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Self-Promotion: The *Relaciones de Méritos y Servicios* and Their Historical and Political Interpretation

MURDO J. MACLEOD

During the Spanish colonial period in America, thousands of people, nearly all of them males, composed or had others compose their *relaciones de méritos y servicios*, accounts of their heroic or goodly deeds, and the supposed merits acquired through the virtues of their ancestors or relatives. Of these, probably as many as a thousand people paid for their *relaciones* to be printed in publishing establishments in Spain and Spanish America. If quantity is a criterion, then, this is evidently one of the major genres of writing and publishing in colonial Spanish America.¹ Moreover, as the Spanish-speaking population of the Americas increased over the years, as more printing presses were set up, and as society, or at least elite society, grew somewhat more literate, the number of *relaciones* written and printed also grew. *Relaciones* of this kind can be found scattered throughout national and provincial archives in the Americas, and especially in the Archivo General de Indias, Seville.

This article comprises four brief parts. The first explains the origins of, cultural assumptions behind, and nature of the *relaciones de méritos*; the second examines their content and format; the third

¹ See, for example, *List of Latin American Imprints before 1800, selected from bibliographies of José Toribio Medina, microfilmed by Brown University* (Providence, RI: Brown University Library, typescript, 1952), especially pp. 103-10. For a useful guide to documents which often contain *relaciones de méritos*, see José María de la Peña Cámara, ed., *A List of Spanish Residencias in the Archives of the Indies, 1516-1775* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress Reference Department, 1955). Other types of mass publication were: powers of attorney, bail bonds, mass cards, playing cards, formal invitations, *pasquines*, and handbills, all categories ignored by historians and which reveal as much about everyday life as *probanzas de méritos*, if not more. These categories of publishing were listed for the author by David Szewczyk of the Philadelphia Rare Books and Manuscripts Company, who provided helpful suggestions for this article.

suggests some possible uses for modern scholars; and finally, by way of illustration, the article will discuss in slightly more detail one minor subcategory of *relaciones*.

The *relaciones de méritos* emerged from Iberian courtly and medieval understandings of mutual obligations. Although class relations were rigidly vertical, the indigence of Spanish petty kings and their high nobilities made reciprocity essential if they were to obtain the help of others against the Moors or in a war with a rival Christian king, for example. In modern parlance, these kings and nobles could seldom afford to pay in advance and instead offered future rewards and favors. In order to obtain these, people of all stations above the poor and the peasantry learned to record and certify their work and deeds performed for their superiors, and because such rewards were, and are, often a long time in coming, these *résumés* would trace long histories. To this contractual reciprocity one must add medieval Spanish beliefs in lineage and inherent nobility and the gradually emerging notions about *pureza de sangre*, blood or lineage free from any "taint," especially of Jewish or Moorish ancestry.²

These systems and beliefs, in a society already based on clans, kinship, and patronage, converged to give rise to the widely accepted ideas that work performed for a superior—*servicios*—must in justice and in law be rewarded, and the famous deeds of one's noble ancestors—*méritos*—could be inherited and claimed by their descendants. Just as the sons of higher and lesser nobility could inherit titles through blood, so could people of all but the most wretched classes inherit the fame and collect the unpaid rewards due to their forebears.³

Nor was this understanding of the nature of inheritance, deeds, and rewards mere accepted custom. In a variety of *reales cédulas* successive kings recognized that merits earned and services

² This is especially true from the late fifteenth century forward.

³ Talking of great deeds, a Sevillian poet says, "y estos tales el buen rey/es obligado por ley/honrar y favorecellos" (and such as these a good king/is obliged by law/to honor and favor them. All translations by the author). The original quotation is found in José Durand, *La transformación social del conquistador*, 2 vols. (Mexico: Porrúa y Obregón, 1953), 1:72. See also the treatise, "Discurso legal de la obligación que tienen los reyes a premiar los servicios de sus vasallos, o en ellos o en sus descendientes," in Fernando Pizarro y Orellana, *Varones ilustres del Nuevo Mundo* (Madrid: Diego Díaz de la Carrera, 1639), second part, fols. 2-23.

rendered to them by their subjects *obliged* them, in law, to reciprocate.⁴ Subjects also knew their rights. Although *relaciones* contain appropriate and expected amounts of the servile formulae of the age, modern readers will often be astonished, given a general knowledge about the power of kings and the inherent lack of equality of the period, at the peremptory, demanding tone used by many of these petitioners. Some writers could barely hide their impatience over the Crown's delays in fulfilling its side of the bargain. A few *relaciones* have something of the flavor of modern dunning letters from loan companies.

