The curse of Columbus

Unlearning Columbus: a review article

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As the nautical writer John Dyson puts it in his celebratory volume, *Columbus: for gold, God and glory*, ‘After Jesus Christ, no individual has made a bigger impact upon the Western world than Christopher Columbus.’ Five hundred years after his fateful landfall on Guanahani island, in 1992, he even threatens to overtake the one in the lead.

So perhaps when dealing with such a totemic figure in history, every reviewer should give a brief autobiographical glimpse into their encounter with those such as Columbus whose followers have made bigger than history itself, their introduction and sustenance into the myth and the monument. For children such as I was, growing up unconsciously in the mind’s eye of British imperialism in the years immediately before its formal disintegration and the detachment of its colonies after decades of struggle by those who were its subjects, Columbus represented its pioneer and foundation.

Who knew him as the much more sinister ‘Colon’ – that ominous homophone for colony? Who knew what a ‘colony’ actually was, beyond an extension of Britain (with the bigger ones providing cricket teams to play against us), a portion of the world where, despite the climate, the jungle and deserts, disease and poverty, the people at least tried to do things in the British way and were thankful to us for it. And this was what linked us to Columbus. British history generally does not like foreigners (unless they are Americans), but yet it always seemed to like Columbus, seemed to see him almost as a special kind


*Race & Class*, 33, 3 (1992)
of Englishman. At school – he ‘discovered’ America: it was unambiguous, it did not matter if anyone else lived there or had arrived there before he came. There was no doubt about it: he, and he alone, ‘discovered’ America. There were some marginal stories about Leif Ericson and his Vikings or Egyptians in paper boats, but Columbus never had a real challenger. It was he who had discovered that the world was round, nobody else was ever considered. It was he who had persuaded the sensible and humane Queen Isabella of Spain to pawn her jewels to pay for his voyage – and we learned about his triumphs to the chorus of a sentimental song played time after time over the radio of the mid-1950s, which ended with the winsome line naming the tiny ships that carried him and his men across an ocean that was to become a crossing of agony and death, ‘The *Pinta*, the *Niña* . . . and the *Santa Mar* . . . i . . . a!’

In the secondary modern school I went to, we put on a play about the life of Columbus. The role of honour went to the first student the school had ever produced who had gained five ‘O’ levels. ‘Look at him now’, the teachers said to us as he played his character on the stage of the school hall with ruff, frock coat and black stockings, surrounded by bemused sailors as he stood an egg on its end, ‘You can also do well and be like him.’ So he was more than an exemplary man of history, he was an institution. And Columbus also became our aspiration, he was there for us to emulate.

It was all this that later we had somehow to unlearn, and the unlearning was a powerful enough task. For me, a black American started this process in my suburban London home. As a teenager, I began a lifelong love of jazz, and my particular favourite artist was the nonpareil of stride piano and musical humour, Thomas ‘Fats’ Waller. In April 1936, in a New York studio, Waller and his sidemen had recorded a tongue-in-cheek version of the novelty song of the period (written by Andy Razaf, himself a Madagascan by birth), *Christopher Columbus*. In the unlikely lyrics, Columbus – sailing with no aid to direction – quells a mutiny on board the *Santa Maria* by using ‘rhythm as a compass’. Then, after some of the hottest music that Waller and his men ever put together on wax, the comical banter changes suddenly to a caustic unaccompanied sentence at the end of the record. Parodying the lines by the American Winifred Sackville Stoner Jr that every schoolchild learns, and adding his own tailpiece, Waller chants:

In fourteen hundred and ninety-two
Columbus sailed the ocean blue –
What happened?

