when I leave I will give very ample satisfaction and reward for the kindness you have shown, and intend to show us.

The Margaritans nodded and gave the impression that they believed Aguirre. Of course, given the terror inflicted upon them already, the speech rang absurdly false. They went back to their homes, where they were once again imprisoned.

Aguirre turned his attention back to his own men. He became suspicious of his captain of ammunition, Juan Enríquez de Orellana, and suspicion was enough.[4] He charged Anton Llamoso to do the deed, and even though Orellana begged for confession, Aguirre refused it and watched with satisfaction as Llamoso garroted him. Lingering fear among some Marañones that they would be next coalesced in animated, but private, conversations among four men: Francisco Vásquez, Gonzalo de Zúñiga, Juan de Villatoro, and Luis Sanchez del Castillo. The four men waited for nightfall and then fled into hiding on the far end of the island.

When Aguirre found out, he "was furious and raved like a madman, foaming at the mouth with rage and passion." He summoned all the town's inhabitants and swore at them, charging them with hiding the cur traitors. He then threatened to level the entire island and kill everyone on it if the traitors were not found. As if that was not inducement enough, he then offered two hundred dollars each for the soldiers. The governor, sure Aguirre would keep his promise of destruction, ordered the inhabitants to search out the Marañones and return them to Aguirre immediately.

With hundreds in on the search, Villatoro and Sanchez were quickly found. Struggling, they were ushered to Aguirre, who wasted no time in stringing them up, again without confession. As they gasped for breath and flailed about with nooses around their necks, Aguirre paced angrily in front of them, berating them for their daring in trying to go back to the king's service. When they were dead, he ordered signs placed on their chests: "These men have been executed because they were faithful vassals of the king of Castille." Aguirre spat on the fresh victims and seethed, "There! Let us now see if the king of Castille will give you life again."

Aguirre held particular contempt for clergy, who he felt enriched themselves and lived off the fat of the lands with royal sponsorship. There was some truth to this view, in fact. To him, monks were most representative of all that reeked about the New World system of patronage. Aguirre viewed monks as disturbing the liberties necessary for all soldiers of the Conquest, namely subjugation of the natives. Accordingly, he ordered the Marañones to slit the throats of any monk they saw, singling out specifically those of the Franciscan and Dominican orders because they most vociferously opposed the conquistadores' rights of native suppression.

On one occasion, seeing a friar pass, Aguirre pointed at him and loudly asked, "Who is this black bundle? Kill him at once!" Citizens nearby dropped to their knees in supplication and pleading, so Aguirre, feeling secure that he had made his strength known, spared the man.

To his list of condemned—bishops, monks, friars, and priests—he added all representatives of the system that prevented the conquistadores from benefiting from their toil; these included viceroys, presidents, judges, governors, and lawyers. Further, all men of noble blood were to be executed, as they were naturally opposed to the common vices of ordinary soldiers. Next up—due, apparently, to his hatred of doña Inés—were all "public women." They, according to Aguirre, "created much evil in this world." Indeed, according to one chronicler, "He had killed the governor [Ursúa] for having brought with him an evil whore."

Aguirre still felt confident of the impending arrival of Montesinos's commandeered ship, so he had the brigantines brought up on land to prevent any of his men, or fleeing Margaritans, from escaping in them. One inhabitant of the island, a man named Alonso Perez de Aguilar, did manage to escape. In response, Aguirre marched with a group of his men to Aguilar's houses (he owned several) and had them razed. The exactitude and completeness with which he destroyed the houses mirrored his rage. Not only were the houses pillaged, but Aguirre had the roofs pulled off and the walls completely dismantled so that not one stone stood upon another. Then he salted the earth where the houses had stood. Last, he slaughtered Aguilar's cattle and salted his farms.

Still in a frothing rage, Aguirre got news of an act of generosity by one of his captains, Juan de Turriaga. Turriaga had seated some of the poorer soldiers at his dinner table. Suspecting his captain of forming a group of loyalists in order to overthrow him, Aguirre sent Pérez and some of his men to take care of Turriaga. When Pérez and the others entered Turriaga's lodging, the doomed man suspected nothing. He rose

and removed his hat, bowing to the higher-ranking Pérez. In response, Pérez discharged his harquebus into Turriaga's head. As Turriaga fell to the ground, the others rushed on him and stabbed him repeatedly. And there he stayed, a mangled corpse in a widening pool of his own blood, before the killers deposited his body in a hole in the ground where he had fallen. During the digging, the men were pleased to find a buried cache of wine bottles and preserves, which they enjoyed in the company of the corpse.

❁

It is worth taking a pause in the narrative here. Readers have to this point no doubt taken notice of Aguirre's and his followers' arbitrary and wanton acts of murder—and the worst is yet to come. Others have taken up the question of whether Aguirre was psychotic, most notably the psychiatrists Juan B. Lastres and Carlos Alberto Seguín. They concluded, "Nothing that we know about him would lead us to diagnose him as psychotic, based on our current understanding of this malady. We find no sign of an alteration in his emotional faculties that might allow us to so characterize him." Their final analysis: "Abnormal personality; psychopath devoid of affect."[5]

It might seem confusing to see Aguirre labeled a psychopath but not psychotic. While the two terms are often used interchangeably, they mean very different things. Someone who is psychotic would appear to most people to be truly insane. But a psychopath is someone who often appears highly intelligent and sometimes charming but can be boastful, manipulative, and remorseless. Jacqueline B. Helfgott explains: "Individuals with borderline personality organization (e.g., psychopaths, narcissists) are able to disassociate or 'split off' affect so they do not experience emotion during an episode of affective violence."[6]

As suggested in chapter 1 and examined more fully in the final chapter, the chroniclers of Aguirre's story had an interest in presenting him as an unrepentant, homicidal lunatic who forced fealty from the Marañones, no matter what modern psychiatrists might believe. Despite the chroniclers' self-interest, there is little to dispute the veracity of not only the murders but their frequency and brutality. I do not intend here to rationalize or justify Aguirre's debauchery (as others have done) but rather to explore how it continued unabated, just as I explored its genesis in chapter 2.

There are some rather mundane reasons for Aguirre's initial success and the almost complete lack of resistance among the Marañones. The story's setting has much to do with it, as we must consider the general

lawlessness and power of the sword inherent in the Spanish Conquest of the New World in the sixteenth century.

But the Spanish Conquest was not exceptional. This surfeit of murdering and madness is not particularly unique in the annals of human history. Neither is megalomania. But the combination of them in a singular person rarely fails to inspire curiosity and, sometimes, admiration. Many historical figures deemed mad are able to inspire a following not only through intimidation and the consolidation of power but through their acolytes' sincere belief in the righteousness of the cause, for revolutionaries—even the evil ones—must be visionaries as well.

But visionary madmen operating within the realm of a larger social order almost always come to a bad end. What is often necessary for their success is operation in a world apart—someplace free of the immediate reach of the prevailing power structure. This is precisely why revolutions and insurgencies often spring from the jungles or hinterlands and besiege towns and cities only after incremental advances; the Peruvian Shining Path, the Afghan Northern Alliance, and the Colombian FARC are all recent examples.

Aguirre's bloodstained march through the Amazon resulted largely from a perfect confluence of revolution-making ingredients: a charismatic leader freed from the powers in Lima and other settled towns, operating in a place where the only rules were those of survival. In Aguirre's case, the untamed jungles of the Amazon allowed for the creation of new laws meant to mirror the loose natural law operating in the jungle for millennia. There, far from the reach of the prevailing powers, Aguirre could usurp the arms of royal influence and create his own moving fiefdom. Of course, so long as his power—and thus, his allure—grew, he would be guaranteed more and increasingly ardent adherents. Such a phenomenon is hardly unique to Aguirre.

A similarly deplorable outbreak of bloodshed took place seven decades after Aguirre, on a diminutive group of islands called the Houtman Albrolhos, about sixty miles off the coast of modern day Australia. There, on the morning of June 4, 1629, the Dutch trading vessel *Batavia* wrecked, depositing most of its passengers and crew on a windswept and desolate speck of land not even two hundred yards across and composed entirely of sharp coral. By midday, some 180 people huddled on this godforsaken patch of earth. Another 120 or so remained aboard the *Batavia*.

The captain, senior officers and sailors, and forty others took a small boat and headed for help in Java, leaving a power vacuum soon filled by

a sinister but charismatic apothecary from Haarlem named Jeronimus Cornelisz. After nine days of battering by the sea, the *Batavia* began to break apart. The men on board were forced into the sea, where they made mad, flailing attempts to reach land. Only twenty-five made it. The last to arrive on land, half-drowned, was Cornelisz.

Cornelisz soon took the reins of power. His magnetism and eloquence made him a logical leader in any case. There was a problem, however: he had been sowing the seeds of a mutiny before the *Batavia* went down. If word of this got out and a rescue ship appeared on the horizon, Cornelisz would be tortured and killed. He began to surround himself with sycophants, attracted to his silver tongue and promises of riches. They collected and controlled all the weapons on the island, but they were desperately outnumbered. Before anyone tried to inspire an uprising, Cornelisz began devising plans to drastically reduce the number of people on the island, later dubbed Batavia's Graveyard.

Cornelisz pronounced a death sentence on three men for allegedly stealing wine. It was a spurious charge, but the executions were carried out immediately and in front of all. It was now clear to everyone that resistance was a dangerous—probably fatal—proposition. We see echoes of Aguirre here. Most chilling for the other survivors on the island—now cowed into silence and submission—was the apparent glee that the killers took toward their charge. Ship journals record one of the victims' deaths this way: "Daniel [the executioner] has pierced the foresaid Warnar with a sword; of which he boasted later, saying it went through him as easily as butter." Mass killings followed. Gijsbert Bastiaensz, the ship's clergyman, lamented, "We all of us together expected to be murdered at any moment, and we besought God continuously for merciful relief. . . . O cruelty! O atrocity of atrocities!"[7]

The official report of the events recorded the horror after an attack on one group left just twenty of them alive:

> Andries Jonas has been ordered by Jeronimus [Cornelisz] to go, together with Davidt Zeevanck and others . . . to kill there the remaining 4 women and about 15 boys who had not been killed in the previous murder on 15 July. Therefore Zeevanck has asked whether he had a knife; Andries Jonas answered that he had a knife but it was not very sharp. Whereupon Zeevanck handed him his own knife saying "Cut the throats of the women." So Andries has gone to Mayken Soers who was pregnant, has taken

her by the hand and led her a little to one side and said to her, "Mayken love, you must die," and thrown her underfoot and cut her throat. That being done he saw that Jan Pelgrom was trying to kill Janneken Gist, therefore he went to help . . . and stabbed Janneken to death with his knife.[8]

When a baby was killed in the third week of July, its incessant crying an annoyance to Cornelisz, it constituted the 105th murder, leaving fewer than sixty people on the island. A slaughter of another eleven people occurred soon after. By the end of August, some of Cornelisz's enforcers had grown almost mad with restlessness simply because there was virtually no one left to kill; all those spared were artisans useful to Cornelisz or people who had signed oaths of allegiance. Jan Pelgrom, a servant to Cornelisz, ran around screaming, "Who wants to be stabbed to death? I can do that very beautifully."[9] When the captain returned from Java on September 16, Cornelisz and his willing band of accomplices had murdered more than 120 people. Their end came soon after.

Charismatic, bloodthirsty leader plus isolation and freedom from norms equals a recipe for disaster. Cornelisz differs from Aguirre, of course, in that the Haarlem apothecary was not attempting to overthrow emissaries of the powerful Dutch trading empire or the foundations upon with it stood. But, like Aguirre, he sought to create a kingdom—with handpicked and often enthusiastic supporters—in a place only nominally under the control of the prevailing power and where he could easily find an outlet for his resentments.

Cult leaders such as David Koresh and Charles Manson moved their followers to isolated ranches and compounds in hopes of operating without interference. The most horrifying and infamous such case occurred when the Reverend Jim Jones moved his People's Temple congregation out of San Francisco in 1977. He chose for the relocation a logical place: the feral and essentially lawless jungles of Guyana. Here, as Jones's paranoia spiraled into insanity, the surrounding rainforest mirrored his madness. No matter how many acres the members of the People's Temple cleared, how many pavilions and barracks they erected, how many crops they planted and foodstuffs they imported; no matter that they cut a road, scratched out an airstrip from the landscape, and created a health clinic and basketball court: the group of almost one thousand members still heard the strange whistling of insects at night and had to stay close within the parameters of the compound. For out beyond, the jungle made quick

work of utopian dreams and attempts to impose order. Of course, with the mass suicides and homicides of 909 People's Temple members the following year, the utopian ideals were made a mockery anyway. Very few escaped, and while many of them, perhaps even most, never wished to leave, the very fact of their isolation would have prevented it. Where was one to go in the jungle?

It certainly was not the first time the Amazon jungle had disdained human ambitions and designs. Two high-profile cases occurred in the early and mid-twentieth century: those of Percy Fawcett and Raymond Maufrais.

Raymond Maufrais was a French journalist and adventurer. He had served the French armed forces as a paratrooper in Asia, and he received the Croix de Guerre for fighting the Nazis in Vichy France. Maufrais's taste for adventure outlived the war, so in July 1949, at the age of twenty-three, he headed to the wilds of French Guiana. His destination was the remote and uncharted Tumuc-Humac Mountains, near the Brazilian border, where several uncontacted native tribes still existed. "When you really want something, you can always get it. Nothing should stop you. Nothing is impossible," he wrote in his journal at the trip's beginning.[10]

But the trip proved difficult from the start. His initial foray into the jungle was in the company of a hunting group, with whom he split in December. Now on his own, accompanied only by his dog, Bobby, he was already struggling: "I'm as sick as a dog. . . . I cough and spit—long blood-stained threads."[11]

Continuing as best he could on bleeding feet and legs, covered by suppurating sores and nasty flies, he battled the choked jungle floor and the riot of liana vines that stretched for his every limb as he passed. "At every stride there's a new trap," he wrote, "a new obstacle. I stagger along like a drunken man, sweating and cursing, pursued and harassed by flies."[12]

Evenings offered no respite; instead, the darkness crashed in all around him. In the rare hours when he managed to snatch sleep, hallucinatory and terrifying dreams awakened him. "At night the usual row starts up at full blast, and the storm howls, and the dead trees begin to fall. I fall asleep and dream and wake up with a start and know that I'm mortally afraid. I feel so far from everything, lost, alone, without the strength to keep going. I know that I'm ill. Terror takes over; my hammock is drenched with rain, the awning fills like a pocket as the water pours down, and my blanket is soaked with overflow. I long to cry. Very quietly I call out, 'Mummy.'"[13]

Soon, food became scarce. He had used up his supplies and had immense difficulty locating anything he could shoot and kill. Maufrais was operating in what some biologists and anthropologists call a counterfeit paradise: a seeming land of plenty, where life thrives and oozes around you like a many-tentacled organism, but a place that actually yields next to nothing for the uninitiated. "I found nothing in the woods. Everywhere's deserted. The water is low in the creek and it doesn't seem to have many fish in it. I tried fishing with seeds, worms and insects, and it was useless. Dry lips, swollen tongue, violent stomach pains, an immense desire to masticate something. Palpitations. Always out of breath. When I got out of the hammock I was dizzy again. Unless I eat tomorrow I shall die." The next day: "Blank, blank, blank. . . . Forest and river are dead, completely empty. I feel as if I'm in an immense desert that's just about to swallow me up. I get weaker every day. I sometimes wonder how I'm still alive."[14]

As the new year arrived, Maufrais found himself at a nadir. On January 3, he killed his starving companion. "I killed Bobby this evening. I was just strong enough to cut him up in front of the fire. I ate him. I was ill afterwards; my constricted stomach caused me agonies of indigestion. I suddenly felt so alone that I realized what I'd just done and began to cry. I was angry and disgusted with myself." That evening, while in his vacuous, dreamlike state, "I thought of Bobby and realized how necessary to me was his silent companionship. There's nobody in camp now to welcome me in the evening. No more barking, no more eager licking. I'm alone. Poor Bobby!"[15]

He managed to go on for another ten days before he abandoned his goal and turned downstream toward a village. He wrote one last entry, on Friday, January 13, 1950: "I'll soon be seeing you my dearest parents! Trust in me! I'm leaving this notebook here and only taking the little pad with me. This notebook is yours: I thought of you as I wrote it, and soon I shall put it in your hands. I promised to come back and I will, God willing."

He left behind most of his supplies, including his rifle and journal. Wearing only his shorts, he set off—no one ever heard from nor saw him again.

Maufrais had been underprepared. Though he was an adventurer who had seen combat and had some jungle experience in Asia, his will, desire, and best-laid plans were exposed as completely inadequate. But there was little shame in this. Only a quarter century earlier, the experienced British explorer Percy Fawcett had also disappeared in the Amazon, deep in the Brazilian Matto Grosso.

During his stint in the British military, Fawcett had drawn posts to exotic locales such as Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka) and North Africa. During these assignments he learned surveying, a skill that would take him to delimit the border between Bolivia and Brazil. Over the next twenty years, he would go back to South America on eight different expeditions, covering vast swaths of the middle of the continent from Pacific to Atlantic, earning a reputation as something of a superman of jungle travel; while scores of men succumbed to tropical disease, madness, and animals, Fawcett not only survived intact but thrived. He even developed an affinity for native tribes, something fairly unique given the prevailing colonial mindset of the early twentieth century. Understanding the damning influence of European conquest in the Americas and elsewhere, Fawcett had a soft spot for the "uncivilized" Indians he encountered: "My experience is that few of these savages are naturally 'bad,' unless contact with 'savages' from the outside world had made them so."[16]

Fawcett became convinced of the existence of a lost city in the Matto Grosso, one he dubbed simply Z. In February 1925, he set off with his son Jack and Jack's friend Raleigh Rimell from England, bound for Rio de Janeiro and then Sao Paulo beyond. Things began well, though they moved a bit too slowly for Jack's anxious tastes. Through the month and into March, they made their way interminably deeper into the jungle. There followed an insufferable period of eight days aboard a crowded steamer, making their way along the Paraguay, Sao Laurenco, and Cuyaba Rivers. Over the next month and a half, the team made its way to a remote outpost at Bacairy.

The party's first objective was Dead Horse Camp, so named because that is where Fawcett's horse had died on an expedition in 1921. Their intended route thereafter would take them northeast along the Xingu River to the team's first objective, the illuminated Stone Tower, an edifice with a light that, according to legend, somehow never extinguished. From the Stone Tower they would travel an almost straight shot east to Z. From there, a southeast route would take them across the Sao Francisco River to a fabled city of fabulous wealth written of by a Portuguese explorer in 1753 (belief in the existence of an Amazonian El Dorado lingered). Then they would have a relatively easy trek out of the jungle through the villages of Xiquexique and Lencois to the coastal city of Bahia, where they could get a steamer home.

In late May the party did indeed reach its first objective, Dead Horse Camp. Here, in a letter home to his wife, Fawcett described the miserable

conditions created by the relentless insects. He recounted the condition of the team: Jack was doing splendidly; Raleigh was suffering badly with an infected foot; and as for himself, "Years tell, in spite of the spirit of enthusiasm." Of Dead Horse Camp and his old companion, Fawcett wrote, "Only his white bones remain. . . . It is very cold at night, and fresh in the morning; but heat and insects come by mid-day, and from then till six o'clock in the evening it is sheer misery in camp."[17]

And then, Fawcett's last recorded words: "You need have no fear of failure."

None of the three men were ever heard from again.

Aguirre and most of his Marañones, by contrast, made it out of the jungle. The horrific conditions that swallowed up Fawcett and Maufrais, and many others not recounted here, four centuries later were no more kind during Aguirre's traverse. But the fact that he had led the expedition out and that acts of madness had become the norm created a toxic brew. Aguirre, no doubt, believed in his own invincibility—at least initially. His cause was righteous, and as the men made their way through the jungle Aguirre seemed more and more an indomitable and clairvoyant leader. It begs credulity to think that he operated virtually alone, capable of bringing a couple hundred men under his control by singular force and threat. No, he needed a willing army to do that—men who believed in him and who were eager to show their fidelity, even by the most gruesome means. There is little question that by the time the Marañones sacked Margarita Island and readied their launch on the mainland, they fully believed in the probability of success; Aguirre, the madman, would be the one to succeed where all else had failed before.

His single-minded pursuit of Esquivel, it must be remembered, had earned him the respect of the "unruly and swaggering soldiers." And that pursuit also gives us insight into his incredible personality: For better or worse, he possessed many of the attributes of more than one prominent historical figure: steadfastness, endurance, paranoia, megalomania, a touch of madness. He was, in short, the perfect man for his time and his place. If anyone could pull off the impossible, it would be him. The madness, the lunacy, the audacity, the boldness: all of it was requisite for the task ahead.

Without the slightest initial remorse for the murder of Turriaga, his captain, Aguirre later changed course and felt it proper to give him a respectful service, mostly out of the commitment he felt he owed him as a fellow

Biscayan. Aguirre himself, full of what all witnesses agreed was sincere mourning, led the funeral procession.

His deflated mood did not last. Soon he began to worry about Monguía's delay. He built himself into a fresh wrath, convinced that Montesinos had incarcerated his men. He marched to the plaza and shouted for all the islanders to hear: "If my men have been imprisoned, you will suffer every species of cruelty imaginable! No person shall be exempt—no man, no woman, no babe at the breast! The public places and streets will be washed with blood! The watercourses of Margarita city shall run with blood!"

Men and women crowded their windows to watch the madman stamp in circles and shout to the heavens. "No house will stand," he continued. "A thousand monks will be sacrificed with the most painful of deaths! And hear this; mark me on this: if Father Montesinos comes into my hands, I shall flay him alive and make a drum of his skull!"

But when Aguirre spotted the ship piercing the horizon, his mood lifted. Here, finally, was his prize. Unbeknownst to him, Montesinos's men captained the ship, not his man Monguía; worse, the father had already spread news of Aguirre's doings all up and down the coast of northern Venezuela. A piragua arrived before the ship. A black slave sympathetic to Aguirre who had witnessed Monguía's offering to Montesinos debarked and rushed to find Aguirre. He broke the news to him. Aguirre was apoplectic with rage. He had many of the town's inhabitants seized and thrown into the fort. He chained them up and added to the restraints already clasping the governor. Before he stormed out, he repeated his promise to wash the streets of Margarita red. When he reached the main road, his men told him that Father Montesinos's ship was headed to Puerto de Piedras, a port fifteen miles from the city.[18]

Aguirre prepared himself and his men. He ordered horsemen placed along the road to Puerto de Piedras so that the moment Father Montesinos's ship came into port they could send a signal down the line to Aguirre. The moment the signal came, Aguirre commenced the march to port, ready for battle. But just as he began, he decided upon a new plan. He considered slaughtering the islanders to avoid leaving any enemies at the rear while he attacked Montesinos. He would kill the leading citizens of the town right there and then, including Governor Villandrando; the judge Manuel Rodriguez; the alguazil major Cosme de Leon, who was crippled in both his hands and legs; the regidor Caceres; and Juan Rodriguez, a servant of the governor.

After being summoned, the men offered terrified protests. Aguirre came and consoled them, giving them his word that they should have no fear and that if they fought with him against Montesinos they would be rewarded, as would every other prisoner in the fort. Aguirre, of course, had no intention of keeping these men alive. Instead, he sent his alguazil, Francisco de Carrion, to collect men and cord and then strangle the four prisoners.

Carrion wasted no time. He found the condemned men and addressed them with deep gravity: "Gentlemen, it is time to die. I advise you to pray to God for his mercy and show contrition for your sins as become Christians."

The governor cried out, "What does this mean? But your Aguirre gave us his word that not only shall we not be killed, but that no harm whatever shall come to us. He just left us with that message."

Carrion set his jaw, his eyes steely. He replied, "It is time to die. I pray you perform your confessions."

It was useless to protest more; the men began their confessions. They had just started when Carrion wrapped the cord around the governor's neck.[19] The others sped through their prayers, but they, too, were hastily dispatched. After all the men were murdered, the assassins laid their bodies together and covered them with mats. They found Aguirre and told him the deed was done.

It was now the middle of the night. Montesinos's ship lay offshore. Aguirre called his followers together and led them to the chamber where the murdered men lay. In the ghostly light of a hundred candles, Aguirre lifted the mats with a flourish, showing the bodies beneath, each with dried trickles of blood painting the corners of their mouths.

"Well do you see, O Marañones!" Aguirre said, pacing before the corpses,

> In the bodies now before your eyes, that, independently of the crimes you committed in the river Marañon, by slaying your governor Pedro de Ursúa, and his lieutenant don Juan de Vargas, by making a prince of don Fernando, and giving your oath of allegiance to him as such, you have divested yourselves of all rights in the kingdom of Castille, you have forsworn allegiance to the king don Philip by swearing to make perpetual war upon him, and you have signed your names to the act. You afterwards added crime to crime; you executed your own prince and lord,

> many captains and soldiers, a priest, and a noble lady; and, having arrived at this island, you have forcibly taken possession of it, dividing the property found in it amongst yourselves, that which belonged to the king don Philip, as well as that of individuals. You have destroyed the books of the treasury, and committed sundry wickednesses. Now you have killed another governor, an alcalde, a regidor, an alguazil major, as well as other persons, whose bodies you now have before your eyes.
>
> So now you must open your eyes, and see each for himself. Be not deceived by any vain confidence; for having committed so many, and such grave and atrocious crimes, be sure that you are not safe in any part of the world, excepting with me. For supposing the king were to pardon you, the relations and friends of the dead would follow you and take vengeance. Thus I counsel you not to leave me, to sell your lives dearly when the occasion offers, and to let all be of one mind; for against such a union, all the force that may be sent against you will be of little avail. Let each man mark well what I have said, for it is a question of life and death.

The implication was clear. Piling crime upon crime meant that any amnesty would be impossible. Their only chance lay in their continued allegiance with the Wrath of God.

Aguirre ordered the wives and children of the newly murdered into the fort. They screamed for their missing husbands and fathers, who, by then, had been stacked in two shallow graves. "Your men are fine," Aguirre assured the hysterical women and children. "They are simply being detained elsewhere."

At daybreak, Aguirre and eighty of his harquebusiers marched to Puerto de Piedras to confront Montesinos. Pérez, left behind to guard the fort and the town and thoroughly enjoying his charge, laid out a grand feast; while Aguirre was off to the fight, Pérez and his men drank wine and gorged themselves with food.

The inhabitants of Borburata, on the Venezuelan mainland, reacted to Montesinos's warning by almost totally abandoning their town. Women and children immediately fled inland, while the men initially stayed behind to strip their houses of anything the Marañones might desire. News had spread by now to Venezuela's governor, Pablo Collado, then in the inland city of San Juan Evangelista de Tocuyo, the unofficial capital of the Venezuelan territory. The warnings then were passed along to Trujillo and

Mérida, newly settled towns in western Venezuela, both of which were readied for defense. The governor of Mérida, Pedro Bravo de la Molina, sent word westward, to Tunja and Santa Fe de Bogotá (today's Bogotá, Colombia), to the Royal Audiencia. Word of Aguirre's Amazonian mutiny had now reached the royals themselves. The revolution was on.

All the able-bodied men of these towns agreed to rise up in defense, so Aguirre would have to face a larger force than he had reckoned. Meanwhile, his own force faced a slow attrition through murder and defection. Aguirre sent at least one man, Martin Diaz de Armendáriz, into exile, instructing him to leave the city and remain on a ranch until Aguirre left the island. Diaz had been Ursúa's cousin, and Aguirre never trusted him, holding him as prisoner since the time Ursúa had been murdered. It was nothing short of a miracle that he was still alive.

