NEW TITLES

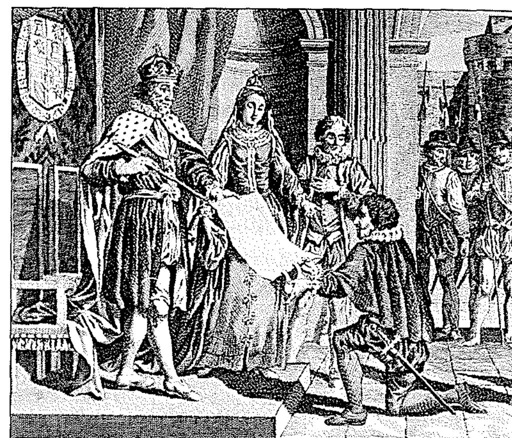
History

THE DIARIO OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS'S FIRST VOYAGE TO AMERICA 1492–1493. *Abstracted by Fray Bartolome de las Casas, trans. by Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelley, Jr. Univ. of Okla. 504 pp. $57.50*
SPAIN AND ITS WORLD 1500–1700. *By J. H. Elliott. Yale. 295 pp. $27.50*

We have grown accustomed to commemorating centennials and even bicentennials. But a cinquecentennial is something of a rarity—nearly as rare as discovering a *nuevo mundo* was in 1492. Among the profusion of books and exhibitions scheduled for 1992, this beautiful edition of Columbus's log of his 1492–93 journey has arrived early. Here is the ultimate travel adventure: Through its archaic prose, we witness again the frustration, the endless days without sight of land, Columbus's lies to his men about the distances, the insubordination of one of the captains, and the Spaniards' curiosity about the people they met.

To place Columbus's diary in its historical context, however, we need to turn to the collection of essays by the preeminent historian of early modern Spain, J. H. Elliott, now of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Elliott argues that the discovery of the New World undermined the Christian scholastic world-view as effectively as Galileo or Copernicus or even Protestantism had. The existence of unknown peoples on the Earth, Elliott notes, compelled Europeans to re-examine the old verities, including the very nature of man.

Although Elliott's essays range widely—from the mental world of Hernán Cortés to the nature of 17th-century revolutions—his preoccupation is with Spain's startling decline within a century after Columbus's discovery of the New World. It is this theme of decline that first attracted Elliott to Spanish history: As a student in England after World War II, he suspected "that the collective predicament of the last great imperial generation of Spaniards . . . was not entirely dissimilar to the collective predicament of my own generation."



Elliott's explanation for Spain's decline is perhaps not unfamiliar: moral degeneration, the decay of rural communities, the concentration of wealth in the hands of the profligate few, competition from foreigners, and the loss of military vigor. More surprising is Elliott's depiction of how "economic decline and cultural achievement [walked] hand in hand." As the Spanish political empire outwardly decayed, Spain turned inward and flourished artistically, creating a "golden age" still visible in the paintings of Murillo and Velasquez. There may be a certain advantage to living in dreams of past glory, as is shown by the most famous, if fictional, citizen of early 17th-century Spain: Don Quixote de la Mancha.

AMERICA'S ROME. Volume One: Classical Rome; Volume Two: Catholic and Contemporary Rome. *By William L. Vance. Yale. 454 pp; 498 pp. $30 each*

Rome is located not only on the Italian peninsula; it is also a city in the American imagina-

tion. Vance, a professor of English at Boston University, wants to understand how that Eternal City of the imagination, America's Rome, was built. He is, in effect, writing two histories simultaneously, recording changes both "in America's own idea of itself" and "in Rome as the place against which that idea could be measured." Rome thus becomes a kind of litmus test, indicating, by their varying responses to it, Americans' changing values.

No Americans ever came to Rome without first having visited it in their reading and their schooling. The writers, artists, diplomats, and churchmen whom Vance shadows through their Roman holiday all were testing their preconceived images, their "American Rome," against the brute experience of the city. The confrontation invariably created something new. As Thornton Wilder has Julius Caesar say in *The Ides of March* (1948), "Rome can exist only in so far as I have shaped it to my idea."

"Piazza Navona, Rome," *by John Singer Sargent, 1907*

Vance's method of dividing each American's impressions of Rome into separate categories like classical, "papal," and contemporary is unfortunately impressionistic and inconclusive. Yet Vance comes up with surprises. So many well-known Americans have admired Rome—the Founding Fathers, for its ancient republican virtues; literary expatriates, for its traditions—that it may be assumed that Rome always made a *beau idéal* for Americans abroad. Hardly. Throughout the 19th century, American visitors bemoaned the corrupting influence of the city: Mark Twain thought the Colosseum vile, and Henry James caricatured the Pope as a "flaccid old woman waving his ridiculous fingers over the prostrate multitude." Only with Edith Wharton's *Italian Backgrounds* (1905), encouraging Americans to reconsider "objects at which the guidebook tourist has been taught to look askance," did Rome begin to enjoy a steadily good press. Yet because one American's impressions inevitably contradicted another's, Vance ends up describing most Roman artifacts as having opposing meanings for Americans. The Colosseum, for example, has evoked for some Americans, like the political cartoonist Thomas Nast, our own imperial destiny, but to others, such as Henry Adams, it has whispered prophecies of our imperial doom.

LAND WITHOUT GHOSTS: Chinese Impressions of America From the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present. *Trans. and Edited by R. David Arkush and Leo O. Lee. Univ. of Calif. 309 pp. $25*

We Americans are all too familiar with the innumerable, often unflattering accounts that European visitors have written of the United States, from Mrs. Trollope in the 1830s to Gunnar Myrdal during the 1940s. But what have visitors coming from the other direction, from China, thought of us? Travel writing has been a major literary genre in China since antiquity. But "we are amazingly uninformed" about what this genre says about America, historian John King Fairbanks has observed. Now Arkush, a historian at the University of Iowa, and Lee, director of East Asian studies at the University of Chicago, have assembled 150 years of Chinese observations of America.

Americans once considered China exotic, which is exactly how 19th-century Chinese thought of America, a wonderland at once amazing and frightening. The young interpreter Zhang Deyi, visiting America in 1868, was astounded at everything from the way "barbarian [American] speech sounds like *jiujiudongdong*" to how Americans "go to bed and when they get up there is the ritual of touching lips." By the turn of the century, however, the Chinese were studying America as a model for modernization. The young reformer Liang Qichao in 1903 contrasted American organization to Chinese haphazardness: "Westerners walk together like a formation of geese; Chinese are like scattered ducks."

Chinese observations of America are at times so different from Europeans' that it almost seems they were reporting about different countries. After the French Revolution, European travelers, finding no feudal or aristocratic traditions here, hailed America as a classless society. Coming from China, where an aristoc-