These last two words, said so bitterly by a man whose voice carried so much public laughter, stayed with me, always returning for years after
when I encountered the real America. What did they mean? What was he saying? They came back nearly a decade later when I climbed up the great pre-Columbian pyramids of Teotihuacan, just outside Mexico City, and I thought out loud – who could ever say they discovered these except those who built them? They came back when, as a schoolteacher in the Caribbean island of Tobago – which Columbus had skirted in 1498 after passing through the Gulf of Paria and seeing the American mainland for the first time during his third voyage – I was shown the collection of Arawak artifacts that an archaeologist friend from Trinidad had disinterred from the island’s beaches. What other human being can discover what is already of humans? For Columbus had come as an outvoyer of the system that did not discover without appropriating, did not find without keeping and enslaving.

So, in reading these books new for 1992, and offering reviews, my criteria retain the clarity of that early unlearning. For what was I to learn later of this voyager and ‘discoverer’? That, as a citizen of Genoa, he emblematised the dedication inscribed on every Genoese ledger: ‘In the name of God and profit’, and carried with him the ‘shameless’ epithet that Dante ascribed to the materialistic and venal values that characterised that maritime republic. He was the man so tight-fisted as to deny the promised reward to the seaman on the Pinta, Juan Rodriguez, for the first to see the ‘new’ land in the west on the first voyage, keeping the money for himself after claiming that he had seen the same land the evening before. He was the instigator of transatlantic slavery, who shackled to his deck six unsuspecting Taino people after the first landfall on the Bahamas in 1492, eventually carrying them back to Spain. He was the prototypal colonist who first ‘pacified’ the Caribbean by countenancing the encomienda allocation of slaves to settlers, and oversaw the erection of 340 sets of gallows across the island of ‘Hispaniola’. He was the self-proclaimed ‘messenger of a new heaven’ whose brief rule as a governor of the same island accounted for the deaths of some 50,000 of its people, whose lust for gold and profit made him decree that every Taino man, woman and child over the age of 14 must deliver, every three months, a hawk’s bell crammed with gold – those who failed were to be hanged in groups of thirteen, ‘in memory of Our Redeemer and His twelve apostles’. It was this man that we had been taught to admire in our days at school. And, for me, this was the beginning of the answer to Fats Waller’s rhetorical question of 1936: ‘what happened?’

Considering these things in 1991, following a bloody war for oil on the shores of the Persian Gulf, it is almost as if we can substitute that twentieth-century mineral for its fifteenth-century progenitor. For it was Columbus, anticipating George Bush and his oil-lust, who wrote (in the logbook of his first voyage): ‘Of gold is treasure made, and with
it he who has it does as he wills in the world and even sends souls to Paradise.’ And it was a Nahuatl commentator who, beholding the behaviour of the invaders of the ‘new world’ that was his country, perhaps foretold the response of Arab peoples to the oil-conquistadors of 1991:

They lifted up the gold as if they were monkeys, with expressions of joy, as if it put new life into them and lit up their hearts. As if it were certainly something for which they yearn with a great thirst. Their bodies fatten on it and they hunger violently for it. They crave gold like hungry swine.

For our teachers and our schools the tasks of learning and unlearning, both 1492 and 1991, have never been greater.

An instructive place to start is in the historical fiction of the Mexican poet and novelist, Homero Aridjis, whose *1492: the life and times of Juan Cabezon* reveals the seedbed of Columbus’s projects and the successive growth of European imperialism. For where did Columbus find the money to finance his enterprise? Certainly, some came from Genoese and Florentine merchants – and the cost of two of his ships was levied against the seaport town of Palos from where he set sail. But the balance came from the crown, and who filled the coffers of the crown, and how? In this masterpiece of historical narration, Aridjis tells us. The Inquisition, established by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand after their persuasion had warmed the Pope, offered an effective and secure means of raising large amounts of money from Spanish Jewry and the new *conversos*, who switched religious allegiance in order to escape its reign of torture, ruin and death.

