
Columbus and the Labyrinth of History

Every generation creates the Columbus it needs. As the Quincentenary of his 1492 voyage approaches, observers are torn between celebrating a brave visionary and condemning the first representative of an age of imperial exploitation. Here Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist John Noble Wilford explores the various Columbus legends and discovers, beneath them, a very human figure and an adventure unprecedented in boldness.

John Noble Wilford

History has not been the same since Christopher Columbus. Neither has he been the same throughout history.

During the five centuries since his epochal voyage of 1492, Columbus has been many things to many people: the protean symbol of the adventuring human spirit, the lone hero defying both the odds and entrenched thinking to change the world; the first modern man or a lucky adventurer blinded by medieval mysticism; an icon of Western faith in progress or an object of scorn for his failings of leadership and intellect; a man virtually deified at one time and roundly vilified today for his part in the initiation of an international slave trade and European imperialism. We hardly know the real Columbus. Such, it seems, is the fate of historical figures whose deeds reverberate through time.

The Columbus story surely confirms the axiom that all works of history are interim reports. What people did in the past is not preserved in amber, a moment captured and immutable through the ages. Each generation looks back and, drawing from its own experiences, presumes to find patterns that illuminate both past and present. This is natural and proper. A

succeeding generation can ask questions of the past that those in the past never asked themselves. Columbus could not know that he had ushered in what we call the Age of Discovery, with all its implications, any more than we can know what two world wars, nuclear weapons, the collapse of colonial empires, the end of the Cold War, and the beginning of space travel will mean for people centuries from now. Perceptions change, and so does our understanding of the past.

Accordingly, the image of Columbus has changed through the years, sometimes as a result of new information, more often because of changes in the lenses through which we view him. Once a beneficiary of this phenomenon, Columbus in times of reigning optimism has been exalted as a mythic hero. Now, with the approach of the Quincentennial, he has fallen victim to a more self-critical society, one prone to hero-bashing and historical pessimism.

As recently as 1974, Samuel Eliot Morison, the biographer of Columbus, concluded one of his books with a paean to European influence on America: "To the people of the New World, pagans expecting short and brutish lives, void of

hope for any future, had come the Christian vision of a merciful God and a glorious heaven." It is hard to conceive of those words being written today. In a forward to the 1983 edition of Morison's *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus*, British historian David Beers Quinn criticizes Morison for ignoring or dismissing Columbus's failings. Columbus, Quinn writes, "cannot be detached from the imperialist exploitation of his discoveries and must be made to take some share of responsibility for the brutal exploitation of the islands and mainlands he found."

By and large, this new perspective has produced a more realistic, demythologized version of the Columbus story. The temptation, though, is to swing too far in the other direction, rewriting history as we wish it would have been or judging people wholly by anachronistic political standards. This has happened all too often regarding Columbus, producing myth and propaganda in the guise of history.

All the more reason for us to sift through the romantic inventions and enduring misconceptions that have clouded the real Columbus and to recognize that so much of the man we celebrate or con-

demn is our own creation. He is the embodiment of our running dialogue about the human potential for good and evil.

Some of the facts about Columbus—who he was and what he did—are beyond serious dispute. This mariner of humble and obscure origins was possessed of an idea that became an obsession. He proposed to sail west across the uncharted ocean to the fabled shores of the Indies, the lands of gold and spices celebrated in the tales of Marco Polo and the goal of an increasingly expansionist Europe in the 15th century. The Portuguese had sought a route around the tip of Africa. Some Florentine cosmographers had pondered the prospect of a westward sea route. But Columbus was apparently the first with the stubborn courage to stake his life on the execution of such a daring scheme.

After years pleading his case before the courts of Portugal and Spain, dismissed as a hopeless visionary or a tiresomely boastful nuisance, Columbus finally won the reluctant support of Ferdinand and Isabella. At the little Andalusian port of Palos de la Frontera, he raised a fleet of three ships and enlisted some 90 seamen. Whatever the sailors' trepidations or their opinion of Columbus when he arrived at Palos, their destiny was to share with him a voyage "by which route," Columbus wrote in the prologue to his journal, "we do not know for certain anyone previously has passed."

Columbus was never more in command of himself and his destiny than on that day, August 3, 1492, when he weighed anchor at Palos. He was a consummate mariner, as all his contemporaries agreed and historians have not contradicted, and here he was doing what he did best and so sure of his success. Of course, he never made it to the Indies, as head-shaking savants had predicted, then or on any of his three subsequent voyages. His landfall came half a world short of them, on an unprepossessing island inhabited by naked people with no knowledge whatsoever of Marco Polo's Great Khan.

On the morning of October 12, Columbus and his captains, together with

their most trusted functionaries, clambered into armed launches and headed for the sandy beach and green trees. They carried the flags of the Christian monarchs of Spain. A solemn Columbus, without so much as a thought that it was anything but his to take, proclaimed possession of the island for the king and for the queen. Columbus and his officers then dropped to their knees in prayer.

It did not escape Columbus that these islanders "go around as naked as their mothers bore them; and the women also." This was not prurience but culture shock. Columbus was generally admiring in his initial descriptions of the people. They were "guileless and generous." Bringing cotton, parrots, and javelins to trade, they paddled out to Columbus's ships in their dugouts, each made from a single tree and so long that they held 40 men; the West Indian term for these dugouts was *canoa*—and thus a New-World word entered European speech. Columbus was pleased to note that they had no firearms. When he had shown them some swords, "they took them by the edge and through ignorance cut themselves." "They should be good and intelligent servants," he concluded, "for I see that they say very quickly everything that is said to them; and I believed they would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to me that they had no religion." Columbus the anthropologist had his priorities.

Unfortunately, we have no record of the first impressions that the people Columbus called Indians had of the Europeans. What did they think of these white men with beards? Their sailing ships and their weapons that belched smoke? Their Christian God and their inordinate interest in gold and a place beyond the horizon called the Indies? We will never know. They could not put their feelings into writing; they had no writing. And the encounter itself doomed them. Within a generation or two, they became extinct, mainly through exposure to European diseases, and so could not pass on by word of mouth stories about the moment white men entered their lives.

Columbus made certain by his words and actions that his discovery would not be lost to history. On the homeward voyage, after visiting a string of other islands

and more people, he composed a letter to the court of Ferdinand and Isabella in which he announced his discovery. He had made good his boast to one and all. He may have harbored some disappointment in not reaching the Asian mainland, but he had sailed across the Ocean Sea and found lands and peoples unknown to Europeans. And he wanted the court to read about it in his own words, especially since this justified his own claim to the titles and wealth due him pursuant to the deal he had struck with the court.

