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**“WON BY KINDNESS” VERSUS “THOROUGH SAVAGES:”  
ALVAR NÚÑEZ CABEZA DE VACA AND FRANCIS  
PARKMAN’S VIEWS OF NATIVE AMERICANS**

*by James B. Seymour, Jr.*

Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and Francis Parkman both explored the American Southwest before its settlement by Europeans. They encountered the Indians who inhabited these regions and described their meetings with them in personal journals. Although their excursions took place over 300 years apart, both viewed the Indians through the filter of the predominately European cultures they left behind. Cabeza de Vaca used his experiences in the New World to strengthen arguments promoting favorable treatment of Indians during the Spanish Conquest of the American Southwest. Francis Parkman found support for his strongly held racial and social biases in his experiences. Conflicting attitudes within their societies shaped how each perceived Indians during their sojourns in the West.

Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was born to an aristocratic family, c. 1490, in the Andalusian town of Jerez de la Frontera, located near Cadiz. Although few facts exist about his personal education, the Spanish revival in scholarship and learning early in the sixteenth century presumably reached him. Humanism and the ideas of Erasmus dominated Spanish thought in this period. As a member of the elite, Cabeza de Vaca probably learned these ideas as part of his education.<sup>1</sup> Because he belonged to the landed gentry, Cabeza de Vaca chose a military career. He served in various military excursions in Europe and distinguished himself in battle, which allowed him to secure a royal appointment as second in command of the Narvèez expedition to Florida. As a result of this ill-fated expedition, Cabeza de Vaca lived among the Native Americans for seven years. He recorded personal observations about the Indians, which influenced Spanish policy towards them.<sup>2</sup>

Cabeza de Vaca had many illustrious relatives, especially his grandfather, Pedro de Vera. Arriving in 1480, De Vera subjugated the Canary Islands for the Spanish crown. After conquering these islands, De Vera captured the native Guanche Indians through a subterfuge and then sold them into slavery. He staffed his residence in Spain with these servants. While growing up, Cabeza de Vaca visited his grandfather's house and met the Indian slaves. Scholars believe that this experience influenced his opinion about Indians. Although he acknowledged their basic humanity, Cabeza de Vaca saw them as servants who needed constant supervision.<sup>3</sup>

Overall Spanish treatment of the Indians dated from the Reconquista and relations with Moslems. The Reconquista inculcated certain beliefs into the Spanish psyche about war and the treatment of non-Christians. For Roman Catholic Spaniards, warfare contained overt religious connotations that stemmed from their experience in regaining the Iberian peninsula. Even though Spanish law was codified during this period, many Spaniards viewed loyalty to a military leader or sovereign as higher than written laws. Spain

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debated the Indian question beginning with Ferdinand and Isabella and continuing under the Hapsburg kings. The Spanish crown sought to redefine its authority and increase its power in the New World. The issue of Spanish treatment of Indians grew from royal aspirations for more power. Officials searched for firm legal, moral, and religious grounds to justify Spanish control of the Indians and to rationalize their excursions into the New World.<sup>4</sup>

The Spanish had difficulty in placing Indians within their cosmology. Three broad theories about the Indians attempted to explain their position. The first view maintained that the Indians were noble savages living in a state of innocence and simplicity. This view overlooked aspects of their civilizations, such as human sacrifices, astronomy, and complex cities such as Tenochtitlán, that belied the image of noble savage. The second theory presented the Indians as a distinct civilization with capable, well-educated people who enjoyed a highly developed culture, history, and economy. This theory undermined Spanish justifications for conquest because it regarded the Indians as equals. The third school argued that they were inferior to Europeans and lacked favorable qualities. This school justified Spanish practices in the New World, such as the *encomienda* system and conversion of the Indians, and received eventual acceptance at the royal court.<sup>5</sup>