Aridjis’ novel is about this fifteenth-century holocaust. 1492 was also the year of the Decree of Expulsion of all Jews from Spain and the expropriation of their property and wealth – with all goods and monies going to the king’s exchequer to pay for the war against the Moors in southern Spain, and to underwrite the Atlantic voyages of ‘discovery’. He shows, in the sweeping and indignant burst of the historical imagination which is his novel, the agony and genocidal terror that was this collecting – making clear how racism begat colonialism, which begat racism and imperialism. His picaresque protagonist, Juan Cabezon, moves through these events – the raids, the arrests, the racist humiliations, the public executions and burning horror of the *auto-da-fé*, the flight for life. Nothing could serve as a more profound and detailed prophecy of the political terror of our own century, from Auschwitz to Santiago, from My Lai to Soweto.

Halfway through the novel, Cabezon, fleeing from the familiaris of the Inquisition, overhears a conversation between ‘a navigator’ and an agent of the Holy Office in a Toledo hostelry. The seaman claims to
know ‘how to reach the Indies by going west’. It is a transient, one page-long encounter, but enough to persuade Cabezon. At the end of the novel, he joins Columbus at Palos, ready to be a mastman on the *Santa Maria*.

In July 1990, an ‘authentic replica’ of the *Niña*, crewed by a Spanish professor of nautical studies and his students, retraced Columbus’s original voyage in a prelude to the trans-oceanic spectacles that will arrive with the quincentenary. This crossing is fully documented, with dozens of full colour plates on high-quality shiny paper in *Columbus: for gold, God and glory*, with text by John Dyson and photographs by Peter Christopher. Alongside the images of the new voyage are maps, archival paintings of the Columbus era, charts and original illustrations that lie uneasily with the cinematic quality of the contemporary photographs – which are more about glory than gold or God. The reader must ask: why spend this money, go to these lengths, photograph so heroically and represent so admiringly this re-sailing of a journey that was so doom-laden for so many millions? Why have the same powerful publishing houses not committed the same resources and finance to a book of similar physical quality showing to the world the vibrant life, order and beauty which Columbus’s landfall despoiled and destroyed – particularly when much of the text of this present book so strongly emphasises Columbus’s profit-lust and stands as contradictory evidence within the ‘glory’ of the colour plates?

Dyson’s main theme is that Columbus (the original Mr Ten per cent, who demanded of King Ferdinand that proportion of any riches he found on his expeditions) had a secret map. This, asserts Dyson, he probably stole from a shipwrecked sailor whom he met while living on the bleak Atlantic island of Porto Santo off Madeira, between 1477 and 1479. This map enabled Columbus to know exactly where he was going in 1492: ‘His goal was not to find a new way to the Orient: he was on the hunt for gold.’ Although this seems to square with what we know about the character of the ‘great navigator’, it is yet another story to add to the Columbus apocrypha. Dyson makes it sound very plausible though, and also gives a strong reminder of how Columbus interrupted his first historic voyage and spent some time with his mistress Doña Beatriz at the Canary island of Gomero, before he set sail again westwards. There he could see at first hand what Spanish colonialism had already done to the Guanches, the aboriginal people of the Canaries – which presaged his own work, yet to be done in the Caribbean: ‘This Spanish style of colonialism by conquest, in which native people were enslaved or slaughtered, proved to be a dress rehearsal for what would come on a very much wider scale on the other side of the ocean.’

In the introduction to Hans Koning’s essential *Columbus: his enterprise*, the author reminds us how young people have for years
called for a revaluation of Columbus and his projects: ‘A new generation of children – black, white, red, yellow – in our schools has been asking for a more objective, less Eurocentric, white race-oriented teaching of history.’ He is absolutely right, and if this book is introduced to them, they will begin to get it very effectively through its finely written pages. It is certainly a book written for young readers, to set in motion a process of demystifying Columbus and the ‘false heroisms’ that he represents, for ‘the year 1492 opened an era of genocide, cruelty and slavery on a larger scale than had ever been seen before’, and very few of us ever learned that in our schools. Profiteer, Christian bigot, whose lasting dream was to find a westward entry to carry the reconquest of Jerusalem from the Arab peoples, and who made it as far as the Caribbean ‘because he was the first captain to steer far enough south to pick up the north-east tradewinds’, Columbus saw nothing except through the lens of acquisition. Among his first recorded words upon seeing the people of the Caribbean were, ‘they would make fine servants’. Soon his compatriots would be treating them, as the priest de las Casas described it, ‘like the excrement in a public square’, while they were hanged on their own fruit trees and slaughtered in their thousands by Toledo steel and their own suicidal concoctions of cassava poison.

