

The Isle of Misfortune | Michael Wood's Diary

Cabeza de Vaca landed in Florida in April, 1527 with more than 300 men on the Narvaez expedition. After weathering storms, disease, starvation and other calamities, he arrived on the "Isle of Misfortune" (Galveston Island) in November the following year - one of only a handful of survivors. He wrote later, "We looked the very image of death and the north wind began to blow and we were closer to death than to life...and at the hour of dusk the Indians came looking for us and when they saw the disaster that had come upon us and the depths we were in, they sat down among us, and with the great grief and the pity they felt for us, all of them began to cry."



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Living Amongst the Other | Michael Wood's Diary

Cabeza de Vaca began to reconcile himself to a life among the Indians, far away from the Christian world. In the early days he was kept as a slave, working for his hosts. In the spring, he collected birds' eggs on the shore and sometimes crossed to the mainland to kill a few deer, or buffalo, saving the skins for clothing. Eventually, however, he could face their cruel existence no longer. Through contacts among neighboring tribes, he was able to leave the island and move into the interior where he experienced kinder treatment. For the next few years he lived among the semi-nomadic Coahuiltecans Indians. Working as a trader, he bartered seashells and coral with the people of the coast.

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Living Amongst the Other | Coahuiltecan Indians

The Coahuiltecan Indians lived widely scattered between the coast of Texas, the Brazos River and the Rio Grande. In the summers, they foraged for fruit and cacti along the inland river valleys. The Coahuiltecan Indians lived at the most basic level of subsistence, engaged in communal hunts for reptiles and insects, and occasionally larger animals. They were incredibly hardy and, despite the rigors of the climate, went completely naked.

Cabeza de Vaca describes many of their customs, including their ceremonial use of the mesquite bean and the hallucinatory peyote mushroom. The Coahuiltecan Indians lived in archaic semi-nomadic clans, a patriarchal culture that knew little of agriculture and pottery, that had only simple tools and cooking implements, and whose diet was cacti, fruit, nuts and meat. When they traveled, they carried their huts on their backs, rolled up as mats.

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The Survivors | Michael Wood's Diary

Having lived as a nomad for five years, Cabeza de Vaca may have been resigned to a migratory life, but the surprising news that other survivors of the tempest were living down the coast renewed his determination to return home. They were Castillo, the ship doctor's son; Estevanico, a Moroccan Moor and Dorantes.

Feeling safety in numbers, the reunited foursome parted with their Indian friends and began a long walk south to Mexico. Their route, along the Gulf of Mexico, is the subject of a centuries-old controversy, especially among Texas nationalists (who would like as much of it as possible to be in Texas).

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The Escape | Michael Wood's Diary

Although Cabeza de Vaca and his three Spanish comrades could not have known it, they had embarked on a 2,000-mile journey. A sighting recorded at Cerralvo means that the troupe must have made their way across to Big Bend, inside the wild and beautiful desertscapes of northern



Mexico. Many of his route descriptions along the next stage of his journey are discernible even today. And, as we followed him through northern Mexico, we were excited to be walking practically in his footsteps.

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The Journey West | Michael Wood's Diary

During those days on horseback, we saw something of the landscape that Cabeza de Vaca would also have seen, dramatically eroded gullies whose reflections of the sun changed dramatically throughout the day – rosey at dawn, terracotta and ochre at



midday and purplish towards sunset. We rode under huge cliffs, past ancient waterholes. These trails were used not just in the 19th century Indian wars, or by the conquistadors, but since prehistory. Cabeza de Vaca's Indian guides would have known them well.

Always close by, we found cave sites with pictographs, some going far back into history. This was evident from the density of ancient garbage heaps on the hill-sides below the cave mouths, some of them 10 or 15 feet deep.

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The Walk to the Sea | Michael Wood's Diary

The weather was autumnal throughout Cabeza de Vaca's journey in the highlands but it must have felt like winter in the mountains.



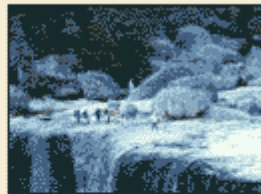
On this walk to the sea, he gives us many interesting details of the culture of the native peoples: their permanent houses of earth and adobe, their fine textiles, and their agriculture (they cultivated maize and beans). The people here gave the travelers shells, beads, and turquoise from the north - as well as five emerald arrowheads used in ceremonial dances. As always, Cabeza de Vaca took a special interest in the women:

"The women were more modestly dressed than in any other part of the Indians that we had seen.... They wear cotton shifts that reach to their knees and over them a blouse with half sleeves and skirts of dressed deerskin that touch the ground. They soap them with a kind of root that makes them very clean and they are very well kept; they are open in front and tied with thongs; and they wear shoes."

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The Spanish Slave Traders | Michael Wood's Diary

By the time they reached the beautiful landscape of the Fuerte River, Cabeza de Vaca and his men were in an empty countryside. Their chance meeting with Spanish slavers here produced one of the most memorable accounts in the Spanish literature of the conquest.



"At dawn we came upon four Christians on horseback. Seeing my strange attire and that I was in the company of Indians they were greatly startled. They stared at me for quite a while, so great was their surprise that they could not find words to ask me anything. I spoke first and told them to take me to their leader."

So the slave-hunters, far from their own kind, in a wild and unknown country, were suddenly confronted by a bearded, half-naked Spaniard, accompanied by an African and 11 Indians, who announced they were survivors of a shipwreck, from eight years before, and nearly 2,000 miles away.

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San Miguel Culiacan | Michael Wood's Diary

With the help of the slave-hunters, Cabeza and his men were able to fix their location - 100 miles from the Spanish town of San Miguel Culiacan at the mouth of the San Lorenzo River on the Pacific Coast. They decided to go there. Meanwhile, news of their incredible survival preceded them. The mayor of Culiacan rushed out and met them with food and clothes "in a peaceful settled valley eight leagues before the town."

The travelers stayed from February through April in Culiacan, gingerly, one imagines, readying themselves for a return to their former lives. Although it appears that, throughout this time, they still wore their Indian rags and chose to sleep on the ground.

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Mexico City | Michael Wood's Diary

Finally, in June, Cabeza de Vaca and his men reached Mexico City where the Viceroy - Hernan Cortes, himself - received them. In Mexico City, Cabeza de Vaca shared his tale and perhaps first conceived the idea of writing it down.

Cabeza de Vaca sailed from Veracruz in 1537, wintered in Cuba, and finally landed in Lisbon in August 1538. From here he made his way back to Spain. His story was first published in 1542 in an error-strewn edition, which he did not control. (By then, he had returned to the New World.) The revised edition came out in 1555. Although very few original copies have survived, today the work remains a best-seller.

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The Aftermath

Cabeza de Vaca's story is not a tale of the fall of civilizations, like those of Cortes and Pizarro. Nor is it an epic of exploration like Orellana's. It is a small story of four people in a vast continent, in a century in which millions died. A small story, but, of course, it is also a big story.

Like all the best fiction, it is a maturation story; a story of spiritual growth and change. The significance for us is that we can read it not just as a tale of growth in the self of one man, but as a change in civilization, too. As we understand it now, unevolved, intolerant societies (or people) see the Other as threatening, alien, different. To see the Other as a reflection of one's own self; to take responsibility for the Other, and feel for him or her, this moment of fellow feeling is what the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes as "the birth of morality in history."

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