

"The past is never dead. It's not even past." William Faulkner

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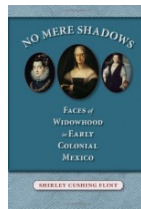


No Mere Shadows: Faces of Widowhood in Early Colonial Mexico, by Shirley Cushing Flint (2013)

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by Ann Twinam

What would Mexico City—or *Tenochtitlan* as it was known to its indigenous population—have looked like to ten year old Doña Luisa Estrada, when she arrived with her parents in 1524, three years after it fell to Spain? What is clear is that her life soon intermingled in the early conquest society. At thirteen she married 26 year old conquistador Jorge de Alvarado. He also experienced the New World as young child: he had been participating in expeditions since he was nine. After his death, Doña Luisa administered his grant of tribute Indians (*encomiendas*) and accumulated estates that stretched from Mexico City to Guatemala. While unfortunately neither left what certainly would appear in Shirley Cushing Flint's *No Mere Shadows: Faces of Widowhood in Early Colonial Mexico*.



Flint was initially fascinated by the history of one of Doña Luisa's sisters, Doña Beatriz de Estrada. Doña Beatriz leveraged her fortune to finance the famous expedition of her husband, Francisco Vásquez de Coronado, to the American southwest. As the author delved into the collective biographies of Estrada wives, husbands, and children she discovered how three generations accumulated and diversified forms of economic wealth and social status, acquired assets in the core and then the periphery, and constantly engaged in lawsuits to maintain them.



Spanish colonial map of Culhuacán, now in present-day Mexico City, 1588 (Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin)

Separate chapters explore the ups and downs of the Estrada family's marriages, widowhood, children, and finances. These include the matriarch, Doña Marina (Gutiérrez Flores de la Caballería), who arrived as the wife of the newly appointed royal

treasurer Alonso de Estrada and who, on his death, managed the extensive properties of urban and rural real estate including a profitable mill. She arranged favorable marriages for her daughters, not only for young Doña Luisa and Doña Beatriz to conquistadors Alvarado and Coronado, but for her daughter Doña Francisca, whose husband possessed the most valuable grant of Indians for tribute after Hernán Cortés. The fortunes of the next generation waned with the marriage of granddaughter Doña María to Alonso Ávila, as he was beheaded in 1566 over charges that he participated in a conspiracy to challenge royal hegemony. She spent her later years in Spain attempting to recover the family fortunes.

Tracing these compelling personal vignettes of the lives of the Estradas provides rare insights into the challenges and opportunities of life for Spanish women in post-conquest Mexico.

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