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CRISTÓBAL DE OÑATE

By AGAPITO REY*

WHEN Don Juan de Oñate set out in 1598 on his expedition to New Mexico, he took along his only son Cristóbal, then a "niño de tierna edad." Don Juan gave him the rank of lieutenant and put him under the tutelage of the sargento mayor, Vicente de Zaldívar, according to Villagrà.¹ Cristóbal accompanied his father on the northern expedition in 1601, but no mention is made of his activities.² The name of Oñate's son rarely appears in the voluminous documents dealing with the founding of New Mexico, an indication that he was not of much assistance to his father in his enterprise.

In 1607 both Oñate and his soldiers were impoverished and unable to carry on without aid from the crown, and at the suggestion of his men Don Juan resigned his office as governor of New Mexico. His letter of resignation reached Mexico in August of 1607, and the Viceroy began at once to look for some one properly qualified to replace him. As a stopgap the Viceroy appointed as governor a Juan Martínez de Montoya, who was already in New Mexico. But when he presented his patent before the Cabildo (city council) he was rejected because he was not a soldier, and for other reasons they did not care to make public. Then the Cabildo re-elected Don Juan de Oñate to the post he had relinquished, and when he declined the appointment, the Cabildo in open session, at the recommendation of the commissary of the Franciscans, Father Escobar, elected Don Cristóbal de Oñate to the post vacated by his father as governor of New Mexico.³

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1. *Historia de la Nueva Mexico*, Canto VI. In Canto XXIV, Villagrà says that on first reaching San Gabriel, Oñate sent his son Crisóbal as a messenger to bear the good tidings to Vicente de Zaldívar who was bringing up the rest of the army, and that captains Quesada and Villagrà accompanied the youth. See G. Espinosa's translation, *The Quivira Society Publications*, IV, 75, 205.

2. In the true report of this expedition (December 14, 1601), we read that Cristóbal de Oñate was one of the men in the party, and with others he signed attesting the accuracy of the report. His presence in the expedition is not otherwise noted. This document and all others mentioned in this article are included in George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, *The Founding of New Mexico*, Coronado Historical Publications, vols. V and VI, now in press.

3. Letter of Don Luis de Velasco to the king, February 13, 1609 (A. G. I.,

This election by the Cabildo was communicated to the Viceroy, with the request that it be confirmed or the appointment be made anew. Requested also was a salary for the governor, and immediate aid for the new colony if it were to survive. The Viceroy did not like the arrangement, and as he hoped to find a man of means and experience to fill the post, he asked the fiscal of the Audiencia for an opinion. Fiscal Leoz recommended in strong terms the rejection of Cristóbal's election for the same reasons already advanced by the Viceroy.⁴

Unable to find a wealthy man eager for a governorship, the Viceroy appointed Don Pedro de Peralta, who reached New Mexico in 1609 with instructions to relieve Don Juan de Oñate, and to build at once the city of Santa Fe.

Who governed New Mexico during the year and a half that elapsed between the resignation of Don Juan de Oñate and the arrival of Peralta? The documents seem to indicate that Don Juan continued to hold his office until Peralta arrived to replace him, and there is no indication that either his son or Montoya actually held office despite their appointments. However, in a petition presented years later by Saez Maurigade, a descendant of Montoya, it is clearly stated that Cristóbal de Oñate held office until the arrival of Peralta. It says that on August 9, 1608, Martínez de Montoya appeared in Santo Domingo before Cristóbal de Oñate, then holding the office of governor and captain-general of New Mexico, and that on the following day, August 10, Cristóbal certified Montoya's supplementary statement of services. It also states that in the period of 1606-1607 Martínez de Montoya took part in an expedition led by Cristóbal de Oñate against the Apaches who had been bold enough to attack San Gabriel. Montoya may have actually secured the signature of young Oñate, considering him as the legal governor

58-3-16). The Cabildo and the soldiers discussed the matter and "concluded that, to save the situation, the governor should resign his post" (August 24, 1607).