The letter Columbus wrote was also his bid for a place in history. He understood that the achievement would go for naught unless the news got back to others. To explore (the word, in one version of its etymology, comes from the Latin "to cry out") is to search out and exclaim discovery. Simply reaching a new land does not in itself constitute a discovery. It must be announced and then recorded in history so that the discovery can be acted upon.

Others besides the indigenous people preceded Columbus in finding parts of America. This is no longer an issue of consuming dispute in Columbian studies. Almost certainly the Norse under Leif Ericson landed at some northern islands and established a short-lived settlement at Newfoundland. Ericson and others may have reached America, but they failed to discover it. For nothing came of their deeds. Columbus, in writing the letter, was making sure his deeds would have consequences and his achievement would enter history.

The letter eventually reached the court in Barcelona and had the desired effect. The king and queen received Columbus with pomp and listened to his story with genuine interest and pleasure. They instructed him to return to the new-found lands with a larger fleet including soldiers and settlers. America had entered world history, though Columbus insisted to his dying day that he had reached the Indies.

This familiar story of Columbus has been embellished to create an enduring popular legend. Some of the tales (though not all of them) have been laid to rest through historical research.

‘Gardens the Most Beautiful I Ever Saw’

*The following account of October 10–13, 1492, is taken from Columbus’s **Diario**, as abstracted by Bartolomé de las Casas and adapted by William Carlos Williams.*

Wednesday, 59 leagues, W. S. W., but counted no more than 44. Here the people could endure no longer. All now complained about the length of the voyage. But I cheered them as best I could, giving them good hopes of the advantages they might gain by it. Roused to madness by their fear, the captains declared they were going back but I told them then, that however much they might complain, I had to go to the Indies and they along with me, and that I would go until I found them, with the help of our Lord. And so for a time it passed but now all was in great danger from the men.

Thursday, 11th of October. The course was W. S. W. More sea [spilling over the deck] than there had been during the whole of the voyage. Sandpipers and a green reed near the ship. And for this I gave thanks to God as it was a sure sign of land. Those of the *Pinta* saw a cane and a pole, and they took up another small pole which appeared to be worked with iron; also another bit of cane, a land plant, and a small board. The crew of the caravel *Niña* also saw signs of land, and a small plant covered with berries.

.... I admonished the men to keep a good lookout on the forecastle and to watch well for land and to him who should first cry out that he had seen land I would give a silk doublet besides the other rewards promised by the Sovereigns which were 10,000 *maravedis* to him who should first see it. Two hours past midnight, the moon having risen at eleven o’clock and then shining brightly in the sky, being in its third quarter, a sailor named Rodrigo de Triana sighted the land at a distance of about two leagues. At once I ordered them to shorten sail and we lay under the mainsail without the bonnets, hove to waiting for daylight.

On Friday, the 12th of October, we anchored before the land and made ready to go on shore. Presently we saw naked people on the beach. I went ashore in the armed boat and took the royal standard, and Martin Alonzo and Vincent Yañez, his brother, who was captain of the *Niña*. And we saw the trees very green, and much water and fruits of diverse kinds. Presently many of the inhabitants assembled. I gave to some red caps and glass beads to put round their necks, and many other things of little value. They came to the ship’s boats afterward, where we were, swimming and bringing us parrots, cotton threads in skeins, darts—what they had, with good will. As naked as their mothers bore them, and so the women, though I did not see more than one young girl. All I saw were youths, well made with very handsome bodies and very good countenances. Their hair short and coarse, almost like the hairs of a horse’s tail. They paint themselves some black, some white, others red and others of what color they can find. Some paint the faces and others paint the whole body, some only round the eyes and others only on the nose. They are themselves neither black nor white.

On Saturday, as dawn broke, many of these people came to the beach, all youths. Their legs are very straight, all in one line, and no belly. They came to the ship in canoes, made out of the trunk of a tree, all in one piece, and wonderfully worked, propelled with a paddle like a baker’s shovel, and go at marvelous speed.



ILLUSTRATION FROM THE GRANGER COLLECTION, NEW YORK

Bright green trees, the whole land so green that it is a pleasure to look on it. Gardens of the most beautiful trees I ever saw. Later I came upon one man in a canoe going from one island to another. He had a little of their bread, about the size of a fist, a calabash of water, a piece of brown earth, powdered then kneaded, and some dried leaves which must be a thing highly valued by them for they bartered with it at San Salvador. He also had with him a native basket. The women wore in front of their bodies a small piece of cotton cloth. I saw many trees very unlike those of our country. Branches growing in different ways and all from one trunk; one twig is one form and another is a different shape and so unlike that it is the greatest wonder of the world to see the diversity; thus one branch has leaves like those of a cane, and others like those of a mastic tree; and on a single tree there are five different kinds. The fish so unlike ours that it is wonderful. Some are the shape of dories and of the finest colors, so bright that there is not a man who would not be astounded, and would not take great delight in seeing them. There are also whales. I saw no beasts on land save parrots and lizards.

On shore I sent the people for water, some with arms, and others with casks; and as it was some little distance I waited two hours for them.

During that time I walked among the trees, which was the most beautiful thing which I had ever seen....

Columbus did not, for example, have to prove that the world was round: All educated people in Europe at the time accepted this as a given. Isabella did not have to pawn her jewels to raise money for the expedition; though the Crown, following its wars against the Moors, was strapped for cash, the financial adviser Luis de Santangel arranged a loan from the ample coffers of the state police and from some Italian merchant bankers. And Columbus did not set sail with a crew of hardened criminals. Only four men, accused of murdering a town crier, took advantage of a promised amnesty, and even they were seasoned mariners and acquitted themselves well on the voyage.

More troublesome for historians have been certain other mysteries and controversies.

Where, for example, did the first landfall occur? We know it was a small island the inhabitants called Guanahani and Columbus christened San Salvador. It was in the Bahamas or thereabouts, far from the Asian mainland he was seeking, but which island? No fewer than nine different possible islands have been identified from the few ambiguous clues in Columbus's journal. The site favored by most experts is the Bahamian island once called Watling's but renamed San Salvador in 1924 to help solidify its claim.

Did Columbus really come from Genoa? Nearly every European nation has at one time or another laid some claim to him. Was he Jewish? Such conjecture originated in the 19th century and was promoted in 1940 in Salvatore de Madriaga's vivid biography, *Christopher Columbus*. But the evidence is circumstantial. Records in Genoa indicate that, whatever his more remote ancestry, Columbus's family had been Christian for several generations.

When and how in the mists of his rootless life did Columbus conceive of his audacious plan? Was it sheer inspiration bolstered by rational research? Or did he come into some secret knowledge? Was he really seeking the Indies? How was he finally able to win royal backing? What were his ships like?—no caravel wreck from that period has ever been recovered. Scholars and amateur

sleuths have spent lifetimes trying to resolve these questions, usually without notable success.

