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Nineteenth-century historians, biographers, and educators fostered admiration for great men, and they mounted their great men on pedestals for all to see and emulate. Many twentieth-century historians and biographers have taken it upon themselves to knock them off the pedestals and then decry the lack of greatness in the so-called great. The debunkers call their craft "getting at the truth", but their truth all too often ends up denigration.

The debunkers have pounded away at Christopher Columbus harder than at most of the great men. As the 500th anniversary of his discovery approaches, in 1992, he will likely take more pounding, along with the ceremonial eulogy and hoopla. Twentieth-century critics have already made Columbus out so incompetent and ignorant, among a barrage of other disparagement, as to arouse amazement that the Genoese weaver's son ever found his way to Iberia, much less to America.

Columbus poses an easy target for the debunkers. Despite his gigantic stature, much about him remains shadowy and controversial. Moreover, his feats have blurred into legend easy for a historian to expose as fiction, for example, the stubborn nonsense about proving the world round. Elementary school folklore religiously evokes the image of a heroic Christopher Columbus cheering and wheedling onward the crews of *Pinta*, *Niña*, and *Santa María*. The craven sailors cringe under the shelter of the pitching deck, terrified of sailing off the edge of the world and plunging into the vastness of space or the fires of hell. In fact, most everybody at the time with secular education or sea experience knew the earth was a



globe. Columbus's entire project of sailing west to reach the East took for granted a round earth, and geographers had mulled the feasibility of the voyage centuries before Columbus. The critical question, argued as far back as the ancient Greeks, posed the distance across the Great Ocean from Iberia to Indies. Most pundits answered that it was just too far. After weeks pushing relentlessly westward, Columbus's officers and crews worried about sailing so far that they would be unable to return against the prevailing easterly wind; they feared they would run out of food and drink and perish on the barren ocean. The expedition might have met that dismal end if the New World had not blocked its seaway. Columbus wildly underestimated the expanse of ocean between occident and orient.

Historical records attest that seasoned, law-abiding seamen made up the crews of *Pinta*, *Niña*, and *Santa María*, not the thieves and cutthroats of legend, dredged from prisons and shipped out with an official good-riddance. The sailors volunteered for the voyage, and they would not have signed on without favorable odds for a safe return at the very least. The crews protested the relentless sail westward with no sign of land, but Columbus did not have to take sword in hand to face down a mutiny. Fifteenth-century sailors expected a voice in major shipboard decisions, and captains were accustomed to hearing them out. Columbus's crews aired their worries and gripes, and he agreed to just three more days of sailing west and then, if no sign of land, to tack about for home.<sup>1</sup>

A touching fable, a debunker's delight, has it that the queen hocked her jewels to bankroll Columbus. It seems in fact that she might have offered them as collateral to get the expedition going without delay, once the monarchs had finally decided to back it. If so, the keeper of the royal coffers declined her majesty's offer as unnecessary. The Moorish wars had Spain financially strapped, but it cost a pittance to outfit and man Columbus's three dinky ships, compared to the

<sup>1</sup> See Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (Boston: Little-Brown, 1942), Chapter 10. Even names are available for 87 of the 90 men on the first voyage. In the two-volume edition Morison lists them with all existing biographical information. The one and two volume editions, both published in 1942, are the same except for voluminous notes, fuller ship and sailing data, and a chapter on syphilis in the larger.

normal expenses of keeping up a court and running a government, not to mention the sums needed to field an army or launch a navy. The investment would reap enormous dividends if Columbus managed to open a sea-route to the gold and spices of the East.

Gaps and discrepancies riddle the bulky documents on Columbus's life and deeds. Columbus himself and his biographer son Fernando did much of the riddling. The proud admiral glossed over his lowly past among the looms and cloth markets of Genoa. He hinted at an illustrious lineage for his family until it declined into common trade. The claim of studies at the University of Padua is a fib, unless he enrolled under an assumed name. Columbus and his son likely fabricated the tale of an epic sea-battle and a story-book swim ashore to his new life in Portugal. Son Fernando, bred to Spanish pride at the Spanish court, took up his father's life as his father had embellished it and further refined it. A humble, "log-cabin" background was no asset at the time. All upstarts trimmed from and grafted onto their family trees, including those who rose to thrones. An ambitious man at any time takes pains to enhance his exploits and image.

