
Came Men on Horses: The Conquistador Expeditions of Francisco Vasquez Coronado and Don Juan de Oñate

by Stan Hoig

xi + 34 pages, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index.
Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2013, cloth
\$34.95.

In this lively and enjoyable book, Stan Hoig provides a well-researched and elegantly written narrative of the Spanish incursions that went north from New Spain and into the American Southwest between the late 1530s and the first years of the 1600s. Hoig examines not only the massive expeditions of Francisco Vasquez de Coronado and Juan de Oñate but also the exploits of several other adventurers and missionaries. The author's careful plotting of these incursions is a valuable resource to anyone interested in Spanish activities in this part of America; those with an interest in Kansas history will find the detailed discussion of Oñate's route in the appendix especially intriguing. Hoig also provides a vivid portrait of the lives of the conquistadors and successfully recreates what it was like to be a participant in these treks into the American interior. Hoig is careful not to romanticize the conquistadors (he never hides their astounding brutality toward the Indians in their path), but neither does he demonize them. Instead, he paints a realistic portrait of these men and their experiences. Recreating the past as lived experience (however unsavory we find the actions and attitudes of those who lived it) is central to historical scholarship, and Hoig manages to bring the conquistadors to life.

A fascinating thread running through Hoig's discussion of all Spanish incursions into the Southwest is the extent to which the hunt for legendary riches—mythical cities of gold that always seemed to glimmer in the distance—informed the actions of the conquistadors. It is difficult to gauge the historical impact of fantasies, and although it may seem surprising that hard-nosed conquistadors let themselves be beguiled by such romantic delusions, *Came Men on Horses* convincingly establishes the importance of myths in shaping the plans of these men. When the Spanish crossed the Atlantic, they carried with them Iberian legends of golden cities of untold wealth. Not only did the plunder of Mexico and Peru seem to confirm the truth of such dreams, but many Native individuals—such as the enigmatic El Turco, who led Coronado's expedition close to ruin on the plains—were ready to deceive or indulge the invaders by spinning gold-threaded yarns of their own, leading Coronado, Oñate, and numerous lesser adventurers to gamble their lives and fortunes on chasing after Cibola, Quivira, and other places shrouded in myths of treasure. Even after the surviving conquistadors had come back to New Spain exhausted after yet another futile excursion to the north, there were always those who were ready to believe that if only they had looked harder—



if they had gone a few miles more—they would have found an El Dorado in the end.

Hoig's narrative would have benefited from more in-depth analyses of the cultural and political backgrounds of the Indian individuals and groups who encountered the conquistadors. Indians are everywhere in this book (and Hoig treats them in a sympathetic manner), but he does not spend much space discussing their cultures and societies. Indians appear as military auxiliaries, slaves, guides, and informants—and above all as local people whose lives were disrupted and too often cut short by the Spaniards—but less as members of complex cultures with ideas and motivations of their own. Of course, Spaniards, not Indians, are the subject matter of this book, but because it is clear from Hoig's narrative that the actions of Native individuals and communities shaped the outcome of these expeditions in a variety of ways, some further consideration of the Native perspective seems merited. Sometimes the Indians assisted the Spaniards, sometimes they fought them, and sometimes they submitted to these intruders and later rebelled, but what cultural and political assumptions underlay these responses often remains unclear in this account.

Nevertheless, this is a well-crafted book, and as an investigation of the actions and mentalities of the conquistadors it will be read with interest by scholars of Spanish colonization and the early history of the Southwest alike.

*Reviewed by Tom Arne Midtrød, assistant professor of history,
University of Iowa, Iowa City.*