Part of the problem lies with the passage of time. Although the record of Columbus by contemporaries is more substantial than that of any other 15th-century explorer, surviving accounts are often difficult to assess from this distance. Whose version is to be trusted: The letters of Peter Martyr, the courtier in Spain who never ventured to the New World? The biography by Hernando Columbus, the devoted son protective of his father's fame? The history of the New World by Bartolomé de las Casas (1474–1566), the Dominican friar and champion of the Indians who never missed a chance to condemn the brutality of the early explorers and colonists? Even the few extant writings of Columbus himself, who could be vague, contradictory and self-serving?

Hero worship has further distorted history. We want—or used to want—our heroes to be larger than life. The result can be a caricature, a plaster saint inviting iconoclasts to step forward with their own images, which can also ignore the complexity of human reality.

We are left, therefore, with enough material to mold the Columbus we choose to extol or excoriate, but not enough ever to feel sure we truly know the man.

Nothing better illustrates history's changing images of Columbus than the succession of portraits of him that have appeared over the centuries. They show a man of many faces—handsome and stalwart, heavy and stolid, shadowed and vaguely sinister. Artistic interpretation, like history, changes with the times.

Yet, there should be little confusion over the man's physical appearance. His son Hernando, who should have known, said he was "a well-built man of more than average stature, the face long, the cheeks somewhat high, his body neither fat nor lean. He had an aquiline nose and light colored eyes; his complexion too was light and tending to be red. In youth his hair was blond, but when he reached the age of 30 it all turned white."

The son went on to describe his father's character: "In eating and drinking, and in the adornment of his person, he was very moderate and modest," Hernando wrote. "He was affable in conversation with strangers and very pleasant to the members of his household, though with a certain gravity. He was so strict in matters of religion that for fasting and saying prayers he might have been taken for a member of a religious order."

Hernando may be guilty of some exaggeration. Columbus could not be too gentle and modest if he were to promote his vision before skeptical courts and if he could control a crew of rough seamen who suspected they might be headed to their deaths. He could be harsh in meting out punishment to seamen and in ordering punitive raids against Indian villages. Like others of that time, and to this day, he presumably saw no contradiction between his behavior and his religious beliefs. By all accounts Columbus was a demonstrably pious man. Late in life, his writings portrayed a mind filled with mysticism and a belief in his divine mission to carry Christianity to all people and prepare them for the impending end of the world.

Of this mysticism, Hernando has nothing to say. He is also frustratingly reticent or misleading about the genesis of his father's consuming dream and even about his origins. Columbus himself chose to reveal very little about his early life.

Every verifiable historical document, however, indicates that Columbus was born in Genoa, which was an independent city-state (the lesser rival to Venice) whose ships traded throughout the entire Mediterranean world. He was probably born in 1451, and both his father Domenico and his father's father were wool weavers; his mother, Susanna Fontanarossa, was a weaver's daughter. Christopher was probably their eldest child. Bartholomew, the chart-maker who would share many of Columbus's adventures, was a year or two younger. The other children who grew to adulthood were a sister named Bianchetta and a brother Giacomo, better known by the Spanish equivalent, Diego, who joined Christopher on the second voyage. All in all, the Columbuses of Genoa were fruit-

ful and humble tradespeople—and nothing for a young man to be ashamed of.

At a “tender age,” as Columbus once wrote, he cast his lot with those who go to sea. At first, he probably made short voyages as a crewman, and then longer ones on trading ships to the Genoese colony of Chios in the Aegean Sea. But even more crucial to Columbus’s development than his ancestry or his birthplace was the timing of his birth. He was born two years before the fall of Constantinople, Christendom’s eastern capital, to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Young Columbus was to grow up hearing about the scourge of Islam, the blockage of regular trade routes to the spices of the East, and the parlous times for Christianity. Priests and popes were calling for a new crusade to recapture Constantinople and Jerusalem. All of this could have nourished the dreams of a great adventure in an ambitious young man with nautical experience.

The most significant mystery about Columbus concerns how he came up with his idea for sailing west to the Indies. As in everything else, Columbus’s own words on the subject obfuscate more than elucidate. It was his practice, writes the Italian historian Paolo Emilio Taviani, “never to tell everything to everyone, to say one thing to one man, something else to another, to reveal only portions of his arguments, clues, and evidence accumulated over the years in his mind.” Perhaps Columbus told so many partial stories in so many different versions that, as Morison suspects, he himself could no longer remember the origins of his idea.

In all probability he formulated the idea in Portugal sometime between 1476 and 1481. Columbus had come to Portugal quite literally by accident. When the Genoese fleet he had shipped with was attacked and destroyed in the summer of 1476, Columbus was washed ashore at the Portuguese town of Lagos. He made his way to Lisbon, where the talk of sea-going exploration was everywhere. He heard stories of westering seamen who found islands far out in the ocean and saw maps sprinkled with mythical islands. On voyages north perhaps so far as Iceland and south along the coast of Africa, he gained a taste for Atlantic sail-

ing. There may even be something to the story of the unknown pilot from whom Columbus supposedly obtained secret knowledge of lands across the ocean. But as far as anyone can be sure—and volumes have been written on the subject—there was no sudden revelation, no blinding flash of inspiration.

Nor did Columbus derive his plan from a careful reading of scholars. He was not then, and never became, a man who read to learn; he read to gather support for what he already thought to be true. His familiarity with the travel accounts of Marco Polo and the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, a 14th-century collection of travelers’ tales from around the world, did not so much inform his concept as inflame a mind already stoked with the dry tinder of desire. From other sources—from a recent Latin translation of Claudius Ptolemy’s second-century *Geography*, which described many Southeast Asian spice islands, to Pierre d’Ailly’s *Imago Mundi*, a compendium of contemporary knowledge about the world which argued that the Western Sea was not very wide—Columbus made some calculations of global distances. Like d’Ailly, he conveniently managed to constrict the unknown he proposed to challenge, grossly underestimating the distance from Europe to Japan. Had he unwittingly deceived himself? Or had he deliberately contrived calculations to deceive those he looked to for support? All that can be said with assurance is that Columbus was by then a man consumed by an enthusiasm that willed away obstacles and brooked no doubt.

His marriage in Portugal may have indirectly contributed to his growing conviction. In 1479, he wed Felipa Perestrelo de Moniz, a daughter of lesser nobility. Her widowed mother showed Columbus the journals and maps left by her husband, who had sailed for Prince Henry the Navigator. From the papers of Bartolomeo Perestrelo and other Portuguese seamen, Columbus concluded, his son Hernando wrote, “for certain that there were many lands West of the Canary Islands and Cape Verde, and that it was possible to sail to, and discover them.” The social position of his wife’s family also smoothed the way for

Columbus’s introduction to the court of Portugal’s King John II.