The belief in the natural inferiority of Indians gradually dominated Spanish policy in the New World. This proposal contained additional religious implications. Because Indians were rational beings, the Spanish believed that their refusal to accept Christianity justified their enslavement. This position reconciled Spanish religious, political, and economic reasons for colonizing and governing the New World. Many people adopted a more extreme position and argued that the Indians were natural slaves by virtue of their inability to receive the Christian faith.<sup>6</sup>

Within the New World, Spanish domination of the Indians led to genuine abuses of power. These persecutions sparked protests that further incited debate over the natural condition of Indians and the nature of the Conquest. Father Las Casas, a Dominican friar, championed the Indians' cause. He cited advances in Indian culture and society as proving their inherent worth as human beings. He proposed a colonizing and proselytizing effort that would meet the Indians more as equals than the harsher system that the Spanish then employed. Las Casas relied in part on the writings of Cabeza de Vaca to substantiate his arguments about Indians' pliability for a more humane conquest. Cabeza de Vaca's account provided needed ammunition in the long-standing debate about treatment of the Indians.<sup>7</sup>

Cabeza de Vaca wrote his chronicles to sway the monarch's opinion regarding the nature of the Conquest. He assumed a counter-conquest position. Cabeza de Vaca advanced the idea of a peaceful conversion of the Indians and regarded Indians as members of the Spanish empire.<sup>8</sup> His account presented a more humane approach to Spanish control of the Indian population. He told his monarch that "to bring all these people to Christianity and subjection to Your Imperial Majesty, they must be won by kindness, the only certain way."<sup>9</sup> Cabeza de Vaca argued that the Indians would become valuable members in the Spanish empire if they were treated humanely.

Cabeza de Vaca contrasted his humane view of conquest with the harsher confrontations that Indians experienced by other Spaniards. He wrote, "with [a] heavy heart" that "the inhabitants [of the Southwest] had fled to the mountains in fear of Christians." He reported the "lavishly watered, fertile, and beautiful land, now abandoned and burned and the people thin and weak, scattered or hiding in fright." He chronicled an encounter between Indians and Spaniards. The Spanish Christians "had come through razing the towns and carrying off half the men and all the women and boys." The survivors "wandered around like fugitives" who preferred "death to a repetition of their recent horror." Cabeza de Vaca disapproved of this waste of human life and agricultural potential. He maintained that the Indians would better serve the empire under their traditional sedentary lifestyle rather than as a scattered and terrorized population.<sup>10</sup>

Cabeza de Vaca arrived at this conclusion through his seven years of wandering among the Indians in the American Southwest. After his shipwreck along the Texas Gulf Coast, the Malhado Indians took him and his companions in and fed them. After they understood the plight of the stranded men, "the Indians ... sat down and lamented for half an hour ..." He remarked that "it was amazing to see these wild, untaught savages howling like brutes in compassion for us."<sup>11</sup> This example illustrates the dual nature of Cabeza de Vaca's views of the Indians. He regarded them as wild, untaught savages or brutes, which reflected his aristocratic antecedents and his belief in the innate superiority of Spaniards. At the same time, the Indians impressed him with their compassion and empathy. This realization disclosed similarities between Indians and Christians and provided the basis for a more humane plan for conquest.

The strangeness of Indian customs colored the descriptions of Cabeza de Vaca's earliest meetings with the Capoques and Han Indians. He related the practice of nipple and lip piercing of the Capoques and Han tribes. He recounted the rituals involved in the ceremonies that expressed mourning and celebrated marriage. He told how the Indians "have a strange custom when acquaintances... meet or...visit, of weeping for half an hour before they speak." He stated that although "they have other strange customs...I have told the principal and most remarkable of them." Although he chronicled the unusual aspects of Indian life, he largely presented this information without judging Indians as inherently inferior because of these practices.<sup>12</sup>

