

Review Essay

The Rewriting of America's First Lesson in Heroism: Christopher Columbus on the Eve of the Quincentenary

Bryan Le Beau

With the Quincentenary upon us, it was predictable that some groups, once again, would seek to set the record straight concerning Christopher Columbus' "discovery" of America. As if on cue, the Norwegians reminded us that 1991 was the 1000th anniversary of Leif Ericsson's voyage to New Foundland, and Native Americans restated their objection to the very idea that Columbus "discovered" a land already inhabited by millions. The charges, however, have gone beyond such perennial pleadings for historical accuracy. As Gary Wills has put it, in Columbus we have been offered for our detestation "the deadliest whitest male" ever.¹

"A funny thing happened on the way to the quincentennial observation of America's discovery," Wills writes: "Columbus got mugged."² The headlines have been merciless: "Clouds Over the Legend of Columbus"; "Columbus Landed, Looted, uh—Rewrite!"; and "Columbus, Stay Home."³ He who was once a national icon has been called a rapist, a plunderer, a slave trader and a mass murderer, who "makes Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent." The Indians of Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Bolivia and Columbia have demanded that the 500th anniversary be identified as the beginning of "the world's greatest genocide," while Indian activists in the United States have made plans to mark October 12, 1992, either with silent mourning or with militant demonstrations intended "to blow out the candles" on Columbus' birthday cake.⁴ Joining Native Americans,

in spirit if not in deed, are many otherwise associated with the mainstream of American society, but who would second the motion of the governing board of the National Council of Churches, which has resolved, in consideration of the “genocide, slavery, ecocide, and exploitation” that followed Columbus’s encounter with the New World, that the Quincentenary should be a time of penitence rather than jubilation.⁵

There are those, of course, who have fought back. Mario Paredes, Director of the Northeast Hispanic Catholic Center, has argued that the attack on the Spanish legacy is “a racist depreciation of the heritages of most of today’s American peoples, especially Hispanics.” Columnist Raymond Sokolov has suggested that critics are attempting to use Columbus as “a convenient scapegoat for our own self-hate and our own very modern doubts about the values of our culture.” And, finally, James Muldoon, Rutgers University professor of history, has described the affair as nothing less than “a condemnation of the entire history of the modern world,” as well as “a peculiar form of intellectual masochism, selectively judging the past by the imperfect standards of the present.”⁶

It is enough to tempt one, like the dying Mercutio, to call down a plague upon both houses in the latter-day Columbian feud, if only both houses were not correct, in some measure, and responsible for what is the most thorough reassessment of the Columbian encounter, at least in the popular consciousness, in more than a century. Like the Chinese character that represents both crisis and opportunity, this scourge upon the land, brought about by their mutual antagonisms, has led us to reexamine the life of Christopher Columbus and the collision of two cultures he initiated, as well as to debunk the myths and legends that persist in informing the American mind.

During the past few years we have been, and will continue to be, offered a veritable smorgasbord of Columbiana sufficient to tempt the palate of all Americanists, regardless of the disciplines or media in which they choose to work. In October 1991, television initiated its quincentennial offerings with *Columbus and the Age of Discovery*. Produced by Boston’s WGBH-TV and written by Zvi Dor-Ner, the seven hour documentary addressed a wide range of topics from what it was about Europe, as compared to China or the nations of Islam, that made it a launch pad for the Age of Discovery, to the Columbian exchange of New and Old World flora and fauna. In most matters, Dor-Ner is indebted to Samuel Eliot Morison and his classic, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (1942). In his assessment of Columbus, however, he is closer to his contemporaries. Columbus is a “thoroughly modern hero,” Dor-Ner writes in the companion volume. He was “a man complex, imperfect, and fallible, who not only motivated history but was swept by it, and whose deeds bear little resemblance to his intentions.” As such, he suggests, the story of Columbus “teaches us more about our limitations than about our greatness.”⁷

Aired in November 1991 was the WNET/BBC-TV production of Robert McCracken Peck’s *Land of the Eagle*, an exploration of the natural history of North America and its link to the continent’s human history since 1492.⁸ Yet to

come in 1992 are *Isabel and Ferdinand* and *The Buried Mirror*. The first, a biography which presents, as well, fifteenth century Spanish political history, is being produced by Sociedad Estatal and written by James Goldman. The second, a Malone-Gill production written by Carlos Fuentes, will present the Americas at the time of the Columbian encounter.

Cinematologists soon will be treated to two feature films. The first, being billed as a \$40 million-plus epic, titled *Christopher Columbus, The Discovery*, is scheduled to premier on July 4, 1992! It is being produced by Alexander and Ilya Salkind (*Superman 1,2,3*) and directed by George Cosmatos (*Rambo 2*) from the screenplay by Mario Puzo (*Godfather 1,2,3*). The part of Columbus will be played by George Corraface (*The Mahabarata* and *Impromptu*); starring as the grand Spanish inquisitor will be Marlon Brando. The second film, the working title of which is *Christopher Columbus*, is to be released on or near the actual Quincentenary. It will be directed by British director Ridley Scott (*Blade Runner* and *Thelma and Louise*) from a screenplay by Roselyne Bosch, and starring Gerard Depardieu (*Cyrano de Bergerac*).