When Columbus finally laid out his plan before John II, probably in 1483 or 1484, the court cosmographers, a Portuguese historian wrote, “considered the words of Christovae Colom as vain, simply founded on imagination, or things like that Isle Cypango of Marco Polo.”

Columbus refused to accept rejection. By this time, his wife had died, and in 1485 he took their son, Diego, and left Portugal for Palos, across the border in Spain. Tradition has it that Columbus and little Diego, penniless and hungry, got off the ship and trudged along a dusty road to the Franciscan monastery of La Rabida. He knocked at the portal to beg for water and bread. If the legend is true, the father may have been taking the son there to be a boarding student, freeing himself to pursue his dream.

Though a secretive man and often portrayed as a loner, Columbus must not have been without charm, even charisma. He had insinuated himself into the influential society of Lisbon and would do so again in Spain. “Columbus’s ability to thrust himself into the circles of the great was one of the most remarkable things about him,” writes Harvard historian John H. Parry. It was also in his character that he seldom acknowledged the help of others.

At La Rabida, Columbus won the friendship and confidence of a Franciscan official knowledgeable in cosmography and through him gained introductions to wealthy patrons and eventually his first audience with Ferdinand and Isabella. They referred his proposal to a commission of learned men at the University of Salamanca. Washington Irving, in his fanciful biography, has the commissioners saying that the “roundity of the earth was as yet a matter of mere speculation.” Many of them no doubt deserved Irving’s condemnation as a “mass of inert bigotry,” but they were right (and Columbus wrong) in their judgment that Asia could not be reached by ships sailing west. They recommended that the monarchs reject the venture.

Columbus was nothing if not persistent. With a modest retainer from the court, he continued to solicit support

from influential courtiers. While in Cordoba, waiting for some sign of royal encouragement, he met Beatriz Enriquez de Arana, a peasant woman, and they became lovers. In August 1488 she gave birth to an illegitimate son, Hernando. (They never married, and sometime after his first voyage, they drifted apart. He likely felt a peasant woman was beneath his station.)

Through another friar at La Rabida, Columbus gained other audiences with the monarchs in 1491 and again in early 1492, just after the Moorish capital of Granada fell to the Christian forces. He had been led to believe that, after the burden of the prolonged war was lifted, the queen especially might be disposed to give her approval. Some writers have let themselves imagine that Isabella saw more in Columbus than an insistent supplicant. Such speculation of a sexual relationship between the two, Taviani says, is “a sheer fairy-tale, rejected by all historians.”

Nothing seemed to change with the fall of Granada. Columbus was turned away, this time with an air of finality. Behind the scenes, however, Luis de Santangel, the chief financial adviser, interceded with assurances to the queen that financing the expedition need not be an insurmountable obstacle. No one knows why the king and queen finally relented. They might have been persuaded by the argument that they had little to lose and much to gain if this importunate foreigner just happened to be on to something.

After his first voyage, when he was the toast of Barcelona, Columbus supposedly faced down his first critics. At a banquet, some noblemen insisted that if Columbus had not undertaken the enterprise, someone else, a Spaniard and not a foreigner, would have made the same discovery. At this, Columbus called for an egg and had it placed on the table. “Gentlemen,” he was reported to have said, pointing to the egg, “you make it stand here, not with crumbs, salt, etc. (for anyone knows how to do it with meal or sand), but naked and without anything at all, as I will, who was the first to discover the Indies.” When it was Columbus’s

turn, he crushed one end of the egg and had no trouble making it stand up on the table.

The anecdote has proved irresistible to historians and storytellers to illustrate the singular role of Columbus in history. But it never happened—one more Columbian myth. The story was not only apocryphal, Morison points out, but it “had already done duty in several Italian biographies of other characters.”

In reality, Columbus would not so easily put down the critics who dogged him the rest of his life—and through history. If only he had stopped with the first voyage, the echo of those fanfares in Barcelona might not have faded so fast.

A fleet of 17 ships, carrying some 1,200 people, left Cadiz in the autumn of 1493 with instructions to establish a permanent settlement on the island of Hispaniola. There, near the present city of Puerto Plata in the Dominican Republic, Columbus built a fort, church, and house for what would be his colonial capital, La Isabela. The experiment was disastrous. The site had no real harbor, insufficient rainfall, and little vegetation. Sickness and dissension brought work to a standstill and the colony to the point of starvation. Expeditions into the mountains failed to find any rich lodes of gold. As Las Casas wrote, they “spread terror among the Indians in order to show them how strong and powerful the Christians were.” Bloody warfare ensued.

With little gold to show for his efforts, Columbus ordered a shipment of Taino Indians to be sold as slaves in Spain. The best that can be said in defense of Columbus is that he was now a desperate man. His power to rule La Isabela was waning. His visions of wealth were fading. He feared that his influence back in Spain would be irreparably diminished by critical reports from recalcitrant officers who had returned to Spain. And he had failed again to find a mainland. His desperation was such that he forced all his crew to sign a declaration that, at Cuba, they had indeed reached the mainland of Cathay. Sick and discouraged, he sailed home in 1496.

The third voyage did nothing to restore his reputation. Departing from Seville in May 1498, he steered a southerly course and reached an island off the

northeastern coast of South America, which he named Trinidad, for the Holy Trinity. A few days later, he saw a coastline to the south. Columbus recognized that the tremendous volume of fresh water flowing from the Orinoco River was evidence of a large land, but he failed to appreciate that this might be a continent or to pursue his investigations. Instead, his mind drifted into speculation that the river must originate in the Earthly Paradise. Bound to medieval thinking, the man who showed the way across the ocean lost his chance to have the New World bear his name. The honor would soon go to a man with a more open-minded perspective, Amerigo Vespucci, who on his second voyage of exploration (1501–2) concluded that the South American landmass was not Asia but a new continent.

Columbus turned his back on South America and sailed to Santo Domingo to attend to the colony there. He found that his brothers, Bartholomew and Diego, had lost control. Some of the colonists had mutinied, and the crown had dispatched a new governor empowered to do anything necessary to restore order. It was then that Columbus was arrested, stripped of his titles, and sent back in irons to Spain in October 1500.



ILLUSTRATION FROM THE GRANGER COLLECTION, NEW YORK

Columbus disgraced, 1500. Charged with malfeasance as governor of Hispaniola, Columbus returned to Spain a prisoner in chains.

