ISSUE 10

Were Christopher Columbus's New World Discoveries a Positive Force in the Development of World History?

YES: Felipe Fernández-Armesto, from *Columbus* (Oxford University Press, 1991)

NO: Kirkpatrick Sale, from *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (Plume, 1991)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto states that although Columbus was far from perfect, the overall results of his work merit consideration as one who helped to shape the modern world.

NO: Writer Kirkpatrick Sale sees Columbus as a product of a sick, dispirited Europe and concludes that the selfish nature and results of his voyages prevented Europe from using the New World discoveries as an opportunity for the continent's salvation.

In October 1998, a *New York Times* article covered a dispute between Hispanic-Americans and Italian-Americans with regard to which ethnic group should play the more important role in the organization of New York's Columbus Day Parade. While both groups had legitimate claims to the Columbus legacy (after all, Columbus was an Italian, but he did his most important work for the Spanish nation), the dispute must have drawn an ironic response from those who witnessed the revisionist bashing that the "Admiral of the Ocean Sea" had received in recent years.

In the five centuries since Columbus "sailed the ocean blue," his historical reputation and the significance of his accomplishments have undergone a series of metamorphoses. In the distant past, an unusual collection of Columbus critics would number French essayist Michel Montaigne, English writer Samuel Johnson, philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and French historian and philosopher Abbé Guillaume Raynal, some of whom believed that the world would have been better off without the admiral's discoveries.

It has only been in the last two centuries that Columbus's stock has risen in the theater of public opinion and historical significance. The United States becoming a beacon of democratic hope for an autocratic world and later an ally of Western Europe, helping to save the continent from the specter of

fascism, played an important role in the reversal of Columbus's reputation. Samuel Eliot Morison's 1942 book, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea, A Life of Christopher Columbus,* marked the apex of this laudatory view of Columbus and his accomplishments.

Historians and publishers love anniversaries and the publicity such occasions generate, and, next to a millennial celebration, none may be more significant than a quincentennial one. Thus, on the 500th anniversary of Columbus's first voyage, the requisite number of tomes on Columbus and his accomplishments were made ready for an eager market. But the world of 1992 was different than the world of Morison's "Admiral of the Ocean Sea," and the historical profession had changed along with it.

The end-of-the-millennium generation of historians treated Columbus differently than had their immediate predecessors. Operating from a different worldview, Columbus became to many of them a flawed figure responsible for the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade, the annihilation of Native American civilizations through cruelty and disease, and the ecological destruction of a continental paradise.

The recently published books about Christopher Columbus opened a national dialogue on the subject. A national Columbus exhibition in Washington, D.C., was received with skepticism by some and quiet reverence by others. While some participated in the national Columbus Day celebration on October 12, 1992, others declared it a day of mourning in honor of those who lost their lives as a result of Columbus's enterprises. A cultural hornet's nest was broken open, and any who entered into the Columbus fray had to have the thickest of skin.

Fortunately, as is usually the case, time has a soothing effect, and we will probably have to wait until the year 2092 for the next major Columbus debate. For now, we have the opportunity—with cooler heads and calmer temperaments—to examine the Columbus legacy.

Felipe Fernández-Armesto presents an account of Columbus and his accomplishments that leans toward a favorable interpretation of the admiral. Kirkpatrick Sale evaluates Columbus as a representative of the forces that missed out on using the New World discoveries as a regenerative catalyst in the development of European and world civilizations.

YES

Felipe Fernández-Armesto

COLUMBUS

PREFACE

Considered from one point of view, Columbus was a crank. Even in his own lifetime he had a cranky reputation. His patrons smiled at his scheme for a crusade and courtiers treated it as a joke. On his first crossing of the Atlantic, mutineers plotted to pitch him overboard during his abstracted machinations with new-fangled and unwieldy navigational instruments. He claimed to hear celestial voices. He embarrassed the court of the Spanish monarchs by appearing provocatively attired in public, once in chains and regularly in a Franciscan habit.

These eccentricities are easy to excuse or even to applaud as such imps as often attend genius. They have had, however, one regrettable effect. Columbus has attracted cranks, as crag calls forth to crag; and if one of the many committees convened to honour the fifth centenary of the discovery of America were to offer a prize for the silliest theory about him, the competition would be keenly contested. Readers wanting to know about Columbus might be almost as badly misled by the many well-meaning amateurs who have been induced by his presumed importance to write up his life: most books about Columbus have been biographies, which even at their best can seem to abstract their protagonist from his proper context. Overwhelmingly the effect has been to project, into popular books, versions of a Columbus who was 'ahead of his time'—a Columbus inaccessible to an imagination disciplined by respect for the sources and by knowledge of the period. If scholarly biographies so far, with few exceptions, have not yielded any more convincing general impression of Columbus, misleading influence from sixteenth-century writers, loosely treated as primary sources, is probably to blame. For five hundred years, Columbus historiography has been afloat without heeding the need for a good long spell in dry dock. Like a well-barnacled bottom, it needs a vigorous scrape to get rid of the glutinous concretion of errors and false impressions. When restored to deep water, it has to be steered cautiously to elude the cranky theories and undisciplined speculations alike. In the Sea of Darkness, Siren voices rise on every side. . . .

From Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus* (Oxford University Press, 1991). Copyright © 1991 by Felipe Fernández-Armesto. Notes omitted.

The Columbus who emerges may not be much more objective than any other, as his image bounces flickeringly between the reader's retina and my own. The Columbus I detect—the socially ambitious, socially awkward parvenu; the autodidact, intellectually aggressive but easily cowed; the embittered escapee from distressing realities; the adventurer inhibited by fear of failure—is, I believe, consistent with the evidence; but it would no doubt be possible to reconstruct the image, from the same evidence, in other ways. Other students have imagined him essentially as a practical tarpaulin, or a ruthless materialist, or a mystic seer, or an embodiment of bourgeois capitalism; the springs of his motivation have been perceived in an evangelical impulse, or in some more generalized religious conviction, or in crusading zeal, or in scientific curiosity, or in esoteric or even 'secret' knowledge, or in greed. I find these versions unconvincing, but I have not written in order to advance my view at their expense—only to satisfy readers who want to make their own choices from within the range of genuine possibilities.