At least one operatic composer and a number of authors of fiction have been busy in preparing for the Quincentenary. In October 1992 at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, Philip Glass will premier his three act opera, *The Voyage*, with a libretto by David Henry Hwang. Already out is a novel by Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich. Dorris and Erdrich, a husband and wife team already well known for their separately authored best selling books of fiction, non-fiction and poetry, have written *The Crown of Columbus*, a novel possibly best described as a romantic *Raiders of the Lost Ark* set in academia.

The Crown of Columbus speaks with the two distinct voices of its authors and of its major characters. Vivian Twostar, a Dartmouth University anthropologist of mixed Native American ancestry, has at first only passing interest in Christopher Columbus. Once faced with the need to publish or perish before the rank and tenure committee, and pressured into producing an article on Columbus for the university's alumni magazine, however, Twostar sets out not only to write about Columbus from the Native Americans' point of view but also to "nail him . . . as a grand payback," for the harm he has done her people.⁹

The contrasting voice of the novel is provided by a WASPish Ivy Leaguer, Roger Williams, whom Vivian describes as "as staunch a Beacon Hill Episcopalian as one was likely to find in academia as opposed to philanthropy or finance."¹⁰ Williams is an accomplished, and pompous, English professor preparing his contribution to the anniversary in the form of a great American epic, which will forever link his name with the likes of Johnson and Boswell. Though mysteriously and irresistibly drawn to one another romantically, Williams and Twostar are polar opposites; but following Twostar's discovery in the Dartmouth University Library of a hitherto unknown uncatalogued cache of Columbus memorabilia, they join forces in an Indiana Jones like search for the long-lost log of Columbus' first voyage.

In contrast to *The Crown of Columbus*, in which the major characters are fictional, *1492: A Novel of Christopher Columbus and His World* includes a nearly all-historical cast. Newton Frohlich, an attorney now living in Israel, builds his first novel around historical personages such as Cristoforo Colombo, a third generation New Christian (a long standing, if minority, opinion championed by writers from Salvador de Madariaga to Simon Wiesenthal) with considerable talent and almost mystical self-confidence; Filipa, Colombo's wife; Beatriz, his Jewish mistress; the Marrano Santangel family, who financed Colombo's voyage while resisting the Inquisition; the Catholic monarchs King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella; and Torquemada, a Jew turned leader of the inquisition against the Jews. The novel includes considerable historical detail, and it succeeds in placing Columbus and his discovery into the context and perspective of fifteenth-century Spain.¹¹

Two novels by Latin American writers on the subject of Columbus and the Columbian encounter are *The Harp and the Shadow* by Alejo Carpentier and *The Dogs of Paradise* by Abel Posse. Carpentier, a Cuban novelist, appropriates Pope Pius IX's attempt to unite European and American Catholicism through Columbus' beatification in order to evaluate the life of Columbus while raising questions as to the comparative values of one's life and deeds, the permanence of legend, and, even, the meaning of grace. The Argentine Posse's Columbus, much like Frohlich's, is a New Christian with mystical powers. He is able to peer into the future, where he sees a New World as potential Garden of Eden turned into a wilderness of plundering, savagery, slavery and environmental destruction.¹²

Already having appeared in the nation's major museums, but leaving behind excellent exhibition catalogues, are *Resplendence of the Spanish Monarchy and Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration*. *Resplendence*, at New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art, was an unabashed celebration of the splendor of the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand, Isabella, Charles V and Philip II, all of whom, while (possibly because they were) presiding over the Spanish conquest and colonization of the New World, were major patrons of the arts. As is often the case, and as the exhibition makes clear, however, theirs was not a commitment to art for art's sake. Whether it was paintings or tapestries, jewelry or religious relics, the art they purchased with the wealth they gathered from New Spain was intended to consolidate the power of the monarchy by making it clear even to the wealthiest and most powerful of their vassals that their life was the noblest of all.¹³

Circa 1492, at the National Gallery of Art, was hailed as making visible the "intellectual soul of fifteenth century civilizations."¹⁴ It moved beyond the Iberian Peninsula to include some 600 works of art from the cultures of Europe and the Mediterranean; Asia, primarily China; and the Americas circa 1492. Included were such diverse items as paintings and a suit of armor, navigational instruments and Aztec statues, drawings and gold ornaments. Each culture is measured by its farthest point of advancement, thereby establishing an essential sameness among them as well as crucial differences.¹⁵

At the National Museum of Natural History through April 1, 1993, is *Seeds of Change*. *Seeds of Change* employs a model for the study of biological and cultural exchange developed by Alfred W. Crosby in his seminal, though now nearly twenty-year-old, *The Columbian Exchange* (1972).¹⁶ The exhibit groups some 700 representative artifacts into five “seeds of change”: sugar; maize, or corn; the potato; disease; and the horse. Each was “planted,” not always intentionally, by Columbus and those who followed him to the New World and returned to the Old, setting in motion a process “altering flora and fauna, reordering the ethnic composition of countries, [and] changing the diet and health of people everywhere.”¹⁷