4. The fiscal recommended that under no circumstances should the governorship of New Mexico be transmitted to Oñate's son, "since the said don Crisóbal, his son, is a youth lacking in age and experience, of whom it is said that he hardly knows how to read and write, he cannot have the authority necessary to establish and guide matters there" (February 2, 1609).

when his own appointment was rejected by the Cabildo.⁵ Be that as it may, we have no other documentary evidence to prove that young Cristóbal actually governed New Mexico, or that he ever led any expedition. In his appointment and instructions, Peralta is sent to relieve Don Juan de Oñate; the name of Cristóbal is not even mentioned.

What became of Cristóbal de Oñate after his father Don Juan gave up the governorship of New Mexico? The late L. B. Bloom says that he was killed in 1610 when his father's party was attacked by the Indians as he was returning to Mexico.⁶ He cites no documents to support his assertion, nor have we found any thus far. Cristóbal must have died shortly after his father gave up his governorship and returned to Mexico, but of natural causes. Had he been killed in New Mexico, the documents could not have failed to state it. Don Juan when answering charges brought against him in his *residencia*, and in his appeal to the crown for compensation for his expenses and sacrifices, never once mentions the loss of his son or the latter's services to his majesty. He recalls the services of his forefathers, his expenses and hardships, and the loss of his nephew Don Juan de Zaldívar, killed at Acoma, but he says not a word about

5. His petition reads: "D. Saez Maurigade, vecino de esta corte, sobre que se le incluya en la descendencia directa del capitán D. Juan Martínez de Montoya, descubridor, conquistador y poblador que fué en las Américas y gobernador del Nuevo Mexico." It was quoted at length by F. V. Scholes in *NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW* (1944), XIX, 337-342. From this and other documents cited above Scholes concludes that Cristóbal de Oñate governed New Mexico for more than a year after the resignation of his father, before the arrival of Peralta. Similar conclusion had been reached earlier by George P. Hammond, *Don Juan de Oñate*, 172-178. Fiscal Leoz suggests that much when he states: "His majesty cannot in conscience continue the government in charge of the said Don Cristóbal when so many obstacles stand in the way." Cristóbal is also listed as governor of New Mexico by L. B. Bloom, *N. M. HIST. REV.*, X, 154; and he adds that Cristóbal acted as governor in 1604 while his father, Don Juan, was on his expedition to the Gulf of California. He cites no documents to support his assertion. However there is a "Petición de los pobladores de la villa de San Gabriel del Nuevo Mexico a don Cristóbal de Oñate," December 1, 1604 (*A. G. N.*, t. XXVI, p. 139). This petition, signed by nineteen men, requests the expulsion of Juan López de Olguín from San Gabriel, "por causas bastantes." It must have been the result of some trivial disagreement, as Olguín is allowed to move to Santo Domingo to be in the escort of Fr. Juan de Escalona, who suggested the petition in the first place. It is clearly stated that Olguín "no va desterrado ni por delito alguno." Don Cristóbal granted the petition.

6. *N. M. HIST. REV.*, XII, 175. H. R. Wagner, *The Spanish Southwest*, Quivira Society Publications, VII, 222, says also that he was killed in 1609 or 1610. However, he admits that he has never seen any document to support his statement.

his son, which means that he had not much to say about him that would help his own cause.

Upon his return to Mexico Don Juan had to stand a *residencia* on his conduct of the conquest and government of New Mexico, as was required of all high officials at the completion of their tenure in office. Oñate had been accused of various crimes by some disgruntled soldiers and, after years of legal maneuvers, in 1614 he was found guilty on some counts and sentenced to pay a fine of 6,000 pesos, to perpetual banishment from New Mexico and from Mexico City for five years, and the loss of his title as Adelantado. Oñate paid the fine and then started on the long tortuous road to appeal and vindication.⁷

In 1622 we find Don Juan in Spain trying to obtain the removal of the disabilities imposed on him eight years earlier. By now his five year banishment from Mexico City had expired, but the perpetual banishment from New Mexico and the suspension of his titles were still in force. On April 6 of this year, 1622, the Council of the Indies recommended the removal of these disabilities.

