



Conquistador: A Novel of Alternate History

S.M. Stirling

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A new alternate history from the bestselling author of "The Peshawar Lancers." It is 1946. The white man is about to discover America.

Conquistador: A Novel of Alternate History Details

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From Reader Review Conquistador: A Novel of Alternate History for online ebook

Ryan Mishap says

Interminable would be a word to describe this alternate world tale that would have been a fast paced adventure story at half the length. Shortly after world war two, a slightly injured soldier rents a place in Oakland. He sets up a shortwave radio in the basement and somehow opens a portal into a California that had never been colonized. He gets his military buddies together and they enter this new land and set up a mini-empire.

In modern times, two Fish and Game cops tracking traffic in endangered species come across a California Condor whose DNA does not match any of the known groups left. This leads them to the secret of the Gate and the other world. There's a plot there to overthrow the benevolent dictatorship of the Thirty Families and start moving into the modern world.

An intriguing idea and, again, would have been better at half the length. Stirling tends to go overboard with description--for instance, he can't just say a lawn overgrown with weeds, no, he has to describe every individual type of plant, the border of the lawn, the overall setting, and then maybe have his character remember some childhood thing about lawns and growing up in whatever ethnicity Stirling has assigned him. He tries too hard to create a concrete reality for us to see when a few brushstrokes would let us use our imagination.

Heather says

This book got my attention due to the alternate history. It got a little confusing because it kept alternation between two different worlds (First Side and New Virginia) in two different years. It was interesting to see how New Virginia was colonized and how it was governed. The main characters were interesting, but at times a bit stereo-typical.

Carolyn says

Excellent premise and I loved the ending! Made me wish for more (a series!) to continue on in what happens as this society evolves and hits it's own growing pains. But then, SimCity was always my favorite computer game (geeky, I know! =)

There is a lot of waxing poetic and descriptions of the differences in the 'other' California, which I couldn't get into. I've not spent much time in California, so I didn't recognize most of the place names. If you've been there much (or live there now), you'll undoubtedly get more of a buzz from it.

Otherwise, a fully excellent book!

Peter Tillman says

It's 1946. The white man is about to discover America....

Bottom line: Steve Stirling's writing just keeps getting better. This parallel-world thriller incorporates the

best features of his popular Draka and Island in the Sea of Time series. Enthusiastically recommended.

1946: John Rolfe, recuperating from his war wounds, is tinkering with a war-surplus shortwave radio. !!CRACK!! The end of his basement is GONE, replaced with a sheet of rippling silver....

2009: Tom Christiansen, game warden, is on a bust of wildlife-smugglers. The smuggler's warehouse is destroyed by incendiaries, but he find a fresh-killed man -- and a fresh-killed dodo...

And Steve Stirling is off and running with another of his patented reinventions of SF/F classics, here the 'virgin world next door.' As always, his research is deep, and impeccable.. His major characters come alive, and the minor ones carry their spears smoothly.

The structure of the book is a police-procedural in 2009 -- Christiansen & a buddy work through an increasingly-weird wildlife-parts smuggling case -- with explanatory flashbacks in "New Virginia", as John Rolfe has tagged his virgin California. Once the wardens have twigged to the Rolfe's secret, they're abducted to New Virginia, and the book morphs to a political thriller -- Draka-like Elements are intent on subverting the (mostly) benevolent oligarchy that rules the new New World. One of the strengths of Conquistador is that all sides are drawn warts and all -- no shining heroes or dastardly villains here (OK, maybe a couple of the latter) -- just people playing with the hands they're dealt. And the new New World is a fabulous wish-fulfillment fantasy, that almost everyone who's gotten a bellyful of the downside of civilization has had -- but here worked out thoughtfully and carefully. Very nice.

This is Stirling's best book yet. If you've liked previous Stirling books, you'll love this one. And if you've put off trying him -- wait no longer. This is a winner.

Reviewed for SF Site in 2003, <https://www.sfsite.com/05a/cq151.htm>
Lightly revised, 2017

Joshua Done says

This was one of the better Stirling novels. I really wish it was the first in a series of novels with people going back between our world and the parallel dimension. (spoiler) If the portal hadn't been closed there would have been lots of opportunity for political intrigue, invasions, and general muckily muck that would have created lots of fun for many books to come. That is only a problem, however, because of how well he built the universe. The people are believable, the community is realistic and starkly contrasting with the more... sympathetic, people of today. I think that this novel is a must read for anyone who thinks they understand the dynamics of colonization and can pass judgement on past generations. That, however, is a personal conclusion which serves to show how good this book really is. It discusses many real world issues in an entertaining and engaging setting that draws the reader in like a moth to a flame.