Coupled with these more exotic customs, Cabeza de Vaca recorded exemplary behavior of the Indians. He wrote that "these people love their offspring more than any in the world and treat them very mildly." He praised the Indians as being "generous to each other with what little they have." He described the general practice of monogamy, except for medicine men, whose "wives live together in perfect amity." For Cabeza de Vaca, these examples proved the basic humanity of Indians and demonstrated their underlying benevolence. Because the Indians were generous and loving, the Spanish would conquer them more easily through application of these qualities rather than through harshness and cruelty. With these examples, Cabeza de Vaca hoped to demonstrate that even the most savage of the coastal Indians

possessed redeeming attributes that would permit peaceful conquest. He argued that the sedentary, agricultural Indians of the interior would prove even more amenable to nonviolent conquest than the coastal hunter-gatherers.<sup>13</sup>

After his experiences as a slave and wandering peddler, Cabeza de Vaca entered a new phase in his relations with the Indians as a respected and powerful medicine man. Because they accepted him as a religious figure, he believed his experiences indicated the receptivity of Indians to conversion. He exhibited the power to heal after invoking the Christian deity. While traveling westward in search of other Christians, he and his companions observed the practice of gift-giving. His Indian companions entered a new village, took the household goods of the villagers, and left with their booty. Rather than becoming upset, the people of the plundered village joined Cabeza de Vaca's procession in order to pillage the next village.<sup>14</sup>

This trade practice potentially served as a peaceful means for the Spanish to confiscate goods, especially precious metals. Cabeza de Vaca implicitly believed in the untapped wealth of the New World. He wrote that "wherever we encountered mountains, we saw undeniable indications of gold, antimony, iron, copper, and other metals." He asserted that "Indians...regard gold and silver with indifference, seeing no use for either." These conditions gave the Spanish a method to obtain gold through peaceful trade rather than destroying villages and terrorizing the populace.<sup>15</sup>

Cabeza de Vaca's narrative served as ammunition for Las Casas, who wanted a more humane conquest of the New World. De Vaca believed that the Indians were "a substantial people with a capacity for unlimited development." Peaceful conquest would exploit their potential and benefit both Europeans and the Indians. The fertile plains of the Southwest region, the tractability of the Indians, and their readiness to convert to Christianity buttressed arguments for humane endeavors to bring the Indians into the Spanish empire.<sup>16</sup>

Francis Parkman presented a different view of the Indians in *The Oregon Trail*. Parkman contended that "for the most part, a civilized white man can discover very few points of sympathy between his own nature and that of an Indian." He further believed that, although Indians had souls, they remained "dormant; and no exertions of the missionaries, Jesuit or Puritan...have as yet availed to arouse it." Parkman discounted the idea of peaceful coexistence between whites and Indians and dismissed as ineffectual the idea of converting them to Christianity as a method to subdue them. Parkman viewed Indians from an uncompromising racial and cultural prejudice resulting from his nineteenth-century New England culture. This bias permeated his account and caused him to overemphasize the negative qualities of Indians in his narratives. He differed from Cabeza de Vaca in recommending harsher methods to subdue Indians and in his essentially negative view of them.<sup>17</sup>

Francis Parkman was born into a wealthy family on September 16, 1823, on Beacon Hill in Boston, Massachusetts. He enjoyed "the full quantum of 'advantages' in the way of wealth, social position, and social background that these natal circumstances suggest." Both his father, the Reverend Doctor Francis Parkman, and his mother, Caroline Hall Parkman, came from long and distinguished lines of ministers. The Reverend Doctor Parkman served as

orthodox Unitarian minister of the New North Church in Boston. His parents taught Parkman that he and his family were the custodians of Boston culture and tradition. He attended Harvard and joined appropriate clubs for his social background, where he favored rational and scientific fields in his education and at one point studied horticulture. He decided to pursue the historical profession after attending law school. Parkman viewed himself as a member of a wise patrician class who would guide his generation of Americans. He thought that "progress was for the free, freedom was for those who were racially fit for it, and, above all others, the land of the fit was New England."<sup>18</sup>

