
Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo. *Writing from the Edge of the World: The Memoirs of Darién 1514-1527*. Ed. and trans. G.F. Dille. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. 218p.

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Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's *Historia General y Natural de las Indias* is important to contemporary scholarship because of the breath and depth of the more than forty-year chronicle in which he vividly attempted to render a true history of the conquest of New Spain. While serving as the Official Chronicler of the Indies and the Notary General, Oviedo's fifty-volume history is drawn from eyewitness accounts, his own memoirs, interviews, and administrative reports. While the majority of Oviedo's *General History* has not been translated into English, G.F. Dille's new translation, *Writing from the Edge of the World: The Memoirs of Darién 1514-1527*, offers a comprehensive account of the cruelty and dysfunction of Spanish colonial administrators, the decimation of native populations, the tremendous wealth generated through colonial acquisition, the challenge of building European cities in a tropical geography, and the obsession with reconstituting the ideology of the Tierra Firme through the Catholic mission. Dille states in his forward, "This translation of Oviedo's Darién years is intended for a general audience interested in early American history as well as the history of Spain during the age that catapulted that country to the position of dominant European power in an astonishingly short period of time" (xiii). Because Oviedo applies his Latin based Renaissance education to his interpretation of primary texts like the Requirement, and eyewitness accounts of Spanish massacres of indigenous populations, Dille's translation of *Writing from the Edge* is also an important text for scholars or courses interested in Early Modern Studies or Literature and the Environment.

While offering rich material for specialists, Dille's translation is accessible and exciting reading for anyone interested in the early Spanish conquest. For example, Book XXIX opens with Oviedo's failed attempts at applying the Requirement, the terms offered by the Spanish crown and Catholic Church to the inhabitants of conquered territories. Oviedo's anxiety caused by lack of application of Spanish and Catholic law cuts both ways: he wanted to bring the indigenous population under rule of law just as much as the colonial administrators who profited greatly from lack of formal checks to their power. The plot and dramatic tension in *Writing from the Edge* derives largely from Oviedo's antagonistic relationship with the governor of Castilla do Oro, Pedrarias Dávila. Pedrarias commissioned numerous discovery expeditions throughout the Tierra Firme which lawlessly enslaved and slaughtered

the indigenous populations and plundered thousands of pesos of gold. While Oviedo fervently desired that indigenous people be brought under the yoke of the church, he lamented such Christian atrocities when he wrote, “And so he caused many deaths by novel cruelties and tortures and fed others alive to the dogs...and he so completely and diabolically discredited the name of Christian that the indignant Indians ever after were implacable enemies with just cause” (69). Oviedo remained in the New World and committed to settlement even though his wife died of fever, his house was destroyed during a rebellion, his tenure as governor of Darién failed completely, and he was almost killed when stabbed in the jaw by an assassin. Finally it is Oviedo’s desire to remain a participant in the events he is recounting that gives Dille’s English translation of *Writing from the Edge* such verity.

The translation of *Writing from the Edge* is smooth and accessible, while retaining Oviedo’s affinity for ordered language. Dille’s introduction provides general historical background on Oviedo, the major players in the early 16th-century Spanish court, as well as the colonization of the Tierra Firme. The introduction also traces the textual and reception history of the entire *General History*. Because the staggering amount of colonial acquisitions recorded by Oviedo are significant to understanding the text, Dille provides a table breaking down 16th-century Spanish currency. He shows the purchasing power of the currency of the early 16th century, instead of offering rates arbitrarily adjusted for modern inflation. Before the main body of the text, Dille provides biographical notes on each of the major historical figures included in his translation of Oviedo’s memoirs. The endnotes are frequent and useful, especially for readers who are not experts in the early Spanish conquest. The extensive bibliography includes all of Oviedo’s works as well as a comprehensive list of critical and historical texts.

Oviedo’s memoirs recount a geography produced by colonial ideology, yet his account obscures the grotesque practices of Spanish conquest and the hardship of life in New Spain far less than the promotional tracts of later centuries. The transformation of seemingly empty space into ordered colonial settlements is at the heart of *Writing from the Edge*. There is a paradox in Oviedo’s project. He professes to take the disinterested position of a historian, simply writing down the facts of his experiences, while actively encouraging settlement because he owned land in Darién. This paradox is one of many critical issues that need to be explored by scholars interested in the way that place was produced through early colonial texts. As scholars working in English produce critical work drawn from the Dille translation of Part II, Book XXIX further translation of Oviedo’s *Historia General y Natural de las Indias* will be encouraged and will contribute to a greater understanding of the ramifications of the earliest days of Spanish colonial settlement. ✱