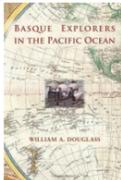


Basque Explorers in the Pacific Ocean

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Basque Explorers in the Pacific Ocean, by William Douglass introduces the reader to how Basques from a tiny territory once pivotal for the whole Iberian Peninsula...

Basque explorers took an active part in Spanish expeditions and explorations on the Pacific region (and elsewhere in the world). From the early Spanish expeditions overseas, Basques were among those who helped establish and sustain the Spanish Empire...

As Douglass states, Basques were "inextricably intertwined" with other Spanish nationals in the Pacific exploration and were, as well, attracted to the sea, being Europe's earliest whalers.

A few examples of this Basque participation are present in the introduction of the book: Douglass's suggestion that the Basque were the possible inventors of the caravel in the 15th century...

During the Spanish Colonial period, Basques enjoyed leading positions all over the Spanish colonies, constituting themselves as a self-aware ethnic group and forming migration chains that were based on cultural peculiarities and an "ancient and strong tendency towards mutual union of those originated in Vasconia..."

The Basques were able to maintain such distinct identity during the Spanish colonial experience because, according to Douglass, the Castilian royalty "had yet to complete the political consolidation of what would eventually become today's Spain" and "throughout the sixteen and seventeenth centuries, Spain was as much a decentralized federation as a single integrated state..."

The author, William "Bill" Douglass, also called "Mr Basque," has dedicated his life to the study of Basques and their history in several books and essays. He has written extensively on its diaspora in the United States to Australia and elsewhere...

The first two chapters of the book are dedicated to situating the reader in the historical background of Spain (or what would become Spain) and Portugal, how they became maritime powers, and how Basques played a role in this. The rise and decline of the Kingdom of Navarra, as well as the Reconquista were described with detail.

Moreover, too much effort is directed towards describing the fate of the Kingdom of Navarra, but not enough is said about the Araba, Bizkaia, and Gipuzkoa, which for much of the period analyzed in the book were on the Castilian orbit (and are, especially the last two, the centers of sea activities).

In the third chapter, Douglass starts to discuss key explorers and expeditions, beginning with Cristóbal de Haro (not related to the de Haro family of Bizkaian lords, though he came from the same city) as a "key underwriter of Portuguese expeditions" which is mentioned throughout the book.

The author describes, in detail, Ferdinand Magellan's adventures and misadventures—from his sour relationship with the Portuguese king to his "escape" to Spain alongside Cristóbal de Haro, and his expedition to circumnavigate the world. Another important character of the chapter is Guipuzcoan Juan Sebastian de Elcano (Elkano), who was appointed as second-in-command of one of Magellan's ships...

Curiously, the chapter dedicates far more time to Magellan than to Elcano; in fact, the latter seems to be simply one of the many secondary and dubious characters who, by pure luck, ended up finishing Magellan's expedition upon his death in the Philippines.

In the fourth chapter, Douglass begins with the "most Basque of any of Spain's Pacific exploration," the one of Garcia Jofre de Loaísa (possibly of Basque origin) with Elcano as his second in command.

Meanwhile, the author introduces Andres de Urdaneta, who reported the difficulties of crossing the Magellan Straits and, due to his discoveries, convinced Spain to use its possessions in Central America as a gateway to the Pacific, instead of trying to cross through the south passage.

Part of the chapter is dedicated to Hernán Cortés's conquests in today's Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras territories, including his disputes with Francisco da Garay (a Basque who once was governor of Jamaica and took part on Christopher Columbus's second expedition) and later with Nuño Bertrán de Guzman, whose chief military officer was the Basque Cristóbal de Ofiate.

Additionally, Douglass describes the many expeditions with or without the presence of Basque sailors that tried to find a northern and mythical passage from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean north of today's Mexican territory.

Finally, Douglass highlights the expeditions to colonize the Philippines, one of them with the participation of Urdaneta and with another Basque from Gipuzkoa, Miguel López de Legazpi, as captain general and several other Basques involved.

In chapter five, Douglass remarks on the many explorers, some of them Basques, who sailed the Pacific coast searching for King Solomon mines and the mythical land of Ophir, all to no avail. Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, son of a Basque mother and Galician father, searched for this "Eldorado" on the Pacific islands but found nothing more than a feud with another explorer, Alvaro de Mendaña.

A historian, Sarmiento authored a book on Inca history while working for viceroy Francisco de Toledo in Peru to "demonstrate that the Incas had been conquerors of other peoples and therefore had no more 'original' claim to political hegemony over the empire than did the Spaniards," also suggesting that the aboriginal population of the "New World" was descendent of Ulysses' mariners, and that the New World itself was part of Atlantis.

Sarmiento also led a fleet with a considerable number of Basques to colonize the island of Tierra del Fogo, a feat that proved to end in failure.

The subsequent failures of other explorers in finding mythical treasures on the south Pacific coast—as well as the many setbacks in maintaining colonies on newly discovered land—led to a decline on the Spanish exploration on the region. Instead, efforts turned to the colonization of California and to further explorations on the rest of the continent.

The sixth and final chapter is dedicated to outlining the shift of the Spanish focus from the Pacific to internal or European issues, as well as a period of financial crisis.

The Netherlands, France, and England would begin to challenge the Spanish-Portuguese hegemony of the seas, founding colonies of their own and exploring the world on the eve of the seventeenth century. The Thirty Year War (1618-1648) and the Spanish War of Succession (1700-1713) added more burden to the already complicated situation taking place in Spain, who lost Portugal (since 1580 under the same Spanish king), most of its non-Iberian territory within Europe, as well as Uruguay, and parts of what would become Brazil's new frontier.

One of the last glimpses of Pacific exploration was the expedition of Gipuzkoan Domingo de Boenechea in 1772 to found a colony in Tahiti, and to claim possession of Easter Island—the latter unsuccessful. A second expedition to Tahiti was organized with Boenechea and Basque, surnamed José de Andía, leading, a third with another Basque, surnamed Juan Cayetano de Lángara.

As Douglass notes, Basques were sea pioneers who sailed even to the American continent concomitantly with the Spanish and Portuguese during the first years of the Atlantic exploration. They also settled in northern Iceland for a while, made fruitful contacts with indigenous populations from the east coast of nowadays Canada (even leaving behind a pidgin), and were important in the making of vessels that allowed long distance explorations.

Finally, Basques were respected builders and sailors (there were, for instance, thirty-five Basques in Magellan's expedition) and took part in decisive moments of the Pacific exploration, with not only Elkano and the many Basque sailors—Felipe de Salcedo, Francisco de Astigarribia, Martín de Ibarra, Pedro de Unamuno, Alonso de Arellano, etc but also with Urdaneta and Legazpi, promoting the colonization of the Philippines.

Douglass's Basque Explorers in the Pacific Ocean is an interesting and detailed lesson of the period's history, despite some moments of digression over royal intrigues, which condense into a single book the dispersed knowledge on the role of the Basques in the Pacific, serving as a good guide for future discussions.

Going further from the general choosing of describing an explorer's life, or an expedition's fate and accomplishments, Douglass seeks to insert different explorers and explorations in a unique context, relating at least two centuries of Spanish naval explorations (and Portuguese) with the formation of the Spanish Empire and its subsequent decline.

The book, one can conclude, broadens the knowledge of the participation of Basques in the making of the Spanish maritime empire that would last for centuries.

Reviewed by Raphael Tsavkko Garcia, University of Deusto

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