

A Study
of
Columbian Scholarship and Morals

by

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I. CHANGING HISTORICAL VIEWS IN THE LAST FIFTY YEARS

Even though it has been 500 years since Columbus first set sail for the New World, it seems as if his exploration has been rediscovered over and over again, especially during the last fifty years. Among the important historical scholars since 1942 are Alfred Crosby, Jeffrey Burton Russell, Felipe Fernández-Armestro, William D. Phillips, Carla Rahn Phillips, and Samuel Eliot Morison.¹ Many of these historians have developed their own hypotheses over the controversy of the discovery, which include scientific knowledge during the fifteenth century, legitimacy of the "discovery," and the biological and social consequences for the indigenous population.

Moreover, scholarship has not been the only aspect affected by new insight in the last fifty years, but

¹ Alfred W. Crosby Jr., *The Columbian Exchange* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972); Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986); Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991); Felipe Fernández-Armestro, *Columbus* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991); William D. Phillips and Carla Rahn Phillips, *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992); and Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942).

also the moral character of the "discoverer," Christopher Columbus. Several factors must be considered before deciding if he was perhaps one of history's greatest heroes or the most contemptible villain. However, Columbus' integrity is not the only issue in question, but also who was responsible for the aftereffects upon the people and the land. Is it justifiable to presume all the opprobrium associated with the exploitation of the natives and the land are all part of a Columbian legacy, or was he just an instrument of society? Most important, perhaps, is the question: how have all these changes in scholarship and moral opinion been incorporated into today's educational system?

Controversy Over the Discovery

Before delving into the issues of whether Columbus rightfully should be proclaimed the discoverer of America, it is important to consider medieval man's conceptions on the theory of the earth's shape. A recent historian, Jeffrey Burton Russell, discusses these matters in his book, Inventing the Flat Earth,

which establishes that educated European people knew the earth was spherical; however the real error lies in a modern misconception that the flat-earth belief was ever the prevailing one among scholars.² Moreover, Russell states that the idea of accepting this myth and falling off the edge of knowledge is more frightening than the myth itself.³ A primary myth that Russell dispels is that one of Columbus' main goals was to disprove the theory of the earth's being flat. Additionally, in the fifteenth century no one had written any books rejecting the theory that the earth was round, because there was no reason to question it. Initially the idea of the earth's being flat was implied by the Bible. St. Augustine preached that the Bible does not make specific reference to the shape of the earth except in metaphors, so the people should look to the evidence of philosophers.⁴ Indeed, various other writers wrote about the earth's being spherical, including John of Mandeville, who wrote an adventure that took place on a round earth. Moreover,

²Russell 2-3.

³Russell 4.

⁴Russell 22-23.

the Book of Sidrach claimed that the world was created as a perfect sphere to mirror God's own perfection. Other depictions of the flat earth myth were of sailors literally falling off the edge of the earth into hell. This myth was popularized by the writer Andrew Dickinson White in 1896.

Moreover, mapmakers during the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries did not necessarily assume that the earth was flat simply because the diagram was flat, since maps made during the twentieth century are also usually flat. Such facts only prove that a map represents a specific area in two dimensions. The size of land masses and bodies of water on maps was not reflected accurately: size usually had to do more with the importance the subject had to the artist.⁵

In the fifteenth century the solar system appeared with the spherical earth's being the center and concentric orbits of the planets around it. Planets and stars were attached to these orbits. Some historians have thought that the idea of a spherical earth only came into existence in 1410 with the rediscovery of Ptolemy's map of the second century

⁵Russell 18.

A.D., but in the thirteenth century Roger Bacon was teaching that the earth was round.⁶

Another notion of the time important in the myth of the flat earth included the idea of the Antipodes. This was a theory that focused on the lands on the opposite side of the planet. This flat earth myth was spread with the help of Lactantius, a pagan in the third century from Africa and Cosmas Indicopleustes, a sixth-century Greek. Lactantius said there was not enough evidence to prove the world was round, and the Bible was not specific, so he considered the concept of the earth's being round unimportant. He also thought everything in the Antipodes was upside-down. Cosmas thought that the universe was an arch and the earth was its ground floor. He took the meaning of the Bible as literal scientific truth, and he viewed maps as physical proof that the earth was flat. Medieval man did not give a second thought to Cosmas' theory, and it was not until it was translated into English in 1897 that historians started linking Cosmas with prevailing medieval thoughts on the shape of the earth.

⁶Russell 15.

⁷Russell 35.

With these theories in mind, a council in Spain was set up to consider Columbus' desire to venture past the uncharted. Initially, this council decided against the voyage for reasons fairly common to the educated medieval man. These reasons included:

1. The sea was too vast.
2. Other inhabitants would not be descendants from Adam.
3. Out of the five climatic zones, only three could be lived in.
4. God would not have kept Christians ignorant about unknown lands.⁵

Even though these were valid reasons for the fifteenth century, Columbus was able to "adjust" actual measurements of latitude and longitude in order to convince Ferdinand and Isabella that the voyage would only take a few weeks, so finally, in April, 1492, Isabella gave her approval.⁶

The most controversial and debated issue in the twentieth century surrounding the discovery of the New World deals with who really deserves the credit of the discovery. Originally, Columbus received the title of "discoverer"; however, research within the last fifty years requires a more in-depth look at the man, as well

⁵Russell 9.

⁶Russell 9-11.

as his contemporaries, the explorer Amerigo Vespucci and the geographer Martin Waldseemüller.

First of all, let us remove all ambiguity regarding the term "discover." According to Webster's New World Dictionary, discover means:

to be the first nonnative person to find, come to, or see (a continent, river, etc.)¹⁰

By this definition Columbus should receive the credit. The word "discoverer" is synonymous with the word "find," yet, every discovery is a finding, but not every finding is a discovery.¹¹ If a person does not realize the nature of his discovery, does that make him any less the discoverer? Edmundo O'Gorman in *The Invention of America* makes this analogy:

If a caretaker of an archive stumbled across an ancient papyrus in a cellar and proceeded to show it to a professor of classical literature who realized it was a previously unknown piece by Aristotle, who then is the discoverer of this document? The caretaker who found it or the professor who identified it?¹²

If the document is just seen as a physical object, it is obvious that the caretaker found it, but if the

¹⁰"Discover," Webster's New World Dictionary, 1989 ed.

¹¹Edmundo O'Gorman, *The Invention of America* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1961).

¹²O'Gorman 15.

document is to be considered an original text by Aristotle, then the discoverer would be the professor.

O'Gorman discusses Columbus' achievement with skepticism. For O'Gorman a "discovery" implies that the class of the found object was previously known to the finder. In other words, he has reasoned that objects such as his do exist, but the existence of this particular one was completely unknown. In order to further explain his point, O'Gorman uses an example of "an astronomer who is already aware that some heavenly bodies are classed as planets may be said to have discovered a planet when he detects for the first time one of those bodies."¹³ However, the astronomer who first conceives the idea of such bodies being "planets" is the one to have "invented" that class of heavenly bodies.¹⁴

In any event, to fully understand what Columbus accomplished as a navigator, we must first consider some background information, and then examine the facts that led up to that moment. First of all, let us consider the motive behind the expedition: Why would

¹³O'Gorman 9.

¹⁴O'Gorman 9.

anyone want to sail off into the great beyond? According to Fernández-Armestro, possible motives included expansion, crusading, greed, piety, desire for knowledge of the unknown, a means of escape, and most importantly, commercial gain.¹⁵ A popular study among sixteenth century scholars, such as Francisco López de Gómara in *Historia General de las Indias*, was that Columbus' main motive was his desire to reveal the existence of certain unknown lands he had learned of from an anonymous pilot who had been shipwrecked upon its shores.¹⁶ These "unknown lands" is an extremely vague phrase, but one might first note that there is no specific destination listed in either the *Diario*, Columbus' first voyage log, or in any of the contracts between Ferdinand and Isabella and Columbus. The only destination mentioned is "to discover and acquire" certain "Islands and Mainlands" in the Ocean Sea, i.e., the Atlantic.¹⁷

Columbus set sail from Palos, Spain, on August 3.

¹⁵Felipe Fernández-Armestro, *Before Columbus* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 1987) 3.

¹⁶O'Gorman 11.

¹⁷Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1990) 25.

1492 with three small ships, the Pinta, Niña and the flagship Santa Maria. He left near the 28th parallel and used the North East trades on the way out and the Westerlies to bring him home. One reason he chose this route was that he was well schooled in the wind patterns of the Atlantic. While other historians say he had no choice because he had to sail from a Castilian port. This was so, because Castile's Crown was backing him, and the Canaries were its only port in the Atlantic.¹⁸ Kirkpatrick Sale, author of *The Conquest of Paradise*, is not convinced that Columbus realized that if he sailed from the Canaries that he would find easterly winds at that latitude, although that is what happened. He states that could have just been pure luck, because most Portuguese voyages left from the Azores, which were 800 miles north and on the same latitude as the Westerlies. Sale thinks it is also possible that he might have picked the Canaries because it was on the same latitude as his final destination, which to Columbus was probably China.¹⁹

¹⁸Felipe Fernández-Armestro, *Columbus* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 74.