The governor in Santa Fe de Bogotá alerted the governments of the coastal cities of Cartagena and Santa Marta as well as the inland city of Popayán, which sat on the path of an overland route to Peru from the northern coast of the Atlantic. He then ordered every town under Spanish control that might fall in Aguirre's path to Peru to ready itself for battle. Should it be determined that Aguirre and the Marañones would travel through Mérida, the citizens there were to retreat, taking with them anything of value, as they simply could not muster a force large enough to defend the city. They should head to Santa Fe de Bogotá, where a larger force could be mustered. At Santa Fe de Bogotá, thirty armed men guarded the silver seal of the Royal Audiencia day and night. In the meanwhile, every effort was to be made to determine if any unsettled men who had taken part in past uprisings, such as Gonzalo Pizarro's and Francisco Hernández Girón's, were still living in the area. The royals feared they would rise up and join this fresh revolt.

When the men were finally collected from all the royal towns and readied for war, they would number some fifteen hundred soldiers, including four hundred pikemen and two hundred harquebusiers. The force was unprecedented, reflecting the threat Aguirre posed, which Spanish leaders perceived as more grave and consequential than had been seen anywhere on the continent to that point. Ordinary citizens participated in weekly military drills to prepare them for battle. Pitched arguments broke out among the military principals concerning whether they should meet Aguirre inland or march to the coast and ready there. But the governor ordered that neither be done; instead, the men should simply be ready and wait. When Aguirre arrived, they would engage him wherever he and his ragtag army of Amazonian usurpers presented themselves.

When Aguirre and his eighty armed men reached Puerto de Piedras, they discovered that Montesinos had already left, having set sail for the city Aguirre just left. So they quickly turned around and headed back to Porlamar, hoping to reach the city before Montesinos did. When Aguirre arrived, Pérez was there to greet him and suggested that all had been kept quiet under his watch. But Christoval García, who hated Pérez, exposed him.

García told Aguirre about Pérez's unauthorized feast. But he added some far more serious charges: namely, that Pérez wished to murder Aguirre, wrest leadership, and sail for France, where he had friends. The feast, García alleged, was a preemptory celebration of Pérez's arrogation of power. Suspicion and accusation, as we have seen, were enough for Aguirre. But he did search out a second opinion. To corroborate his story, García sent a young mestizo page to tell Aguirre that everything García said was true. Of course, García undoubtedly coached the page.

Far more damning, however, was a report several soldiers repeated. On the day Aguirre left, some of them asked who was to lead should Aguirre be killed in battle. Pérez—not unreasonably as second in command—replied, "Am I not here, and ready to serve you all? I will do my duty right well should the old man fail us." That was enough. According to Simón, Aguirre "chose a little bearded monkey called [García de] Chaves, who, although still young, was learned in every species of villainy, and some others of a similar stamp, belonging to his guard, and commanded them to kill Martín Pérez." Southey confirmed the basic flavor of Chaves's temperament, though there was some disagreement on the abundance of facial hair: "The tyrant called for one Chaves, a lad with scarcely a hair upon his chin, who was yet old enough in crimes to be charged to such an office."[20]

Aguirre summoned Pérez from the fort, and he came immediately. As he entered the lodging where Aguirre waited, he barely had time to ask why he had been sent for when Chaves fired on him with his harquebus, wounding him badly. Several other men set on him with their swords and lances. Pérez stumbled outside, begging for a confessor, full of sword wounds. He staggered to where the women were being held prisoner, and among their shrieks, he seized one, covering her in blood. But she escaped his weakening grasp. In the main plaza in front of the fort, Pérez fell, writhing in agony while blood and entrails spilled from his body. Chaves rushed to him, pulled his bloodied hair, and slit his throat, finishing him off. During these events, Aguirre leaned from a window, telling everyone that there was no need for worry or concern; he had merely been compelled to put his camp master to death.

The scene was so grisly and disturbing that witnesses screamed and raced around in panic. Prisoners held in the fort hid themselves under beds or threw open the windows of the turrets. A woman named Maria de Trujillo, wife of the alcalde Francisco de Ribera, leapt from an open window but managed to survive her plunge to the ground below. Two others, Domingo López and Pedro de Angulo, followed her example and threw themselves from a turret. Each man got himself up on the strength of coursing adrenaline and limped off into the woods to hide. Others were not so lucky, however, and soon several bodies of the dead or severely injured littered the ground outside the battlements.

At that moment, Anton Llamoso, who had been one of Aguirre's most faithful servants and killers, passed Pérez's body. Seeing Llamoso, Aguirre pulled his sword and pointed it at him. "They tell me that you were one of the party with the maestro del campo; how was this? Was this friendship? They tell me that you, too, wanted to kill your father." Several of Pérez's murderers, still covered in his blood, heard this and came to Aguirre's side, ready to pounce on the allegedly traitorous Llamoso.

Llamoso was terrified. Shakily, he denied the accusations. He slowly found his voice, showering his accusers with "a thousand blasphemies." "Treason never entered my thoughts," he protested. "You must believe me, for the affection I have always had for you." Aguirre was unconvinced. Llamoso looked around at the readied stances of the men who would kill him, the gory result of their handiwork laid at his feet and cut to pieces. All of Llamoso's past loyalties, apparently, counted for nothing. Only the most extreme example of allegiance would now suffice.

Llamoso rushed to Pérez's body and threw himself on it. "Curse this traitor, who wished to commit so great a crime! I will drink his blood!" he shouted. "Putting his mouth over the wounds in the head, with more than demoniac rage, he began to suck the blood and brains that issued from the wounds, and swallowed what he sucked, as if he were a famished dog. This caused such horror to those who were present, that there was not one who was not turned sick at heart by the scene," Simón wrote. But Aguirre, for one, found this show of fidelity so convincing that he told his queasy men to back off, sheathed his sword, and welcomed Llamoso back to the land of the living. For many chroniclers at the time, and for later historians, Llamoso's monstrous show of devotion represented the depravity and grotesqueness of the entire Aguirre affair. The reality was that it was simply one more in a long line of gruesome acts.

And there would be more to come.

CHAPTER 14

Rebel until Death

The next morning, the Marañones spotted Montesinos's ship a mile or two off land, far enough away to be out of range of Aguirre's artillery. Several of the Marañones readied themselves on shore while some of Montesinos's men came close via canoe and piragua. The two groups engaged in a shouting match; the Marañones called the others cowards for fear of landing, while Montesinos's men screamed that the Marañones were nothing but traitors who would soon meet their gruesome end. But as neither was close enough to the other to hit with artillery, the only shells lobbed were verbal. Not surprisingly, none of the inhabitants of Margarita rushed out to aid Montesinos as the provincial would have wished. The combination of fear of Aguirre and hatred for Montesinos paralyzed the Margaritans completely.

Aguirre saw that Montesinos's men would not land, so he returned to the fort, where he sat down and penned the first of a series of letters that remain as some of the most extraordinary documents to emerge from the New World, presaging revolutionary tracts to come during the next four centuries. These missives give us the fullest view of Aguirre and his quick mind. In his wry and patronizing letter to Montesinos, he listed the names of those who deserted him, recounting the cowardly and traitorous nature of several of them and making it clear that their participation in such crimes would spell their doom. Lost in the translation is a brilliant turn of phrase that Aguirre used to describe the men he believed were traitors: *chafalonía*, meaning, in its Andean dialect, "worn-out gold jewelry" or "antique carved silver, destined to be melted again."[1] The implication was that these men were indeed worth something once but had long outlived their value:

Magnificent and Reverend Sir,

It would give us much greater pleasure to celebrate your paternity's reception with boughs and flowers than with harquebusses and discharges of artillery, because it has been told to us, by many persons, that such would be more generous; and, if we are to judge by the proceedings we have this day observed, which are greater than we had been led to expect, it would seem that your paternity is a lover of arms and military exploits: and thus we see that you imitate the honor, virtue, and nobility which our forefathers attained sword in hand. This I do not deny; neither do these señores who are here, and who came from Peru by the river Marañon to discover and settle new countries, some of us maimed, some halt, and some of sound body. Owing to the troubles in Peru, we sought to find a land, miserable as it might be, to give rest to our poor bodies, which are covered with more seams than are pilgrims' weeds, and we would have remained and settled there, had we not, after many troubles, passed from the river, and into the sea, hungry and menaced even by death; and let those who may come against us take into account that they come to war with the ghosts of dead men. The soldiers of your paternity call us traitors, but they should be chastised, they should not say so, because to attack don Philip, king of Castille, is the work of grand and noble souls; for, if we were engaged in mean occupations, we could pass an orderly life, but we know no other trade than to make cannon balls and sharpen lances, which are the sort of money current here. If there was any necessity to go into details, we might make it known to your paternity that Peru owes much to us, and we might relate the cogent reasons we have for doing what we do, but of these things I will say nothing.

Tomorrow, please God, I will send to your paternity copies of the edicts that have been made amongst us, each man being at liberty to do as he thinks best. There are those, with you, who swore fealty to don Fernando de Guzmán as their king and denaturalized themselves from the kingdoms of Spain; and they mutinied, and usurped the powers of justice, and pillaged estates; amongst these were Alonso Arias, don Fernando's sergeant, and Roderigo Gutierrez, his chamberlain. Of the other señores we need take no account because such discourse would be trifling; although, as to Arias, he would not be mentioned, had he not been a good rope maker. Rodrigo Gutierrez was rather well to do, but he had a downward look, a sign that he was a great traitor. Then there was Gonzalo de Zúñiga, a man of Seville. If he shows up in your camp, with bushy eyebrows that meet in the middle, know then,

your paternity, that he was a great buffoon, a very vulgar man, and his tricks are these: he was in Popayan with Alvaro de Hoyon, in the rebellion against his majesty, and when his captain was about to fight, he deserted him and fled; and, having escaped, he was in Peru with Sylva in the mutiny and robbery of the royal treasure, when they killed the judge, and then he ran away again. He is such a coward that, as long as there is anything to eat, he is diligent, and in the hour of battle he flees, but his signatures will not desert. I am sorry that one man is not here, namely Salguero, because we want him much to watch over our sheep because he understands that business well. As to my good friends Martin Bruno, Anton Perez, and Andres Dias, I kiss their hands. As to Monguía and Artiaga, may God pardon them, and if they are alive, I beseech your paternity to let me know; and we should all like to be together, and that your paternity were our patriarch: for, after believing that God is no more than any other, all the rest is moonshine.

I beg of your paternity not to go to Santo Domingo, because we believe that you will there be dispossessed of the throne on which you sit.[2]

In your reply, I beseech your paternity that you will write to me, and let us treat one another well in this war. God will bring trouble on all traitors, and the king will restore the loyal to life, although up to this time we have seen no one resuscitated by a king; he cures no wounds, he restores no one to life. May the most magnificent and reverend person of your paternity be in great and increasing dignity.

From this fortress of Margarita, I kiss the hands of your paternity. Your servant,

Lope De Aguirre.

Aguirre also added the Borgias' family motto: Aut Caesar, aut nihil (Caesar or nothing). The letter was a bit disjointed and rambling, but when Montesinos and his men received it, they failed to recognize the quick wit within. Instead, they "roared with laughter" and regarded the letter as the "nonsense of a buffoon." Among other things, Aguirre had even offered to make Montesinos pope if he joined their virtuous cause. Montesinos's return letter was far more measured and reflected the disconnect between the old order and the radical new one, which expressed a general contempt for religious figures.

"You must abandon your road of errors and turn into the path of loyalty and service to your king," Montesinos wrote. "Such a path is of great import to you for the security of your conscience. But if, through blind

obstinacy, you would not do so, then I charge you as a Christian, to have reverence for the churches and all holy things, and the honor of women, and, for the love of that God to whom you will have to give an account of your doings, stop the shedding of blood and the continuance of cruelties on Margarita Island. Monguía and Artiaga are alive, and are faithful servants to your majesty, and have complied with their obligations as Spaniards."

Montesinos had the letter sent to Aguirre and then set sail, this time to Santo Domingo to alert the whole of the West Indies of the madman on Margarita. Aguirre's next moves would do nothing to dilute the charge of madman: he picked two fresh victims to his capriciousness.

The two Marañones were Juan de San Juan and Diego García de Paredes. They had been lying on a beach under the shade of some palm trees. Another of the Marañones, ill-favored toward the two men, reported to Aguirre that they were awaiting Montesinos's ship, hoping to escape. The charge, as usual, was enough, though it certainly could have been true. Without looking for corroboration, Aguirre had the men dragged to the rollo, where his minions garroted and hanged them both. The response to these actions could go one of two ways: the Marañones could reach a general consensus that their leader was truly insane and they had no other option but to destroy him. Or they could search for new and increasingly desperate ways to convince Aguirre of their allegiance.

Aguirre now wished to leave Margarita. But as he had earlier sunk the brigantines and Montesinos's ship was not available to him, leaving was impossible. He ordered the governor's unfinished ship to be completed with haste, sending out a general call directing all carpenters in the city to come forward at once. Eager to see Aguirre gone, several men offered their help in constructing the ship. Meanwhile, Aguirre changed his mind about Martín Díaz de Armendáriz, Ursúa's cousin, whom he had earlier banished. He sent several of his men to find and murder him. It was done posthaste—more allegiance proven.

As he prepared to leave the island, Aguirre ordered the production of a standard—three flags made of silk, colored in black and emblazoned with two crossed red swords. Wishing to have the flags properly consecrated, Aguirre ordered they be blessed in the church on August 15, the Day of Assumption of Our Lady.

Aguirre himself led the procession to the church for the ceremony. Along the way, in a scene worthy of a great drama, he stumbled upon a pack of playing cards. He plucked the king of spades and glared at it before tossing it to the ground. Then, in an intense fury, he stamped on it, all the

while hurling curses and blasphemies to the heavens. He snatched the card from the ground and tore it into as many pieces as possible, until it was reduced to fiber. As Aguirre ripped it to shreds, his most loyal followers took up chants and oaths against the king.

They continued to the church, where they forced the priest to give mass. The flags consecrated, Aguirre handed them to his closest captains. "Take these so that you might march under them," he said. "You will follow, defend, and guard my person. You will go out into the field on all occasions with these flags against any warrior who might oppose us. We will sack towns. But there we will respect the churches and female honor. Nothing else. You have full liberty to do as you please. For we have made a new king; also, we make new laws."

The soldiers were overjoyed. They publicly assented to the restrictions regarding women and churches but privately assumed that breaking these rules would only raise the esteem Aguirre felt for them; in short, they had license to do anything they pleased—the more wicked and outrageous, the better.

This did not cease the rumors, however. Alonso de Villena was next to be accused of "speaking against his leader." Villena did not bother to plead his case, as he knew it would be useless. Instead, he sought to flee and throw himself upon the mercy of the king's ambassadors. He quietly put it out to the city's residents that he wished to escape. Aguirre's soldiers went after him, but he hid himself too well in the woods and was not found. His successful escape might have given heart to any others who wished to do the same. But Aguirre ordered the murder of two of Villena's friends—men named Dominguez and Loaysa—claiming that they must have been in on the escape. Aguirre's lieutenant, Juan de Aguirre, stabbed Dominguez to death and garroted Loaysa. Now any man who thought of escape would also have to consider how many of his associates he was consigning to a cruel death.

The two Aguirres were not done. Juan went to the house of "a married and excellent woman," Ana de Rojas, where Dominguez and Loaysa had been lodging, and accused her of contributing to Villena's escape as well. He dragged her to the fort and put her into manacles and shackles. The pain was too great for the woman, and she cried, "Kill me now, for I shall never leave this prison." Juan de Aguirre took her to the rollo, where he hanged her without delay. As she struggled for her last breaths, several harquebusiers entered the plaza and fired pot shots at her. Aguirre, standing nearby, loudly cheered each shot that found her head or heart.

The cruelties continued unabated. Ana de Rojas's husband, a man named Diego Gómez—old and crippled, but who had once been "a noted conqueror of the region"—was out of town at the time, ill on a farm. Aguirre ordered him murdered as well. Two of the Marañones, a man named Pedro Sanchez Paniagua and a Portuguese soldier named Manuel Baeza, went to the farm and killed the old man. For good measure, they also murdered Francisco de Salamanca, a friar with whom Gómez was staying, throwing both bodies into the same grave and leaving Gómez's eight children orphaned. Aguirre, hating all priests, thrilled at the news of the friar's murder.

Aguirre then found Francisco de Torrecillas, another friar in town, and sat down with him to confess his sins. Aguirre recounted all he had done, clearing his conscience. The friar severely reprimanded him, telling him to turn from his wicked ways and search, once again, for the righteous path. "Follow God and your King," the friar told him. "In so doing, do not have the weight of so many murders on your head." Furious, and armed with a lieutenant fresh from murdering one priest, Aguirre ordered Paniagua to do the same to Torrecillas, even though this friar was much beloved in town.

Paniagua wasted no time. He found the friar on the road and dragged him into a house, informing him that it was time to die.

The friar dropped to the ground and began reciting Psalm 51, the Miserere: Have mercy on me, O God. . . . Paniagua, joined now by two others, lifted him from the ground. The friar clasped his hands toward the heavens, offered himself up to God, and directed a steely gaze at his executioners. "Give me the most cruel death of which you are capable," he commanded them. He wished to die a martyr, suffering maximum pain. Furious at the friar's incipient courage, they threw him against a pike and garroted him with such violence that the cord, strung between his jaws, shattered his teeth and broke his jaws into several pieces. Still, the man was not dead. So they lowered the cord to his throat and finished the deed.

But some of the Marañones began to have second thoughts about their current enterprise and the man who was leading it. One of them, a soldier named Simón de Sumorostro, begged Aguirre to be left behind, claiming that he was too old and too tired to continue in any wars. He was one of the inhabitants of Margarita Island who had volunteered their services to the Marañones. Aguirre assured him that it would be fine to stay behind when the others departed. Overjoyed, Sumorostro walked away, the burden of past misdeeds falling from his heavy shoulders. Aguirre

called over two of his men and, with a wink of his expressive eye, told them to follow Sumorostro and make sure that he was safe and that no harm would come to him from the island's inhabitants. The men smiled back, knowing full well the meaning of Aguirre's message. Within minutes, Sumorostro was dead, hanged on the rollo. No one else would ask to be left behind; instead, those wishing to escape simply took their chances by fleeing.

Sumorostro's corpse, still hanging on the rollo, soon had company. This time, a woman named Maria Chávez joined him there because one of the Marañones who had been staying with her had fled and she was unable to give any information about the escape.

Murders were coupled with cruel amusements, as when the Marañones forced a young Margaritan man to wash his face with fetid urine, salt, and pepper; they then cut off his beard before repeating the urine ablution. To add to the humiliation, they ordered the young man to present four chickens to his barbers as thanks for the shave job. One of the Marañones, Alonso Cayado, fell victim to this same public humiliation, ostensibly because he showed no joy in the murders and molestations of the townspeople.

Leading a group of cowed or complicit men may have given Aguirre a greater sense of safety from attack, but others would soon come to fight the Marañones. As Aguirre and his men began the process of loading the now-finished ships, Francisco Fajardo, a long-admired mestizo and founding father of Caracas, landed his men on Margarita Island.[3] Seeing that he would be badly outnumbered, Fajardo sent the men into some thick woods, where they shouted to Aguirre's men to come over to their side and rise up against their traitorous leader. In exchange, Fajardo offered the king's protection.

Aguirre, fearing Fajardo had a much larger force than he showed, locked all his men in the fortress and refused to allow any of them out. Fajardo's force was in fact minimal, but Aguirre feared that any of the men he sent out to rout him would just as soon defect. He assured them that Fajardo's offers were merely clever traps in any case. Once defected to Fajardo's side, Aguirre claimed, the men would be subjected to punishment for their misdeeds. Despite the warnings, Pedro Alonzo Galeas broke from the Marañones the first chance he got and gave himself up to Fajardo, who rewarded him with a canoe and orders to go to the inland town of Nueva Segovia de Barquisimeto, northeast of Tocuyo, and inform authorities there of Aguirre's presence and the number of men

and weapons he possessed. Galeas did it willingly, "preferring to place his trust in the tempestuous waves of the ocean."[4] It was not a bad trade-off; only the day before, Aguirre had threatened to use Galeas's skin to make parchment for a drum.

Aguirre was feeling the pinch, and his agitation and anxiety showed. He flew into a rage when his admiral, Alonso Rodrígues, seeing that ocean waves were wetting Aguirre's feet, asked his leader to back up a bit. Aguirre was already furious at the admiral for suggesting that the islanders would miss three pilfered horses and a mule, as well as for commenting that the boats were overloaded and unsafe. Aguirre raised his sword and lopped off Rodrígues's arm.[5] Feeling a bit contrite, he ordered Rodrígues to be attended to medically. But Aguirre soon changed his mind, certain that such a gross injury would not be soon forgotten, and he ordered the admiral killed.

Aguirre decided it was time to leave. They had been on Margarita Island forty days, a period in which the island and its inhabitants were altered so thoroughly that the effects of the Tyrant's visit would linger for centuries. One unfortunate inhabitant, a priest named Pedro Contreras, almost escaped the worst, but at the last moment Aguirre ordered him detained and forced him onto one of the three vessels then debarking the island with the well-armed Marañones, headed for the mainland.

The Marañones left Margarita Island from Porlamar on the last day of August 1561. Chroniclers estimate that of the roughly two hundred soldiers who arrived on the island in July, 150 remained, the others either murdered or deserted. Twenty islanders were pressed into service, and eleven had been murdered on the island.

One of the deserters, a Captain Altamirano, gave his account to the chronicler Vásquez: "I had hidden in a cluster of huts," he explained, when the Marañones left Margarita. "It was short of a miracle that he failed to look for me, for had he done so, he would not have shown me any more mercy than he had shown others. When I saw the vessel with full sails sailing away, I felt like one born again. I gave thanks to God for having saved me from the clutches of the monster. I did not even mind being poor and destitute. I found the island and its town destroyed. The widows and those who had been robbed continued for a long time to tell the story of their misfortunes."[6]

The original plan had the men heading overland to Nombre de Dios, in Panama, and then entering the Pacific and heading down the coast to Peru. But Aguirre changed plans, rightly guessing that Montesinos had

alerted everyone along that route. The men would now head to the port of Borburata, in Venezuela, and then move southwest into Nuevo Reyna de Granada (today's Colombia), to Popayán, and then Peru. An extraordinary overland route of more than thirteen hundred miles, it promised myriad environmental challenges, such as thick forests and the Andes, to say nothing of hostile Indians and any Spanish forces arrayed to stop them. No doubt the increasingly dispirited Marañones silently bristled at this idea; the thought of having to undertake another torturous journey most likely led many of them to thoughts of desertion.

The voyage did not begin well. As he had done before, Aguirre hindered progress by confiscating all navigational tools, forcing the other two vessels to follow his. A passage that should have taken two days instead lasted eight, owing to contrary winds. However, according to Simón, Aguirre "attributed this delay to the bad management of the pilots, and he menaced them with death, believing that, as he was so long in seeing his port, the pilots were taking him elsewhere." Aguirre fixed his eyes on his men and muttered, "If God has made the heavens for the wicked and cruel, such as these I have with me, I will not go there." He then raised his head toward the skies and screamed, "Oh, God! if you will do me a favor, do it now, and the glory of it guard for your saints!"

He waited; the calm of the sea and the lack of needed wind persisted. The ships virtually stationary in the languid water, Aguirre burst forth in a sputtering rage: "I do not believe in God! He is a great robber! Until now I have been on his side, but he has deserted me and gone over to my enemies! They can have him. They can have all of you who would betray me. The sea, the winds, the tempests: all have betrayed me." His men sat stunned by the blasphemies, by the increasingly unhinged nature of their leader, by the fact that there was little way out.

Whether through God's good graces, the skill of his pilots, or just luck, Aguirre and his men anchored at the port of Borburata on September 5. He had made it to the mainland. Aguirre's first act at port was to set fire to a merchant vessel that had been stripped and scuttled in preparation for his coming. With the three vessels just offshore, illuminated by the burning wreck of the merchant vessel, the people remaining in town fled, taking all their possessions with them and sending messengers to tell Governor Collado in Tocuyo that the rebel had landed.

Collado immediately set to work assembling a royal force under the leadership of General Gutierrez de la Peña. General Gutierrez sent word to Pedro Bravo de la Molina in Mérida to amass and send his forces:

the enemy was on the threshold. He also asked Captain Diego García de Paredes to come and fight with his men.

García de Paredes had a well-earned reputation for success and valor. The illegitimate son of a distinguished officer known all over Spain as the Samson of Estremadura, he had come to the New World in 1548 and immediately aided in the defense of major Caribbean ports against the French. Later, he helped Pizarro conquer the Incas. Afterwards, he returned to Spain, where he fought for Charles V in Italy, Germany, and North Africa. He returned to Peru and founded the city of Cuicas (later Trujillo) in 1556. He was still governing Trujillo when the call came to defeat Aguirre. García de Paredes did not hesitate; he and his men, joined now by Bravo, answered the call, arriving at Tocuyo to the open and appreciative arms of Governor Collado. Gutierrez, meanwhile, was drilling his forces east, in Barquisimeto, nearer to where Aguirre had landed and along the route to Peru.

With Gutierrez, García de Paredes, Bravo, and Collado colluding, forces were amassing against the rebel, wanderer, and pilgrim Aguirre. If Aguirre were to succeed, his visions of a great force coming to his side would have to materialize. Though unbeknownst to him, the sudden dissembling of many citizens of the interior towns who feared that all their forces together would be insufficient to deal with the fierce madman helped Aguirre. His reputation had by this time spread and strengthened all along the coast of Venezuela and into Colombia. These men argued that if they left, Indian uprisings would wipe out their towns, and so they would stay just where they were, ostensibly to guard against native attacks but more likely to remain out of the warpath of the rebel who was by now larger than life.

Aguirre hoped for a repeat of the scene when he landed at Margarita: namely, that the inhabitants of Borburata would be there to greet and welcome him. Of course, no such thing happened. So Aguirre sent some of his most trusted confidants ashore. They found the city abandoned—except for one man. Amazingly, Francisco Martín, one of the Marañones who had gone off with the defecting Monguía, had left Montesinos and wished to come back to Aguirre. The men returned with their new recruit and old compatriot. Though Aguirre wished for more, he was thrilled to welcome his old comrade back into the fold.

Aguirre pumped Martín for information about the abandonment. Martín told him that Monguía, joined by Artiaga and Rodrigo Gutierrez, deceived the rest by first taking their guns and then, when they arrived

near enough to port, shouting "Long live the king!" and turning over the lot of them to Montesinos, even those who were not willing. Better news for Aguirre was that Martín was not alone in his loyalty to Aguirre. There were others, who had been harassed by the inhabitants of Borburata and were now hiding in the woods. Only Martín managed to get away to port to await Aguirre. Aguirre composed a letter and sent Martín off to the woods to rouse his starving comrades. The letter promised food, clothes, and reinstatement into the band of Marañones if they returned immediately.

As Aguirre awaited the bolstering of his forces, his agitation grew. A soldier who had joined Aguirre on Margarita, Antonio Farías, upon debarking at Borburata had the temerity to ask if it was an island or the mainland; such stupidity was sufficient reason for Aguirre to kill him—and so the first victim of the Venezuelan campaign was one of Aguirre's own. Perhaps the fact that Farías had joined the expedition late, forsaking those he already knew on Margarita, was reason enough for Aguirre to be suspicious of his later loyalties.