Koning’s book is a rare achievement in the way in which its style and content connect with the curiosity of young students, and can dissipate the layers of lies and glorification that surround Columbus’s life and projects. It concludes with an interview with the Bolivian political activist and writer, Domitila Chungara, author of the unforgettable testimony of Columbus’s legacy, Let Me Speak! She shows how his life-quest for gold and profit still lives on to damn the lives of those original peoples of the Americas who have survived. Columbus in a new guise: ‘We know that Latin America lies within the orbit of foreign interests, of the International Monetary Fund, the multinationals, North American imperialism, all of which have an interest in looting even greater riches.’

Even before the quincentenary has begun, at the time of writing (September 1991) the first edition of Felipe Fernandez-Armesto’s Columbus, 4 is already out of print. It is clearly being seen as an influential, possibly definitive, portrait of the man and explorer which will be widely read during the commemorative year. This biography again emphasises Columbus’s appetite for profit and his assiduous attempts to create his own historical persona and thereby become ‘the author of his own legend’. Yet Fernandez-Armesto, with all his professorial authority (he is general editor of The Times Atlas of World Exploration and director-designate of the Oxford comparative colonial history project), adds his own weight to the received myth, portraying the ‘weaver’s son who rose to greatness’ (as announced on
the flyleaf), as directly and personally responsible for the ‘unique achievement – the discovery of America.’

Yet, later in the biography, he qualifies this significantly: Columbus is, in fact, ‘our discoverer of America’ – Europe’s man. And it is this naked Eurocentrism and open scorn of the pre-Columbian Americas and their peoples that makes the overall emphasis of the book backward and dubious – also suggesting that, in the European mercantilist tradition that was to follow, Columbus’s profit-obsession was no bad thing. A good biography for a Thatcherite and post-Thatcherite age, this. Columbus pioneered to ‘put a girdle round the Earth’, declares Fernandez-Armesto, as if that was itself a global achievement rather than an imperial cord. He writes glowingly of Columbus making the Atlantic a ‘European lake’, as if he already had in his mind a pre-vision of NATO. And as for the peoples of the lands he encountered, they – against the ‘peace-loving and biddable’ prospects which Columbus saw in them – in fact only turned out to be ‘shifty and deadly’. For Fernandez-Armesto, like his formidable subject, the Caribbean is characterised as ‘cannibal country’. His comments – which do nothing to set aside the sordid colonial myth of Caribbean cannibalism invented by Columbus and his despoliation of the word ‘Carib’ to make it synonymous with the eating of human flesh – provoke an instant re-reading of the brilliant essay by the Barbadian-Harlem writer, Richard B. Moore, ‘Caribs, Cannibals and Human Relations’, which debunks the degradation of the original Caribbean people continued by an eminent Columbus scholar, 500 years after it was begun by Columbus himself.

Kirkpatrick Sale’s The Conquest of Paradise makes a very different approach to Columbus, concerning itself as much with the huge impact of his wake, as with his life and times. This is made very clear on the same key subject of ‘cannibalism’, in which Sale leaves Fernandez-Armesto’s Columbian attitudes well behind. ‘The myths surrounding the Caribs are almost entirely fabrications born in the fable-hearted mind of Cristobal Colon’, declares Sale after presenting his evidence – and there is much else that is brave, true and myth-breaking in his outstanding book.