Added to this legal tradition already well established in Spain was the conquest and settlement of America. Many of the conquistadors and *primeros pobladores* were of the petty nobility, or at least, after the anonymity of a sea voyage, passed themselves off as such. Because of their status, however, they had a special socio-economic problem. Only a few of them had a patrimony; they could not perform any manual labor without becoming *déclassés*, and they had to avoid at least the appearance of commerce, although most of them, unofficially, were in trade. Their only "trading goods" in America were their ability to exploit the new land and its inhabitants—which royal government and law tried to restrict—and their collection of *hazañas* and ancestors. The ancestors were either shadowy or vague in many cases or members of a swarm of minor nobles and, as a result, deeds became for some time more important than ancestry in the New World.⁵

The problem was how to "*valer más*," (become more worthy) or how to turn *honra* (honor and status) into something more tangible. Sixteenth-century Spaniards, perhaps more than any other Europeans of the time, recognized that nobility required money to support it in the expected style and that the more money acquired the more nobility was enhanced.⁶ Thus, as a group, they were intensely preoccupied with the problem of how to turn nobility, fame, and especially deeds

⁴ See, for example, the *real cédula* by Felipe II (1595) discussed in Durand, *La transformación social*, 78.

⁵ Luis Cabrera de Córdoba states, "la sangre vertida vale más que la heredada" (spilled blood is worth more than inherited blood). Luis Cabrera de Córdoba, *Felipe Segundo, Rey de España* (Madrid: Luis Sánchez, 1619), 79.

⁶ "Poderoso caballero es don dinero," said Quevedo. See also Pilar Sánchiz Ochoa, *Los hidalgos de Guatemala: realidad y apariencia en un sistema de valores* (Seville: Universidad de Sevilla, 1976).

into position and capital. One solution was to think of merits and services as capital and to use them openly to "buy" a better position from the king or the viceroy.

If one thinks of the deeds of the conquest as capital, then one gains new insight into the intense dislike the conquistador and *encomienda* class had for reformers such as Bartolomé de las Casas. Not only did the bishop advocate reforms such as the abolition of the *encomiendas*, but he also scorned their deeds, claiming that they were far less heroic and much more exploitive than the conquistadors had claimed: "...but of course, these were not heroic feats of conquest, but rather fights against chickens, for all of them are naked Indians."⁷ Las Casas was depreciating, lessening, the economic value of the *hazañas* which would go into their *relaciones de méritos y servicios*. And, of course, enough of them had lied or exaggerated (comparisons with imperial Rome were one of their favorites) to make them especially nervous about Las Casas' criticisms.

This brings up the question of skepticism. To the modern observer the *relaciones*—straight self-promotion and puffery—are suspect and even ridiculous. Why, then, were they so popular, so obviously important, and so much a part of all systems of career advancement, promotion, and reward?

Many *relaciones* were in fact discounted. Anyone who has seen, to take a few examples, the marginal notes on some *relaciones* left by the various *fiscales* of the Consejo de Indias, or the biting comments of some of the advisors to the archbishop of Mexico as he reviewed candidates for a vacant canonry, can certainly be sure that skepticism was as rampant then as now. Occasionally outright lies or forged credentials crop up, but these cases seem to have been discovered in their own day. If, for the first generation of mainland conquistadors, the Old World could be left behind and conveniently forgotten by some, and a new life invented, such obfuscation and revision of personal history became increasingly difficult as the sixteenth century advanced. The degree to which everyone knew each other in these typically small conquistador bands, even in the early colonial period, and to which people enjoyed turning up malicious gossip, are surprising. In his *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la*

⁷ The original wording is: "...pero, cierto, no eran grandes hazañas las que hacía venciendo, como pelease con gallinas, que son todos indios desnudos." Durand, *La transformación social*, 84-85.

Nueva España, Bernal Díaz del Castillo relishes telling about his comrade with the missing hand, cut off by the law as a judicial penalty, probably for theft; he mentions another who was the confessed nephew of an infamous footpad, and recounts that a *gallego* in the company, a man from the province of Galicia, was so constantly and profoundly inebriated that he was simply known to all as "el beberreo" (the drunk).⁸

As life became more competitive, these conquistadors were very sensitive to precedent. As far as merits and services were concerned, Hernán Cortés' men of the first expedition (1519) outranked those who came with Pánfilo de Narváez, while members of Francisco Pizarro's band present at the seizure of Atahualpa were careful to point out that they had earlier rights than those who accompanied Diego de Almagro, and that they, in turn, had prior claims over the latecomers who arrived with Pedro de Alvarado. As groups of conquistadors and settlers continued to arrive, the number of *relaciones de servicios* sent to Spain rose quickly, and competition, even among old comrades in arms, became intense. As a result, people watched each other carefully and were ever ready to set the record straight and correct or denounce errors of fact, something Bernal Díaz was doing in his writings, after all. (By the time he wrote, of course, most of his conquistador cohorts were dead, so he had little fear of rebuttal.)⁹