Despite suffering from physical infirmities throughout his life, Parkman enjoyed camping and exploring the outdoors. The romanticism implicit in camping captured his imagination. Stories of Indian life and accounts of pioneers' exploits, such as *The Leatherstocking Tales* (c. 1800) by James Fennimore Cooper, reinforced Parkman's romantic notions about outdoorsmen and the frontier. He accepted the national frontier myth and the ideal of self-reliance. Parkman considered himself as a hero figure and superimposed this image onto his rendition of his actual experiences. His life contained elements of romantic legend because he intentionally cultivated such images for himself. Parkman felt the urge to leave the rarified atmosphere of Boston culture and to experience personally the untamed wilderness.<sup>19</sup>

Parkman indulged this urge. He decided to travel the frontier region before his impending marriage to Catherine Bigelow. In his decision, "Parkman, a child of Unitarianism, ... turn[ed] to the fierce strenuousness of the hunting Sioux for a counterimage of human possibilities." He observed and recorded the cultures of different Indian tribes he encountered on his journey. These descriptions reflected Parkman's cultural biases of the Indians, which stemmed from his upbringing, education, and class. *The Oregon Trail* (1849) became a drama of cultural confrontation between civilized white society and savage Indian culture. Rather than learning from his experiences, Parkman's prejudices remained intact and he retained his Boston reticence and reserve throughout his journey.<sup>20</sup>

In his first meeting with Indians, Parkman described a Pawnee chief as having a ridge of hair "very much like the long bristles on the back of a hyena." He termed the Pawnees the "first specimens that we met - and very indifferent ones they were - of the genuine savages of the prairie."<sup>21</sup> Parkman predicted that "Indians will soon be abased by whiskey and overawed by military posts."<sup>22</sup> He presented the Indian woman Margot, a trader's wife, as "a female animal" because of her slovenliness and ill-nature. Her husband, Reynal, exuded an "image of sleek and selfish complacency" because he had "caught not only...[the Indians'] habits but their ideas." From this description, Parkman apparently considered Reynal contaminated by his close contact with Indians.<sup>23</sup> The rest of the book continues this pattern of denigrating Indians and those who adopted their customs.

When he portrayed the Ogillallah village, Parkman called the residents "thorough savages." He believed that "neither their manners nor their ideas were in the slightest degree modified by contact with [white] civilization." He further contended that "they knew nothing of the power and real character of

the white men, and their children would scream in terror when they saw me."<sup>24</sup> Parkman overlooked earlier confrontations between white men and these Indians, which might cause their terrified reaction. He also assumed that white men's character was innately superior to the Indians' nature. Parkman displayed an inability to understand that the Indians' behavior reflected finely crafted survival skills, which resulted in his describing them without understanding their culture.<sup>25</sup> In the 1850s, many Indians did not consider their civilization inferior to white civilization and consequently failed to see valid reasons to adopt white ways. Parkman ignored these possible interpretations for his experiences that might also explain the Indians' response to white society.

Parkman used a generous amount of sarcasm to vilify Indians when he related a story about a successful buffalo hunt. After the buffalo had been "reduced to a heap of bloody ruins," the Indians consumed the meat. He asserted that "the surrounding group of savages offered a not very attractive spectacle to a civilized eye." They proffered choice morsels from the buffalo, but he "begged leave to decline" their "extempore banquet."<sup>26</sup> He described sleeping accommodations among Indian children in similarly sarcastic tones. He awoke to find "one of the children crawling over me, while another larger one was tugging at my blanket and nestling himself in a very disagreeable proximity." To remedy this intolerable situation, Parkman "immediately repelled those advances by punching the heads of these miniature savages with a short stick which I always kept by me for the purpose."<sup>27</sup>

Parkman made sweeping generalizations about the Indians' character and conduct. He ascribed "strange unbridled impulses" to them and contended that "nothing offers so strong a temptation to their ferocious instincts as the appearance of timidity, weakness, or security."<sup>28</sup> He believed that "for the most part, a civilized white man can discover very few points of sympathy between his own nature and that of an Indian." Parkman found that despite "every disposition to do justice to their good qualities, he must be conscious that an impassable gulf lies between him and his red brethren." He thought that, after spending time with them on the prairie, a person "begins to look upon them as a troublesome and dangerous species of wild beasts."<sup>29</sup> Parkman considered this natural gulf between Indians and civilized white society as impassable, so attempts to mingle the two cultures inevitably would fail. His negative descriptions of the traders and mountain-men, such as Reynal and Chatillon, who lived among the Indians, revealed his belief. Parkman found what he expected to find in the prairie, retained his disgust at the Indians' appearance, and emerged with his prejudices intact.

