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The History Teacher, Vol. 25, No. 2. (Feb., 1992), pp. 137-144.

Stable URL:

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What Shall We Tell the Children? The Press Encounters Columbus

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NATIONS OUTGROW HEROES, the way children must learn to live without Santa. Lenin is being toppled in Russia. The Federal government removed Custer's name from his national park. It is now Christopher Columbus's turn at the chopping block. Journalists, editorial writers, and talk show hosts suddenly see in Columbus a hot prospect, now that he has become "controversial." This article looks at some of the opening skirmishes of this surprising Quincentenary year conflict over a hero, as presented in the press, with a special focus on how this conflict has become the bugbear of right-wing commentators.

James Axtel, in 1987, sounded one of the first scholarly warnings that all was not well with how events surrounding 1492 are presented in American history textbooks. His reading of the most popular college texts revealed gross distortions of the reality of the "discovery." He advised school boards and teachers to stop adopting textbooks "that are hopelessly outdated, stylistically painful, and cratered with crucial omissions."¹ The academic community was not prepared to make an adequate response to his critique. Perhaps too many specialists in America and Europe saw in the upcoming anniversary of the first Atlantic crossing an opportunity to gain funding for big projects — such as getting the *Nuova Raccolta Colombiana*² translated, producing a fresh twelve-volume collection of the major

documents (the *Repertorium Columbianum*),³ issuing *The Columbus Encyclopedia*,⁴ launching mega-exhibitions along the lines of the Smithsonian's *Seeds of Change*,⁵ or creating high-budgeted TV series, like PBS's "Columbus and the Age of Discovery."⁶ Engrossed in such laudable projects the scholarly community left others to redefine Columbus in the public mind. Hans Koning was one of the first in the field, publishing with a socialist house *Columbus: His Enterprise*, which attacked the Admiral as an economic exploiter and bloody slaver; a "typical man of the (white) race."⁷ The major horn blast against Columbus's reputation arrived in 1990, with the publication of Kirkpatrick Sale's *The Conquest of Paradise*.⁸ A self-styled ecologist, the author lambasted Columbus in Kitty Kelly-style as a lousy sailor, an inadequate administrator, a cruel tyrant, and the patron saint of all the rapers and looters who despoiled the environment in his wake. In an article in *The Nation* (illustrated by a drawing of the *Santa María* with a death-head for a prow), Sales continued the attack: "Not so surprising that the enterprise of Europe's conquest of Paradise should have begun, as it was to continue, with deceit, robbery, and ill-gotten gains. Surprising that we have heard so little about that all these centuries."⁹

The "we" above obviously does not include the first peoples in the hemisphere. As Garry Wills observed in the *New York Review of Books*: "A funny thing happened on the way to the quincentennial observation of America's 'discovery.' Columbus got mugged. This time the Indians were waiting for him."¹⁰ Some aboriginal peoples have seized the chance to call attention to their plight, garnering a massive amount of publicity for rather modest efforts. In the summer of 1991 three hundred participants from throughout the hemisphere gathered at Quito, Ecuador for the "First Continental Meeting of Indigenous Peoples — 500 Years of Resistance" and a smaller group met in Iquitos, Peru to map strategies. In North America, writers cranked up magazines, like *Native Nations* out of New York City, or the Alliance for Cultural Democracy's Minneapolis-based *huracan*, which runs stories denouncing activities designed to honor Columbus, and a tabloid newspaper *Indigenous Thought*, published at the University of Florida, to serve as "A Networking Magazine to Link Counter-Quincentenary Activities."¹¹

Columbus's critics found unexpected allies among groups which once would fervently have supported him. The National Council of Churches, which includes most of the leading Protestant denominations in the United States, resolved: "For the descendants of the survivors of the subsequent invasion, genocide, slavery, 'ecocide' and the exploitation of the land ... a celebration is not the appropriate observance of this anniversary."¹² The American Library Association passed a resolution urging member libraries

to approach the commemoration with materials “which examine the event from an authentic Native American perspective, dealing directly with topics like cultural imperialism, colonialism and the Native American Holocaust.”¹³