In assessing Columbus and those who followed him to the New World, *Seeds of Change* argues that their “real tragedy” lies in their having failed to realize that they had encountered “another old world,” which had long been populated by “numerous and diverse peoples with cultures as distinct, vibrant, and worthy as any to be found in Europe”; that they regarded the people they encountered as merely “another form of fauna to be discovered and exploited”; and that they failed “to recognize the fragility of the American environment,” the resources of which “they set to work despoiling . . . as quickly as they began destroying its peoples.”¹⁸

The Quincentenary will also produce a number of useful reference books. Already out is *Columbus: An Annotated Guide to the Scholarship of His Life and Writings, 1750-1988*, by Foster Provost, and Kenneth Nebenzahl’s *Atlas of Columbus and the Great Discoveries*. Nebenzahl’s *Atlas* includes maps from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, beginning with the world as known to Europeans upon the eve of Columbus’ first voyage and ending with maps recording the new knowledge that was assembled as a result of his discovery and of the next century of exploration. Yet to come, is *A Columbus Dictionary*, by Foster Provost, *The Christopher Columbus Encyclopedia*, being edited for two volumes by Silvio Bedini, and the eight volume *Repertorium Columbianum*. Being prepared by UCLA historian Geoffrey Symcox, *Repertorium Columbianum* will be a compilation, translated into English, of all available source materials on Columbus and his voyages.¹⁹

Europe in 1492 has been described as “a jigsaw of precarious statelets lacking the slightest element of cohesion,” “perennially engaged in mutually destructive” conflicts, while under the threat of “an Islamic deluge” and poised, on the eve of the Renaissance, to “leap across the frontiers of the mind.”²⁰ Providing information by which we might assemble that jigsaw and better understand the world of Christopher Columbus, as well as the world he encountered, are *Fourteen Ninety-two: The Year and the Era*, by Bartnet Litvinoff, quoted above, and two companion books, subtitled “portrait of a continent 500 years ago,” *Europe 1492*, by Franco Cardini and *America 1492*, by Lucena Salmoval. Due out in 1992 is *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus*, by William D. and Carla Rahn Phillips.²¹

Possibly the most scholarly interpretative offering of day, and also quite likely the least well known, is the three volume collection, *Columbian Consequences*, edited by David Hurst Thomas. The collection includes papers delivered by more than 100 scholars, mostly archaeologists and anthropologists, at a symposium sponsored by the Society of American Archeology. Volumes one and two, separately subtitled *Archeological and Historical Perspectives on the Spanish Borderlands West* and . . . *East*, once again employ the Crosby model, addressing a variety of topics related to the encounter between Native Americans and Europeans along the southern border between what would become the United States and Mexico. Volume three, *The Spanish Borderlands in Pan-American Perspective*, is less confined by geography, as it sets out to examine the Pan-American consequences of Hispanic-Native American interaction further to the south of the Spanish Borderlands in Southern Mesoamerica and Central America. It also takes up different, but related, topics such as Roman models for Spanish colonization, and provides some direction for the future of borderlands scholarship.²²

Similarly focused, if less daunting in its magnitude, is Jerald T. Milanich's and Susan Milbrath's *First Encounters: Spanish Explorations in the Caribbean and the United States, 1492-1570*. Prepared to accompany a similarly titled 1989 exhibit at the Florida Museum of Natural History, *First Encounters*, much like *Columbian Consequences*, builds on the impact of the Spanish on the native inhabitants and natural environment of the New World. Unlike *Columbian Consequences*, it also addresses the impact of discovery on the European, especially popular, imagination. In the exhibition catalogue, Susan Milbrath, most notably, explores European images of America that appeared soon after 1492 in personal letters, chronicles, works of fiction and the visual arts. She argues that such images tended to reflect what Europeans wanted, or at least expected, to "see," as they were shaped by or incorporated into pre-existing images that had been generated decades earlier from accounts provided by the likes of Marco Polo and Sir John Mandeville. To come in 1992 on another aspect of the Columbian encounter is Charles H. Lippy et al's *Christianity Comes to the Americas, 1492 - 1776*.²³

Most of the books that have been published over the past three years specifically on Columbus, rather than on the Columbian encounter, and that have attracted the most attention, have been written by well informed professional writers who are not Columbus scholars. These works present little, if any, new information, and few original interpretations. They are written from a presentist perspective, for a popular audience, reflecting current multicultural concerns and other sensitivities while seeking to shed light from the past on the current human condition. This generation of books is uniformly critical of Columbus, but, though more sharply phrased, their criticisms can be found in the scholarly literature that precedes and accompanies them. Where they differ is in their imbalance derived from the absence of dispassionate detachment and historical

perspective. Recent books by Hans Koning, Vincent Sinovcic and Kirkpatrick Sale fit this description particularly well.