Gossip and malice were not the only factors keeping some *relaciones* reasonably honest. Such questions as one's role in a battle or campaign could be subject to various interpretations and rival claims, but other matters such as offices held and tangible good deeds performed were too much a matter of public record to be falsified completely. For instance, a priest's role in helping those afflicted by an epidemic could be exaggerated by the priest, and in fact clergy regularly overstated their unflinching and life-threatening dedication during these disasters. *Relaciones de méritos* seem to show that they never abandoned their diseased parishioners unless ill themselves, but in fact burial registers show that they often fled from these epidem-

⁸ Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (Madrid: Imprenta del Reyno, 1632), 241-45.

⁹ Several of the *probanzas* cited below contain cantankerous corrections to other people's claims (see especially notes 23 and 24).

ics.¹⁰ It is likely that the *libros de entierros*, at least in this comparison, are more accurate. Other *servicios*, however, were much easier to verify, such as a priest's claim that he had rebuilt the parish church, changed the roof from straw to pan tiles, or installed a new altar with an expensive icon of Saint Joseph, or an *alcalde mayor's* claim that he had restored the *casas reales*, or settled forty Indian families scattered in *rancherías* into one village. The bishops came through most villages on fairly regular pastoral visitations, and officials were surrounded in many towns by jealous *vecinos* (town citizens) quick to spot a factual distortion. *Residencias*, judicial review of conduct at the end of a term of office, with all their flaws, also kept petitioners from making glaringly false claims of good deeds. The following *relación* is typical. Its author, Capitán Don Pedro Ponce de León, is most specific about details which are readily verifiable by others but vaguer about his role in battles and voyages where his participation could be challenged or subject to different interpretations. He writes, for example, that he has served eight years, eleven months, and eleven days but is vague about his role in a battle against the Turks.¹¹

Printing may have reduced skepticism and increased accuracy. Although a minority of the total number of *relaciones*, those which were published seem—this is an impressionistic finding—more moderate in tone, more apt to rely on documents of record, and more likely to call in witnesses to testify to their veracity. People who published their *relaciones* were in general probably wealthier than those who did not and, of far greater importance, were usually higher in rank and more publicly visible. Moreover, they may well have been constrained by the realization that printing one's claims to preferences and rewards exposed them to a much wider audience over the years. Perhaps fifty to one hundred would be published, whereas manuscript *relaciones* commonly went to only a handful of people.

It should be added, however, that a counter-argument is also plausible. Written *relaciones de méritos* were often made, witnessed,

¹⁰ The Genealogical Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints contains microfilm of thousands of *libros de entierros*. This author's work on villages around Guadalajara shows them to be fairly accurate regarding priestly absences during times of calamity.

¹¹ Capitán don Pedro Ponce de León, *Relaciones de servicios de Capitán don Pedro Ponce de León, que lo es de una Compañía de Infantería Española* (Madrid: n.p., 1680), especially fols. 1-4.

and certified in the local notary's office, a center for community gossip, exchange of news, and idlers—not, in other words, the place to lie too blatantly or to keep secrets. Perhaps such a place inhibited flights of fancy more than the relative anonymity of a printing shop, at least for those not too conscious of the perdurability of the printed word.¹² In fact, comparisons of *relaciones de méritos y servicios* which describe the same facts or events show that while most people emphasized and enlarged upon their own roles in major and minor happenings, in this genre, they did not usually lie about the basic verifiable facts.

Relaciones de méritos y servicios followed a basic format. Typically they began with humble and formulaic greetings to the eminent person to whom the petition was addressed, although some greetings show considerable eccentricity. Licenciado Joseph Antonio Cortés, *teniente de cura* (assistant priest) of the village of Amanalco, whose clerical career, incidentally, was going nowhere, addressed the archbishop of Mexico in a chatty, familiar, yet ornate way. He begins "My beloved prelate" and, as if that were not enough to attract the prelate's attention, continued, "These brief merits of mine sail safely before the wind, brief indeed to bring to such illustrious notice." He goes on to insist defensively on his right to bring these few merits to the attention of one so great, for after all, "The aromatic ointments with which Saint Mary Magdalene anointed Christ's feet would not have been of such great value if she had not surrendered her heart with them." The unfortunate Licenciado Cortés had been toiling in Indian parishes for twenty-nine years and still had not won a parish of his own. His ingratiating effusiveness may have been born of desperation and certainly was not typical.¹³

Following the greeting would be a brief or lengthy recounting of lineage and ancestry in which certain formulaic phrases recurred,

¹² David Szewczyk is persuaded that manuscript sources are more accurate. He also points to a change, around 1640, from manuscript to more printed sources. (Personal communication.)