Oñate left no stone unturned to obtain vindication. As part of his campaign he promoted the compilation of a book of poetry in memory of his son Cristóbal. This book entitled *Canciones lúgubres* was published in 1622.⁸ It was assembled by Francisco Murcia de la Llana, who relieved his father of the commission he had been appointed to do. He says that he accepts his task in order to repay in a small measure the many favors his father owed the illustrious families of the Oñates and the Zaldívars. Furthermore it was proper that a young poet should sing the glories of a young dead hero.⁹

The poets must have been briefed as to what they were to say in their compositions, since they all repeat the same

7. The document containing the sentences imposed on Oñate and his captains is found in the volumes mentioned in note 2.

8. For the description of this rare bibliographical item see H. R. Wagner, *The Spanish Southwest*, VII, 222-223. The only known copy is now in the Jones collection in Brown University Library; the Bancroft Library has a photostat copy, which I utilized for this article.

9. Murcia includes also a poem in memory of Villagrà, who had died in 1620 while on his way to Guatemala to assume his post as alcalde mayor of Zapotitlan. It was perhaps Villagrà who helped Oñate to contact the literary world. Villagrà's rimed

uninspired platitudes. One of Murcia's poems is a "Discurso figurativo," in which the gods assemble to crown the illustrious youth. In another poem, an *Alabanza* imitated from Ovid's fable of Phoebus and Phaeton, he compares the Oñates with these mythological characters, but in this case, Cristóbal is able to control the reins of the chariot of state (sun). Murcia speaks in glowing but vague terms of the heroic deeds of young Oñate. He fell, not because of his lack of ability, like Phaeton, but because of Death's envy. While Don Juan lost his only son, he still finds solace in a daughter, Doña María, married to her cousin, Vicente de Zaldívar, who served his uncle as sargento mayor and maese de campo in the conquest of New Mexico.

The Murcias had been official correctors of books for the Council in Madrid so long that some wits asked whether they would ever come to an end. In their official capacity they were well acquainted with the writers at the Spanish court and it was not hard for young Murcia to find poets to sing the praises of young Cristóbal de Oñate.

There are ten other contributors to *Canciones lúgubres*, recruited among those whose books the Murcias had seen through the press.¹⁰ The best known among them is Alonso de Salas Barbadillo, a writer of clever picaresque novels interspersed with poems. He contributed a *silva* in whose title he says that Cristóbal died at the age of twenty-two in

chronicle of the expedition was published in 1610 in Alcalá, and it contained laudatory poems by some of the same men who collaborate in *Canciones lúgubres*. Among others there is a poem in Pindaric verse by Tribaldos de Toledo, in which he sings the praise of Oñate's son:

Of Don Cristóbal, worthy son,
He who through many combats won
For Spain, Galicia the new,
Adding a kingdom by his hand
To the noble Mexic land,
All honor to him is due.

But Tribaldos seems to confuse young Cristóbal with his forebear of the same name, one-time governor of New Galicia and supporter of Coronado. See Villagrà, *Historia de la Nueva Mexico*, translated by G. Espinosa, Quivira Society Publications, IV, 33, 37; G. P. Hammond and A. Rey, *Narratives of the Coronado Expedition*, p. 35.

10. Other poets included are: Francisco Cascales, Sebastián de Lirio, Luis Tribaldos de Toledo, Licentiate Nicolás Davilana, Dr. Francisco Yáñez, Alonso de la Mota, Alonso de Salas Barbadillo, Fr. Ambrosio de Herrera, Diego Manuel and Licentiate Francisco de Herrera Maldonado. Bibliographical data on these men is found in Pérez Pastor, *Bibliografía Madrileña*, and in standard histories of Spanish literature. In this article we are not discussing the literary aspect of *Canciones lúgubres*.

the conquest of New Mexico. His age is given variously as twenty-two to twenty-four.¹¹

In this volume are found two well known Spanish humanists: Francisco Cascales and Luis Tribaldos de Toledo. The first was from the city of Murcia, the same as the collector of this volume, who was named after this city. Cascales' poetic device consists in being transported to New Mexico by Melpomene, who shows him what Don Juan has conquered for Spain, and the ancestors of Cristóbal, who are bemoaning his demise.