¹⁹Sale 23.

Columbus' initial course was to sail due west until he hit land. However this should not have been a problem, except that Columbus only incorporated certain methods in navigating. Using a compass, recording time travelled in one direction, and estimating the speed of the ship during this travel was open to error. Inaccurate recording time could ruin calculations, not to mention the difficult task of judging speed. Although he said he used celestial observations too, one of the reasons he might have been thrown off course is by using a chart while trying to take exact astronomical readings of latitude and verifying latitude by timing the length of the solar day.²⁰ After eight days out from the Canaries the compasses would not point north. This was an extremely frightening situation, since the compass was the instrument navigators relied on the most. Actually what happened was that the ships had sailed to the line of latitude on the earth where one can see the normal diurnal rotation of the North Star. Since the sailors believed the North Star was an unmoving star in the universe, whenever they took their measurements it

²⁰Fernández-Armestro 75.

seemed to move from one side to the other, so they believed the compass was at fault. Columbus supposedly recognized that the variations of his compass resulted from the needle's being magnetic North and the Pole Star's being true North. Both Fernández-Armestro, author of *Columbus*, and Sale doubt the ability of Columbus to have performed this calculation, so possibly Columbus did not realize the value of this atmospheric calculation.²¹

It is extremely difficult to pinpoint which New World island he first landed at, but according to Phillips and Phillips, authors of *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus*, as well as many other historians, Columbus thought he was about to discover the island of Cipangu (Japan); in fact, he was somewhere in the Bahamas.²² On the morning of October 12, 1492, after having sighted land, a landing party was assembled, whereupon Columbus proceeded to claim the territory for his sponsors. He named the island San Salvador in honor of Jesus Christ, although it was called Guanahani by the natives. At this time Columbus made no claim he

²¹Fernández-Armestro 77-8.

²²Phillips and Phillips 154.

was in Asia. Between the 15th and the 23rd of October he located three other islands, naming them Santa Maria de la Concepción, Fernandina and Isabela. Quite possibly two of these islands today are the Crook Island and the modern Long Island. Columbus sailed three months about the Caribbean, and on the 24th of October he landed on Cuba, believing it might be part of the mainland of Cathay.²¹ By November 1st, Columbus had convinced himself that Cuba was part of China's mainland even though the natives had told him otherwise. On the 5th of December he landed on Hispaniola and claimed that if it was not Cipangu it was at least "a marvel." He left Hispaniola on January 16, 1493, and on the 5th of February reached the Westerlies, which would take them home to Spain.

On September 25, 1493 Columbus left on his second voyage to the New World. It was during this second trip that Columbus decided that Cuba had to be the mainland of Asia, although he had not yet found proof of this. Fernández-Armestro states that Columbus began inventing ways to prove that Cuba might be part of

²¹Fernández-Armestro, Columbus 85.

continental Asia.²⁴ He even had his crew take an oath that Cuba was a mainland. Mistaking Cuba for Cathay could be due to his inaccurate measurement of an eclipse during this time.²⁵ Furthermore, it was on the second return voyage that Columbus decided on a more southerly route for his return, one which forced him to fight head winds the whole way. Phillips and Phillips think that this possibly shows that Columbus was still trying to figure out the wind patterns at this time.²⁶

The third, and probably the most important voyage began in May, 1498. Columbus split his ships into two squadrons in order that one would follow the same route as the second crossing, while Columbus' squadron would explore the unknown parts of the Atlantic. According to Fernández-Armestro's Columbus, the Admiral continued westward, but he had given up on finding the southern continent. At this point he changed his course to north and "stumbled onto [South] America," near the Paria Peninsula, of what is now Venezuela. According

²⁴Fernández-Armestro 108.

²⁵Fernández-Armestro 109-10.

²⁶Phillips and Phillips 211.

to Fernández-Armestro, Columbus had no idea whether it was insular or continental.²⁷ Yet Sale states that Columbus recorded on August 13th that it was not an island, but a continent "hitherto unknown." From his book, *The Conquest of Paradise*, Sale implies that it was not rational calculations which helped him arrive at this decision, but rather that he talked himself into this view, because he knew he had to justify his expedition to the monarchs this time.²⁸ Even Morison, for all his praise of Columbus, does not give him the benefit of the doubt, but believes that Columbus "discovered" America completely by accident.²⁹ Upon further exploration, somewhere along the southern coast of Paria, the fleet discovered the powerful Orinoco River. Sale and Fernández-Armestro then both give Columbus credit for realizing that the heavy outflow of the Orinoco River into the Gulf of Paria could only come from a large river. This river had to come from a large landmass; therefore the island might be a

²⁷Fernández-Armestro 125-27.

²⁸Sale 171.

²⁹Morison 532.

peninsula which was attached to a continent.³⁰ The power of the estuary of the Orinoco frightened him and caused him to begin thinking again about a large mainland. According to Fernández-Armestro, Columbus correctly assessed it within a few days of finding the mainland of America, which had until then remained unknown. Therefore, he says it is an error to give the credit for first understanding its nature to a later explorer.³¹

If Columbus had left his conclusions at that, perhaps historians would not question his right to the title of "discoverer." However, either to embellish his achievement for the crown on his findings in the New World or simply because these were his beliefs as a medieval man, Columbus then stated that this land was probably near the Garden of Eden where the four great rivers of the world run together. He supposedly wrote a letter to Ferdinand and Isabella describing "a new heaven and a new earth." He later thought the earth was pear-shaped and the stem was where it ascended to the heavens, "sailing uphill." The equator represented

³⁰Sale 171.

³¹Fernández-Armestro 128.

the place where the earth met the heavens, perhaps the Garden of Eden by which he would infer that he was near the Orient.³² Phillips and Phillips believe that this statement alludes to Columbus' thoughts that the Orinoco River was near the Terrestrial Paradise, which he believed had to be in Asia.³³ He probably came to this conclusion because the Indians' skin color here was whiter than all the others', there was plenty of food, and his ship was just north of the equator. This is an important point because, according to Morison, the Garden of Eden was thought to be just below the equator. Therefore by landing five degrees north latitude Columbus had landed directly in the "Serpent's Mouth," i.e. the Orinoco River.³⁴ After the completion of the third voyage Columbus wrote a book entitled, Book of Privileges, in which he admitted that he had not found what he set out to discover. He even mentions that da Gama's "Indies" and his Indies, that is his "West Indies," are not the same.³⁵ It is

³²Fernández-Armestro 128.

³³Phillips and Phillips 226-27.

³⁴Morison 556-7.

³⁵Sale 204.

unclear which hypothesis Columbus supported, but at this moment he apparently believed in the new continent theory. However, later Columbus utterly rejected his "new continent" theory, insisting that he had found a route to Asia.

On February 26, 1502 Ferdinand and Isabella gave approval for the fourth voyage, primarily to stay in the world expansion race with Portugal, who had just claimed Brazil in 1500. He crossed the Atlantic in just twenty-one days, but this voyage, so full of hope, would soon bring despair. He sought refuge in Santo Domingo from a hurricane and then resumed his voyage coming out on the coast of Belize. His main purpose on this voyage was to decide if he had discovered a new continent on the third voyage or if he was really in China. According to Sale's The Conquest of Paradise, it was during this final voyage that he decided Veragua (Costa Rica) must be a large peninsula at the top of this new continent that lies between Europe and Asia. Sale thus disagrees with most historians' view that Columbus was again convinced he had reached Asia and did not realize he had reached a new continent.

Phillips and Phillips state, as almost every other

author does, that Christopher Columbus' voyages were not so much a beginning, but a continuation of "a centuries-old human process of exploration and migration."³⁶ Although he did not set out to discover the Western Hemisphere, his expeditions led to the search for direct contact with Asia and the gradual mapping of the Atlantic Ocean. He was eventually credited with changing the dimensions of the world that Europeans knew in 1492. However, it is true that other people had had a hand in the discovery of the New World. The Vikings and Leif Ericson had certainly been there, but this discovery made little impact on the world. The Vivaldi brothers also tried to seek an Atlantic route around Africa to reach Asia in 1291, but were never heard from again after they departed from the Canary Islands.³⁷

Moreover, many writers over the last 500 years have tried to prove that America had already been discovered when Columbus happened upon it, and that Columbus does not deserve the credit of this discovery. In order to reemphasize the importance of this issue, I

³⁶Phillips and Phillips 1.