Jonathan Palfrey says

This is a story with a great scenario and Stirling's usual very thorough research and above-average writing, with plenty of detailed scenic descriptions.

It's the story of two worlds: one very close to our own (though not exactly the same), and an alternative world in which Alexander the Great didn't die at 32 but lived on to be 76. As Alexander lived a dangerous

life and seems to have been a heavy drinker, this scenario is rather unlikely, but possible.

The consequences include no Roman Empire, no Latin, no Christianity, no Islam, no surviving Judaism, retarded technological development, and no European discovery of America; until a young Virginian ex-soldier called John Rolfe steps through his private, accidental gateway in California in 1946. Developments are rather interesting for those involved.

Characterization is competent and reasonably varied, considering that most of the main characters have military training and combat experience (in different times and places). However, there are more memorable characters in some other Stirling books.

The first half of the book describes limited and secretive interaction between our California and the alternative version. This part of the book is well paced and fascinating.

Halfway through, all the action moves to the other world, and suddenly slows down as we're given a sort of guided tour. This is mildly interesting but fails to maintain the pace that we've become accustomed to.

The rest of the book is basically the story of a quasi-military operation in the alternative California; the distinctive characteristics of the other world are still there, but the story becomes preoccupied with tactics; readable enough, but the initial sense of wonder has dissipated because we're now familiar with the whole situation.

At the end, the story is wound up briskly and in a fairly satisfactory way, though it leaves me wondering how events would unfold on the other world in future. I suspect the answer is that it would gradually become more like ours, although that would disappoint both the author and most of his characters.

This book started with a really great idea and exploited it well, but Stirling was unable to come up with a second half that maintained the impetus and matched the standard of the first half.

When I first read it, I thought the political system created by Rolfe on the second world rather bizarre, and I wondered why Stirling chose it when he had a free hand to choose anything. I've since come to realize that he didn't really have a free hand. The whole situation rests on the key issue of gate security: if the US government in the first world discovers the gate, Rolfe and his partners stand to lose everything they've built up, and would surely destroy the gate to avoid that. So strict gate security is essential, which has implications for the political system. In fact, as the story reveals, Rolfe's gate security is strict, but not strict enough.

The gate is fragile and unreliable, and no-one understands how it works. For all Rolfe knew, it could have closed permanently at any time, from his first visit onwards. He was very lucky to have continuous use of it for decades; if he had as much sense as the author credited him with, he presumably took into account that any passage through it might be his last.

He was also lucky in finding partners that he could trust. If in the early stages he'd needed to kill someone (or even just prevent him from visiting the first world), and that someone was known to be linked to him in the first world, the police might have noticed a missing person and might well have searched his house in a routine attempt to find the body. Discovery of gate, end of game.

After rereading and reconsideration, I've decided to uprate the book from 3 to 4 stars, because I really like the scenario, the first half, and the eloquent descriptions. The second half could have been better, but it's adequate and doesn't ruin the book.

John Dye's review makes the valid point that Rolfe allowed some troublesome people into his kingdom, although he was smart enough to have known better. At the beginning he had a real need for Colletta; but he

reckoned he could trust Colletta up to a point. Later on, he could and should have been more choosy.

The obvious conflict in this book would have been against American-led Settlers fighting for more equal division of political power and wealth. But Stirling wanted to paint Rolfe as a relatively good guy, and it would have been hard to do in that kind of conflict. So he imported a colourful bunch of nasty non-Americans for the specific purpose of making Rolfe look good by comparison. Rolfe wouldn't have done that: he wasn't that desperate to look good. Stirling did it for him.

(view spoiler)

Annette says

My husband has recently devoured the "Dies the Fire" series, but since he checked them out from the library I haven't had opportunity to read them. Instead this stand-alone story was my first Stirling, and I found the author to live up to his hype.

Obviously there's a pretty significant fantasy element to the story - random returning WWII soldier accidentally opens a portal to a parallel universe where Columbus never arrived in America. Variations on a theme most sci-fi fans have read before. But it's what he Does with his parallel universe that sets "Conquistador" apart: he keeps a secret from the world at large, while populating it with people - and animals - of his own choosing.

