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Author(s): Daymond Turner

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GONZALO FERNANDEZ DE OVIEDO'S HISTORIA GENERAL Y NATURAL--FIRST AMERICAN ENCYCLOPEDIA

Daymond Turner

On May 7, 1532, the Consejo de Indias wrote to the King-Emperor Charles, the First of Spain, and Fifth of the Holy Roman Empire:

> Gonzalo Hernández de Oviedo, resident of Hispaniola, has had the care and inclination to write of affairs of the Indies; he offers to carry forward his work if he is given some salary towards the expense of collecting material and maintaining a clerk. It appears appropriate that it be included in the Chronicle of Spain. He displays more ability than anyone over there. It would be well to order him to examine all those lands where he has not been and to send the reports to this Council in order that here they may be edited and incorporated in the Chronicle and he should be given an annual subsidy.

In a reply of August 18 of the same year the Emperor stated:

> What you say about writing of Indian affairs that there be a record of them is well, and since you feel that Gonzalo Hernández de Oviedo will do it well, as he been so long in those parts, and because of the experience he has about them, give him charge of it . . .[1]

Despite a salary of 30,000 *maravedís* the 54-year-old civil servant did not relish the prospect of further travels, and after additional negotiations it was agreed that all royal officials in the Indies should, on request, supply the new *cronista* with detailed reports of the geography, natural phenomena and happenings in their respective territories,[2] "ordering that, as a man constituted for repose, he should now rest in his own house, gathering (information) and writing . . ."[3] The fifty books of the vast *Historia general y natural de las Indias, islas y Tierra-Firme del Mar Oceano* which were the result of this felicitous

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[1] Cited by Juan Pérez de Tudela Bueso in his "*Vida y escritos de Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo*" which constitutes an introduction to edition of *Historia General y natural de las Indias* published at Madrid, 1959. *(Biblioteca de autores españoles:* CXVII-CXXI) I, 1-CLXIX, p. cxviii.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. xcix.

[3] *Cf.* J. Natalicio González: "*Prólogo*" to edition *Historia general* . . . Asunción del Paraguay, 1944. I, p. 10.

appointment would not see print in their entirety until 1855, nearly three hundred years after the death of their author.[4] But taken as a whole they offer a broad and amazingly-detailed panorama of the New World as seen through European eyes in the fifty-six years following Columbus' first voyage.

Recent research has revealed that Oviedo was not the Renaissance cavalier, the courtier-soldier-poet painted by Amador de los Ríos, but something much more appealing to the student of Spanish literature, a *pícaro,* and a *pícaro* who made good. Born in Madrid in August, 1478, of obscure antecedents, he was indeed, in his youth, a *mozo de muchos amos.* Starting at the age of twelve as a page in the household of the Duke of Villahermosa, he was to serve in turn the Infante Don Juan, only son of Ferdinand and Isabel; Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan; Isabel de Aragón, widow of Marquis Francisco de Gonzaga; Cardinal Don Juan de Borja; King Fadrique of Naples; the "young Queen", Doña Juana, Fadrique's sister; and the Duke of Calabria. He was with the Court at Granada when Christopher Columbus received final permission for his voyage to the unknown. The following year he was with the Court at Barcelona when Columbus returned, bearing gold and parrots and Indians to his sovereigns. He knew and talked to Leonardo Da Vinci and Jacabo Sannazaro. He served as a scribe of the Holy Inquisition, as a public notary in Madrid and as a secretary to the Gran Capitán. He married Margarita de Vergara, who, he tells us, was "the most beautiful woman in the Kingdom of Toledo" and who died after a difficult labor, which he describes in horrifying detail, three years after their marriage.