Koning, a prolific novelist and essayist, who has also written under the name Hans Koningsberger, has led a crusade against the crimes of Christopher Columbus, in which, he argues, we all share. Generating newspaper headlines like “Teach the Truth about Columbus” and “Don’t Celebrate 1492 — Mourn It,”²⁴ Koning insists that the only way we can celebrate the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ encounter with the New World is to ignore the record for the sake of the traditional story, which is ahistorical. Columbus was not “a wise but misunderstood . . . [and] brave adventurer”; he was greedy, petty and cruel. Moreover, as the traditional story “underwrites the superiority of one race over another,” it is “poisonous,” as well.²⁵

It is instructive in this instance, both in suggesting how the times have changed and for whom this book is intended, to point out that *Columbus, His Enterprise: Exploding the Myths*, was first published in 1976. At that point, Koning writes, he found little sympathy for, or comprehension of, his point of view. There has been a “change in the air,” however, as “a new generation of children—black, white, red, yellow—in our schools has been asking for a more objective, less Eurocentric, white race-oriented, teaching of history.” Children may not have quite put it that way, he admits, but surely they had “a gut feeling” that something was “terribly and terrifyingly wrong” with what they were being taught.²⁶ Included in the 1991 edition of his book is an appendix titled, “Columbus in the Classroom,” by Bill Bigelow. Bigelow, a secondary school teacher, attempts to show how Koning’s book “can be imaginatively used in the classroom” not merely to set the record straight concerning Columbus, but “to teach students to read history skeptically.”²⁷

Vincent Sinovcic seeks to explode still other Columbian myths in *Columbus: Debunking of a Legend*. His most original claim may be that Columbus was Croatian! That which may draw most readers to his book, however, is Sinovcic’s crediting with having provided Columbus with the information he needed to reach the New World “the anonymous, heroic and tragic crew of the caravel Atlantic, which, in 1484, found America,” to whom he dedicates his book.²⁸

The theory that Columbus was in possession of a map he had obtained from a Portuguese pilot who had survived being blown off course to the coast of the Americas some eight years before Columbus reached those shores is not new. It was promoted by Columbus’ critics during the years immediately following his death, and it has surfaced from time to time over the centuries with little evidence to support it. Two corollaries that often accompany the theory are that Columbus, though reluctant to share his find with anyone, showed the map to Queen Isabella in 1491, thus accounting for her abrupt change of heart in the matter of his proposed enterprise; and that, based on what he learned from that map, Columbus knew full well what he would find some 2400 miles into the Atlantic, and that it was not the Orient.²⁹

The secret map theory is also central to the essay prepared by John Dyson for *Columbus: For Gold, God, and Glory*. Based on research by Luis Miguel Coin Cuenca, Dyson, aboard a reproduction of the caravel Nina, retraces Columbus' first voyage using information provided by Las Casas' summary of Columbus' log. Pointing to discrepancies between his own observations and those in the log, which, Dyson argues, other historians have noticed but dismissed as incidental, he concludes that Columbus must have fabricated his log in order to provide a false trail rather than reveal the route he actually took. Columbus' actual route, he suggests, most likely was taken from the previously mentioned secret map.³⁰

Sinovic's explanation of how it happened that Columbus nevertheless was given credit for the discovery of America is closely tied to another, more commonly held theory that Spain's behavior in the colonization of the New World has been intentionally, and politically, denigrated, including fabrication of the "Black Legend," for purposes of imperialistic rivalry. England may have initiated the legend in its popularization of Las Casas' *Destruction of the Indies* (1552), but the United States followed England's lead in the nineteenth century when, for purposes of American nationalism, as Sinovic puts it, it became "a political necessity" to diminish the Spanish discovery and colonization of the hemisphere.³¹

Probably the most widely read and quoted of the popularly written debunking books of the day is Kirkpatrick Sale's *Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*. Sale is touted as having debunked at least ten myths concerning Columbus. That Queen Isabella pawned her jewels to finance Columbus' first voyage, or that it was widely believed in 1492 that the earth was flat, to cite just a representative two, long ago were rejected by the scholarly community for lack of evidence.

No doubt accounting for Sale's considerable popularity, however, is not his myth debunking but his central thesis that Columbus is the archetype for those contemporary Americans guilty of ecocide. Columbus, Sale explains, was the product of a sickly and dispirited Europe with a history of environmental despoilation. As he was primarily responsible for implanting European culture in the Americas, Columbus is to be blamed for having brought, as well, this destructive European attitude toward nature. "The blindness, the insensitivity, the disconnectedness, the exploitation, the destruction—and above all the mysterious obsessive need to try subduing nature" marked European culture in the fifteenth century, and beginning with Columbus it transformed a vast, hitherto unspoiled paradise.³²

Possibly the most balanced of the recently published popularly written books about Columbus is *The Mysterious History of Columbus*, wherein John Noble Wilford, a Pulitzer prize winning science writer for the *New York Times*, provides a dispassionate "exploration of the man, the myth, and the legacy." Wilford's premise is that the story of Christopher Columbus is deceptively familiar in that it leaves the impression that it is firmly grounded in fact and that historians agree on those facts and their interpretation. Nothing could be further from the truth,

