
BACKGROUND BOOKS

COLUMBUS AND THE LABYRINTH OF HISTORY

Historians treat it as axiomatic that each new generation, by building on past scholarship, knows more than those that went before. By this logic, we *must* know more about Columbus than scholars did in 1892 during the fourth Centenary. Unfortunately, that is not the case (or at least it was not 10 years ago).

Popularly, much lore that was common currency about Columbus a century ago has been lost, and, in scholarship, few American historians now specialize in the sorts of topics—navigation, shipbuilding, exploration, mariners and merchants, etc.—that once constituted our knowledge of the “Age of Discovery.” Instead there is an increasingly acrimonious debate about Columbus—and, by extension, about European world dominance. The current vilification of Columbus, however, is not necessarily more accurate than the uncritical praise of a century ago.

Washington Irving’s three-volume **Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus** (1828) set the tone for the 19th century. Irving aimed to spin a good yarn and also to promote Columbus as a role model for the nation. His Columbus displayed the virtues which citizens of the new nation should have: piety, high morals, a scientific spirit, perseverance, rugged individualism, and so on. The immense popularity of Irving’s biography influenced, well into the 20th century, virtually every American history textbook. Indeed, as recently as 50 years ago, the Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison, in effect, rewrote Irving’s Columbus for the 20th century. In his magisterial **Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus** (Little, Brown, 1942), Morison, an admiral himself, literally went “to sea in quest of light and truth.” He retraced Columbus’s voyages and, by focusing on his maritime achievements, skirted Columbus’s more controversial career on land. “We are right in so honoring him,” Morison wrote, “because no other sailor had the persistence, the knowledge and the sheer guts to sail thousands of miles into the unknown ocean until he found land.”

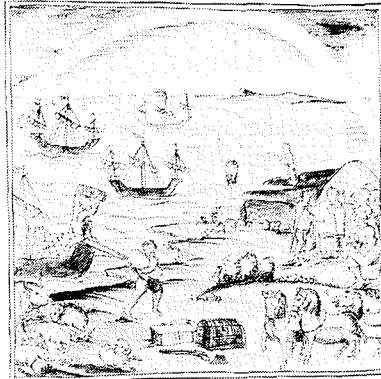
From European scholars, however, a different, more plausible Columbus has emerged. From Jacques Heers’s **Christophe Colomb** (Hachette, 1981), which showed a typical merchant mariner of his time looking for profitable opportunities wherever fortune took him, to Alain Milhou’s **Colon y su mentalidad mesianic en el ambiente franciscanista español** (Casa-Museo de Colon, 1983), which depicted a mystic who believed he was helping spread the Christian message to all the world, a more complex Columbus has taken shape. Two current biographies in English embody this new understanding. Oxford historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto reveals a **Columbus** (Oxford, 1991) who was “the socially ambitious, socially awkward parvenu; the autodidact, intellectually aggressive but easily cowed; the embittered escapee from distressing realities; the adventurer inhibited by fear.” And John Noble Wilford’s **The Mysterious History of Columbus** (Knopf, 1991) is, arguably, the most thorough and up-to-date narrative about Columbus available in English today.

A second new direction in Columbus studies came from those earlier works that placed him within the larger history of global conquest and empire-building. Yale historian J. H. Elliott’s **The Old World and the New** (Cambridge, 1970) focused on the Europeans who had to assimilate the unexpected reality of another world suddenly looming into existence. “The discovery of America,” Elliott wrote, “had important *intellectual* consequences, in that it brought Europeans into contact with new lands and peoples, and in so doing challenged . . . traditional European assumptions about geography, theology, history, and the nature of man.”

University of Texas historian Alfred W. Crosby’s **Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492** (Greenwood, 1972) traced the migrations of plants, animals, and, most disastrously, microbes and diseases across the ocean. In **Plagues and Peoples** (Doubleday, 1976), William H. McNeill of the

THE COLUMBIAN EXCHANGE

There is an old American folk song which tells of a "Sweet Betsy from Pike" (Pike County, Missouri) who traveled out westward "with her lover Ike, with two yoke of oxen, a large yellow dog, a tall Shanghai rooster and one spotted hog." Not only Betsy but practically her whole caravan of animals were in a sense "immigrants," descendants of Columbus and other two- and four-legged adventurers who had crossed the Atlantic from Europe. They were part of what historian Alfred Crosby describes as "a grunting, lowing, neighing, crowing, chirping, snarling, buzzing, self-replicating and world-altering avalanche." Today, writes Crosby, a "botanist can easily find whole meadows [in America] in which he is hard put to find a species that grew in American pre-Columbian times." In his *The Columbian Exchange* (1972) and *Ecological Imperialism* (1986), Crosby describes the plants and animals and diseases that crossed the Atlantic in both directions in the wake of Columbus's voyages, thus recreating ecologically the Old World in the New and the New World in the Old. Here are listed some of the immigrants and transplants.