¹³ The original wording of these quotations is: "o Prelado amado mio;" "Caminan seguros con Viento en popa, estos cortos méritos mios corto Volumen ala verdad para una atencion ilustre;" "No huvieran sido de tanto valor, los unguentos aromaticos, conque Stta Maria Magdalena ungió los pies de Xptto, si con ellos no huviera ofrecido rendida su corazon." Méritos del Lizdo. Joseph Antonio Cortés, Theniente de Cura de Amanalco, Relaciones de méritos, siglo XVIII, John Carter Brown Library, Providence, Rhode Island (hereinafter JCBL), no. 24.

such as, "legitimate son of married parents, old Christians free from all racial taint," to which were sometimes added extras such as "of Jews, etc.," or "of widely known, honorable, and moral conduct."¹⁴

People of little social or economic importance sometimes would not stress their ancestry, often because it was obviously unknown or of little consequence. Some simply did not name their parents at all, while others glossed over the whole question with vague declarations such as "and taking for granted his untainted birth, and first steps in Grammar and Rhetoric."¹⁵ Others still, admitting to having been orphaned, simply claimed legitimacy.¹⁶ One extraordinary case, that of a foundling left on the doorstep of an Indian woman who then raised him to adulthood, asserted that he did look Spanish and, because of his many other merits, asked that a legal exemption be made. It was granted, and the petitioner passed from the novitiate into the Franciscan order and monastery in Puebla.¹⁷

Indians, especially those in Holy Orders, had to prove noble descent and took much more care to do so. Mestizos were often the product of an irregular union, such as that of a conquistador and an Indian princess. Doña Francisca Maldonado de Guzmán Villacreces y Alvarado had three problems as she composed her *relación*. As a woman, she had to prove that all male descendents from her parents Don Pedro de Alvarado, conquistador, and Doña Luisa Xicotenga, daughter of the cacique of Tlaxcala, were extinct and that, as a result, she was entitled to inherit their accumulation of merits, "so that to her alone have come down the services and merits of the said *adelantado* and of doña Luisa Jinotega."¹⁸ Second, she faced the problem that

¹⁴ The original wording of these quotations is: "hijo legitimo de padres casados, cristianos viejos limpios de toda mala rraza;" "de Judios etc;" "de notorios, honrados y ajustados procederer." See Relaciones de méritos, siglo XVIII, JCBL, nos. 1, 25, and 67, for variations in the standard formula.

¹⁵ The original wording is: "supuesto su limpio nacimiento, y primeros progresos en la Grammatica, y Rethorica." Méritos de Dr. Dn. Joseph Rodriguez Díaz, Relaciones de méritos, siglo XVIII, JCBL, no. 124, fol. 1. See also another *relación* by him, no. 116.

¹⁶ See, for example, Relación de méritos de Joseph Mariano Sánchez Motero, Relaciones de méritos, siglo XVIII, JCBL, no. 82.

¹⁷ Informaciones franciscanas, 18 legajos, JCBL, leg. 6, fols. 23-27.

¹⁸ The original wording is: "de manera que en sola ella han quedado los servicios y méritos del dicho adelantado y doña Luisa Jinotega." Información promovida por Da. Francisca Maldonado de Guzmán Villacreces y Alvarado, esposa de don Juan de Alvarado, para probar que en ella habían recaído los méritos y servicios de sus

Pedro and Luisa had not married, so that not only mixed blood but also illegitimacy were in her background. While this could not be ignored, its impact could be lessened somewhat by introducing several elderly witnesses who testified that Pedro did not treat Luisa as an occasional concubine but rather respected her, appeared in public with her regularly, and publicly demonstrated that he considered her to be of noble lineage and his constant companion. These witnesses also pointed out that Luisa was a baptized and observant Christian and that Pedro had fully acknowledged and recognized his bastard children by her. Doña Francisca's third task, that of establishing that she had the public reputation of being a member of Santiago de Guatemala's elite and had married a person of like station, was relatively easy to do, again with the help of witnesses. In writing to the Crown to support Doña Francisca's case, the *audiencia* of Guatemala gave one of the most eloquent and elevated defenses in the entire genre of *méritos y servicios*. These documents were vital, the *audiencia's oidores* claimed, because great deeds should be recorded and remembered and any self-respecting society needed a complete history.¹⁹