However, Columbus is not without friends among American Catholics. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a widely-reported pastoral letter *Heritage and Hope: Evangelization in America* which held that “the effort to portray the history of the encounter as a totally negative experience in which only violence and exploitation of the native peoples were present is not an accurate interpretation of the past.”¹⁴ James Muldoon, a professional historian writing in *America*, came rushing to the defense of the Admiral. “Should we,” he wrote, “then, celebrate Columbus? Certainly. He was a brave man whose actions made a major contribution to the formation of the modern world. . . . We praise the good and condemn the bad. To reject Columbus is in effect to reject the modern world.”¹⁵ But there has been slippage, even in this camp. “Columbus was a great man, but he wasn’t perfect. Nowhere are his failings more obvious — with the advantage of hindsight to be sure — than in his treatment of the native peoples of the New World.” So writes Russell Shaw, director of public information for the Catholic fraternal order of the Knights of Columbus. He goes on

Plainly there is something unhistorical — an abuse of truth — in glossing over the painful episodes in the long process of exploration, colonization and, yes, exploitation that began with Columbus’s voyages. But it is no less unhistorical — no less an abuse of the truth — to depict that experience in exclusively negative terms.¹⁶

While the wind was riffling pages, the Reagan administration was taking down the sails. Rather than sink federal funds into fireworks and parades the decision was made by this conservative administration to “privitize” 1992. The event was inoffensively retitled a Jubilee, rather than a celebration, faint sign that Columbus had lost his status among Republicans as a venerated ancestor. The first director of the commission was not an Italian-American, as one would have expected were much going to be made of the occasion, but a Cuban-born businessman who set up a thirty-member commission, sans Indians. He resigned in February 1991, after questions were raised about his financial dealings, activities dubbed a legacy of the greedy 1980s.¹⁷

Considering the disinterest at the highest levels of American government in festivities, the modicum of organized protest abroad in the land, and the rush of at least some partisans to Columbus’s defense,¹⁸ the agitated response in the press from the right-wing appears far out of proportion and

rather misdirected. In heated prose in a *Time* essay significantly entitled “Hail Columbus, Dead White Male,” Charles Krauthammer wrote “For the left, the year comes just in time. The revolutions of 1989 having put a dent in the case for the degeneracy of the West, 1992 offers a welcome point of attack. The villain is Columbus. The crime is the discovery — the rape — of America.”¹⁹ In the *National Review* Jeffrey Hart fumed:

Get ready for the assault upon Columbus. As the five-hundredth anniversary of 1492 approaches, the American mainstream, with justified pride, will be celebrating his achievements; but the academic and racialist Left will be denigrating him. ... [t]he Left hates America so much that it wishes to vilify its European roots. The founding documents, written by white males who were mostly Protestants, are today gleaming ideals from Tiananmen Square to Prague. But not in the American academy.²⁰

The precise target of vituperation was made explicit by James Driscoll, who asserted it is “revisionist academics seeking a shortcut to tenure,” and he continued,

Those pygmy professors may make a name for themselves as cheap-shot specialists, but anyone with a sense of fair play will reject them. ... As the world celebrates his [Columbus’s] voyages next year, the academic peashooters should retire to their caves and brood silently. Let them refrain from spoiling the party.²¹

In practical terms — meaning the funding academics would need to do a thorough job of redefining Columbus for the public — the right has apparently convinced the National Endowment for the Humanities that danger lurks on the left. Wounded applicants charge the Endowment has, at the final cut, overturned grants suspected of Columbus-bashing or insufficient deference to European civilization. Lynne Cheney, conservative head of the agency, responded to the allegations through her spokesman that “...media projects must be balanced. Skepticism must be applied evenhandedly. ... Because we are such a diverse culture, it is all the more important the projects exhibit a balanced approach to all groups.”²²

In the search for issues whereby to intrude itself even more fully upon college campuses than by funding alternative campus newspapers, providing free lawyers for racist students involved in “fighting words” incidents, or helping out an association of conservative scholars, the right has been busy manufacturing stories about the horrors of Political Correctness.²³ The use of PC buzz phrases like “dead white man,” “academic and racialist left,” and “balance” regarding Columbus are giveaways of the right’s Alice-Through-the-Looking-Glass drive to stifle scholarly discussion

1492, ironically all in the name of freedom of speech. Enough uproar has been made by the right, seconded by President George Bush, to convince the authors of “Columbus, Stay Home!” in *Newsweek* that cosmic issues in academia are actually involved:

[t]he attempt to assess Columbus and his proper place — should we mourn, celebrate or both? — comes in the midst of an acrimonious debate in American intellectual life. This controversy pits those anxious to prove the evils of Eurocentric thinking and action against those who treat all attacks on Western tradition as a threat to civilization itself. In the shorthand of the times, this is another example of the skirmishing called political correctness.²⁴

