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***The De Soto Chronicles: The Expedition of Hernando de Soto to North America in 1539-1543* edited by Lawrence A. Clayton, Vernon James Knight, Jr., and Edward C. Moore**

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**Hernando de Soto**

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

*The De Soto Chronicles: The Expedition of Hernando de Soto to North America in 1539-1543.* Edited by Lawrence A. Clayton, Vernon James Knight, Jr., and Edward C. Moore. Tuscaloosa, 1993. University of Alabama Press. xxx, 564 pp. (vol. 1) and 558 pp. (vol. 2). Illustrations. Glossary. Index. Bibliography. 2 vols. cloth – \$50.00

These two volumes are a culmination of an intense interest in Hernando de Soto whose expedition into today's United States' heartland in 1539-1543 was the first real European venture of this nature. While some years earlier Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca had walked from his shipwreck on the Florida shores to Mexico, De Soto had with him at least 600 persons, plus horses, dogs and equipment. Cabeza de Vaca had survived. De Soto perished and was buried in the Mississippi River, but his party continued to Mexico. Both expeditions landed somewhere in the Tampa Bay area and then marched north into the interior of today's United States. The arrival of the De Soto expedition forms one of the most significant chapters of Tampa Bay history, and two of Florida's sixty-seven counties are named in honor of Hernando de Soto.

These two voluminous tomes are neither a biography of De Soto nor a modern account of the expedition. Such studies are easily available. For example, the excellent contemporary Florida historian Eugene Lyon has provided us with a fine and scholarly account of De Soto and his expedition. The two volumes reviewed here are updated translations of the key primary accounts (chronicles) of the De Soto expedition, and they have never been published together.

There are four pivotal accounts which have provided the great majority of our knowledge of the De Soto expedition. One was written in Portuguese by a "gentleman of Elvas" (his name unknown). Two others are by the Spaniards Hernandez de Biedma and Rodrigo Rangel. The fourth, the longest and best known, is by the Peruvian Garcilaso de la Vega who was of royal

Inca lineage but of mixed parentage. It is called “La Florida” and is known for its literary qualities but is probably inferior in historical accuracy. This chronicle occupies all of volume two. The other three accounts are in the first volume.

The four chronicles have been previously published separately in English translation. Their original publication and later translations have had “an erratic history.” Those interested in that history should read four pages in volume one entitled “Notes on Translation and Names.” It is interesting to note that the large Garcilaso de la Vega chronicle in this edition is actually a newly located translation that was done in the early part of this century by Dr. Charmion Shelby of Austin, Texas. Commissioned to undertake this massive project, she worked for thirteen years with dedication and unmatched expertise while at the Library of Congress, but upon its completion, no funds were available for its publication. Now forty years after her death, it appears in print for the first time.

The editors have kept “the classic translation of Elvas” (the Portuguese gentleman) done in 1933, but with some minor corrections and notes by the Florida historian John H. Hann. The Biedma and Rangel chronicles, which are somewhat shorter, have a new translator in Professor John Worth of the University of Florida.

Besides these four chronicles, some smaller but pertinent pieces are also published in volume one. Eugene Lyon contributed a small surviving fragment by the priest Sebastian de Cañete who apparently had a “narrative” of the De Soto journey. It was located in the Archive of the Indies in Seville by Lyon. Of interest to local readers is a letter of De Soto from Tampa Bay, dated July 9, 1539, in which he tells of an encounter with Juan Ortiz, “a hidalgo native of Seville,” who had come on the early Narváez expedition, had miraculously survived and assumed a native lifestyle which included fluency in the native language of the Tampa Bay area. Ortiz, a valuable advisor to De Soto, has become a legendary figure of Florida history.

These several smaller or fragmentary items, while lacking coherence, add to the value of this splendid publication. Finally, it must be noted that the well-known historian of early Spanish Florida, Paul E. Hoffman, offers a concise but excellent biography of De Soto (in forty-seven pages), using the most pertinent primary and secondary sources. However, to my mind, it should have been placed at the beginning of volume one rather than at the end.

We are indebted to everyone who has contributed to this publication for a well done task. It is recommended that institutions that are interested in American history possess this publication. The De Soto expedition is one of the greatest epics of American history and of Europe's first encounter with the interior of today's United States.

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