



## **Thinking About Columbus: The Use and Utility of the Image of Columbus in Western Thought**

**T**his year much of the western world has been swamped in the commemoration of 1492. The quincentennial celebrates the events set in motion five hundred years ago by the men under the command of Christopher Columbus, a sequence of events with profound consequences for life on this planet. Festivals, demonstrations, celebrations, protests, conferences, and every manner of ceremony have sought to define the significance of 1492 to the world. As we think about Columbus and 1492, we are forced to consider the deep meanings of history and the interpretations and evaluations of historic events. This is a complex burden.

I have not yet mentioned what happened on October 12, 1492. When I choose a word to describe that day, the word labels and gives meaning, whether that meaning is intended or not. For example, it would sound quite normal to many people if I were to say that "500 years ago Columbus discovered the New World." Generations of educated persons from the kindergarten to the university levels have been instructed as to the truth of the discovery.

But consider the meaning of that phrase. It pinpoints a date that a "discovery" of a "new world" took place. This is literally false. It is false because millions of people already inhabited the lands that were labeled America by the Europeans. Indigenous peoples had a rich cultural heritage, one that included philosophic thought, technological prowess, and imperial civilizations. Nor is the phrase true even if we exclude the residence of native peoples upon the soils that were new to the sailors of the Niña, Pinta, and Santa María. The Vikings had colonized Vinland some 500 years earlier, opening trade and exploration that lasted for scores of years. If one were to speak of the European discovery, then credit must go to northern Europeans, not to those of the Mediterranean. The discovery is, of course, true in a symbolic sense, but, as the Mexican intellectual Edmundo O'Gorman notes, America was not discovered, it was invented by sixteenth-century Europeans.<sup>1</sup>

Now, imagine that I had introduced this presentation with the statement that "500 years ago Europeans invaded a land largely unknown to them, with near genocidal effects upon the human inhabitants of those lands. The ecological and demographic impacts of that invasion are unparalleled in human history. The European presence in America led to a demographic catastrophe among native peoples and countless horrors as millions of Africans were enslaved for the production of goods for sale in Europe. In the conquest of the indigenous

peoples of the western hemisphere, cultural domination, resource exploitation, and economic subjugation served as the standards of European behavior."

How different from the previous meaning; it is an interpretation of the past which offends many people. Yet a demographic catastrophe did occur. European economic structures enslaved millions of Africans. Were these things the fault of Columbus? Perhaps not, but they happened as a result of 1492. In any event, they cannot be overlooked. Anthropologist Kathleen Deagan reminds us of the complexities surrounding the quincentennial.

It would be a terrible mistake to turn it into a fiesta, a birthday party or some other positive commemoration without giving close attention to the plight of the American Indians and African Americans.<sup>2</sup>

If you are uncomfortable with invasion, or somewhat ashamed of discovery, what label can be given to the event of October 12, 1492? Many persons have chosen "contact" or "encounter," leaving the interpretation of these words to individual analysis. I shall use these phrases, hoping to give them a more neutral meaning, although my own prejudices will become clear.

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**H**ow then do we think about Columbus? How do we make sense of 1492? It seems to me that thinking about Columbus requires inquiry into several related areas. Certainly the image of Columbus over time merits some attention. That consideration involves the utilization of Columbus for various mythic, political, religious, or other purposes. It is unjust to think about Columbus without reflection upon the consequences of contact. How was the world changed as a result of 1492? Justice to that topic would demand a lifetime of inquiry simply to survey the literature before any original ideas might be formulated. I will simply offer a little food for thought; perhaps some corn would be appropriate. Finally, the implications of 1492 and 1992 for the study of history should attract a few comments.

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**C**olumbus was not well thought of in his time. His administrative skills as governor of Santo Domingo proved less meritorious than his navigational ability, and he failed to produce the wealth he had promised to the Castilian monarch. His insistence that he had reached Cathay became less and less supportable over time as it became clear that the "Indies" were new to the European. The honors of the day instead went to Vasco da Gama, Magellan, Francisco Pizarro, and to Hernán Cortés, all men who

produced wealth and extended Iberian empires. Columbus's fame, if we are to call it that, is owed to his son, Ferdinand, to the Dominican father, Bartolomé de las Casas, and to Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo. Las Casas recorded many conversations with Columbus; his books are among the most important sources of information on Columbus's multiple voyages. Oviedo, the author of a massive history of the early contact period, rescued Columbus from oblivion and linked him with the "glories" of the Spanish success in the Caribbean.<sup>3</sup>

Naturally, others felt differently. The English and Dutch perpetrators of the "Black Legend," of the horrendous treatment of native peoples, used Columbus's name as a symbol of Spanish atrocities. Indeed, from an early date, the dual images of hero and brutalizer are linked with Christopher Columbus.