Scholars quoted in this article are actually pretty laid back and mostly respectful of Columbus. They trail far behind the march of critics outside the academy, which parade has probably gone too far along the route to be reversed by feeble right-wing cries that the PC redcoats are coming. When *Newsweek* issued a Columbus special issue in the winter of 1991, although it was replete with paid advertisements from the Knights of Columbus and Italian-American cultural associations, it carried a lead article which contains the by-now-obligatory paragraph of contrition: “Slavery, conquest, disease and humiliation — these are the legacy of Columbus in the eyes of some people today. They see nothing to celebrate in the 500th anniversary of his crossing; instead they think it should be an occasion for protest — or at best a vast, doleful silence.”²⁵ Another article (“Who Was Columbus?”), after engaging in instant-research journalistic straddling, concludes satirically: “So put yourself in Columbus’s shoes. ... [y]ou started out with the best intentions. You were going to get rich *and* save the world. You didn’t see any contradiction there. You were the first American.”²⁶ For staid *Time* to run an article “Good Guy or Dirty Word” or the feel-good *USA Today* to use as a front-page headline “Columbus: Hero or Villain?” means the game is up.²⁷

The “Jubilee” thus will be a pretty limp affair everywhere but in Spain, which is putting vast sums into the Quinto Centenario to calculatedly advance its newly democratic government’s economic and political agendas. So, 1992 could well be Columbus’s last solo performance before he is lost in rewritten history books and encyclopedias among the throng of explorers and exploiters of the age of first contact. The ethnic groups and governmental power brokers who, at the turn of the nineteenth century, turned Columbus into an American icon through the use of political and commercial rituals tailored to the uses of a mass-consumption society,²⁸ have other matters to occupy them now. It is hard to imagine that much fuss will be

made in the United States once the searching reevaluation is completed, save that Columbus has been entombed in a national holiday which gives postal workers and bank clerks a deserved Monday off.

Yet, even though America may no longer need Columbus as a founding father, will his image change in books for children? There are other role models, female in addition to male, pacifists in addition to warriors, who are less ambiguous than he. Perhaps we could at least get rid of the flat earth and Isabella's jewels.²⁹ Although Americans share an aversion to presenting their young with any exemplar who is a mixture of both good and bad, we should continue to discuss Columbus, if in a different fashion. Alfred Crosby argues, correctly I believe, that the Encounter may have been the most influential event on the planet since the retreat of the continental glaciers and that we have to pay 1492 its proper due as "a major disjuncture in the history of the planet."³⁰ School should be the place for respectful study of, although not necessarily unconsidered admiration for, the Admiral of the Ocean Sea.

Notes

1. James Axtell, "Europeans, Indians, and the Age of Discovery in American History Textbooks," *American Historical Review*, 92 (February, 1987), 621-32.

2. English translations, in re-edited versions, of the twelve volumes of the 1892-96 texts, titled *Nuova Raccolta Columbiana*, will begin appearing in 1992, produced by the Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Rome.

3. Twelve volumes of the *Repertorium Columbianum*, with Norman Thrower as general editor will appear beginning in 1992 containing texts translated from Italian, Latin, Castilian, Portuguese, and Nahuatl sources (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press).

4. *The Columbus Encyclopedia*, edited by Silvio A. Bendini, et al., 2 vols. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

5. A book to go with the exhibition is *Seeds of Change: A Quincentennial Commemoration*, edited by Herman J. Viola and Carolyn Margolis, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1991).

6. "Columbus and the Age of Discovery" was the first contender out of the gate in a seven-part program released in 1991, proving to be attractively photographed but very old fashioned. Other series to look for are: "The Other Americas" (10 part series); "Music at the Time of Columbus," featuring the Waverly Consort; "The Buried Mirror," with a text by Carlos Fuentes, produced by the Smithsonian, which promises to be one of the best of the lot; "Isabel and Fernando in Spain" (four-part series) produced by Sociedad Estatal out of Madrid, Spain; "Cipango!" produced by Columbus Countdown 1992; "The Story of Spanish" (six-part series) produced by Wisconsin Public Television; "Surviving Columbus; The Story of the Pueblo Indians" produced by the Latin American Institute, University

of New Mexico; "Diaspora 1492" produced by KQUED in San Francisco; and let us not overlook theatrical films due to open in October 1992: Mario Puzo's "Christopher Columbus: The Movie" starring Timothy Dalton (last seen as James Bond) and Ridley Scott's epic with the ubiquitous Gérard Depardieu.