The rest of the men landed, careful not to ask questions, and set themselves up in the abandoned town. They burned the ships behind them to prevent desertion. Aguirre was anxious to resume the march. He sent out several of his men to hunt down horses. But only a few of them returned, the others victims of poisoned arrows that Indians had set in traps along the paths. The Spaniards of Borburata had drafted these Indians to attack upon first sight of the Marañones. Eventually, the Marañones would capture some ninety horses, but none were broken in and the men had a terrible time of it. Aguirre's old skills as horse breaker would come in handy here. But the sight of his first returning bedraggled party sent Aguirre into fresh paroxysms of rage. "Come," he screamed at his men. "Follow me!" He gathered up his drummers and buglers, as well as his flags, and led a parade up and down the main road of the abandoned town, yelling to the heavens: "All will be held to account! All will be murdered! We declare a war of blood and death against God, his saints, the King of Castille, and all his vassals."

A quarter century of frustration and anger was let loose in torrents. The soldiers were given free rein to loot and pillage at will. Several of them discovered an estate several miles out of town. There they found in hiding an alcalde, Benito Chaves, along with his wife and daughter. The men took what they could, left the women, and dragged Chaves back to Aguirre, along with a tradesman named Pedro Nuñez.

Aguirre asked Nuñez why everyone had fled the town. "For fear of you, sir," Nuñez replied.

Aguirre grinned. "And what do you yourself think of us?" he asked. Nuñez hedged, afraid that no answer would be correct. "Have no fear," Aguirre assured him. "You may answer freely, unbound from any threat of harm for whatever answer you give."

Nuñez looked around at the leering Marañones and, poor man, answered the truth: "The inhabitants, sir, think, sir, you and your band are cruel Lutherans," he stammered.

Aguirre ripped the helmet from his head and cocked his hand. Nuñez covered his face, dropping to the ground, where Aguirre towered over him, shaking with rage. "Stupid barbarian," he shouted. "Are you such an ass as to believe this?" Nuñez shook his head as Aguirre put his helmet back on. "I do not dash out your brains now because I shall chastise you later for your ignorance."

Nuñez's luck would not hold for long. One of the soldiers found a jar of olives belonging to Nuñez; in it were several pieces of hidden gold. Nuñez had either the courage or the stupidity to ask Aguirre if he would see to it that the gold be returned to him; the soldier could have the olives.

Aguirre smiled. "How did you fasten the jar?" he asked Nuñez.

"With pitch, sir."

The soldier in question stepped forward and produced a jar that had been sealed with plaster, not pitch.

"If you would lie about this, you would lie about anything," Aguirre told Nuñez, and before the poor man could respond, Aguirre kept his promise and smashed Nuñez's head with his helmet. Then he had him strangled.

While the Marañones were engaged in breaking the wild horses, the men lingered in Borburata, slaying cattle, stealing hidden clothes and jewels, and drinking and eating prodigious amounts of food and wine. They found a multitude of wine casks; there was so much excess, in fact, that the men took to boiling their food in wine and bathing in it as well. Some even poured the wine into troughs to clean their feet at night. Aguirre joined in at least once, a rare smile of joy painted on his face. He also sent a letter to the town of Valencia, some twenty miles to the east, assuring the inhabitants there that he had no intention of passing through. As their new ruler, however, he ordered them to send horses. If they did not, he would wreak havoc should he ever pass that way. The people of Valencia

ignored the letter, thus assuring themselves a page in this sad and increasingly maniacal saga.

Indeed, it seemed that Aguirre wished to add to his litany of crimes daily, and no one was immune. One of the Marañones, Juan Perez, was feeling ill and sat beside a river to rest. Seeing him there and inquiring what was the matter, Aguirre assured Perez that he had the cure. Minutes later, he had Perez hanged, a placard attached to the gallows explaining that Perez had been executed for being "backward and useless." During Perez's execution, however, several men tried to intercede on his behalf, beseeching Aguirre not to do it and proclaiming that Perez was a good man. Aguirre warned them not to intervene on behalf of men who were so lukewarm in war. It was, however, an unprecedented crack. While there had been desertions, to that point there had been no direct questioning of Aguirre's methods without consequence. But none of those who tried to mediate on Perez's behalf paid a price for it. Of course, their supplications were not enough to spare the man.

Aguirre was ready to resume the inland march. But two more of his soldiers defected: Pedro Arias de Almesto and Diego de Alarcon. Aguirre's response was sadistic. He sent two of his men to the estate of the alcalde Chaves and instructed them to return with his wife and daughter. This being done, Aguirre told Chaves that he had better find the two deserters; meanwhile, his wife and daughter would be forced to accompany the Marañones to Peru. Once the deserters were found, Aguirre would return the two women to Borburata.

Then they set off for Valencia to wreak revenge; all in the party went on foot, as the horses were used to ferry loads. Aguirre was at least unsparing in his burdens; all would share equal weight, even himself and his daughter, Elvira. Also—in perhaps the only "marked favor" the chroniclers are willing to ascribe to Aguirre—he left behind three sick soldiers, Juan de Paredes, Francisco Marquina, and Alonzo Ximenez. Simón suggests that he did not hang them because "they had been his accomplices in all his cruelties."

On the march out of town, the party scaled a steep hill and Aguirre caught sight of a piragua heading to port filled with Spaniards. He halted his men, left them in the charge of his *mayordomo* Juan de Aguirre, and took two or three dozen harquebusiers with him back toward town. There the men further ransacked the town looking for the visitors but found nothing. They set up in a house and had at a pipe of wine. Several of them got very drunk, but Aguirre bested them all. He was so inebriated that he could no longer stand. "Now would have been the moment to kill the traitor,"

Simón wrote, "for there were none to defend him, all being under the influence of drink." No one did the deed then, however, and no one would do the deed later, when an even better opportunity presented itself.

Though no one killed Aguirre, three more of the party took the opportunity to desert: Resales, Acosta, and Jorge de Rodas. Acosta would later join the ranks of deserters who would offer up their stories for publication—their primary interest, of course, lying in their own exculpation. In so doing, they would all contribute to the portrait of Aguirre as an unconscionable and blood-lusting lunatic, the man who fills the contours of this present story.

While Aguirre and the others began their long slog out of inebriation, Juan de Aguirre sent several men to find water; their supply had become dangerously low, and those in camp were suffering. In their searches through the woods, the men found a few ravines where they could quench their thirst. They also found a slipshod encampment where several of the townspeople had slept as they fled from the Marañones. There, incredibly, they discovered a cloak belonging to Rodrigo Gutierrez, one of the Marañones who had defected to the provincial Montesinos. Inside the cloak was a declaration against Lope de Aguirre drawn up before the judge of Borburata. The document included a corroborating statement by Francisco Martín, the pilot who had recently returned to the Marañones.

Juan de Aguirre wasted no time on an interrogation. Martín and another soldier, Anton García, had been detained because of some altercation between them. Juan de Aguirre found Martín and stabbed him to death. Several others joined in, firing harquebusses to finish him off. During the fray, a soldier named Harana hit García with his shot and killed him. A terrible row broke out between those who felt Harana had done the deed on purpose and those who defended it as an accident. The matter seemed to be settled when Harana boasted of having done the deed purposely. He would do it again, he proclaimed, because he believed that García intended to run off that very night.

Still, the divisions increased and the Marañones fought amongst themselves. Juan de Aguirre knew that he did not have the heavy hand needed to keep order, so he ran to town and told Lope de Aguirre was what going on back at camp. Upon receiving the news, Aguirre shrugged. "The murdered remain dead," he said. "And the living stay in life." He was too pleased with Juan de Aguirre's murder of Martín to let the fray bother him.

The next day, the trek to Valencia resumed. The mountainous terrain forced the men onto their hands and knees in places, and the horses found

it impossible to move, so the men had to carry their loads. Aguirre himself took more than his share despite the crushing heat. Even as much younger men collapsed under the weight of their burdens, Aguirre continued to take on more. But the heavy yoke and the rough track took their toll during the eight-day journey; Aguirre, the old man who could shoulder more difficulties than anyone, fell terribly ill. Indians carried him into Valencia on a litter, while soldiers shaded him with his bloodsword-emblazoned flags. The inhabitants of Valencia did not stick around to meet him, however. They gathered their possessions and scurried off in canoes to the islands in Lake Tacarigua, where they stayed with friendly Indians.

Historian Reginaldo de Lizárraga later expressed astonishment that no one had dared to seize or to kill Aguirre, even though he was just a solitary man with a limp. Vázquez ascribed the lack of courage to another source: "[Aguirre] killed rather than be killed by others, for this is what many thought of doing, but did not dare to do so, because God seemed to allow Aguirre to act as universal executioner."[7] But surely here was an opportunity to kill Aguirre. In fact, he became so ill during his first day in Valencia that he shouted to his soldiers, "Kill me, Marañones! Kill me!" And yet no one did. More opportunities arose; Simón reported that "in a few days he was reduced to a skeleton, and at the point of death. In this state he could have easily been killed by any one, for there were no guards to watch over him, and the people went in and out of his quarters to see him as they pleased." Vázquez suggested that "he would have been easier to kill than a chicken." No doubt some of the soldiers later regretted their inaction; perhaps they believed he would die naturally.

In time, Aguirre recovered his health. The chroniclers express horror that his first act was not to give thanks to God but rather to blaspheme more, cursing God as he did everyone else who failed to join his worthy enterprise; his men, he declared, were "honorably employed in warlike doings, as true men who love war and follow the profession of arms since the beginning of the world." Mixing in religious imagery, as he often did, he reminded his followers that "war is so honorable a career that even the angels in Heaven had engaged in war when they expelled Lucifer." Indeed, heaven was full of warriors, in Aguirre's view—just as the earth was populated by them. He often proclaimed a personal maxim: "God created heaven for deserving persons, but the earth for the powerful, and Peru for Aguirre!" At other times, he would tell his men to enjoy themselves as much as they could now on earth, for there was no hell and no heaven besides.

Feeling renewed to warrior status, Aguirre issued a fresh proclamation: no one was to go past gunshot range of the town. Tough luck for a soldier named Gonzalo who, unaware of the new rule, came into town with three parrots strung over his shoulder and met loyal soldiers in the road who immediately put him to death for his infraction.

More opportunity for fresh bloodletting soon presented itself. The alcalde Benito Chaves, charged with finding the deserters Arias and Alarcon, took his charge seriously, as he wished to rescue his wife and daughter. He got some friends and his son-in-law, don Julian de Mendoza, to help. Soon enough, they found their men and began the march to Valencia to make the trade. Halfway there, Arias melted in fear; he threw himself on the ground and declared that he would go no further. Don Julian wasted no time; he pulled his sword, declaring that Arias's head would be enough for Aguirre. "Preferable," Arias declared, "to what the Wolf will do to me." Don Julian called the bluff and pressed the sword to Arias's neck. After the first insertion into skin, Arias yelped and jumped to his feet, swearing he would go. And so the four men marched into Valencia, Arias pressing his hands to his wound.

Aguirre kept his word. He gave up the two women, who ran to the arms of their men. One of the Marañones strung up Alarcon by the ankles and dragged him through the streets while another called out, "This is the sentence commanded to be put into execution by Lope de Aguirre, the great chief of the noble Marañones, on this man because he is a faithful vassal of the king of Castille, that he be dragged to the place of execution, hung, and quartered; and such is the fate of those who act like him."

Alarcon was beheaded and his head was placed atop the town's rollo. When Aguirre spotted the head, he broke into a devilish laugh and shouted, "Is that you, friend Alarcon? How is it the king of Castille does not come to bring life to you?" The Marañones crowding around sniggered, pleased with themselves for pleasing their leader.

Amazingly, Arias was spared. Aguirre needed a secretary, and Arias had good penmanship. Aguirre even ordered that Arias's neck wound be dressed and cleaned.

Aguirre sent Christoval García, a caulker, and a party of soldiers to give chase to the Valencians now huddled up on islands in the lake. García's weak attempt at constructing rafts failed miserably, the rafts sinking and spilling their cargo as soon as they hit the water. García dragged his tail back to town and awaited the wrath of God. Only the timely arrival of a letter appeased Aguirre enough to forget García's failure. It seemed

that the Borburata alcalde, Chaves, had located and imprisoned Rodrigo Gutierrez, the man who owned the cloak discovered in the woods that contained the deposition that was Francisco Martín's death sentence. Aguirre sent Francisco de Carrion and twelve others to fetch the deserter.

Gutierrez had fled to the church to take shelter. When Carrion attempted to coax him out, a priest defended him enough that Carrion gave up and set on Chaves instead. Gutierrez used the deflection to escape and flee once again into the woods. Carrion gave up the whole business and returned to Valencia, where he barely managed to keep his own life for not having killed Chaves. Chaves, of course, was terrified at having disappointed Aguirre. Hoping to rectify matters, he wrote a letter to Aguirre, alerting him to the intentions of Collado and the other officers appointed to stop Aguirre. Chaves reported that they intended to stop him either at Barquisimeto or Tocuyo. Aguirre was obliged for this information; he decided to leave Valencia the very next day in hopes of passing through those areas before the loyalist forces could mass against him.

In the meanwhile, Aguirre's attention turned to Father Pedro Contreras, the priest from Margarita who was made to trek along with the rest to Valencia. It was something of a miracle that the priest had survived so long, considering Aguirre's deep disdain for all clergy. Father Contreras did in fact survive, and his survival was due to his connection to the most striking document to emerge not only from this expedition but perhaps in the entire annals of Spanish conquest and colonialism in the New World.

Father Contreras would be allowed to leave providing he agreed to deliver a letter to the authorities at Margarita. If this was not possible, he was to forward it to Santo Domingo and see to it that it would eventually be delivered into the hands of King Philip himself. It is an extraordinary letter; at least one later historian called it the "first declaration of independence in America," a sentiment shared by Simón Bolívar.[8]

Here, in total, is the often rambling, often angry, sometimes witty, and altogether astonishing letter:

To King Philip, the Spaniard, son of Charles the Invincible:

From Lope de Aguirre, your lesser vassal, old Christian, of middling parents but fortunately of noble blood, native of the Basque country of the kingdom of Spain, citizen of the town of Oñate.

In my youth I crossed the sea to the land of Peru to gain fame, lance in hand, and to fulfill the obligation of all good men. In 24 years I have done you great service in Peru, in conquests of the Indians, in founding

towns, and especially in battles and encounters fought in your name, always to the best of my power and ability, without requesting of your officials pay nor assistance, as can be seen in your royal records.

I firmly believe, most excellent King and lord, that to me and my companions you have been nothing but cruel and ungrateful. I also believe that those who write to you from this land deceive you, because of the great distance.

I demand of you, King, that you do justice and right by the good vassals you have in this land, even though I and my companions (whose names I will give later), unable to suffer further the cruelties of your judges, viceroy, and governors, have resolved to obey you no longer. Denaturalizing ourselves from our land, Spain, we make the most cruel war against you that our power can sustain and endure. Believe, King and lord, we have done this because we can no longer tolerate the great oppression and unjust punishments of your ministers who, to make places for their sons and dependents have usurped and robbed our fame, life, and honor. It is a pity, King, the bad treatment you have given us. I am lame in the right leg from the harquebus wounds I received in the battle of Chuquinga, fighting with marshall Alonzo de Alvarado, answering your call against Francisco Hernandez Girón, rebel from your service as I and my companions are presently and will be until death, because we in this land now know how cruel you are, how you break your faith and your word, and thus we in this land give your promises less credence than to the books of Martin Luther. Your viceroy the marquis of Cañete hanged Martin de Robles, a man distinguished in your service; and the brave Tomas Vasquez, conquistador of Peru; and the ill fated Alonso Dias, who worked more in the discoveries of this kingdom than the scouts of Moses in the desert; and Piedrahita, a good captain who fought many battles in your service.[9] *In Pucara they gave you victory, and if they had not, Francisco Hernandez [Girón] would now be the king of Peru. Don't give much credence to the claims your judges make of services performed, because it is a great myth, unless they call having spent 800,000 pesos of your royal treasury for their vices and evil deeds a service. Punish them as evildoers, as such they certainly are.*

Look here, King of Spain! Do not be cruel and ungrateful to your vassals, because while your father and you stayed in Spain without the slightest bother, your vassals, at the price of their blood and fortune, have given you all the kingdoms and holding you have in these parts. Beware,

King and lord, that you cannot take, under the title of legitimate king, any benefit from this land where you risked nothing, without first giving due gratification to those who have labored and sweated in it.

I am certain there are few kings in hell because there are few kings, but if there were many none would go to heaven. Even in hell you would be worse than Lucifer, because you all thirst after human blood. But I don't marvel nor make much of you. For certain, I and my 200 harquebus-bearing Marañones, conquistadores and noble, swear solemnly to God that we will not leave a minister of yours alive, because I already know how far your clemency reaches. Today we consider ourselves the luckiest men alive because we are in these parts of the Indies, with faith in God's commandments full and uncorrupted as Christians, maintaining all that is preached by the holy mother church of Rome, and we intend, though sinners in life, to achieve martyrdom through God's commandments.

Upon leaving the Amazon river, called the Maranon, on an island inhabited by Christians called Margarita, I saw some reports from Spain regarding the great schism of Lutherans there, which caused us to be frightened and surprised. In our company there was a German named Monteverde, and I ordered him cut to pieces.[10] *Destiny rewards the prudent. Believe this, excellent Prince: Wherever we are we ensure that all live perfectly in the Christian faith.*

The dissolution of the priests is so great in these parts that I think it would be well that they feel your wrath and punishment because there is now none among them who sees himself as less than governor. Look here, King, do not believe what they might tell you because the tears that they shed before your royal person is so that they can come here to command. If you want to know the life they lead here, it is to deal in merchandise, seek and acquire temporal goods, and sell the Sacraments of the Church for a price. They are enemies of the poor, uncharitable, ambitious, gluttonous, and arrogant, so that even the lowest of the priests tries to command and govern all these lands. Correct this, King and lord, because from these things and bad examples faith is not impressed upon the natives. Furthermore, if this dissolution of the priests is not stopped, there will be no shortage of scandal.

If I and my companions, by the correct position we have taken, are determined to die, for this and for other things that have happened, singular King, you are to blame for not duly considering the labor of your vassals and for not thinking of what you owe them. If you do not look

out for your vassals, and your judges do not take care of this, you certainly will fail in government. Certainly there is no need to present witnesses, but simply to point out that each of your judges has 4,000 pesos of salary, 8,000 pesos in expenses, and after three years in office each has 60,000 pesos saved, along with properties and possessions! Despite all this we would be willing to serve them as we do, except that for our sins they want us to drop to our knees wherever we are and worship them like Nebuchadnezzar. This is insufferable. Just because I am an unfortunate man made lame in your service (and my companions long and weary in the same) I should not fail to advise you never to trust your conscience to these learned persons. It is in your royal interest to watch out for them, as they spend all their time planning the marriages of their children, and care for nothing else. The common refrain among them is: "To the left and to the right, I possess all in my sight."

The friars do not want to bury poor Indians, and they are lodged in the best estates in Peru. The life they lead is bitter and burdensome, as each one has as a penance a dozen young women in his kitchen, and as many boys engaged in fishing, hunting partridges, and bringing fruit! They get a share of everything. In Christian faith I swear, King and lord, that if you do not remedy the evils of this land, divine punishment will come upon you. I tell you this to let you know the truth, even though I and mine neither expect nor want mercy from you.

Oh, how sad that a great Caesar and Emperor, your father, should conquer with the power of Spain the great Germany, and should spend so much money from these Indies discovered by us, and that you should not concern yourself with our old age and weariness enough to provide for our daily bread.

You know that we know in these parts, excellent King and lord, that you conquered Germany with arms, and Germany has conquered Spain with vices. We over here are happier with just corn and water to be removed from such a bad irony. Let those who suffer such an irony keep their reward. Let wars spread where they may, and where men take them. Never, no matter what adversity might come upon us, will we cease to be subject to the teachings of the Holy Mother Church of Rome.

We cannot believe, excellent King and lord, that you would be so cruel to such good vassals as you have in these parts. Your judges must be acting this way without your consent. I say this, excellent King, because two leagues from the city of Kings [Lima], there was discovered near the sea a lake where there were some fish God permitted to

exist there. Your evil judges and officials, to profit from the fish for their pleasures and vices, leased them in your name, giving us to understand, as though we were fools, that this was done by your will. If this is so, master, let us catch some of the fish, because we worked to discover it, and because the King of Castile has no need for the 400 pesos they leased it for.[11] *Illustrious King, we do not ask for grants in Cordoba or Valladolid, nor in any part of Spain, which is your patrimony. Deign to feed the weary and poor with the fruits and proceeds from this land. Remember, King and lord, that God is the same for all, and the same justice, reward, heaven, and hell.*

In the year 1559 the marquis of Cañete entrusted the expedition of the river of the Amazons to Pedro de Ursúa, Navarrese, or rather, a Frenchman. He delayed the building of the boats until the year 1560 in the province of the Motilones, in Peru. The Indians are called Motilones because they wear their head shaved. These boats were made in the wet country, and upon launching most of them came to pieces. We made rafts, left the horses and supplies, and took off down the river at great risk to our persons. We then encountered the most powerful rivers of Peru, and it seemed to us to be a freshwater sea. We traveled 300 leagues from the point of launching.

This bad governor was so perverse and vicious and miserable that we could not tolerate it, and it was impossible to put up with his evil ways. Since I have a stake in the matter, excellent King and lord, I will say only that we killed him; certainly a very serious thing. We then raised a young gentleman of Seville named don Fernando de Guzmán to be our king, and we made an oath to him as such, as your royal person will see from the signatures of all those who were in this, who remain in the island of Margarita, in these Indies. They appointed me their field commander, and because I did not consent to their insults and evil deeds they tried to kill me, and I killed the new king, the captain of his guard, the lieutenant-general, his majordomo, his chaplain, a woman in league against me, a knight of Rhodes, an admiral, two ensigns, and six other of his allies. It was my intention to carry this war through and die in it, for the cruelties your ministers practice on us, and I again appointed captains and a sergeant major. They tried to kill me, and I hung them all.

We went along our route down the Maranon river while all these killings and bad events were taking place. It took us ten and a half months to reach the mouth of the river, where it enters the sea.[12] *We*

traveled a good hundred days, and traveled 1,500 leagues. It is a large and fearsome river, with 80 leagues of fresh water at the mouth. It is very deep, and for 800 leagues along its banks it is deserted, with no towns, as your majesty will see from the true report we have made. Along the route we took there are more than 6,000 islands. God only knows how we escaped from such a fearsome lake! I advise you, King and lord, not to attempt nor allow a fleet to be sent to this ill-fated river, because in Christian faith I swear, King and lord, that if a hundred thousand men come none will escape, because the stories are false and in this river there is nothing but despair, especially for those newly arrive [sic] from Spain.

The captains and officers with me at present, and who promise to die in this demand like pitiful men are: Juan Jeronimo de Espinola Ginoves, admiral; Juan Gomez, Cristobal García, captain of infantry, both Andaluz; mounted captain Diego Tirado, Andaluz, from whom your judges, King and lord, with great injury, took Indians he had earned with his lance; captain of my guard Roberto de Sosaya and his ensign Nuflo Hernandez, Valencian; Juan Lopez de Ayala, from Cuenca, our paymaster; general ensign Blas Gutierrez, conquistador for 27 years; Juan Ponce, ensign, native of Seville; Custodio Hernández, ensign, Portuguese; Diego de Torres, ensign, Navarre; sergeant Pedro Gutierrez Viso and Diego de Figueroa; Cristobal de Rivas, conquistador, Pedro de Rojas, Andaluz; Juan de Saucedo, mounted ensign; Bartolome Sanchez Paniagua, our lawyer; Diego Sanchez Bilbao, supply; García Navarro, inspector general, and many other hidalgos of this league.[13]

We pray to God our Lord that your fortune ever be increased against the Turk and the Frenchman, and all others who wish to make war on you in those parts. In these, God grant that we might obtain with our arms the reward by right due us, but which you have denied.

Son of your loyal Basque vassals, and I, rebel until death against you for your ingratitude.

Lope de Aguirre, the Wanderer[14]

Simón was so offended by the letter that he chose not to include it in his chronicle, writing only that "it was a most audacious piece of composition, and as full of absurdities as the individual who had written it, for in it he showed little talent and sense, but the cruelty of his disposition was most apparent." In spite of Simón's misgivings, the letter did survive in the account of Vásquez and others.[15] In *The Conquest and Settlement*

of Venezuela, José de Oviedo y Baños introduces Aguirre's letter to King Philip this way: "Though the letter delivered by Lope de Aguirre to Padre Contreras, to be transmitted to the king, really does not deserve notice, yet, as a specimen of the madness of that man, we refer to it, that the reader may be amused for a moment by this fine letter, as being dictated by an owner of mules."[16]

What Simón and Oviedo y Baños mistakes for absurdities and a lack of sense can be seen instead as the desperate pleas of a man with a quarter century of grievances at his back. If only he could get an audience, he must have believed, someone would bow to his reason. Perhaps it was a kind of madness to even believe in the possibility of being heard. Historian Frank Graziano's take is that "Aguirre was mad, but his delusion coincided with the truth." However, as Graziano points out, at least one chronicler wrote, "Aguirre was a man in his right mind, although he used it badly."[17]

While perhaps a stretch to call this document the "first declaration of independence in America," it is extraordinary in so many ways. First, there is a continuation here of what Aguirre began in the jungle; there he purposely turned away from exploration, turning his back on what so many before him had given their lives for: the illusory goal of untold riches and new lands to conquer. Instead, he would deliver the New World to the glory of what he saw as the old Spain, a land full of heroes and warriors, uncorrupted by greedy judges and clergymen and Protestants. By his own proud admission, Aguirre could be cruel, even evil. However, he viewed his brand of evil as lesser than the evil that was the Spanish Crown. Because he was fighting those more powerful than he, his cause necessitated cruelty in the name of virtuous victory.

Further, Aguirre breaks from his predecessors in another important way; while countless men emerged from the jungles after barely surviving the toil and trouble of the hinterlands, they nevertheless gave glowing reports of potential riches in a desire to receive patronage for return trips. By contrast, Aguirre explodes the myth with this startling assertion: "If a hundred thousand men come none will escape, because the stories are false and in this river there is nothing but despair, especially for those newly arrive from Spain."

And of course, there is the brazen slap in the royal face with his voluntary denaturalization, so that the real men of the New World can run their own lives in the land they settled. Though it would take a few more centuries to actualize, this very goal—new for its time—would be the end dream for every country in the Americas. In 1764, for example,

the Massachusetts lawyer and revolutionary James Otis published "The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved." Within the document appears strikingly similar language and sentiment as that found in Aguirre's letter to King Philip: "It is evidently contrary to the first principles of reason, that supreme unlimited power should be in the hands of one man. It is the greatest 'idolatry, begotten by flattery, on the body of pride,' that could induce one to think that a single mortal should be able to hold so great a power."[18]

Whether King Philip ever received Aguirre's letter is unknown, but more than one astute historian has doubted that anyone close to the king would have dared showed him such blasphemies.[19]

❁

On Aguirre's orders, all of the Marañones slept together in one enclosure so as to prevent escape and desertion. Before the march west the next morning, Aguirre rid himself of three others he distrusted: Benito Diaz, Francisco de Sosa, and a soldier named Cegarra. He had them all confined to a hut within the enclosure and strangled. In the morning, he ordered the hut set on fire with the three bodies still within.