The story - which flips frequently between the 40's, 70's, and 2008 - is told in an engaging manner, with believable and mostly likeable characters - and the ones that aren't likeable you at least appreciate. Without giving too much away, I appreciated the fact that the settlers from the 40s made most of the same "mistakes" of the settlers of the 16 and 1700's in our universe. Interesting to consider that as fashionable as it is to pillory our ancestors for decimating the native populations (people, animals, etc.), there are quite probably some historical inevitabilities at work. :)

Anyway, this book places Stirling squarely in the same category as Turtledove as far as master writers of alternative histories.

Joy says

I needed another book to read, and as I have really enjoyed the other books by S.M. Stirling, I picked this one up a few weeks ago for my Kindle. As outlined in the book description, a man named John Rolfe created/discovered a Gate to an alternate Earth where Alexander the Great didn't die young, thus changing the course of history significantly. Rolfe brings over friends and allies, and they begin to settle what would be Southern California and setting it up as the Commonwealth of New Virginia, complete with the landed gentry of the Thirty Families who rule the world. Sixty years later, Rolfe's granddaughter Adrienne becomes involved with a man named Tom who is a fish and game warden on "FirstSide" as she tracks a plot to take over the Gate from her family.

First off, I really enjoyed this book a lot. The settings for both FirstSide and the Commonwealth were very well done, and the latter had a clear sociopolitical structure that was explained throughout the novel. The society that has grown up in the Commonwealth was plausible and consistent, down to the problems with supplies that can happen when the Gate used to transport them is only so large - including how it has gone down in the past. I was not particularly enamored of how much of the backstory was told in interrupting vignettes to the main story, although to be fair they were generally placed where they would relate to the

main story and I don't know of a better way to accomplish the same writing goal. The pacing was a little uneven for me, as the story moved very slowly at the beginning, then moved along at a good clip before accelerating to lightspeed in the last 14%. The whole ending did feel quite rushed, even with realistic clips as people were injured and fell out of the storyline for the time being, and I wish there had been a bit more spacing there at the end to make it feel like less of a push. The very end of the book, however, was quite entertaining...and while it leaves the door open for a sequel, it also leaves the story wrapped up very nicely to be a standalone novel.

The descriptions of the Commonwealth side alone, along with the idiosyncracies of the Rolfe and others in the Thirty Families are worth reading the book for alone. The characters are well defined and act according to their personalities, although a bit more background/discussion of the "bad guys" would've been useful especially near the end of the bok. Overall, this is a great read especially if you like the idea of alternate history or worlds, and/or if you like Stirling's other novels.

Margaret says

Nope. Not for me. Couldn't get into it at all.

Tim Martin says

Conquistador by S.M. Stirling has one of the most interesting premises I have ever read in any science fiction novel. What if you discovered a portal - one that you created completely by accident and known only to you - that lead to an alternate North America, one where the Europeans never set foot, the only other humans on the continent the Native Americans? This idea was explored previously in the book _Wildside_ by Steven Gould (though in that novel there were no Native Americans but instead Pleistocene megafauna such as sabertooth cats); in that work, the small group of individuals who knew about the portal to an alternate world sought to mine well known sources of precious metals in the American West, selling it back in their home world. In _Wildside_, the gateway was discovered relatively recently in the novel's timeline and the book basically portrayed that world's first exploitation.

Conquistador took that idea and ran with it. Instead of a relatively recent discovery, the alternate world portal was created in 1946 (the main events of the novel are set in 2009). Former soldier John Rolfe, back from fighting in the Pacific during World War II, rented a house in Oakland, California. In the basement of the house with the aid of a radio set and a freak accident created a portal to the same location in a North America untrammelled by Europeans. Cautiously exploring it with a few Army buddies he trusted, he began to see that that world possessed real possibilities.

Fast forward to 2009, where we meet Fish and Game wardens Tom Christiansen and Roy Tully, working with the LAPD in investigating the smuggling of rare and endangered wildlife. They rescue a California Condor on one of their missions and consider it a job well done until interesting facts come to light. One, the condor's DNA does not match the gene pool of any condor group in captivity or the wild, and in addition is far healthier than a condor should be, with no traces to speak of of pesticides or pollution. Two, they find an amazing photograph of what appear to be actual, real-life Aztec priests, though a few are clad in Grateful Dead T-shirts. Dedicated and skilled investigators, they uncover more and more and cross paths with Adrienne Rolfe, descendent of the still living John Rolfe. Ostensibly working to help Tom and Roy, in reality she is there to prevent them from discovering the Gate to her world, one that links the Commonwealth of New Virginia (named because John Rolfe was descended from the John Rolfe of Jamestown fame, the one

who married the woman nicknamed Pocahontas) and FirstSide (what those in the Commonwealth call their original, home dimension). I don't think I give too much away when I say that their investigation leads Roy and Tom to the Commonwealth and to uncovering a huge, sinister plot, one that has implications for both FirstSide but also (especially) for New Virginia.