The importance of Columbus's discovery of America is deeply entrenched in the mythology of Western culture. It is seen as the opening through which liberal democracy and individual enterprise came to establish themselves as global potencies. Consider, for example, this comment:

Columbus's voyages of exploration have been compared with good reason to the first explorations of space in the twentieth century. Both altered and intensified people's understanding of the world in which they live and their place in it, and resulted in an explosion of technological advances and scientific inquiries.<sup>4</sup>

Here we have praise of the adventurous spirit, the tools of technology, and the deity of science. Are there many icons held in higher esteem in Western culture? Absent is any sense of self-analysis, or reflection upon the fullest ramifications of those voyages.

Columbus became part of the United States mythology slowly, but the outlines of that veneration were clear at an early date. The English geographer, colonizer, and explorer, Richard Hakluyt, writing in the second half of the sixteenth century, identified Columbus's success with that of English explorers. The seventeenth-century Bostonian, Samuel Sewall, suggested naming the new land after the explorer, "the magnanimous heroe ... who was manifestly appointed of God to be the Finder of these lands."<sup>5</sup> The image of Columbus became associated with the progress and development of America, especially in that portion which became the United States. Indeed, ponder for a moment the utilization and meaning of the word "Columbia" in the United States. We have the District of Columbia, the Columbia river, Columbia University—renamed from King's College—and the list could go on.

Columbus was appropriated by the founding fathers to become an image of the new republic which they launched. As John Wilford notes in a recent article, the 300th anniversary of 1492 was a symbolic adoption of Columbus by the United States.

It is not hard to understand the appeal of Columbus as a totem for the former subjects of George III. Columbus had found the way of escape from Old World tyranny. He was the solitary individual who challenged the unknown sea, as triumphant Americans contemplated the dangers and promise of their own wilderness frontier . . . as a result of his vision and audacity, there was now a land free from kings, a vast continent for new beginnings.<sup>7</sup>

The nineteenth-century account of Columbus by Washington Irving certainly falls within this interpretive vein. Who could imagine a more successful rags-to-riches story than the often rejected Columbus? The details of his bitter final years need not concern those who worshiped the hero. What better example of the self-made man to be offered to an industrializing nation, the epitome of striving individualism? It matters not if the myth bore little relation to reality, for perhaps myths serve national interests better than the cold, hard stuff of critical introspection. The 400th anniversary of Columbus, the Chicago Exposition of 1892, epitomized the mythic union between the hero Columbus and the growing world power of the United States. The invocation to open the exposition offered thanks for

that most momentous of all voyages by which Columbus lifted the veil that hid the New World from the Old and opened the gateway of the future of mankind.<sup>8</sup>

This self-congratulation has not ended. Again, quoting a July 1991 comment by John Wilford:

[Columbus's] reputation is inextricably linked to America [speaking, I think, of the United States]. Ultimately, Columbus's place in history can only be judged in relation to the place accorded America [again, he means the United States] in history. Surely we have not finally established that place . . . it seems that his destiny is to serve as a barometer of our self-confidence and complacency, our hopes and aspirations, our faith in progress and the capacity of humans to create a more just society.<sup>9</sup>

Before I leave you the impression that the United States has a monopoly on Columbus worship, listen to an Italian, Paolo Emilio Taviani:

Despite the allegations of those who call him an adventurer, dishonest or simply lucky, Columbus was a true genius. He carried out the Atlantic venture, revealing himself to be an excellent captain, capable of withstanding the fury of the elements and the rebellious complaints of his crews. To imagination, intelligence, daring and willpower, he brought constancy and spiritual strength. His deep, unswerving religious sentiment hardened his resolve and brought him serenity even in the most troubled moments, he was ever aware of being an instrument of Divine Providence. He was one of the giants of human history.<sup>10</sup>



It is difficult for a judicious student of the past to speak of Columbus with the same mythic reverence. Justin Winsor, who wrote in 1891, symbolizes the reinterpetative analysis of Columbus.

There is no more conspicuous example in history of a man showing the path and losing it. Hardly a name in profane history is more august than his. Hardly another character in the world's record has made so little of its opportunities. His discovery was a blunder; his blunder was a new world; the New World is his monument! Its discoverer might have been its father; he proved to be its despoiler. He might have given its young days such a benignity as the world likes to associate with a maker; he left it a legacy of devastation and crime. He might have been an unselfish promoter of geographical science; he proved a rabid seeker for gold and viceroyalty. He might have won converts to the fold of Christ by the kindness of his spirit; he gained the execrations of the good angels. He might, like Las Casas, have rebuked the fiendishness of his contemporaries; he set them an example of perverted belief.<sup>11</sup>

Or, listen to Hans Koning, writing in 1976, a symbolic year in itself.