The genealogical section found in most of these documents best illustrates the fact that past merits and services were considered capital, inheritable goods of value. Sometimes this practice was manifested in rather absurd ways. Captain Antonio de los Ríos y Terán, of the militia in Chile, wrote an account of his merits in 1754, but by 1770, when he went through the process for a second time, he still had not found more than half a printed page worth writing down. So he turned to his brother, a canon in the cathedral of Santiago, and listed his much more considerable achievements, hoping to partake of his brother's merits because he had so few of his own.²⁰

antepasados Xicotenga, señor de Tlascala, el adelantado don Pedro de Alvarado, don Francisco de Villacreses y Alvarado y otros, Guatemala, 26 May 1633, in *Epistolario de la Nueva España*, ed. Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, 16 vols. (Mexico: J. Porrúa e hijos, 1939-42), 13, 367-76. Luisa Xicotenga had been a gift from the cacique of Tlaxcala to Cortés, then by him to Alvarado but never became Alvarado's wife. He married twice.

¹⁹ The *audiencia's* letter is in Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario de la Nueva España*, 241-45. For the antecedents of this case, see "Provança del Adelantado D. Pedro de Alvarado y doña Leonor de Alvarado su hija," *Anales de la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala*, 13:4 (1937):475-87.

²⁰ Antonio de los Ríos y Terán, *Relación de los méritos, y servicios de D. Antonio de*

Similar to the case of the Guatemalan mestiza *relación* discussed above, and a clear indication of how merits and services were considered inheritable goods, was the *relación* submitted to the Crown by Don Joseph de Quiroga y Losada, a cavalry captain. In his fifteen years, eight months, and twelve days of service—some of these petitioners could calculate the worth they had accumulated down to the very day—he had performed well but hardly in spectacular fashion. His father, a sailor and soldier, was even less distinguished. But Quiroga's uncle had exceeded them both, serving with distinction in both Peru and Chile, and had appointed Quiroga as heir to his *mayorazgo* (entailed estate), titles, and other worldly goods. Thus, Quiroga assumed, he was also heir to the rewards flowing from his uncle's merits and services. Unfortunately, it is not known if his presumptuous petition was successful. In another far-fetched case, Joan de Salazar sought reward because his wife's uncle had taken part in the conquest of New Spain. The economic and material aspects of these petitions could not be clearer.²¹

Those who lacked a distinguished lineage and outstanding or noble relatives tended to pass quickly on to the next standard part of the *relación*, the personal biography. Here too there was a variability which provided clues. Some *relaciones* gave day-to-day details of a whole life while others obviously felt it best to skip certain years and events. Some writers showed a becoming modesty and wrote only of events and deeds of fair importance. Others, especially those who had been passed over for a post, promotion, or grant, or were becoming desperate because of age or misfortune, tended to heap up any and every detail of their lives which was at all praiseworthy, hoping to bludgeon their superiors into rewarding them by the sheer weight of their accumulated minor services.²²

All kinds of people submitted petitions. Soldiers told of their years of service, campaigns, and battles; government officials listed their posts, the committees, the *juntas* on which they had served, and *residencias* which had cleared them of any major faults; clerics either

los Ríos y Terán, capitán de milicias del reyno de Chile (Madrid: n.p., 1770), fols. i-iv.

²¹ Don Joseph de Quiroga y Losada, *Relación de los servicios del Capitán de Cavallos Coraças don Ioseph de Quiroga y Losada...* (Madrid: n.p., 1670). The petition by Joan de Salazar, which includes his wife's uncle's *probanza*, is in the Archivo General de Indias, Patronato 89, leg. 2, fol. 1, and is dated 30 May 1626.

²² See, for example, *Relación del Br. Dn. Lorenzo Díaz del Costero, Relaciones de méritos*, siglo XVIII, JCBL, no. 44.

recounted their degrees, learning, and cathedral and university positions, or told of parish work or churches repaired and of feeding the poor, traversing difficult routes, and comforting the dying.²³

Although such accounts were the vast majority, some had more intricate purposes. García del Pilar, who escaped with honor from the defeats of the *Noche Triste* at Tenochtitlán, wrote his account with many of the usual expectations of the sixteenth century. He wanted a coat of arms depicting his role after the defeat and showing two Indian chiefs he had captured. He wished to be reconfirmed in his possession of lands and *encomiendas* and to be granted some kind of permanency in them. (He was probably afraid that the new *audiencia* would confiscate all these things if he dared to travel far, as he planned to do in his impending journey to Spain.) He wanted to be appointed *vecino* of Mexico City and of one other city in New Spain, with all the rights and privileges and grants of Indians' labor and tribute which accompanied grants of *vecindad*. All these requests were normal and reasonably close to what the petitioner might expect from a grateful monarch, but then García de Pilar went too far. He asked for permission to bring six Indian slaves to Castile, for sale perhaps, and two *naborías* (personal servants) for his own use. This was against the law, the request was denied, and García del Pilar's presumption must have cast a gloom over the rest of his petition because a decision on the rest of it was tabled.²⁴