On April 11, 1514, he sailed in the armada of Pedrarias Dávila for the New World. He went as deputy of the Secretary Lope Conchillos, carrying a portfolio of administrative appointments, many of which he fails to mention anywhere in the *mare magnum* of his writings, and the post of Inspector, or *Veedor,* of the gold foundries on the Mainland. Time does not permit us to describe the costly house he built at Santa María de la Antigua del Darien, his struggles with Pedrarias, his successful

[4] The first nineteen books were printed at Seville by Juan Cromberger in 1535. A second edition of these plus a part of the fiftieth were printed by Juan de Junta at Salamanca, 1547. There was one printing of the twentieth book (Valladolid, Francisco Fernández de Córdoba, 1557.) The first edition of all fifty books was that of José Amador de los Ríos, Madrid, Real Academia de la Historia, 1851-1855. As José de la Peña y Cámara has pointed out (in his "Contribuciones documentales y críticas para una biografía de Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo," *Revista de Indias,* XVII, 69-70, pp. 273-332) Ríos' biographical data have been superseded by recent scholarship. It is also to be regretted that modern editors (González and Pérez de Tudela) have elected to follow the Ríos text which, ignoring differences between the 1535 and 1547 editions and extensive manuscript materials, is hardly a critical one.

trading ventures in the Gulf of Urabá, his disastrous tenure as Pedrarias' lieutenant at Darien, his monopoly of the pearl trade on the Isthmus, his slave hunting in Nicaragua.

Let it suffice to note that in an era when the voyage was often fatal, he made the dangerous Atlantic crossing eleven times. Between travels, he found time to produce at least a dozen books besides his *General History*. Stopping off at Santo Domingo on a return to the Peninsula in 1523, he married for a third and last time. He acquired substantial land-holdings in Hispaniola and a number of rental properties in its capital city. The year following his appointment as Chronicler of the Indies, he was named Alcaide of the fortress of Santo Domingo, a post which he held till his death on the night of June 16, 1557. He was found dead with the keys of the fortress entrusted to his care still clutched in his hand.[5]

Perfunctory as it is, the foregoing will give some idea of the individual who set for himself the task of recording everything that was then known, or believed or suspected about the newly-discovered Western Hemisphere. He chose as his model Pliny's *Natural History*, but he tells us:

> I have not extracted (these books) from the two thousand volumes that I may have read, as Pliny writes in the passage cited above . . . but I accumulated all that I write here out of two million hardships and necessities and perils in the more than twenty-two years that I have been observing and experiencing these things in my own person, serving God and my king in these Indies.[6]

But he does not follow his model exactly, and after his first part he does not even attempt to group descriptions of flora, fauna, and native cultures into separate books. Rather he follows what one scholar has called "a geographic approach to history." [7]

Part One treats of the sea routes to, the discovery and the history and characteristics of the Antilles. After a detour, in Book Twenty, through the East Indies with Magellan's crew, the Second Part begins with a detailed description of the East Coast of the Mainland, from the Western mouth of the Straits of Magellan to the Capes of Labrador, listing landmarks, headlands, capes, bays and rivers, grumbling at the king's chart

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[5] Biographical material based, saved otherwise noted, on Pérez de Tudela, *op. cit.* (Note 1 above). While rejecting the hypothesis of Peña relative to Oviedo's *converso* antecedents Pérez presents a remarkable objective synthesis of published materials concerning Oviedo's life and his own researches in the Spanish archives.

[6] *Historia General* — I, p. 32-33. All citations from the text hereafter are from Asunción del Paraguay edition of 1944 unless otherwise noted.

[7] *Cf.* Roberto Ferrando. "Fernández de Oviedo y el conocimiento del mar del Sur," *Revista de Indias.* XVII, 1957, pp. 469-482.

makers when their latitudes do not agree with his own celestial observations "made on dry land and not the heaving deck of a ship." Then he treats in a separate book each administrative division of the East Coast. The Third Part deals with the Pacific coast in a similar fashion, beginning at the Strait and running north. The Western shore was not as well-known or fully explored in 1548, but, as Ferrando has pointed out, passage of time proved Oviedo's conjectures as to what lay to the north of parallel 37 more accurate than the ones most popular with his contemporaries.[8] In Part Three, however, the regional descriptions start with the West Coast of New Spain and move south. The Fiftieth Book, part of which was first published in 1547, and parts of which were left unfinished in manuscript offers a collection of sometimes amusing, sometimes harrowing accounts of shipwrecks in many waters. In its final chapter he defends his work against critics who, among other charges, allege he ought to have written it in Latin.

