

"Who was Columbus?"

by David Gates

in "Newsweek" (Special Issue, Fall/Winter 1991, pp. 29-31)

Forget the lettering at the top of Sebastiano del Piombo's famous painting, identifying that pursed-lipped, peevish-looking character as Columbus. It was probably added, years after the fact, to a portrait of some long-forgotten Italian nobleman. And forget the yarns in which he has to persuade stubborn monarchs that the earth is round, and face down a mutinous crew terrified they're going to sail off the edge. In 1492 educated people already knew, in theory, that you could reach the East by sailing west; sailors had long ceased to smite their brows when ships and land masses popped into sight from below the horizon. And he probably never heard the name Columbus, a Latinizing of his likely birth name, Cristoforo Colombo; Richard Hakluyt's "Principall navigations" (1598) popularized this fancy-dan form among English speakers. He was generally called Cristobal Colon, as he still is among Spanish speakers. He signed himself simply XpoFERENS, a Greek-Latin hybrid clearly meant to suggest his self-assigned mission of bringing Christ to the naked people across the ocean. His son, who was also his biographer, called him Colonus.

Like heroes from Julius Caesar to John Kennedy, Christopher Columbus has mostly been who people wanted him to be. To Renaissance humanists, he was the open-minded explorer, the arch-empiricist; to North American revolutionaries, he was the Founding Fathers' father, standing toe to toe with Old World monarchs and making them see things his way. Even 20th-century historiography hasn't quit humanized him--even when it's demythologized him. Samuel Eliot Morison's worshipful "Admiral of the Ocean Sea" (1942) acknowledges Columbus's slave trading and his disastrous stint as a colonial governor; still, his Columbus is not only a master seaman--Morison traced the voyages himself in a variety of boats--but a visionary "who carried Christian civilization across the Ocean Sea." In Kirkpatrick Sale's hostile "The Conquest of Paradise" (1990), Columbus becomes the embodiment of every political, spiritual and ecological sin imaginable to a founder of the New York Green Party: Eurocentrism, speciesism, capitalism, estrangement from both nature and self. "Perhaps most revealing of all," Sale writes, "this is a man without a settled name, and it is hard not to believe that a confusion, or at least inconstancy, of that kind reflects ... psychological instability." Oh, right: he's an incompetent sailor, too.

The real Columbus, according to people who had seen him in the flesh, was a tall, red-faced man; he might've looked something like a 1512 portrait by Lorenzo Lotto, painted six years after Columbus's death. (We're not dead certain this portrait was meant to be Columbus, either.) He was probably born in Genoa, in 1451. His father was a wool weaver and tavernkeeper. In his early 20s, Columbus went to Portugal, then the most adventurous seafaring nation; at least once he sailed down the coast of West Africa. He married, had a son and was widowed; later he had a second son (Fernando, the biographer) by a woman he didn't marry. (That and the miracles he didn't perform killed his proposed canonization in the 19th century.) At some point, for some reason, he made it his life's goal to reach Asia by sailing west across the Atlantic. After years of lobbying in the royal courts of both Portugal and Spain, he managed to get funding from the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella. On four separate expeditions, he explored various Caribbean islands from which he sent back plants, minerals and slaves. Once he claimed to have found the Terrestrial Paradise: it was actually the mainland of South America. Under his stewardship, the first permanent Spanish settlement in the New World became so cruel and chaotic that he was returned to Europe in chains. He made one final, anticlimactic voyage and died, embittered with plenty of money.

What was he like? Ambitious, obviously. Despite relatively humble beginnings--Genoese wool weavers didn't have the prestige or political clout of their Florentine or Venetian counterparts--he managed to marry a Portuguese woman whose family had influence at court. (Only after King Joao X turned him down did Columbus approach Spain's Ferdinand and Isabella.) He seems to have craved not just wealth but, as his first-name only signature suggests, instant nobility. He campaigned, successfully, to be styled "Don," and Spain still honors his request to pass the title "Admiral of the Ocean Sea" on to his descendants. His ambition may or may not explain why he married Felipa Perestrello e Moniz, but it could well explain why he didn't marry Beatriz Enriquez de

Arana, the mother of his son Fernando. "Marriage to a low-born orphan," write University of Minnesota historians William and Carla Phillips in the forthcoming "The Worlds of Christopher Columbus," "would do nothing to enhance his prestige and would surely impede his search for noble status."