Probanzas or *relaciones de méritos y servicios* could have many other purposes. Bernal Díaz del Castillo wrote his *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* partly to correct what he believed to be the distorted record written by Cortés' secretary, Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia de la Conquista de México*. Many *probanzas* followed this tradition, asking for nothing specific at that time but hoping to correct an erroneous previous publication. Don Alonso de Sotomayor, commander of the Spanish forces who defeated Sir Francis Drake in Panama in 1596 shortly before Drake's death, was obviously the moving force behind Francisco Caro y Torres' vindicative *relación* of 1620. Lope de Vega, the most famous

²³ All of these types can be found in the *relaciones* listed in José Toribio Medina, *Biblioteca hispano americana* (Santiago de Chile: Fondo Histórico y Bibliográfico José Toribio Medina, 1961), 4:255-72.

²⁴ "Relación de méritos y servicios de don García del Pilar," in Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario de la Nueva España*, 14:159-63.

and prolific playwright of Spain's Golden Age, in his long poem on Drake, "La Dragontea," had praised Diego Xuárez de Amaya, the *alcalde mayor* of Nombre de Dios, and mistakenly addressed him as Captain General. Caro y Torres pointed out that in fact Xuárez de Amaya had abandoned Nombre de Dios without a fight when Drake's men landed and that the only captain general in Panama, the true hero of the victory for manifest and demonstrable reasons, was Don Alonso de Sotomayor.²⁵

One step removed from the corrective or revisionist *probanzas* was a group whose purpose might be called keeping the record clear and up-to-date. In one case, accused and convicted of wrongdoing, including malfeasance in office, Don Joseph del Pozo y Honesto, treasurer of the Real Hazienda [*sic*] of San Juan, Puerto Rico, published a long defense in 1723 after having been convicted and sentenced by the Council of the Indies. (One can assume that cutting jokes about having been to the public well too often, given his other surname of "Pozo," were enjoyed by the small backbiting elite of colonial San Juan.)²⁶ Pozo y Honesto decided to use *probanzas de méritos* as a protective device, or "preemptive strike" in modern parlance, and clearly wanted to keep all his laudable activities plainly on the record. To this end, he published *relaciones de méritos* on 6 June 1724, 2 August 1727, and 15 July 1730, approximately every three years. For someone so obviously under suspicion perhaps the expense was a good and worthwhile investment.²⁷

Another category of *relaciones* which took them a step further

²⁵ Francisco Caro y Torres, *Relación de los servicios que hizo a su Magestad del Rey don Felipe Segundo y Tercero don Alonso de Sotomayor, de Abito de Santiago...* (Madrid: Viuda de Cosme Delgado, 1620).

²⁶ José del Pozo y Honesto y Pedro José de Nava, *Demonstración legal en defensa de D. Joseph del Pozo y Honesto, tesorero, y oficial real de la Real Hazienda de la ciudad, è isla de S. Juan de Puerto Rico, en Indias...* (Madrid: n.p., 1723). The kinds of petty, but intense, squabbles which could arise within a tiny, competitive, yet fairly isolated elite such as that of late colonial San Juan can be seen in José G. Rigau-Pérez, "The Introduction of Smallpox Vaccination in 1803, and the Adoption of Immunization as Government Function in Puerto Rico," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 69 (1989):393-424.

²⁷ *Relación de méritos de don Joseph del Pozo y Honesto, tesorero oficial real de las caxas de Puerto Rico* (Madrid: n.p., 1724); *Relación de méritos de don Joseph del Pozo y Honesto, tesorero oficial real de las caxas de Puerto Rico* (Madrid: n.p., 1727); and *Relación de méritos de don Joseph del Pozo y Honesto, tesorero oficial real de las caxas de Puerto Rico* (Madrid: n.p., 1730).

than the corrective *probanzas* and those meant to set the record straight were those in reply to grave charges. Perhaps the best known of these is the autobiographical defense of Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán, conqueror and destroyer of Pánuco and other provinces.²⁸

Beyond the clear and partly disguised personal motives behind some of the *relaciones de servicios*, they can also reveal the gradual but massive changes within the period. A study of large numbers of the *relaciones* confirms many trends already suggested in the historical literature, as the following examples illustrate.

