

REVIEW ESSAY: IN SEARCH OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

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John Dyson, with Peter Christopher. *Columbus: Gold, God and Glory. In Search of the Real Christopher Columbus*. Markham, Ont.: Viking/Madison Press, 1991. 228 pp., maps, illustrations, appendices, bibliography, index. \$45, cloth; ISBN 0-670-83725-3.

Felipe Fernandez-Armesto. *Columbus*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. xxviii + 218 pp., maps, illustrations, notes, index. \$32.50, cloth; ISBN 0-19-215898-8.

Robert H. Fuson (trans.). *The Log of Christopher Columbus*. Camden, ME: International Marine Publishing Company, 1987. xviii + 252 pp., photographs, illustrations, maps, appendices, bibliography, index. US \$29.95, cloth; ISBN 0-87742-951-0.

David Henige. *In Search of Columbus: The Sources for the First Voyage*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991. xiii + 360 pp., maps, appendices, bibliography, index. US \$24.95, cloth; ISBN 0-8165-1090-3.

Kirkpatrick Sale. *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991; copyright, Alfred A. Knopf, 1990. 453 pp., maps, source notes, index. Cdn. \$14.99, paper; ISBN 0-452-26669-6.

John Noble Wilford. *The Mysterious History of Columbus: An Exploration of the Man, the Myth, the Legacy*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1991. xiv + 320 pp., maps, illustrations, bibliographical notes, index. Cdn. \$32, US \$24, cloth; ISBN 0-679-40476-7. Canadian distributor, Random House of Canada.

Christopher Columbus, as he is known in the English-speaking world, has been a very elusive man. He was no twentieth-century space explorer whose biographical and physical details would be filed and filed again in minute detail. Neil Armstrong, the first earthling to land on the moon, will make few difficulties for those with the responsibility of analyzing the quincentennial of his mission. He acted during the information era. Not so Columbus.

Those who had absorbed Samuel Eliot Morison's *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* thought they had a grasp of Columbus. They did not have to trouble themselves, for by his research, both in libraries and in his sailing the Atlantic, Morison imposed his views on a generation or two in a very forceful way. However, the approach of the quincentennial of Columbus' voyage has resulted in a number of works that show how much more complicated 1492 was.

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John Noble Wilford, science correspondent for the *New York Times* and a Morison man, has written a book that is probably as good a place to start as any in coming to grips with Columbus. His *The Mysterious History of Columbus* indicates many of the problems and issues that surround an understanding of the man and his times. The work opens with Columbus composing his letter to Isabella and Ferdinand as he returns from what he believed to be the Indies. The Admiral was determined to make the most of what was not an altogether satisfying voyage. He had lost a ship and the expected riches had yet to materialize. Then Wilford discusses Columbus' contemporaries who stepped in between the Admiral and those who would later try to come to grips with him. More is actually known of these contemporaries—Bartholomew de las Casas, Peter Martyr, Hernando Columbus and Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo—than of the Admiral. Las Casas, in fact, takes over Columbus' own words and is responsible for the majority of the log of that first voyage. He saw a copy of it and paraphrased much of it as a source for his *Historia de las Indias*. Columbus' version was lost to history.

Exactly where Columbus developed his idea of a westward voyage has stimulated debate. Wilford assesses the various views regarding Columbus' determination to overcome doubts of respected academics and royal advisors in order to win support. He is able to knock old myths such as Isabella pawning her jewels and Columbus having a crew of convicts to shreds because others have done the requisite research and writing and he has pulled the information into what should be a more popular format. All the books must also touch on Columbus' landfall. There are many islands in the Bahama-Turks and Caicos chain and some have emerged as primary contenders—Watling's Island, Grand Turk and Samana Cay—and Wilford explores why. He leans toward Watling's island, perhaps because Morison did. However Wilford wisely lets another investigator suggest that perhaps it would be better not ever to be sure. The search in the tropics has its own attractions and rewards.

Wilford discusses the views regarding Columbus' impact on the indigenous people. Columbus becomes less the hero once he has made his voyage westward and returned to tell that he had indeed arrived at the islands off Asia. The subsequent Castilian effort to exploit this "New World" had a devastating impact on the indigenous people through the introduction of diseases such as measles and smallpox. There are a variety of interpretations of this impact and Wilford is judicious in presenting them.

