

THE
ENCOUNTER
THAT
TRANSFORMED
THE
WORLD



SEEDS OF CHANGE



LET'S TALK
ABOUT IT

READING AND
DISCUSSION
PROGRAMS IN
AMERICA'S
LIBRARIES

INTRODUCING

SEEDS OF CHANGE

Seeds of Change: A Quincentennial Commemoration, edited by Herman Viola

The Crown of Columbus, by Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich

Christopher Columbus, Mariner, by Samuel Eliot Morison

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Did European civilization earn its place in the modern world or steal it? Should we call Christopher Columbus's voyage of 1492 a discovery or an encounter? Should we think of its consequences as a triumph or tragedy? How much credit or blame does Columbus himself deserve for the results? Who was Columbus anyway? Was he a good man or bad? A wise man or a crackpot? Modern or medieval? Blessed or cursed?

These are some of the questions we confront as we observe the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's voyage. How we answer them depends in large part on how we confront them. Consider the question of what to call the event of 1492: discovery or encounter? Discovery in its modern sense inevitably suggests that the natives of America were a "people without history" whose past is unimportant compared to the future that awaited them after their existence was revealed to Europe. Native Americans are understandably offended by this implication. But there is more to it than that. Discovery suggests a passivity on the part of the

"discovered" that is often at odds with the historical record and is very definitely at odds with the outlooks of Indian peoples today.

The reputations of Columbus and of native Americans have been linked ever since 1492—it was after all he who assigned to them their traditional misnomer, Indians—but until recently the role assigned to Indians in representations of the Columbus drama has also been passive. John Vanderlyn, the painter whose *Landing of Columbus* hangs in the U.S. Capitol and provides our most familiar image of October 12, 1492, placed Columbus in the foreground, the Indians in the background, timid and distant, even though in the actual event the inhabitants of Guanahani flocked to the beach and could scarcely contain their curiosity as the Europeans waded ashore. In other representations of Columbus, the Indian role was even acted out by whites. For example, Tammany Hall, the New York City fraternal group that staged the first Columbus Day celebrations in 1792, dressed its officers in pseudo-Indian regalia when they paraded through the city each October 12. When Vanderlyn portrayed Indians in another famous painting, he actually painted them in Tammany costumes—which is not so different from the Fraternal Order of Red Men, whose members used to greet "Columbus" when he waded ashore in San Francisco's Aquatic Park on Columbus Day; they wore Plains Indian war bonnets and were accompanied by "Indian princesses" decked out as Pocahontas.

Dressing up as Indians is an old American tradition, one that is often used to make a point about white society. What is different about 1992 is that for the first time in the evolution of America's Columbian tradition, real Indians are entering the picture. It is no longer possible today, as it was in 1892, to imagine that native Americans constitute a "vanishing race." Their numbers in North America today may have actually exceeded the native population of 1492, while Indian peoples are increasing even faster in South America. Throughout the western hemisphere, their leaders manifest a new assertiveness and a new unity. These attitudes extend both to control of the land and resources that remain in native ownership and to the ways in which Indian peoples are depicted in the study of culture and history.

One of the breakthroughs of the fourth Columbian centennial was a new seriousness among white scholars in the study and appreciation of Indian culture. Modern anthropology traces its origins partly to the

collections and exhibitions of Indian artifacts arranged in Columbus's honor in Chicago and Madrid 100 years ago. The Field Museum of Natural History, for example, was founded to house the collections assembled for the great World's Columbian Exposition or Chicago World's Fair of 1893. As we approach the fifth centennial, Indian communities throughout the Americas are demanding control of these cultural resources, pressing for the return of some museum artifacts and the liberation of others from the glass cases of museums where Indian objects are displayed alongside precious gems and the bones of extinct animals. New museums are opening where the representation of native culture is in the hands of the natives themselves. The culmination of this trend will be the new National Museum of the American Indian, which will take its place among the other Smithsonian museums on the national mall in Washington at the century's end.

It is not surprising, then, that in the face of such circumstances scholars and artists today are inclined to think of 1492 as an Encounter of Two Worlds, as the Organization of American States puts it officially, not as the discovery of a new world by an old one. And it probably should not surprise us also that, as the Indian's stock has risen, Columbus's has fallen, at least among intellectuals. At the time of the third centennial in 1792, patriots of the young American republic adopted Columbus as a symbol of the nation's future. They wrote epic poems and schoolbook history lessons in his honor and scattered his name across the national map. One hundred years later, Columbus was enshrined as a symbol of American progress. Vanderlyn's famous image was engraved on stamps and coins, while other artists elaborated the Columbus legend in dozens of heroic and poignant guises. Columbus monuments, streets, and parks became fixtures of numerous cities, while October 12 became an official holiday, beginning with Colorado in 1907 and culminating in the establishment of the federal Columbus Day in 1934. If schoolchildren learned a single fact about history, it was that Columbus discovered America on October 12, 1492.