Much of the book was a narrated tour of Commonwealth (though there is plenty of action at the end). We learn that it was never intended just to be a source of (quite vast) wealth (carefully laundered FirstSide through dummy corporations and used-up mines bought FirstSide), but in addition be a thriving, self-sustaining community, which by 2009 has a population of 150,000, with towns, roads, airports, restaurants, hospitals, schools, a military force (including aircraft), a fishing industry, and thriving agriculture. Though many of the original Settlers (and the "involuntaries," forced settlers who accidentally discovered the Gate and were forced to settle in New Virginia) came from America, we learn that many came in waves from other parts of the world, notably Germany, Italy, and Dutch Indonesia in the 1940s, French North Africa and British Kenya in the 1950s and 1960s, and later on from Rhodesia, South Africa, and Russia through the 1990s. Though most of the Settlers live in the American West (and mostly in California), some settled in Hawaii or Australia.

The Commonwealth of New Virginia is not truly a democracy, but more a (benign) feudal system, run by a group called the Thirty Families, mostly descendents of the original Army buddies brought over in the 1940s by John Rolfe, though with some additions since then. Different areas were allocated to different Families - the Collettas for instance taking Santa Clara Valley and the Rolfes the Napa region for instance - with other areas set aside as either common Commission area (which included several towns) or as basically national parks. This system is important to the plot of the novel and gave New Virginia a very different flavor from FirstSide America.

Other intriguing facts of varying degrees of importance to the main story are the fact that many of the Native Americans are still about and active; while large numbers died due to imported disease from John Rolfe and others in the 1940s, many yet still live, many basically living the same lifestyle they originally had and still not entirely happy with the newcomers. Several Native Americans become important players in the novel and I found them intriguing characters. Also, Rolfe made a number of interesting introductions (reminding me of an August 2005 article that appeared in the journal *Nature* about "rewilding" North America); he brought over to New Virginia and successfully established populations of African elephants, tigers, lions, giraffe, rhinos, kangaroos (!), leopards, cheetahs, wild boar, and various antelope species into western North America, which apparently thrived alongside the already numerous pronghorn antelope, elk, deer, bison, bear, mountain lions, wolves, and coyotes.

An interesting setting, I have to say one I wouldn't mind living in; next to no taxes, no pollution, lots of beautiful wilderness, lots of job opportunities, though it could be a bit more democratic and is overly dependent upon FirstSide for technology, high-tech items, and heavy machinery (as well as movies and music). A sequel would be interesting.

Steven says

Thus far I have read the Change trilogy and Peshawar Lancers all from S.M. Stirling. This story is what I wished all of them were. This story grabbed me at the beginning and kept me enthralled throughout. The last 1/4 of the book was a real page turner that I could not put down. (In spite of several pressing things that I really should have taken care of.) The gist of the tale is that shortly after WWII a gate is discovered that can transport man between the present day and an alternate North America that was never discovered by Europeans. The veteran who makes this discovery shares it between himself and a select few of his buddies.

They create a secret, selective , parallel society in this "New World".

Nikki says

This book was written for "MANLY MEN". Every female is either dismissed as a horse or else repeatedly (exhaustively) praised as being supple, golden-skinned enigmas. The author fears we will forget their toned muscles, gleaming hair, jewel-bright eyes, and how great they are in bed, and therefore doesn't let more than a few pages pass between each increasingly chuckle-inducing reminder. There is too much attention given to unimportant weaponry details, "manly" discussions throwing around as many bigoted terms as possible and passages declaring how tough and steely the male characters are (while also reminding us that they are tan, SO TAN, and their muscles are SO DEFINED, so manly). I believe the intended audience is white men with very hairy chests who are never wrong, can bench 500lbs, and spend their day snapping bones between their jaws after guzzling cold beers and conquering big-chested broads.