Debunkers brand Columbus a liar, unreliable even when not coddling his image. Many historians have taken to distrusting Columbus even when they do not flatly disbelieve him. In *The Man-Eating Myth*, anthropologist W. Arens challenges Columbus on the cannibalism he reported among the Caribe Indians, and he hints at a consensus among scholars that Columbus was both too deluded and too artful to be a dependable source of information.<sup>2</sup>

Jalil Sued Badillo's *Los Caribes: Realidad o Fábula* zeroes in on the "fable" of the Caribe's cannibalism, whereas Arens deals in general with what he calls the cannibalism myth. Sued Badillo declares that Columbus put together and propagated the fable: the admiral seized on and enhanced horror-stories of Caribe cannibalism that he heard from Tainos, who lived in dread of the fierce Caribes. Columbus crassly worked

<sup>2</sup> *The Man-Eating Myth* (Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 44-49, 53-54.



up the fable in order to justify enslaving the Caribes.<sup>3</sup> Cannibals were legal game for slavers at the time.

The debunkers seize on bits of deprecation quoted in the voluminous records of the Columbus family's protracted lawsuit against the Spanish crown, which ran on from 1514-1536. The admiral's heirs sued to regain all the concessions granted their patriarch more than a generation earlier, before he had discovered anything. Old seamen called in to testify warmed up, and likely spiced up, old grievances against the admiral. Partisans of the Pinzón family insinuated that Columbus had faked the discovery: he had heard about the lands out there from an aged pilot in the Azores, who had crewed aboard a ship that hit upon them years before. The Pinzónians also hinted that Columbus's seamanship did not reach much beyond distinguishing bow from stern: Martín Alonso Pinzón, captain of the *Pinta*, had navigated the ships across on the first voyage.

Columbus claimed that he went to sea at an early age and over the years sailed the Mediterranean, down the African coast, to Britain, even to Iceland. Young men in a major port like Genoa often shipped out in sailing season and plied a shore trade in winter. Nevertheless, Christopher Columbus the landlubber has come to play a role in histories. These historians scoff away Columbus's claim that he took to the sea in his youth as another of his lies to weave a past for himself away from the toilsome Genoese looms. They claim that Columbus shipped out on only a couple of uneventful voyages before undertaking the momentous one.

Mariner-historians like Samuel Eliot Morison and Björn Landström groan with disbelief at this scholarly interpretation of Columbus as green landsman.<sup>4</sup> Columbus made four epic voyages across unknown waters to unknown lands employing a variety of ships, officers, and crews. He used the enlightened guesswork of dead reckoning with uncanny accuracy to mark positions and hit destinations. Columbus the

<sup>3</sup> (Río Piedras, PR: Editorial Antillana, 1978), p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> See above for Morison. Björn Landström, *Columbus*, trans. Michael Phillips and Hugh W. Stubbs (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967). Landström writes in Swedish and now lives in Sweden, although he was born and raised in Finland. He is an artist as well as a maritime historian and beautifully illustrates his own histories. His works also have been translated into Spanish.

tenacious explorer always insisted on hugging unknown coasts in order to survey them close up. He tacked his ships in and out of thousands of miles of uncharted coastline where rocks and reefs still snagged hulls centuries after the charting of them. Columbus never lost a ship under sail. Those who discount his seamanship and navigational experience have to credit him with phenomenal luck in the brilliant pilots and masters he signed on, voyage after voyage.

Critics have lambasted Columbus for ignorance in geography. An Amerindian leader, irked at the misnomer "Indian" that Columbus hung on his race, put it bluntly and succinctly: Columbus was "a dumb honky who didn't know where he was."<sup>5</sup> True, he did not know where he was. But no one else at the time did either. The two names for the Caribbean bow of islands, Antilles and West Indies, still attest to the confusion. Legend located the fabulous island of Antilia to the west of Portugal; India or the Indies, in the medieval conception, spread vaguely and exotically from modern China and Indonesia to East Africa and took in all lands between. Fabulous islands dotted the Great Ocean on medieval mappaemundi, but nobody suspected anything the size of a pair of continents.