It was an ignominious end to Columbus’s authority and to his fame in his

Columbus's Mysterious Signature

In 1498, Columbus instructed all of his heirs to continue to “sign with my signature which I now employ which is an X with an S over it and an M with a Roman A over it and over them an S and then a Greek Y with an S over it, preserving the relation of the lines and the points.” At the top, thus, is the letter S between two dots. On the palindromic second row are the letter S A S, also preceded, separated, and ended with dots. The third row has the letters X M and a Greek Y, without dots. Below that is the final signature, Xpo Ferens, a Greco-Latin form of his given name.

To this day no one can decipher the meaning Columbus had in mind, but it almost certainly bears on his religious outlook. The simplest explanations hold that the letters stand for seven words. It has been suggested that the four letters stand for “Servus Sum Altissimi Salvatoris,” for “Servant I Am of the Most High Savior.” The three letters of the third line could be an invocation to Christ Jesus and Mary, or to Christ, Mary, and Joseph. Another proposed solution is that the seven letters are the initials for “Spiritus Sanctus Altissimi Salvator Xristus Maria Yesus.”

John Fleming, a medievalist at Princeton University, believes he has cracked the code, finding it to be an “acrostic of considerable complexity committed to a more or less learned and hermetic mystical theology.” Columbus, he concludes, was borrowing from two medieval traditions in formal signatures, that of the church worthies, like St. Francis, who devised intricate crucigrams, and that of the church mariners who often included in their craft marks anchors, masts, fishhooks, and so forth. For his signature, Fleming says, Columbus seems to have combined religious and nautical symbolism. The unifying idea is the medieval association of the Virgin Mary with Stella Maris, the indispensable navigational star also known as Polaris, or the North Star. The first cross bar stands for Stella MariS. The vertical “mast” stands for “Stella Ave Maris,” after the vesper hymn “Ave, stella maris.” By design, the structure

represents both a Christian cross and a ship's mast. The line X M Y may have one meaning, “*Jesus cum Maris sit nobis in via*” (an invocation with which Columbus opened much of his writing), with the Y representing the fork in the road and the symbolism for his having chosen the hard way to destiny's fulfillment. Fleming suggests a double meaning. The X and Y at either end of the bottom line could also stand for “Christophorus,” his name and destiny, and “Jacobus,” for “St. James,” whose feast day and Christopher's are the same and who is, not incidentally, the patron saint of Spain, Santiago—Sant Yago.



Fleming's cryptographic skills have uncovered other clues in the signature to Columbus's “religious imagination.” But, for understanding Columbus the mystical discoverer, Fleming draws insight from his associations with Mary, Christopher, and Santiago. He writes: “In Columbus's heavenly city, the Virgin Mary stands ever firm between her two Christ-bearing guards, Christophorus on the one hand, San Yago the Moorslayer on the other. And in the larger meaning of these two saints, both celebrated by the Roman church on a single day, which was of course Columbus's name-day, we may see adumbrated much of the glory, and much of the tragedy, of the European encounter with the New World.”

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lifetime. The crown eventually restored his titles, but never again was he allowed to serve as viceroy. The monarchs now were under no illusions about Columbus. He had failed as a colonial administrator, and they had strong doubts about the validity of his claims to have reached the Indies.

Columbus was given permission for one final voyage, which lasted from 1502 to 1504. He was specifically barred from returning to Santo Domingo. Instead, he explored the coast of Central America and attempted without success to establish a settlement in Panama.

Historians cite the last voyage as one of his many “missed opportunities.” With luck and more persistence, Columbus might have stumbled upon the Maya civilization or the Pacific Ocean. As it was, he barely made it back to Spain. He was marooned a year on Jamaica, where he wrote a pathetic letter to the monarchs. “I implore Your Highnesses' pardon,” he wrote. “I am ruined as I have said. Hitherto I have wept for others; now have pity upon me, Heaven, and weep for me, earth! I came to Your Highnesses with honest purpose and sincere zeal, and I do not lie. I humbly beg Your

Highnesses that, if it please God to remove me hence, you will aid me to go to Rome and on other pilgrimages.”

Columbus in his last years was a dispirited man who felt himself to be misunderstood and unappreciated. He sought to define himself in a remarkable manuscript now known as *Libro de las profecías*, or *The Book of Prophecies*. Between the third and fourth voyages, Columbus collected passages of biblical scriptures and the words of a wide range of classical and medieval authors. Ac-

cording to his own description, this was a notebook “of sources, statements, opinions and prophecies on the subject of the recovery of God’s Holy City and Mount Zion, and on the discovery and evangelization of the islands of the Indies and of all other peoples and nations.”

The document reveals the depth and passion of Columbus’s belief that he had a special relationship with God and was acting as the agent of God’s scheme for history. He marshaled evidence from the prophecies of the Bible to show that his recent discoveries were only the prelude to the realization of a greater destiny. It was as if he saw his role as being not unlike John the Baptist’s in relation to Christ. The wealth from his voyages and discoveries had given the king and queen of Spain the means to recover the Holy Land for Christendom, and thereby he had set the stage for the grandiose climax of Christian history, the salvation of all the world’s peoples and their gathering at Zion on the eve of the end of time.

Most historians who studied the document have tended to dismiss it as the product of his troubled and possibly senile mind. His other writings at the time sometimes betrayed a mind verging on paranoia. Delno C. West, a historian who has recently translated the *Book of Prophecies*, suspects that historians were “reluctant to admit that the first American hero was influenced by prophetic ideas.” If the book indeed reflects Columbus’s thinking even before 1492, it undermines the popular image of Columbus as a man of the modern age who applied reason in conceiving his venture. It exposes him as a person thoroughly mired in the medieval world, obsessed with eschatology, and driven by a supposed call from God to carry out a mission of apocalyptic dimensions.

West contends that this spirituality, which fed Columbus’s apocalyptic view of history, lay at the heart of the man and shaped his actions. Rather than some map or unknown pilot’s tale, this may have been the “secret knowledge” that inspired Columbus. Certainly, without his unwavering belief in himself and his destiny, Columbus might not have sustained the single-minded persistence it took to win support for the enterprise and

to see it through. “The Lord purposed that there should be something clearly miraculous in this matter of the voyage to the Indies,” Columbus wrote in the *Prophecies*, “so as to encourage me and others in the... Household of God.” Beginning in 1493, he began signing nearly all of his letters and documents *Christof-erens*, a Latinization of his given name that means “Christ-bearer.”

New attention to the spiritual side of Columbus does not, however, necessarily bring this complex man into focus. Images of a superstitious spiritualist and the modern explorer must be superimposed to produce a stereoscopic picture of Columbus, revealing the depth and heights of the mental terrain through which he traveled as he found America and then lost his way in failure, self-pity, and a fog of mysticism.

Columbus was probably no more than 55 years old when he died on May 20, 1506, in Valladolid, Spain. But he was much older in body and in tormented mind. His last voyages had left him crippled with arthritis and weak from fever. He was reduced to a sad figure, spending his last years in disgrace while stubbornly pressing his claims for the restoration of titles and the wealth due him.