Parkman's chronicle provoked controversy among later historians as many sought to redress the misinformed stance of his writings. Others concentrated on understanding the motivations behind Parkman's preconceptions about Indians and frontier life. Francis Jennings argued that "one of Parkman's main objectives in all his writings was to make Indians seem like brute beasts without power of reason."<sup>30</sup> Jennings argued that Parkman used every device available to him to make the Indians appear irrational and cowardly. He "convert[ed] the flesh-and-blood colonials and Indians into the abstractions of

civilization locked in conflict with savagery." Parkman used this pattern to justify American persecution of Indians and to reinforce negative images of Indian life.<sup>31</sup> Jennings believed that "there can be no doubt that [Parkman] knew exactly what he was doing" in his damaging portrayals of the Indians.<sup>32</sup> Parkman's adventures reinforced his cultural prejudices about Indians.

Philip Terrie believed that *The Oregon Trail* revealed Parkman's "fascination...[with] distinguishing whites from Indians as well as ... whites who live among and act like Indians." Terrie interpreted Parkman's chronicle as a method of "discovery of 'the other in ourselves' [that] becomes possible (but not realized) through the process of 'Indianization.'" Terrie faulted Parkman because he "never consciously rises above his culture's racist insistence that Indians possessed certain predictable characteristics. He sees what he expects to see." Terrie wrote that "Parkman's raw fascination with the physical charms of Indian women appears repeatedly in *The Oregon Trail*."<sup>33</sup> He concludes that this attraction both tempted and repulsed Parkman because of his racial prejudices. Parkman's experience on the Oregon Trail suggested that he and the Indians shared many commonalities in human nature that, "for this son of the Boston aristocracy, the implications of [which]...[were] too profound for him to confront."<sup>34</sup>

*The Oregon Trail* by Francis Parkman and *Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America* by Cabeza de Vaca present two divergent views of Indian tribes in North America. Both were educated and came from the elite of their societies. Despite the similarities in backgrounds, their historical accounts depicted Indians radically differently. Parkman's narrative emphasized the negative qualities of the Indians. He recorded the scorn with which he viewed them and what he regarded as their barbaric customs. Although he lived among the Indians and enjoyed their hospitality, he deplored their customs and practices. He left the prairie with his preexisting prejudices about the Indians not only intact but reinforced. In part, his narrative demonstrates the limitations of the travel account in ethnocultural evaluations. Despite his antipathy towards Indians, his account included valuable material about mid-nineteenth-century Indian life and customs.

Cabeza de Vaca's account expressed a more sympathetic view of Indians. He lived with the Indians longer than Parkman and consequently had more contact with both their good and bad qualities. Cabeza de Vaca held a variety of positions among the Indians, ranging from slave to revered religious figure. His experience gave him a unique understanding of the Indians' culture. Further, Cabeza de Vaca learned their languages and understood the Indians first hand. These considerations partially explain his more positive attitude.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Sarah Phillips Huffman, "Two Sixteenth Century Chroniclers and the Indian Policy of the Spanish State" (MA thesis, Texas A&M, 1977), pp. 15-16.

<sup>2</sup>Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America*, trans. and ed. by Cyclone Covey (1961; reprint, Albuquerque, 1983), pp. 8-9. (page references are to reprint edition) Hereinafter cited as *Cabeza de Vaca*.



<sup>3</sup>José Bernardo Fernández, "Contributions of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca to History and Literature in the Southern United States" (PhD. diss., Florida State University, 1973), pp. 30-31, 32-33, 34. De Vera's ruse involved swearing to the Guancho Indians on the Host used in the Roman Catholic Mass that they would together go and enslave a neighboring tribe. When the Indians boarded the ships, they were clapped in irons and enslaved. When asked how he could justify such behavior, De Vera responded that he swore on an unconsecrated Host, which invalidated his promise.