There are, however, three traditions of Columbus historiography which I actively defy. The first is the mystifying tradition, concerned to reveal allegedly cryptic truths which the evidence cannot disclose. Works of this type argue either that Columbus was not what he seemed, or that his plan for an Atlantic crossing concealed some secret objective. For instance, the rationally unchallengeable evidence of Columbus's Genoese provenance has not prevented mystifiers from concocting a Portuguese, Castilian, Catalan, Majorcan, Galician, or Ibizan Columbus, sometimes with the aid of forged documents. At a further level of mystification, a persistent tradition has insisted on a Jewish Columbus. His own attitude to Jews was not free of ambivalence: at one level he treated them with respect and professed, for instance, that, like Moors and pagans, they could be accessible to the operations of the Holy Spirit; at another level he shared the typical prejudices of his day, condemning the Jews as a 'reprobate' source of heretical depravity and accusing his enemies of the taint of Jewish provenance. The theory that he was of Jewish faith or origins himself can only be advocated *ex silentio*, in default—and sometimes defiance—of evidence.

Believers in Columbus's 'secrets' thrive on lack of evidence, because, like every irrational faith, theirs is fed on indifference to proof. Thus otherwise creditable scholars have argued, for instance, that all the evidence which proves that Columbus sailed in 1492 on a mission to Asia should be 'decoded' to demonstrate the opposite; or that his plan can be explained only by access to secret foreknowledge, transmitted by an 'unknown pilot', or by means of a fortuitous pre-discovery of America by Columbus himself, or even as the result of a chance encounter with American Indians. Readers of this [selection] can rely on being spared any such rash speculations.

The second objectionable tradition treats paucity of evidence as a pretext for intuitive guesswork. Imaginative reconstructions of what Columbus 'must' have been thinking or doing at moments when the sources are silent or ignored are made the basis for vacuous conclusions. On the strength of such musings, in highly popular books, Columbus has been credited with a strenuous love-life, with visionary glimpses of America from Iceland or Porto Santo, with undocumented visitations by his 'voices', and with a plan to conceal his presumed Hebraic ances-

try. Sometimes the method is defended by frank contempt for the essential resources of historical enquiry, by an appeal to 'leave the dusty documents on the shelf and come back to the flesh and the spirit' or to speculation licensed on the grounds that 'there are no documents, only the real lives of these men and women, whose blood coursed through their veins as does ours through our own'. Yet, even if one were disposed to admit this obviously fallacious reasoning, the premiss on which it is based is false. We are extremely well informed about Columbus. No contemporary of humble origins or maritime vocation has left so many traces in the records, or so much writing of his own.

The last hazard I have tried to avoid is that of subscribing to a legend of the explorer's own making. The picture transmitted by the historical tradition of a uniquely single-minded figure is false, I am sure. Though Columbus could be obsessively pig-headed, his self-image, as I try to show in this [selection], was dappled by doubts. His sense of divine purpose grew gradually and fitfully and was born and nourished in adversity. His geographical ideas took shape slowly and were highly volatile in the early stages. His mental development proceeded by fits and starts and led at different times in different directions. The contrary view —that his ideas came suddenly, as if by revelation or 'secret' disclosure, or were sustained consistently, in defiance of contemporary derision, with an inflexible sense of purpose—goes back to a 'promotional' image which Columbus projected in his own writings in the latter part of his life. His aim was not only to dramatize his story and to emphasize the unique basis of his claims to material rewards but also to support a broader picture of himself as a providential agent. He was, he professed, divinely elected to execute a part of God's plan for mankind, by making the gospel audible in unevangelized parts of the earth. That tendentious reading of his own life was adopted by the authors of the detailed sixteenth-century narratives that have influenced all subsequent writers. Bartolomé de Las Casas, whose work has been fundamental to all modern studies of Columbus, accepted Columbus's self-evaluation as a divine messenger because he shared a providential vision of history and wrote to justify and celebrate an apostolate among the Indians in which he personally played no mean part; the next most influential narrative, the *Historie dell'Ammiraglio*, reflects much of the same view, either because it was derived from Las Casas's work, or perhaps because it was genuinely the work of Columbus's son, to whom it is attributed. Although few modern historians admit to a providential conception of history, almost all have accepted a secularized version of the legend, generally with misleading results. Some wild conclusions have been based, for instance, on the myth of Columbus's 'certainty', which goes back to Las Casas's vivid image: 'so sure was he of what he would discover, that it was as if he kept it in a chamber locked with his own key.' . . .

'THE MESSENGER OF A NEW HEAVEN'

Decline, Death and Reputation . . .

That a weaver's son had died titular Admiral, Viceroy, and Governor; that he should have become the founder of an aristocratic dynasty and have established a claim to fame which has made and kept his name familiar to every educated person in the western world: these are achievements which command the attention of any observer and the respect of most. But it can fairly be objected that Columbus's merits should be judged by his contribution to mankind, not his accomplishments for himself. His contemporaries had mixed views of that contribution. The New World did not shine for all beholders with the glow reflected in Columbus's gaze. For anyone who really wanted to get to Asia, it was a Stone-Age obstacle course. After its discovery in the sixteenth century, the New World tended to drift away again from the Old, developing internal economic systems, 'creole' identities, and finally independent states. When Rousseau totted up the advantages and disadvantages that accrued to mankind from the discovery of America, he concluded that it would have been better if Columbus had shown more restraint. Contemporaries as various as Abbé Raynal and Dr Johnson agreed. The fate of America has remained ever since, in a particular tradition, a paradigm of the despoliation of nature and the corruption of natural man. And if the influence of the Old World on the New was pejorative, that of the New upon the Old was slow to take full effect. Only with the improved communications and mass migrations of the nineteenth century, perhaps only with the transatlantic partnerships of the world wars in the twentieth, did the weight of America wrench the centre of gravity of western civilization away from its European heartlands. The potential of most of the continent is unrealized even today. Five hundred years after the discovery, America's hour has still not come.