Many of the sixteenth-century petitions from Mexico, Guatemala, New Granada, and Peru sought *encomiendas* or continuations of those already in existence. As the seventeenth century advanced, pensions and offices became a leading aim as the decline of the Indian population and the rise of *empleomanía* (hunger for office) made *encomiendas* less desirable and government positions comparatively more lucrative. By the mid-eighteenth century, signs of the first great Atlantic trade boom are visible. To be sure, not all areas or groups benefitted. Areas which were heavily populated by indigenous groups, such as inland Mexico, Guatemala, and highland Peru and Alto Peru may well have seen a deterioration in living conditions as the pressure rose to produce goods for the growing export trades. Many of the *probanzas*, however, now emphasized tax exemptions, trade privileges, and monopolies. Some parts of the economy had shifted again because of the rise in long-distance trades, and commerce had gained on public office and government pensions as a favored resource or livelihood.

The perusal of large numbers of these documents also offers the reader a clear picture of the beliefs and unwritten assumptions of the age. For example, in spite of the numerous *reales cédulas* inveighing against it, nepotism was too deeply part of the extended family and patronage traditions of the culture to be denied. In fact, people mentioned "nepotism" casually, even proudly, and obviously believed it to be fair and creditable to them that some uncle, cousin, royal official, or bishop had brought them along as a secretary or page or had found them a parish or a minor office simply because of family ties or obligations of patronage.²⁹ Sometimes local populations

²⁸ Nuño de Guzmán, "Memorial," in Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario de la Nueva España*, 24, 166-94.

²⁹ *Relaciones de méritos*, siglo XVIII, JCBL, nos. 4, 25, 76, 89, 109, and 112.

must have suffered considerably because of nepotism. A priest awarded a new parish commonly brought with him his aged parents or widowed mother, his unmarried sisters—a priest's house was a fairly safe *purdah* in most cases—and even indigent cousins and family retainers or *paniguados* (hangers-on) if the parish was wealthy enough. In the mid-1750s, the central Mexican village of Zempoala may have felt looted rather than sustained by its new *cura* Andrés Ygnacio Fernández Andrade. According to his *relación*, he was to remain more than seven years, but no sooner had he arrived than he installed a swarm of brothers and half-brothers, perhaps as many as four of them, plus their family members, as vicars and *tenientes de cura* in the parish. When Bachiller Don Francisco Gil de Andrade, a member of the same clan and parish priest of Cuauhtitlán, died in late December 1780, a letter dated New Year's Day 1781 asking the archbishop of Mexico to attend the exequies was signed by no less than sixteen men, three of them brothers of the deceased and the rest probably hangers-on, all living in this village near Mexico City.³⁰ Patterns like these appear very clearly in the written genre *relaciones y méritos*.

Perhaps a major use for the *méritos y servicios* is the reconstruction of group biographies and the fine details of historical events. The gradual shifts of tactics and fortunes in a battle can be fairly well established by reading the conflicting and converging versions of several participants. The career patterns of a group of officials as they are promoted, fail to advance, or are disgraced, and the kinds of positions to which they aspire upon reaching a given level, are all quite readily available if these *relaciones* are studied systematically. The history of a church building or *cabildo* house—when it was built, given a new roof, hit by lightning or destroyed by fire, extended and improved, became the home of a new image, or fell down only to be abandoned—can all be resurrected through the use of *relaciones de méritos* and other documents.

A prosopographic case study may serve as the final illustration, as a way of concluding this article. In 1758, 1760, 1762, 1764, and at similar intervals thereafter, the archbishop of Mexico

contain candid descriptions of different types of nepotism and their role in career advancement.

³⁰ Noticia de la muerte de Bachiller don Francisco Gil de Andrade, cura de Quauhtitlán, Relaciones de méritos, siglo XVIII, JCBL, no. 71. See also nos. 47 and 50.

authorized *concurros* or *oposiciones* (competing candidacies) among the secular clergy of the diocese to fill vacant positions at the cathedral, in Mexico City, and in the country parishes. The method by which people applied and competed was quite standardized. They submitted a *relación* or *probanza* of merits and services with whatever supporting documents they wished. Many referred to documents about them already on file in the cathedral archives, and cathedral officials would then certify the veracity of these documents. In the John Carter Brown Library there is a large *legajo*, or bundle, which contains over 150 of these autobiographical applications for the aforementioned *concurros*. About seventy of them are in manuscript form and over eighty were printed; some employ both forms. An indigent priest, for example, having applied in 1758 with a printed merits and services, would reapply four years later by adding on a handwritten page or two about his accomplishments since the previous *concurso*. Several of the documents are synopses of longer ones, and a few priests submitted two or three *relaciones* in these years. What emerges most notably from this *legajo* are not only the names and individual lives, but a group biography of the 150 or so secular clergy active in religious life in the diocese of Mexico during the mid-eighteenth century.³¹

Who were these clergy? Most were poor, from peripheral villages and mining camps, and, in spite of their claims, of less-than-renowned parentage. Many must have been mestizos, although fairly large numbers were from Spain or were the sons of peninsular parents. A sizeable group was from Mexico City and a small number had reasonable claims to nobility or noble connections. The only undoubtedly noble group was the five Indian priests, all able to prove they had descended from preconquest rulers.