Mexican historian Edmundo O'Gorman contends that Columbus did not discover America because nobody can discover something without awareness of what he has discovered. O'Gorman claims that Europe "invented" America and suggests that Amerigo Vespucci deserves having the two continents named after him: Vespucci came closer than Columbus to visualizing them as continents and a truly New World for the Old. He helped Europe invent America, whereas Columbus stuck doggedly by his Indies in the southeast corner of Asia.<sup>6</sup>

German writer Jakob Wassermann paints a portrait of Columbus the feckless dreamer, as inept in dealing with reality as Don Quixote. Wassermann even proposes that Cervantes based Don Quixote on Columbus.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> I vividly remember the quote from a newspaper article of some years back, but I regret that I cannot furnish an exact reference.

<sup>6</sup> *La invención de América* (México, 1977).

<sup>7</sup> *Christoph Columbus: Der Don Quichote des Ozeans: Ein Porträt* (Berlin: Fischer Verlag, 1929).



Columbus debunking sinks to outright vilification. The blurb on C.O. Sauer's history *The Early Spanish Main* labels the discoverer "ignorant, blundering, vain, tyrannical, tremendously ambitious."<sup>8</sup> V.S. Naipaul blasts Columbus's career as a "horror" and his ego as "an exposed deformity". Naipaul hammers away at Columbus with the word "banality": the banality of his perceptions; the banality of his expectations — gold and more gold; even the banality of his writing style.<sup>9</sup>

Columbus gets called hypocrite too. Debunkers pan his religious fervor as a sham, a cover for his greed. Mexican historian Ramón Iglesias characterizes Columbus as cold, egotistical, and materialistic. He claims that the image of Columbus as mystic and prophet took shape in the blatant self-advertisement of his later years, when he tagged along after the royal court and importuned for reinstatement to the posts and privileges taken from him.<sup>10</sup>

The debunker can always sniff that the Vikings got to America long before Columbus. Fanciful hyperdiffusionists like Barry Fell predicate that swarms of Old World peoples traveled, traded, procreated and scratched out hieroglyphics all over the New World two milleniums before Columbus.<sup>11</sup> So why all the fuss about his blundering rediscovery?

The great discoverer has degenerated into a villain, dreamer, or bungler; the great adventure into a nightmare, mistake, or trifle. The way things are going, the debunkers might conjure hints of lurid scandal out of some obscure Columbus document. Maybe Columbus wormed his way into Queen Isabella's confidence by intrigue or sorcery, like a kind of Rasputin. In his novelized history *El arpa y la sombra*, Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier already has featured a Jewish Christopher Columbus entwined in a stormy romance with a queen as passionate as she is imperious. Maybe Columbus even in-

<sup>8</sup> (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). The blurb is a quote from *Kirkus Reviews*.

<sup>9</sup> "Columbus and Crusoe", in *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Stories* (London, 1972), pp. 204-205. The article first appeared in *The Listener* (28 December 1967).

<sup>10</sup> *El hombre Colón y otros ensayos* (México, 1944), esp. pp. 41, 48. "El hombre Colón" dates from 1929.

<sup>11</sup> See *America B.C.: Ancient Settlers in The New World* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976).

vented the entire history of his voyages and discoveries —the most outrageous Columbus lie of all.

Columbus the greedy, incompetent scoundrel and inveterate liar is recent issue. In the past, even his detractors credited him with formidable gifts: an incompetent scoundrel could never have accomplished what he did. Detractors as well as admirers usually acknowledged that Columbus sailed off guided by ideals, above and beyond his baser goals.

No doubt about it, Columbus craved gold. He knew that both backers and scoffers at the Spanish court would weigh his success or failure —in the short run, at least— largely by the gold and other precious goods stowed in the holds of his ships. He wanted gold in order to enhance himself and his family. He understood the power of wealth with all the lucidity of a poor, ambitious supplicant. But Columbus aspired to more than just wealth.

The terms that Columbus exacted from the Spanish monarchs trace out the foundations of his huge ambitions. He would get rich, of course —one-tenth of the net take from his voyage, the right to one-eighth investments in and one-eighth of the profits from future voyages. He demanded the privilege of being addressed right away as "Don Cristóbal Colón", and "don" was a princely title at the time. He demanded the rank of Admiral of all the Ocean Sea and "all the islands and mainlands" he found in it. He would reign as viceroy and governor of those islands and mainlands.