Still, the sheer extent of the new lands across the Atlantic, and the large numbers of new peoples brought within the hearing of God's world, left the generation of Las Casas and Fernando Colón in little doubt of the potential importance of the events connected with Columbus's life. By 1552 the historian Francisco López de Gómara could characterize the discovery of the New World as the greatest happening since the incarnation of Christ. Yet the same writer denied that Columbus was truly the discoverer of those lands. This was a representative sentiment. Columbus had complained even in his own lifetime of being 'despoiled of the honour of his discovery' and though he was referring to the stintedness of his acclaim rather than to the elevation of the claims of rivals, it is true that his reputation has since suffered repeatedly from attempts to attribute the discovery of the New World to someone else.

The early history of the controversy was dominated by the legal wrangle between Columbus's heirs and the monarchs of Spain over the non-fulfilment of the royal promises of 1492. Any source of doubt that could be cast on Columbus's claim to have performed his side of the bargain was welcome in the prejudicial atmosphere of the first half of the sixteenth century. It was said, for instance, that the New World had formed part of the domains of King Hesperus or that the credit for the discovery belonged to Martín Pinzón, or that it rested with an 'unknown pilot' who had preceded Columbus to the New World by chance and confided his knowledge to the Genoese when on the point of death. It was this last story which López de Gómara repeated; Las Casas heard it treated as common knowledge when he was a young man in Hispaniola before 1516; in 1535 Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo dismissed it as a vulgar rumour; and it

has been echoed ever since. Testimony was even procured—almost certainly not without deliberate perjury—to deny the amply verified fact that Columbus had visited the American mainland on his third voyage in 1498. The discoverer's sons, Diego and Fernando, strenuously resisted these allegations. Diego had the testimony of numerous favourable witnesses recorded on his father's side and Fernando wrote extensively in defence of his claims. It must be said that whatever Martín Pinzón's role on the first transatlantic voyage, of which we shall never know the whole truth, he joined the enterprise only at a late stage, when Columbus's plans were already well advanced. Though Columbus was familiar with many mariners' tales of unknown lands in the west, and recorded some of them along with other evidence in support of his theories, the story of the unknown pilot is unacceptable as it stands: it proceeds from biased sources; it is unwarranted by any contemporary authority; and it relies on the hypothesis of a freak crossing such as is otherwise unrecorded in the latitude on which Columbus sailed (although accidental crossings have happened further south, on routes not known to have been frequented before Columbus's time). The argument that the unknown pilot must have existed because Columbus would not otherwise have known where to go reminds one of Voltaire's ironic case in favour of God: if He did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him. The unknown pilot is not required, even as a comforting fiction. Columbus had assembled sufficient indicators of lands in the west, according to his own standards, by his own researches, without recourse to secret sources. By his own admission, the materials he collected included seamen's yarns about Atlantic lands, which formed only one flimsy strand in the web of evidence. The 'certainty' he is supposed to have evinced, and which can alone be explained, it is said, by some pre-discovery of America, is, as we have seen, another myth. The presumed mariner cannot have helped very much, since his information was insufficient to preclude Columbus's belief that he had found Asia. The Admiral's doubts on that score, when they arose, were clearly attributable to his own observations....

An alternative argument, still connected with the Vikings, but voiced more often by admirers of Vespucci, is that Columbus's discovery of America was no better than that of the Icelanders, since he came upon the New World quite haphazardly and failed to recognize it correctly; one cannot be said to 'discover' something unless one recognizes it for what it is. It has also been said that neither Columbus nor anyone else up to his time anticipated the existence of a second world landmass and that it is therefore imprecise to speak of the 'discovery' of something which the European mind was not conceptually equipped to comprehend. Rather, the discovery of America happened gradually and cumulatively, as, under the influence of further explorations, men's presuppositions became adapted to the facts. Now it is agreed that one cannot be said to have 'discovered' a thing without recognizing it for what it is. Otherwise the event is a mere accident, which will pass unnoticed unless someone else happens to suggest the identification which the finder failed to make. The penicillin will stay in the crucible until it is washed up; the comet will shoot out of sight. Such was not the case, however, when Columbus stumbled on America.

In the first place, the possibilities of just such a discovery as Columbus made —that of a continent separate from the Eurasian landmass—were seriously debated, actively canvassed, and, in some cases, excitedly anticipated among scholars prior to Columbus's departure. As soon as he returned to report, a considerable number of learned commentators jumped to the conclusion that he had found just such an antipodal world. Columbus himself on his third voyage correctly identified the mainland, which he then discovered for the first time, with this rumoured continent. During the virtual derangement brought on by his subsequent sufferings, he forsook the idea, and even while he still embraced it his opinion of the proximity of his discoveries to Asia was grossly exaggerated, but America did not have to be 'invented'; the discourse of the day included suitable terms for describing it and classifying it, and Columbus himself was among the first people to make use of them.