Is there a place for this heroic Columbus if we think of 1492 as an encounter, rather than a discovery? Some people don't think so. Historians today are more interested in processes than in events and in the fates of groups rather than individuals. Dwindling numbers of people turn out for Columbus Day parades, and official planning for the quincentenary commemorations is mired in controversy. If Columbus makes news today, it is usually through some challenge or other to the old pieties:

computer experts wrangle over the design of Columbus's ships or the location of his landing place, demonstrators splatter his statue with blood on Columbus Day or march around with cardboard Santa Marias depicted in a sea of skulls. And yet defenders still point out that, like it or not, Columbus did indeed discover a new world, if not in the traditional sense, then in the sense that the bridge of ships he laid down across the Atlantic revealed the world to itself whole for the first time. It does not strain the imagination to find the beginnings of our own world in the Columbus saga, if not in that famous moment on the beach, then in the dogged determination of the navigator who sailed back to Europe against great odds and who crossed the ocean again and back three more times, initiating a flow of people, plants, diseases, goods, and ideas that tied the fates of America and Europe together irretrievably and that eventually moved out across all of the oceans of the world. We may not like the world that Columbus made, but if we look at it in this light, it is hard to deny the significance of his achievement.

Seeds of Change: A Quincentennial

Commemoration, edited by Herman Viola

Seeds of Change is the name both of a book and of the museum exhibition that the book helps to interpret. While both are wide-ranging in the topics they explore, their focus is on the “Columbian exchange” of plants, peoples, animals, and microbes. Many readers will find this a startling view of history, for it makes heroes not of statesmen and warriors but of anonymous and lowly farmers. Its villains are microbes and ordinary people whose worst crimes were unintentional. The greatest events of this kind of history are not the conquests of cities but the slow and often poorly understood processes by which one food crop displaces or supplements another or by which new peoples and cultures are formed by the encounters of strangers. As this book makes clear, the processes of biological exchange, including human genes as well as foods and diseases, had more to do with making the world as we live in it today than did any of the famous deeds recorded by chroniclers. The exception is the one deed that set the exchange in motion: Columbus’s arrival in the Bahamas in the autumn of 1492.

October 12, 1492, was the one day in history when epoch and moment merged. With the landing on San Salvador, we can see the very beginning of the world-transforming processes that *Seeds of Change* describes. It is thus unlikely that, however much historians become absorbed in unraveling the processes set in motion that day, public interest in Christopher Columbus and the steps that led him to that moment will entirely fade away.

Herman Viola, editor. *Seeds of Change: A Quincentennial Commemoration*. 1991. Smithsonian Institution Press.

The Crown of Columbus, by Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich

Columbus’s power to fascinate us is at the center of Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich’s novel. This book’s leading characters are Vivian Twostar and Roger Williams, respectively a native American anthropologist and a WASP poet. Each is involved in a Columbus project in anticipation of the approaching quincentenary. They are also involved with each other, and the tension that drives the novel derives in part from our curiosity about how their increasingly competitive projects will affect their complicated relationship.

As is often the case in real life, these fictional characters start out by using Columbus as a symbol, a name all but divorced from historical reality but one that stands for things the characters like or dislike about contemporary society. For Vivian, her ambiguous feelings about Columbus reflect the ambiguous position of

indigenous peoples in modern societies. For Roger, Columbus is a stand-in for the poet’s alter ego: a great individualist whose dream became deed, the man who, as another New England poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote in his essay “Self-Reliance,” “sailed the ocean in an undecked boat.” Yet notwithstanding their academic tendency to deal with life and history at the level of abstraction, both characters are drawn into engagement with the real Columbus and the actual event. Vivian and Roger both modify their views of Columbus and, in the process, modify their views of themselves and of each other. Encounter and discovery operate at both the personal and historical levels in this story, and in the end the distinction between them blurs.

Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich. *The Crown of Columbus*. 1991. HarperCollins.