There is an interesting chapter emphasizing Columbus' strong religious drives, which resulted in his *Book of Prophecies*. That Columbus wrote such a highly religious tome for the Catholic kings gives the appearance that by 1500 the Admiral was a bit mad. But Wilford shows how others have come to view the work as important for understanding a man so completely driven to accomplish his goals.

That Columbus was indeed a medieval man and not a representative of a new scientific age seems to disturb Kirkpatrick Sale. Sale is determined to impose his late twentieth century, North American liberal values on the Spanish conquest. He has little understanding and no sympathy for how a seven hundred year reconquest of the Iberian peninsula from Moorish control could shape a people. It has to be understood that Spanish Christians developed a warrior tradition during the reconquest that thought it acceptable to seize territory and to exploit that territory. The man who chose to engage in warfare did so in order to become a somebody so that his son could become a son of somebody—an *hidalgo*. Columbus, an ambitious Genoese, clearly slipped easily into that tradition. His determination to acquire titles is all too clear in his pushing the Crown to grant him the right to be called Don and to hold the

rank of High Admiral of the Ocean Sea and Viceroy and Governor of those territories he discovered and claimed. The warrior of the reconquista was not worried about discovery, but he would certainly have understood Columbus' desire for titles and gain. Sale does not.

A taste of Sale's approach to Columbus, the man, can be seen in the remark that "[f]or all his navigational skill, about which the salty types make such a fuss,... Admiral Colon [Sale insists on using the Spanish spelling without explanation until p. 54] could be a wretched mariner." (209) He also reprimands Columbus for not knowing the names of the trees and wildlife that he came upon on that first voyage. Moreover, Columbus also has to carry the blame for the introduction of slavery and European diseases. Sale blames Columbus and the Spaniards that followed him for carrying their culture with them to the New World without considering that any people prefer their way of life to that of others, initially. It is natural to want to impose those values and customs with which one is accustomed. All one has to do is consider what an average North American traveller looks for abroad when it comes to accommodation and food.

The problem with Sale's book is that it has been successful in becoming a "bestseller." It appeals to the current passions, which are largely ahistorical. Sale has read widely in Columbian materials but suggests that pre-Columbian America was a Paradise overlooking the ecological damage that forced the Mayans to move their empire several times or that "slash and burn" techniques of clearing tropical forests was not imported from abroad. *The Conquest of Paradise* is a polemic that should be read with that in mind.

To obtain a sense of Columbus the man, there is no better place to start than Fernandez-Armesto's biography. It is a solid piece of scholarship, sometimes marred by being a bit ponderous, but it is as complete a biography as one will probably ever have. Fernández-Armesto takes Columbus from his origins in Genoa, *circa* 1451, right through to his death in Castile "almost certainly on 20 May 1506." (183) From the date of his birth to the date of his death Columbus made it difficult for the biographers. Fernández-Armesto covers all of Columbus' four voyages as well as the Admiral's failure as an administrator-governor of his new territories. He stresses the Admiral's materialism and quest for status, which as noted above was characteristic of the reconquest era. Columbus certainly provided ample evidence of his willingness to search for gold. He does not appear to have been as keen to explore for exploration's sake. He had a chance to do that on his third crossing when he hit the fresh waters of the Orinoco pushing their way some fifty kilometres into the Atlantic. He thought that this provided evidence of a continent but he preferred to go on to Hispaniola, where his colony lay. Fernández-Armesto finds mitigating circumstances for this move, but on all his expeditions Columbus preferred to remain close to his ship rather than penetrate inland. It was enough to come on new territory, have his men test the immediate shores for possible gold, and to sail on. This is made very clear in the log of Columbus' first voyage.

None of the works mentioned thus far are much concerned with the sailing experience. John Dyson's "coffee table" book is. He and his colleagues have recreated their version of Columbus' first voyage. Dyson joined Luis Miguel Coin, a mariner-professor, who captained a replica of the *Nina* across the Atlantic according to Coin's theory that Columbus sailed on a line further south than previously thought. The book has full-colour illustrations of the modern voyage as well as paintings, photographs and illustrations that provide descriptive material to supplement the historical aspects of the text. Dyson produced that text. It gushes. There are just too many suppositions as to how Columbus acted and lived. Dyson tries too hard to make a case for the Coin route and to promote the sometimes revived view that Columbus probably

had a secret map provided by an unknown pilot who had survived a shipwreck in the western Atlantic. Yet, of these particular books, *Columbus: For Gold, God and Glory* does offer the reader the best sense of what life must have been like on the caravel, that relatively tiny vessel that emerged from the Portuguese experience earlier in the fifteenth century. No record of the dimensions of the three Columbus ships exists so that the current *Nina* is not an exact replica, but there is enough information extant to know what the caravel looked like and how it was built. There are a number of excellent photographs of the twentieth-century caravel in action.