³⁷Phillips and Phillips 51.

would like to reiterate O'Gorman's analogy of the caretaker who stumbles across an ancient manuscript. The caretaker does not realize the value of this piece, so he takes it to a professor of literature, who realizes it is a work by Aristotle. The problem arises in deciding who deserves the credit of "discovering" this piece. One example of how this analogy applies to Columbus is the myth of the "unknown pilot" who advised Columbus of what he would find. According to Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, a sixteenth-century historian, the existence of this pilot is doubtful. Oviedo believed Columbus deserved the credit of the discovery because he felt Columbus had learned of the possibility of the existence of another continent from ancient authors, and knew what he was going to find when he decided to start out on the voyage.³⁸ In contrast to Oviedo's view was that of another sixteenth-century historian, Gómara, who believed the account of the anonymous pilot was true. Gómara did not believe that Columbus realized the existence of the lands by reading classical literature, but by consulting scholars and corroborating the anonymous pilot's story. Therefore,

³⁸O'Gorman 16.

for Gómara the "unknown pilot" was the first real discoverer.³³ However neither of these theories resolve the problem of who discovered the New World. O'Gorman demonstrates that the solution to this quandary had to come from combining the two elements required in the discovery process. In order to be acceptable, the new theory had to incorporate the idea that the lands discovered were previously unknown and that the discoverer had guessed their existence. This is exactly the theory that Columbus' son, Ferdinand, advanced. According to Ferdinand, no one knew of the existence of the lands which he found in 1492. Therefore, it is untrue that Columbus was given any news about them or read about them in ancient books. Moreover, Ferdinand believed that Columbus conceived the idea that there must be "a hitherto unknown continent" to the west of Europe. The problem remained as to how Columbus could have come up with such an idea. For Ferdinand, the answer was simple, his father had a stroke of genius, i.e., he formed a scientific hypothesis through his own readings and

³³O'Gorman 17.

observations.⁴ However, the outcome of the fourth voyage seems to tear a hole in Ferdinand's thesis, because it was this voyage, according to O'Gorman, and others that Columbus convinced himself finally and unequivocally that all the lands he had thus far explored were part of Asia.⁵

Although somewhat skeptical of Columbus' claim of a new continent in 1499, after the third voyage, Ferdinand and Isabella still authorized four other voyages to Paria, which included those of Columbus, Alonso de Hojeda and Amerigo Vespucci. All these ventures returned with various kinds of evidence, such as Indians, gold, and new plants that supported Columbus' claim of "Otro Mundo."

Indeed, there is a case that Vespucci should be credited with the conscious discovery of America, for whom the continent was named. Vespucci claimed to have explored what is now the American mainland in 1497, and believed he had reached a "New World," before Columbus made his claim in 1498. This is the disputed point

⁴Ferdinand Columbus, Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus, trans. Benjamin Keene (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1959) 40.

⁵O'Gorman 19.

that surrounds the issue of the discovery of America. Vespucci appears to have realized that this was an entirely different area of the world, while even in 1498 Columbus still leaves historians confused as to whether he actually realized that this "new world" was not Cathay. Vespucci claimed to have made four voyages to the New World, although only three of these voyages are documented in Vespucci's *Epistola* printed around 1503. After the first voyage he claims to have sighted a vast continent which we know as South America. Vespucci's reputation came largely from a letter he wrote to Lorenzo di Pier Francesco de' Medici in 1502, in which he tells of his discovery and vividly describes the land and its people. The letter was published in 1503 under the title, *Mundus Novus*. One of Vespucci's main goals was to prove the existence of a "New World," a great southern mainland separate from the northern one which contradicted the previously accepted view of the world.⁴ It is alleged by some that Vespucci's first voyage found him sailing along the coast of Mexico, Florida and the Carolinas. A map of the New World appeared in 1513 which was probably

⁴O'Gorman 116-17.

derived from Vespucci's own drawings. However, soon after Vespucci's death in 1512, scholars began to question his claims of priority in discovery. Little evidence was found to support his own reports of making a voyage in 1497. Furthermore, he claimed to have led all the expeditions, but he actually had only been a navigator on the first voyage.⁴³

In order to complicate things further, the German mapmaker, Martin Waldseemüller, was the first to record and understand the true identity of the "New World," in such a way as to satisfy O'Gorman's analogy of the caretaker and the classical scholar. It was Waldseemüller who initially credited Vespucci as the first European to reach the New World. In 1507, Waldseemüller illustrated the separate land masses of northern and southern continents, and suggested that the land be named America.⁴⁴ However, by the time Waldseemüller realized that he should have credited Columbus with the discovery, the name had already

⁴³George Young, The Columbus Memorial (Philadelphia: Jordan Bros., 1893) 68-9.

⁴⁴O'Gorman 123.

become associated with the New World.⁴⁵ All three men contributed to Europe's first realization that there was another continent across the ocean which destroyed medieval man's understanding of the universe. In the words of O'Gorman, "it was more than just a chance discovery, it was a process of invention as these new theories became visible."⁴⁶ We must remember that discovery is a process, not an event.

The Biological Impact of the Discovery

The idea of discovery, as noted earlier in Webster's Dictionary, is that of a nonnative's first setting foot upon a new land. Although this interpretation does not satisfy O'Gorman's analogy, it is obvious in a common-sense definition that the "true" discoverer was the unknown first person who crossed the land or ice bridge of the Bering Strait. Alfred Crosby, the author of *The Columbian Exchange*, believes the ancestors of the Indians who crossed the Bering Strait arrived in America before agriculture or writing

⁴⁵Morison 384.

⁴⁶O'Gorman 124.

had been invented. Thus they were isolated from Old World innovations in developing their own technologies.⁴⁷

For the Europeans, however in a land so vastly different culturally and biologically from their own, it seemed natural that they should want to transform the New World into the Old by importing plants and animals for sources of food. The economic basis of the larger European settlements centered around mining and large plantations for export to Europe. It was important that the Spanish staples, wheat, wine and olive oil, be grown in New Spain (Mexico) and Peru, the largest colony.⁴⁸ It is also important to note that America introduced maize, potatoes, chiles, tomatoes, and new varieties of beans and squash to the Old World.

In addition to those plants brought over to the New World for intentional consumption, there were also grasses and clover brought over unintentionally, as were diseases. The practices of turning over grasslands to livestock promoted the growth of heartier immigrant grasses and weeds, such as Kentucky

⁴⁷Alfred Crosby, The Columbian Exchange 30-1.

⁴⁸Crosby 70.

bluegrass, daisies, and dandelions. Crosby states that it is often difficult to find a single species of plant in a meadow that grew in America prior to Columbus.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the contrast between domesticated animals of the Old and New Worlds was more impressive than the difference in flora. The Indians' domesticated animals only consisted of a small type of dog, two members of the camel family -- the llama and the alpaca, the guinea pig, and several types of fowl.

Although pigs provided the Europeans with one of their main food sources, it was the horse and large attack dogs that allowed the conquistadors to overcome the Indians. In addition, it was cattle that eventually became the main meat source and money-maker in ranching. Gold, hides and sugar became the chief exports of Hispaniola.⁵⁰

The Indians did not readily accept new food plants, however they did see the advantages in the new domesticated animals. The larger animals, however, competed with the Indians for food. Crosby enters into great detail on the many effects the horse had on the

⁴⁹Crosby 73-4.

⁵⁰Crosby 85.

Indian. The horse became very popular among the American Indians by the late eighteenth century. Ultimately, its greatest effect on the Indian was to enable him to resist the advance of the Europeans. Another animal which changed the way of life in the New World was the ox, especially in the cultivation of the soil.⁵² Moreover, even in the twentieth century, the exchange of plants and animals goes on continually between Europe and the Americas.⁵³

The most important and detrimental effect Europeans had on Indians was the transmission of new diseases. The isolation of those Indians who had crossed the Bering Strait left their immune systems without resistance to Old World diseases. The early inhabitants of the Americas were relatively disease-free. However, once the New World and Old World were reunited, Indians faced their most deadly enemy, hitherto-unknown disease.⁵⁴ A common question historians ask is, "Why were the Europeans able to conquer America so easily?" According to Crosby's

⁵²Crosby 40.

⁵³Crosby 103-10.

⁵⁴Crosby 30-1.

