

Columbus—Hero or Villain?

Felipe Fernández-Armesto *weighs up the case for and against the man of the hour and finds a Columbus for all seasons.*

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This year, his statue in Barcelona exchanged symbolic rings with the Statue of Liberty in New York; meanwhile, the descendants of slaves and peons will burn his effigy. In a dream-painting by Salvador Dalí, Columbus takes a great step for mankind, toga-clad and cross-bearing—while a sail in the middle distance drips with blood. The Columbus of tradition shares a single canvas with the Columbus of fashion, the culture-hero of the western world with the bogey who exploited his fellow-man and despoiled his environment. Both versions are false and, if historians had their way, the quincentennial celebrations ought to stimulate enough educational work and research to destroy them. Instead, the polemical atmosphere seems to be reinforcing *à parti pris* positions.

It is commonly said that the traditional Columbus myth—which awards him personal credit for anything good that ever came out of America since 1492—originated in the War of Independence, when the founding fathers, in search of an American hero, pitched on the Genoese weaver as the improbable progenitor of all-American virtues. Joel Barlow's poem, *The Vision of Columbus*, appeared in

1787. Columbus remained a model for nineteenth-century Americans, engaged in a project for taming their own wilderness. Washington Irving's perniciously influential *History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* of 1828—which spread a lot of nonsense including the ever-popular folly that Columbus was derided for claiming that the world was round—appealed unashamedly to Americans' self-image as promoters of civilisation.

Yet aspects of the myth are much older—traceable to Columbus' own times and, to a large extent, to his own efforts. He was a loquacious and indefatigable self-publicist, who bored adversaries into submission and acquired a proverbial reputation for using more paper than Ptolemy. The image he projected was that of a providential agent, the divinely-elected 'messenger of a new heaven', chosen to bear the light of the gospel to unevangelised recesses of the earth—the parts which other explorers could not reach. His plan for an Atlantic crossing 'God revealed to me by His manifest hand'. Playing on his christian name, he called himself 'Christo ferens' and compiled a book of what he said were biblical prophecies of his own discoveries. Enough contemporaries were convinced by his gigantic self-esteem for him to become literally a legend in his own lifetime. To a leading astrological guru at the court of Spain, he was 'like a new apostle'. To a humanist from Italy who taught the would-be Renaissance men of Castile, he

was 'the sort of whom the ancients made gods'.

From his last years, his reputation dipped: writers were obliged to belittle him in the service of monarchs who were locked in legal conflict with Columbus' family over the level of reward he had earned. Yet his own self-perception was passed on to posterity by influential early books. Bartolomé de Las Casas—Columbus' editor and historian—professed a major role for himself in the apostolate of the New World and heartily endorsed Columbus' self-evaluation as an agent of God's purpose. Almost as important was the *Historie dell'Ammiraglio*, which claimed to be a work of filial piety and therefore presented Columbus as an unblemished hero, with an imputed pedigree to match his noble soul.

Claims to having access to a divine hot-line are by their nature unverifiable. Demonstrably false was the second element in Columbus' self-made myth: his image of tenacity in adversity—a sort of *Mein Kampf* version of his life, in which he waged a long, lone and unremitting struggle against the ignorance and derision of contemporaries. This theme has echoed through the historical tradition. That 'they all laughed at Christopher Columbus' has been confirmed by modern doggerel. Vast books have been wasted in an attempt to explain his mythical perseverance by ascribing to him 'secret' foreknowledge of the existence of America. Yet almost all the evidence

which underlies it comes straight out of Columbus' own propaganda, according to which he was isolated, ignored, victimised and persecuted, usually for the numinous span of 'seven' years; then, after fulfilling his destiny, to the great profit of his detractors he was returned to a wilderness of contumely and neglect, unrewarded by the standard of his deserts, in a renewed trial of faith.

The image of Columbus-as-victim of the Spanish courts is explained by his relishing his own misfortunes as good copy and good theatre.