Christopher Columbus, Mariner, by Samuel Eliot Morison

Samuel Eliot Morison’s biography of Columbus (first published in 1955) offers an earlier generation’s answers to the questions raised in the first two books in our series. *Christopher Columbus, Mariner* is based on the same author’s *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, a two-volume work that won the Pulitzer Prize when it was first published in 1942. Morison was a New England aristocrat with formal training in history who taught all of his life at Harvard University, his alma mater. He was also an avid sailor, eventually becoming an admiral himself through his service as a naval historian during World War II. In preparation for writing about Columbus, Morison persuaded Harvard to charter a yacht so that he could follow the routes of Columbus’s four voyages through the Caribbean. This experience provided him with the ultimate retort to the “armchair scholars” and “library navigators” who speculate about the many facets of Columbus’s life, about which there are numerous questions and little definite proof.

“I was there,” Morison seems to shout to his readers. Of course he was not there, as common sense tells us. But devices like his frequent unexplained use of nautical terms reinforce Morison’s claim to authority. *Christopher Columbus, Mariner* is actually a twentieth-century reading of the Yankee tradition fostered by nineteenth-century historians, artists, and poets. It presents Columbus as a quintessentially American hero, a lonely and visionary individualist who triumphed against great odds. It also portrays a great navigator whose gifts were poorly understood or appreciated in his own lifetime. Morison’s evocation of New England’s Columbian traditions and his lively, fast-paced style helped to make this interpretation the definitive one for most Americans of the last two generations.

Samuel Eliot Morison. *Christopher Columbus, Mariner*. 1955. New American Library.

FOR FURTHER READING

- German Arciniegas. *America in Europe: A History of the New World in Reverse*. Translated from the Spanish by Gabriela Arciniegas and R. Victoria Arana. A distinguished Colombian historian argues that the impact of America upon Europe since 1492 has been as great as Europe's impact on America. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986.
- Leslie Bethell, editor. *The Cambridge History of Latin America*. Vol. 1, *Colonial Latin America*. A definitive collaborative work, this volume brings together contemporary scholarly perspectives on the encounters of peoples that laid the foundations for Latin American society. Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Fernando Colon. *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus by His Son Ferdinand*. Translated and annotated by Benjamin Keen. This first biography of Columbus, written by his scholarly illegitimate son, invents a formal education and other flattering details about the family's origin, but its account of Columbus's voyages incorporates evidence and testimony found in no other source. Rutgers University Press, 1959.
- Alfred W. Crosby, Jr. *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. One of the most influential modern works on the Columbian era, this book introduced the subject of environmental change as part of historical process. Greenwood Press, 1972.
- Alfred W. Crosby, Jr. "The Columbian Voyages, the Columbian Exchange, and Their Histories." This pamphlet offers the best brief discussion available of the ideas and issues that provoke debate during the quincentennial commemoration. American Historical Association, 1987.
- Alfred W. Crosby, Jr. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. An expansion of Crosby's earlier work, this book charts the impact on indigenous peoples of the ecological changes that Columbus's voyages introduced. Greenwood Press, 1986.
- Zvi Dor-Ner. *Columbus and the Age of Discovery*. A book written to accompany the WGBH-Boston television series of the same title by the series' executive producer, who is also an expert sailor. Morrow, 1991.
- J. H. Elliott. *Imperial Spain, 1479-1716*. This survey provides the social and political context of Columbus's accomplishments and traces the remarkable florescence and equally remarkable decline that Spain underwent in the two centuries following the Columbian voyages. St. Martin's, 1964.
- J. H. Elliott. *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650*. In contrast to Arciniegas's view described above, Elliott argues here that America had surprisingly little impact upon Europe in the centuries immediately following Columbus. Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- J. H. Elliott. *Spain and its World, 1500-1700*. A compilation of recent essays by the leading authority on early modern Spain writing in English today. Yale University Press, 1989.
- Carlos Fuentes. *Christopher Unborn*. This erudite and witty novel—set in 1992 and told from the perspective of a fetus conceived as part of a contest in Mexico to produce the first baby of the quincentennial year—is more noteworthy for its insightful asides on relations between the Hispanic and Anglophone peoples of North America than for its clever plot. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989.
- Robert H. Fuson, editor and translator. *The Log of Christopher Columbus*. This book provides a more readable and complete documentary account of Columbus's voyages by translating archaic Spanish into modern English idiom and incorporating information from other contemporary sources that are not found in Columbus's journals. The result is a handsome book but an unsettling one for readers who want to be certain exactly whose words they are reading. International Marine Publishing, 1987.
- Antonello Gerbi. *The Debate of the New World: The History of a Polemic*. Revised and enlarged edition translated from the Italian by Jeremy Moyle. A provocative and exhaustive treatise on the attempts by European philosophers to incorporate new knowledge of humans and nature gained from American explorations into their world view while at the same time forcing the new information into categories and interpretations that will allow them to maintain their belief in the superiority of their own civilization. Univ. of Pittsburgh, 1973.
- Washington Irving. *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. Edited by John Harman McElroy. (Vol. ix of *The Complete Works of Washington Irving*.) The first modern biography of Columbus in any language and the one that, more than any other single work, shaped the nineteenth-century view of the admiral as an American hero. Twayne Publishers, 1981.
- Donald Meinig. *Atlantic America, 1492-1800*. (Vol. I of *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*.) A historical geography of the colonial New World, this book offers an interpretation framed not by the national maps that later emerged in North and South America, but by the patterns of economic and demographic movements that developed as island beachheads gave way to mainland enclaves, which in turn grew into regional economic and cultural zones linked in an increasingly dense web of transatlantic trade networks. Yale, 1986.
- Samuel Eliot Morison. *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: The Life of Christopher Columbus*. A Pulitzer Prize-winner, this biography is more detailed, more comprehensive and less opinionated than the same author's *Christopher Columbus, Mariner*. Little, Brown, 1942.
- J. H. Parry. *The Age of Reconnaissance: Discovery, Exploration and Settlement 1450 to 1650*. An international survey by the British maritime historian who succeeded Morison at Harvard. Univ. of California, 1981.
- J. H. Parry. *The Spanish Seaborne Empire*. A detailed examination of the ocean exploration, commercial and military sea lanes, and maritime technology that held together the Spanish empire in Europe and America. Knopf, 1981.
- Jeffrey Burton Russell. *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians*. Why do most of us believe that all of Europe thought the earth was flat until Columbus proved them wrong? Russell exposes the falseness of this myth, traces its origin to nineteenth-century historians, and examines its appeal and remarkable persistence. Praeger, 1991.
- Kirkpatrick Sale. *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*. A vigorous retelling of the Columbian saga, which incorporates Alfred Crosby's ecological interpretation and a debunking attitude toward Columbus with a survey of European and Euro-American imperialism down to the present day. Knopf, 1990.
- Paolo Emilio Taviani. *Christopher Columbus: The Grand Design*. Translated from the Italian by William Weaver. An admiring treatment of Columbus's formative period by a leading Italian Columbianist, this work is valuable chiefly for the exhaustive review it offers of the many points of controversy in Columbus scholarship. Orbis, 1985.