The standard Columbus Day image of Columbus is false. This is important, for it did not get that way by chance. It is distorted in the same way that much in United States history is distorted. Our past, our present, and our future are burdened by these distortions. Grant him the originality and fierce ambition needed to set that western course. But what else is there to say? Here was a man greedy in large ways, and in small ways—to the point where he took for himself the reward for first sighting land from the Pinta lookout... Perhaps we will come to say that Columbus was not only a man of his time, but he was a man of his race... Columbus was a typical man of the West. And the West has ravaged the world for five hundred years, under the flag of a master-slave theory which in our finest hour of hypocrisy was called the "the white man's burden."<sup>12</sup>

Was Columbus a typical man of the West? Is it just to use him as a symbol of the behavior of Europeans in the western hemisphere? Naturally no person is typical, but few people escape the dominant characteristics of their culture or time. Columbus's drive for riches and glory, his dedication to the Roman Catholic Church, his hatred of the church's foes, and his adventuring spirit were shared by many people of his generation. As he and his compatriots established relations with indigenous peoples, they not only drew upon earlier patterns of behavior, they helped to establish norms of conduct toward alien peoples that would be followed throughout the western hemisphere. Whether or not Columbus should be used symbolically this year, he will be, just as he has been in the past.

Accordingly, his thoughts on the people he encountered merit repetition. Columbus's earliest diary entries suggest some of his sentiments.

In order that they would be friendly to us—because I recognized that they were people who would be better freed [from error] and converted to our

Holy Faith by love than by force—to some of them I gave red caps, and glass beads which they put on their chests, and many other trinkets of small value, in which they took so much pleasure and became so much our friends that it was a marvel. They should be good and very intelligent servants, for I see that they say very quickly everything that is said to them; and I believe that they would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to me that they had no religion. Our Lord pleasing, at the time of my departure I will take six of them from here to Your Highnesses in order that they may learn to speak . . . these people are very naive about weapons, as Your Highnesses will see from seven that I caused to be taken in order to carry them away to you and to learn our language and to return them. Except that, whenever Your Highnesses may command, all of them can be taken to Castile or held captive in this same island; because with 50 men all of them could be held in subjection and can be made to do whatever one might wish<sup>13</sup>

Columbus links the extension of Christendom through conversion, trade, personal service, military conquest, and kidnapping in the same breath, concepts which for him contained no contradictory meanings. The Christian cultures of the late fifteenth-century Mediterranean had been in conflict with the Islamic cultures of the same region for hundreds of years. The Christian societies of the Iberian peninsula were in large part defined by the reconquest effort against Islamic Moors who had invaded the region in 711. The centuries-long reconquest experience established most of the institutions, behavioral patterns, ideologies, and objectives that would be employed in the conquest of the western hemisphere. The Castillian spirit of religious conquest extended beyond Iberia into the Atlantic Ocean when Queen Isabella authorized the conquest of the Canary Islands in 1479. This brutal war resulted in the enslavement of thousands of Guanches and Africans, the establishment of a sugar-based plantation system, and the “population” of those lands by Christian subjects of Castille. Columbus, who was part of this conquest, proposed a system of slavery that would ensure the labor of the native peoples of those islands, to which Isabella is reputed to have said “What does he think he is doing with my vassals?”

As Columbus and the Castillians encountered the Lucayan inhabitants of Guanahani, the place he named San Salvador, they desired to “populate” the lands that were new to them. Populate in this sense meant the settlement of Christians and the incorporation of these areas into the Christian world. The adventurers were charged with the effort to convert pagan natives to Christianity; if they refused the offer of conversion (the Requirement), they became “heathens,” and subject to enslavement in a “just war.” These principles had been used with the Moors, Africans, Guanches, and other peoples. Unfortunately, the Castillians did not speak the language of the natives, nor could the Lucayans speak Spanish; this communication barrier made them subject to enslavement. The Requirement stated that

if you do not [accept Christianity], and wickedly and intentionally delay to do so, I certify to you that, with the help of God, we shall forcibly enter

into your country and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and of their Highnesses; we shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their Highnesses may command; and we shall take away your goods, and shall do all the harm and damage we can ... and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault...<sup>14</sup>