These passages of autobiography cannot be confirmed by the facts. The documented length of his quest for patronage was less than five years. Throughout that time he built up a powerful lobby of moral supporters at the Castilian court and financial backers in the business community of Seville. His own protestations of loneliness are usually qualified by an admission that he was unsupported 'save for' one or two individuals. When added together, these form an impressive cohort, which includes at least two archbishops, one court astrologer, two royal confessors, one royal treasurer and the queen herself. In his second supposed period of persecution, he was an honoured figure, loaded with titles, received at court, consulted by the crown and—despite his woebegone protestations of poverty—amply moneyed.

The explanation of the image of Columbus-as-victim must be sought in his character, not in his career. He was what would now be called a whinger, who relished his own misfortunes as good copy and good theatre. When he appeared at court in chains, or in a friar's habit, he was playing the role of victim for all it was worth. His written lamentations—which cover many folios of memoranda, supplications and personal letters—are thick with allusions to Jeremiah and Job. The notions of patience under suffering and of persecution for righteousness' sake fitted the hagiographical model on which much of his

self-promotional writing was based: a flash of divine enlightenment; a life transformed; consecration to a cause; unwavering fidelity in adversity.

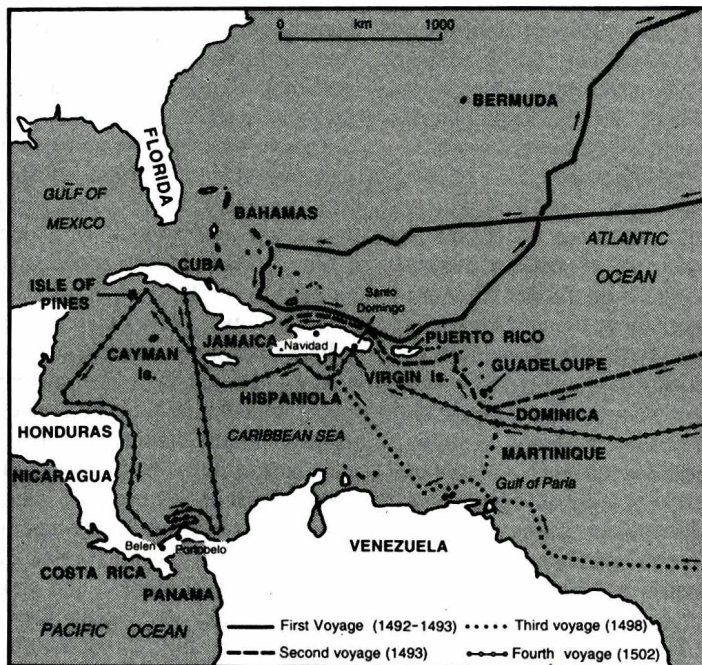
The images of Columbus-as-hero and Columbus-as-villain has a long historical and literary tradition.

The most successful promotional literature is believed by its own propagators. To judge from his consistency, Columbus believed in his own image of himself. It is not surprising that most readers of his works, from Las Casas onwards, have been equally convinced. Columbus seems to have been predisposed to self-persuasion by saturation in the right literary models: saints, prophets and heroes of romance. Despite his astonishing record of achievement, and his impressive accumulation of earthly rewards, he had an implacable temperament which could never be satisfied, and an unremitting ambition which could never be assuaged. Such men always think themselves hard done by. His extraordinary powers of

persuasion—his communicator's skills which won backing for an impossible project in his lifetime—have continued to win followers of his legend ever since his death.

Like Columbus-the-hero, Columbus-the-villain is also an old character in a long literary tradition. Most of the denunciations of him written in his day have not survived but we can judge their tenor from surviving scraps. The usual complaints against servants of the Castilian crown in the period are made: he acted arbitrarily in the administration of justice; he exceeded his powers in enforcing his authority; he usurped royal rights by denying appeal to condemned rebels; he alienated crown property without authorisation; he deprived privileged colonists of offices or perquisites; he favoured his own family or friends; he lined his pockets at public expense. In the course of what seems to have been a general campaign against Genoese employees of the crown in the late 1490s, he was 'blamed as a foreigner' and accused of 'plotting to give the island of Hispaniola to the Genoese'.