Contrary to legend, he was neither destitute nor alone at the end. His two sons were with him, in a comfortable home. We cannot be sure of the traditional story, that he died believing he had reached the Indies. He never gave explicit expression to any recognition that he had found something other than Asia. All the evidence, though, suggests that he died unsatisfied.

His death went unheralded. There was no public ceremony of mourning and no recorded expressions of grief at the royal court. The man who rose from obscurity died in obscurity. His remains have been moved so many times over the centuries, from Spain to the New World and presumably back again, that no one is sure of his final resting place.

In the first century after his voyages, Columbus languished in the backwaters of history. His reputation suffered from his many failures as a colonial governor. The 1519–1522 Magellan circumnaviga-

tion left no doubt about the magnitude of Columbus’s error in thinking he had reached the Indies. Conquering explorers such as Cortes and Pizarro won greater immediate fame by their dazzling exploits against the Aztecs and Incas. Cartographers saw fit to name the New World after Vespucci, not Columbus. Books of general history scarcely mentioned Columbus or ignored him altogether.

Within 50 years of Columbus’s death, Bartolomé de las Casas, the Dominican bishop who extolled and defended the Indians, produced the first revisionist history. In his *History of the Indies*, Las Casas wrote eloquently of the atrocities committed against the Indians. To sail to the islands Columbus had discovered, Las Casas wrote, one needed only to follow the floating corpses of Indians that marked the way. His accounts of torture and killings documented the so-called Black Legend of Spanish cruelty that was seized upon by the English, Dutch, and French to fan the fires of national rivalries and religious hatreds.

As the Age of Discovery flourished during the late 16th century, Columbus began to be rescued from oblivion. He was celebrated in poetry and plays, especially in Italy and later in Spain. A glimmer of history’s future hero could be seen in a popular play by Lope de Vega in 1614. In *The New World Discovered by Christopher Columbus*, he portrayed Columbus as a dreamer up against the establishment, a man of singular purpose who triumphed, the embodiment of that spirit driving humans to explore and discover.

It was in the New World, though, that Columbus would be transformed almost beyond human recognition into an icon.

By the late 17th century, people in the British colonies of North America were beginning to think of themselves as Americans and sought to define themselves in their own terms and symbols. Samuel Sewall, a Boston judge, suggested that the new lands should rightfully be named for Columbus, “the magnanimous hero... who was manifestly appointed by God to be the Finder out of these lands.” The idea took root. In time, writers and orators used the name “Columbia” as a poetic name for Amer-

ica. Joel Barlow's poem *The Vision of Columbus*, appearing in 1787, has an aged Columbus lamenting his fate until he is visited by an angel who transports him to the New World to see what his discovery had brought to pass. There he could glimpse the "fruits of his cares and children of his toil."

Indeed, the young republic was busy planning the 300th anniversary of the landfall, in October 1792, when it named its new national capital the District of Columbia—perhaps to appease those who demanded that the entire country be designated Columbia. Next to George Washington, Columbus was the nation's most exalted hero. In him the new nation without its own history and mythology found a hero from the distant past, one seemingly free of association with the European colonial powers and Old-World tyranny. Americans invoked Columbus, the solitary individual who had challenged the unknown, as they contemplated the dangers and promise of their own wilderness frontier. "Instead of ravaging the newly found countries," Washington Irving wrote in his 1828 biography, Columbus "sought to colonize and cultivate them, to civilize the natives."

This would be the Columbus Americans knew and honored throughout the 19th and into the present century. With the influx of millions of immigrants after the Civil War, he was even made to assume the role of ethnic hero. In response to adverse Protestant attitudes and to affirm their own Americanism, Irish Catholic immigrants organized the Knights of Columbus in 1882. The fraternity's literature described Columbus as "a prophet and a seer" and an inspiration to each knight to become "a better Catholic and a better citizen." Catholics in both America and Europe launched a campaign to canonize Columbus on the grounds that he had brought the "Christian faith to half the world." The movement failed not because of Columbus's brutal treatment of Indians but mainly because of the son he had sired out of wedlock.

Columbus's reputation was never higher than on the 400th anniversary of his first voyage. There were parades and fireworks, the naming of streets and dedicating of monuments. The World's Co-

lumbian Exposition in Chicago, with its lavish displays of modern technology, was less a commemoration of the past than the self-confident celebration of a future that Americans were eager to shape and enjoy. Americans ascribed to Columbus all the human virtues that were most prized in that time of geographic and industrial expansion, heady optimism, and unquestioning belief in progress. A century before, Columbus had been the symbol of American promise; now he was the symbol of American success.

The 20th century has dispelled much of that. We have a new Columbus for a new age. He is the creation of generations that have known devastating world wars, the struggle against imperialism, and economic expansion that ravages nature without necessarily satisfying basic human needs. In this view, the Age of Discovery initiated by Columbus was not the bright dawning of a glorious epoch but an invasion, a conquest and Columbus himself less a symbol of progress than of oppression.

Columbus scholarship has changed. More historians are writing books from the standpoint of the Indians. They are examining the consequences—the exchange of plants and animals between continents, the spread of deadly diseases, the swift decline of the indigenous Americans in the face of European inroads. The Quincentennial happens to come at a time of bitter debate among Americans over racism, sexism, imperialism, Eurocentrism, and other "isms." Kirkpatrick Sale's 1990 book about Columbus said it all in its title, *The Conquest of Paradise*.

Was Columbus a great man, or merely an agent of a great accomplishment, or perhaps not a very admirable man at all? His standing in history has varied whenever posterity reevaluated the consequences of Europe's discovery of America. Ultimately, Columbus's reputation in history is judged in relation to the place that is accorded America in history.

Europeans took a long time appreciating their discovery. Columbus and succeeding explorers looked upon the

islands and mainland as an inconvenience, the barrier standing in their way to Asia that must be breached or circumnavigated.

As early as Peter Martyr, Europeans tried to assimilate the new lands into what they already knew or thought, rejecting the utter newness of the discovery. This was, after all, during the Renaissance, a period of rediscovering the past while reaching out to new horizons. And so the peoples of the New World were described in terms of the Renaissance-ancient image of the "noble savage," living in what classical writers had described as the innocent "Golden Age." The inhabitants of the New World, Martyr wrote, "seem to live in that golden world of which old writers speak so much, wherein men lived simply and innocently without enforcement of laws, without quarreling, judges and libels, content only to satisfy nature, without further vexation for knowledge of things to come."