In the shadow of the burning hut and bodies, Aguirre sought to rally his men, delivering a rousing speech before their march. "Men, I am going to be honest with you," he began. "You must understand that on view of the background of all the crimes you have committed, I know exactly what each of you harbors in his heart. You must realize that I know the people of Peru; you cannot cast stones without showing the hand that casts them."

A great look of sincerity, almost forlornness, crossed his face:

> Look, my Marañones, I know that you will kill me and desert me just when I need you most, that is when we come to the valleys of Peru. I know that with my blood you will purchase a pardon for your crimes. You find the stones of Peru red with the blood of captains you have killed and left to be gored by a bull's horn. You have been a party to the destruction and have made a habit of it, have enjoyed it and have found relief and new strength in the blood of the poor officers whom you have always betrayed.

He looked at his men in turn. "You better get a move on and kill me!" he shouted, back now in the groove of his anger. "Upon my soul, you have to

beat me to it. One may invite me to a snack or a proper meal. You do not need a large crowd to do away with me. I am alone, facing you all." He paused dramatically. "And where will you go?" he asked.

> Do you not realize that you have killed a prince, governors, officers, alcaldes, sheriffs, friars, priests, commendadores, and women, that you have robbed, sacked, and killed whomsoever you could find? Do you not realize that we are going to have to fight tooth and nail, and that any one of you will, as the mildest form of punishment, have his ears clipped? You must know that without me you have no hope to survive, for there is no escape for you in the entire world. Even if you wanted to be angels, the entire world would combine to assail you; that is, unless Peru becomes ours. Upon my soul, comrades, may God grant us health. Let us be comrades in Peru and ensure that that kingdom will be under our control, by the Marañones! Let us like the Goths of Spain become the masters! Fear of death will not deter us from achieving what obviously will be ours and which fate has preserved for us. You must also know that all the Indian shamans of Peru say that from across the mountains and from unknown parts men will arrive to rule Peru. We are the ones! I am most certain of this.

The speech was manipulative, but of course, it was full of the truth. It was also, in the end, very effective. Most of the men stepped forward, swore their allegiance anew, and claimed to be loyal followers ready for the fight ahead.

Then Aguirre and his remaining army of Marañones took to the hills outside of town. With the leader in front, the line of men slogged over the tough passes, leaving behind them a ransacked and plundered town, flames from the burning hut sending wisps of smoke skyward as if they were pleas to the very heavens to intercede and stop the pillaging trail of the Traitor and wanderer, the rebel until death, Lope de Aguirre.

CHAPTER 15

Death Comes

On Governor Collado's orders, the citizens of both Barquisimeto and Tocuyo sent spies to warn of Aguirre's advance. When one of them spotted the Marañones outside Barquisimeto, he ran to town and told everyone to arm themselves in preparation. Instead, the men fled, abandoning their town to the advancing army, so fierce was Aguirre's reputation by this time. They need not have been so quick; in all, it would take eight days' hard travel before the Marañones reached the town. During this time ten men deserted, each going independently of the other and each taking advantage of the atrocious conditions to slip off unnoticed.

Told of the desertions, Aguirre frothed and raved, swearing at God and all his saints. "Oh, Marañones," Aguirre screamed, "How true it is what I have said: that you would leave me in the hour of greatest need, and that I should have to fight alone with the mountain cats and monkeys of the forests. Better would it have been had I died before this than I should yield my life to these vile ones of Venezuela!" Aguirre yelled out for his trusted page, a youngster named Antonio, calling him a prophet. "How well did you foresee the truth, Antonio. Had I but believed you, these Marañones would not have deserted." Apparently, Antonio had often said to Aguirre that he should not trust the Marañones.

Juan Gomez, still a loyal admiral, sought to reassure his boss. "Corpus de Dios," he exclaimed, grabbing Aguirre by the arm. "Why does your worship vex yourself? True, the other day three men deserted us. But if thirty had done so, I would rather have had the room than the company of such fellows, for there would have been so many enemies less." He unsheathed his sword and clanged it against a tree. "But for the love of God! There are

many and strong trees hereabouts," a not-so-subtle suggestion that there was plenty of opportunity for fresh hangings.

Those who had not deserted suffered over the rocky terrain as the heat and thundering rain poured down all around them. Horses slipped and fell; some rolled over backwards to their deaths. Aguirre raged, opening his mouth wide to receive the pouring rain, and shouted to the skies, "Does God think that because it rains in torrents I am not going to Peru and destroy the world? He is mistaken in me." He ordered the Marañones to cut steps into the mountain track for the horses. They hacked at the muddy ground, slipping and sliding under the watchful and menacing eye of their leader, who turned to one of his men and with ferocity muttered, "I swear to God that I will leave nothing alive on this land."

Several of the chroniclers here claim that as the campaign became increasingly desperate, Aguirre wished for immortality as much as actual conquest; he is to have said on at least one occasion that if he could not return to Peru and kill all who lived there, "then at least the fame of all the things he had done and all his cruelties would remain in the memory of man forever." If true, the statement certainly suggests a change in goals and undermines claims about his being a true revolutionary; however, it may all be part of the same obsessive belief that the honorable battle was enough in and of itself. No doubt Aguirre saw his many acts of cruelty as entirely justified and ultimately likely to earn him history's grace, not opprobrium. Incredibly, this belief would, in some circles at least, come to pass.

The Marañones were hungry, but they found some relief when they stumbled upon a gold mining settlement. The workers there had fled, leaving behind a large quantity of maize. Aguirre would rather have had the black slaves who worked there, for whenever the opportunity arose to add black slaves to his party, he took it, promising them the same liberties as the Spaniards enjoyed. In the army of the Marañones, there were roughly twenty black men, and they even had their own captain.

The men continued their slog until, after several days, one of the advance scouts reported the arrival of more of the king's forces. The fight lay ahead. Aguirre pulled aside some of his most trusted lieutenants and proposed the murder of some forty of the Marañones, men he suspected would desert the moment they came within view of the royal forces. But things were at a turning point. For the first time, Aguirre was overridden;

his men simply refused, saying that he would be far less secure by reducing his numbers to a hundred men. Better, they argued, to go ahead with them all, including the three or four dozen he did not trust. It was a good argument, of course, but at this point, the men probably considered that they would end up on the next list and were thinking privately of deserting before Aguirre could pile even more crimes upon their heads.

At Barquisimeto, Pedro Galeas, the man who had deserted and given himself up to Fajardo, was being held captive under suspicion of being one of Aguirre's spies. But before long, his sincerity and contrition won him the trust of General Gutierrez and the others, who used him to find out the location and strength of Aguirre's army. Galeas assured those in command that at best fifty men went with Aguirre willingly; the rest would give themselves over to the loyalist side the moment they had the chance to do so. Diego García de Paredes was happy to hear this; truth was, he had no confidence whatsoever in his rather small army of soldiers. His army rode around with clothes that did not fit, possessed saddles and bridles that disintegrated in their hands, carried poorly made lances and swords, and were outfitted with ridiculous Burgundian helmets, which in actuality were nothing better than old cloth hats, tri-colored, cotton-tasseled and fringed, and basically useless. "Such helmets," observed Simón, "provoked a smile rather than confidence as to their utility for defense." Gutierrez's men were no better suited; they were similarly dressed and of the fifty of them, there were only two harquebusiers, one with a weapon that barely worked.

Despite his misgivings, García had a job to do. He marched his men toward Aguirre's position, along an old and rarely used track, so narrow that the men had to form a single-file line and those on horses could not turn around. From the other direction, Aguirre's men marched in the same fashion. Up and down the trail the two parties marched, completely oblivious to the position of the other until they actually marched right into each other. They stood in dumb stupefaction for a moment before mutually retreating. García's men turned in such a haphazard manner that tree branches and their own stumbling bodies forced the lances from their hands and the caps from their heads. Few of the frightened men bothered to stoop and collect them.

The Marañones, on the other hand, were hardly afraid. Their retreat was due to their marching unarmed. Their harquebusses were not lighted, and so they were vulnerable. When they did get them lighted and ready for fire, they resumed their march. The objects García's men had left behind lay in their path. It was a stroke of luck for Aguirre; while it may not

have dissuaded those Marañones who wished to desert, it might at least have given them pause to see firsthand the ragtag bunch in which they would have placed their lives and trust if they chose to leave. Aguirre fingered one of the caps and gathered his men for a good look. "Do you see, Marañones, where fortune has brought you, and where you wish to fly to and remain? Look at these helmets, bought by the galleons of Meliana [Spain]! See how rich these vassals of the King of Castile are!"

The royal forces had another chance at the Marañones, but once again they deemed their firepower insufficient and retreated. This time they went all the way back to Barquisimeto. García sent a letter to Governor Collado, still at Tocuyo, and told him that Aguirre's army appeared too large and too strong for the current forces; they would need reinforcements, and quickly. General Peña did posses something perhaps even more valuable, however: a stack of pardon letters. He would tempt the Marañones away from their leader with promises of amnesty; it had worked against Gonzalo Pizarro, after all. Collado, who had signed the letters, had an even stronger inducement for Aguirre himself. Not quite a full pardon, Collado's plea to Aguirre was to give up the rebellion and join the king's forces; in exchange, Collado would overlook all the crimes committed thus far and recommend in the strongest terms to His Majesty that Aguirre escape all punishment so long as he promised to remain loyal to the king. With a touch of somewhat silly bravado, Collado added that if Aguirre should ignore these promises then Collado would be happy to meet him and settle matters man to man.

The royal army then abandoned Barquisimeto, emptying all the houses but leaving the letters of pardon. They retreated to the hills outside of town. It was October 22, 1561, more than thirteen months since the expedition began and almost four months since the men had left the jungle. Aguirre sent a letter to the largely empty town telling the inhabitants that they should remain, that he wished to do them no harm; in fact, if any wished to join his cause, they could expect to be handsomely rewarded when they reached Peru. If they fled, however, they could expect a town razed to the ground upon their return. For good measure, he would tear to pieces any person he caught. Then he set out to town. His men had orders to fire on anyone who moved three paces out of the line of the march; Aguirre's primary concern was desertion.

The Marañones approached town; the royalist forces, numbering about eighty, amassed on the heights above. Had they good firepower, they could have done severe damage to the rebels. They descended the

hill and entered town on one side at precisely the same time that Aguirre's men entered from the other. Neither side was close enough yet to the other to inflict any damage. In any case, the royal forces were simply making a show of it; as soon as they saw Aguirre's men filling the streets of the town, they retreated once again to the heights. They hoped that as soon as the Marañones took possession of the houses they would find the pardon letters and begin deserting en masse. Not surprisingly, Aguirre decreed that anyone caught reading or possessing a letter of pardon would suffer pain of death.

The Marañones set up in a turreted compound in the center of town, surrounded by high mud walls, so that even if some of them wanted to desert, they would have had no opportunity to do so unnoticed. If the royal forces lacked courage, the same could not be said for their leader. With great stealth, García and eight of his men entered town from the opposite direction and took up Aguirre's rear. Unnoticed by the Marañones, García pilfered powder for their harquebusses, four horses, and piles of clothing before heading back to the hills. It was a bold move and tilted the balance of power—still in Aguirre's favor—slightly more toward the royals.

The Marañones found the letters of pardon, compounding Aguirre's greatest fears. He addressed his men once more:

> I know, Señores, that you have found letters of pardon written by the governor, in which inducements are held out for you to join him, promising pardon for all the wickedness you have committed up to the present time, and, as I am an experienced man in such things, and I wish you and myself well, I shall undeceive you: Put no trust in governors, nor in their papers or signatures; think on the cruelties, robberies, deaths, and destruction of towns you have committed. You may be well assured that, as to the atrocities you have committed, neither in Spain, the Indies, nor any other part of the world have there been such men as you are, who have done such horrors; and I tell you, although the king in person wished to pardon you, I do not believe he would be allowed to do so, much less a licentiate such as Pablo Collado, for the relations and friends of those you have slain would hunt you to the death and kill you, for you will be always exposed to be murderers. You will be insulted and hunted like wild beasts, and called traitors. Just see what was the fate of [Juan] Piedrahita, of Tomas Vasquez, and of other captains, in regard to the king's

> pardon, when, having served the crown of Castille the whole of their lives, there came a talkative little lawyer of no account who cut their heads off.[1] Then what would happen to us, who have committed more murders and desperate actions in one day than all those who have rebelled in the Indies against the king? Let each of you think well on this; be not too easy of belief; do nothing in a hurry so as to repent afterwards; and, as I have often said, nowhere are you so safe as in my company. As to having anything to do with these papers of the governor, they are bitter fruit and gilded pills, so that under a delusive color you would swallow poison. Let us reflect: if we at present have hunger and troubles, the future has rest in store for us; if we have some difficulties before we get to Peru, there we shall find abundance and happiness.

He began to make his way back to his dwelling, leaving his men to think on what he had said. The short of it: they were trapped. There was no doubt about that; their only option was to fight. He turned to them and concluded before heading off again: "Let us sell our lives dearly, and do our duty."

Aguirre ordered almost all of the houses in town set on fire, worried that they would give cover to the king's forces. The straw houses went up quickly. After a soldier named Francisco de Guerra also set the straw church alight, Aguirre ordered men inside to save some images of saints. Only a few houses remained by that night, when several of the king's men snuck into town and set them on fire, too. Now only one, large structure remained, and it was there that most of the Marañones resided. Just before daybreak, García ordered his five harquebusiers into town to discharge their weapons, hoping to cause enough confusion to have Aguirre commit some mistake. Aguirre's forty harquebusiers returned fire, and after the confrontation all slipped back to their respective entrenchments without having lost a man.

While his men were doing their best to engage the Marañones, Governor Collado lost his appetite for battle. He retired to Tocuyo and awaited Pedro Bravo de la Molina and his men from Mérida. When Bravo arrived, Collado was happy to bestow whatever honors on him he desired; thus it would be Bravo, joining the courageous García, who would lead the charge against the Traitor, Collado riding in the rear. Bravo and his brave men sniggered at the cowardly Collado.

Bravo and the men who had joined him on the road in New Trujillo—some seventy in all, making Bravo's force number some two hundred—marched out of Tocuyo and headed to join García's men outside Barquisimeto. Once joined, their numbers would favor the royal forces, though the firepower advantage still belonged to Aguirre. Along the way, they met a messenger bearing another letter from Aguirre, a response to Collado's letter, essentially calling his bluff. "Most magnificent Señor," it began:

> *Amongst other papers from you, found in this town, was a letter of yours directed to me, with more promises and preambles than there are stars in heaven, and, as regards myself and my companions, it was unnecessary for you to have taken such trouble, for I well know to what point your power extends and how far you are able to oblige me in your recommendations to the king. Most superfluous are your offers, as I know well that your position and power are but of poor account and, if the king of Spain had to pass through the conflict there is to be between us both, I would not accept them; moreover, I will give you every advantage in arms. But to me all you say is a mere artifice, and such as has often been resorted to against those brave men who conquered and settled this country. And you have come to rob them of the fruit of their hard-earned labor, saying that you come to do them justice, and the justice you offer them is to inquire how and in what manner they conquered the country, and for this you come to make war on them. The favor I ask of you is that you do not force us to come to blows; if we do, your gains will be few, for my companions make but light of your promise of pardon and are prepared to sell their lives dearly. I have nothing to do with affairs in this part of the country; I wish to pay well with my own money for the cost of some horses and other things. By this course you will preserve your district from the horrors of war. From what we have already seen of the things of this land, we will put wings on and use our spurs well not to be detained here; we have seen some of your hoods of helmets, or rather hats, and playthings of lances, thrown away by your soldiers in their hurry to escape from us. These things tell us what your forces are composed of.*
>
> *I return to the letter; it is of little use your saying that we were not acting as if we were in the king's service. I and my companions are only doing what our predecessors did, which is not against the king; for we*

hold him who commands us as our lord, and no other. It is a long time since we divested ourselves of our rights as Spaniards and we refuse fealty to the king. We have made a new king whom we obey, and, as vassals of another lord, we may well make war against those we have sworn to fight, which is our business and not yours. And in conclusion I say, that according to the sort of behavior you and yours adopt in our vicinity, so will we treat you. If you search us out you will find us ready for you, and the sooner you supply us with what we require, the sooner will we leave this land. I do not offer you my services because you would hold them valueless.

Our Lord preserve the most magnificent person of your worship, etc. Your servant,
Lope De Aguirre

Collado was sufficiently spooked; Aguirre had called his foolish bluff. He looked up to address those assembled around him. "Would to God that the result of this war might be settled personally between me and Aguirre," he sighed. "For although he makes himself out so powerful, it might happen that I should punish him as he intimates he could do with me; but, as God has so ordained it, let us give him thanks for all his mercies: Our sins are the cause of so many evils that even to this great distance have reached the sparks of the rebellions in Peru that make us so unhappy and put us into such straits."

So, it seemed, the governor—and those around him in agreement—believed that Lope de Aguirre, Lope El Loco, was indeed the Wrath of God.

❁

Despite their fears, Bravo, Collado, and the men continued on, eventually joining García. Their spirits were lifted all around because of the increased numbers. Even better, Collado announced that a judge in Santa Fe was on the way with five hundred armed men, though the claim may have been simply put out for purposes of morale and had little truth to it. Aguirre became aware of all this because of a defection from the royal side. A black slave, seeing a better chance for freedom with Aguirre than in continued servitude to the king, ran to Aguirre's camp and told him everything that was going on in the heights above town—probably García's intention all along. While the slave no doubt wished to do Aguirre service, his appearance caused murmurs among the Marañones that they were now terribly

outnumbered; many of them confided in each other that they would take the very first opportunity available to flee to the royal side.

Two soldiers named Rengel and Francisco Guerrero were the first to put plan into action. Their arrival at the royalist side cheered the king's men; their assurance that many others were simply waiting for the opportunity to do the same cheered them further. Indeed, several of the royalist leaders proposed simply sitting and waiting; Aguirre would lose his men to desertion quicker than in battle. On the other hand, one pitched battle would probably be all that it would take; once the fighting began, the men would doubtless flee to the royals. There was precedent, of course—on the battlefields near Cuzco, Gonzalo Pizarro had lost his men and then his life only thirteen years earlier.

Now, with Bravo and his men as reinforcements as well as the information that Pedro Galeas and the two more recent deserters had supplied, the royalist forces finally felt ready to take on and defeat Aguirre. Bravo and forty others, including the deserters Rengel and Guerrero, came within shouting distance and tried to impel the remaining Marañones to come over. Bravo minced no words: if they came over, they would receive pardons and the king's mercy. If they resisted, their throats would be slashed. While yelling this, they seized a few of Aguirre's remaining Indian slaves, who had been washing clothes in a ravine.

If Aguirre had doubts about his success, he kept them private, but his constant references to his men deserting him and his increasing vigilance over their freedom showed his panic. Simón wrote, "The traitor was beginning to have some fears of his ultimate success, seeing that his men were deserting him, that the king's men showed so bold a front, and even came up to the walls of his quarters, and that his Indian servants were taken from him." Concerning the Indians, one can only imagine the ambivalence these natives felt in being "rescued" by a side that certainly did not offer any liberty.

But Aguirre was not ready to give it up yet. He sent sixty of his most trusted men with their harquebusses to fire into the king's camp throughout the night and retire at daybreak. Aguirre gave command to his captain of guard, Roberto de Susaya, and to Christoval García, captain of infantry. At daybreak, some of the king's sentinels discovered the Marañones laying down for a few hours' sleep and rushed back to camp to raise the alarm. What ensued was another maddening standoff. Both sides massed and stared at each other, exchanging insults and promises but little else.

Just then, Aguirre came bounding up the track on a jet-black steed, his black flag emblazoned with blood-red swords trailing in the breeze behind him. Aguirre and his sixty harquebusiers made a flanking movement; finally, it appeared that a battle would take place. The king's forces had the advantage in numbers, more than doubling Aguirre's sixty with fresh reinforcements from Coro, Valencia, and Borburata. But among their 150 men, they had only five or six harquebusses.

The royalists began a slow retreat, and Aguirre pursued. A cadre of the king's men broke off from the main group and took up the position Aguirre had just abandoned. Some among the king's group argued for attacking him then; it was now or never. Others conjectured that waiting for internecine skirmishes was the better option. Aguirre, for his part, had arranged for another wave of armed Marañones to come up from the rear and join the fray. There was no question that the Marañones' firepower would cut the king's men to pieces. However, an amazing thing happened that turned the tide and began the slow march to Aguirre's final defeat.

The shot coming from the Marañones' harquebusses traveled roughly half the distance it should have flown. The powder was simply bad—rotted and rendered useless by months of jungle travel. The shot issued from the harquebusses that found a mark against the king's horses' skin would flatten, stick to the hair, and then drop off harmlessly. By contrast, a shot from a royal harquebus eliminated Aguirre's horse from under him. The old, crippled man took a tumble. Looking up, he rallied his men on, even as two of them fell near him, injured.

One of the hurt soldiers had fallen from his horse, which wheeled about in the confusion. Diego Tirado, one of Aguirre's closest confidants, mounted the horse, dug in his heels, and rode directly into the king's men, shouting, "Long live the king! Long live the king." The royals halted their fire and welcomed Tirado. Aguirre had lost another man.

Tirado convinced the king's men to stop their skirmish at once; Aguirre's forces, he argued, were too strong. Instead, he instructed them to scatter so they could not be taken together in any great number. Governor Collado dismounted from his own horse and gave it to Tirado with instructions to head back and skirmish with the Marañones. This was a crushing blow. Aguirre watched as one of his most trusted men turned against him and now fought for all that Aguirre believed wicked and unworthy. He turned to the rest of the Marañones and told them that it did not look as it appeared, that in fact he had sent Tirado to do business with the governor. It is doubtful that any of them believed it. In fact, a soldier named

Francisco Caballero mounted his horse and took some tentative strides toward the king's camp but returned under a fusillade of shot and confusion, unnoticed by most—but not all—of the Marañones.

Then it seemed that Aguirre would get a defection from the other side, as a horseman appeared amid the smoke, riding directly for the Marañones. It was a royalist soldier named Ledesma. Aguirre shouted to his men to hold their fire; Ledesma came as close as thirty or forty paces before shouting "Long live the king!" and speeding back to the royals. It was a bold move, a symbolic shot across the bow to show the Marañones that the men they faced were brave, despite their ridiculous costumes.

"Marañones," Aguirre shouted, "Is it possible that a few herdsmen with sheepskin jackets and hide bucklers show themselves to us and you do not bring them to earth?" He watched his men closely and became convinced that they were merely shooting into the air. Indeed, it did not appear as if one single royalist had even been injured by the awesome firepower of Aguirre's army, rotted powder or no. Aguirre ordered his men back to town, driving them on with threats and his drawn sword. "If fate allows me to be defeated by those vile *cazabe*-eaters and corn-munchers," he screamed, "I shall cease to believe in God!"[2]

Back in camp, Caspar Diaz, still loyal to Aguirre, stood in wait for Francisco Caballero, the soldier who had attempted to defect. As Caballero approached, Diaz leapt at him with a sharp sword, shouting, "Death to the traitor," and thrust the instrument into him. Other Marañones rushed to finish him off, but Aguirre stopped them and ordered that Caballero be treated and cured. The Marañones were stunned. Had their leader given up? Had he lost his appetite for bloodshed?

Seeing their surprised faces, Aguirre fumed again. "Cowards!" he screamed. "Woman-hearted cowards! You show such prowess in the art of war here among your own and yet you cannot—with all your great advantage in firepower—put a dent against the forces that oppose you. Instead, you point your guns skyward and make war upon the heavens."

While the soldiers protested that it was not their fault, that the powder in their weapons was bad, Aguirre stormed off to make a new list: these men, the sick and the unwilling, would die. When he was finished, some fifty names were on the list, fully a third of his force. But when he showed the list to his top lieutenants, they blanched. It was an unwise move, they argued. Not only was it possible that they would wind up killing some men who only wished to do his service, but on the off chance that they did not emerge from the coming battle victorious they also

would have to answer for such a large and premeditated crime. This must have been a terrible blow to Aguirre; his men had already committed every species of crime imaginable—adding this would not have made any difference to any royal force. They all knew that. Of course, the men were as much as admitting that the possibility of defeat was very real indeed. Worst of all, Aguirre had a plan that required the complicity of his men, and they would not follow the order. Things were breaking down.

Aguirre retired to be alone. He sat and ruminated, worked himself into a fresh fury, and then, slowly, managed to suppress the rage. His mood grew forlorn; he knew that if he carried on, his men would continue to desert and all would be lost. He walked back out to his men and addressed them again, this time holding a dagger to his own chest.

> Cut my heart out with this dagger—all my life I have never hurt one of the Marañones and I have treated all like my own person. I assure you that I shall always do what any one of you may ask of me, irrespective of whether we win or lose. If I have caused some deaths in the past, I want you to understand that I have done so in order to protect your lives and have acted for the benefit of all. I say this today, for I have sworn not to offend even the lowest in rank among you. For my survival is a guarantee for a survival of all of you.

The men simply stared at him. He stared back, speechless for a rare moment, before turning on his heels, muttering, "I shall die in that glorious land [Peru] and there my bones shall enjoy the earth and rest, in the land where I have toiled and suffered so much."[3]

He knew it was coming to an end, that his men would not be able to withstand the temptation of pardon. Southey reflected, "All dreams of conquest were now over with Aguirre; no adventurer had joined his standard, his veteran ruffians had been stopped in their progress by a handful of half-armed men, and to proceed to Peru was manifestly impracticable."[4] So he landed on a bold plan; he would reverse himself and march his army back to the coast in the hopes of fitting out some vessels and changing his route. None could desert at sea. Aguirre, the Wrath of God, would not give it all up so easily.

All the while, his men were feeling the pinch of a self-perpetuating cycle: Aguirre would not allow anyone out of the encampment for fear of desertion. But because he allowed no one out to search for food, provisions

were dwindling, thus increasing the desire of so many to defect once and for all and be free of what was shaping up to be a hopeless enterprise. The men ate the remaining horses and dogs. It was impossible to keep a watch over everyone at every minute, of course, and in ones and twos, soldiers deserted to the king's side, all the while encouraged by Bravo and a handful of his men, who kept up a continual exhortation to come over without consequence. Among the defectors were Antonio de Mercado and Custodio Hernández, whose written report about the whole affair would soon follow.

While Bravo shouted to the Marañones to defect, one of them, a mestizo named Juan de Lescano, took aim and shot Bravo's horse out from under him. Both tumbled and the horse died. The Marañones thought that Bravo died, too, so they raised a great cheer. But he got up and, with barely a limp, made his way back to the royalist camp; it was another blow to morale.

It was Monday morning, October 27, 1561. Though Aguirre could not murder those he believed to be disloyal, he did disarm them. In another sign of his slipping control, the men argued loudly, saying that having them march without arms was as good as offering them for slaughter. They argued with little concern for retribution. Aguirre faced them, stifling his rage, massed as they were in a semicircle against him, their anger just on the point of full-blown mutiny. He choked down his pride and begged their pardon, suggesting to them that this was his only error of the entire expedition and that he would be happy to rearm them. Several of the more emboldened soldiers refused their arms, expressing such deep offense that they wished to go no farther. Aguirre had to beg them to take their arms and resume the march. He thrust the weapons at the men, but the offended soldiers let them fall to the ground. A general feeling of impending revolt continued, even as the Marañones followed orders and headed for the coast; when Aguirre wished to kill one of his captains, Juan Gerónimo de Espindola, no one would carry out the order.