Queen Isabella championed the cause of the natives, forbidding their enslavement, but the tradition of conquerors utilizing coercive labor resulted in widespread violations of this preference. Moreover, many Castillians doubted that the people they had encountered were human; they believed instead that they were animals, and thus subject to domination by humans. This rationalization enabled the Castillians to exploit the labor of the native populations. The Spanish crown proved unwilling and often unable to bring its subjects in the western hemisphere under control. Its native policies did little to mitigate their abuse by Spanish colonists. Not until 1537 did Pope Paul III settle the issue, declaring in the papal bull *Sublimus Deus* that "We ... consider ... the Indians are truly men and that they are not only capable of understanding the Catholic Faith, but according to our information, they desire exceedingly to receive it."<sup>15</sup>

The acknowledgement by the highest Roman Catholic religious authority of the existence of humans not discussed in the Bible symbolized a profound reconceptualization of the European world. The modification of a Christianity-based cosmos had deep and permanent consequences for the development of European societies, especially as it coincided with the Lutheran Reformation. Contact with unknown lands shattered the Ptolemaic universe, and in turn sustained the rational inquiry initiated in the Renaissance. Indeed, in many different ways the European intellectual, political, economic, cultural, and religious expansion that so defines the world's history over the past 500 years can be symbolized in the events of 1492

Contact set less positive events in motion for indigenous peoples of the western hemisphere. Alfred Crosby labels the transfer of knowledge, contagions, and resources across the Atlantic the "Columbian Exchange." The transfer of foodstuffs included the potato, tomato, corn, turkey, and squash from the western hemisphere, and horses, cattle, sugar, and coffee from the eastern hemisphere, to cite only a few examples. The most immediate exchange, however, was disease, which resulted in the decimation of native populations. The population of the lands encountered by Europeans in 1492 is estimated to have ranged between 40 and 90 million people. One hundred years later, that number was perhaps 11 million. If the smaller figure is correct, contact meant the loss of 29 million people, a 73 per cent population decline. If the larger number is correct, then 79 million died as a result of contact, almost 88 per cent of the pre-Columbian figure. Contrary to the writings of Bartolomé de las Casas or the worst excesses of the Black Legend, Spanish



cruelties did not decimate native peoples. It might be said that whatever the consequences of contact with Europeans might have been for the indigenous peoples of the western hemisphere, the Spaniards do not deserve blame for that catastrophe. This is, in certain senses, true. The early Spaniards certainly did not *purposefully* infect natives so as to hasten their destruction, as did some English colonists. Still, contact brought European diseases to natives who were ravaged by the millions.

Smallpox was the captain of the men of death in that war, typhus fever the first lieutenant, and measles the second lieutenant. More terrible than the conquistadores on horseback, more deadly than sword and gunpowder, they made the conquest by the whites a walkover as compared with what it would have been without their aid. They were the forerunners of civilization, the companions of Christianity, the friends of the invader.<sup>16</sup>

But, after all, these were only uncivilized heathens, they could not even speak and they had no religion. However, to quote from Francis Jennings:

Words have a reality all their own. In the process of being conquered, highly refined native populations in the Western Hemisphere lost everything, including their identities, becoming "barbarians" and "savages" to their new rulers. At the deepest level of the popular culture the United States inherited from Europe, its citizens find reminders of the cherished national myth that "civilized" white men, beginning with Columbus, won this land from Indian "savages." Although the ideologists of conquest can no longer evoke admiration for holy wars or pseudobiology, they have yet one great and powerful system of myth among their resources. In it the Christian Caucasians of Europe are not only holy and white but also *civilized*, while the pigmented heathens of distant lands are not only idolatrous and dark but *savage*.<sup>17</sup>

Space does not permit me the luxury of exploring much further these thoughts on Columbus. Please allow me, however, a quick mention of some ideas. Russell Means, of the American Indian Movement, notes that Columbus "makes Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent." After years of bitter controversy, the United Nations refused to commemorate the event because of the deep divisions plans for a celebration generated. So too did the Canadian government. Even the National Council of Churches voted to condemn Columbus's arrival as an "invasion" and plans to hold a counter-demonstration to the Catholic church's plans for a celebration of 500 years of Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

The geographer D. W. Meinig discusses the importance of imperialism to his conceptualization of the Atlantic World. His guarded prose merits repetition

I wish to make clear that I use *imperialism* as a generic term, to refer to a type of geopolitical relationship; the aggressive encroachment of one people upon the territory of another, resulting in the subjugation of the latter people to alien rule. Such events are apparently as old as human history. The European conquest of the Americas may be seen as one vast episode in the age-old and continuing workings of imperialism in

history [Moreover], those who triumph usually go on to create larger and stronger societies, and they also create their own versions of history.<sup>19</sup>

Recent tirades in the once-placid meetings of stolid groups such as the American Historical Association indicate that even learned history professors face serious self-examination. Put in gross simplification, the discourse ranges from advocates of multi-culturalism to those longing for the narrative tradition of epoch histories. Simon Schama recently brought the discussion to the attention of the readers of *The New York Times*.