Plants

From the Old World to the Americas:

Bananas
Barley
Cabbage
Cauliflower
Daisies
European Melons
Figs
Kentucky Bluegrass
Lemons
Lettuce
Mangoes
Olives
Oranges
Peaches

Pomegranates
Radishes
Rice
Sugar Cane
Tumbleweed
Wheat
Wild Oats
Wine Grapes

From the Americas to the Old World:

Avocados
Beans
Chile Peppers
Cocoa
Coffee
Maize
Papaya

Peanuts
Pineapples
Potatoes
Pumpkins
Squash
Sweet Potatoes
Tobacco

Tomatoes



Diseases

From the Old World to the Americas:

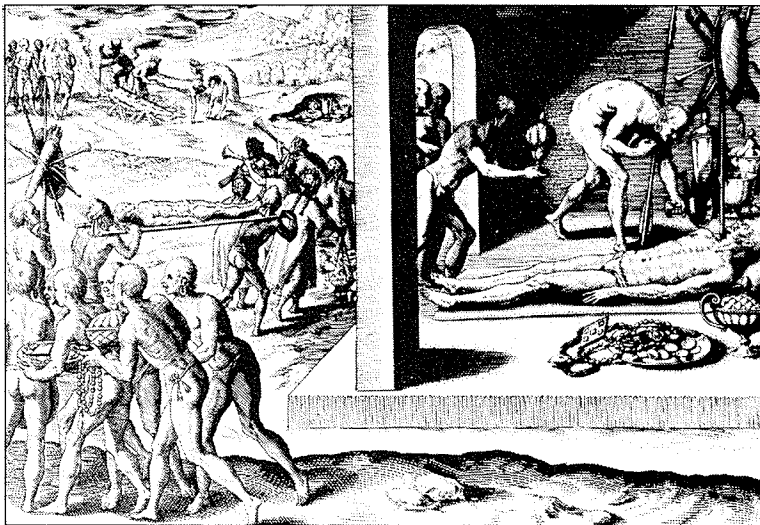
Amoebic Dysentery
 Bubonic Plague
 Chicken Pox
 Cholera
 Diphtheria
 German Measles
 Influenza
 Jaundice

Malaria
 Measles
 Meningitis
 Mumps
 Smallpox
 Tonsillitis
 Trachoma
 Typhus

Whooping Cough

From the Americas to the Old World:

While European diseases ravaged indigenous American populations, only one disease, *Trap-
 onema pallidum* (syphilis), is believed to have
 been brought back from the Old World. No
 Old-World human fossils from pre-1490 show
 signs of syphilitic damage.



Animals

From the Old World to the Americas:

Anopheles Mosquitoes
 Cattle
 Chickens
 Domestic Cats
 Donkeys
 Goats
 Hessian Flies
 Honeybees
 Horses
 Larger, fiercer European dogs
 Pigs
 Rats
 Sheep
 Sheep
 Sparrows
 Starlings

From the Americas to the Old World:

American Gray Squirrels
 American Vine Aphids
 Chiggers
 Guinea Pigs
 Muscovy Ducks
 Muskrats
 Turkeys

University of Chicago described "the world's biosphere . . . as still reverberating to the series of shocks inaugurated by the new permeability of ocean barriers . . . after 1492." McNeill estimated there were 25 to 30 million Native American Indians in Mexico in 1492; by 1620, after exposure to European disease, there were 1.6 million. In his **Conquest of Paradise** (Knopf, 1990), writer and ecological activist Kirkpatrick Sale penned the most extreme indictment of all: Columbus's legacy of unbroken environmental despoliation has left us no choice but to start over again. "There is only one way to live in America," Sale writes, "and that is as Americans—the original Americans—for that is what the earth of America demands. We resist it further only at risk of the imperilment—worse, the likely destruction—of the earth."

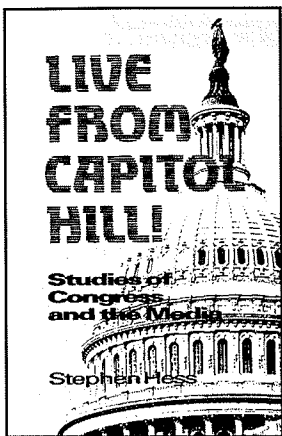
It might be thought, at this late date, that there is nothing left to learn about Columbus or his voyages. All the original documents by Columbus are now in print: **The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America, 1492-1493** (Univ. of Okla., 1989), translated by Oliver Dunn and James Kelly; **Cristóbal Colón: textos y documentos completos** (Alianza, 1982), edited by Consuelo Varela; and the mystical **Libro de las Profecías of Christopher Columbus** (Univ. of Fla., 1991), translated and edited by Delno C. West.

The most exciting scholarship inspired by the Quincentenary, however, refutes the assumption that everything about Columbus is either known or unknowable. Florida archaeolo-

gist Kathleen Deagan has established, by excavating Columbus's first colony La Isabela, the astonishing alacrity with which the Spaniards adapted their diet, clothing, and dwellings to the New World environment. Eugene Lyon, at the Center for Historical Research in St. Augustine, has uncovered the first manifest for any of Columbus's ships—for the *Niña's* third voyage—which describes its rigging, cargo, crew, and even the medicine aboard ship. The mining equipment on the 1495 Spanish ships bound for La Isabela shows us, Lyon reports, how early the Spaniards planned a permanent mining industry in the Americas. Deagan's discoveries about La Isabela and Lyon's about Columbus will be presented in an upcoming issue of *National Geographic* (January 1992). **First Encounters: Spanish Explorations in the Caribbean and the United States, 1492-1570** (Univ. of Fla., 1989), edited by Jerald Milanich and Susan Milbrath, describes the past decade's most significant archaeological and historical breakthroughs in understanding the Hispanic penetration of the Caribbean and the Southeast. And it would be almost impossible to compile a more complete reference work than **The Columbus Encyclopedia**, edited by Silvio A. Bedini, to be published by Simon and Schuster next year. Such publications, and the scholarship they represent, recapture—and, indeed, substantially advance—the knowledge about Columbus and his voyages that was current a century ago. After 500 years, we are still discovering Columbus.

—Carla Rahn Phillips

Carla Rahn Phillips is professor of history at the University of Minnesota. She is coauthor, with William Phillips, of 'The Worlds of Christopher Columbus, which will be published by Cambridge next year.



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