Ecological Imperialism, new diseases were the most important reason.⁵⁴

Before the Europeans, "diseases tended to be endemic rather than epidemic."⁵⁵ European migration led to epidemics upon contact with new groups; therefore those isolated the longest suffered the most. Crosby states that these killers came to the New World with the explorers and the conquistadors. The fatal diseases of the Old World killed more effectively in the New, largely because comparatively mild diseases of the Old World turned killer. The highest mortality period occurred within the first hundred years after the Europeans and Africans arrived. In fact, pre-Columbian calculations estimate native population between 90 and 112 million on the eve of the conquest, with a reduction of 4.5 million by the middle of the seventeenth century.⁵⁶ Records show that there were approximately fourteen epidemics in Mexico and seventeen in Peru between 1520 and 1600. The highest

⁵⁴Crosby, Ecological Imperialism 196.

⁵⁵Crosby, The Columbian Exchange 37.

⁵⁶H. F. Dobyns, "An Outline of Andean Epidemic History to 1720," Bulletin of the History of Medicine 37 (1963): 493-515.

mortality areas, also affected by Spanish labor systems and ecological disruption, were New Spain (Mexico), Peru and the Caribbean. After the initial enormous losses of several generations of Indians, there seems to have been a drop in the mortality rate.⁵

The most deadly of the early diseases were smallpox, measles, and typhus. According to Crosby, early Spanish comment on such disease focused more on the allegation it was God's wrath which had been cast down on this sinful society. Smallpox appears to have been the first killer, because a person can contract it by breathing the same air as an infected person. Crosby states that smallpox first struck the New World in December, 1518, and quickly exterminated a third or even a half of the Indians on Hispaniola. It immediately spread to Puerto Rico and the other Greater Antilles, wreaking havoc and destruction. From there it proceeded to Cuba and Mexico. A smallpox epidemic gave Cortés' army a decisive advantage in conquering the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (Mexico City) on their second attempt. Next it passed to Peru, killing

⁵Crosby 39.

a large portion of the Incas.⁵¹ Smallpox was carried to North America by the Calusa tribe in southern Florida, who traveled to Cuba for trading purposes. The disease arrived in the Argentine pampas in the 1520s or 1530s. In 1558 or 1560 there was another outbreak in the Rio de la Plata that killed more than 100,000 Indians. There were similar outbreaks of this magnitude in Paraguay, Chile and Brazil during this same period. There were other major killers such as measles, influenza and bubonic plague which made this invasion of European diseases the largest holocaust ever.

An interesting point is that the only export to the Old World from the New was syphilis, which "never stopped population growth in the Old World."⁵² Even this one disease, though, may not have come from the New World. As stated in *The Columbian Exchange*, the most popular theories regarding the origin of syphilis have been the Columbian theory and its antithesis. The Columbian theory argues that it was Columbus and his crew which brought syphilis back to Europe, while the

⁵¹Crosby 49.

⁵²Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism* 216.

other hypothesis holds that syphilis was present in the Old World long before 1493. However the more recent Unitarian theory proposes that venereal syphilis is but one form of a world-wide family of venereal diseases called treponematoses. The Unitarian theory is based upon the idea that syphilis originated in Africa as a nonvenereal disease called yaws, which takes on different symptoms depending on climatic and cultural differences. Originally, due to the moist, hot climate of Africa, yaws was an infection which only affected the surface layers of the body. However, as it was carried to the drier climates of the "undiscovered" New World, the organism retreated into the bodies of its hosts, and became a type of nonvenereal syphilis, transmitted by close contact under unclean conditions. As civilization grew and personal hygiene improved the organism was forced to retreat even further into its host, thereby making the only means of transferring this disease was through sexual intercourse."

Crosby asks, "Was venereal syphilis present on both sides of the Atlantic in 1492 or only on the

"Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange* 142-43.

American?"¹⁰ It seems that there is no conclusive evidence showing a description of syphilis in pre-Columbian medical texts in Europe. In addition, the most convincing evidence is the study by archaeologists of physical remains which show no signs of syphilis in Europe prior to 1493; however Indian remains in the Americas at this time do. Other scientists believe in the antithesis theory that it did exist in the Old World, but in a mild form.¹¹ Both Las Casas and Oviedo, historians during the sixteenth century, state that Columbus brought syphilis to Europe from America. Still other hypotheses regard syphilis as a result of genetic evolution of less destructive diseases.

Forced Labor Systems

The final major historiographical shift of the last fifty years concerns the exploitation of the Indians, which has now been well documented and analyzed. From the moment Columbus first made a landfall, he came in contact with the natives.

¹⁰Crosby 123.

¹¹Crosby 126.

Columbus' first impressions of the natives are those of an anthropologist, describing and categorizing people according to background. However, it was Columbus' intention to take samples of everything back to Spain, and unfortunately this included the natives. He brought a few back to Spain where he planned to Christianize them and teach them Castilian, so they could then act as interpreters. They would also provide striking physical evidence that Columbus had discovered a distant land.

In *The Columbian Exchange*, Crosby reminds us that a primary question raised among Spaniards regarding their desire to Christianize the natives was: "If God had created everything in one week, why were both eastern and western hemispheres so different?"¹¹ Is it unreasonable Crosby asks, that Europeans upon making this observation might have begun to question the medieval model of the world, and to ask whether Europe was the center of the universe?¹²

It is easy to see that fifteenth-century Europeans believed that the entire world including its people,

¹¹Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange* 10.

¹²Crosby 10.

were at their disposal to use as they saw fit. Even though Columbus sometimes treated the natives well, he never doubted his "right" to use them as he wanted. Even upon the first meeting with natives, Columbus seems not to have considered them as another human race, but rather as just another commodity to extract from his "Indies."

In addition, when he realized that these islands were not near the commercial cities of Asia, in order to find a means of moneymaking, he enslaved the natives.⁴⁵ It is unknown whether Columbus had planned slavery from the beginning, or if he just thought it was a natural development, since the natives seemed to him to be so culturally backward. Sale suggests that slavery of the natives could not be justified legally, since the islands were now a "possession" of the Crown. Therefore, the natives were Spanish subjects and, as such, they could not, according to law, be enslaved by other Spaniards.⁴⁶ It remains obvious that the Spaniards did not see the natives in this light, but rather they believed it was

⁴⁵Phillips and Phillips 155.

⁴⁶Salé 97.

their duty as Christians to help these people develop a proper way of life, that is, the European way.

From the beginning, Columbus thought the Indians would be converted easily, because to him they appeared to have no religion. And by teaching these Indians his faith it would free the Indians from their wrongful way of life. One example of the historiography of the last half-century is Lewis Hanke's, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice*. He agrees that Spanish law did indeed respect Indian rights, contrary to the "Black Legend" propagated by Europeans north of the Pyrenees.⁶

Yet Hanke admits that one group of Spanish theologians did not regard Indians as full adults, but rather as slaves to develop the resources of the New World. Hanke nonetheless shows that there was another group concerned with Indian conversion and the actual welfare of the Indians. Moreover this group, led by Bartolomé de las Casas, thought the Indians could fully participate in Spanish society as adult citizens.

Nevertheless, no matter which perspective one takes, the fact still remains that Europeans in fact

⁶Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1965) 19.

engaged in unmitigated exploitation of the Indians. A primary example of this occurred on Columbus' third voyage, when he implemented the encomienda system, which allowed the colonists unlimited personal use of these Indians.¹⁸ The encomienda was an institution by which the Crown gave or "commended" Indians to Spaniards, who Christianized the Indians in exchange for labor tribute. Although liable to the demands for tribute and labor during the lifetime of the encomendero or sometimes longer, these Indians were regarded as free because they were not legally owned by their encomenderos. But in fact, encomienda amounted to slavery.¹⁹

Columbus turned to the encomienda because of problems created by Spaniards' taking Indian women, which obviously made for a tense relationship between the Spaniards and the natives. Moreover, Spaniards decided that the proper relationship between colonist and Indians was that of slave and master. These reasons, in conjunction with the labor shortage,

¹⁸Hanke 19.

¹⁹Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1964) 58.

brought about the Crown's agreement to institute the encomienda. On May 4, 1493, Pope Alexander VI handed down a papal concession assigning temporal dominion of the newly discovered lands to Spain and Portugal, for the sole purpose of spreading the Christian faith, enabling the Spanish Crown to proceed with the encomienda. At first, the encomienda was the delegation of royal power to collect the tribute from, and to use, the personal services of the "King's Vassals," i.e., the Indians." On December 20, 1503, it was Isabella herself who issued the royal cédula or decree officially establishing the encomienda in the New World. This cédula stated that "the Indian inhabitants were free and not servile..." which flies in the face of how the Indians were really treated. In accordance with the cédula, Isabella directed Frey Nicolás de Ovando, royal governor of Española, to "compel and force the said Indians to associate with the Christians of the island...to gather and mine the gold and other metals...for the Christian

¹¹Lesley Byrd Simpson, *The Encomienda in New Spain* (Berkeley: California UP 1982) xiii.

inhabitants...". This same document which outlined the natives freedom clearly legalized forced labor.