Clio, the Muse [of history] is under assault. On the one hand, she is told to stand forth and deliver the Eternal Verities of the Western tradition; on the other hand, she is told that she is a wicked good-for-nothing unless she becomes "multicultural."<sup>20</sup>

Schama yearns for the return of the narrative tradition, with the power to inspire, to evoke passionate interest, to tell a story. For him, the demon that led classic historians astray was social science, the bane of academia, those raw empiricists who cast aside literary tradition for revisionist interpretations of mundane and boring facts.<sup>21</sup>

Students of Columbus are blessed with ample narrative accounts written by the finest of scholars. From Bartolomé de las Casas to Washington Irving, Columbus has inspired the loftiest thoughts of thinkers across the ages. In the United States, perhaps none has a higher reputation than Samuel Eliot Morison, a Professor Emeritus at Amherst College. Morison's *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* is among the finest accounts of the explorations of Columbus.

My main concern is with the Columbus of action, the Discoverer who held the key to the future in his hand, and knew in exactly which of a million possible keyholes it would turn the lock. I am content to leave his "psychology," his "motivation," and all that to others. Yet as the caravels sail on tropic seas to new and ever more wonderful islands, and to high mountain-crested coasts of terra firma where the long surges of the trade winds eternally break and roar, I cannot forget the eternal faith that sent this man forth, to the benefit of all future ages. . . . And if Columbus was a failure as a colonial administrator, it was partly because his conception of a colony transcended the desire of his followers to impart, and the capacity of natives to receive, the institutions and culture of Renaissance Europe. . . . Other discoveries there have been more spectacular than that of the small, flat sandy island that rides out ahead of the American continent, breasting the trade winds. But it was there that the Ocean for the first time . . . gave up the secret that had baffled Europeans since they began to inquire what lay beyond the western horizon's rim. Every tree, every plant that the Spaniards saw was strange to them, and the natives were not only strange but completely unexpected, speaking an unknown tongue and resembling not a race of which even the most educated of the explorers had read. . . . Never again may mortal man hope to recapture the amazement, the wonder, the delight of those October days in 1492 when the New World gracefully yielded her virginity to the conquering Castilians.<sup>22</sup>

Aside from his narrative, which is quite inspiring, Morison identifies the significance of Columbus as the benefit of future ages; the spread of institutions and culture of Renaissance Europe; and the virginity/conquering image of cultural contact. Many scholars now find it hard to glorify narratives that offer so biased an image of the past. To indigenous peoples, 1492 represented a human and cultural disaster. To countless African peoples, the economies imposed upon colonial societies meant almost comparable losses. To others, the European contact heralded ecological exploitation of unprecedented magnitude.

Did Columbus discover, contact, or invade lands unknown to him in 1492? The obvious answer is that it depends upon whom you ask. It also depends upon whether one seeks some sense of truth available in the historical record or whether one prefers to interpret the past in one's own interests. To those seeking to utilize the events of the past for contemporary purposes, which includes most of the scholars that I've ever read, each answer is appropriate. Readers then must read critically so that cultural utilization of history, or nationalist, or religious, or gender, or class, or economic, or racial, or any number of other objectives can be perceptible and assessable. If the concept that history is written with contemporary issues in mind is accepted, then certain interpretations merit reconsideration. It seems unjust to focus upon the "glories" of Columbus without giving the negative consequences of contact equal if not greater emphasis. If we seek social justice, self-government, religious tolerance, and cultural autonomy, all principles allegedly held in high esteem in this country, a white-washing narrative of 1492 seems inappropriate. Despite the blemishes of such an account of the past, and despite the preferences of political appointees such as Lynn Cheney to censor a frank discussion of 1492, intellectual freedom demands a confrontation with the full implications of contact. Not all of these implications are easy to discuss; few of them fit well within the image of the past that myth-makers have forced upon the public for generations. However, it is my opinion that the complexities of contemporary society, which include vast numbers of distasteful images, seemingly intractable problems, and realities many seek to avoid, demand a critical assessment of the past. This is the only manner by which we might hope to leave a more balanced historical record for others to contemplate 500 years from now.