The tradesman's son, a foreigner to boot, made audacious demands. The monarchs balked. Columbus held firm; he withdrew from the court, packed his belongings, and rode off. Their majesties sent a lackey galloping after him and acceded to his terms. They must have figured that they had even more to gain than Columbus, and less to lose. The Genoese commoner must have impressed them, as courtier and envoy as well as navigator. Otherwise —despite promises of lucre and empire— they would not have sent him off in their names, with titles granted by them and letters that introduced him as their ambassador. Columbus's words and deeds would reflect on them; the success of trade and diplomacy with the Orient would hinge on his initial finesse.



Detractors scoff that Ferdinand and Isabella shipped him off in order to get rid of a pest besieging their throne room. The scoffers insult the monarchs' intelligence. They had cheaper and easier ways to get rid of a pest. If they esteemed him above a simple heave-ho, they could grant him an innocuous rank and dispatch him to languish in the garrison of some remote outpost against the Moors.

Columbus craved titles: don, admiral, viceroy, governor, maybe Duke of the Indies. His heirs settled their case against the crown for the hereditary title Duke of Veragua, the soggy north coast of Panama. Columbus would have insisted on a duchy along with the dukeship —land, not just a court title. He foresaw himself lord of vast feudal domains, and in the feudal system a vassal could rise to more actual wealth and power than his king.

Columbus read a prophetic significance in the names he bore: Christopher and Colón, the surname he adopted in Spanish, perhaps with visionary design. He was Christopher, the bearer of Christ. He was Colón the colonizer, destined to establish Christian-European culture across the Ocean Sea. He believed himself God's instrument. In his writings he envisions that the profits from his colonial fief would finance a crusade to free the Holy Land from Islam and incorporate it into Christendom once and for all. The contention that Columbus shammed religiosity to mask his greed is more insult than interpretation. Always comfortable with churchmen, Columbus sought their company, lodged in their homes, and won their backing. The priests, monks, and bishops who knew him never seem to have doubted the sincerity of his piety and ideals.

Columbus's sense of a divine mission to convert and colonize might seem misguided in our secular age, a time when the backlash against colonialism still cracks around the world and flogs the consciences of old colonial powers. But Columbus's contemporaries applauded it. What more noble mission than to carry the light of Christianity and Christian culture to the dark reaches of the world? Even the magnificent Great Khan needed Christian enlightenment for his and his people's salvation. Secular ambitions did not necessarily conflict with religious. A pious Caesar commanded obedience and

disposed of wealth in God's name. Worldly wealth could finance the expansion of Christendom.

Columbus failed as colonial administrator, and he had to be removed. His deeds and policies helped fuel the conflagration of abuse and disease that wiped out the Hispaniola Tainos within a generation and then blazed over to depopulate other islands. He granted tracts of land along with the natives on them —"encomiendas", fiefs and serfs. Theoretically the feudal set-up should have ruled the natives paternally, worked them benevolently, and enlightened them to Christianity and civilization; but in practice it contributed to the genocide. At first Columbus tried to keep his men from abusing the natives, but flinty Spaniards rebelled against the foreigner's authority. Gangs took off to maraud on their own, to plunder the gold that never turned up in the expected abundance. Freewheeling captains carved out their own fiefs. The colony slipped into anarchy. Desperate to show a profit, Columbus slapped impossible gold quotas on the Tainos and had them severely punished when they could not render payment. In defiance of royal orders, he had Tainos rounded up and shipped to Spain to be sold as slaves. People of the time shrugged off slavery as a fact of life, but the queen had forbidden enslaving the natives of her new domain. She wanted Christianized subjects, not chattels. To his discredit, Columbus mulled a commerce in slaves even on the first voyage, as the innocent Tainos lavished their simple hospitality on him.

Columbus lived between Middle Ages and Renaissance. In many ways he thought in medieval terms and acted according to medieval norms. Viewed from another perspective, however, he looks the Renaissance man, with multiple talents. He was something of a scholar, an adept courtier, perhaps a poet in the rough, certainly one of the great adventurers of all time. His journals and reports show his fascination with his New World and the beings and things in it.