Other allegations attacked his competence rather than his good faith, generally with justice. It was true, for instance, that he had selected an unhealthy and inconvenient site for the settlement of Hispaniola; that he had disastrously misjudged the natives' intentions in supposing them to be peaceful; and that his proceedings had so far alienated so many



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colonists that by the time of his removal in 1500 it was a missionary's opinion that the colony would never be at peace if he were allowed back. All these complaints reflect the priorities of Spaniards and the interests of the colonists and of the crown. There were, however, some charges against Columbus which anticipated the objections of modern detractors, who scrutinise his record from the natives' point of view, or who look at it from the perspective of fashionably ecological priorities.

First, there was the issue of Columbus' activities as a slaver. Coming from a Genoese background, Columbus never understood Spanish scruples about slavery, which had been characterised as an unnatural estate in the most influential medieval Spanish law-code, and which the monarchs distrusted as a form of intermediate lordship that reserved subjects from royal jurisdiction. Castilian practice was, perhaps, the most fastidious in Christendom. The propriety of slavery was acknowledged in the cases of captives of just war and offenders against natural law; but such cases were reviewed with rigour and in the royal courts, at least, decision-making tended to be biased in favour of the alleged slaves.

Shortly before the discovery of the New World, large numbers of Canary Islanders, enslaved by a conquistador on the pretext that they were 'rebels against their natural lord' had been pronounced free by a judicial inquiry commissioned by the crown, and liberated, in cases contested by their 'owners', in a series of trials. This does not seem, however, to have alerted Columbus to the risks of slap-happy slaving.

Although the ferocious Caribs of the Lesser Antilles were generally deemed to be lawful victims of enslavement (since the cannibalism imputed to them seemed an obvious offence against natural law) Columbus' trade was chiefly in Arawaks, who, by his own account, were rendered exempt by their amenability to evangelisation. By denying that the Arawaks were idolatrous, Columbus exonerated them of the one possible charge which might, in the terms of the time, be considered an 'unnatural' offence. Even when the monarchs reproved him and freed the Arawaks he sold, Columbus was astonishingly slow on the uptake. In a colony where the yield of other profitable products was disappointing, he traded slaves to allay the colony's grievous prob-

lems of supply. 'And although at present they die on shipment,' he continued, 'this will not always be the case, for the Negroes and Canary Islanders reacted in the same way at first'. In one respect, contemporary criticisms of the traffic differed from those made today. The friars and bureaucrats who denounced Columbus for it did so not because it was immoral, but because it was unlawful.

Slavery was only one among many ills which Columbus was said to have inflicted on the natives. The current myth incriminates him with 'genocide'. In the opinion of one *soi-disant* Native American spokesman, 'he makes Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent'. This sort of hype is doubly unhelpful: demonstrably false, it makes the horrors of the holocaust seem precedented and gives comfort to Nazi apologists by making 'genocide' an unshocking commonplace. Though he was often callous and usually incompetent in formulating indigenist policy, the destruction of the natives was as far removed from Columbus' thoughts as from his interests. The Indians, he acknowledged, were 'the wealth of this land'. Their conservation was an inescapable part of any rational policy for their exploitation. Without them the colony would have no labour resources. At a deeper level of Columbus' personal concerns, they were the great glory of his discovery: their evangelisation justified it and demonstrated its place in God's plans for the world, even if the material yield was disappointing to his patrons and backers. And Columbus had enough sense to realise that a large and contented native population was, as the monarchs said, their 'chief desire' for his colony. 'The principal thing which you must do,' he wrote to his first deputy,

is to take much care of the Indians, that no ill nor harm may be done them, nor anything taken from them against their will, but rather that they be honoured and feel secure and so should have no cause to rebel.

Though no contemporary was so foolish as to accuse Columbus of wilfully exterminating Indians, it was widely realised that his injunctions were often honoured in the breach and that his own administrative regulations sometimes caused the natives harm. The missionaries almost unanimously regarded him as an obstacle to their work, though the only specific crime against the natives to survive among their memoranda—that

'he took their women and all their property'—is otherwise undocumented. The imposition of forced labour and of unrealistic levels of tribute were disastrous policies, which diverted manpower from food-growing and intensified the 'culture-shock' under which indigenous society reeled and tottered, though Columbus claimed they were expedients to which he was driven by economic necessity.