Aguirre was justified in his suspicions of Espindola, for he had already confided to a few of the Marañones that he would await the next skirmish and then take advantage of the confusion to defect to the king's side. While he and some fifteen harquebusiers rushed to a ravine to secure some Indians there from advancing royal forces, Espindola rode with all haste toward to royals, shouting the signal for desertion: "Long live the king, caballeros! Long live the king!" He turned to the Marañones and shouted, "To the king's side, caballeros, to the king's side!" The rest of

the Marañones in his party followed suit, and soon another fifteen men had deserted to the king's side, where the royals welcomed them and gave pardon. As Aguirre watched helplessly, another party of Marañones did the same thing, shouting, "Long live the king, to whose service we come." The balance shifted and then shifted again until Aguirre was left with only a handful of his very closest comrades. He sighed to whomever would listen, "If it is my fate to die ruined in Venezuela, then I believe in neither the word of God, nor in the sect of Mahomet, nor in Luther, nor in the pagan world: I believe that there is nothing for man except birth and death."

The exodus was not lost on those Marañones still remaining within the walls of their fort. They watched the proceedings as well and no doubt envisioned their own escape before the royal party descended and finished them off.

Even Juan de Aguirre, one of Lope de Aguirre's most trusted and blood-covered henchmen, deserted as well, taking with him a large party of men. But he did so only after first trying to find his mentor in madness and kill him, too, in hopes of winning favor with the royal forces. But not finding him quickly enough, he rushed out before it was too late. While Anton Llamoso, the Portuguese who had displayed his loyalty by sucking out the brains of Martín Pérez, busied himself fixing an old gate at the edge of town, the entire body of remaining Marañones fled past him, decamping to the king's side. But Llamoso stayed. As Captain García de Paredes rushed to town to finish off the Tyrant, only four of the original party remained: Lope de Aguirre; his daughter, Elvira; her duenna, Juana de Torralva; and Llamoso.[5] The royals captured Figueroa, the murderer of the friars on Margarita, as he tried to flee the approaching army. He was later quartered and his remains exhibited at the town crossroads.

There could be no more delusion; it was over. Only a cruel death remained. With weight and sadness and disgust, Aguirre turned to his last remaining friend and asked why he had not fled as well. "We have been friends in life. And so we shall in death," Llamoso replied.

"How does it seem to you, my son?" Aguirre asked.

"I think I am going to die with you. But I will stay until we are cut to pieces."

Simón wrote, "Aguirre made no reply; he was crestfallen and lost." The chroniclers dutifully report what he did next as indicative of his cruelty; Simón wrote that he went to his daughter "to crown all his cruel acts with this most bloody and unnatural one."

"My daughter, my love. I thought I should see you married and a great lady," he is supposed to have said. "But my sins and my great pride have willed it otherwise. Commend yourself to God, my daughter, and make your peace with him. . . . For I am about to kill you that you may not be pointed at with scorn, nor be in the power of anyone who may call you the daughter of a Traitor. For it is not right that you should remain in this world for some villain to enjoy your beauty and your loveliness." He approached Elvira with a loaded harquebus and thrust a crucifix into her hands. "My love, you will not become a mere mattress for the unworthy."[6] She begged for her life, pleading, "My father, please do not kill me. Satan is misleading you; the devil is seducing you, father." He raised the weapon and whispered, "Die—because I must die."

Elvira tried another tack; she fell to her knees and begged, "I shall become a nun, where neither sky nor moon shall ever see me. I shall pray to God for you and for me." Aguirre moved closer to his daughter.

Juana de Torralva, horrified, tried valiantly to save her mistress by smacking the harquebus out of the weakened hands of the disheartened Aguirre. She succeeded, but she could not prevent him from stabbing Elvira to death. All the while, he sobbed, "My daughter, my daughter." She replied, "It is all over, my father," and died. It was an act that he had probably rehearsed many times when it had become clear that he could not succeed.

The witnesses, the chroniclers, later historians—all viewed Aguirre's murder of his own flesh and blood with understandable horror. But knowing what we do about Aguirre and his unending devotion to Elvira, the act can be seen paradoxically as perhaps the most loving one he committed in his entire life. He knew what awaited her; as the child of the most infamous traitor in the New World, her life would not be spared the misery of her patrimony. The punishment for traitors was whole, and it extended not just to their lives but also to the property they left behind and all the ancestors to come after. Elvira would have had nothing, and she could not have expected mercy or charity. She may not even have made it out of that camp without being raped or murdered—or both.

His dead daughter on the floor of the hut beside him, her duenna sobbing in the corner nearby, Aguirre threw down his arms and laid himself on a bed. It was a mere moment before the king's forces swarmed outside. García de Paredes entered the fort, accompanied by soldiers Ledesma, Galinda, and Guerrero. The first in the hut was Ledesma; when García de Paredes entered, Ledesma pointed his sword at Aguirre and proclaimed, "Here have I Aguirre, my prisoner."

Aguirre, passion lost but wits intact, slapped the sword from Ledesma's hand and hissed, "I do not give myself up to such a villain as you." He turned to García de Paredes and addressed him: "Señor maestro del campo, I beg that you, who are a caballero, will respect my rank and listen, for I have many important things to say—for the good of the king's service," he managed, trying his best at a half-hearted bow. García de Paredes looked to Elvira and said, "You evil man! You have killed that innocent girl."[7]

"I have never done a better deed in my whole life," Aguirre replied, and he asked for the customary three days allowed for a hearing. García de Paredes agreed. However, a throng of ex-Marañones now scuffling for a good look convinced García de Paredes that the best thing to do would be to cut off his head that instant—they had waited so long for this very moment, after all. "Kill him! Kill him," the others shouted, this band of misfits and rebels who, only days, even hours, earlier, had willfully taken Aguirre's side in his doomed expedition. The reason for their reversal was obvious: they feared that he would tell of all the cruelties they took part in themselves, and the full extent of their crimes would so horrify the authorities that their promised pardons would disappear like wisps of smoke.

Aguirre's plea for more time should not be viewed as the last gasp of a desperate man searching for some way to escape the implacable noose. His request echoes what he had hoped to achieve in writing his letter to King Philip. As with the letter, he would not have tried to assert his innocence or explain away some grand misunderstanding. He had already freely admitted his sins and crimes; in the end, what Aguirre wanted more than anything was a final chance to explain himself, to appeal to reason and point out all that was wrong with the system of patronage and corruption that ruled the New World. But Aguirre was, finally, out of chances.

García de Paredes turned to Aguirre and told him to prepare for death. Aguirre raised himself to his full height and watched as two of his Marañones, Custodio Hernández and Cristóbal Galindo, eager for a good report to the king, raised their harquebusses and prepared to fire. Others stripped Aguirre's protective mail from his body. The first shot went off, only wounding Aguirre in his side. "That was badly done," he spat. But the second shot came right after, piercing his chest. "That has done the business," he gasped, and fell dead.[8]

The career of the New World's most infamous man had come to an end. But his legacy? That would endure—indeed, to the present day.

CHAPTER 16

Legacy

Custodio Hernández, who would subsequently write an account exculpating himself and inflating his role in Aguirre's surrender, rushed to the body of the Traitor and seized his head, slicing it off with his sword and raising it in the air for all to see. Because Aguirre's hair was so long, the head dragged along the ground as Hernández brought it out to present to Governor Collado.

Collado sought to wrest control from those who thought it appropriate to murder the Tyrant before he could give an account of his crimes and before the governor ordered it himself, as was protocol. He ordered Elvira buried in the church and her father's body quartered and thrown out in the road for all to witness.

Aguirre's head was taken to Tocuyo, where the townspeople placed it in an iron cage and put it on display, alongside the bodice and yellow silk mantle Elvira wore when her father stabbed her. The stab marks were plainly visible in the garments. Aguirre's head remained until weather, birds, and insects reduced it to a skull. It remained even until Simón wrote his account, forty-two years after the events. And for many years after, the citizens of Tocuyo celebrated the anniversary of the day Aguirre's head arrived.[1]

Many desired the Traitor's flags, but they went to Diego García de Paredes. When he sailed back to Spain, he placed the flags on his father's tomb as tribute. García de Paredes was subsequently awarded the governorship of Popayán for his role in defeating Aguirre, but when he reached the West Indies in 1563, hostile natives killed him off the coast of Venezuela.

The governor did assent to give some treasure to Gutierrez and Bravo for their work: each was to take one of Aguirre's hands back to their town as a grisly souvenir. Gutierrez received the left hand for Valencia, Bravo the right for Mérida; each was to be placed on the town's rollo. The hands were transported on the ends of lances held aloft, but neither made it to its designated destination. The soldiers from Valencia soon decided that they had no desire for the appendage, so they threw it to some hungry dogs that devoured it. As for the right hand, it putrefied so badly on the way to Mérida that when the soldiers passed the Mototan River, they threw it in because the smell was so terrible. Who knows for how long some remnant of bone remained, there in the muck of the black riverbed?

For his part, Governor Collado was soon hauled before a judge and charged with cowardice for his passive involvement in the whole affair. The judge sentenced Collado to death, but the sentence was later commuted to several years in prison.

As for the Marañones who defected to the king's side under the promise of pardon, they were fortunate that Collado was a man of his word. Each did indeed receive pardon for his crimes, and the governor treated them well. They dispersed throughout the Spanish Main, "sowing the seeds of mutinies and rebellions," Simón reported. Apparently, the rebellious blood stoked by Aguirre had boiled anew for many of them. News of their activities made its way to the king, who sent decrees back to the New World in 1562 ordering that all the ex-Marañones be arrested and sent back to Spain. The vast majority evaded arrest, but some were not so lucky. Pedro Sanchez Paniagua was taken prisoner in Mérida, where he was quartered. Anton Llamoso, Aguirre's friend to the end, suffered the same fate after Captain Ortún Velasco de Velázquez captured him in the city of Pamplona, a place, ironically, that Pedro de Ursúa founded before his fateful Amazon adventure. Llamoso's head was displayed in the main square. Francisco de Carrion, Roberto de Susaya, Diego Tirado, García de Chaves, and Diego Sanchez de Balboa were all captured in Santa Fe as they attempted to flee to Peru. Each was killed.

Vásquez wrote, "Once the destruction caused by this cruel and evil tyrant was over, the Governor and Captain General and other captains withdrew to Tocuyo where they were residing; and so it was that with the death of that evil man, the land became calm; and the tyrants who had come with him went off to seek their fortune . . . and there was peace."

Well, that was not entirely accurate. In fact, Aguirre and his men haunted northern Venezuela—principally Margarita Island—for centuries.

❁

Cumaná, Venezuela (Maracapana in Aguirre's time) today functions as the continental gateway to Margarita Island by ferry. Founded by Gonzalo de Ocampo in 1521 where the Manzanares River meets the Caribbean, it is widely considered South America's first European settlement still in existence. Some date its settlement even earlier, to the establishment of a monastery by Dominican friars in 1513. Natives destroyed the town in 1519, but it was resettled in 1521 as an important slave and pearl center.

Catastrophic earthquakes visit the city every hundred years or so, destroying much of the town. During one such quake, in December 1797, a full 80 percent of Cumaná was leveled. There was some warning, however: a slight tremor in the ground and a strong smell of sulphur preceded the quake by half an hour, allowing many residents to flee from their homes and into the open streets.

The 1797 earthquake produced something even more extraordinary than the usual destruction. It "was attended . . . by a vertical motion, or raising up of the ground. . . . Flames issued from the earth on the banks of the Manzanares, near the hospitio of the Capuchins, and in the Gulf of Cariaco, near Mariguitar," wrote Josiah Conder in *The Modern Traveler* in 1830.[2] These fiery exhalations, not uncommon in Cari and Guanipa in the mesas and flatlands in and around Cumaná, also occur in the Bordones Valley of the mountains near Cumanacoa. But in a testament to Aguirre's enduring legacy, locals were still ascribing these natural phenomena to the Tyrant three centuries after his time there. The German explorer and scientist Alexander von Humboldt, who traveled extensively in Latin America at the turn of the nineteenth century, reported,

> In these savannas, flakes of fire rise to a considerable height; they are seen for hours together in the driest places; and it is asserted, that, on examining the ground which furnishes the inflammable matter, no crevice is to be found. This fire . . . does not burn the grass; because, no doubt, the column of gas which develops itself, is mixed with [nitrogen] and carbonic acid, and does not burn at its basis. The people [on Margarita Island] call these reddish flames by the singular name of the soul of the tyrant, imag-

> ining that the spectre of Lope de Aguirre, harassed by remorse, wanders over these countries sullied by his crimes.

"When the people of Cumana, and the island of Margarita, pronounce the words 'El Tirana,'" he added, "it is always to denote the infamous Lope de Aguirre."[3]

A half century after Humboldt's report, the exiled South American writer and explorer Ramón Páez wrote of the Llaneros (cowboys) of Venezuela,

> in spite of their bravery and sangfroid in other respects, they entertain great fear of *espantos* or ghosts and apparitions. One of the most popular hallucinations of this kind is *la bola de fuego*, or "light of Aguirre the Tyrant," as the natives usually style it—a sort of *ignis fatuus*, arising from the decomposition of organic substances at the bottom of certain marshes. Superstitious imaginations, unacquainted with this phenomenon, readily transform these gaseous exhalations into the soul of the famous Lope de Aguirre . . . for which impardonable atrocities it is believed his accursed soul was left to wander over those countries which he sullied with his crimes.[4]

In 1912, historian John Augustine Zahm commented, "When at night the jack-o'-lanterns dance over the marshy plains, the solitary wanderer crosses himself and whispers, 'The soul of the Tyrant Aguirre.'"[5]

The belief held sway well into the twentieth century, evidenced by this observation from 1920: "Lope de Aguirre, whose fantastic and bloodthirsty insanity caused half the continent to shudder at his name . . . is still remembered in Venezuelan folk-lore, where the phosphorescence of the swamp is called fuego de Aguirre in the belief that under such form the tortured soul of the tyrant wanders abroad."[6]

José Joaquin Salazar Franco offers a slightly expanded version of this same myth, this one specific to the inhabitants of the island where Aguirre's infamy has lived the longest. Still not finished paying penance for his crimes, the Tirano Aguirre haunts the night on horseback, sometimes causing a din by dragging chains and accompanied by the howls of his victims. One can see him in several forms, but none dares look directly at him for fear he will attach himself to the observer. He can appear "as a ball of fire across the sky . . . or on the sea surface hitting the woodwork of the boats."[7]

Some Amazonian landmarks still bear Aguirre's name to this day. The Huallaga River leaves the cloud forest of the Peruvian Andes and descends to the Amazonian plain past the village of Chasuta, in eastern San Martin state, near the Amazonian state of Loreto, downstream from Moyobamba and the place where Ursúa began his expedition. Here is where Ursúa set up camp after navigating forty-two difficult rapids. The narrow pass here is called the Pongo de Aguirre, and hovering over the last of these rapids is a cliff known as El Salto de Aguirre (the Leap of Aguirre). Local native legend has it that a conquistador named Lope de Aguirre killed a sacred condor here; as retribution, any traveler who passes through the Pongo de Aguirre takes his life in his own hands.[8]

In the nineteenth century, Alexander von Humboldt recorded that the natives of Barquisimeto "believe that the soul of the traitor wanders in the savannas, like a flame that flies the approach of men."[9] Even today, according to historian Carlos Stohr, the residents of Barquisimeto believe that some incarnation of Aguirre still haunts the night. The city itself, now a major metropolis and Venezuela's fourth largest in population, is not in the same location it was when Aguirre was murdered there, and a trip to Barquisimeto today yields no palpable Aguirre reminders or artifacts. Barquisimeto has not officially forgotten its role in the Aguirre saga, however. In 1995, the Museo de Barquisimeto presented an exhibit detailing Aguirre's arrival in the city and his defeat at the hands of the royalist forces. The museum also displayed the wooden cross purportedly placed on Elvira's grave. By killing Elvira, Aguirre assured that his fears for his daughter would not come to pass. Indeed, Elvira was universally viewed with sympathy, and she received a respectful burial in Barquisimeto.

But as a general rule, finding physical reminders of Aguirre's march through the mainland of northern Venezuela is virtually impossible today. The towns that played instrumental roles in the final months of Aguirre's life (Barquisimeto, Valencia, Mérida, Tocuyo, Borburata) are, not surprisingly, very different places in modern times than they were 450 years ago.

Valencia is today a city of one and a half million and growing. But it was a sleepy village, barely five years old, when its residents fled at Aguirre's approach. When he left, virtually nothing remained, and the city's modern growth hides any palpable history before the eighteenth century. Mérida and Tocuyo sent armies to defeat Aguirre but were fortunate to avoid his

visit. And the city that calls itself Borburata today bears no resemblance to Nuestra Señora de la Concepcíon de Borburata, a village that paid a high price for his having been there but was merely his landing point on the continent.

Attempts to connect to Aguirre in modern times must necessarily focus on Margarita Island. There is no better testament to the grisly legacy of Aguirre on Margarita Island today than in the small east coast town of Puerto Fermín, which is the Spanish name that subsumed the town's original name, Paraguachí. Puerto Fermín today still bears the unofficial name El Tirano (the Tyrant). A trip along the main north-south artery between Porlamar and Pampatar in the south and Playa El Agua in the north, Margarita's most popular beach, gives a traveler opportunities to turn off at any of several signs trumpeting El Tirano and Playa El Tirano. It is no touristy gimmick, but rather a nod to the everyday use of the name of the man who destroyed the area four and a half centuries earlier.

Margarita Island resident, historian, radio show host, and cultural ambassador Pedro Bellorin laments the fact that most Venezuelans have little idea who Aguirre was, but this, of course, is true of many people in many places concerning the historical figures who gave their names to local towns and cities and shaped the surrounding lands. Despite this general lack of knowledge about who exactly Aguirre was, a widespread cultural shortcut exists regarding Aguirre's name and the use of it.

Dr. Carolina Acosta-Alzuru, professor of Media Studies at the University of Georgia and a native Venezuelan, explains, "In Venezuela, most people know the expression 'el tirano Aguirre,' but many don't know his name was Lope de Aguirre. In a way, his historical presence has been reduced/simplified to that phrase 'el tirano Aguirre.' And, of course, the existence of Playa El Tirano in Margarita, a beautiful beach that many visit every year, reinforces that simplification." "Lope de Aguirre elicits the word 'Tyrant' immediately," she continues. "In Venezuela, when we want to say that someone is really bad we say 'es como el tirano Aguirre.'"[10] Indeed, an utterance of "el tirano" is understood throughout Venezuela to be a shorthand reference to Aguirre. As for the beach, Playa El Tirano is actually just a bit south of his actual landing spot at Puerto Abajo.

A more palpable Aguirre reminder is easily visited in the capital of Margarita Island, La Asunción, where the world's only statue of Aguirre stands in the courtyard of the Casa de la Cultura. Fronting the pleasant, tree-lined Plaza Bolívar and opposite the whitewashed Cathedral of Our Lady of La Asunción, the Casa de la Cultura's doors open directly onto a

small historical display, several busts of prominent citizens, and Aguirre's statue, framed by vegetation.

The statue was the brainchild of two men: Marcos Evangelista Pérez Jiménez, president of Venezuela from 1952 to 1958, and Heraclio Narvaéz Alfonzo, governor of Margarita from 1949 to 1958. They proposed the statue not quite as a tribute to Aguirre but because they rightly believed Aguirre was an important historical figure and locals did not know enough about him. Made in Genoa, Italy, in 1956, the statue cost 13,700 Bolivares (roughly four thousand dollars at the time), and was intended for a scenic spot adjacent to Playa El Tirano, next to where a large cross stands today, often bedecked with ungainly black vultures. In 1956, the water reached much farther inland than it does today, and rough seas victimized the spot chosen for the statue. The townspeople argued that the tempestuous nature of the seas signified the bad spiritual nature of the area and successfully fought Aguirre's placement there.[11] Subsequently, locals built a rock wall and wave break, which reclaimed land now housing a restaurant and decrepit hotel.

Needing to find a different home for their statue, Jiménez and Alfonzo had it placed in the Nueva Cadiz museum in La Asunción, next to today's Casa de la Cultura on the Plaza Bolívar. In 1994, Pedro Bellorin, then a city councilman and dedicated to preserving the island's history, got permission from the governor to move the statue back to Puerto Fermín. But political forces led to the statue being moved back to La Asunción just four years later and placed in front of the Palacio Municipal, just down the street from its old home in the Nueva Cadiz museum. There, out in the open, the statue became the victim of vandals who continually knocked it over, breaking the sword and tearing away a piece of protective armor from just above the left knee—both of these appendages remain missing to this day. In 2006, the statute was moved once again to Puerto Fermín, but old unease apparently remained; there was little love for the statue, and local tradition had it that anyone strong enough to haul it away was welcome to take it.[12] But the historically minded prevailed, and the statue was taken back to La Asunción, to the Casa de la Cultura, where it remains today.

In all respects, it is a fine statue: bronzed and imposing, Aguirre stares out from underneath a tufted helmet. Apart from the two missing pieces, the figure is arrayed from tip to toe in full armor. And while only the sword's hilt remains in the right hand, a scroll—perhaps his letter to King Philip—remains in his left, and his gaze is as steely as ever.

After Aguirre's death, there was still some official business to dispense with. First, there was a public reading of the punishment, even after Aguirre had been killed and torn to pieces. The punishment was complete and total, as read by the Royal Audiencia's judge, Licenciado Bernáldez, in Tocuyo on December 17, 1561:

> I declare the tyrant Lope de Aguirre guilty of the crime of lese majesty against His Royal Majesty King Philip Our Lord, and of having committed treason against him on many occasions; in consequence of which I condemn his reputation and the memory of his name to be taken for those of a tyrant and traitor against his king and natural lord, from the time he first planned his tyrannical treason forward; and I declare him to have been justly beheaded, drawn, and quartered. I further declare that all his property will henceforth belong to the chamber and treasury of His Majesty; and I order that any houses belonging to the said Lope de Aguirre be razed to the ground so that neither they nor their memory will remain, and the land on which they stand ploughed and covered over with salt, and this sentence is to be proclaimed to the public. I further declare that any sons left by the said Aguirre, either legitimate, bastard, or adopted, are to be considered the children of a tyrannical traitor, forever infamous, unworthy, and unfit to be knighted, hold public office, or be given any other position forbidden in such cases under that law; nor shall they receive any inheritance or legacy from any person, relative or stranger alike. And I order this sentence against his memory and property of the accused to be executed without recourse to appeal by any person whatsoever.

In addition, the king eventually "forbade that his name be mentioned under threat of the most severe penalties, and he ordered that his writing be destroyed so that posterity would know nothing of them."[13]

The intent was obvious: consign Aguirre to oblivion. Of course, the explosive nature of what he had undertaken would make that a nearly impossible task. Additionally—as is often the case—in their zeal to make him the ultimate example, the authorities assured his name would linger forever. The quartering of the body and the severing of the head and hands to auction off as trophies "as if they were relics of some saint" was a mistake, at least in the view of Vásquez, who wrote that "it would have

been better to have thrown him to the dogs, that they might have eaten him whole, and thus the memory of his evil fame might have perished." Indeed, there are many reasons why people are still writing books about that sixteenth-century rebel today, in the twenty-first century.

The most obvious reason, of course, is because of the extraordinary nature of the story; the Ursúa expedition, with Aguirre as protagonist, has proven an irresistible tale for Latin American historians, cultural critics, sociologists, and novelists. In the first place, the story offers all the requisite drama of a sweeping novel: salaciousness, tyranny, rebellion, betrayal. And it comes neatly in a classic three-act structure: the pre-expedition deceit, the madness and desperation of the jungle, and the increasing despotism before the inevitable end. But Aguirre's story is more than just a great *story*. It raises questions and concerns that go to the very heart of Latin American identity.

Another reason Aguirre's story has not failed to fascinate is the central question of how such a base man could wield such influence, in the manner of cult leaders all over the world and all through time. Diego de Aguilar y de Córdoba, the sixteenth-century Spanish poet, wrote of Aguirre, "He was of a deceitful disposition and unpredictable in his actions. He loved to associate with lewd, evil, and depraved persons, and however despicable a man was, a thief, vile, cruel, the more he regarded him as his friend. Aguirre was cunning, fickle, and treacherous. He never kept a promise. He was a lecher, a glutton, and a drunkard. He never spoke well of anybody, not even his own friends."[14] An anonymous chronicler offered, "He was the worst man to exist since Judas since he was a traitor to God, to the king, and to his friends."[15]

Echoing Diego de Aguilar, Vásquez wrote after some reflection,

> Nature made him an enemy of all good and decent men; he deprecated all charitable works and any effort inspired by compassion. He was the friend and companion of base and odious men and chose the vilest men and thieves as his companions. He was crafty, fickle and treacherous, a born liar. He seldom spoke the truth and only occasionally and as by accident did he control his language. He was vicious, lecherous, a glutton, and on occasion he drank too much. He was a bad Christian, possibly even a Lutheran or worse, for he did and said things we have described before: killing friars, women and innocent people without giving them a chance to confess their sins, though they asked for

> this and it could have been arranged. One of his regular vices was to commend his soul and person to the devil, detailing in his cursing his head, legs, arms and even all he possessed. He seldom spoke without blaspheming God and his saints. He never spoke well of a person, not even of his friends, and he slandered everybody. To conclude—there was not a single vice that could not be found in this person.

These characterizations very well may contain some truth, but it does force one back to the question: why would so many so willingly follow a man who was evil incarnate in such a terribly inhospitable place? Why, given several opportunities on the mainland, did one of his men not kill him and end his reign of terror?

For the answer, we must go to the earliest writings about Aguirre; these accounts are universal in their condemnation of the man and reduce him to a static, evil person. Of course, the earliest accounts were all written by ex-Marañones who had a supreme interest in exculpating themselves in what amounted to a petition to the king. It is worthwhile here to turn briefly to who exactly these early chroniclers were.

Four contemporaneous accounts were written by ex-Marañones: those of Gonzalo de Zúñiga, Francisco Vásquez (with Pedrarias de Almesto), Pedro de Monguía, and Custodio Hernández. The most exhaustive account comes from Vásquez, in "A Narrative of All That Happened in the Expedition to Amagua and Dorado." It was his account, including firsthand observations from Pedrarias de Almesto, that Simón relied upon; in fact, there are numerous long sections in Simón's account that are taken from Vásquez word for word and without credit.

After these come near contemporaneous accounts, written after the expedition was completed but including accounts of eyewitnesses or those who knew the story intimately. First was Antonio Vázquez de Espinosa's *Compendio y descripción de las Indias occidentals*, a history of the West Indies that included a previously unpublished firsthand account from a Captain Altamirano, an expedition participant who escaped. In all, there are at least ten accounts written by participants in the expedition, though several of them were anonymous and most confine themselves to specific episodes: the events at Margarita Island or Barquisimeto, for example.

Reginaldo de Lizárraga, born a Biscayan like Aguirre, wrote *Descripción del Perú, Tucumán, Río de la Plata, y Chile* (Brief Description of All the Lands of Peru, Tucuman, Río de la Plata and Chile) in 1545, which included

an account of the Aguirre saga. Another secondary source was Toribio de Ortiguera's *Jornada del río Marañón y relación verdadera de todo lo que sucedió en la jornada de Omagua y Dorado* (The Passage of the River Amazon, Together with Other Events in the Western Indies, Worthy of Relating), written at the end of the sixteenth century. Ortiguera was at Nombre de Dios in 1561 and sent forces to defeat Aguirre. He was not a firsthand witness to the expedition, but he used eyewitnesses as his sources and was generally careful not to stray from corroborated events. He wrote his account twenty-five years after Aguirre's death, motivated by a hope that people would not forget the extraordinary story; after all, there was a surfeit of people then writing accounts in the Indies and the entire affair might have just as easily slipped off into oblivion as simply another tragic event.