According to Steve J. Stern's *Peru's Indian Peoples and the Challenge of Spanish Conquest*, early documents show that some natives participated enthusiastically in the commercial economy of the Spaniards, not only to raise money for tribute, but to benefit from the surplus." In the beginning, some Indians formed an alliance with the encomenderos in farming and military service. The people who participated willingly were usually the caciques or local chiefs, who still controlled the basic processes of production that maintained the Spaniards' economy. Eventually the Spaniards' alliances with the caciques faded, either because the Spaniards demanded too much, or because the natives began to resist the demands made upon them by the alliance. Soon disillusion with the Europeans set in and disaster struck for the natives. The caciques became disillusioned because they learned that the encomenderos had cultivated working relations

"Simpson 13.

"Steve J. Stern, *Peru's Indian People's and the Challenge of Spanish Conquest* (Madison: Wisconsin UP 1982) 38.

with the local chiefs and their societies to extract as much wealth as possible. On their part, the native chieftains accepted the alliance in order to advance local prosperity, gain an ally against rival native groups and limit colonial demands and abuses.³

Inevitably labor demands by the Europeans became a matter of extreme oppression for the natives. With the discovery of rich silver and gold mines in Peru in the 1560s, the Europeans' demand for native labor increased. Yet it was previously at this time that native population began to decrease because of European diseases. New epidemics and an increasing Indian mortality rate resulted in a tribute income that steadily declined.⁴ This labor shortage in conjunction with lowered tribute amounts created a serious dilemma for the Spaniards, who tried to resolve it in several ways. Initially, the Spaniards' primary solution was to enforce a harsher labor system. Laborers were often forced to carry heavy loads of supplies to distant locations. In addition, laborers were faced with brutal production quotas and after

³Stern 43-4.

⁴Gibson 81.

completing their obligations, they struggled to receive their wages. Other examples of brutality under the encomienda included using Indians in all forms of manual labor, jailing them, and sometimes killing them. In fact, Cortés even branded Indians and sold them as slaves.³ Encomenderos justified these hideous acts by claiming that white rule was in danger and that Indians might rebel and try to reassert native domination. It soon became apparent that ruthlessness alone was not the answer to the problem. By the 1550s the Crown sought to develop a working force that would choose its own work and receive a wage for it. The Crown felt that coercion was unnecessary and that Indians would work willingly if a sufficient wage were provided. In addition, by the mid-sixteenth century there were no longer enough workers to support encomienda. A labor draft called the repartimiento was the proposed solution to these problems. This was a system of rationed, rotational labor. Although repartimiento did not in practice observe the Crown's demand for shorter work hours, moderate tasks, or labor for wages, it did subject the labor institution to

³Gibson 78.

administrative scrutiny.⁷

As Hanke made clear, one of the greatest problems the Crown and Spaniards struggled with was how the Indians should be treated, especially since Columbus had begun a slave trade on his second voyage. One of the first crusaders for Indians' rights was Friar Antonio de Montesinos, who gave sermons in Hispaniola against the ill treatment of Indians. His sermons were considered the first real cry for justice in the New World. In 1509, ecclesiastics concerned about the justice of the encomienda system eventually convinced the Crown that Indians should only serve for a year or two and not for life. However a royal edict to that effect was so utterly ignored that Indians in encomienda for a time became inheritable. This left the exploitation in the first two decades of Spanish rule almost completely unchecked.⁸

Montesinos declared in 1511 that the Spaniards' cruelty to the Indians had almost cost the Spaniards the possibility of converting the Indians to Christianity, much in the same way they had lost the

⁷Gibson 224.

⁸Hanke 24.

Moors and the Turks. In 1512, the first Indian legislation was drawn up at Burgos. These laws described the "ideal relationship between the Indians and their Spanish masters." Many other treatises were written concerning these matters. One of these, by Martín Fernández de Enciso, argued that the Indians had been assigned to Spain just as God had given the Jews their own Promised Land, and that it was the Spaniards' duty to rid the world of idolaters. This was to be accomplished not necessarily by killing them, but by converting them to the Christian religion.¹⁵

Most important there was the royal decree entitled the "Requirement" of 1512 that was to be read to the Indians by interpreters before hostile actions could be taken against the Indians. In this manifesto Indians and their land were now regarded as subjects and property of the Spanish Crown. They also had to allow the faith to be preached to them. If the natives failed to do so, then the Spaniards could take their wives and children and dispose of their families as the colonists saw fit. If any harm came to the Indians it would be their own fault, and not the fault of the

¹⁵Hanke 32.

Spaniards. The Requirement was often read in Spanish, even though the Spaniards knew that the Indians could not understand that language. If it had not been for men like Las Casas, "there might have been no struggle for justice at all."³

In 1516, three Jeronymite friars were sent to Hispaniola to discover if any Indians were capable of living as Spaniards. This was an extremely controversial issue because if it was discovered that they could live on their own as Christian Europeans, they would be set free. This stipulation implying freedom from Spaniards was fiercely opposed by the colonists. It was also noted that Indians set free might develop friendships with the large number of Negroes now on the island, and such an eventuality would be dangerous.⁴

Men such as Las Casas and Montesinos declared that wars against the Indians were unjust and tyrannical, and the resources extracted from them were ill-gotten and should be restored. They also felt force to subdue and convert them was unlawful and unnecessary.

³Hanke 36.

⁴Hanke 43.

Although many disputes arose concerning Spain's right to govern the New World, most Spaniards since the discovery of the Indies felt that the papal concession alone justified the Spanish authority. However, their real concern was their own right to use the Indians as they saw fit.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that scientific knowledge over the last fifty years has advanced. Jeffrey Russell has shown that the notion that medieval man believed the world was flat is false. Historians such as O'Gorman, Morison, and Fernández Armestro help us to see a more in-depth picture of Columbus as a man and the feats he accomplished, than was understood prior to World War II. O'Gorman who makes clear precisely what is meant by a "discovery". Morison's scholarly contribution that introduced the accidental discovery theory and Sale's reemphasis of this point. Fernández-Armestro who stresses the importance of Columbus' third voyage and the discovery of the powerful Orinoco River. Hanke who advocates that not all Spaniards during the conquest can be stereotyped with the "Black Legend." And finally Crosby who discusses the reality of the Columbian

legacy on humanity and the environment.

II. CHANGING MORAL OPINION

The controversy of the discovery during this, the quincentennial anniversary, does not just affect the academic world and its different theories surrounding the legitimacy of the discovery, but it also affects how the public feels about Columbus as a person and the meaning of the discovery. This is an issue that requires consideration of the United States', Latin America's and Spain's interpretation of Columbus as a symbolic and patriotic image. Is Columbus a hero who helped bring us out of the Middle Ages, or is he perhaps a sinister villain that we should associate with the beginnings of modern imperialism? As we try to arrive at a decision in the proper moral interpretation of the man, we can simultaneously consider whether Columbus' actions were necessary in the discovery, or whether he was just an instrument of European expansion. Whatever the outcome, an important point to bear in mind is how this information has affected and continues to influence the educational process in our country today.

Hero or Villain

The issue that has produced more debate and has changed drastically in the last twenty to thirty years is the public's opinion of Columbus as either a hero or villain. Of all major historical figures, Columbus has probably undergone the most dramatic revision. In the sixteenth century, Columbus assumed heroic proportions after his 1492 voyage when he returned to Europe, and was credited with changing the dimensions of the world that Europeans knew in the fifteenth century.¹

Moreover, especially in the eyes of Las Casas, Columbus was seen as the instrument that made the gospel possible in the New World.² After 500 years hero worship is still present and the Vatican, for example, still supports Columbus as one of the greatest people in history.³ Pope John Paul II celebrated a Mass in Santo Domingo before Church leaders from Latin America and thousands of Dominican worshipers one day prior to

¹Phillips and Phillips 3-4.

²Fernández-Armestro, *Before Columbus* 67.

³Howard W. French, "Pope's Mass at Dominican Monument to Columbus," *New York Times* 12 Oct. 1992: B7.

the 500th anniversary. Yet as a gesture to the changing political climate the Pope said he came to "commemorate the evangelization of the Americas, and not their colonization."⁴ The Pope also stated that the lighthouse constructed for the celebration "symbolized the crusade of the cross implanted in the land" of the New World 500 years ago.⁵ On the other side, many North American protestors argue that Columbus was a missionary who spoke more of gold than of God.⁶

As early as the seventeenth century, North Americans viewed Columbus as their idol and model for exploration. By the eighteenth century he took on heroic and mythic proportions which did not fade even as his trials and tribulations were brought to light with the publishing of his *Diario*, the log of the first voyage, in the nineteenth century. The United States did not pay particular attention to his flaws, and as its history evolved he became a national hero.

⁴French B7.