<sup>4</sup>Huffman, "Two Sixteenth Century Chroniclers," pp. 2, 7-8, 11.

<sup>5</sup>Huffman, "Two Sixteenth Century Chroniclers," pp. 21, 23.

<sup>6</sup>Huffman, "Two Sixteenth Century Chroniclers," pp. 27, 28-29.

<sup>7</sup>Huffman, "Two Sixteenth Century Chroniclers," p. 29.

<sup>8</sup>Rolena Adorno, "The Discursive Encounter of Spain and America: The Authority of Eyewitness Testimony in the Writing of History," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 49 (April 1992) pp. 211, 220.

<sup>9</sup>*Cabeza de Vaca*, p. 123.

<sup>10</sup>*Cabeza de Vaca*, p. 123.

<sup>11</sup>*Cabeza de Vaca*, pp. 57, 57-58.

<sup>12</sup>*Cabeza de Vaca*, pp. 61-63.

<sup>13</sup>*Cabeza de Vaca*, pp. 61-63.

<sup>14</sup>*Cabeza de Vaca*, pp. 103-106, 112-113,

<sup>15</sup>*Cabeza de Vaca*, pp. 124-125.

<sup>16</sup>*Cabeza de Vaca*, p. 120.

<sup>17</sup>Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail* (1950; reprint, New York, 1978), pp. 205, 85, 149 (page references are to reprint edition).

<sup>18</sup>Howard Doughty, *Francis Parkman* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 1-2, 20-21, 23-24. Wilbur R. Jacobs, *Francis Parkman, Historian as Hero: The Formative Years* (Austin, 1991), pp. 3, 12. Wilbur R. Jacobs, "Francis Parkman -Naturalist - Environmental Savant" *Pacific Historical Review* 41 (August 1992) p. 343. Francis Jennings, "Francis Parkman: A Brahmin among Untouchables," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 42 (July 1985) p. 322.

<sup>19</sup>Doughty, *Francis Parkman*, pp. X, 3, 35, 132, 139. Otis A. Pease, *Parkman's History: The Historian As Literary Artist* (1953; reprint, 1968), p. 2. For a fuller analysis of Parkman's illnesses, consult Jacobs, *Francis Parkman, Historian as Hero*, pp. 3-28. Jacobs argued that Parkman suffered from both psychological and physical illnesses throughout his life.

<sup>20</sup>L. Hugh Moore, "Francis Parkman on the Oregon Trail: A Study in Cultural Prejudices," *Western American Literature* 12 (November 1977) pp. 185, 186.

<sup>21</sup>Parkman, *Oregon Trail*, p. 57.

<sup>22</sup>Parkman, *Oregon Trail*, p. 149.

<sup>23</sup>Parkman, *Oregon Trail*, pp. 95, 96.

<sup>24</sup>Parkman, *Oregon Trail*, p. 149.

<sup>25</sup>Moore, "Francis Parkman," p. 189.

<sup>26</sup>Parkman, *Oregon Trail*, pp. 161-162.

<sup>27</sup>Parkman, *Oregon Trail*, p. 177.

<sup>28</sup>Parkman, *Oregon Trail*, pp. 200-201.

<sup>29</sup>Parkman, *Oregon Trail*, pp. 205-206.

<sup>30</sup>Jennings, "Francis Parkman," p. 310.

<sup>31</sup>Jennings, "Francis Parkman," pp. 311, 313, 316.

<sup>32</sup>Jennings, "Francis Parkman," p. 318.

<sup>33</sup>Philip Terrie, "The Other Within: Indianization on *The Oregon Trail*," *The New England Quarterly* 44 (September 1991) p. 384.

<sup>34</sup>Terrie, "The Other Within," pp. 376, 377, 379, 380, 385-386, 392.