First Encounters: Spanish Explorations in the Caribbean and the United States, 1492-1570 edited by Jerald T. Milanich and Susan Milbrath

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BOOK REVIEWS


First Encounters is the ninth publication in the University of Florida’s Ripley P. Bullen Monographs in Anthropology and History. It also doubles as the introductory volume of the Columbus Quincentenary Series and is intended to accompany the Florida Museum of Natural History’s traveling exhibit (also called “First Encounters”).

The two editors and majority of the contributors are associated with the University of Florida, making First Encounters essentially an “in-house” production. This is evident from the fact that the book was tailored to the thirteen essays included rather than commissioning essays to fit into a well-planned volume. There is no other way to explain how, or why, this particular collection was assembled. No serious work dealing with the history of the United States in general, and Florida in particular, should ignore Juan Ponce de Leon or Jean Ribault. Nevertheless, all of the references concerning these two would not fill one page in the text if they were combined. The thirteen essays in First Encounters include an introduction and a conclusion that deal with the notion of trans-Atlantic contacts. Of the remainder, seven are concerned with history and pre-history in Florida, two focus on archaeological excavations in Haiti, one describes Columbus’s favorite ship (Nina), and one takes the reader on a hunt for the Columbus landfall.

Eugene Lyon’s essay on the Nina is virtually an adaptation of the piece he did for National Geographic in November 1986, yet no reference is made to that article. Despite that minor point, this is clearly the most enjoyable chapter in the book and gives one a feel for life at sea in the late fifteenth century.

The other previously published essay, by William F. Keegan (“Columbus’s 1492 Voyage and the Search for His Landfall”), is the weakest essay of the lot and should never have been published. It is a slightly edited book review that was published in The Sciences in 1989. He still quotes from one of the books he reviewed (because it supports his theory), but he deleted all references to the other (which runs counter to his thinking). Keegan fails to inform his readers that his ideas have been thoroughly demolished by Joseph R. Judge of the National Geographic Society; that his hero (Samuel Eliot Morison) has recently been dethroned by most scholars; that the translation of Columbus’s log he refers to is grossly incorrect in places; and that he follows the geography of Morison, not the geography of Columbus.

Despite some weaknesses, First Encounters is an attractive book, with more than 150 illustrations (many in color), ranging from fifteenth and sixteenth-century maps and woodcuts to contemporary photographs of archaeological sites and artifacts. Fourteen original maps by Heidi Perry enhance the volume and clarify the text. She should have been mentioned in the acknowledgements.
The University of Florida is to be commended for making the Columbus Quincentenary Series available for the 500th Anniversary of America’s discovery. Additional titles will be anxiously awaited and the complete set should make an excellent souvenir of the 1992 celebration.

Robert H. Fuson


During the American Revolution, a thirty-four-year-old Spanish officer enjoying the patronage of the powerful Galvez family sailed for Havana armed with an extraordinary commission from Charles III to resolve discord in the Caribbean high command, coordinate activities with the French and expedite three allied operations: to capture Pensacola, expel the British from Nicaragua and conquer Jamaica. Original and revised versions of journals and other manuscripts in which don Francisco Saavedra de Sangronis described his three year mission to the Indies have survived in his papers, housed in the Archives of the Jesuit Fathers of Granada. In this volume his first journal is published in its entirety, along with excerpts from his daybook and selections from volume four of his unfinished autobiography.

It took the special agent seven months to reach his destination. First, storms scattered the Franco-Spanish convoy; then the British captured his vessel. As a prisoner in Jamaica, he spent two months making notes about the island’s economy, defenses and political climate in preparation for a possible invasion. Jamaicans, the Spaniard observed, were anti-American. After his release, Saavedra crossed to the south coast of Cuba and travelled by road to Havana to restore harmony between Spain’s land and naval forces and press for the recapture of East Florida.

During the siege of Pensacola, Saavedra occupied himself by observing the Choctaws, Tallapoosas and Alabamas of the vicinity, who with their languages “limited to a few words” and “arbitrary gestures” seemed to present “a clear idea of the infancy of the human race” (pp. 175-176). “[I]f they were more numerous and if they had more ambition,” he mused, “conquerors as famous as the Tartars and the Celts would emerge from them” (p. 183). His account of the Battle of Pensacola, told from the standpoint of the reinforcement expedition, will not further the Bernardo de Galvez “Yo Solo” legend, as the editor points out in his analysis of the sources and historiography.

The journal of a traveller in the American Mediterranean during the early 1780s might be expected to trace the spread of disaffection in English and Spanish colonies. “The face of the Indies has been altered greatly with the rebellion of the Anglo-Americans,” Saavedra acknowledged. There were disturbing reports of provinces in revolt in Santa Fe (New Granada) and Peru, and taxes were the cause in these cases as in the North American one. If Spain would only devise “equitable trade and tax regulations,” she could yet save her colonies (pp. 258-260). His experience with creoles in Cuba, Mexico, Santo Domingo and elsewhere persuaded him of their loyalty. About France he was ambivalent, especially after a visit to the “French Cape” on