This, in barest outline, is the design of the fifty books of the *General History* . . . that have come down to us. I have been unable to find any published report of the existence, even in manuscript, of the Fourth Part which Oviedo promised us and on which he was presumably working for nearly a decade following the last entries in the *Historia* as we know it today.[9] In its present form it must represent the labors of from 1519 down the year 1548, thirty years, for the author tells us he acquired from his father the habit of keeping written memoranda of interesting matters and events which came to his attention, and in the *Sumario* printed at Toledo in 1526, he regrets the absence of such memoranda and records which he says are among his personal papers in Santo Domingo.[10]

The more than six thousand personal and place names listed by Pérez de Tudela in his *Índice onamástico y toponímico*[11] are but a feeble indication of the total scope of the work, but their number may provide some clue as to why the *General History* . . . has not found a wider audience. Still to be compiled are the indices which will lead the curious to every reference to indigenous and imported flora and fauna, agriculture, anthropological data, astronomy, climatology, cartography, demography, entomology, economics, forestry, hydrography, icthycology, native languages, medicine, mining, navigation, ornithology, religion, political science, native architecture, the art of leadership, etc., etc.

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[8] *Op. cit.*

[9] *Historia general,* Bk. XIV, Vol. III, p. 191-192.

[10] Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés. *Sumario de la natural historia de las Indias* (in: E. de Vedia: *Historiadores primitivos de Indias.* Madrid, Rivadeneyra, 1852 I (*Biblioteca de autores españoles,* XXII) p. 471.

[11] Tomo V (BAE CXXI), pp. 421-479.

Here are our first detailed accounts of Indian farming, including the cultivation of such unfamiliar "breads" as cassava and maize. (Oviedo also mentions seeing a field of this latter grain growing at Toledo in 1525, certainly a very early example of its introduction into Europe.) There is a considerable list of native fruits and vegetables. Our chronicler describes the physical appearance, planting and cultivation of each, how it is prepared as food (or "wine") and makes observations as to its flavor and lasting qualities, or suitability for use as ships' stores.[12]

Those who think of the Spaniards as gold-seekers and exploiters only will be interested to learn that by 1535 the *conquistadores* had successfully acclimated seven kinds of domestic animals,[13] a dozen fruits,[14] some fifteen garden vegetables,[15] and had discovered and were using in their cuisine and pharmacopeia no less than thirty-eight indigenous herbs believed identical with those found on the peninsula.[16] Some of the imported plants, he is careful to note, did not reproduce successfully in the Indies. And he gives detailed, circumstantial accounts of the introduction of two plants destined to play a large role in the future of American agriculture: sugar cane and the banana. In case of the former he gives information about the cost of setting up and operating a sugar plantation and lists the more important ones on Hispaniola.[17]

Among the plants native to Hispaniola was one which did not take our author's fancy. Allow me to quote, in translation, in its entirety, his tribute to a plant which has won a more favorable reception in the United States:

> The Indians of this Island of Hispaniola have a fruit they call *maní* [the peanut]; and it is a very common plant in their farms and gardens; and it is about the size of a pine kernel with a shell; and they consider it healthful: Christians pay little heed to it, save they be some low sort of fellow, or children or slaves, and persons whose taste will bear anything. It is mediocre in flavor and of very little nourishment, a very common vegetable among the Indians, and it occurs in great quantity.[18]

In addition to trees brought from Spain, there are descriptions of more than seventy trees native to the islands and the mainland. Again we are told of appearance, habitat, rate of growth, whether the tree is poisonous or medicinal, and whether its timber is suited for building