Two career tracks emerge. The most prestigious, as one might well expect, involved posts in the cathedral chapter and at the university and colleges of Mexico City. Priests on this track seldom made much of their pastoral duties but instead emphasized their degrees, continuing education, sermons, and teaching. The other career track was that of parish priest in the poorer parishes of Mexico

³¹ Relaciones de méritos, siglo XVIII, JCBL. For an excellent recent study of clerical careers, see William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), especially Part 2.

City or, as was the case for the large majority of these men, assistant priest, vicar, or titular parish priest in the dozens of country parishes in the diocese. In both tracks, they served long apprenticeships after being admitted to Holy Orders. Some men, even after thirty years of apprenticeship, never obtained a parish of their own.

If one was on a "fast track," it helped to be from Spain and/or to be of clearly noble origins. It also helped to have an important sponsor, especially if he were a cleric from the diocese. Higher education, especially when it meant circulating in or near Mexico City and the seats of power, was a definite advantage. Although Indian nobles advanced reasonably well, they never achieved what their Spanish counterparts did. Obscure origins were a heavy handicap.

Knowing an indigenous language was also an essential skill on the parish priest track, less so if one were a Mexico City educator or bureaucrat. Because there was an oversupply of those knowledgeable of Náhuatl, it was less prestigious and thus less helpful to one's career than languages such as Otomí or Masagua.

Most of these clergy lived isolated, narrow lives. After they left home for clerical training or arrived from Spain, few wandered far from the diocese, although they were constantly shuttled from village to village within the diocese itself. A small minority acquired experience in adjacent areas such as Puebla, Oaxaca, or Michoacán. A very few had been soldiers or sailors, and one had been an important civil administrator in Panama, but nearly all had been destined for a clerical career from between the ages of eight and twelve years and, having never left the diocese, knew no other life.

The secular clergy in Mexico City lived repetitious lives of sermons, teaching, and theological seminars and debates. Most had few pastoral duties and participated little in more momentous events, hardly mentioning their roles in such matters as earthquake relief or care of the sick during epidemics. On the other hand, the monotony of life out in the country parishes was relieved by danger. Applicants often began their parish career by assisting invalid or dying priests. Some parishes were huge, their parishioners sickly, and the weather hot. Roads were little more than muddy tracks. Priests slipped off mules and horses and broke arms, legs, and skulls; were bitten by mosquitoes, scorpions, and snakes; fell down cliffs (one man, his death graphically reported, was "smashed to bits"); were trapped by

mudslides and floods; and died of typhus, smallpox, and other diseases during cyclical epidemics. In a few places parishioners rioted and threatened priests because of unpopular policies.

Although priests served in a few prosperous rural parishes, most complained of the direst poverty. Some of the poorest parishes were unwilling to support their local clergy, who apparently ate little more than tortillas and beans. Several supported brothers, sisters, aged parents, and other dependents. Many described the conflict between pastoral duties and an adequate level of living. In a dispersed and difficult parish it was essential to hire assistant priests to cover all the territory and attend the night calls to the sick and dying, the Sunday and fiesta masses, and the baptisms and funerals in outlying villages and *rancherías*. Yet, if one hired helpers, they in turn needed food, clothing, and lodging, and one's income and level of living declined even more. If one decided against hired help, one risked falling ill from overwork or received constant reprimands from visiting bishops for not fulfilling all of one's duties or not covering all of the parish territory.

A similar conundrum faced priests over the question of good works. Because of the two systems of *oposiciones* and *relaciones de méritos* and episcopal visitations to parishes, it was more advantageous to perform tangible and visible good deeds, such as rebuilding, embellishing, or bringing precious items to the church or parish house, than it was to care for the sick, hasten long distances to tend to the dying, or teach young children. But building programs and buying images or ornaments cost money while pastoral duties and teaching did not. Yet if one did not invest money for these things, there would be little to include in one's *relación* and promotion would stop. Restoring a church was good for local morale and was an investment in one's own clerical future, but it also meant a lowered standard of living in many cases.

The above is simply a sketch of some of the more obvious findings from a concentrated group of *relaciones de méritos y servicios*, but the usefulness to scholars of this form of writing should be apparent. Anthropologists, historians, historians of art and architecture, scholars of family networks, prosopography, linguistics, disease, religion, and acculturation have used these *relaciones* far too little. Whatever their shortcomings as a literary form, they were an

essential part of Spanish colonial life, and if scholars wish to understand that life, they must first understand their importance.