Wilford explains, as the record concerning Columbus is frustratingly incomplete.³³

Wilford's purpose is to present what is known about Columbus and to point to those areas where the facts are lacking, and where questions, even heated debate in the form of conflicting historical interpretation, persist. Whose version of Columbus is to be trusted? Too many important documents either are missing or incomplete to tell, he concludes, and these "lacunae are an invitation to confusion" and abuse both by hagiographers and detractors. Who is closer to the truth? he asks. Serious historians can honestly arrive at widely differing interpretations of motives and actions, and so they have.³⁴

This is not to suggest that Wilford avoids the tough questions, or that he fails to recognize Columbus' failings. Under his rule as governor, Wilford writes, "thousands of Tainos were raped, killed, and tortured and their villages burned," and it was Columbus that first suggested and actually enslaved Native Americans.³⁵ Was he, then, a great man? Clearly not, because in Columbus we find both the best and worst of humanity. "Columbus was neither ahead of the time nor behind," and that is the context in which his actions should be judged.³⁶

Few scholars have published books on Columbus in the last three years. Moreover, they are far more limited in scope than those just discussed, and, unfortunately, none has attracted much notice in the popular press. In *Columbus*, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, an Oxford historian of the Age of Exploration, presents only the "unadorned facts about Columbus, as far as these can be elicited . . . from unimpeachable sources." He identifies three traditions of Columbus historiography, all of which may be found among the popular writers previously discussed: "the mystifying tradition," wherein the writer reveals "allegedly cryptic truths which the evidence cannot disclose"; the tradition that "treats paucity of evidence as a pretext for intuitive guess work"; and the tradition of "subscribing to a legend of the explorer's own making."³⁷ Fernandez-Armesto consciously avoids all three, but, as little new primary evidence has surfaced on Columbus, neither does he offer any new insights into the man or his times. What he does provide is a much needed balance of historical perspective.

Fernandez-Armesto finds Columbus to have been "socially ambitious," a "socially awkward parvenu," an "autodidact, intellectually aggressive but easily cowed," an "embittered escapee from distressing realities," and an "adventurer inhibited by fear of failure." On Columbus' role in the enslavement of the Indians, Fernandez-Armesto concludes that Columbus' "overriding objective" was to silence his detractors, whose continued complaints would have alienated the monarchs and jeopardized all that he had achieved. The result was that "short-term expedients took the place of long-term planning and the interests of the natives were forgotten." As such, Fernandez-Armesto argues, Columbus was guilty of misjudgment, not wickedness.³⁸

Fernandez-Armesto suggests that Columbus may also have been at fault for painting a picture of the world he had discovered filled with images of large quantities of gold for the taking and Indians willing to serve. This not only

attracted “the idlers and fly-by-nights” Columbus might have done much better without, but it also inevitably provoked disillusionment and hostility among that same group when they found out how different the environment of the New World turned out to be.³⁹

Finally, in *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and the Modern Historians*, Jeffrey Burton Russell, an intellectual historian of the medieval world at the University of California at Santa Barbara, investigates the history of what he calls the “flat earth error.” This error postulates that prior to 1492 most people believed in a flat earth; that the largely self-educated Columbus’ most difficult task in selling his *Enterprise of the Indies* to the courts of Portugal and Spain was to convince not only the uneducated but the scholars at both courts that this was not the case; and that one of the results of Columbus’ voyage was that it proved to his critics that the earth was round.⁴⁰

Russell points out that from the time of the Greeks the educated of Europe knew not only that the earth was round, but also its approximate circumference. (It was on this latter point, of course, that Columbus’ proposal faltered.) Russell suggests that the “flat earth error” did not become common knowledge until the nineteenth century. At that point, it was not only popularized by Washington Irving in his biography of Columbus, to which we can trace so many of the myths and legends surrounding Columbus, but, he argues, it was also consciously promoted by intellectuals involved in a struggle between science and religion.

The “flat earth error,” Russell shows, was part of an evolving nineteenth-century faith in progress, which was closely tied to our growing confidence in the liberating power of scientific empiricism and to our increasing disenchantment with the power of religious imagination. Citing the works of those few who did insist that the earth was flat, but who had no following in medieval intellectual circles, nineteenth-century intellectuals sought to show that Columbus was the archetypical “clear-headed rationalist,” who through “justness of mind and reasoning which mathematical knowledge gives,” won out in his battle against unjust irrational religious dogma.⁴¹

One irony of the situation Russell points out is that at the point the “flat earth error” became orthodoxy, which was also the point at which the conflict between science and religion faded, historians began to offer evidence to the contrary. For decades thereafter, however, their efforts proved futile, as even the most scientifically empirical and well reasoned arguments were not sufficient to undermine the persuasive power of the myth they had created. The “flat earth error,” which had grown out of our contempt for the past, had become part of our modern belief in the superiority of the present and our faith in progress, and we were reluctant to abandon it.⁴²

In reviewing what has appeared on the eve of the Columbus Quincentenary, it is clear that the best work has built on the Alfred Crosby model for the study of the Columbian encounter, whether it be in books such as *Columbian Consequences* or in exhibits such as *Seeds of Change*. Otherwise, especially where that

work has focused on Columbus himself, one is tempted to conclude that the Columbus Quincentenary has been left to the amateurs.

