

Review of *Children of the Sun* by Elizabeth Manson Bahr

Book Guild Publishing, Sussex, England: 2009

ISBN 978 1 84624 310 3

Like me, you may be somewhat wary of fictional interpretations of history, whether of the Hollywood variety or in novels: do they tell you what *really* happened or are they products of the script-writer's/novelist's imagination? Elizabeth Manson Bahr has written a novel – her first – depicting the fall of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán from the point of view of a few of the most-involved characters in the story: the Emperor himself and members of his family – many with their own influential roles in society, together with other representative members of that society – principally a maidservant and a wealthy merchant.

So how accurately can a twenty-first century writer delve into that world? Certainly not without a great deal of painstaking research which the author has clearly not stinted on, and which provides a persuasive background to the imaginary thoughts, conversations and actions which create the “plot” – its outcome never in doubt, of course – of the novel. Although I could not banish the skeptical thoughts which kept surfacing (“there’s no record of conversations like this”; “she can’t know that anything like that really happened”), they were gradually replaced by reflections that such things *might* have occurred given the cultural and intellectual world of the Mexica documented by commentators who were present at the time, details of which the author manages to slip in unobtrusively as natural adjuncts to the action, not as an obvious history lesson. In fact, those interested in Mexican history and aware of the crucial role of the events depicted will find in it a stimulus to reflection on how such events affected the real people involved, both the Spanish and the Mexica, and how members of the two cultures must have appeared to each other with all their apparently unbridgeable differences.

Anyone not so interested can simply enjoy a gripping story, well-told and full of exciting incident, even if the denouement can come as no surprise. One is drawn into the world of Moctezuma’s favourite daughter, married to her cousin (his nephew) and the events of the two turbulent years which changed her life. Bahr has used English forms of their names (as with most others), and so Tecuichpo and Cuauhtémoc, last Emperor of the Mexica, become Jewel and Falling Eagle. The outcome is a poignant, and – depending on your point of view – a tragic one for Mexico, but Jewel, unlike her sisters, is a survivor. The brief summary of the rest of her life at the end of the book leaves one wanting to know more about her (cue novel number two?), and also to seek out some of the many historical sources of the extraordinary events which form the background to this very readable book.

*Rosalind Maudslay on behalf of the British Mexican Society.*

*August 2009*