Paolo Emilio Taviani. *Columbus: The Great Adventure: His Life, His Times, His Voyages*. A dramatic and vivid account of Columbus's complex personality and life-long ambition, adventure, and obsession. Distilled from Taviani's four-volume work, this well-balanced biography reveals Columbus's strengths and weaknesses and chronicles each of his voyages. Crown/Orion, 1991.

Tsvetan Todorov. *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. Translated from the French by Richard Howard. A "deconstruction" of the writings of Columbus and Cortez by a Bulgarian literary theorist. Harper, 1984.

Gerald Vizenor. *The Heirs of Columbus*. Vizenor's sly, inventive, and subversively funny novel speculates on the nature of Columbus's legacy to native Americans. Drawing from the Indian trickster tradition, the novel spins a web of outrageous characters and shenanigans involving ceremonial objects and the remains of Columbus and Pocohontas. Wesleyan University Press, 1991.

John Noble Wilford. *The Mysterious History of Columbus: An Exploration of the Man, the Myth, the Legacy*. Wilford investigates the numerous mysteries and riddles of Columbus's life and motivations. His portrait of Columbus is of a superb navigator blinded by his beliefs and tragically inept as a governor of the barely conquered islands he claimed for Spain. A far-reaching and creative examination of the tremendous consequences of Columbus's encounter with the so-called New World. Knopf, 1991.

Eric Wolf. *Europe and the People without History*. The author argues that Europeans devalued the peoples of America, Africa, and Asia, which they incorporated into their empires, by ignoring their accomplishments before the European invasion and attacking those aspects of their cultures that offered possibilities of resistance to imperialism. Univ. of California, 1982.

"Seeds of Change: The Encounter That Transformed the World" was written by John Alexander Williams, Director, Center for Appalachian Studies, Appalachian State University, Boone, N.C.

Let's Talk About It

Development of this material was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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ISBN: 0-8389-7561-5

Cover: "Columbus Landing" courtesy of Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington; "Horses Unloaded" courtesy Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.