Of course the discovery of America was a process, which began with Columbus but unfolded bit by bit after his time, fitfully, without being fully complete until our own time. There has, after all, been a lot of America to discover. The outline of the coasts of South America was not fully complete until about 1540, and although the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of North America were roughly known by that time, the northern coast remained concealed beneath ice until Amundsen cut his way through it in 1905. On the main point at issue between Columbus and posterity—the relationship of America to Asia—Fernández de Oviedo pointed out in the 1530s that the whole truth was still unknown, and so it remained until the early eighteenth century, when the Bering Strait was explored. Many of the important physical features of the interior were still unknown late in the eighteenth century and unmapped until the early nineteenth; only the advent of aerial mapping in the present century—which did not encompass the last secrets of South America until the 1970s—penetrated the final areas to defy exploration. Long as the process has been, Columbus retains a primordial place as its initiator; and the extent to which he advanced it in the span of his own short career is all the more startling against the backdrop of the process as a whole: after alighting on some islands of the Bahamas, he explored much of the coast of Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, the Lesser Antilles as far as Dominica, Trinidad, and the coast of the mainland from the mouth of the Orinoco to the Bay of Honduras.

The last argument against ascribing the discovery to Columbus also raises a conceptual problem. Only from the most crassly Eurocentric perspective, it is said, could one speak of the 'discovery' of land which had been well known to its native peoples for thousands of years. It has even been argued, by a highly creditable scholar, with only the faintest trace of detectable irony, that an American discovery of Europe preceded the European discovery of America, when a Caribbean canoe was misdirected across the Atlantic, and that the knowledge of this was Columbus's 'secret'. Whatever one thinks of this prank, it is hard to deny priority to the American discovery of America. This respectable argument would make 'discovery' an almost useless term, by limiting it to uninhabited lands. It misses the point that discovery is not a matter of being in a place, but of getting to it, of establishing routes of access from somewhere else. The peopling of

the New World, which was followed by isolation, was conspicuously not a discovery in that sense. So vast a hemisphere naturally afforded scope for much internal exploration: it is proper to speak of exploration, recorded in maps, by some Eskimo, North American Indian, and Mesoamerican peoples, and by the Incas, recorded in the latter case with mnemonic devices which we now barely understand. The reliance of early Spanish and Portuguese explorers on native guides, even in some cases over long distances, suggests that other histories of exploration happened in the New World, which we can only guess at. None of this makes the creation of routes which no one knew about before, such as Columbus's across the Atlantic, any less of a discovery.

Despite nearly five hundred years of assiduous detraction, his prior role in the discovery of America remains the strongest part of Columbus's credentials as an explorer. But we should recall some of the supporting evidence too: his decoding of the Atlantic wind system; his discovery of magnetic variation in the Western hemisphere; his contributions to the mapping of the Atlantic and the New World; his epic crossings of the Caribbean; his demonstration of the continental nature of parts of South and Central America; his *aperçu* about the imperfect sphericity of the globe; his uncanny intuitive skill in navigation. Any of these would qualify an explorer for enduring fame; together they constitute an unequalled record of achievement.

Columbus was a self-avowed ignoramus who challenged the received wisdom of his day. His servility before old texts, combined with his paradoxical delight whenever he was able to correct them from experience, mark him at once as one of the last torchbearers of medieval cosmography, who carried their lights on the shoulders of their predecessors, and one of the first beacons of the Scientific Revolution, whose glow was kindled from within by their preference for experiment over authority. The same sort of paradox enlivened every aspect of his character. His attraction towards fantasy and wishful thinking was ill accommodated in that hard head, half-full already with a sense of trade and profit. In his dealings with the Crown and his concern for his posterity, his mysticism was tempered by a materialism only slightly less intense—like the rich gurus who are equally familiar nowadays in spiritual retreats and business circles. Though religion was a powerful influence in his life, its effects were strangely limited; his devotional bequests were few; his charity began and almost ended at home. The Indians he discovered he contemplated with evangelical zeal and treated with callous disregard. He was an inveterate practitioner of deception, a perennial victim of self-delusion, but he was rarely consciously mendacious. In dealing with subordinates, he was calculating and ingenuous by turns. He craved admirers, but could not keep friends. His anxiety for ennoblement, his self-confessed ambition for 'status and wealth', did not prevent him from taking a certain pride in his modest origins and comparing the weaver-Admiral with the shepherd-King. He loved adventure, but could not bear adversity. Most paradoxically of all, beyond the islands and mainlands of the Ocean, Columbus explored involuntarily the marchlands between genius and insanity. Times of stress unhinged—sometimes, perhaps, actually deranged—him; in his last such sickness, he obsessively discarded his own most luminous ideas, and never recovered them.

It probably helped to be a visionary, with a flair for the fantastic, to achieve what he achieved. The task he set himself—to cross the Ocean Sea directly from Europe to Asia—was literally beyond the capacity of any vessel of his day. The task he performed—to cross from Europe to a New World—was beyond the conception of many of his contemporaries. To have accomplished the highly improbable was insufficient for Columbus—he had wanted 'the conquest of what appeared impossible'. He died a magnificent failure: he had not reached the Orient. His failure enshrined what, in the long term, came to seem a greater success: the discovery of America.

One cannot do him justice without making allowances for the weakness that incapacitated him for ill fortune. He was too fearful of failure to face adverse reality—perhaps because he had too much riding on success: not only his personal pride, but also the claims to the material rewards on which his hopes for himself and his heirs rested. It is hard to believe, for instance, that his insistence on the continental nature of Cuba was other than perversely sustained in the face of inner conviction; or that he can really have felt, in his wild and self-contradictory calculations of the longitude of his discoveries, the confidence he claimed. The ambition that drove him was fatal to personal happiness. Almost anyone, it might be thought, would rest content with so much fame, so much wealth, so many discoveries, so dramatic a social rise. But not Columbus. His sights were always fixed on unmade discoveries, unfinished initiatives, imperfect gains, and frustrated crusades. Instead of being satisfied with his achievements he was outraged by his wrongs. Unassuaged by acclaim, he was embittered by calumnies. This implacable character made him live strenuously and die miserably. Without it, he might have accomplished nothing; because of it, he could never rest on his laurels or enjoy his success. It was typical of him to abjure his achievement in discovering a new continent because he could not face failure in the attempt to reach an old one. He wanted to repeat his boast, 'When I set out upon this enterprise, they all said it was impossible', without having to admit that 'they' were right.