To their credit, these well informed writers have focused the eyes of a nation on Columbus to a degree unparalleled in recent history. Indeed, in the first instance of which this writer is aware, the stir they have created has led the National Council of the Social Studies and thirty other organizational signatories (not the American Studies Association) to issue guidelines for the study of the Columbian Quincentenary that clearly spell out acceptable interpretations of the Columbian encounter. These guidelines, appropriately titled *The Columbian Quincentenary: An Educational Opportunity*, encourage educators to provide students with “basic, accurate knowledge about Columbus’ voyages, their historical setting, and unfolding effects,” including that “Columbus did not discover a new world”; that “the real America Columbus encountered in 1492 was a different place from the precontact America often portrayed in folklore, textbooks and the mass media”; that “the encounters of Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans following 1492 are not stories of vigorous white actors confronting passive red and black spectators”; and that “as a result of forces emanating from 1492, Native Americans suffered catastrophic mortality rates.”⁴³

What is also clear is that most of the popularly written books recently published on Columbus really have little to do with Columbus. Zvi Dor-Ner suggests this in his guide to *Columbus and the Age of Discovery* when he writes that Columbus has long been, and remains, “more useful to writers and polemicists as a myth than as an actual historical figure.”⁴⁴ Where the polemics of the recent period differ from those of the past, however, is that where, beginning in nineteenth century America and lasting well into the twentieth, Columbus came to represent the blessings on the world of Western Civilization in general and of the United States in particular, he has come to represent quite the opposite today. Consistent with an age in which Western Civilization itself has been put on trial, Columbus has come to embody all that we question, even despise, in our culture. Once again we turn to Gary Wills, where he writes:

If any historical figure can appropriately be loaded up with all the heresies of our time—Eurocentrism, phallocentrism, imperialism, elitism and all-bad-things-generally-ism—Columbus is the man.⁴⁵

Finally, in what we have seen of the Quincentenary thus far, we may be led to ask whether the Harvard historian Simon Shama was right when he asserted, “Clio has a problem.”⁴⁶ Indeed, academia may have a problem. Jeffrey Russell’s study of the “flat earth error” is instructive, not so much in his suggestion that nineteenth-century intellectuals, in their war with superstitious religion, contributed to the creation of the fallacious idea that most, even the best educated, people in the Middle Ages believed that the earth was flat, but rather in his showing their ineffectiveness in correcting that fallacy, once widely held.

It might be argued that the debunking of Columbus began with Las Casas, but it is more easily shown that scholars have sought to demythologize Columbus for most of the twentieth century, certainly beginning with Justin Winsor's critical biography of 1891. Winsor became just one of many, thereafter, who described Columbus as having left the New World with "a legacy of devastation and crime"; with having proved to be "a rabid seeker for gold and a vicerealty"; with, for his actions, having "gained the execrations of the good angels"; and with, in his bad behavior, having set an example for those who followed.⁴⁷ Why then do myths to the contrary persist? One is tempted to proclaim that if the Quincentenary does nothing else, it will have succeeded if it erases such myths once and for all, but we are also left to ponder why we, members of the academy, have been so ineffectual in bringing about that which others have now accomplished. To whom have we been talking, or for whom have we been writing, for these past decades?

Jeffrey Russell is right, of course, when he writes that myths "take on a life of their own," that they are mutually reinforcing, and that they become so embedded in our world view that they become "impervious to evidence."⁴⁸ If that is the case, however, if our world view is based more on what we think happened than on what really happened, whither the academy. In the case of Columbus, City of Columbus, Ohio, Mayor Dana Rinehart may be right. What Columbus has come to symbolize to Americans, accurately or not, is "not going to change because of some dusty debate among professors."⁴⁹