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[12] E. g. *Historia general* . . . (Asunción ed.) Bk. VII, Ch. 1-4, Vol. II, pp. 159-176.
[13] *Ibid.*, Bk. XI, Ch. 1, Vol. III, pp. 70-81.
[14] *Ibid.*, Bk. VIII, Ch. 1, Vol. II, pp. 199-210.
[15] *Ibid.*, Bk. XI, Ch. 1, Vol. III, pp. 34-37.
[16] *Ibid.*, Bk. XI, Ch. 2, Vol. III, pp. 37-38.
[17] *Ibid.*, Bk. IV, Ch. 8, Vol. I, pp. 218-226.
[18] *Ibid.*, Bk. VII, Ch. 5, Vol. II, p. 176.

or cabinetwork. There is even some effort to identify woods which are termite-resistant.[19]

Oviedo catalogs more than forty land animals including such long-extinct rodents as the *mohuy* and *hutía* and a variety of serpents. With a delightful anecdote, also included in the *Sumario,* he illustrates the intractability of the American wildcat. He records his observations on the behavior of certain animals in captivity in his own household. He, like many a later chronicler, is intrigued by the Indian dogs that don't bark and he recalls the following experience in Nicaragua:

> I came to a place where some of my friends were eating a very plump one, very well roasted and basted or rubbed with garlic. And it did not taste bad up till the time when one of my companions, seeing that I was digging into it with zest and gusto, said: "Sir, it wouldn't be a bad idea to take some of these dogs along with us, since you like them too!" Forsooth, I regretted eating it, and I ate no more . . . I can say as one who tried it, it tasted good to me, and I only wish they had waited to tell me what it was.[20]

In his approach to animals, then, Oviedo was practical. First of all were they edible? Then could the hide be tanned or serve any useful purpose. Finally, in a very few cases such as the llamas or "Peruvian sheep" could they be domesticated? On this latter score, he speaks of an Indian on Hispaniola who succeeded in training a wild pig, of Iberian ancestry, to hunt with him.

Fish are classified with water animals and are well-represented, from the flying fish, first encountered on the long voyage out, to the remora which, our chronicler asserts, was trained by Indian fishermen to pursue and attach itself to other, larger fish; the Indian would then haul in the remora and its victim by means of a long line attached to the remora's tail.[21] He also describes alligators which he styles "great lizards" and is quite concerned as to whether these are identical with the crocodiles mentioned by Pliny.[22]

The insect world is not overlooked. Chigoes and mosquitoes are included among the "plagues" visited on mankind in the Indies. And the damage wrought by termites and other borers is duly noted. One of my entomologist friends tells me that Oviedo's is probably the earliest recorded description of the fire-ant, and that his description of the effects of the bite, and his observations and the behavior of various species of ants and wasps are scientifically valid.[23]

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[19] *Ibid.*, Bks. VIII and IX, Vol. II, pp. 197-310, Bk. X, Vol. III, pp. 1-31.
[20] *Ibid.*, Bk. XII, Ch. 5, Vol. III, p. 64.
[21] *Ibid.*, Bk. XIII, Ch. 9, Vol. III, pp. 138-139.
[22] *Ibid.*, Bk. XII, Ch. 7, Vol. III, pp. 70-71. Oviedo classifies the alligator with lizards, hence as a land animal.
[23] *Ibid.*, Bk. XV, Vol. III, pp. 162-182.

Throughout, there is a tremendous amount of Indian lore. The Alcaide of Santo Domingo was no Las Casas. On more than one occasion he locked horns with the saintly Bishop of Chiapa anent the "nobility" of the American savage. But prejudice did not blind him to Indian virtues where these were found. He even speaks admiringly of such Indian inventions as the hammock, the use of which as a camp-bed he feels would greatly reduce the sick rate of armies in Europe.

He describes Indian hair styles, nakedness or dress, ornaments and tattooing. He cautions his compatriots not to use their swords carelessly, for Indians have extremely thick skulls. We see Indian marriage customs, political organization, "rites, ceremonies and idolatries," agriculture and commerce. Their houses, tombs, beds, canoes, the palisade towns of the Isthmus and the great stone cities of Culua. The employment of tobacco. He compares the Haitian *areytos* with the ballads and folkdances of Europe, he finds the game of *batey* like Italian football. He uses and defines a great many Indian words.