The third volume of Francisco Carillo's *Encyclopedia historíca de la literatura Peruana*, contains the chronicles of Zúñiga and Vásquez, assisted by Almesto. These, plus the accounts by Toribio de Ortiguera, Custodio Hernández, and Aguilar y de Córdoba; a metrical chronicle by Juan de Castellanos; the memoirs of Pedro Medrano, an expedition member; the unpublished manuscripts of a Padre Aguado; and several anonymous sources (*crónica anónima*) constituted the material used by Fray Pedro Simón, who began his exhaustive work in 1623 and published it in 1626 in Madrid in the *Noticias históricas de las conquistas de tierra ferme* (Sixth Historical Notice of the Conquest of Tierra Firme). Another anonymous chronicle was later discovered in the Academia de la Historia in Madrid. Much of the surviving information about Aguirre's exploits after he reached Venezuela comes from the account of Lucas Fernandez Piedrahita, a priest who died in Panama in 1688 and wrote of Aguirre's assault on the main in his *Historia de la Conquista y poblacion de Venezuela*. Most of the account borrows liberally from Simón and Castellanos.

Robert Southey originally wrote of the Aguirre affair (the first account in English) for a chapter in his history of Brazil, but it was omitted as beyond the scope of the book. He then published the account in the *Edinburgh Annual Register* of 1810. Simón's text was translated into English in 1861 by William Bollaert, with an introduction by Clements Markham, for the British Hakluyt Society, which publishes scholarly editions of primary travel and geographic texts.

From there on through the years, the truth of the expedition and its crazed but charismatic leader moldered in the dense mysteries of the jungles and coasts of the New World, left alone for subsequent generations to breathe life into it.

So there were four major firsthand chroniclers, all ex-Marañones seeking to clear their names, legitimately or not. Their accounts are invaluable for piecing together the extraordinary story of the Ursúa expedition. However, we can certainly see some bias or, at the least, exaggeration in each. Francisco Vásquez's account is a good one; he witnessed the events firsthand and he is a generally reliable narrator.[16] Of course, one needs to look closely at his recounting of the episode when Ursúa was killed and Aguirre and Guzmán led a council immediately after. It must be remembered that only three men defied the general fervor and declared that they would not seek to legitimize the assassination of Ursúa, the king's representative on the expedition. Those three were Francisco Vásquez, Juan de Cabañas, and Juan de Vargas Zapata. Vargas and de Cabañas were killed, leaving the author of the chronicle as the only man to have openly defied Aguirre. This, if accurate, is curious to say the least.

Though Almesto and Vásquez are paired as co-authors, the reality is that Almesto essentially took Vásquez's version and put his own name to it. Almesto did this after officials in Nueva Grenada assigned him the task of writing the official version of the expedition's events. With the record in his hands, Almesto certainly had an advantage in presenting himself as sympathetically as possible—something he took great pains to achieve.

Custodio Hernández wrote his account before standing trial before the *audiencia* in Santo Domingo.[17] His account of Aguirre's death gives another example of possible truth stretching. While the early chronicles are pretty consistent in how things ended, Hernández, writing in the third person, offers up a slightly different version, with himself in the spotlight:

> When Custodio Hernández saw that most of his friends and many others had already crossed into the royal camp, he mounted his horse and rode downhill toward the fort. He loaded his harquebus, entered the fort and asked for Aguirre, upon which the tyrant made his appearance. Hernández aimed his gun at him and said: "You are a prisoner of war; drop the harquebus you carry in your hands!" The Tyrant said, "So, I am a prisoner" and Hernández took the prisoner's sword and dagger. There arrived Juan Guerrero and he and Hernández entered the daughter's chamber where they seized Aguirre's additional

> weapons, including his coat of mail, a corslet and a helmet. They dressed Aguirre in a brown coat. Guerrero then left. Custodio Hernández remained alone with the prisoner and asked him why he had slain his own daughter. Aguirre replied because I did not wish her to be raped by the soldiers.[18]

A second account more or less confirms this version of events. But it is an anonymous account, and it is quite probable that the author—or at least the primary source—was Hernández himself: "The first to arrive on the scene was Custodio Hernández, who said, 'Surrender and drop your arms!' He and another man then disarmed him. Ledesma arrived and said, 'Is this Lope de Aguirre? I cannot wait to cut him down!' whereupon Aguirre said: 'I solemnly declare before God that if I had taken you and ten others, I would have made minced meat of you!' Hearing this, Ledesma wanted to run him through, but Custodio Hernández would not allow this, claiming that Aguirre was his prisoner."[19]

Consider the heroic nature of Gonzalo Zúñiga's account of the siege of Margarita. He also writes of himself in the third person: "During the entire time Aguirre and his men spent on the island [Margarita], Zúñiga hid in the mountains, eating plants and at great danger to his life, but enduring all this, in order not to be a traitor to His Majesty whom he had always totally served." He later includes himself in a group of deserters who wished to flee earlier but could not: "Twenty five fled from him as he departed from that island, and they came to justice as servants of Your Majesty who proved to have come through their own resolve and not having been able to separate and flee from the cruel tyrant before, because of coming through the land of infidels."[20]

Pedro de Monguía had perhaps the easiest time exculpating himself; after all, he had given up himself and his men to Fray Montesinos and then led the provincial on the path that eventually spelled Aguirre's end. On the other hand, he had signed his name to the *informacíon* that bestowed princehood on don Fernando de Guzmán. Montesinos signed Monguía's *relación*, however, giving it more weight.[21] Monguía claimed he deserted "so that the most suitable means for the destruction of the tyrant could be arranged and at least so that he could not carry out the evil and diabolical intent that he purposed."[22]

The chroniclers, it seems, were not completely successful in exculpating themselves, however. The details are sketchy for most of them, but what is known is the following: Zúñiga was imprisoned in Santo Domingo.

Authorities eventually sent him to Spain, and his punishment was banishment from the New World. Hernández was also captured and sent to Santo Domingo, but what happened after is lost to history. Vásquez appears to have fared better. He surfaced in Tocuyo in 1562 to testify at the trial of Pedro de Galeas.[23] Nothing is known of Monguía after his account was published.

What is clear is that the chroniclers had a definite and immediate agenda. Telling the story of a rebellion in which they had taken part, they had to convince their readership—primarily, royal emissaries who could have them killed—that they were forced to participate against their will. It is not surprising, then, that all the early chroniclers reposition themselves in the narrative and take great pains to portray Aguirre as completely and unfailingly evil, malicious, and without a shred of decency. Latin American historian Beatriz Pastor Bodmer points out that a ballad in Zúñiga's account includes six qualifying words used to define Aguirre; as the ballad progresses, the adjectives become increasingly disapproving: "Biscayan, treacherous, wicked, killer, dog-rabid, diabolical."[24]

There is little doubt that Aguirre was touched with megalomania; likewise, there is little doubt that his brief reign was a bloody one (during a time when most expeditions and New World enterprises were bloody), but the portrait of a one-dimensional madman does not account for how Aguirre managed to lead so many men for almost half a year, the inevitable breakdown coming only when his followers saw their defeat and defected, hoping to save themselves with pleas for mercy.

Before the inevitable end, there were some natural reasons for the Marañones to attach themselves to Aguirre. Because Peru, Venezuela, and New Granada were adjunct states run by a monarch an ocean away and because the Marañones were even further removed from legitimate rule, deep in the jungle, they naturally coalesced into a group around the strongman among them, the man who had the most experience, or material wealth, or ingenuity, mimicking the system they had come to know back in Europe. In "The Roots of Caudillismo," François Chevalier explains, "Ties of blood and personal bonds are the only ones which have a real importance in societies where written contracts, if they exist at all, play a limited role."[25]

The end showed quite clearly the disconnect between Aguirre and his Marañones; the former was a literal revolutionary, intent on overthrowing a system he viewed as hopelessly corrupt and at odds with his idealized version of a glorious Spain. His followers, on the other hand, were primarily concerned with the promised rewards of power and treasure. It is this

disconnect that leads many modern writers to view Aguirre in a much more favorable light. By contrast, the view of an idealized Spanish past versus an increasingly decadent Spanish present was a theme for Spanish writers and thinkers for centuries, beginning with the great Cervantes, barely a teenager when Aguirre died.

❁

After more than two and half centuries of being called tyrant, traitor, evil malcontent, and worse, Aguirre began an extraordinary reincarnation as the Americas' first revolutionary. This was no small thing as the march toward indigenous independence began in earnest with the military successes of the great liberator, Simón Bolívar, in the first two decades of the 1800s. After all, Aguirre had not only risen up against the Spanish Crown (more than one New World malcontent did that), but he had actually denaturalized himself. His famous letter to King Philip took his revolutionary zeal to a new level. Bolívar, centuries later, could certainly find sympathy and league with the sentiment. Even their routes of conquest and revolution intersect; Bolívar came through the Margarita port of Juangriego on May 3, 1816, and was later proclaimed the Gobernante Supremo de Venezuela in the town of Santa Ana. It was from there that Bolívar engaged in his almost decade-long campaign to liberate Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru.

While his ragged army made its overland trek through the most miserable conditions, Bolívar, like Aguirre before him, seemed to have no squeamishness about defying God if God showed himself, through environmental factors, to be in opposition to his cause. "If nature opposes us, we will fight against it and make it obey us . . . Not even God will take victory away from me," Bolívar once declared.[26]

Of course, while Aguirre's overland attempt through the Isthmus of Panama and on into Peru was doomed even before it began, Bolívar took a similar route and succeeded. Had he failed, he, too, might have been written off as insane in unsympathetic history texts as well, an idealist with too much revolutionary zeal, no matter the legitimacy of his desires. But Bolívar succeeded where Aguirre failed, and thus he is hailed all over the continent as a military genius and the father of independence, the Great Liberator, the perfected and idealized version of and precursor to Che Guevara and other Latin American icons.

But Bolívar's path to liberation included the murdered bodies of many, many more Spaniards than Aguirre's slash and burn. In one famous

instance, Bolívar ordered the execution of more than eight hundred imprisoned Spanish soldiers in one day. Because the ends were so very different, Aguirre's megalomania becomes Bolívar's righteous single-mindedness.

Something of a full circle occurs here; the founding site of our present story, of Aguirre's famous public indignity from which sprouted the many seeds of his deep discontent, Potosí, is the same place that saw Bolívar ride in, triumphant, three centuries later.

❁

Not surprisingly, Aguirre's position among modern Basques differs widely from his characterization at the hands of the Spanish. Aguirre, of course, was a Basque himself, and he has enjoyed a much more secure legacy in Basque mythology.[27] Many Basque men labored in the New World in the service of Spain, but Basques, then as now, often kept their own language and customs, eager to guard against subsumption by the Spanish. Considering the separatist movements that dominate and define Basque relations with greater Spain to this day, the Basques often view Aguirre as one in a line of separatists seeking to force a split with a Spanish authority that has always failed to recognize their sovereignty. There is evidence for Aguirre being celebrated as a favorite son in the town of Oñate as recently as the middle of the twentieth century. Basque writers José de Arteche (1906–1971), Elías de Amézaga (1921–2008), and Ignacio Amestoy (1947–) explicitly rescue Aguirre from the written histories that consigned him to ignominy.[28]

Segundo de Ispizúa's *Los vascos en América* (Basques in America, 1914) repositions Aguirre as a legitimate model for American independence. In this configuration, Aguirre becomes a worthy and sympathetic figure. Ispizúa's view mirrors Aguirre's: because the New World system was an affront to the medieval Spanish ideals of war and had been transformed instead into one of vice and patronage, Aguirre had to rebel against it. In so doing, he was a singularly important figure, the precursor to Bolívar. He and his Marañones would save Peru by wresting it from the hands of the corrupt and returning it to an idealized vision of the past.

Aguirre, like many Basques, looks backward to go forward, to a time when love of and success in making war defined the very nature of a Spaniard. In the end, the portrait of Aguirre is a conflicted and complicated one. But one way of looking at him is essentialized in this astute observation from Beatriz Pastor Bodmer: Aguirre is ultimately defined by "the impasses reached by the tragic consciousness of a man who identifies

totally with a mythical past and who is completely unable to come to terms with the present."[29]

It is not terribly surprising that the Basques would seek to rescue one of their own from the calumnies of historical accounts. What is fascinating is that Aguirre has enjoyed something of a resurrection in Latin America as well, the scene of all his crimes. For Latin Americans, Aguirre's thinking was not so much a nod to the past but a prediction of the continent's coming future. His revivification began in the nineteenth century and reached full flower by the twentieth. The reasons for Aguirre's transformation from monster to admirable rebel in this period are not very opaque. As independence movements swept the continent, Latin American citizens, now self-identified as Americans instead of Spanish subjects, looked for meaning in their new classification. Living in a world of political instability fraught with the sense of a centuries-old search for identity, twentieth-century Latin Americans saw Aguirre as the first to give raging voice to the issues afflicting them: What did it mean to live under the arbitrary rules of an absolute ruler? What did it mean to call oneself a Chilean, or Venezuelan, or Argentinean, rather than a Spaniard living outside of Spain? Aguirre, in his bombastic, inimitable way, had asked these very questions centuries earlier. Indeed, Bolívar's prescient pronouncement that the Americas were "ungovernable," doomed to become a collection of states led by an elite cluster of autocrats, finds some root (and begrudging admiration) in Aguirre, whose rebellion and usurpation predicts the future. Aguirre's disenchantment was, in some ways, the defining characteristic of Spanish America: the discovery and expansion of Spanish influence in the New World was primarily a byproduct of so many failed searches for new riches.

A dominating archetype in Latin America beginning in the nineteenth century was that of the *caudillo*, the quintessential (usually military) strongman with a populist, reformist bent, an "admired and fearless warrior who, while appearing to assume political control legitimately, soon claims it by any means necessary," modeled in the real world by men such as Miguel Hidalgo, Félix Calleja, Simón Bolívar, José de San Martín, Antonio López de Santa Anna, and Andrés Santa Cruz.[30] Twentieth-century models include Victoriano Huerta, Juan Perón, Augusto Pinochet, Alfredo Stroessner, Manuel Noriega—the list seems endless. Even now, the Latin strongman holds sway in many countries: Fidel Castro, of course, was one, as is Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. For many admirers, the saving and resurrection of Aguirre's reputation rests on his portrayal as a caudillo.[31] For a

quintet of Latin American novelists, discussed below, who retell Aguirre's story in a more favorable light, Aguirre packs the trinity of Latin American cultural archetypes: "the defiant *caudillo* or strongman, his acquisition of power, and the exercise of that personalist control in the face of opposition from both society and nature."[32] The twentieth-century Peruvian painter Gérman Suárez Vértiz executed the most famous portrait of Aguirre; it is a striking one, reflecting the prominent jaw, scowling visage, and beady, hawkish eyes, "boiling inside his skull, especially when he was angry" that all the chroniclers described. Despite its unflattering physical representation, the portrait is complimentary in at least one respect: it is titled *Lope de Aguirre: Fuerte caudillo de los Marañones* (Lope de Aguirre, strong leader of the Marañones).

Aguirre served as the inspiration for the dictatorial protagonist in the influential Spanish dramatist and novelist Ramón del Valle-Inclán's *Tirano Banderas*.[33] Published in 1926, the work was a major influence on the Latin American dictator novel, a genre that reached full flower in the 1960s and 1970s. Focusing on the intersection of power, politics, and personality, the dictator novel is "the most clearly indigenous thematic tradition in Latin American literature," according to noted literary critic Roberto González Echevarría.[34]

Echoing the complex attachment to the Latin idea of the caudillo, psychiatrists Juan Lastres and Carlos Seguín, commenting on the work of Basque academic Segundo de Ispizúa, nicely summed up Aguirre's complexity: "There are three kinds of Lope de Aguirre: the one from history, the one from tradition, and a third one who is neither from history or tradition—Aguirre the man."[35] Of course Aguirre was a man, a human being, but as often is the case with larger-than-life historical figures, his humanity gets forgotten, tossed aside for the larger actions that define him.

In the twentieth century, the Latin American Marxist left began to exalt Aguirre. The Venezuelan communist writer Miguel Otero Silva published *Lope de Aguirre: Príncipe de la libertad* in 1979.[36] In Otero Silva's novel, Bolívar looks to Aguirre as a precursor of American independence, trying to get Aguirre's letter to King Philip II published in the newspaper *El correo nacional*. Otero Silva also has Bolívar assert, "You were not as insane, Lope de Aguirre, as the critics judged." Another Venezuelan, Arturo Uslar Pietri, published his Aguirre novel, *El camino de El Dorado*, in 1947. Often considered Latin America's progenitor of magic realism, Pietri infuses his

Aguirre story with the lushness of the Amazonian landscape, something of little use or need to the chroniclers. Also published in 1947, in Venezuela, was Casto Fulgencio Lopez's *Lope de Aguirre, el peregrino: Primer caudillo de America*. The novel, though heavily embellished, situates Aguirre as delivering the first "cry of freedom" in the Americas.

These novelists see in Aguirre, in Bart Lewis's words, "a first Latin American citizen." They have Aguirre speak for himself, even explain himself, in a way that the chroniclers could not or would not. In each of their works, the novelists sought to balance the record. In doing so, they essentially cleared Aguirre of his sins. But their intent was not to change history; rather, they sought to change the way history treated Aguirre. They asserted that the chroniclers painted Aguirre incorrectly, and their novels allow not necessarily a correction but a balance to the history.[37] It has to be remembered that not only did the chroniclers record history, but they created it as well; for example, Vásquez's account, the most widely cited, is not an historial but rather an accusatory relacíon. The Argentinean Jorge Ernesto Funes exonerates Aguirre altogether in his 1984 novel *Una lanza por Lope de Aguirre* by having Aguirre engage directly with his chronicler (*cronista*). The two then rewrite the full and true story together, updating, contradicting, and mocking the Vásquez version. At one point, the outraged chronicler, upon watching Aguirre's last stand against the royals in Barquisimeto, mutters in disbelief, "This is the man that [Vásquez] dares call, in passing, this little strutting runt[!]"[38] Another Argentinean writer, Abel Posse, rewrote the Aguirre saga with a uniquely postmodern sensibility in *Daimón*, published in 1978. Posse has Aguirre shuttling through different eras in Latin American history, up to the present, partaking in and commenting on each and living eternally throughout them all—until a banal death comes at the end.

Even some modern Spaniards have softened their views toward the revolutionary. At the least, there is interest in revisiting the madman's legacy. For them, the Latin American novels discussed above almost serve as a new gospel, changing what everyone had previously assumed about Aguirre. Prominent twentieth-century Spanish writers who have used Aguirre as their subject include Ciro Bayo (1860–1939), Pío Baroja (1872–1956), Gonzalo Torrente Bellester (1910–1999), and Ramón Sender (1934–). In October 1961, on the four hundredth anniversary of Aguirre's execution, the Spanish intellectual and literary circle Academia Errante issued a series of papers favorable to Aguirre, beginning with the work of the Basque Segundo de Ispizúa.

Félix Álvarez Sáenz was born in Spain but moved to Peru in 1970, when he was twenty-five years old.[39] In 1987, his Aguirre novel *Crónica de blasfemos* was a finalist for the prestigious Rómulo Gallegos prize, which annually recognizes the best Spanish-language novel. In Álvarez Sáenz's novel the fictional chronicler Estebanillo becomes deferential and even subsumed by Aguirre, so that finally it is Aguirre who tells his own story, not those subservient to other interests.

There is even a children's book about Aguirre: *Los peregrinos del Amazonas*, by the Spaniard Alfredo Gómez Cerdá. Published in 1994, it tells the Aguirre story through the eyes of a young naïf named Manuel.

Today, even in Venezuela—site of his greatest infamy—Aguirre has been almost officially pardoned, even exalted. On the eve of the 450th anniversary of the events, the official website of the Venezuelan government's culture minister rewrote and salvaged Aguirre's place in Latin American history. He is written of as "honoring a warrior lineage that framed its history with the sword." The text goes on to describe his letter to King Philip II as "the day that finally" sees a "break with the king." It concludes, "Thanks to the prose of Miguel Otero Silva, Lope de Aguirre remains the soldier, the traitor, the pilgrim, father, lover, the dreamer, the convict, but especially the protagonist of a story that moves the reader to a time when America was still an idea unrealized."[40]

Estimates put the number of murders either ordered by or committed by Aguirre at more than seventy, including his own daughter. Add to this the hundreds of men and women who died during the expedition, including the hundreds of Indian slaves abandoned in the jungle, and the death toll rises much higher—and all this in a matter of months.

No doubt many of the Marañones who followed Aguirre were motivated by their lust for gold and power. No doubt others were simply too afraid to protest. But Aguirre's end came not at the hands of his own men, and it came only when all hope was literally lost.

Like most human beings, Lope de Aguirre defies easy characterization. He remains a unique figure on the landscape of early conquest in the Americas, upsetting an old order and presaging a new one. In some respects, he was a madman. And, yes, he was a wanderer, a pilgrim, a traitor, the Wrath of God. But he was also a caudillo, a revolutionary, and—for better or worse—a leader of men.

NOTES

PROLOGUE

1. The Indians working the silver mines at Potosí produced some forty-five thousand tons of pure silver through two centuries of extraction. They died by the thousands doing it. Many were poisoned while trampling silver ore powder mixed with mercury, which produced toxic vapors. Many were simply overworked. The thin air at more than twelve thousand feet elevation and exposure to the unrelenting elements—harsh sun by day and freezing nights—took their toll. Mercury mines at Huancavelica proved just as deadly.
2. "Soldier" (*soldado*) was the generic term later given to all transient New World Spaniards. Because the Peruvian conquest was accomplished by Spanish settlers, Spaniards ultimately came to call anyone a soldier who was not a landowner or tradesman. Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, 138. Men of this period would have called themselves *conquistador* (conqueror), *descrubridor* (discoverer), or *poblador* (settler).

   The unruly nature of many New World men and their penchant for massacring Indians and beheading Europeans led King Charles V to decree the New Laws. Royal Spanish interest in the treatment of indigenous people derived in large part from apprehension on the part of the king, who feared for his mortal soul. He was aware of the genocidal acts committed in the New World in his name. One of his own countrymen, the Spaniard Bartolomé de Las Casas, who became bishop of Chiapas in Mexico, was a vocal critic of Spanish treatment of natives. Las Casas's books railing against such brutalities were published in Spain and proved influential. Besides, Protestant critics could easily use this information as propaganda against the Catholics. These laws were designed to give Spain a tincture of respectability in the New World.

   The New Laws were openly despised by the *encomenderos* (see chap. 2, note 8) who relied on native slave labor. The chronicler Agustín Zárate wrote in 1555 that when notice of the laws was sent through the Indies, it

caused "a very great disturbance . . . especially in the province of Peru, which is where the harm was most general for there was no one left who did not have all his property taken away from him and find himself forced again to search for food." Zárate may have been exaggerating a bit here, but he does offer another reason for the mass disenchantment on the part of the encomenderos. "When they [the original settlers] discovered the province of Peru it was stipulated that they were to be given their Indians for life, who would then be passed on to their children or to their wives if they remained childless . . . and that it was not fair for them to have their property taken away from them now that they were old and tired, and of neither an age nor state of health to go out in search of new lands and things to discover." Pastor Bodmer, *Armature of Conquest*, 170.

There was some legitimacy to this last point. These Spaniards had come to Peru, in part, on the basis of that very promise, which many believed to be the natural order. The sixteenth-century historian Francisco López de Gómara recorded one such gathering when the New Laws were announced: "[They] showed their teeth, decayed from eating toasted corn in the conquest of Peru; others displayed many wounds, bruises, and great lizard bites; the conquerors complained that after wasting their estates and shedding their blood in gaining Peru for their emperor, he was depriving them of the few vassals that he had given them. The soldiers said they would not go to conquer other lands, since they were denied the hope of holding vassals, but instead would rob right and left all they could." Keen, *Latin American Civilization*, 54.

3. The Aguirre-Esquivel history comes from Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries*, 1273–78, and was not included in Fray Pedro Simón's study.
4. Convents, monasteries, and sometimes churches offered refuge and sustenance to people fleeing civil or criminal justice. Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, 141. It is possible that Aguirre intended to seek refuge at the convent.
5. Pineda would have had good reason to refuse Aguirre, had he known of his presence. Pineda had once fought with the rebel Francisco Hernández Girón (see chap. 3), becoming the rebel's captain of horse before switching his allegiance and ingratiating himself with the royals. Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries*, 243.
6. The harquebus was an early muzzle-loaded firearm, the precursor to the modern shotgun.
7. Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries*, 1278.

CHAPTER 1

1. Clements Markham, introduction to Simón, *Expedition*, i.
2. French Guiana providing an odd, persistent exception.
3. U.S. Bureau of Education, *Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1897–1898* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1899), 927.

CHAPTER 2

1. "Lope de Aguirre," trans. Blas Uberuaga and Robert Allenger from *Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Basque Country*, Buber's Basque Page, last updated April 11, 2010, www.buber.net/Basque/History/aguirre.html.
2. All direct quotations of Gonzalo de Zúñiga come from Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*.
3. Hernando de Soto would eventually explore what would become the southeastern United States, discovering the Mississippi River.
4. The original city was called San Miguel and was founded on a site called Tangarará. It was later moved and renamed Piura. Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, 9n15.
5. An encomienda was a royal grant awarded to favored men. The encomienda carried with it the tributes of Indians within the boundaries of the grant; tributes generally took the form of produce and labor. The head of the encomienda, the encomendero, was charged with protecting and seeing to the religious welfare of the Indians. In exchange, the encomendero could parlay his Indian tribute into exploitation of labor, becoming, in essence, something akin to a feudal lord. For an excellent discussion of the encomienda system, see Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, chap. 2.
6. Ironically, all the golden treasure seized from the Aztecs in Mexico and the Incas in Peru created a flow of riches to Spain so immense that it eventually caused hyperinflation and unbalanced the kingdom's economy. In 1557, Spain declared bankruptcy and defaulted on its loans. Another effect was that the cost of living was much greater in the New World than in Spain. Often, men with marginal incomes headed back to Spain, where their relatively meager Peruvian accounts made them comparatively wealthy. Some of the original captors of Atahuallpa returned to Spain immediately, as very wealthy men. Kirkpatrick Sale writes that the flow of Spanish gold "increased costs in virtually every village in every country [in Europe] by some 400 percent in the course of the [sixteenth] century." *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 236. Likewise, "in Castille ten pesos of gold was enough to buy several hectares of land, while in Peru the same amount of money could not even buy a ream of writing paper." Ainsa, "Myth, Marvel, and Adventure," 24.
7. For an in-depth and indispensible study of these 168 men, see Lockhart, *Men of Cajamarca*.
8. Silverberg, *Golden Dream*, 123; Ainsa, "Myth, Marvel, and Adventure," 19.
9. For a more thorough description of the ceremony at Guatavitá, see Chapman, *Golden Dream*, 100–103.
10. Nicholl, *Creature in the Map*, 300.
11. German names were often difficult for the Spaniards and so they were latinized. Most accounts of the time, and even subsequent histories, refer to Ehinger as Dalfinger or Alfinger, for example. The Welsers themselves often appear in accounts as Los Belzares. Chapman, *Golden Dream*, 67.