Columbus' own actions are recorded in the *Log*, either by the Admiral himself or by Las Casas' paraphrasing of the Admiral's account. Robert Fuson takes the versions and moulds them into an attractive book that presents his interpretation of Columbus' activities. He pushes the National Geographic's landfall views as only a consultant to that society would! Fuson supplies three introductory chapters discussing the log which he put together from three sources—Columbus, Las Casas and Columbus' son, Hernando. Fuson was determined to make his log a readable narrative so remember that the work is a very reconstructed log of that voyage. The result is no less interesting for that reconstruction, but it is not really Columbus' log.

The chapter on "Columbus, the Man" leans toward superlatives when discussing Columbus the scientist and Columbus the leader. Where Sale is too critical, Fuson leans in the other direction. His chapter on "The Ships and Navigation" is a useful look at the types of ships and the methods employed to sail them in the fifteenth century. However, the log itself poses questions. Much stress is laid on how Columbus kept the daily distances sailed from his seamen. Yet the log reveals that the pilots, at least, if not others, were keeping track of the distance, so it is hard to believe the "secret" log story has validity. The log also reveals why Columbus was interested in establishing a fortress on one of the islands. Sale found this proposal reprehensible because it signalled Columbus' determination to dominate when instead Columbus, following on the Portuguese experience, appears to think of forts as a means to defend the merchants from raids by rivals. The log's last entry is on 15 March 1493 just after the *Nina* had landed at the Rio Tinto port of Palos from whence the voyage had started that previous August. This is then followed by a series of appendices which look at various questions surrounding the experience: the landfall; the crew composition; the possible site of Columbus' first settlement, Navidad; and the indigenous diet. The appendices are useful expressions of opinion or information.

David Henige is only concerned with the log. His book is not for the maritime-minded. It is in the line of a detailed dissection more appealing to semanticists and is not written in a popular style, but the book's contents are worth an effort. In an important sentence Henige shows us how complicated the whole episode was, as Columbus' log/diary:

...also served as a subterfuge to beguile the Portuguese [who had their claims on overseas territories], as a propaganda device and apologia in the service of Columbus, as a paean to a new world discovered as well as a testimony to the monumental illusions that it was really just another part of the Old World, and as an instrument for Las Casas to buttress his own worldview of the Spanish discovery and conquest__ (122)

Henige underlines the ambiguities surrounding Columbus' first effort. That effort came at a time when Castile, the strongest Spanish kingdom, was prepared to challenge Portugal in the Atlantic and beyond. Columbus was an instrument of Castile's challenge. Having taken almost twenty years to consolidate their power on the Iberian peninsula, the Catholic monarchs were not about to let Columbus, a foreigner, have powers that the monarchs were denying their nobles in Castile. Immediately after Columbus' return from that first voyage, Isabella accordingly took measures to control the development of the new territory, which was largely confined to a small section of the Caribbean. Columbus and the monarchs died before Spain's holding in America took on that grand sweep that stretched from North America to Tierra del Fuego.

Columbus died concerned with his patrimony and his place in the Crown's esteem. His patrimony proved to be secure and his descendants are today important members of Spain's aristocratic and naval circles. But he died not fully satisfied that he had the Crown's and his peers' undivided esteem. Too bad. Yet, how characteristic of the time. Here was a man who had sailed the Mediterranean as far as Asia Minor; who had plied the waters of West Africa; who, in his greatest moment, had crossed and recrossed the Ocean Sea in an act that would change the world; and who was afraid that he would be forgotten. Columbus, like those other great conquistadors, worried that he had not done enough before death that his fame would live on ("Let me die, let my fame live" was an old Castilian saying). Columbus had certainly done enough. He would be pleased at all the attention he is receiving in 1992.

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