Prattle On, Boyo says

Conquistador began with a really intriguing premise but unfortunately, its creator turned it into a Lifetime movie for men. Stirling seemed abnormally preoccupied with the protagonist -Tom Christiansen- I understand the need for detail but Stirling's intimate descriptions were overkill. It was never just a simple sentence to describe a simple action. e.g. He tapped his finger on the trigger of the Browning, no, Stirling had to say "He tapped a strong, supple index finger on the trigger of the Browning." And when Christiansen was wounded towards the end, he couldn't just describe the body as lifelessly falling to the deck of the Mosquito. Instead, he had to describe it as "220 pounds of strong, hard man falling out of its harness." At times, I had to keep flipping to the cover of the book just to make sure I wasn't reading gay erotica. If you are a straight male and don't enjoy reading the intimately described detail of a Fish & Game Warden and his strong, six pack abs and Army Ranger crap, then do yourself a favor and stay away from this title. It belongs on the scrap heap next to the Harlequin Romance novels.

Thomas says

What if you discovered a portal (something similar to television's "Stargate") - one that you created completely by accident and known only to you - that led out of your basement and into an alternate North America? What if your new backyard opened onto a wilderness populated only by Indian tribes that had never seen a white man?

In this story the alternate world portal was created in 1946 (the main events of the novel are set in 2009). Combat veteran John Rolfe, back stateside from battles in the Philippines and Okinawa during World War II, rents a house in Oakland, California. In his basement whilst tuning a ham radio transmitter he accidentally opens a portal to a pristine location in a North America untrammelled by Europeans. He ends up exploring this strange new world with a few trusted army buddies. They initially gain wealth through gold mining in the new world where Sutter's Mill once stood in their old world. Then they set their sights higher and over the decades create their own nation on the far side of the gate.

But the main part of the story is set in 2009. Enter Fish and Game wardens Tom Christiansen and Roy Tully, working with the FBI and various California law enforcement agencies to investigate the smuggling of rare

and endangered wildlife.

At first, they think that they're just dealing with ordinary, every day, vicious poachers selling samples of nearly every available endangered species to foreign buyers. Then they discover after rescuing a California Condor on one of their missions that its DNA does not match the gene pool of any condor group in captivity or the wild, and in addition is far healthier than a condor should be, with no traces to speak of pesticides or pollution. Digging deeper they uncover more weird and incongruous evidence - like a real live Dodo bird in a dead smuggler's office. Eventually they cross paths with Adrienne Rolfe, granddaughter of the still living John Rolfe.

Adrienne grew up in the rough and tumble world of the Commonwealth of New Virginia (that's the name Rolfe gave his private country because he's a descendant of THE John Rolfe of Jamestown fame, the one who married the woman nicknamed Pocahontas). Although Adrienne pretends to help Christiansen and Tully, her real mission is to keep the existence of the gate and everything on the other side hidden from the Firstside (what those in the Commonwealth call their original, home dimension). So, she sabotages much of their work early in novel.

Long story short - their investigation leads Roy and Tom to the Commonwealth and to uncovering a huge, sinister plot, one that has ominous implications for both the FirstSide and (especially) New Virginia. They confront the crisis going through many exciting adventures and struggling against desperate odds. It's all great fun.

It's not only the story that's intriguing; the world that S.M Stirling creates is enthralling. It's uncrowded, there are hardly any taxes, no pollution, lots of beautiful wilderness, lots of job opportunities.

The society/governance of The Commonwealth of New Virginia has touch of democracy (mostly at the local level), but mainly it's a (benign) feudal system, run by a group called the Thirty Families, mostly descendants of the original Army buddies brought over in the 1940s by John Rolfe, though with some additions since then. Different areas of what we would call California and Western North America were allocated to different Families - with other areas set aside as either common Commission area (which included several towns) or as basically national parks. If you read carefully you may find some hints that George R. R. Martin may have influenced Stirling. One of the house mottoes is "Winter is Not Coming".

Another cool thing about the Commonwealth is the tinkering Rolfe did with the animal kingdom. He brought over to New Virginia and successfully established populations of African elephants, tigers, lions, giraffe, rhinos, kangaroos, leopards, cheetahs, wild boar, and various antelope species into western North America, which apparently thrived alongside the already numerous pronghorn antelope, elk, deer, bison, bear, mountain lions, wolves, and coyotes. As a result you just can't leave the house without a rifle and plenty of ammunition. You never know what you're going to run into.

The descriptions of the Commonwealth side alone, along with the idiosyncrasies of the Rolfe and others in the Thirty Families make the book worth reading. Overall, this is a great read especially if you enjoy the idea of alternate history or worlds.

Turner says

"The covers of this book were too far apart." -Ambrose Bierce

"This is not a book to be set aside lightly. No, it should be hurled, with great force." -Dorothy Parker

Really, this is about the worst book I've read this whole millennium.