Oviedo was always conscious of his wider public and of posterity, so that he defines not only *indigenismos* but other words as well:

> I said above that one *arrelde* of beef is worth two *maravedís* in this city, and not everyone will understand what an arrelde is or what a maravedí is worth, unless the reader be Spanish. And that this may be understood, I say that a *dinero* or *jaqués* of Aragon, or a *dinero* of Italy, is worth a maravedí and a half; and a Roman *quatrin* is worth one maravedí; and four Neapolitan *cavaluchos* are worth one maravedí; and an arrelde is a weight of four pounds, every pound a weight of sixteen ounces. So, from what I have said I will be understood by the Italians and many other peoples; and they will recognize how cheap meat is here, although it is as good as any that can be obtained in the world.[24]

These definitions include linear measurement:

> Two hundred twenty-five [paces] make up a stadium, which is the eighth part of a mile; so, in this wise, two thousand paces makes a mile, and eight thousand paces make a league . . .[25]

Where words fail to convey the precise description of the object under discussion, our historian includes sketches in his own hand. It is perhaps unfair to judge him as an artist by the quaint nineteenth-century engravings included in the Amador de los Ríos edition and reproduced without comment by subsequent editors. Some of these look like stock illustrations from a printer's type box, rather than the work of a sixteenth-century draftsman (e.g., the animals depicted in Plate V). They rep-

[24] *Ibid.*, Bk. III, Ch. II, Vol. I, pp. 168-169.

[25] *Ibid.*, Bk. XXXII, Ch. 5, Vol. VIII, p. 194.

resent a total of eighty drawings in the original manuscript, however.[26]

Prescott, who apparently knew the *General History . . .* through extracts made by his copyists in Madrid, found Oviedo overly credulous and was distressed by his lack of classical education.[27] More recently, Morison has dealt more kindly with him, paying tribute to his obvious powers of observation.[28]

Our Gonzalo himself defined his method in Chapter I of his Second Book, and reiterates this *modus operandi* throughout the forty-eight which follows:

> I do not write on the authority of any historian or poet, but as an eye-witness of the greater part of everything I shall treat here; and what I may not have seen, I shall set down on the report of trustworthy persons, in no case relying on a single witness, but on many (witnesses) in those matters I have not personally experienced.

Perhaps it is appropriate to close with the tribute of J. Natalicio González who has edited the only edition of *The General and Natural History . . .* to appear in the Americas:

> In spite of all, the name of Oviedo will not see itself erased from the annals of America. His book, immense, verbose, veracious, partial and fabulous at the same time, will be for centuries to come one of the indispensable reference works for the clarification of our origins. The old historian, robust and burdened with years as a Biblical patriarch, is also a child of America, which he did not understand in its entirety, but of which he made himself a part, because that one who consecrates all the powers of his spirit to expressing the complex content of a world, ends by being absorbed by it. The fact is that this punctilious Castillian who conversed with Leonardo, who frequented the house of Michael Angelo, who knew all of the great figures of Europe when Spain was mistress of the nations, noticing suddenly in the evening of life that he belonged more to the New World than the Old, remarked in 1546 to the future Phillip II: "This cold air of Madrid where I was born, is no longer suitable for a man who has been serving Their Majesties and Your Highness and your ancestors in the Indies for lo these thirty-five years!" Melancholy words of a conquered conqueror, of the Spaniard who had imperceptibly become an American![30]

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[26] In Asunción edition these plates are distributed throughout the fourteen volumes of the text. However, all are assembled (in larger format) as an appendix at the end of the Volume V, Madrid, 1959, edition.

[27] *Cf.* William Hickling Prescott. *The Conquest of Mexico,* New York, The Modern Library, n. d., pp. 409-412.

[28] Samuel Eliot Morison. *Admiral of the Ocean Sea . . .* Boston; Little, Brown and Company, 1942, pp. 52-53.

[29] *Historia general . . .* Bk. II, Ch. 1, Vol. I, pp. 32-33.

[30] González, *op. cit.,* p. 17-18.