The innocence of the indigenous Americans was more imagined than real. To one degree or another, they knew warfare, brutality, slavery, human sacrifice, and cannibalism. Columbus did not, as charged, "introduce" slavery to the New World; the practice existed there before his arrival, though his shipments of Tainos to Spain presaged a transoceanic traffic in slaves unprecedented in history.

This idealized image of people living in nature persisted until it was too late to learn who the Americans really were and, accepting them for what they were, to find a way to live and let live. Disease and conquest wiped out the people and their cultures. In their place Europeans had begun to "invent" America, as the Mexican historian Edmundo O'Gorman contends, in their own image and for their own purposes. They had set upon a course, writes historian Alfred W. Crosby, of creating "Neo-Europes." This was the America that took its place in world history.

In the 18th century, however, European intellectuals did engage in a searching reappraisal. A scientific movement, encouraged by the French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon (1707–1788), spread the idea that Amer-

1991: Cerebration, Not Celebration

It was in 1982 that I first became aware that the 500th anniversary of Columbus's 1492 Voyage of Discovery was a minefield, where the prudent celebrant stepped lightly and guardedly.

To my long-time friend Ramon, in an institute attached to the foreign ministry in Madrid, I said on the telephone one day that year, "Ramon, here at Florida we're beginning to get interested in the Columbus Discovery Quincentenary."

"Why do you say Columbus?" he responded. "He was an Italian mercenary. It was Spain that discovered America, not Columbus."

"But, Ramon," I protested, "we can't celebrate 1492 in the United States without mentioning Columbus."

"In your country," he lectured me, "Columbus Day is an Italian holiday. But the ships, the crews, the money were all Spanish. Columbus was a hired hand."

"But—"

"So when Cape Canaveral space center holds its 100th anniversary, are you going to call it the Werner von Braun celebration?"

I was grateful to Ramon for alerting me, in his way, to the sensitive character of this anniversary. Soon afterwards I learned that "Discovery," too, is a term freighted with ethnic and cultural contentions, as many descendants of the native peoples in the Americas argue against its Eurocentric and paternalistic coloring. "We were already here," they reminded me. And they were here so long ago, 10 to 25,000 years the anthropologists say. I was left to wonder, which was the Old World and which was the New?

As the past ten years have shown, the Spanish-Italian tension has softened, but the European-Native American disjunction has hardened, as historians, epidemiologists, moralists, romanticists, and native spokespersons have clashed over the benefits, if any, that European entrance onto the American stage brought the societies of both worlds, particularly this one.

Certainly huge numbers of indigenous people died as a result of the collision: some, it is true, from the sword, but by far the majority from the Europeans' unwitting introduction of pathogens—smallpox, measles, tuberculosis, the plague—to which the native peoples had no immunities. Recognizing the dimensions of that calamity, many Westerners acknowledge that there is little to celebrate. In Spain, where a 500th Year Worlds' Fair will open in Seville, many of that country's intellectuals are decrying what they call a 15th-and 16th-century *genocidio*.

In the margins of the debate, native descendants and their advocates are publicizing a long list of grievances against the Caucasians who abused their liberties, expropriated their lands, and despoiled an environmental paradise. On July 17–21, 1990, some 400 Indian people, including a delegation from the United States, met in Quito, Ecuador, to plan public protests against 500 years of European "invasion" and "oppression." Even before that, the first sign of reaction in the United States had already come when, in December 1989, representatives of the American Indian Movement, supported by a group of university students, began picketing the "First Encounters" archaeology exhibition mounted by the Florida Museum of Natural History as it traveled from Gainesville to Tampa, Atlanta, and Dallas. (In Tampa, their presence was welcomed because it boosted paid attendance.) In 1992, a loose confederation of North American Indian groups will picket in all U.S. cities where the Columbus replica ships will dock. They seek, one of their leaders told me, "not confrontation but media attention to present-day Native American problems."

African Americans also remind their fellow citizens that the events of 1492 and afterwards gave rise to the slave trade. And Jews appropriately notice that 1492 was the year when they were forcibly expelled from their Spanish homeland. In a counter-counteraction in all this Quincentenary skirmishing, however, the National Endowment for the Humanities decided not to fund a proposed television documentary about the early contact period because, reportedly, it was too biased against the Europeans. (Spain, by contrast, is acting uncommonly large-minded: It has agreed to fund the Smithsonian-Carlos Fuentes television production, "The Buried Mirror," a show that is highly critical of Spain's colonial practices.)

It is this "politically correct" dynamic that, most likely, will keep 1992 from being quite the exuberant and careless celebration that the Bicentennial was in 1976.

Anglo-Saxon and Celtic Americans felt comfortable with the Bicentennial because it reinforced their ethnic and cultural givens (Plymouth Rock, Virginia, Washington, Jefferson, the English language, Northern European immigration, etc.). Today, nervous about what is happening to "their" country and learning that citizens of Hispanic origins are projected soon to be the largest U.S. minority, the old line white majority may not be enthusiastic about celebrating the 500th coming of the Hispanics—especially since they sense no continuing need for Columbus as a unifying principle or symbol.

What is likely to happen in 1992? Occasional public celebrations and observances will be produced by civic, ethnic, and cultural bodies. Reproductions of Columbus's ships will arrive in various ports from Spain. Tall ships may parade in New York harbor. Fireworks will explode here and there. People will view two television mini-series and read countless ambivalent newspaper stories.

The Federal Quincentenary Jubilee Commission that was appointed to superintend our exultations is in disarray, its chairman forced out on a charge of mishandling funds, its coffers empty of federal dollars, its principal private donor, Texaco, pulling the plug. Some states, and numerous individual cities (especially those named after Columbus, 63 at last count), have plans for observances, large or small. Florida which has the best reasons, geographically and temporally, to do something, has no state-wide plans, two commissions having collapsed and a third now being stripped of its funds.

But now the good news: In anticipation of the 500th anniversary an enormous amount of intellectual activity has occurred, in the form of archival discoveries, archaeological excavations, museum and library exhibitions, conferences, and publications. Some 30 new and upcoming adult titles have been enumerated by Publishers Weekly. Over 100 exhibitions and conferences have been counted by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This remarkable efflorescence of original research and scholarship will leave a lasting legacy of understanding and good. On the twin principles that cerebration is more valuable than celebration and that correcting one paragraph in our children's schoolbooks is worth more than a half-million dollars worth of fireworks exploded over Biscayne Bay, 1992 should be the best 1492 anniversary ever.

—Michael Gannon

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ica was somehow inferior to the Old World. As evidence, Buffon offered denigrating comparisons between the “ridiculous” tapir and the elephant, the llama and the camel, and the “cowardly” puma and the noble lion. Moreover, Old-World animals introduced there fared poorly, declining in health and size, with the sole exception of the pig. It was Buffon’s thesis that America suffered an arrested development because of a humid climate, which he attributed to its relatively late emergence from the waters of the Biblical flood.

