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# Recipe for the New Right Stuff: A Review Essay

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JANET R. FIREMAN

For decades and decades, two names only have dominated the historiography of Juan de Oñate. In the hundreds of footnotes and textual references in which it has appeared, the terse citation "Hammond and Rey" has signaled to the reader that the right stuff—the basic source material—has been consulted. In his newest book, *The Last Conquistador*,<sup>1</sup> Marc Simmons put his finger on it: "the foundation of any study of the life of Oñate [is] the monumental work of George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey."<sup>2</sup> Their 1953 work—not a biography in itself—contains nearly all the official and related documentation, translated and edited, dealing with Oñate's New Mexico adventure.

Earlier, in the first two volumes of the *New Mexico Historical Review* (1926–27), and republished in a single volume entitled *Don Juan de Oñate and the Founding of New Mexico*, George Hammond wrote a narrative on the subject.<sup>3</sup> Hammond and Rey's *The Rediscovery of New*

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1. Marc Simmons, *The Last Conquistador: Juan de Oñate and the Settling of the Far Southwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

2. Simmons' reference is to George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, eds., *Don Juan de Oñate, Colonizer of New Mexico, 1595–1628*, 2 vols. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1953).

3. George Hammond, *Don Juan de Oñate and the Founding of New Mexico* (Santa Fe: El Palacio Press, 1927).

*Mexico, 1580–1594* provided the prologue material necessary for studying Oñate.<sup>4</sup> A number of other articles by Hammond and Rey, several by other writers concerning Oñate's geneology and family, his rivals for the New Mexico colonizing contract, still more on his and his lieutenants' explorations from the Rio Grande, form all that has counted until now in the Oñate bibliography.

Of course over the years there have been plenty of references in other sources to Oñate's doings in New Mexico. Some have been related dispassionately and some nostalgically or in an idealized fashion, and some would portray Oñate as the quintessence of Black Legend cruelty. But whatever their outlook, most of these have been but brief digressions or expressions; none has assembled all the ingredients required. So difficult, so challenging was the alchemy, no one even tried.

Now all that is changed. The agent of change is Marc Simmons and the 1991 publication of his stunning contribution to *The Oklahoma Western Biographies*, of which it is the second volume: *The Last Conquistador: Juan de Oñate and the Settling of the Far Southwest*. From this time forward, Oñate citations will be transformed; the name "Simmons" will be engraved upon scholarly and popular references alike as Oñate's interpreter par excellence.

If Hammond and Rey performed the undeniably essential service of dishing out just about all the existing Oñate documentation, Simmons has enriched and garnished their presentation; he has served up an incomparable feast. The appetizer is context; the main course is a sort of savory ragout made up of factual material, flavored just so with analysis and with insight. Chef Simmons' dessert is perfection, because it finishes off a fine meal with something to remember it by: sensitivity and understanding.

All these delectable historical flavors are concentrated in a remarkably small portion; rich as it is, the book is a marvel of succinctness. To continue the cuisine analogy but a moment longer, it might be said that Simmons' meal of *The Last Conquistador* is everything that fast food is not, except that it can be consumed quickly if so desired. All the rest is different. Simmons has engaged in long and what appears to be loving preparation, he has used quality ingredients with high nutritional value, they are infused with appealing presentation, and the meal is resplendent in its aftertaste.

Even if Simmons' ingredients were "almost entirely from pub-

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4. George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, eds., *The Rediscovery of New Mexico 1580–1594* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1966).

# The Last Conquistador

## JUAN DE OÑATE AND THE SETTLING OF THE FAR SOUTHWEST



**BY MARC SIMMONS**

*The Last Conquistador: Juan de Oñate and the Settling of the Far Southwest.* By Marc Simmons. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. xvi + 208 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. \$24.95.)

lished sources, both primary and secondary,"<sup>5</sup> it is some mean feat to pull off such a successful biography of such a remote figure, in such a compact format, and with so much style at that. Biography may well be the most appealing form of historical writing to professional, buff, and to the altogether unaffiliated reader. And while history is full of and about people, not so very much historical biography is being written these days. That may be so, because to be good, according to Robert Utley—who knows a thing or two about writing good biography—it must have "chronology, context, and texture." Utley says that "biography is not easy. It requires an understanding of human motivations, behavior, and relationships that comes not only from study, but from personal experience."<sup>6</sup>

How does the personal experience of a twentieth-century man, living and working in New Mexico, prepare him to understand the Spanish colonial world of four hundred years ago? We may learn the answer to this question only from a biography of Marc Simmons—not an uninteresting prospect itself—but (unfortunately) is well beyond the object of this essay. Still, it is clear that Simmons did his homework on the study of human motivations, behavior, and relationships that Utley mentions as necessary assignments for the biographer. Proof just about jumps off the pages that Simmons has grappled with the complications of motivation and morality that ruled the late sixteenth century in Spanish America.<sup>7</sup>

Understanding the context of the times from Oñate's point of view and relating it to the reader has been one of Simmons' accomplished choices. "Just as the Indians made sense of the conquest through native categories of thought and action, the Spanish conquistadores [in the Coronado Expedition] understood the world before them through their own cultural categories."<sup>8</sup>

Oñate's time was no different, according to Ramón A. Gutiérrez, except that it came during what was an anachronistic interlude in the already initiated "Franciscan Century" of the colonizing process. Oñate was a throwback. Whereas the early New Mexico explorers like Este-

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5. Simmons, *The Last Conquistador*, 197.

6. Robert M. Utley made these remarks in a review of Dan L. Thrapp, *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography in New Mexico Historical Review* 65 (July 1990), 367.

7. Colin M. Maclachlan, *Spain's Empire in the New World: The Role of Ideas in Institutional and Social Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 33–34, 38–39, 64–66.

8. Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 44.

vanico, Fray Marcos de Niza, and Coronado had been legitimately part of the conquest years as much as Hernán Cortés, Oñate was a man attempting to play it again, to renew the Conquest, this time in *New Mexico*.<sup>9</sup> Gutiérrez makes a clever argument for “theater of the conquest,” posing many of Oñate’s tactics as well as his staff and equipment as the “cast of characters” and “props” of reenactment drama. The point of this elaborate machinery of occupation, Gutiérrez says, was to teach by example. Oñate assumed that the Pueblos had heard the details of the Conquest of Mexico through the grapevine and would therefore recognize the reenactment elements, the results they were intended to suggest, and accordingly, would accommodate the Spaniards through cooperation and capitulation.<sup>10</sup>

Marc Simmons addresses this point in a more direct way. The main title of his book, *The Last Conquistador*, is no gratuitous happenstance; Simmons lays careful claim to the description. In the “Preface,” remarkable all by itself for the wallop it packs on several subjects, Simmons writes:

In a very real sense, Juan de Oñate represented the end of a tradition. He was the last conquistador, the final knight in burnished armor who sallied northward under authority of Cross and Crown to find wealth, glory, and fame. In that sense he was a medieval figure, confirming the old observation that the Middle Ages drew its last breath in the New World. On the other hand, some of his behavior and attitudes show him to have been, at the same time, a man of the New Era, one grappling with changes rapidly overtaking his society.<sup>11</sup>

Do those particular words, “final knight in burnished armor” make you think of anyone in particular? No, not Hernán Cortés, and not Lancelot. Here’s a hint: another burnished—but visibly tarnished—knight who was the exact contemporary of Juan de Oñate. Right! This would be no other than himself, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, who appeared on the highways and byways of Spain (and the empire?) in the

9. Patricia Nelson Limerick finds Oñate very much a player in *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 225–26. Limerick explains that when the realities of the Southwest failed to match the idealized expectation of the conquistador, when New Mexico proved no match for the conceptualization the crown accepted, consolidation of losses was the official response. New Mexico became a mission field by Spanish design, and the legacy of conquest trudged on.

10. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came*, 46–51.

11. Simmons, *The Last Conquistador*, xiv.

years immediately preceding, but who appeared first in print only in 1605. In that year, Oñate, having been disappointed by the "windmills" of Quivira a few years before, redirected his exploration of the West. Crossing mountains, deserts, and canyons, he "discovered" and waded into the South Sea and claimed it in the name of the king. Oñate was at the head of the Gulf of California.

Américo Castro could have been thinking about Oñate in the same terms Marc Simmons was, when Castro observed that in Spain,

we find ourselves . . . facing a history that at once both affirms and destroys itself in one swan song after another. . . . In 1605, in the twilight that played upon the scene where the Renaissance was struggling with forces that opposed its spirit, the *Quixote* appeared as the eternal incarnation of the rationally impossible made possible poetically.<sup>12</sup>

If Juan de Oñate's adventures in the Southwest were not as poetic as those of Don Quixote, it is because Oñate pertains to history and to reality, not to literature. But Simmons places the last conqueror in the context of his times—Quixote's times—as surely as Miguel Cervantes set down the Knight of the Mournful Countenance. Understanding the times in which the biographer's subject lived, as Utley has indicated, is part of the hard work of biography. To do this, and to recreate it for the reader, Simmons uses a careful analytical balance of environmental and hereditary factors to flesh out the values, attitudes, and belief systems of the middle-aged man who took up the conquest of New Mexico.

Simmons' credibility in recreating the times owes a great deal to his remarkable understanding and astonishing ability to convey the elements of Spanish character. For example, in explaining that the crusading spirit continued in Spain past the Middle Ages and also dominated the age of discovery and conquest, he writes: "The conquistadors . . . went after glory, riches, and the soul of the natives, and that, united with their abiding sense of history, gave them a distinctive style. Above all, Spaniards of the sixteenth century had style."<sup>13</sup> Marc Simmons might have been struck by a thunderbolt of self-recognition when he wrote those lines, for not only is he possessed of a sense of history, but the historian also has style. What style! Simmons utilizes those gifts powerfully to convey his insights into Spanish char-

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12. Américo Castro, *The Spaniards: An Introduction to Their History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 143.

13. Simmons, *The Last Conquistador*, 8.

acter. Américo Castro might have been describing Simmons' abilities when he wrote:

In order to understand the Spaniards (or the French or the Italians), it is necessary to upset the rhythm of historical time—as Proust has done—to interweave memory with the vision of the future, to inject into the “before” the lived experience of the “after” (and vice versa). In this fashion history takes on the flesh of real life, of empirical (temporal and spatial) experiences as well as of conceptualized projections, and of the firm bonds between *inward states* and *outward conditions*.<sup>14</sup>

Simmons carefully assembles the known facts—in absence of personal diaries, letters, or other such papers—as preparation for recreating the character features of Oñate, his times, and his significance. Simmons assembles the ingredients from both past and present; those which he knows as the historian's facts, and those which he knows as the historian's understanding and interpretation. He throws in ample measures of the former, bringing to the concoction all that he and others have been able to verify and corroborate of Oñate's life and times. Historian-chef Simmons seasons his creation judiciously with the fragile herbs of understanding of the times and the volatile spices of the national character. Then, in a flourish befitting the most elegant knights of bygone times, he decorates the delicacy he has formed with his *coup de maître*: a magnificent sense of style.

And there you have it, *señoras y señores*, ladies and gentlemen: a recipe for the new right stuff, that is, the new standard bibliographical reference for anything you need to know about Oñate: *See Hammond and Rey AND Simmons*.

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14. Castro, *The Spaniards*, 379.