12. Chapman, *Golden Dream*, 49–50.
13. Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 8.
14. Demetrio Ramos Pérez, "Lope de Aguirre en Cartagena de Indias y su primera rebellion," *Revista de Indias*, nos. 73–74 (1958): 538.
15. Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 8.
16. "Chuncho" was a Quechua word that the Incas used to refer to all "primitive people." The Spanish borrowed the practice.
17. Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 8.
18. Smith, *Explorers*, 96.

CHAPTER 3

1. Quesada almost intersected directly with Aguirre in 1561, when Quesada was named commander of a force out of New Granada designed to quell Aguirre's rebellion. Aguirre was defeated before he reached Quesada, however.
2. Léon, *Second Part*, 263.
3. A quarter century later, Antonio de Sepúlveda, a merchant from Bogota, made the most serious attempt to drain the lake. Constructing a complicated drainage works, he did indeed recover much gold. But the costs of drainage were astronomical, and Sepúlveda gave it up. Soon after, torrential rains filled the lake and the drainage works collapsed. Ainsa, "Myth, Marvel, and Adventure," 19–20.
4. Histories differ on this point—many claim that Elvira was conceived not in Panama but in Cuzco. Likewise, most histories have Aguirre arriving with Elvira for Ursúa's expedition from Cuzco, but at least one history claims that Aguirre "came from faraway Bolivia [to join the expedition] with a daughter and all he had." Lastres and Seguín, *Lope de Aguirre*, 19n10.
5. The name, depending on the source, can mean "faithful," "joyous," or "trustworthy" and would be pronounced in the Spanish way, as "El-vee-ra," rather than with a long *i*. Ninety-five percent of the first generation of mestizo children were illegitimate. Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, 167.
6. Pedro Bellorin, interview with the author, July 2010.
7. Estimates put the ratio at ten Spanish men for every Spanish woman in the New World, but the difference might have been substantially larger. *Pasajeros a Indias*, cited in Richard Konetzke, "La emigracíon de mujeres españolas a América durante la época colonial," *Revista Internacional de la Sociología* 3 (1945): 123–50.
8. Socolow, *Women of Colonial Latin America*, 38–39.
9. Castilla and his forces conceived the revolt in the Dominican monastery at Cuzco and managed to seize control of some of Upper Peru's southern mining areas before being defeated.
10. Oviedo y Baños, *Conquest*, 158.
11. All direct quotations of Gonzalo de Zúñiga come from Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*.
12. Markham et al., *Expeditions into the Valley*, ix.

13. Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 146.
14. Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 307.
15. Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, 5.
16. Patronato 116, no. 1, ramo 1, Archivo General de Indias, Seville, cited in Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, 38. In the sixteenth century, the title "don" was reserved for direct descendants of Spanish nobility and a few high government officials.
17. Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, 8.
18. Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, 17.

CHAPTER 4

1. Clements Markham, introduction to Simón, *Expedition*, 3.
2. Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, 143.
3. Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries*, 1467.
4. Minta, *Aguirre*, 18.
5. On entradas, see Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, 143–45.
6. "Doña" did not carry the same noble connotation for women as "don" did for men. Virtually any woman of some prominence was addressed as "doña."
7. Minta, *Aguirre*, 71.
8. Markham, introduction to Simón, *Expedition*, xxxvi. Markham later became president of the prestigious Royal Geographic Society in London, but he is perhaps more famous for pilfering cinchona seeds on one expedition and using them to begin a quinine operation.
9. Martín, *Daughters of the Conquistadores*, 26.
10. Martín, *Daughters of the Conquistadores*, 13.
11. Most Indian slaves were foreign to Peru, coming mostly from Spanish settlements in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Mexico. After the Conquest, increasing numbers of Indian slaves came from Venezuela.

    Black slaves were present from the beginnings of the Conquest. After the Incan defeat at Cajamarca and the explosion of Spanish wealth, the numbers of black slaves multiplied accordingly. Initially used as military auxiliaries, their functions expanded as Spanish cities were created. Black slaves enjoyed a limited degree of autonomy and were vastly superior in social rank to Indian slaves. Every stratum of Spanish society included black slave owners, but ownership involved very small numbers. Plantations that relied on slave labor were filled with Indians. In the years after the Conquest, numbers of freedmen increased, as black slaves could buy their own freedom or earn it through gifts of charity. For an in-depth look at the roles of blacks in early Peru, see Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, chap. 10.
12. Minta, *Aguirre*, 97.

CHAPTER 5

1. After Pizarro's defeat, the quinto real was reinstated and continued until the eighteenth century.

2. Pastor Bodmer, *Armature of Conquest*, 302.
3. Keen, *Latin American Civilization*, 56–57.

CHAPTER 6

1. Pedrarias de Almesto was eventually named the expedition's official chronicler. His account is essentially a theft of Vásquez's. His name, Pedrarias, is probably a bastardization of Pedro de Arias.
2. Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 146.
3. Toribio de Ortiguera, quoted in Minta, *Aguirre*, 117.
4. This may have been the same Martín de Guzmán who fought with Aguirre in the uprising against Governor Heredia of Cartagena. See chap. 2.
5. Robert Southey, who wrote the first English account of the expedition in 1821, described the Caperuzos: "They wore a single garment of cotton; its texture was good, and it was painted with many colors. Their principal food was fish, maize, and manioc, of which they made their banqueting drink; they had potatoes also, and other roots. . . . Their dwellings were large and square; their weapon, the wooden spear and throwing stick." *Expedition of Orsua*, 26.
6. The chronicler Toribio de Ortiguera called the island isla de los Cararies, but thereafter it was called García Island in honor of Arce.
7. Zahm, *Following the Conquistadores*, 475.
8. Slightly sturdier versions of these canopied rafts are still in use in the Amazon today.
9. Omagua meant "flat heads" in the native Tupí language. Markham et al., *Expeditions into the Valley*, 175; Southey, *Expedition of Orsua*, iii. This was a reference to the tradition of flattening the brows of newly born children using boards and cotton buffers.
10. When Pizarro's captain, Francisco de Orellana, and the friar Gaspar de Carvajal came into contact with other tribes in the province of the Omaguas, they were warned about hostile female warriors. When the Spaniards arrived at the village, their coming was already common knowledge. Predictably, the women attacked. Carvajal reported the novel sight: "These women . . . fought so courageously that the men did not dare run away. They killed any who did turn back with their clubs. . . . These women are very pale and tall, with very long braided hair wound about their heads. They are very robust . . . fighting as much as ten Indian men." Oviedo y Valdés, *Discovery of the Amazon*, 434. Despite their fierceness, the queen was captured.

    Historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés reported that the captured queen informed Orellana that she ruled over seventy all-female villages. The women remained steadfastly unmarried, but they did "consort with Indian men at times." *Discovery of the Amazon*, 434. Carvajal added, "When a child is born, if it is a son he is killed and returned to his father, and if a daughter, she is raised very solemnly and taught the things of war." These reports almost precisely echoed Aztec conqueror

Hernando Cortés's account of New World women who lived "without a single man . . . at certain times men go over from the mainland and have intercourse with them; the females born to those who conceive are kept but the males are sent away." Pastor Bodmer, *Armature of Conquest*, 157.

The myth of women warriors long preceded Orellana, Carvajal, and Cortés. In naming the women "Amazons," Carvajal had merely reached back into European tradition, referring to the legendary women warriors of Greek mythology described by the great Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century B.C. The name given to the women derived from their extraordinary custom of severing their right breast to ease the drawing of bows; the Greek *a-mazos* means "without breast."

Eight hundred years later, in *The Travels*, Marco Polo wrote of two islands, one inhabited by men and the other solely by women. Each spring, the men visited and engaged in propagation. Then they went back to their own island. When reports began to filter out of the Americas that Incan kings, with their great wealth, held many "wives," young virgins raised for the purpose, the myth got new life.

Later, when Orellana was busy petitioning the king for a right of conquest and a return trip to the jungle, he made sure to include this account of Amazons to inflate the dangers and achievements of the first voyage. Orellana knew that the presence of Amazons was also associated with great riches. Carvajal described the women warriors being "served exclusively on gold and silver, and there are many gold and silver idols in the houses with which to serve the Sun." If Orellana saw the women firsthand, it meant that he had pinpointed the approximate location of these treasures. In any case, "Amazon" stuck and the world's greatest river is still known by the name.

However, the veracity of stories about such a tribe of women warriors is as dubious in South America as it was in Europe or Asia Minor. Amazon expert John Hemming makes a reasonable argument that what Carvajal and Orellana saw were in fact long-haired men from the Carib-speaking Wai Wai tribe, and they may have simply invented capturing Conori. *Tree of Rivers*, 33.

For an interesting discussion of Carvajal's and Orellana's interactions with the Amazons, see Chapman, *Golden Dream*, 161–70.

11. Chapman, *Golden Dream*, 189–90.
12. German hangovers from this brief explosion of Amazonian exploration lasted at least another three centuries. A *New York Times* article of December 21, 1902, suggested that Germans might have "melancholy reason" to reconsider investment capital then headed to Venezuela, reminding readers that the country had once been "an abyss for German funds and a grave for German adventurers."

In the end, the Germans' brutality was shocking; even the Spanish conquerors who preceded them and committed atrocities of their own blanched at the accounts. Indeed, the viciousness was one of the cited reasons for termination of the contract with the Germans in 1556. There

is here, however, at least a whiff of self-righteous disingenuousness. After all, the end of German involvement and exploration in the region was also hastened by the beheading of von Hutten and Seyler with a dull machete by the Spaniard Juan de Carvajal, who, after founding the city of Tocuyo in 1545, was later executed himself by order of the king, but not before earning the moniker Demon of the Andes.

13. The search for cinnamon was soon realized to be a futile enterprise. Writing of his expedition to the king, Pizarro explained that "Your Majesty will gain no use or service from this land or its products." Indeed, Pizarro found the whole region uninhabitable and the relatively few cinnamon trees "at a very great distance from each other." He spent more than two months searching for the trees and found nothing to justify further effort. Pastor Bodmer, *Armature of Conquest*, 165.

    It was, in all respects, a disheartening and pathetic catastrophe. Pedro Cieza de Léon summed it up: "Pizarro was greatly distressed at finding that he could not reach any fertile or abundant province beyond such rough country. . . . He frequently deplored having undertaken this expedition." Hemming, *Search for El Dorado*, 112. When Pizarro and the rest of the survivors, numbering barely a hundred out of the original thousands, emerged from the jungle and entered Quito in August 1542, they were "nearly naked [and] . . . their feet were bare and wounded by thorns and roots, and they were so wan and wasted that one could no longer recognize them." Bandelier, *Gilded Man*, 62.

14. Pizarro had sent Orellana and almost sixty others ahead to get food and come back. But in keeping with the nature of the doomed expedition, there was no village where they had expected one and the river, swollen with rain and expanding by the day, swept the men well past where they may have intended a turnaround. Pizarro had instructed them to *go and come back*. Instead, they just went. Accident or not, this was tantamount to mutinous behavior, and they knew it. Leaving Pizarro without the use of their brigantine could be an assignment of death. To guard against later charges of abandonment, the men drew up a document stating that they had no choice:

    > We, the cavaliers and hidalgos and priests who are here with this expeditionary force with Your Worship, having become aware of Your Worship's determination to go up the river over the course down which we came with Your Worship, and having seen that it is an impossible thing to go back up to where Your Worship left Gonzalo Pizarro, our Governor, without risking the lives of us all. . . . We hereby exonerate ourselves from the charge of being traitors or even men disobedient to the service of the King in not following Your Worship on this journey.

15. The Omaguas indeed had a highly advanced civilization. They were part of the great Carib wave that moved northward from modern-day Paraguay into

the Amazon basin and all the way to the West Indies. The Omagua branch occupied the northern Amazon for hundreds of miles near the Negro River and north to the Guaviare River. Silverberg, *Golden Dream*, 188.

16. Some chronicles of the time call the Marañón River the Bracamoros, after the province of the same name. The Marañón River is viewed today primarily as the mouth of the Amazon. Its birth is in the Andes, as it flows out of the mountains at the Pongo de Manseriche gorge. Here, the Santiago River joins the Marañón, and they flow east together. One hundred forty miles east of the Pongo de Manseriche gorge, the Huallaga and the Marañón meet. Two hundred miles farther to the east, the Ucayali River joins from the south. This, then, is the Amazon.

    When today's Marañón was discovered by the Spanish explorer Vicente Yáñez Pinzón in 1500, he gave it the name Río Santa Maria de la Mar Dulce. ("Mar dulce" meaning "freshwater sea." El Mar Dulce was a name often given to newly discovered rivers, such as the mighty Plata of Uruguay and Argentina, discovered by Juan de Solís in 1516.) The eighteenth-century historian Juan de Velasco claimed that the name Marañón derived from the words of a soldier, sent by Francisco Pizarro to discover the source of the Piura River, who asked upon seeing the great river, "Hac mare an non?" (Has it salt?). The question echoes the biblical story of the Israelites in the desert who, sipping salty waters, cried out, "Mara," because of the bitterness or saltiness, and the water retained that name. Alternately, the question may have simply been, "Mare an non?" (Sea or not?).

    When the river began to be named in accounts, at least a decade later, it was called Marañón because, as the sixteenth-century Spanish historian Agustín Zárate had it, a captain named Marañón discovered it. In the late eighteenth century, the Jesuit priest Juan de Velasco repeated that claim in *Historia del reino de Quito en la América meridional* (History of the Kingdom of Quito in South America). There is no convincing evidence to support the claim's veracity.

    The Spanish word for cashew is *marañón*. And because marañón trees grow along the banks of the river, the name could have been derived that way. William Bollaert, the English translator of Pedro de Simón's account of the Ursúa expedition, claims that Marañón is derived from the Spanish word *parana*, one of the meanings of which is a place rendered impassable by briers and brambles. Minta, *Aguirre*, 92.

    Chachapoyas's current location is different from the original settlement, owing to the difficulties presented by climate, terrain, and disease.

17. Another story of the Tupinambá Indians at Chachapoyas tells it somewhat differently, but it, too, had floated around the gold-sniffers in Peru. This one recounts the trials of an Indian chief called Viaruzo (variations include Viraratu, Virrazú, or Uiraracu), who had also come from Brazil with a massive army of men, looking for better lands for his tribe. They engaged in great battles along the way. The tribe continued along the Amazon for fourteen years before ending up in Peru in the Spanish frontier town

of Santiago de Moyobamba. There, the Spanish took the men prisoner. Viaruzo, perhaps to save his skin, told his captors of great riches they had seen along their journey—more gold than there was in all of Peru. With the Indians were two Portuguese, and, according to Robert Southey, "it is not unlikely that they contributed to delude a people who were eager to be deluded." *Expedition of Orsua*, 2. Echoing the earlier story, Viaruzo, too, was brought before the viceroy in Lima—this time the marquis of Cañete, don Andrés Hurtado de Mendoza. Minta, *Aguirre*, 10.

18. While it is easy in the twenty-first century to mock the earnestness with which some of the early explorers undertook searches for such fabled treasures as the Fountain of Youth or the Seven Cities of Cibola in North America, there was evidence to suggest the presence of vast riches somewhere in the jungle interior of South America, within the equinoctial circle, a plane in the celestial sphere mirroring the earth's equator. Belief in these riches accompanied the very first explorers.

    In 1493, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella wrote to Christopher Columbus asking his advice on the viability of changing course to search the interior of America for riches. Basing their view on Portuguese reports, they wrote, "There may be islands and even *terra firma* which, depending on where they lie in relation to the sun [a reference to the equinoctial line], are thought to be very fruitful and richer than any other land." Columbus needed little convincing; he had earlier written to them, "Gold is most excellent; from gold one can make treasure, and whoever has treasure can do what he wishes in this world, and can even ensure that souls go to Paradise." James McGovern, *The World of Columbus* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1992), 32.

    The fifteenth-century chronicler Pedro Martir de Anglería believed that riches lay in the torrid zones because of "the virtue of the effect of the sun on terrestrial matter at the equinox." Pastor Bodmer, *Armature of Conquest*, 154–55. Already discovered fertile zones in the tropics such as the Moluccas (the Spice Islands) meant that, in Martir's view, similar veins lay in the same zone in unexplored regions of the world, including the South American interior. The gem collector Jaume Ferrer de Blanes, a very respected cartographer in his time, gave support to the view: "Just around the equinox . . . precious stones, gold, spices, and medicinal plants are abundant and valuable. . . . what I have heard most often from many Indians, Arabs, and Ethiopians is that most of the good merchandise comes from a very hot climate." Pastor Bodmer, *Armature of Conquest*, 154.

19. Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 109.

20. Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 108.

CHAPTER 7

1. Chicha is still drunk today. It is made from fermented corn. Simón wrote, "When it was ready for drinking, it was first mixed with water, for its strength was such that drinking it pure would have caused drunkenness,

more so than wine from grapes." Chicha is also the name given to an indigenous Peruvian music. Popular in jungle cities in the 1960s and 1970s, it borrowed liberally from American and British pop, psychedelia, and funk.

2. Silverberg, *Golden Dream*, 86. See also F. A. Kirkpatrick, *The Spanish Conquistadores* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1963).
3. Minta, *Aguirre*, 189. Under Orellana's direction, the surviving crew made it through the Amazon to the Atlantic Ocean, where they navigated up the coast, past Guyana, through the Gulf of Paria, past the mouth of the Orinoco, and onto Margarita Island, now part of Venezuela. It was the first recorded traverse of the world's longest river. During the descent, the men also named a great Amazon tributary, the Negro. Carvajal noted that the water "was black as ink, and for this reason we gave it the name of Río Negro, which river flowed so abundantly and with such violence that for more than twenty leagues it formed a streak down through the other water, the one not mixing with the other." Silverberg, *Golden Dream*, 161.

   At Trinidad, Orellana purchased a ship and returned to Spain in November 1542. Carvajal remained behind to recover his health and eventually became archbishop of Lima. Orellana brought back to Spain highly exaggerated stories of extraordinary wealth. The king subsequently granted Orellana a return trip and government over whatever he could conquer in the Amazonian province of New Andalusia. In the deal, he was absolved of any wrongdoing against Pizarro.

   Orellana sailed from Sanlúcar, Spain, in May 1545, accompanied by a too-small fleet and his wife, Ana Ayala. But his return trip to the New World was plagued from the start. After weathering storms and being abandoned by many of his men, he managed to find the mouth of the Amazon in December, only to founder in the river's mighty current. Orellana regrouped, repaired the boats, and sent out scouting parties that invariably lost more men to difficult river conditions and hostile Indians. Eventually he laid up on an island, picked his way up the river the best he could, and ultimately found to his horror that he was merely on a tributary and not the main branch of the Amazon after all.

   The nineteenth-century Chilean geographer José Toribio Medina, who produced an exhaustive account of the Orellana saga, reported that the expedition leader's final days were spent in maddening futility and heartbreak: "On account of his being ill, he made up his mind to come to a land of Christians: and during this time when he was out looking for food for the journey, the Indians shot seventeen of his men with arrows. From grief over this and from illness Orellana died." Chapman, *Golden Dream*, 177. His companions buried him under an enormous tree that spread its roots into the mighty river with which his name would forever after be entwined. Today, there is an Amazonian province of Ecuador that bears his name. Its capital, Puerto Francisco de Orellana, is situated at the confluence of the Coca and Napo rivers, Orellana's starting point.

4. Simón, *Expedition*, 37, also lists Juan de Vargas among the conspirators. Simón also records, however, how a man named Juan de Vargas came to Ursúa's defense when the conspirators attacked. This Juan de Vargas was killed and buried next to Ursúa. Either Simón's list of conspirators was in error, then, or there were two men named Juan de Vargas on the expedition, one a conspirator and one loyal to Ursúa.
5. Cotton armor was obviously preferable to metal in the heat of the jungle lowlands. In 1570, the priest Pedro de Aguado wrote of the cotton armor, "The layers of cotton are quilted between folds of linen and sewed with rough thread . . . and every thread is strongly knotted." Though escupil was as effective as armor, the soldier wearing it did not cut an attractive figure. Aguado wrote, "A mounted man armed in this way, upon his horse comparisoned in the same fashion, looks the most hideous and monstrous thing that is possible to see." Chapman, *Golden Dream*, 83.

CHAPTER 8

1. No relation to Francisco or Gonzalo Pizarro.
2. A sixteenth-century Portuguese writer, López Vaz, once wrote of Aguirre: "He was born in Biscay, a country near unto France, wherefore I believe him rather to have been a Frenchman than a Spaniard, for that in the heart of a Spaniard there could not have been as much cruelty as this man showed." Chapman, *Golden Dream*, 226.
3. Minta, *Aguirre*, 178.
4. Chronicler Antonio Vázquez de Espinosa (not to be confused with Francisco Vásquez) wrote that "all Indians carry swatters or feather fans, elegantly fashioned and variously colored, to repel the insects." Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 81.
5. Martín, *Daughters of the Conquistadores*, 26.
6. Nicholl, *Creature in the Map*, 27.
7. Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 194.
8. Tierra Firme refers to the Spanish Main, roughly the Pacific coast from Panama to the mouth of the Orinoco.
9. Early expeditions referred to the Pacific as the South Sea and the Caribbean as the North Sea.
10. At the time, Veragua, Nicaragua, was the collective name given to the Caribbean coastal region that comprises today's Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama.
11. Francisco Hernández Girón had attempted a similar thing, creating a company of three or four hundred black slaves to fight in his rebellion and promising them their freedom after victory. Because he was defeated, their freedom did not come to pass. Fernández, *Historia del Perú*, 384.
12. Chapetonas and chapetons were Spaniards who had come to the New World by stealth, without passports. In the early years of the Conquest, there were relatively few Spanish women, and those who did come were

married, at rates upwards of 90 percent. As the decades progressed and Spanish women laid down roots in Peru, they sent for female relations, and the New World saw an influx of Spanish women looking for husbands. Encomenderos were required to marry and have Spanish sons if they wished to pass their encomienda to their heirs.

13. Simón conjectured that by taking the "leftward branch," Aguirre entered the mouth of the Japurá River and from there reached the Rio Negro. There is much disagreement over the exact course the expedition took in coming to the Atlantic. See chap. 10, note 4; chap. 11, note 1; chap. 12, note 1.

CHAPTER 9

1. Southey, *Expedition of Orsua*, 80.
2. Markham introduction to Simón, *Expedition*, xxxvi.
3. The two women referred to here are doña Inés's companion, doña Maria de Sotomayor, and a woman named Juana de Torralva, who attended Aguirre's daughter, Elvira.
4. Pariacaca was the Incan god of water and rainstorms.
5. Southey, *Expedition of Orsua*, 81.
6. Minta, *Aguirre*, 180.
7. Southey, *Expedition of Orsua*, 42.

CHAPTER 10

1. Some Conquest accounts forget chronology and erroneously attribute the name of the Marañón River to Aguirre and his men, suggesting that it came from the *maranas*, the "tangles" or "villainies, tricks, intrigues, or frauds" committed there and the nickname Aguirre and his men gave themselves, Marañones. More likely, the name may have some derivation not from "tangles" but "entanglements," referring to the multitude of obstacles at the river's mouth and from Aguirre's clever use of it, not the other way around. See chap. 6, note 16.
2. The average Spanish conquistador generally viewed sailors and foreigners (Basques were considered "half-foreign") with contempt. Many Biscayans filled the ranks of sailors. Lockhart tells of a plebeian mestiza who was considered to have lowered herself by marrying a sailor in the 1550s. *Spanish Peru*, 115. Further, Basque sailors often clustered in service in the civil wars and on expeditions. Fully half of the men organized for Blasco Núñez Vela's fleet in 1544 were Basque.
3. Aguirre, the Wrath of God (*Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes*) was the name German director Werner Herzog gave his 1972 biopic, starring Klaus Kinski; a very young Nastassja Kinski plays the non-speaking role of Elvira. The movie is highly fictionalized. Herzog himself has been quoted as saying, "This film is not really a narrative of actual happenings or a portrait of actual people. . . . It is a film about what lies behind landscapes, faces, situations,

and works." S. S. Prawer, *Caligari's Children: The Film as Tale of Terror* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 19.

4. The expedition's route to the Atlantic has always been a matter of speculation. The chroniclers could only guess at their precise location, and their accounts conflict. There is great disagreement among modern historians as well. The basic dispute boils down to this: some say that the expedition continued down the Amazon and into the Atlantic; others give an alternate route, one that ends up in the Orinoco. See Smith, *Explorers*, 112.

   The argument for an Amazon journey to the Atlantic is primarily supported by the chroniclers' descriptions of the breadth of the river, which better fit the wider Amazon than the Orinoco. In the Amazon version, the Marañones' constant leftward shift was merely a response to navigating the many branches or the islands of the mighty river. Also, given the time that elapsed between Ursúa's murder and the expedition's arrival at Margarita, it would seem that the men took the comparatively easy Amazon route, the one with a strong current. See Minta, *Aguirre*, 176.

   But many historians now believe it more likely that Aguirre followed a zigzag route to the Orinoco River and then to the northern tip of South America. From the Amazon, when he veered left—northwestward—he probably entered the Japurá River and then headed northeast into the Negro River (at modern day Manaus, Brazil). Then, where today's Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil meet, they would have headed east to the watery maze of the Cassaquiari Canal and north to Piedra Lais in Venezuela's Amazonas State. Then the men could have picked up the Orinoco, which heads east but spills out into the Amacuro Delta south of the island of Trinidad and the Gulf of Paria (which Francisco de Carvajal dubbed the Mouths of the Dragons in 1542), where the Caribbean and the Atlantic meet.

   An important passage on this subject comes from Simón:

   > [The Marañones] continued their voyage, and got amongst a large number of islands, which confused them. They now had to row, particularly as the coming in of the tide made the waters contrary for them; and when the tide fell, which it did so strongly that they did not know where they were going on that waste of waters, the pilots were confused, having no knowledge of the river and its tides. Before them they saw some points of land on the continent, or on rather high islands, and Aguirre sent certain pilots in piraguas to see how they were to proceed with their navigation; and having done so, they became the more puzzled in consequence of the difference of opinion amongst them as to which course they ought to take: so they at last determined to proceed as God pleased to let them.

   This description could fit either the island-studded and channeled Amazon or the maze that is the Cassaquiari. But Simón follows this passage

with a very telling statement: "They came to a small Indian village on the cliffs of the river, on one of the islands, whence the natives came peacefully to barter food with them. The Indians were naked, but on the soles of their feet they had pieces of deer skin, fastened like the sandals worn in Peru, *and as I* [Simón] *have seen worn in the provinces of the government of Venezuela*" (emphasis added). It must be remembered that Simón was not a participant in the expedition, but he used Vásquez, who was, as his primary source. If Vásquez reported this sight and the Indians that Simón subsequently saw in Venezuela were from the same tribe, then the expedition must have been in the area of the Orinoco and not the Amazon. (Eyewitness accounts of the expedition did not record such a description for any other tribe along the length of the Amazon.) Further, it was near this area that Aguirre and his men found salt cakes that fleeing Indians had abandoned. The presence of salt also suggests the Orinoco.

The key might be to understand the lack of geographical knowledge at the time. Many of the early chroniclers, ignorant of the Orinoco, might very well have simply called it the Amazon. Indeed, those who were on the expedition were in the habit of calling all the rivers they descended the Marañón. It was not until 1743 that the Frenchman Charles Marie de La Condamine undertook the first scientific expedition through the Amazon jungle. Making his way to Cayenne in today's French Guiana, he showed the possibility of getting to the Atlantic by this northeastern route. Indeed, the 1744 publication of his findings includes the first definitive descriptions by a European of the Cassaquiari Canal. Another decade would elapse before the Spanish Commission sent surveyors to pick their way through the Cassaquiari to delineate the boundaries between Venezuela and Brazil.