Buffon’s ideas enjoyed a vogue throughout the 18th century and inspired more extreme arguments about “America’s weakness.” Not only were the animals inferior, so were the Americans, and even Europeans who settled there soon degenerated.

Unlike the proud patriots in colonial and post-Revolutionary North America, European intellectuals began expressing strong reservations about the benefits of the American discovery. There was no gainsaying its importance. Few disputed the opinion of Adam Smith: “The discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind.”

But there were negative assessments, not unlike today’s. The anti-imperialist Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) wrote: “The Europeans have scarcely visited any coast but to gratify avarice, and extend corruption; to arrogate dominion without rights, and practice cruelty without incentive.” He was also one of the first to make an unflattering connection between the conquest of America and its original conqueror. Columbus, Johnson said, had to travel “from court to court, scorned and repulsed as a wild projector, an idle promiser of kingdoms in the clouds: nor has any part of the world had reason to rejoice that he found at last reception and employment.”

The French philosopher Abbé Guillaume-Thomas Raynal (1713–1796) challenged others to consider the following questions: Has the discovery of America been useful or harmful to mankind? If useful, how can its usefulness be magnified? If harmful, how can the harm

be ameliorated? He offered a prize for the essay that would best answer those questions.

The respondents whose essays have survived were evenly divided between optimists and pessimists. Although “Europe is indebted to the New World for a few conveniences, and a few luxuries,” Raynal himself observed, these were “so cruelly obtained, so unequally distributed, and so obstinately disputed” that they may not justify the costs. In conclusion, the abbé asked, if we had it to do over again, would we still want to discover the way to America and India? “Is it to be imagined,” Raynal speculated, “that there exists a being infernal enough to answer this question in the affirmative?”

Pangs of guilt and expressions of moral outrage were futile, however; nothing stayed the momentum of European expansion in America. Most of the immigrants had never heard of the “American weakness” or read the intellectuals who idealized or despised the Indians or deplored Europe’s bloodstained seizure of the lands. By the millions—particularly after the introduction of the steamship and on through World War I—immigrants flocked to a promised land where people could make something of themselves and prepare a better life for their children. There had been nothing quite like this in history. This was reflected in the image of Columbia. Little wonder that Columbus’s standing in history was never higher than it was when the achievements and promise of America seemed so bright and were extravagantly proclaimed at home and abroad.

The “primary factor behind our [current] reassessment of the encounter,” Crosby writes, “is a general reassessment of the role of rapid change, even catastrophe, in human history, and even the history of the earth and of the universe.” The earlier faith in progress was founded on a Western belief that change came gradually and almost invariably for the better. In 19th-century science, the uniformitarian geology of Charles Lyell and the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin were widely accepted because they seemed to confirm the idea of progress: The present world and its inhabitants

were the products not of global disasters and multiple creations but of slow and steady change.

By contrast, Crosby observes, the 20th century has experienced the two worst wars in history, genocide, the invention of more ominous means of destruction, revolutions and the collapse of empires, rampant population growth, and the threat of ecological disaster. Catastrophism, not steady progress, is the modern paradigm. Even the universe was born, many scientists now believe, in one explosive moment—the Big Bang.

“The rapidity and magnitude of change in our century,” Crosby concludes, “has prepared us to ask different questions about the encounter than the older schools of scientists and scholars asked.”

If Abbé Raynal held his essay contest today, the pessimists might outnumber the optimists. Indeed, almost everything about Columbus and the discovery of America has become controversial.

And perhaps the greatest controversy of all is whether or not to celebrate the Quincentennial. The critics who advocate not celebrating it are correct, if to celebrate perpetuates a view of the encounter that ignores the terrible toll. This must be acknowledged and memorialized in the hope that nothing like it is ever repeated. Even so, it would be unhistorical to ignore the more salutary consequences. The New World, for example, changed Europe through new ideas, new resources, and new models of political and social life that would spread through the world. William H. McNeill is one of many historians who believe this led to the Enlightenment of the 18th century and thus to the philosophical, political, and scientific foundations of modern Western civilization. It should not be overlooked that this is the kind of society that encourages and tolerates the revisionists who condemn its many unforgivable transgressions in the New World.

Of course, attributing so much to any one historical development makes some historians uneasy. In cautioning against the “presentism” in much historical in-

terpretations, Herbert Butterfield recalled “the schoolboy who, writing on the results of Columbus’s discovery of America, enumerated amongst other things the execution of Charles I, the war of the Spanish Succession and the French Revolution.” No one will ever know what the world and subsequent events would have been like if the discovery had not been made, or if it had not occurred until much later. But the impact of that discovery can hardly be underestimated. And it did start with Christopher Columbus.

That brings up another issue central to the Quincentenary debates: Columbus’s responsibility for all that followed. It must be remembered who he was—not who we wish he had been. He was a European Christian of the 15th century sailing for the crown of Spain. There can be no expiation, only understanding. His single-mindedness and boldness, as well as the magnitude of his achievement, give him heroic standing. Others did not have Columbus’s bold idea to sail across the unknown ocean, or if they did, they never acted upon it. Columbus did. In so many other respects, he failed to rise above his milieu and set a more worthy example, and so ended up a tragic figure.

But he does not deserve to bear alone the blame for the consequences of his audacious act.

We must resist the temptation to shift blame for our behavior to someone dead and gone. Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian novelist, finds little to admire in the early Spanish conquerors but recognizes the dangers inherent in transferring to them an inordinate share of the blame for modern America.

“Why have the post-colonial republics of the Americas—republics that might have been expected to have deeper and broader notions of liberty, equality, and fraternity—failed so miserably to improve the lives of their Indian citizens?” Vargas Llosa asks. “Immense opportunities brought by the civilization that discovered and conquered America have been beneficial only to a minority, sometimes a very small one; whereas the great majority managed to have only a negative share of the conquest.... One of our worst defects, our best fictions, is to believe that our miseries have been imposed on us from abroad, that others, for example, the conquistadores, have always been responsible for our problems.... Did they really do it? We did it; we are the conquistadores.”

People have choices, but they do not always choose well. One wishes Columbus had acquitted himself more nobly, in the full knowledge that, even if he had, others who came after would have almost surely squandered the opportunity presented to them to make a truly fresh start in human history—a new world in more than the geographic sense. But wishes, yesterday’s self-congratulation or today’s self-flagellation, are not history.

Columbus’s failings, as well as his ambitions and courage, are beyond historical doubt—and are all too human. The mythic Columbus of our creation is something else. His destiny, it seems, is to serve as a barometer of our self-confidence, our hopes and aspirations, our faith in progress, and the capacity of humans to create a more just society.

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