The Oxford Union Society once invited an American ambassador to debate the motion, 'This House Believes that Columbus Went Too Far'. The eighteenth-century debate on the moral benefits of the discovery of America no longer commands much interest, but we can still ask the less solemn question, 'What difference did it make?' The brouhaha of the fifth centenary celebrations creates the impression of a generalized and unthinking acceptance that Columbus was the protagonist of an important event; yet it may still be worth asking what exactly makes it important and what, if any, is the justification for the fuss.

One of the most conspicuous changes to have overtaken the civilization in which we live—we usually call it 'Western civilization' or 'Western society'—in the course of its history has been the westward displacement of its centre of gravity, as its main axis of communication, the Mediterranean 'frog-pond' of Socrates has been replaced by an Atlantic 'lake' across which we traffic in goods and ideas and around which we huddle for our defence. The career of Columbus, which began in the Mediter-

ranean and took Mediterranean mariners and colonists across the Atlantic for the first time, seems to encapsulate the very change which it can be said to have initiated. At present—and for as long as quincentennial euphoria lasts—the Admiral of the Ocean Sea is bound to seem significant for us. Historians and journalists will even acknowledge, without embarrassment, that he made the sort of personal contribution to history which, in our awareness of the determining influence of the long and grinding 'structures' of economic change, we have become loath to concede to individuals. On the other hand, the judgements of history are notoriously fickle, and depend on the perspective of the time in which they are made. It may not be long now before 'Western civilization' is regarded as definitively wound up—not cataclysmically exploded, as some of our doom-fraught oracles have foretold, but merely blended into the new 'global civilization' which, with a heavy debt to the Western world but a genuinely distinct identity, seems to be taking shape around us. At the same time, the motors of the world economy are moving or have moved to Japan and California. The Pacific is likely to play in the history of 'global civilization' the same sort of unifying role which the Atlantic has played in that of the West. By 2020, when we come to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of Magellan's crossing of the Pacific, those of us who are still alive may look back wistfully to 1992 with a feeling of *déjà vu*, and irresistible misgivings about the fuss.

NO

Kirkpatrick Sale

THE CONQUEST OF PARADISE: CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS AND THE COLUMBIAN LEGACY

PROLOGUE

Surprising as it may seem from the present perspective, the man we know as Christopher Columbus died in relative obscurity, his passing not even recorded at the time on the subcontinent whose history he so decisively changed. But the true importance of his Discovery became clearer with every passing decade as the New World yielded up its considerable treasure to the Old, and as the historical significance became appreciated in scholarly, and then in popular, opinion. A half-century after his death it was certainly esteemed in the land that was its most obvious beneficiary—"the greatest event since the creation of the world," the Spanish historian Francisco López de Gómara called it in 1552, "excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it"—and by the end of the sixteenth century even the French, notoriously stingy with praise for non-Gallic achievements, were ready to admit, in the words of one Louis Le Roy, that there was nothing "more honorable to our or the preceding age than the invention of the printing press and the discovery of the new world; two things which I always thought could be compared, not only to Antiquity, but to immortality." By the time two more centuries had passed, and the full incredible panoramas of the two new continents had become known (and in great measure exploited) by the nations of Europe, there were few who would have disagreed with the blunt assessment of the Scottish economist 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."

Replete as those judgments are, however, it really has not been until the present century—indeed, until the retrospective provided by the quincentennial of the First Voyage—that a fully comprehensive measure of the Columbian achievement could be taken. Only now can we see how

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completely the Discovery and its legacy over the last five centuries have altered the cultures of the globe and the life-processes upon which they depend:

- It enabled the society of the European subcontinent to expand beyond its borders in a fashion unprecedented in the history of the world, and to come today to dominate virtually every other society it touches, Westernizing the great bulk of humanity, imposing its institutions and ideas, its languages and culture, its technologies and economy, around the earth.
- It enabled Europe to accumulate wealth and power previously unimaginable, the means by which it created and developed the most successful synergy of systems ever known, a mixture of humanism and secularism, rationalism and science, materialism and capitalism, nationalism and militarism—in short, the very structures of what we know as modern civilization.
- It enabled the vast redistribution of life-forms, purposely and accidentally, that has changed the biota of the earth more thoroughly than at any time since the end of the Permian Period, in effect rejoining the continents of the earth that were separated so many geological eons ago and thereby causing the extinction, alternation, and even creation of species at a speed and on a scale never before experienced.
- And most significant, it enabled humanity to achieve, and sanctify, the transformation of nature with unprecedented proficiency and thoroughness, to multiply, thrive, and dominate the earth as no single species ever has, altering the products and processes of the environment, modifying systems of soils and water and air, altering stable atmospheric and climatic balances, and now threatening, it is not too much to say, the existence of the earth as we have known it and the greater proportion of its species, including the human.

After five centuries, then, we have come to a unique position from which to judge the consequences of the Columbian discovery in their fullest dimensions. We can now appreciate especially what it means that it was the particular culture of one small promontory of the Asian landmass, with its particular historical attributes and at that historical moment, that was the cause of this event and its opulent beneficiary, and what has been the effect of the implantation of that culture throughout the world. We can now perhaps even bring ourselves to look with new eyes at the Discovery itself and the processes it unfolded, to reassess, with the wisdom of hindsight, the values and attitudes inherent in that culture and in the industrial civilization it has fostered.

In that spirit of reassessment this inquiry was undertaken. Columbus is above all the figure with whom the Modern Age—the age by which we may delineate these past five hundred years—properly begins, and in his character as in his exploits we are given an extraordinary insight into the patterns that shaped the age at its start and still for the most part shape it today. He is the figure as well who was primarily responsible for the ways in which the culture of Europe was implanted in the Americas, under not only Spanish flags but subsequent banners too, and his extraordinary career, very like his sailing routes, was the model for all those that came after. And he is the figure who, more than any other, provided the legacy by which European civilization came to dominate the American world for five centuries with consequences, we now realize, involving nothing less than issues of life and death.