Despite the possibility of an alternate route, most nineteenth-century historians continued to claim that the Marañones stayed along the length of the Amazon. Among these was the esteemed scientist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt, who declared, "I see nothing to indicate that the expedition ever went out of the bed of the Amazon." *Personal Narrative*, 323. Robert Southey also believed the expedition's route followed the Amazon. But several expedition members claimed that the end point of their journey to the Atlantic was a river's mouth directly opposite the island of Trinidad. If so, it was undoubtedly the Orinoco. If the Orinoco route is indeed the one taken, it represents another extraordinary fact about the expedition: these traitorous men, without strong navigational skills, became the first ever to make this astonishing and complicated trip. Such an achievement would be as amazing a navigational feat as Orellana's first full descent of the Amazon River.

CHAPTER 11

1. The Arnaquinas made their home on the upper tributaries of the Negro and Putumayo Rivers, which would lend support to the belief that the

expedition went north and west up the Negro and into the Cassaquiari to the Orinoco, as opposed to staying on the Amazon.

Sir Walter Raleigh, the English explorer responsible for the failed New World settlement at Roanoke, Virginia, wrote of Aguirre in his *Discoverie of the Large, Rich, and Beautiful Empire of Guiana* (1595), mentioning, erroneously, that he came within just one degree of separation from the mad Biscayan. Raleigh was an acquaintance of John Hawkins, captain of the English ship *Jesus of Lubeck*, who sailed to San Juan de Ulúa, Mexico, and battled with Spanish naval forces. In that same year, Hawkins allegedly "met with such a one upon the coast, that rebelled, and *had sailed down all the river of Amazons*." Raleigh, *Discovery*, 23 (italics mine). This, of course, was Aguirre. The problem is that Hawkins could not have met with Aguirre but rather must have become acquainted with his story along the Mexican coast. Hawkins sailed in 1565, four years after Aguirre had been in Venezuela.

Nevertheless, Aguirre's story made its way back to Raleigh through Hawkins and others, and Raleigh felt compelled to include a brief account of Aguirre's villainy in *Discoverie.* Raleigh there made the claim that Aguirre descended the entire length of the Amazon and into the Atlantic, where he veered northwest to Margarita Island: "He had of his party 700 soldiers [more than three times the actual number], and of those many promised to draw in other captains and companies, to deliver up towns and forts in Peru; but neither finding by the said river any passage into Guiana, nor any possibility to return towards Peru by the same Amazons, by reason that the descent of the river made so great a current, he was enforced to disembarque at the mouth of the said Amazons, which cannot be less than 1,000 leagues from the place where they embarked. From thence he coasted the land till he arrived at Margarita." Raleigh, *Discovery*, 22.

2. Southey, *Expedition of Orsua*, 92.
3. Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 93.

CHAPTER 12

1. The seventeen days taken to cross the Gulf of Paria has led many to conjecture that the expedition indeed ran the course of the Amazon and had to sail northwest along the coast of Brazil and past Venezuela. If, as one chronicler wrote, "[Aguirre] came out on the coast, opposite the island of Trinidad," there is little to explain why it took more than two weeks to cross this relatively short distance (roughly 250 miles), especially if, as the chronicles have it, they enjoyed "a steady sea and fair wind." Markham et al., *Expeditions into the Valley*, 110. Indeed, it had taken Orellana the same amount of time to cover the distance from the mouth of the Amazon to Margarita.
2. Pampatar was founded in the 1530s; its name translates from the native Guaiqueri as "place of salt."

3. The Guaiqueri were the original inhabitants not only of Margarita Island but of the neighboring islands of Cubagua and Coche as well. It was they who welcomed the first Spanish invasion, and it was they who paid the price for it. Ironically, Aguirre did not kill any natives but saved his wrath for the Spanish.

   Paraguachí is today also called Puerto Fermín and to this day retains the unofficial name El Tirano (the Tyrant's Port), in honor of Aguirre's landing there.
4. Pueblo Porlamar's fort was located where the red and white Porlamar lighthouse (El Faro de Puntilla) stands today, in a small plaza at the end of the Calle de Marina, a few steps away from the Caribbean. Father Francisco de Villacorta, the island's vicar, founded the city of Porlamar fifteen years before Aguirre's arrival.
5. The Audiencia of Santo Domingo was created in 1512 in today's Dominican Republic to settle legal disputes between New World explorers and the monarch back in Europe. Its jurisdiction eventually spread to include all major legal issues—such as the trial of the Marañones—in New Spain.

   Though male leadership was requisite, the early governance of Margarita Island offers an interesting exception. After receiving official leadership of the island in 1524–1525, Villalobos died. Leadership then transferred to his wife, doña Isabel Manrique, who petitioned the Crown to transfer rights of governorship to their daughter, Aldonza. Because Aldonza was underage, doña Isabel herself operated as de facto governor, appointing a series of lieutenant governors until 1535, when Aldonza married Pedro Ortiz de Sandoval. To this point, none of the governors—Villalobos, either of the Manrique women, or Ortiz—actually lived on Margarita Island; all governance extended from Santo Domingo. That did not change when Ortiz died in 1546; after his death, governorship reverted to Aldonza Manrique, and she continued to live in Santo Domingo. Residency changed when Aldonza's daughter Marcela, at the age of fourteen, married Juan Gómez de Villandrando, who assumed leadership, moved to the island, and was governor when Aguirre arrived.
6. See Morón, *Breve historia*, 60ff.
7. Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 97.

CHAPTER 13

1. According to Bart Lewis, "Aguirre lore has always held that the official scribe of the Ursúa expedition, Pedrarias de Almesto, had fallen in love with Lope's daughter Elvira." *Miraculous Lie*, 102.
2. In Abel Posse's novel *Daimón*, Pedrarias de Almesto marries Elvira, a sin for which he receives torture from Aguirre's hands.
3. The city of Maracapana was a port city in the 1560s but was subsequently moved inland three miles. Today's Cumaná, Venezuela, is where Maracapana used to stand.

4. Juan Enríquez de Orellana was no relation to Francisco de Orellana of Pizarro's expedition.
5. Lastres and Seguín, *Lope de Aguirre*, 118.
6. Jacqueline B. Helfgott, *Criminal Behavior: Theories, Typologies, and Criminal Justice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 155.
7. Evan L. Balkan, *Shipwrecked! Deadly Adventures and Disasters at Sea* (Birmingham, AL: Menasha Ridge Press, 2008), 74. See also Mike Dash, *Batavia's Graveyard: The True Story of the Mad Heretic Who Led History's Bloodiest Mutiny* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002).
8. Balkan, *Shipwrecked!*, 74-75.
9. Balkan, *Shipwrecked!*, 75.
10. Raymond Maufrais, *Journey without Return* (Boston: Crowell, 1954), 166.
11. Maufrais, *Journey without Return*, 158.
12. Maufrais, *Journey without Return*, 176.
13. Maufrais, *Journey* without *Return*, 183.
14. Maufrais, Journey *without Return*, 203.
15. Maufrais, *Journey* without *Return*, 204.
16. Evan L. Balkan, *Vanished! Explorers Forever Lost* (Birmingham, AL: Menasha Ridge Press, 2008), 23. See also P. H. Fawcett, *Exploration Fawcett* (London: Phoenix Press, 2001).
17. Balkan, *Vanished!*, 29.
18. Today Punta de Piedras holds no physical reminders of the sixteenth century, when Montesinos was there and it was known as Puerto de Piedras. Its primary function today is as the location of a ferry service to the Venezuelan mainland.
19. After Juan Gómez Villandrando's murder, Aldonza and Marcela Manrique traveled to Spain in 1565 with Marcela and Villandrando's two sons, where they petitioned the Council of the Indies to transfer the governorship of Margarita Island to the oldest son, Juan Sarmiento de Villandrando. The transfer was approved in 1575, and the family governed the island until 1593, when the last of the family members died. Margarita Island then reverted to the Crown.
20. Southey, *Expedition of Orsua*, 125.

CHAPTER 14

1. Lastres and Seguín, *Lope de Aguirre*, 101.
2. Montesinos ultimately got precisely the punishment Aguirre predicted he would. Aguirre told him not to go to Santo Domingo, for the authorities there would strip him of his office. Montesinos went anyway. When the authorities undertook an investigation of the responses to Aguirre's reign on Margarita after the affair had ended, they singled out Montesinos as an example of one who made poor choices. Doña Marcela Manrique, the widow of the murdered governor, protested that her husband—and countless others—would have been spared had Montesinos initially gone to Santo Domingo and asked the authorities there to muster forces.

Instead, by deciding to engage in armed conflict and then eventually backing down from that decision he only caused more mayhem, as it bought Aguirre more time and gave him more reason to give into his paranoia. The authorities agreed and banished Montesinos from the West Indies. But the story does not end there. In 1571—a decade later—the same widow Marcela was protesting Montesinos's presence on Margarita once again to the same officials in Santo Domingo. Minta, *Aguirre*, 204.

3. Fajardo was called Francisco Taxardo in Simón's account and is sometimes referred to as Faxardo in older texts.
4. Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 126.
5. There was a strange trinity of severed limbs at this time. Rodrígues's amputation was preceded only days earlier by an incident at a local church; there, a delinquent was being held for having cut off the hand of another citizen. As the Marañones grabbed him, the man clasped the tabernacle. As the others wrested it from him, a small statue of the baby Jesus crashed to floor, where its little arm separated from the rest.
6. Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 100–101.
7. Vázquez is relating information told him by Captain Altamirano. Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 79.
8. Victor Alba, *The Latin Americans* (New York: Praeger, 1969). Bolívar also referred to the letter as a declaration of independence on at least one occasion. See Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 2, 12, 18. A plaque next to the statue of Aguirre in the Casa de la Cultura in La Asuncion, the capital of Nueva Esparta state on the island of Margarita, reads in part, "Se rebeló contra la Monarquía Española; esta accíon fue reconocida por Simón Bolívar como 'La primera declaración de independencia de una region de América.'" ([Aguirre] rebelled against the Spanish monarchy; this action was recognized by Simón Bolívar as "The first declaration of independence in a region of America.")
9. Robles is best known for orchestrating an escape from the camp of rebel Gonzalo Pizarro in 1547. See Lockhart, *Men of Cajamarca*, 260.

   Vasquez was a sailor from Palos who left the sea and participated in the conquest of Cuzco. He was awarded and oversaw an encomienda with Alonso de Toro, who had been present at the seizure of Atahuallpa at Cajamarca. Vasquez eventually became an alcalde and a captain during the civil wars and fought with Girón. See Lockhart, *Men of Cajamarca*, 357–58, and *Spanish Peru*, 123–24.

   Dias was a horseshoer of low birth who had been a close friend of Diego de Trujillo and who was present at the seizure of Atahuallpa at Cajamarca. See Lockhart, *Men of Cajamarca*, 363.

   Piedrahita was a sea captain who fought with Girón.
10. Word had by this time leaked out of the Old World about the Protestant Reformation and its Lutheran (German) schism from the Catholic Church (Spanish). Thus Aguirre slew the German Monteverde, a fellow member of the Ursúa expedition.

11. The lakes Aguirre refers to are probably those around Chorrillos, near Lima. It sheds an interesting light on his mindset that he felt inclined to dredge up a grievance from many years earlier; here, in the midst of his attempted revolution, he hearkens back to what he sees as a pattern from his earliest days in Peru, almost a quarter century earlier.
12. In fact, it was closer to nine months.
13. By continuing his practice of naming specific men, Aguirre ensured their doom.
14. Letter translated by Tom Holloway, Department of History, Cornell University, 1994, from A. Arellano Moreno, *Documentos para la historia economic de Venezuela* (Caracas: University Central, 1961), available from the *InternetModernHistorySourcebook*,http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1561aguirre.html.
15. The original manuscript of Aguirre's letter to King Philip does not survive. However, several copies do exist. The oldest extant copy was reproduced seventeen years after Aguirre's death in Diego de Aguilar y de Córdoba's *Libro primero del Marañón, año de 1578*, which currently sits in the collections of the University of Oviedo in Spain. A copy of Córdoba's book is also in the British Museum.
16. Markham, introduction to Simón, *Expedition*, 189.
17. Graziano, *Millennial New World*, 228.
18. James Otis, "The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved," 1764, available at Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs at Ashland University, *TeachingAmericanHistory.org*, "Document Library," http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=267.
19. Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 12. Robert Silverberg, though not convinced Philip II received the letter, noted that the king, "a connoisseur of the irrational, might have taken a certain melancholy delight in its blazing words." *Golden Dream*, 255. For a fascinating discussion of the possibility of Philip II having received the letter, see Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 8n20. Minta adds, "[King Philip's] bureaucracy was no doubt efficient enough to ensure that Aguirre's letter never reached him." *Aguirre*, 214. Emiliano Jos conjectured, "If the letter arrived in King Philip's hands he would have taken measures so that no one could read its contents, but because Lope permitted and even sought that his writings were known among his soldiers, some of the latter made copies, by which the famous document has survived to our day." *Expedición*, 111.

CHAPTER 15

1. Aguirre is referring to Marquis of Cañete's execution of these men for their support of the rebel Girón.
2. Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 76. Cazabe is a flatbread made from cassava root.
3. Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 76.
4. Southey, *Expedition*, 202.

5. Juana de Torralva, who attended Aguirre's daughter, Elvira, was from Castile in Spain. She and Elvira were probably the first white women to cross South America by way of the Amazon jungle. Torralva was apparently a very young woman during the expedition, as Simón related seeing her in Barquisimeto in 1612, more than fifty years after the Ursúa-Aguirre expedition.
6. Elena Mampel González, basing her translation on the anonymous chronicle, has it that Aguirre uttered, "I who so much desire that you not become a mattress for scoundrels." Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 279.
7. Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 76.
8. A slightly different version of Aguirre's last moments has it this way, in the original Spanish: After the first shot, Aguirre muttered, "éste no es nada" (this one is nothing) and after the second, fatal, shot, "éste si" (ah, yes, that's the one). See Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 10, 36.

CHAPTER 16

1. Minta, *Aguirre*, 220.
2. Conder, *Modern Traveler*, 33.
3. Humboldt, *Personal Narrative*, 164.
4. Páez, *Travels and Adventures*, 50.
5. Zahm, *Following the Conquistadores*, 479.
6. Alexander et al., *Mythology*, 196.
7. Franco, *Mitos y creencias Margariteñas*, 64.
8. An interesting but erroneous tale has passed through the centuries thanks to Juan de Velasco (1727–1792), the historian of Quito, who had it that on a rock overhanging the Huallaga one could see an inscription that Aguirre cut after he murdered Ursúa. The rock is known as the Salto de Aguirre, but the geography and the timing are way off; Ursúa was murdered well beyond the spot.
9. Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 10.
10. Carolina Acosta-Alzuru, e-mail messages to author, June 9 and 10, 2010.
11. Pedro Bellorin and Carlos Stohr, interviews with the author, July 2010.
12. Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 2.
13. Arciniega, *Dos rebeldes*, 273.
14. Mampel González and Escandell Tur, *Lope de Aguirre*, 292ff.
15. Mampel González and Escandell Tur, *Lope de Aguirre*, 280, trans. Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 52.
16. See Jos, *La expedición*, 24.
17. Mampel González and Escandell Tur, *Lope de Aguirre*, 190.
18. Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 78–79; see also Mampel González and Escandell Tur, *Lope de Aguirre*, 200.
19. Jay, *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution*, 77.
20. Zúñiga's account came in the form of a letter written to his father, with full knowledge that it would eventually be made public. Mampel González and Escandell Tur, *Lope de Aguirre*, 26.

21. A relación was generally deemed a legal document, almost a confession, designed for the eyes of authorities sitting in judgment. The original chronicles can rightly be seen, in their time, as relacións, as opposed to Simón's *historial*, which was a historical account.
22. Mampel González and Escandell Tur, *Lope de Aguirre*, 187.
23. Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 50, 53.
24. Pastor Bodmer, *Armature of Conquest*, 305.
25. In *Caudillos: Dictators in Spanish America*, ed. Hugh M. Hamill, 27–41 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 28.
26. Graziano, *Millennial New World*, 229.
27. See Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 129.
28. See Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 22n13.
29. Pastor Bodmer, *Armature of Conquest*, 201.
30. Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 17.
31. See Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 9, 19n4.
32. Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 9.
33. "Emiliano Jos concludes, based on first-hand knowledge, that Valle-Inclán was thinking of Lope de Aguirre when he created his dictator in *Tirano Banderas*." Pastor Bodmer, *Armature of Conquest*, 305.
34. Roberto González Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 65.
35. Lastres and Seguín, *Lope de Aguirre*, 15.
36. See Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 108–9.
37. This idea is the major thrust of Lewis's *Miraculous Lie*.
38. Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 136.
39. For a brief biographical sketch of Álvarez Sáenz, see Lewis, *Miraculous Lie*, 144.
40. Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela, Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Cultura, http://www.ministeriodelacultura.gob.ve.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES, SPANISH

Aguilar y de Córdoba, Diego de. *El marañon.* 1578. Edición y estudio preliminar de Guillermo Lohmann Villena. Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1990.

Carillo, Francisco. *Encyclopedia historica de la literatura Peruana*, Vol. 3, *Cronistas de las gueraas civiles de Don Lope de Aguirre, Llamado "La ira de Dios"* Lima: Horizonte, 1977.

Castellanos, Juan de. *Elegías de varones ilustres de Indias.* Biblioteca de autores españoles, vol. 4. Madrid: Imprenta de los Sucesores de Hernando, 1914.

Fernández, Diego. *Historia del Perú.* Vol. 2 of *Crónicas del Perú.* edited by Juan Pérez de Tuleda. 5 vols. Madrid: Biblioteca Hispania, 1963–1965.

Franco, José Joaquin Salazar. *Mitos y creencias Margariteñas.* Tacarigua de Margarita: Fondo Editorial Fondene, 1999.

Lizárraga, Reginaldo de. *Descripción del Perú, Tucumán, Río de la Plata, y Chile.* Edited by Ignacio Ballesteros. Crónicas de America. Madrid: Historia 16, 1987.

López de Gómara, Francesco. *Historia general de las Indias.* Madrid: Calpe, 1922.

Mampel González, Elena, and Neus Escandell Tur, eds. *Lope de Aguirre: Crónicas (1559–1561).* Ediciones Universidad de Barcelona. Barcelona: Editorial 7½, 1981.

Ortiguera, Toribio de. *Jornada del río Marañón y relación verdadera de todo lo que sucedió en la jornada de Omagua y Dorado.* Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, 1968.

Oviedo y Valdés, Gonzalo Fernández de. *La historia general y natural de las Indias.* Edited by Jorge Gurria Lacroix, Madrid: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1979.

Simón, Pedro. *Historial de la expedición de Pedro de Ursúa al Marañón y de las aventuras de Lope de Aguirre.* Lima: Sanmartí, 1942.

Vásquez, Francisco. *El Dorado crónica de la expedición de Pedro de Ursúa y Lope de Aguirre.* Edited by Javier Ortiz de la Tabla. Madrid: Editorial Alianza, 1987.

Vázquez de Espinosa, Antonio. *Compendio y descipción de las Indias occidentals.* Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1969.

Zúñiga, Gonzalo de. *Relación muy verdadera de todo lo sucedido en el río Marañón. . . .* Vol. 4. Madrid: Colección de Documentos inéditos de Luis Torres de Mendoza, 1865.

PRIMARY SOURCES, ENGLISH

Cohen, John Michael. *The Discovery and Conquest of Peru: A Translation of Books I to IV of Agustín de Zárate's "History" of These Events, Supplemented by Eye-Witness Accounts of Certain Incidents and by Later Historians.* New York: Penguin, 1968.

Conder, Josiah. *The Modern Traveller: A Description, Geographical, Historical, and Topographical, of the Various Countries of the Globe.* London: Wells and Lilly, 1830.

Garcilaso de la Vega, El Inca. *Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru.* Translated by Harold Livermore. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966.

Humboldt, Alexander von. *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent during the Years 1799–1804*. London: G. Bell, 1821.

Jay, Felix. *Sin, Crimes, and Retribution in Early Latin America: A Translation and Critique of Sources—Lope de Aguirre, Francisco de Carvajal, Juan Rodríguez Freyle.* Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen, 1999.

Léon, Pedro Cieza de. *The Second Part of the Chronicle of Peru.* Translated and edited by Clements R. Markham. London: Hakluyt Society, 1883.

Markham, Clements. *The Conquest of New Granada*. London: Smith, Elder, 1912.

Oviedo y Valdés, Gonzalo Fernández de. *The Discovery of the Amazon According to the Account of Friar Gaspar de Carvajal and Other Documents.* Translated by Bertram T. Lee. New York: American Geographical Society, 1934.

———. *Natural History of the West Indies.* Translated by Sterling A. Stoudemire. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959.

Páez, Don Ramón. *Travels and Adventures in South and Central America: First Series: Life in the Llanos of Venezuela*. New York: C. Scribner, 1862.

Raleigh, Sir Walter. *The Discovery of the Large, Rich, and Beautiful Empire of Guiana*. London: Hakluyt Society, 1848.

Simón, Pedro . *The Expedition of Pedro de Ursua and Lope de Aguirre in Search of El Dorado and Omagua in 1560–1.* Translated by William Bollaert, with an introduction by Clements R. Markham. London: Hakluyt Society, 1861. Reprint, New York: Adamant Media, 2001.

Southey, Robert. *The Expedition of Orsua; and the Crimes of Aguirre.* London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1821.

———. *History of Brazil.* London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1810.

SECONDARY SOURCES, SPANISH

Álvarez Sáenz, Félix. *Crónica de blasfemos.* Lima: Editorial Hipatia, 1986.

Arciniega, Rosa. *Dos rebeldes en el Perú*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1946.

Burmester, Luis Germán. *Lope de Aguirre y la jornada de los Marañones.* Buenos Aires: La Cumbre Social Anónima, 1941.

Caro Baroja, Julio. *El Señor Inquisidor y otras vidas por oficio.* Madrid: Alianza, 1968.
Cerdá, Alfredo Gómez. *Los peregrinos del Amazonas.* Mexico City: Fondo del Cultura Económica, 1994.
Funes, Jorge Ernesto. *Una lanza por Lope de Aguirre.* Buenos Aires: Platero, 1984.
Ispizúa, Segundo de. *Los vascos en América.* Biblioteca de Autores Vascos 1. San Sebastián, Spain: Ediciones Vascas, 1979.
Jos, Emiliano. *Ciencia y osadía sobre Lope de Aguirre el peregrino.* Sevilla: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, 1950.
———. *La expedición de Ursúa al Dorado, la rebelión de Lope de Aguirre y el itinerario de los "Marañones," según los documentos del Archivo de Indias y varios documentos inéditos.* Huesca, Spain: Imprenta V. Campo, 1927.
Lastres, Juan B., and Carlos Alberto Seguín. *Lope de Aguirre, el rebelde: Un ensayo de psicohistoria.* Lima: Universidad de Lima, 1993.
Lope de Aguirre descuartizado. San Sebastián, Spain: Auñamendi, 1963.
López, Casto Fulgencio. *Lope de Aguirre, el peregrino: Primer caudillo de America.* Barcelona: Ediciones Nueva Cádiz, 1953.
Mártir de Anglería. Pedro. *Décadas del Nuevo Mundo.* Buenos Aires: Editorial Basel, 1944.
Morón, Guillerno. *Breve historia de Venezuela.* Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1979.
Otero Silva, Miguel. *Lope de Aguirre: Príncipe de la libertad.* Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1979.
Pastor Bodmer, Beatriz. *Discurso narrativo de la Conquista de América.* Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1983.
———. "Lope de Aguirre el loco: La voz de la soledad." *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 14, no. 28 (Spring 1988): 159–73.
Posse, Abel. *Daimón.* Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1989.
Sender, Ramón J. *La aventura equinoccial de Lope de Aguirre.* 3rd ed. Madrid: Magisterio Español y Casals, 1998.
Torrente Ballester, Gonzalo. *Lope de Aguirre: Crónica dramática de la historia americana en tres jornadas.* Madrid: Escorial, 1941.
Uslar Pietri, Arturo. *El camino de El Dorado.* 3rd ed. Buenos Aires: Losada, 1954.

SECONDARY SOURCES, ENGLISH

Ainsa, Fernando. "The Myth, Marvel, and Adventure of El Dorado: Semantic Mutations of a Legend." Translated by J. Corbett. *Diogenes* 41, no. 164 (1993): 13–26.
Alexander, Hartley Burr, Louis Herbert Gray, John Arnott MacCulloch, and George Foot Moore. *The Mythology of All Races.* Boston: Marshall Jones, 1920.
Bandelier, Adolph Francis Alphonse. *The Gilded Man (El Dorado) and Other Pictures of the Spanish Occupancy of America.* New York: D. Appleton, 1893.
Bray, Warwick. *The Gold of El Dorado.* London: Times Newspapers, 1978.
Chapman, Walker. *The Golden Dream: Seekers of El Dorado.* New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967.

Francis, J. Michael. *Invading Colombia: Spanish Accounts of the Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada Expedition of Conquest.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.

Graziano, Frank. *The Millennial New World.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Hemming, John. *The Conquest of the Incas.* New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1970.

———. *The Search for El Dorado.* New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978.

———. *Tree of Rivers.* New York: Thames and Hudson, 2008.

Holloway, Thomas H. "Whose Conquest Is This Anyway? *Aguirre, the Wrath of God.*" In *Based on a True Story: Latin American History at the Movies*, edited by Donald F. Stevens, 29–46. Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1997.

Keen, Benjamin. *Latin American Civilization.* Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000.

Lewis, Bart L. *The Miraculous Lie: Lope de Aguirre and the Search for El Dorado in the Latin American Historical Novel.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003.

Lockhart, James. *The Men of Cajamarca: A Social and Biographical Study of the First Conquerors of Peru.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972.

———. *Spanish Peru, 1532–1560: A Social History.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968.

Lowry, Walker. *Lope Aguirre, the Wanderer.* New York: Bookman Associates, 1952.

Markham, Clements Robert, Garcilaso de la Vega, Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, and Cristóbal de Acuña. *Expeditions into the Valley of the Amazons, 1539, 1540, 1639.* London: Hakluyt Society, 1859.

Martín, Luis. *Daughters of the Conquistadores: Women of the Viceroyalty of Peru.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983.

Minta, Stephen. *Aguirre: The Re-Creation of a Sixteenth-Century Journey across South America.* New York: Henry Holt, 1993.

Nicholl, Charles. *The Creature in the Map: A Journey to El Dorado.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Oviedo y Baños, José de. *The Conquest and Settlement of Venezuela.* Translated by Jeannette Johnson Varner. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

Pastor Bodmer, Beatriz. *The Armature of Conquest: Spanish Accounts of the Discovery of America, 1492–1589.* Translated by Lydia Longstreet Hunt. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992.

Silverberg, Robert. *The Golden Dream: The Seekers of El Dorado.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 1996.

Smith, Anthony. *Explorers of the Amazon.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Socolow, Susan Midgen. *The Women of Colonial Latin America.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Winsor, Justin, ed. *Narrative and Critical History of America: Spanish Explorations and Settlements in America from the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century.* New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1886.

Zahm, John Augustine. *Following the Conquistadores: Along the Andes and Down the Amazon.* London: D. Appleton, 1912.

Zárate, Agustín. *The Discovery and Conquest of Peru.* Translated by John Michael Cohen. New York: Penguin, 1968.

INDEX