The erudite Tribaldos speaks of the rise to Heaven of the innocent soul of young Oñate. "His death left Spain, and particularly Cantabria, in mourning." It is all generalities, valueless as poetry or history. Tribaldos is the most famous humanist of the group, and the one most closely identified with American matters. He was named Chronicler of the Indies after the death of Antonio Herrera in 1625. He wrote a *Vista general de las continuas guerras; difícil conquista del Gran Reyno y provincias de Chile* (1625). We find laudatory poems by him in several books of his day. He contributed a sonnet for the *Milicia y descripción de las Indias* (1599) by Bernardo Vargas Machuca. He edited the poems of Francisco de Figueroa, and gave the approval for the publication of the translation of Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics* by Cristóbal de Mesa in 1614. He defended Lope de Vega in the latter's literary disputes.¹²

The apparent purpose of this volume is to honor the memory of Cristóbal de Oñate who died so young, but the real object is to glorify the families from which he descended and thus enhance the prestige of his father, Don Juan de Oñate, who is seeking the restoration of his titles and honors.

11. Salas Barbadillo gives no details in the poem itself. An epitaph at the end of the volume reads: "Hic iacet D. Christophorus de Onnate Indorum terror . . . obijt anno aetatis suae vigesimo secundo." However Diego Manuel prolongs Don Cristóbal's life two more years, saying he died "en años venticuatro." Such is also the age given by Herrera Maldonado:

Y en veintiquatro Apolinarieas vueltas,
tus vitorias resueltas,
vida de un capaz siglo te atribuyen.

12. More details about them can be found in J. García Soriano, *El humanista Francisco Cascales*, Madrid, 1924; M. Menéndez y Pelay, *Historia de las ideas estéticas*, Madrid, 1946, II, 331-333.

The poets all repeat with monotonous accord that he was a descendant of Montezuma, Cortés, Juan de Tolosa and Cristóbal de Zaldívar.

The Oñates had intermarried with the Zaldívars and Tolosas, all powerful families in Mexico and Spain. They had become wealthy exploiting silver mines in Zacatecas, and are praised as founders of this city.¹³ Vicente de Zaldívar, nephew and son-in-law of Oñate, is eulogized as the patron of the new Jesuit foundations in Zacatecas.

Wealth and influential family ties smoothed Don Juan's path. His Biscayan relatives and friends were rooting for him. Much of this was brought out in the *Canciones*, which seem to be cut from the same pattern, showing indications of having been written to order, based on information supplied by Oñate himself or his agents. This information must have been very sketchy, limited to the bare facts that Cristóbal accompanied his father Don Juan de Oñate to New Mexico and that he had died young, but without telling when, where, or how. The poets did not know Cristóbal personally, and they had to belabor their imaginations to make it appear that they were bemoaning the loss of a bosom friend.

Oñate's campaign for exoneration proved successful. In 1623 the Council of the Indies recommended that his disabilities be removed. He was appointed inspector of mines, and by 1628 both he and his nephew and son-in-law, Vicente de Zaldívar, were members of the order of Santiago.¹⁴

13. In a petition addressed to the king in 1623, Oñate lists the many services his family and himself have rendered the crown. He points out particularly the large sums that have accrued to the royal treasury from the silver mines exploited by the Zaldívars. An English translation by L. B. Bloom was published in *N. M. Hist. Rev.*, XII, 130.

14. Captain Cristóbal de Zaldívar in his petition states that "he is a nephew of Don Juan Oñate, knight of the Order of Santiago, conqueror of the provinces of New Mexico, and brother of Vicente de Zaldívar of the same habit of Santiago, who was *mase de campo* in the said conquest where he rendered special services." Published by L. B. Bloom, *N. M. Hist. Rev.*, XII, 191.