Columbus was for the most part self-taught; he likely had only minimal schooling as a boy in Genoa. As far as anybody knows, he taught himself Latin, when in his twenties; and he used it to study geography, which at the time entailed poring over classical texts and deciphering arcane biblical passages as well as interpreting the validity of more modern



erudition. He mastered the subject well enough to debate the court scholars of both Portugal and Spain. He was apparently a self-taught courtier too; elegant lords and palaces seem to have intimidated him no more than court sages. Contemporaries testify to his dignity and eloquence, in Portuguese and Spanish, both foreign languages for him.

Columbus's journal entries convey his excitement over his Indies. He got excited when he saw gold ornaments and heard tales about golden islands, of course, as his detractors love to point out. But non-profit phenomena stirred him too. Flora and fauna piqued his curiosity. He observed native customs and techniques; he admired their honesty, generosity, kindness—all the "Christian" virtues of the simple Tainos—even though in more callous entries he calculated their potential as subjects, servants, or slaves. The magnificent greenery of the Caribbean islands, topped by lofty peaks and sky-blue, inspired him to daily raptures. Few people at the time saw much beauty in nature unless human hands had weeded and trimmed it into an orderly garden. Fewer still saw any beauty in rugged mountains.

Cuban biographer Armando Alvarez Pedroso eulogizes Columbus as a poet comparable, at his best, to Cervantes and Shakespeare, an estimate absurd enough to arouse wonder what he was nipping on when he arrived at it. Alvarez Pedroso must have glossed over Columbus's awkward prose and taken an imaginative leap into Columbus's mind to reach that judgment.<sup>12</sup> Columbus never mastered a written language. His native Genoese dialect was little written, and he came to Spanish via Portuguese too late in life and too caught up in other affairs to capture the finer points of its grammar, much less its nuances. But the imagination behind his voyages and ambitions and the rapturous tone he slips into when he sings the beauties of the Caribbean islands indicate something of a poetic temperament. In any case, the self-taught foreigner deserves credit for expressing himself in Castilian as lucidly as he did. Peruvian conquistador Francisco Pizarro, a native Spaniard, all but exhausted his literacy with his signature.

<sup>12</sup> *Cristóbal Colón* (Havana, 1944), p. 296.

V.S. Naipaul sinks to nastiness when he lambasts the "props of banal poetry" in Columbus's journal descriptions.<sup>13</sup>

No debunker seems yet to have branded Columbus a coward, although they do typically pass over or ignore his courage. However, the mariner-historians, themselves sailors, regard Columbus's courage with virtual awe. They appreciate the coldblooded audacity it took to sail three lonely ships thousands of miles from land into the unknown, then more thousands threading reefs and rocks along uncharted coastlines. Morison himself sailed Columbus's route prior to undertaking his biography. Landström, no blind worshipper of Columbus, characterizes him as "almost unbelievably brave".<sup>14</sup>

Landström depicts Columbus in his final years as "a sniveling old foggy".<sup>15</sup> Legend, on the other hand, paints a more tragic or melodramatic picture: a forlorn, destitute Columbus on his deathbed, rejected by callous king and fickle public, denied all the honors and rewards due him. In fact, he remained Don Cristóbal and Admiral of the Ocean Sea to the end. He had recovered his treasures from Santo Domingo, and he must have lived well-off, or at least he could have. Columbus was not above touches of showmanship to promote his cause, and to an extent he might have fostered the image of destitution and rejection. He likely could have kept the king's confidence and held forth as distinguished maritime and colonial advisor if he had not been so crankily stubborn about what he could not have. Columbus stayed bitter about his dismissal to the end. He trailed along after King Ferdinand's itinerant court, submitting plea after plea for reinstatement as viceroy and governor, until he died in Valladolid. The king refused to reinstate Columbus, with good reason, but he meant to do right by the Columbus family. He subsequently appointed son Diego as governor in Santo Domingo, then grandson Luis.

Columbus's illustrious career came to an ignominious close, but his bitterness is understandable in the context of his enormous ambitions. Instead of governor, viceroy, empire-builder, crusader, he languished ignored in modest wealth.

<sup>13</sup> "Columbus and Crusoe", p. 204.

<sup>14</sup> *Columbus*, p. 191.

<sup>15</sup> *Columbus*, p. 191.



Columbus's greatness lay in discovery and exploration, however, in navigation and sea command, not in colonial administration. Maybe deep down inside himself he knew it, even though he could not accept it.