7. Hans Koning, *Columbus: His Enterprise* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976, revision 1992). He expands upon his arguments in an op-ed piece "Don't Celebrate 1492 — Mourning It," *New York Times* (14 August 1991), A22 and "Teach The Truth About Columbus," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition* (9-15 September, 1991), p. 29. He bases his negative views on a rather neglected book *The Early Spanish Main* by Carl Sauer (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1966).

8. Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1990).

9. Kirkpatrick Sale, "What Columbus Discovered," *The Nation* (22 October 1990), pp. 444-46.

10. Garry Wills, "Goodby, Columbus," *The New York Review of Books* (22 November 1990), pp. 6-9.

11. Garry Abrams, "Sea of Troubles," *Los Angeles Times* (1 April 1991), pp. E1-2.

12. James Muldoon, "The Columbus Quincentennial: Should Christians Celebrate It?" *America* (27 October 1990), p. 300.

13. Joel Achenbach, "Columbus, Rediscovered. In Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-Two, the Admiral is Sailing into One Hell of a Political Squall," *The Washington Post* (14 July 1991), pp. F1, F4-5.

14. Text in *Columbia* (August 1991), pp. 6-8.

15. Muldoon, pp. 300-303.

16. Russell Shaw, "Christopher Columbus: Hero or Villain?," *Columbia* (February 1991), p. 4.

17. Achenbach, p. F4.

18. Karl E. Meyer, "Columbus Was Not Eichmann," *New York Times* (27 June 1991), p. A28.

19. Charles Krauthammer, "Hail Columbus, Dead White Male," *Time* (27 May 1991), p. 74.

20. Jeffrey Hart, "Discovering Columbus," *National Review* (15 October 1990), p. 56.

21. James G. Driscoll, "Stop Reviling Columbus — We Need Legends," *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel* reprinted in *The Buffalo News* (20 July 1990), p. G3.

22. Karen J. Winkler, "Humanities Agency Caught in Controversy Over Columbus Grants," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (13 March 1991), pp. A5-9.

23. For a discussion of an incident alleged to have been manufactured for consumption by the press see David Beers, "PC? B.S.," *Mother Jones*, 16 (September/October 1991), pp. 12-13 and rebuttal letter in 16 (November/December 1991), p. 6.

24. Aric Press, et al., "Columbus Stay Home? A Bitter Debate Over His 500th Anniversary," *Newsweek* (24 June 1991), pp. 54-55.

25. Columbus Special Issue, *Newsweek*. A Joint Project with the Smithsonian's Natural History Exhibit "Seeds of Change," (Fall/Winter 1991). Kenneth Auchincloss, "When Worlds Collide. Celebrate it or Bemoan it: The Encounter Between East and West Had Vast Consequences that are Still Unfolding Today," pp. 8-13.

26. David Gates, "Who Was Columbus?," *ibid.*, pp. 29-31.

27. John Elson, "Good Guy or Dirty Word," *Time* 136 (26 November 1990), p. 79. See also Paul Gray, "The Trouble With Columbus," *Time* 138 (7 October 1991), pp. 52-6; Randy Jones, "The Santa Maria's Excess Baggage," *U.S. News and World Report* 127 (2

October 1989), p. 14; Rae Corelli, "To Celebrate ... or Repent?," *Macleans* (5 August 1991), p. 42.

28. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Good Day Columbus: Silences, Power and Public History (1492-1892)," *Public Culture* 3, (Fall 1990), pp. 1-24.

29. New titles found at my local mall bookseller are Peter Sis, *Follow the Dream. The Story of Christopher Columbus* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1991) and Russe Bourne, *The Big Golden Book of Christopher Columbus and Early Adventurers* (New York: Golden Books, 1991). The jewels show up in both and the flat earth in the Golden Book, which at least, to its credit, faces up to the slaughter of the islanders. For a superficial critique of twenty new children's books see: Barry Lopez, "Columbus for the Imagination," *The New York Times Book Review*, December 1, 1991, pp. 29, 56.

30. Alfred W. Crosby, "Reassessing 1492," *American Quarterly* 41 (December 1989), pp. 661-69.