This reassessment is particularly pertinent to the nation that not only is the foremost exemplar of the success of the transplanted culture but has lived out the Columbian legacy to its fullest, even taking as its greatest hero, as its very symbol, the Discoverer himself. For as Columbia, the personification invented for the newly formed United States at the end of the eighteenth century, he represents the soul and spirit of that nation and embodies what it takes to be its sense of courage and adventure, of perseverance and triumph, of brash indomitability. And thus it is in the United States that he is honored with more place names of all kinds—cities, counties, towns, rivers, colleges, parks, streets, and all the rest—than any other figure of American history save Washington, with more monuments and statues than have been erected to any other secular hero in the world. More than any other nation, the United States bears the honor, and the weight, of the Columbian achievement. More than any other nation, it is in a position to appreciate in the fullest its multiple, its quite consequential, meanings....

1625–1992...

That the Quincentennial that ends this latest century will be celebrated with more commotion and ceremony than ever before there is no question, though whether it will have much to do with the man it is supposed to commemorate there is real reason to doubt.

The official events, carefully planned, expensively mounted, and much ballyhooed, will involve every nation on both sides of the Atlantic and some few on the Pacific as well. As of 1989, thirty-two nations and twenty U.S. states and colonies had established official Quincentennial commissions, and they had authorized a bewildering array of celebrations, parades, pageants, fireworks displays, conferences, symposiums, exhibitions, projects, monuments, museum shows, contests, scholarships, grants, books, newsletters, magazines, scholarly compendiums, television programs, commemorative coins and stamps, memorabilia, sailing races, cruises, guided tours, and myriad other forms of observance, a great many hewing to the same spirit of gain that characterized the original voyage, though some of them guided by its sense of discovery and learning as well....

Obviously this foofaraw will exceed, in length, money, fervor, technology, publicity, self-congratulation, and bathos, any previous commemoration; Father Charles Polzer of the U.S. Quincentenary Jubilee Commission has described the attention drawn to it as "widespread and monumental," an understatement.

It is not, however, without its dissenters. Many of those who know well the cultures that once existed in the New World have reason to be less than enthusiastic about celebrating the event that led to the destruction of much of that heritage and the greater part of the people who produced it; some have insisted on labeling the events of 1492 an "encounter" rather than a "discovery" and having it so billed for 1992, some others have chosen to make it an occasion to direct attention to native American arts and achievements, and others still are planning to protest the entire goings-on as a wrongful commemora-

tion of an act steeped in bloodshed, slavery, and genocide. The United Nations General Assembly, given several opportunities to endorse the Quincentennial, has been diplomatically stymied—by disputes about whether Colón was the first discoverer (Iceland and Ireland have both insisted on precedence), whether a commemoration that glorifies a colonialism from which many nations still suffer is apt, and whether West European world hegemony is a fit phenomenon for other continents to honor—and has taken no official action at all. And some of those who have sought to draw attention to the environmental destruction wrought in the aftermath of the Discovery, particularly members of various Green movements in the industrialized world, have decided to use the occasion to draw into question the nature of a civilization that could take the earth so close to ecocide.

In all of this, it seems certain, Cristóbal Colón will be quite lost, even Christopher Columbus quite hard to find, as his accomplishments are made the malleable and serviceable clay into which the breath of one cause or other, one patriotic mission or other, one testimonial to modernism or other, is blown. But that is in keeping, of course, for it is as the source of just such symbols that Colón has functioned through the five centuries of his life-after-death: from the time that he was made into a super-Hercules by Oviedo and Martyr to the time he became the early modern hero for the English who needed instigation and the Italians who needed inspiration; in the epics by which he became the personification of America as in the biographies that made him stand for wealth and progress; by the pageants that turned him into the image of this nation's skill or that one's genius and the celebrations that made him the agent of capitalist ingenuity and persistence... and beyond. It may be fitting, or only richly ironic, that, having seen the world as utilitarian, so has the world seen him.

Walt Whitman imagines Columbus on his deathbed, in Valladolid, in that May 1506, knowing the end is near, staring into the future:

What do I know of life? what of myself?
I know not even my own work, past or present;
Dim, ever-shifting guesses of it spread before me,
Of newer, better worlds, their mighty parturition
Mocking, perplexing me.

Ah, but no, Colón, they do not mock and should not perplex: indeed, they live out your legacy, your destiny, more successfully and more grandly, if more terribly, than you ever could have dreamed.

* * *

1992 Worldwide population is estimated at more than 5.6 billion.

Rainforest area in the Western Hemisphere, originally 3.4 billion acres, is down to 1.6 billion, and going fast, at the rate of 25 million acres a year, or 166 square miles a day; U.S. forestland, originally more than a billion acres, is down to 500 million commercially designated acres, some 260 million having gone for beef production alone.

Topsoil depletion and runoff in the United States reaches a rate of 80 million feet per day, nearly 30 billion tons a year.

Twenty-five years after the U.S. Endangered Species Act went into effect, listing 500 of the several thousand threatened species in the country, twelve of the protected species have become extinct and 150 more are losing population at a rate that will lead to extinction within a decade. Two hundred threatened plants native to the United States have become extinct in the last five years. At least 140 major animal and bird species have become extinct since 1492, including four species of whales, seventeen varieties of grizzly bears, seven forms of bats, Eastern and Oregon buffalo, great auks, sea otters, sea minks, Eastern elks, long-eared kit foxes, Newfoundland and Florida wolves, Eastern cougars, Arizona and Eastern wapiti, Badlands bighorn sheep, heath hens, passenger pigeons, Jamaica wood rails, spectacled cormorants, Puerto Rico blue pigeons, Eskimo curlews, Puerto Rican conures, Carolina parakeets, Antigua and Guadeloupe burrowing owls, Guadeloupe red-shafted flickers, ivory-billed woodpeckers, Berwicks wrens, Tecopa pupfish, harelip suckers, longjaw ciscos, and blue pike.