⁵French B7.

⁶James Barron, "He's the Explorer/Exploiter You Just Have to Love/Hate," *New York Times* 12 Oct. 1992: B7.

Nineteenth-century Americans identified with him as representing "the spirit of the frontier." North Americans saw him as a hero with bold new ideas, a sort of misunderstood genius, a man ahead of the scholars of his time. Eventually he became a symbol that represented everything they admired in themselves as a nation. By the twentieth century Italian and Hispanic Americans called for a national holiday in his name, which has been celebrated annually since 1920. Americans celebrate Columbus because his legacy is an important symbol of how we view ourselves. Many Americans feel that Columbus was simply doing what makes all explorers and pioneers great: "following his dream wherever it took him."¹

In 1942, 450 years after the discovery, hero worship for Columbus was at an all time high because of the United States' involvement in World War II. During this time of immense patriotism, Americans thought of Columbus as having marked the beginning of American civilization, and the American way of life they were

¹Phillips and Phillips 4.

²"A day to celebrate discovery," Chicago Tribune 12 Oct. 1992: 3.

fighting to preserve. Perhaps the best example of Columbus' heroic proportions fifty years ago was New York City's Mayor La Guardia's likening him to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He said both were navigators looking for lands to shelter unhappy people. Americans of the 1940s thought of Columbus in much the same way they thought of their grandparents, as an immigrant who could not get what he wanted in his own country, so he went in search of new lands to improve his lot in life.⁵ All of these factors show that the United States has given Columbus a position of honor so high as to have placed him on a pedestal. In fact, there are no other countries that have praised him more than our own by naming cities, counties, rivers, and towns after him. As with all heroes, eventually something is discovered about them that makes them less of a hero in our eyes. And one day we wake up to realize that this so-called god that we placed on a throne has taken a tumble back to the mortal world. Such is the case of Christopher Columbus.

One hundred years ago the flood of immigrants

⁵"Roosevelt Seen in Columbus Role," New York Times 13 Oct. 1942. La Guardia was an Italian-American in part appealing for the votes of other Italian-Americans.

after the Civil War made Columbus an ethnic hero. The Knights of Columbus was organized in 1892 by Irish Catholics. A statue was erected in New York City at Columbus Circle by Italian-Americans, and some Catholics unsuccessfully tried to elevate him to sainthood. With the flood of new immigrants coming from Asia, Latin America and other Third World countries, it is natural that these new citizens would demand awareness of their own ethnicity. Within the last thirty years as new ethnic communities have increased in numbers and visibility, they have accused Columbus of one atrocity after another -- with just cause in many cases. New scholarship, partly motivated by mounting interest in multiculturalism, has brought to light several characteristics which has forced many Americans to reevaluate their view of him as a hero. According to Kirkpatrick Sale, the primary issue here is that Columbus' legacy involved "issues of life and death."¹⁰ That is, the initial encounter and treatment of the native people and their land led to the most drastic devastation of population this world has ever seen, surpassing the Holocaust of World War

¹⁰ Sale 5.

II. As noted earlier, between 90 and 112 million natives were living in the Americas prior to the conquest, within two centuries the native population had been reduced to approximately 4.5 million, which is about a ninety-five percent reduction.¹¹ For example, according to Russell Thornton, a sociology professor at Dartmouth College, in 1492, 100,000 to 200,000 Indians lived in New England and New York State. The Pilgrims, in the early 1600s already showed evidence of abandoned Indian villages, most likely caused by an increase in the mortality rate due to the importation of Old World diseases. In addition, the Indian population suffered armed attacks and the colonists' destruction of the forests for their farms.

Although colonists probably did not recognize the significance of the rapid reduction in the native population, it has not gone unnoticed in society today. This attitude was salient in this past year's Columbus Day celebrations and parades. In past years the parades have usually been a time to display ethnic

¹¹Fox Butterfield, "Columbus Runs Into Storm in Boston," New York Times 11 Oct. 1992: 18L.

¹²Dobyns 493-515.

pride, especially among Italian-Americans. However, in 1992 cities all across the United States witnessed anti-Columbus demonstrations. Protesters objected to a festival atmosphere, stressing that Columbus was not a hero, but rather a symbol of "all the ways whites have destroyed cultures different from their own."³

Indigenous groups and some African Americans boycotted the commemoration stating "his discovery brutalized native populations, started centuries of destruction of their cultures and led to the importation of slaves from Africa."⁴

In Chicago, protestors dumped red dye into the Chicago River to symbolize the spilled blood of Native Americans. As demonstrators released the dye, they also displayed a banner with the message, "Sink the Myth of Columbus."⁵ Other protests involved Native American groups who called for 1491 to be celebrated, instead of 1492, because 1491 was, in their view, "the

³Mary Hill and Robert Davis, "Columbus '92: Not a Parade for everyone," Chicago Tribune 13 Oct. 1992: 1.

⁴Dan Baum and Margaret L. Knox, "Columbus Day events: Cheers, jeers, yawns," Chicago Tribune 12 Oct. 1992, sec.1: 2.

⁵Hill 10.

last good year before the Europeans invaded." Other means of commemorating the day included a day-long series of activities at the University of Illinois recognizing the 500 years of resistance of Native Americans since the invasion of Columbus.

Although exploitation of the Indians is probably the most nefarious crime Columbus has been accused of, it is just one among many other actions which suggest a dark side of Columbus that has slowly begun to emerge in public opinion over the last fifty years. One of the most well-known and disputed, if lesser, accusations in question is the story of the "false log." According to the biography of Las Casas, Columbus kept a daily log of events that included figures on the distance he travelled on the first voyage. The Diario contained two different sets of figures of the estimated distance. It has been surmised that Columbus kept one set of true measurements that only he knew about, and another "false" set in case the voyage was long "the men would

¹⁴Baum and Knox 2.

not be frightened and lose courage." Another possible theory is that Columbus was duping the crew in order to keep the sailing route and distance safe from future competitors.⁴⁸ However, according to both Phillips and Phillips and Oliver Dunn and James Kelley, authors of the English translation of Las Casas' Diario, Columbus did not set out to intentionally deceive anyone. Phillips and Phillips believe that there was no false log and that it was a simple matter of Las Casas' not being able to interpret the dual calculations. They believe it is possible that Columbus annotated the distance by a method he had learned as a young sailor, and then interpreted it into simpler terms for the crew to understand. In addition, Phillips and Phillips think it would have been extremely unlikely that Columbus could have intentionally falsified the log because he could not have duped the other two ships' navigators.⁴⁹ Dunn and Kelley speculate that Columbus was not feeding the

⁴⁸ Oliver Dunn and James I. Kelley, Jr., *The Diario of Christopher Columbus: First Voyage to America* (Norman: Oklahoma UP, year?) 28.

⁴⁹ Sale 49.

⁵⁰ Phillips and Phillips 148.

crew raise measurements, but rather interpreting his measurements into the more commonly used Portuguese maritime league.¹¹ Whatever Columbus' real purpose was we may never know, unless the lost original log is discovered.

Another question about Columbus' integrity concerns the credibility of his claim to having first spotted land. After several weeks at sea, Columbus, in order to encourage the crew, reminded them that the first person to spot land would receive a bonus of 10,000 maravedis from the Crown.¹² It is said that at ten o'clock in the evening on the 11th of October, Columbus thought he saw a light on the horizon which he pointed out to two crew members, but only one of the two confirmed it. However, Columbus did not raise the call that he had spotted land and approximately four hours later, at two in the morning, the call was raised on the *Pinta* that land was sighted. Columbus later recorded that since he saw the light, he was the first to spot land, and was therefore entitled to receive the

¹¹Dunn and Kelley 30.

¹²David Henige, *In Search of Columbus: The Sources for the First Voyage* (Tucson: Arizona UP, 1991) Ch. 10.

reward from the Crown. According to Sale, the point at which Columbus claimed he saw the light was about forty miles out "and at that distance there was no way he could have seen anything at all."⁶³

Another factor which calls into question Columbus' moral character was that he never took responsibility for anything bad that happened on the voyages; rather he always claimed that any adversity was divine intervention. Although we know Columbus was something of a mystic and was influenced by millenarian visions, his attitude does not always seem pure or virtuous. Columbus claimed that one of his main goals was to help convert the world to Christianity, and one of the means of doing this was to use all the profits from his voyages in the reconquest of Jerusalem. However, little if any of this money was ever invested into this plan, particularly not the funds Columbus personally received from his voyages. Another instance in which Columbus blames his own failures on God's will was on December 24, 1492, when the Santa Maria went aground. Poor management and the lack of proper personnel attending the wheel caused the accident, but Columbus

⁶³Sale 63.

viewed the shipwreck as God's will and as a sign that he should explore the area more and to establish a settlement. He at least knew how to put the best face on ill fortune.²³

Most important of his beliefs in divine intervention was his phenomenal ability to win the majority of the chick-pea lotteries. The story of the chick-pea lotteries occurs on the return of the first voyage when the crew of the Niña encountered fierce storms and were so afraid for their lives that they held a lottery. The game established that whoever drew the chick-pea with a cross on it out of a hat would take a pilgrimage to various sanctuaries to thank the patron saint of that site for the crew's safe return. Columbus just happened to win three out of four lotteries. Columbus' son, Ferdinand, claims in his book that his father's luck was due to a divine miracle and that God directed Columbus' hand to the marked pea.²⁴ Columbus did go ashore and fulfilled one of

²³Phillips and Phillips 6. Justin Winsor, a nineteenth-century U.S. historian, was the first writer to portray Columbus in an unglamorous perspective. He claimed that Columbus was an inept administrator so sure of his own knowledge he disobeyed royal orders and brought many of his troubles on himself.