If that seems distasteful--even after we've corrected for the 15th century's less enlightened views on both women and social class--consider that Columbus supported her in part with money he'd chiseled from the sailor who'd raised the cry of "Tierra!" on his 1492 voyage. Columbus had promised a 10,000-maravedi annuity (perhaps \$1,400 today) to whoever first sighted land; at first he credited one Juan Rodriguez Bermejo, but he later argued that he himself should get the annuity, since he'd spotted, or thought he spotted, a distant light some hours earlier. Perhaps the real issue wasn't the money but the credit for being the first: for Columbus, as for most people, money seems to have been mixed up with self-esteem. (Wealthy but neglected in his last days, he claimed to be "without a single blanca.") The Phillipses speculate that Columbus may have turned the annuity over to de Arana because he felt guilty about his treatment of Bermejo. It's possible--though it's equally possible he cheated the man to channel some money to his mistress. We'll never know.

One thing does seem certain: that Columbus sometimes exaggerated, misrepresented and just plain lied, particularly in overselling the islands he discovered. One often-cited instance of his deviousness may be a bum rap: the confession in his journal of the first voyage that he underreported the distance the ship made each day so as not to alarm the sailors. The Phillipses argue that this part of the journal may be garbled. (It doesn't exist in manuscript, but in a 16th-century paraphrase of an unreliable copy.) But there are enough other instances--like his forcing sailors on the second voyage to swear that Cuba was not an island--to justify Sale's claim that Columbus's indifference to the distinction between truth and falsehood sometimes verged on madness.

Yet where Columbus seems looniest to us, he's actually at his most orthodox. World maps in his day did place the Garden of Eden near Asia--where he always insisted his islands were--and he was sufficiently a man of the Middle Ages to deem the Bible a reliable (if sibylline) source of geographical knowledge. As the Phillipses show, Columbus's picture of the world was a collage of Scripture, Ptolemy, contemporary maps, his own observations and wishful thinking. Similarly, we should take seriously the stated purpose of his explorations: to bring the unconverted to Christ and to raise funds in order to capture Jerusalem, thereby ushering in the Second Coming. It's hard for moderns to ignore the dissonance between these pious aims and the reality: the Admiral of the Ocean Sea brutalizing and enslaving the "Indians" and enriching himself. It's safe to say he never saw it that way. Despite his posthumous status as empiricist exemplar, he put a lot of energy into not seeing things as they were.

It's become commonplace to regard Columbus as a representative man of his time, with one foot in the Middle Ages and one in the Renaissance. It's safer than making inferences about his personality, beyond such hard-to-miss traits as the grandiosity and self-pity he showed late in life. Consequently, today's Columbus is more "complex" than the imaginary hero who stood the egg on end, but also more remote. Only imagination can bring us close to him again: not by resurrecting discredited yarns, but by using the verifiable facts to reconstruct what his experience must have been like.

So put yourself in Columbus's shoes. You're 41--in those days, an old man--and at last your dream comes true. They've given you your ships, the winds are favorable, you reach the land you always knew was there. But it's not the way you thought it would be, and not what you promised when they put up the money. There's island after island after island, but you can't find Cipango (Japan), where the cities and the gold mines are, and you can't get a straight answer out of the locals. So you deliver what you can: a little gold, some plants you thought (mistakenly) you recognized and a few natives. You're vindicated; they give you more ships, more men. But something's not right, and your sponsors soon get suspicious. You should be dealing with Eastern potentates, not these naked people who've started to hate you. You try to keep order in your pitiful settlement, but things get out of hand. You wind up in chains, accused of brutality and, worse, incompetence. And you started out with the best intentions. You were going to get rich and save the world. You didn't see any contradiction there. You were the first American.