Wilderness areas, officially designated at 90 million protected and 50 million unprotected acres, have been reduced from about 2.2 billion acres in pre-Columbian times—a decrease of roughly 96 percent.

The population of the native people of North America is about 20 million, only 1.5 million outside of Mesoamerica.

EPILOGUE

By the 1780s, the question of the importance of the Discovery and its impact on the world had become a topic of some debate in the intellectual circles of France and in the writings of the reigning *philosophes*, an extension of the old *sauvage noble–bête sauvage* debates earlier in the century. It was so provocative a subject, in fact, that Abbé Guillaume Reynal, the author of a highly popular four-volume study, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of Europeans in the Two Indies*, decided to see if the matter could be set to rest, in appropriate *philosophe* tradition, by asking the learned men of the Academy of Lyons to hold an essay contest, invite entrants on all sides, and award a prize, which he would himself contribute, to the one they judged had made the best case. The topic of debate: "Was the discovery of America a blessing or a curse to humankind?"

Unfortunately the precise workings-out of that contest have not survived the ebb and flow of history, which was turbulent indeed in France, we may remember, at that time. It is known, however, that entries were submitted in 1787 and 1788, that the Lyons savants were unable to declare an outright winner, and that only eight essays, with a fair mixture of opinion on the several sides of the issue, survive. Of those survivors the one that is easily the most learned and lucid, as well as the most persuasive, is the one by the *abbé* himself.

Reynal was willing to concede some positive effects of the Discovery. "This great event hath improved the construction of ships, navigation, geography, astronomy, medicine, natural history, and some other branches of knowledge; and these advantages have not been attended with any known inconvenience." Moreover, the domains of the Indies "have given splendor, power, and wealth, to the states which have founded them," although it was true that great expenses had been lavished "to clear, to govern, [and] to defend them," and that eventually they would all inevitably assert their independence and be lost to the "country which has founded its splendor upon their prosperity." As well, "Europe is indebted to the New World for a few conveniences, and a few luxuries," but those were "so cruelly obtained, so unequally

distributed, and so obstinately disputed" that they could not really be said to be worth the price in human lives and disruption—and "before these enjoyments were obtained, were we less healthy, less robust, less intelligent, or less happy?" And finally, although "the New World has multiplied specie amongst us," the cost was high for the peoples of the Americas, who still "languish in ignorance, superstition, and pride" and have lost "their agriculture and their manufactures" to boot, and even for Europe, where the benefits were largely overwhelmed by a concomitant inflation.

On the negative side, the effects loomed larger. For one, "the bold attempts of Columbus and of Gama" created "a spirit of fanaticism" for "making discoveries" in search of "some continents to invade, some islands to ravage, and some people to spoil, to subdue, and to massacre." Those who succumbed to such adventures became "a new species of anomalous savages" who "traverse so many countries and who in the end belong to none . . . who quit their country without regret [and] never return to it without being impatient of going out again," all so that they might "acquire riches in exchange for their virtue and their health." "This insatiable thirst of gold," moreover, had "given birth to the most infamous and the most atrocious of all traffics, that of slaves," the "most execrable" of crimes against nature. And with all that "the machine of government," overextended in resources both at home and in the Americas, had "fallen into confusion," with the poorest states being forced to languish "under the yoke of oppression, and endless wars," while those who were "incessantly renewed" by Indies treasure "harassed the globe and stained it with blood."

Such was the indictment from the learned philosopher. And here, in full, was his conclusion:

> Let us stop here, and consider ourselves as existing at the time when America and India were unknown. Let me suppose that I address myself to the most cruel of the Europeans in the following terms. There exist regions which will furnish you with rich metals, agreeable clothing, and delicious food. But read this history, and behold at what price the discovery is promised to you. Do you wish or not that it should be made? Is it to be imagined that there exists a being infernal enough to answer this question in the affirmative! Let it be remembered that there will not be a single instant in futurity when my question will not have the same force.

Let it be remembered.

Reynal was not alone in his condemnation. The thought had haunted some few right from the start—Montaigne, for example, in the expansionary sixteenth century, who said he was afraid "that we shall have greatly hastened the decline and ruin of this new world by our contagion"—and was not absent even from some, such as Henry Harrisse, in the ebullient nineteenth century: "As to the sum of happiness which has accrued to humanity from Columbus' discovery, philosophers may deem it light and dearly purchased" . . . It is even a mortal question whether the two worlds would not have been far happier had they remained forever unknown to each other." The vantage point of five hundred years allows us to appreciate the wisdom of such few far more acutely than their contemporaries ever could.

It may be that all such judgments, including Abbé Reynal's, are in the end fruitless: history is what happened, not what should have happened. Certainly there are those who argue, with some merit, that it is foolish to think that Europe could have been anything but what it was, done anything but what it did. Why should one suppose that a culture like Europe's, steeped as it was in the ardor of wealth, the habit of violence, and the pride of intolerance, dispirited and adrift after a century and more of disease and famine and death beyond experience, would be able to come upon new societies in a fertile world, innocent and defenseless, and not displace and subdue, if necessary destroy, them? Why should one suppose such a culture would pause there to observe, to learn, to borrow the wisdom and the ways of a foreign, heathen people, half naked and befeathered, ignorant of cities and kings and metal and laws, and unschooled in all that the Ancients held virtuous? That, according to J. H. Elliott, who had wrestled with just this question, would be asking "a great deal of any society," but certainly more than the society represented by Europe in the fifteenth or even the sixteenth century.