Columbus was a man of extraordinary vision with a defiant attitude to what was possible; he could not anticipate the consequences of his discovery.

Some contemporaries also condemned the sanguinary excesses of his and his brother's punitive campaigns in the interior of Hispaniola in 1495–96. It should be said in Columbus' defence, however, that he claimed to see his own part as an almost bloodless pacification and that the 50,000 deaths ascribed to these campaigns in the earliest surviving account were caused, according to the same source, chiefly by the Indians' scorched-earth strategy. The outcome was horrible enough, but Columbus' treatment of the Indians inflicted catastrophe on them rather by mistakes than by crimes. In general, he was reluctant to chastise them—refusing, for instance, to take punitive measures over the massacre of the first garrison of Hispaniola; and he tried to take seriously the monarchs' rather impractical command to 'win them by love'.

It would be absurd to look for environmental sensitivity of a late twentieth-century kind in Columbus' earliest critics. Yet the accusation of over-exploitation of the New World environment, which is at the heart of the current, ecologically-conscious anti-Columbus mood, was also made before the fifteenth century was quite over. According to the first missionaries, members of Columbus' family were 'robbing and destroying the land' in their greed for gold. Though he declined to accept personal responsibility, Columbus detected a similar problem

when he denounced his fellow-colonists' exploitative attitude: unmarried men, with no stake in the success of the colony and no intention of permanent residence, should be excluded, he thought. They merely mulcted the island for what they could get before rushing home to Castile.

The danger of deforestation from the demand for dyestuffs, building materials and fuel was quickly recognised. The diversion of labour from agriculture to gold-panning aroused friars' moral indignation. The usefulness of many products of the indigenous agronomy was praised by Columbus and documented by the earliest students of the pharmacopoeia and florilegium of the New World. The assumption that there was an ecological 'balance' to be disturbed at hazard was, of course, impossible. On the contrary, everyone who arrived from the Old World assumed that the natural resources had to be supplemented with imported products to provide a balanced diet, a civilised environment and resources for trade. The modifications made by Columbus and his successors were intended, from their point of view, to improve, not to destroy. They introduced sources of protein—like livestock; comforts of home—like wheat and grapes; and potential exports—like sugar, whether these changes were really disastrous is hard to judge dispassionately. The loss of population in the early colonial period was probably due to other causes. In the long run, colonial Hispaniola proved able to maintain a large population and a spectacular material culture.

Since it was first broached in Columbus' day, the debate about the morality of the colonisation of the New World has had three intense periods: in the sixteenth century, when the issues of the justice of the Spanish presence and the iniquity of maltreatment of the natives were raised by religious critics and foreign opportunists; in the late eighteenth century, when Rousseau and Dr Johnson agreed in preferring the uncorrupted wilderness which was thought to have preceded colonisation; and in our own day. Until recently, Columbus managed largely to avoid implication in the sins of his successors. Las Casas revered him, and pitied, rather than censured, the imperfections of his attitude to the natives. Eighteenth-century sentimentalists regretted the colonial experience as a whole, generally without blaming Columbus for it. This was fair enough. Columbus' own model of colonial soci-

ety seems to have derived from Genoese precedents: the trading factory, merchant quarter and family firm. The idea of a 'total' colony, with a population and environment revolutionised by the impact and image of the metropolis, seems to have been imposed on him by his Castilian masters. In making him personally responsible for everything which followed—*post hunc ergo propter hunc*—his modern critics have followed a convention inaugurated by admirers, who credited Columbus with much that [h]as nothing to do with him—including, most absurdly of all—the culture of the present United States. Columbus never touched what was to become US territory except in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. The values which define the 'American ideal'—personal liberty, individualism, freedom of conscience, equality of opportunity and representative democracy—would have meant nothing to him.