²⁴Henige 116-18.

these promises on February 18, 1493, when he safely arrived in the harbor of Santa María in the Azores. He made one other pilgrimage when he returned home to Spain, but apparently never made the third pilgrimage.

Furthermore, there can be no question that Columbus was greedy. This greed was displayed time and time again in his ongoing pursuit for gold, titles of nobility and in the selfish way he treated his crew. His desperate search for gold often resulted in outrageous treatment of the natives, and sometimes having gold forcibly removed from their bodies. His greed for power is also obvious in his demand to the King and Queen that he receive the title of Admiral of the Ocean Sea and Viceroy and Governor General over all lands he discovered. After losing the titles of viceroy and governor upon the end of his third voyage, Columbus spent the rest of his life trying to regain them. He also displayed signs of greed for glory by not wanting to share any of the credit for discovery with Martín Pinzón, his fellow captain. As noted earlier, Columbus acted greedily to his crew in claiming the 10,000 maravedis from the Crown for himself because he insisted he was the first to sight

land. He also forced the crew to take an oath that Cuba was a mainland of Asia, even though he had no proof. Perhaps he did this out of the fear of losing his titles and the royalties he would receive when the islands began to make a profit. According to Fernández-Armestro, threatening the men with the loss of their tongues if they said the islands were not Asia was the act of a desperate and greedy man.²⁵

Yet even after 500 years Columbus' popularity remains relatively strong, according to a poll taken by The Associated Press. In 1992, out of 1,001 people randomly selected, sixty-four percent still considered him a hero; fifteen percent considered him a villain; nine percent thought he was both; and twelve percent said he was neither, or were not sure.²⁶ In fact, Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago thinks Columbus has been downtrodden enough. He believes "you cannot blame Christopher Columbus for all the ills in this country. No one's perfect in life. Everybody's trying to blame

²⁵Fernández-Armestro, Columbus 109-10.

²⁶James Barron, "He's the Explorer/Exploiter You Just Have to Love/Hate," *New York Times* 12 Oct. 1992: B7.

him for everything."²² On the other hand, some citizens feel he was no better than Adolf Hitler.²³ Even Spain officially commemorated the 500th anniversary by observing a "Day of Respect for Native American Cultures."²⁴ Whatever one's opinion, it is obvious that Columbus committed atrocities, yet it is unfair to pass judgement on a man that lived in the fifteenth century according to twentieth-century values. This does not mean that he should be excused for what he did, but rather that one should take into consideration that what he did was not unlike other actions of the time in which he lived.

Inevitability of the Discovery

Another issue in question is: Who is responsible for the aftereffects -- Columbus or the colonists that followed? In fact, the discovery of America was inevitable, since John Cabot arrived there in 1497.

²²Hill and Davis 10.

²³Hill and Davis 10.

²⁴"Christopher Columbus, Then and Now," New York Times 12 Oct. 1992: A18.

without knowledge of Columbus' discovery and Pedro Cabral did so in 1500, trying to reach India. It is human nature to place blame when a tragedy occurs, and it is much easier to blame a single person than to blame a society as a whole. In this instance, can we say that everything that came after October 12, 1492 was without question Columbus' fault? Or was he a scapegoat of our own present-day moralizing?

Once again it is Kirkpatrick Sale who seems to lay complete blame on Columbus for what became of the Indians and the environment. He states that Columbus was:

the figure 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, as the model for all those that came after.

I think it would have been more appropriate if Sale had said Columbus was a symbol for what happened over the next two hundred years. After all, Spain had been exploiting other peoples and their lands for centuries. For instance, King Jaime I of Aragon in the thirteenth

²⁰Sale 5.

century believed that conquering other kingdoms was kind of a game, a type of "chivalric adventure." Upon his conquest of Majorca, a pattern unfolded that would influence the history of the crown of Aragon: Jaime promised the Aragonese the conquered lands, so something would have to be done with the original inhabitants, even if this meant expelling or exterminating them. God, gold and glory were the main motivators behind the Iberian conquests of the thirteenth century which Fernández Armestro considers to be the beginning of the European expansion into the Mediterranean and the Atlantic.

Europe at the time of Columbus was the home of the Spanish Inquisition, the plague, famine, and the beginning of a materialistic and capitalistic world. These things also played major roles in what was to transpire in the New World. Spanish expansion was a bold, enthusiastic affair. It was pushed along by the need for greater resources, such as gold, to help finance a crusade that lasted more than 700 years to reconquer Spain from the Moors.

One of Columbus' contemporaries did not blame

¹Fernández-Armestro, *Before Columbus* 19-22.

Columbus personally for immoral acts but linked him with other Spaniards. In fact, Las Casas condemned his own countrymen in a pamphlet entitled, *The Destruction of the Indies*. In this piece, the Spanish friar claims that it was the Spaniards' desire for gold that led them to make "unsanctified impieties." He claims that they were tyrants who treated the Indians as "the dung and filth of the earth."³¹ Although Las Casas lays the blame upon Spanish society, Columbus cannot be completely exonerated. His own interactions with the natives as well as his negligent use of the land are justifiable reasons for finding him guilty. One such example is Columbus' claim upon encountering the Indians that "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."³² In addition, realizing that the islands were not near the commercial cities of Asia, in order to find a means of profiting from them, Columbus considered colonizing them. In other words he wanted to bring in Spaniards to set up

³¹Dunn and Kelley 76-77.

³²Dunn and Kelley 75.

communities to extract as many resources from the land as possible. Therefore, Columbus not only dehumanized these poor people, but he also did it in such a manner as to benefit from their misfortune. Moreover, he used the land as if it were disposable. For instance, when the community of La Navidad failed, Columbus and the colonists simply moved to the other side of the island and never gave a second thought to the land eroded by the community the colonists were abandoning. However, to take this view is to judge Columbus from a twentieth century ecological perspective.

One cannot lay the fate of the Americas on his shoulders alone. Nonetheless, some do blame him for anything negative about the discovery. The idea of the voyage was Columbus', but he was not the only navigator during the fifteenth century who pursued a goal of sailing across the Atlantic. If the result had been different and Columbus had not discovered the island of Guanahani in 1492, as noted, it would have just been a matter of a few years before someone else did arrive in the New World. It is also important to remember that Columbus' treatment of the Indians was no different than the Spaniards' intolerant treatment of the Moors

and the laws, except that the Indians were judged to be heathens rather than infidels. Perhaps if we want to point an accusing finger at specific people, we should look to the conquistadors that followed Columbus, but even they were doing what was considered acceptable to the majority of Spanish society in the those days. Whether we decide if Columbus is guilty of certain crimes or not, we have to remember to look at the picture as a whole and to realize that Columbus was just one of many pieces in a life size game of chess.

The Aftereffects

As stated earlier, Columbus' landfall not only affected how fifteenth-century Europeans viewed the world, but it also had a devastating impact on the New World. While Europeans were trying to determine how they could benefit from this discovery, another human race was trying to find ways to survive this intrusion into their lives. It is contemptible that neither Columbus nor his fellow discoverers ever gave a thought to how they might be affecting the environment and its people. Although there are a few positive ways in

which this discovery has enhanced the environment, the negative elements certainly outweigh the positive.

The primary outrage was Columbus' lack of concern for the native people, since his only concern was to see how he could benefit from this population. Despite the realization that Spaniards did not know the germ theory of disease transmission, it is still inconceivable how some explorers after Columbus could detect that the natives' mortality was high and not try to correct it. Lack of interest on the Europeans' part in the death of a huge number of Indians casts them in a barbaric light and presents them to the world as annihilators. The first and most dramatic example of this indifference is the case of the Arawaks of the Greater Antilles and the Bahamas. These people were the first to come in contact with Columbus and the primary diseases such as smallpox, measles, influenza, and the bubonic plague that the Europeans brought from the Old World. In 1492, the historian Oviedo estimated that when Europeans arrived in the New World, there were a million Indians living on Santo Domingo in 1492, and less than sixty years later there were only 500 left. Slavers went to the smaller islands in search of

Indian replacements, and as a result within sixty years of Columbus' landfall, all Antillean aborigines had been almost completely wiped out.³⁴ Crosby estimates that the death rate that occurred when Old World peoples entered the New World was about ninety percent.³⁵ Disease and exploitation were twin destroyers of the Europeans' legacy.