Of course one may still wonder, and wonder long, about what that says about this society, the one now dominant in America, and the West, and the world. And one may even legitimately wonder, if it is not too painful, about what might have been. Was not Europe in its groping era of discovery in the fifteenth century in fact in search of salvation, as its morbid sonnets said, or of that regeneration which new lands and new peoples—and of course new riches—would be presumed to provide? Was that not essentially the arrangement Colón sold to the Sovereigns, confirmed in the Capitulations?

And there *was* salvation there, in the New World, though it was not of a kind the Europeans then understood. They thought first that exploitation was salvation, and they went at that with a vengeance, and found new foods and medicines and treasures, but that proved not to be; that colonization and settlement was salvation, and they peopled both continents with conquerors, and it was not that either; that progress and power and technics wrested from the new lands was salvation, and they made mighty nations and towering cities in its service, but it was not even that.

The salvation there, had the Europeans known where and how to look for it, was obviously in the integrative tribal ways, the nurturant communitarian values, the rich interplay with nature that made up the Indian cultures—as it made up, for that matter, the cultures of ancient peoples everywhere, not excluding Europe. It was there especially in the Indian consciousness, in what Calvin Martin has termed "*the biological outlook on life*," in which patterns and concepts and the large teleological constructs of culture are not human-centered but come from the sense of being at one with nature, biocentric, ecocentric, and where there was myth but not history, circular rather than linear time, renewal and restoration but not progress, imaginative apperception far more subtle than science, understanding without words or even ideation, sacred rather than material interpretation of things, and an interpenetration into earth and its life-forms that superceded an identification with self or species.

It was there then, when Colón first encountered what he intuited, correctly, to be "in all the world . . . no better people nor better country," and it is there even now, despite the centuries of batterment,

for those who stop and bend and open to hear it. It was salvation then, it might possibly be salvation now. Certainly there is no other.

An Irokwa woman in New York City, Doris Melliadis, said fifteen years ago:

> Now they come to gather for the coming disaster and destruction of the white man *by his own hands*, with his own progressive, advanced, technological devices, that only the American Indian can avert. Now the time is near. And it is only the Indian who knows the cure. It is only the Indian who can stop this plague. And this time the invisible will be visible. And the unheard will be heard. And we will be seen and we will be remembered.

So we may hope. There is only one way to live in America, and there can be only one way, and that is as Americans—the original Americans—for that is what the earth of America demands. We have tried for five centuries to resist that simple truth. We resist it further only at risk of the imperilment—worse, the likely destruction—of the earth.

There exists a nineteenth-century "bible" with the title *Oahspe*, said to have been influential among the Irokwa of the last century, which purports to be the words of "Jehovih" transmitted through a Dr. John Ballou Newbrough in 1881, in which Christopher "Columbo" is mentioned as playing a special part in the Design of God. In "one of the plans of God for redeeming the world"—a world which He acknowledged had fallen upon sinful times—Columbo was visited by the heavenly hosts and inspired by them "to go with ships to the westward, across the ocean," there to find for Europe "a new mortal anchorage," "a new country, where only the Great Spirit, Jehovih, is worshipped." He makes the momentous voyage, but the news of it is discovered by the agents of Satan, "the false Kriste," and his angels "did set the rulers of Spain against Columbo, and had him cast in prison, thus breaking the chain of inspiration betwixt Columbo and the throne of God"—and it is these evil spirits that instead lead the people of Europe across the ocean "to the countries Columbo had discovered" and there, to the consternation of Heaven, did "evil take its course."

So it may have been. However one may cast it, an opportunity there certainly was once, a chance for the people of Europe to find a new anchorage in a new country, in what they dimly realized was the land of Paradise, and thus find finally the way to redeem the world. But all they ever found was half a world of nature's treasures and nature's peoples that could be taken, and they took them, never knowing, never learning the true regenerative power there, and that opportunity was lost. Theirs was indeed a conquest of Paradise, but as is inevitable with any war against the world of nature, those who win will have lost—once again lost, and this time perhaps forever.

POSTSCRIPT

Were Christopher Columbus's New World Discoveries a Positive Force in the Development of World History?

Poring over the many Columbus-oriented works that were products of the quincentennial anniversary is likely to leave one bewildered and perplexed. One wonders how many writers can take the same information and come to diametrically opposed conclusions concerning Columbus and his place in history. Of course, as is usual in historical matters, one's experiences and the perspective derived from them are important determinants in drawing conclusions from the historical process.

It is worth noting that when the Columbus "iconography" was established in the West, civilization was a Eurocentric one, and many of its voices were muted or silent. As Western history became more "inclusionary," different voices began to appear, and a different historical view of Columbus began to take shape. What the future will hold for the subject remains to be seen.

When participating in the Columbus debate it is important to determine those things for which Columbus may be held accountable. We cannot hold him responsible for all of the evils that followed his discoveries if we do not have proof of such evil-doing. It is part of history's burden to seek the truth regardless of the consequences.

To list the major works on Columbus and his place in history is daunting. But there are a few significant works, which provide a variety of perspectives. Basil Davidson's *The Search for Africa: History, Culture, Politics* (Random House, 1994) contains a chapter entitled "The Curse of Columbus," which accuses him of playing an important role in the development of the slave trade. Paolo Emilio Taviani's *Columbus: The Great Adventure* (Orion Books, 1991) is a newer example of the iconographic Columbus viewpoint. Of course, Samuel Eliot Morison's *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (Little, Brown & Company, 1991) has relevance and interest. Historian David E. Stannard even goes so far as to raise the specter of a "holocaust" in his book *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (Oxford University Press, 1992). This book represents the extreme in negative viewpoints of Columbus and what resulted from his accomplishments. Finally, *Seeds of Change*, Herman Viola and Carolyn Margolis, eds. (Smithsonian Institute Press, 1991), is the book that emanated from the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History's 1992 Columbus Exposition. It is as balanced (and handsome) a treatment as one can receive about this controversial topic.