Columbus deserves the credit or blame only for what he actually did: which was to discover a route that permanently linked the shores of the Atlantic and to contribute—more signally, perhaps, than any other individual—to the long process by which once sundered peoples of the world were brought together in a single network of communications, which exposed them to the perils and benefits of mutual contagion and exchange. Whether or not one regards this as meritorious achievement, there was a genuine touch of heroism in it—both in the scale of its effects and in the boldness which inspired it. There had been many attempts to cross the Atlantic in central latitudes, but all—as far as we know—failed because the explorers clung to the zone of westerly winds in an attempt to secure a passage home. Columbus was the first to succeed precisely because he had the courage to sail with the wind at his back.

Historians, it is often said, have no business making moral judgements at all. The philosophy of the nursery-school assembly, in which role-models and culprits are paraded for praise or reproof seems nowadays to belong to a hopelessly antiquated sort of history, for which the reality of the past mattered less than the lessons for the present and the future. A great part of the historian's art is now held to consist in what the examiners call 'empathy'—the ability to see the past with the eyes, and to re-construct the feelings, of those who took part in it. If value judgements are made at all, they

ought at least to be controlled by certain essential disciplines. First, they must be consistent with the facts: it is unhelpful to accuse of 'genocide', for instance, a colonial administrator who was anxious for the preservation of the native labour force. Secondly, they should be made in the context of the value-system of the society scrutinised, at the time concerned. It would be impertinent to expect Columbus to regard slavery as immoral, or to uphold the equality of all peoples. Conquistadors and colonists are as entitled to be judged from the perspective of moral relativism as are the cannibals and human-sacrificers of the indigenous past. Thirdly, moral judgements should be expressed in language tempered by respect for the proper meanings of words. Loose talk of 'genocide' twists a spiral to verbal hype. Useful distinctions are obliterated; our awareness of the real cases, when they occur, is dulled.

Finally, when we presume to judge someone from a long time ago, we should take into account the practical constraints under which they had to operate, and the limited mental horizons by which they were enclosed. Columbus was in some ways a man of extraordinary vision with a defiant attitude to the art of the possible. Yet he could not anticipate the consequences of his discovery or of the colonial enterprise confided to him. Five hundred years further on, with all our advantages of hindsight, we can only boast a handful of 'successful' colonial experiments—in the United States, Siberia, Australia and New Zealand—in all of which the indigenous populations have been exterminated or swamped. The Spanish empire founded by Columbus was strictly unprecedented and, in crucial respects, has never been paralleled. The problems of regulating such vast dominions, with so many inhabitants, so far away, and with so few resources, were unforeseeable and proved unmanageable. Never had so many people been conquered by culture-shock or their immune-systems invaded by irresistible disease. Never before had such a challenging environment been so suddenly transformed in an alien image. In these circumstances, it would be unreasonable to expect Columbus' creation to work well. Like Dr Johnson's dog, it deserves some applause for having performed at all.

So which was Columbus: hero or villain? The answer is that he *was* neither but has *become* both. The real Columbus

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was a mixture of virtues and vices like the rest of us, not conspicuously good or just, but generally well-intentioned, who grappled creditably with intractable problems. Heroism and villainy are not, however, objective qualities. They exist only in the eye of the beholder.

In images of Columbus, they are now firmly impressed on the retinas of the upholders of rival legends and will never be expunged. Myths are versions of the past which people believe in for irrational motives—usually because they feel good or find their prejudices confirmed. To liberal or ecologically conscious intel-

lectuals, for instance, who treasure their feelings of superiority over their predecessors, moral indignation with Columbus is too precious to discard. Kinship with a culture-hero is too profound a part of many Americans' sense of identity to be easily excised.

Thus Columbus-the-hero and Columbus-the-villain live on, mutually sustained by the passion which continuing controversy imparts to their supporters. No argument can dispel them, however convincing; no evidence, however compelling. They have eclipsed the real Columbus and, judged by their effects, have

outstripped him in importance. For one of the sad lessons historians learn is that history is influenced less by the facts as they happen than by the falsehoods men believe.

FOR FURTHER READING:

J. H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New* (Cambridge University Press, 1970); A. W. Crosby, *Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Greenwood, 1972); J. Lerner 'The Certainty of Columbus', *History*, lxxiii (1987); F. Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus* (Oxford University Press, 1991).