The brutalization of the native population through maltreatment, freezing temperatures associated with the mines in the mountains, hunger and overwork, combined with new diseases ultimately led to the importation of black slaves from Africa to the Americas. The diseases Europeans brought to the New World still remains a threat in Amazonia, more so than the hostile actions of the peasants or road builders. In fact, as twentieth-century society has become more ecologically aware of the effects Columbus and his followers had on the natives, these ideas are portrayed more and more in films and novels in order to make the public aware of what is becoming of our world. For example, the recent fictional film, "The Medicine Man," portrays a

³⁴Crosby 75.

³⁵Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange* 45.

scientist researching a cure for cancer in the jungles of the Amazon, but he is concerned for the native peoples' welfare. This is indicated when the scientist makes all outsiders to the area wear a surgical mask in order not to bring in diseases. Another film is "The Conquest of Paradise," which portrays the exploitation of the natives by Columbus and his followers.

The effects of Columbus' legacy is still being felt today among Native Americans. There are many Latin American Indian peasants who are still fighting for their independence after 500 years of oppression by the descendants of the first Europeans. In addition, this domination is reflected throughout the hemisphere in discrimination against Native Americans in employment, education and civil rights.

Along with Columbus' exploitation of the Indians, the land was often devastated. The Spaniard's foremost thought was to determine what he could gain from the discovery, without ever considering what could be lost. The colonists first choice was to extract as much wealth from the New World as possible. The New World was the suppliers of raw materials, and the Old World supplied the manufactured goods. Even though Ferdinand

and Isabella were somewhat skeptical of Columbus's inflated claims on his first return, they still authorized three more voyages by Columbus, and one by Alonso de Hojeda and two by Amerigo Vespucci. These voyages were allowed in the hopes that the Sovereigns could extract enough gold and silver to enable them to continue financing their religious wars.³⁶ According to Crosby, this imperialism or just plain indifference to the Americas was so great that Europeans began to take for granted that similar conquests would follow wherever they went.³⁷ These negative habits have brought about "a destruction of the ecological stability over enormous areas and an increase of erosion that is so great that it amounts to a crime against posterity."³⁸

For some people the evidence seems to prove that the negative aspects of Columbus' discovery outweigh the positive. However, if one were to consider the Old World side of it, it would appear that Europe had something to be thankful for. For instance, the

³⁶Sale 189.

³⁷Crosby 297.

³⁸Crosby 218-19.

importation of gold and silver from the New World is certainly linked with the inflation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Therefore, this influx had a tremendous influence on the rise of the commercial classes, the decline of the old aristocracy, and the creation of the world market. Moreover, the Americas represented a haven for those who suffered from religious persecution. It also offered immigrants of the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries a chance at improving their status in life and purchasing their own land. Immigration ultimately led to an increase in food production and a more resistant immune system, thereby increasing human population. However, were these several positive outcomes worth almost an entire race of humanity?

Changing Emphasis in Education

Finally, let us examine how changing scholarship over the last fifty years has affected educational practice. Although new information has been discovered about Columbus, it is still not accurately portrayed in the United States school system. In fact, as recent as

the 1970s, myths about Columbus rather than facts were still being taught about him. A balanced portrayal of him has only recently been presented in most of America's classrooms. Twenty years ago schools wanted to portray Columbus as a role model, so his reputation as a hero was maintained. On the other hand, to represent him as the first destroyer of the environment or as a genocidal psychopath does equal injustice, and the real Columbus would still remain hidden to many school children. A striking way to present how educational views have changed in the last fifty years is to compare an excerpt from Merlin M. Ames' 1947 textbook with John A. Garraty's counterpart of 1991.

Ames writes:

At last the rulers of Spain gave Columbus three small ships, and he sailed away to the west across the Atlantic Ocean. His sailors became frightened. They were sure the ships would come to the edge of the world and just fall off into space. The sailors were ready to throw their captain into the ocean and turn around and go back. Then, at last they all saw the land ahead. They saw low green shores with tall palm trees swaying in the wind. Columbus had found the New World. This happened on October 12, 1492.

It was a great day for Christopher Columbus and for the whole world as well."

In the 1947 version the flat earth myth is presented and Columbus is portrayed as the ideal hero. It is important to note the contrast of a 1991 version.

When Columbus stepped ashore on Guanahani Island in October 1492, he planted the Spanish flag in the sand and claimed the land as a possession of Ferdinand and Isabella. He did so despite the obvious fact that the island already belonged to someone else - the Indians who gathered on the beach to gaze with wonder at the strangers who had suddenly arrived in three great, white-winged canoes. He gave no thought to the rights of the local inhabitants. Nearly every later explorer - French, English, Dutch and all the others as well as the Spanish - thoughtlessly dismissed the people they encountered. What we like to think of as the discovery of America was actually the invasion and conquest of America.³³

The recent version of the discovery sheds a more balanced light on Columbus' "discovery." Some go too far in condemning Columbus, and one history book popular this year in some high schools portrays Columbus as a Renaissance Darth Vader, "who ushered in

³³Merlin M. Ames, My Country, quoted in "Columbus Scrutinized in Schools," by Sam Dillon. New York Times 12 Oct. 1992: B7.

³⁴John A. Garraty, The Story of America, as quoted in "Columbus Scrutinized in Schools," by Sam Dillon. New York Times 12 Oct. 1992: B7.

five centuries of imperialism by enslaving, raping and butchering the native Caribs who greeted his 1492 voyage."⁶

There is no full consensus among educators in this the 500th anniversary. Consequently, students across America are learning everything from skepticism to contempt for the explorer's exploits. Yet, the majority of textbooks discuss Columbus' faults as well as his accomplishments. Some teachers are trying to incorporate critical perspectives into their curriculum, as several schools held mock trials last fall to decide if Columbus was friend or foe. In an elementary school in Greenwich Village students gave a play in which Columbus was portrayed as "a bewildered fool obsessed by gold."⁷ Of course, not everyone is convinced that Columbus should be taught as a villain. Some still feel Columbus is an almost sacred symbol, and that he should be taught as "a great man who committed atrocities."⁸ This appears to be a

⁶Dillon, "Schools Growing Harsher in Scrutiny of Columbus," New York Times 12 Oct. 1992: A1.

⁷Dillon A1.

⁸Dillon B7.

contradiction in terms: How can a man be great, if he has committed atrocities?

Conclusion

In 1992, the year of the quincentennial anniversary, Columbus was never so controversial. What makes it even more interesting is that not only are his achievements now in question, but his integrity as well. Today, it is no secret that Columbus and later explorers committed heinous crimes against the natives, exposed them, if unwittingly, to devastating diseases, and often drove them from their land. Without the help of historians like Crosby and Hanke facts such as these would still be overlooked by today's society. Crosby's astounding claim that by the seventeenth century ninety percent of the natives were killed by European diseases is not something that can be easily forgotten. Another point that Hanke helps clarify is that not all Spaniards travelled to the New World in order to make a fortune. He reminds us that there were Christians whose intentions to help the natives, regardless of whether the natives wanted it, were those of a more

selfless nature. Furthermore, it must also be conceded that Columbus' voyage vastly increased humanity's knowledge about the environment, a fact which helped create new ideas in philosophy, literature and the sciences. The effects of the Columbian exchange are still being discovered today in the continual transfer of plants, animals and diseases. In addition, indigenous people must still carry the burden of Europe's invasion not just physically but emotionally too. It is obvious that the Europeans and their New World descendants benefitted the most. Yet one must also remember that it is preposterous to presume that one man alone could have caused the depredations that the Americas and their native peoples have suffered. It would seem much more logical to view Columbus as a symbol of the brutalization, exploitation and extinction that was to come. At the same time, it is important to credit Columbus with the nautical and geographical discoveries he made and the promise he unwittingly revealed of a new more equal and free society in politics and religion. His discoveries greatly advanced an emphasis on reason and experimentation that helped to bring about the

Enlightenment period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries." In the end, whether Columbus was a hero or a villain is something that we all must decide for ourselves, but perhaps the true hero in this situation is the historian who continues to ask new questions of the past.

"Karl E. Meyer, "After 1492: A Utopian Encounter," New York Times 25 Jan. 1993.

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