Notes

1. Quoted in Charles Krauthammer, "Hail Columbus, Dead White Male," *Time*, May 27, 1991, 74.
2. Gary Wills, "The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy," *The New York Review of Books*, November 22, 1990, 6.
3. Marco R. della Cava, "Clouds over the Legend of Columbus," *USA Today*, January 15, 1990, 1ff; Tim Golden, "Columbus Landed, Looted, Uh — Rewrite!" *New York Times*, October 6, 1991, Sec. 2, Pp. 1, 36; Aric Press et al., "Columbus, Stay Home," *Newsweek*, June 24, 1991, 54.
4. John Elson, "Good Guy or Dirty Word," *Time*, November 26, 1990, 79; Della Cava, 2; John Wilford Noble, "Discovering Columbus," *New York Times Magazine*, August 11, 1991, 49.
5. Noble, "Discovering Columbus," 49.
6. Paredes and Muldoon are quoted in Elson, 79; Raymond Sokolov, "Stop Knocking Columbus," *Newsweek*, Fall/Winter 1991 (Special Issue), 82. Although not included in this essay, Sokolov has written a book of related interest titled *Why We Eat What We Eat: How the Encounter between the New World and the Old Changed the Way Everyone on the Planet Eats* (New York, 1991).
7. Zvi Dor-Ner with William G. Scheller, *Columbus and the Age of Discovery*, Companion Guide (New York, 1991), viii.
8. Robert McCracken Peck, *Land of the Eagle*, Companion Guide (New York, 1990).
9. Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich, *The Crown of Columbus* (New York, 1991), 164.
10. *Ibid.*, 34.
11. Newton Frohlich, *1492: A Novel of Christopher Columbus and His World* (New York, 1991).
12. Alejo Carpentier, *The Harp and the Shadow* (San Francisco, 1990); Abel Posse, *The Dogs of Paradise*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (New York, 1990).
13. Antonio Dominguez-Ortiz et al., *The Resplendence of the Spanish Monarchy*, Exhibition Catalogue (New York, 1991).

14. Kay Larson, "Art World Views," *New York Times*, November 11, 1991, 106.
15. Jay A. Levenson, ed., *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration*, Exhibition Catalogue (New Haven, 1991).
16. Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, Connecticut, 1972).
17. Herman J. Viola and Carolyn Margolis, eds., *Seeds of Change: A Quincentennial Celebration*, Exhibition Catalogue (Washington, D.C., 1991), 11.
18. *Ibid.*, 12.
19. Foster Provost, *Columbus: An Annotated Guide to the Scholarship of His Life and Writings, 1750-1988* (Detroit, 1991); Kenneth Nebenzahl, *Atlas of Columbus and the Great Discoveries* (New York, 1990); Foster Provost, ed., *A Columbus Dictionary* (Detroit, Forthcoming from Omnigraphics, Inc.); Silvio Bedini, ed., *The Christopher Columbus Encyclopedia* (New York, Forthcoming from Omnigraphics, Inc.); Geoffrey Symcox, ed., *Repertorium Columbianum* (Los Angeles, Forthcoming from the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles).
20. Bartnet Litvinoff, *Fourteen Ninety-two: The Year and the Era* (London, 1991), 14.
21. Franco Cardini, *Europe 1492: Portrait of a Continent 500 Years Ago* (New York, 1990); Lucena Salmoal, *America 1492: Portrait of a Continent 500 Years Ago* (New York 1990); William D. Phillips and Carla Rahn Phillips, *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus* (New York, Forthcoming from Cambridge University Press).
22. David Hurst Thomas, ed., *Columbian Consequences: Archeological and Historical Perspectives on the Spanish Borderlands West* (Washington, D.C., 1989); David Hurst Thomas, ed., *Columbian Consequences: Archeological and Historical Perspectives on the Spanish Borderlands East* (Washington, D.C., 1990); David Hurst Thomas, ed., *Columbian Consequences: The Spanish Borderlands in Pan American Perspective* (Washington, D.C., 1991).
23. Jerald T. Milanich and Susan Milbrath, eds., *First Encounter: Spanish Explorations in the Caribbean and the United States, 1492-1570*, Exhibition Catalogue (Gainesville, Florida, 1989), 183; Charles H. Lippy et al., *Christianity Comes to the Americas, 1492-1776* (New York, Forthcoming from Paragon House (Ginger Books)).
24. Hans Koning, "Teach the Truth about Columbus," *Washington Post*, September 15, 1991, C6; Hans Koning, "Don't Celebrate 1492—Mourn It," *New York Times*, August 14, 1990, A15.
25. Hans Koning, *Columbus: His Enterprise, Exploding the Myth* (New York, 1991), 7; Koning, "Teach the Truth about Columbus," C6.
26. Koning, *Columbus*, 8. Though hardly exhaustive or systematic, I reviewed eight junior high and high school level United States history text books published during the past six years. If Koning is correct concerning older textbooks, as of late Columbus' star is falling from the firmament, if not quite as rapidly or as thoroughly as Koning might wish. Columbus continues to be discussed in the context of the Age of Exploration, in which case he is praised for his navigational skills, intelligence, and dedication. Quite often, however, he is now associated with those who came after him and created the Spanish empire in the New World, or New Spain, of whom textbooks have long been critical. In a few instances, Columbus is held culpable more directly, if subtly, not necessarily as having personally carried out any particular inhumanities but as having allowed them to occur under his leadership. Typical of the latter approach is a subsection of a junior high level textbook titled, "Trouble in Conquered Lands," wherein we are told of the mistreatment, killing, and enslavement of Native Americans in the settlement of Hispaniola, which Columbus established and governed. In this instance, the subsection is included in a section devoted to Columbus. Columbus' death is described in the preceding subsection, however, and it is not clear that any of this happened while he was governor. James West Davidson and John E. Batchelor, *A History of the Republic; The United States to 1877* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1986), 58.
27. Bill Bigelow, "Columbus in the Classroom," in Koning, *Columbus*, 141.
28. Vincent Sinovic, *Columbus: Debunking of a Legend* (New York, 1990), i.
29. A more widely held theory, though also lacking evidence to support it, is that Columbus showed Isabella a copy of a letter and map by Paolo Toscanelli, which had been illegally obtained for Columbus from the Portuguese court.
30. John Dyson, *Columbus: For Gold, God, and Glory* (New York, 1991).
31. Sinovic, 58.
32. Kirkpatrick Sale, *Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (New York, 1990), 5, 286.
33. John Noble Wilford, *The Mysterious History of Columbus* (New York, 1991), ix.
34. Wilford, *The Mysterious History of Columbus*, x.
35. John Noble Wilford, "Discovering Columbus," *New York Times Magazine*, August 11, 1991, 55.
36. Wilford, *The Mysterious History of Columbus*, x, 185.
37. Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Columbus* (New York, 1991), vii, viii.
38. *Ibid.*, 112.
39. *Ibid.*, 134.

40. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians* (New York, 1991).
41. *Ibid.*, 32, 29.
42. *Ibid.*, 71-72, 76-77.
43. *The Columbian Quincentenary: An Educational Opportunity* Washington, DC, 1991), 1, 2.
44. Dor-Ner, 328.
45. Wills is quoted in Krauthammer, 74.
46. Simon Schama, "Cleo Has a Problem," *New York Times Magazine*, September 18, 1991, 30-34.
47. Justin Winsor, *Christopher Columbus and How He Received and Imparted the Spirit of Discovery* (New York, 1891); Winsor quoted in Wilford, "Discovering Columbus," 46.
48. Russell, 76.
49. Dana Rinehart is quoted in della Cava, 2.

Bibliography

A List of Recently Published Books, Exhibition Catalogues, and Companion Guides Discussed in This Essay

- Bedini, Silvio, ed. *The Christopher Columbus Encyclopedia*. New York: Simon and Schuster, Forthcoming.
- Cardini, Franco. *Europe 1492*. New York: Facts on File, 1990.
- Carpentier, Alejo. *The Harp and the Shadow*. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1990.
- Dominguez-Ortiz, Antonio et al. *Resplendence of the Spanish Monarchy*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991.
- Dor-Ner, Zvi with William G. Scheller. *Columbus and the Age of Discovery*. New York: William Morrow, 1991.
- Dorris, Michael and Louise Erdrich. *The Crown of Columbus*. New York: Harper Collins, 1991.
- Dyson, John. *Columbus: For Gold, God, and Glory*. New York: Simon and Schuster (Madison Press), 1991.
- Fernandez-Armesto, Felipe. *Columbus*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Frohlich, Newton. *1492: A Novel of Christopher Columbus and His World*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.
- Koning, Hans. *Columbus: His Enterprise, Exploding the Myth*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991.
- Levenson, Jay A., ed. *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.
- Lippy, Charles H. et al. *Christianity Comes to the Americas, 1492-1776*. New York: Paragon House (Ginger Books), Forthcoming.
- Litvinoff, Bartnet. *Fourteen Ninety-two: The Year and the Era*. London: Constable, 1991.

- Milanich, Jerald T. and Susan Milbrath. *First Encounters: Spanish Explorations in the Caribbean and the United States, 1492-1570*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1989.
- Nebenzahl, Kenneth. *Atlas of Columbus and the Great Discoveries*. New York: Rand McNally, 1990.
- Peck, Robert McCracken. *Land of the Eagle*. New York: Macmillan, 1990.
- Phillips, William D. and Carla Rahn Phillips. *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus*. New York: Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming.
- Posse, Abel. *The Dogs of Paradise*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden. New York: Macmillan (Atheneum), 1990.
- Provost, Foster. *Columbus: An Annotated Guide to the Scholarship of His Life and Writings, 1750-1988*. Detroit: Omnigraphics (for Brown University's John Carter Brown Library), 1991.
- Provost, Foster, ed. *A Columbus Dictionary*. Detroit: Omnigraphics, Forthcoming.
- Russell, Jeffrey Burton. *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and the Modern Historians*. New York: Praeger, 1991.
- Sale, Kirkpatrick. *Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990.
- Salmoyal, Lucena. *America 1492*. New York: Facts on File, 1990.
- Sinovic, Vincent. *Columbus Debunking of a Legend*. New York: Rivercross Publishers, 1990.
- Symcox, Geoffrey, ed. *Repertorium Columbianum*. Los Angeles: Center of Medieval and Renaissance Studies of the University of California at Los Angeles, Forthcoming.
- Thomas, David Hurst, ed. *Archeological and Historical Perspectives on the Spanish Borderlands East*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990.
- Thomas, David Hurst, ed. *Archeological and Historical Perspectives on the Spanish Borderlands West*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989.
- Thomas, David Hurst, ed. *The Spanish Borderlands in Pan-American Perspective*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.
- Wilford, John Noble. *The Mysterious History of Columbus*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.
- Viola, Hermon J. and Carolyn Margolis, eds. *Seeds of Change: A Quincentennial Celebration*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.