He sees Columbus’s enterprise as the first project that sought to impose Europe upon a continent that was nothing but its own: ‘It wasn’t so much that Europe discovered America as that it incorporated it.’ Sale’s thematic stress upon Columbus as the man, who, as he continually testified in his journals, arrived to ‘discover and acquire’ (thus making the two words synonymous throughout his life’s work), flaunting his preoccupation – as expressed in his letter to Queen Isabella – with ‘things of great profit’, makes his book effectively an examination of the base of imperialism. For ‘only Europe was so interested in global dominance’, and Sale presents a taxonomy of its
crimes without jargon or sensationalism. He is particularly strong on showing the environmental devastation imposed upon America and its people as a direct result of Columbus’s intervention as well as the destructive work of those who came after him, and its relationship to the ecological damage that had already been committed in Europe—such as the demolition of thousands of acres of forestlands. *The Conquest of Paradise* will remain a seminal text well after the quincentenary, demonstrating in an engagingly clear and often poetic style how all the worst structures and routines of the European mind and culture—from a savage frenzy of organised religious hatred, a predilection for exploiting the ‘gentleness’ of generous hosts to the habit of systematically destroying the balance and bounty of the natural environment—were all foisted upon the lands that, after Columbus and his associates, became the Americas.

I’m searching for America, and I fear I won’t find her
... I’m calling America but she doesn’t reply;
those who fear the truth have hidden her.

Thus wrote Panamanian poet Ruben Blades in his poem *Looking for America*, which is quoted by Duncan Green in his unremitting survey of the contemporary inheritance of Columbus’s 1492 landfall, *Faces of Latin America*.6

Green has done a most useful service in compiling his book at this particular time and date, for it stands as a concise and compact amalgam of facts and commentary upon Latin America today, and the ways in which the region’s condition reaches directly back to Columbus and his historic moment. For what came after—as soon as Columbus set about building his first colony at the ‘Isabella’ settlement on the northern coast of ‘Hispaniola’, institutionalising the subjugation of the local peoples and their hospitable cacique, Guacanagari—was the creation of, in Green’s words, ‘the most unequal continent in the world’. His book is a grotesque but factual journey through the many different dimensions of this horrific inequality as they are manifested today. From the narco-capitalism of Peru and Colombia, which continues to enslave eight million consumers in the US alone, it runs through the environmental disasters of places like the Brazilian city of Cubatao, where deadly toxic dioxanes and benzene produced and dumped by foreign multinationals have caused so many people to die and lives to be wrecked (‘We are being forced to choose between poverty and poison’, declared one campaigner), to the hamburger imperialism providing for the US fast-food market which is denuding the Central American states of erstwhile healthy farming and ranching lands. All this, and the grim tyrannies and autocracies that sustain it through many parts of the Americas, is the flotsam and jetsam of the *Santa Maria* and her little flotilla, the
consequences of Columbus’s four mortal voyages.

*The Voice of the Victims, 1492-1992* raises the question of whether any authentic Christian could ever feel sanguine about Columbus’s 1492 arrival and its ensuing 500 years. ‘It is not the memory of a blessing, but the nightmare of a genocide’, write the editors, Virgil Elizondo and Leonardo Boff, in their introductory essay. The contributors write in awe of what their predecessors from Europe have done and what continues to happen for the sake of US and European expansionism, including ‘extinguishing, snuffing out thousands of peoples with their original languages and cultures, and exterminating at least three great civilizations’. Thus, a sustained note of overwhelming guilt envelops the articles that form this book.

Yet, in the tradition of de las Casas, there is a sharp and compassionate witness to be found in the authors’ words. They hold up no spiritual illusions to conceal, only the reality of the experience of the victims to reveal. And not just the victims, but those who struggle and organise too. Reminiscent of las Casas’ recounting of the aims of Columbus and his company’s Christian mission – ‘which is to acquire gold, and to swell themselves with riches in a very brief time and thus rise to high estate disproportionate to their merits’ – are the words of these priest-authors of today, when they describe the present political and economic arrangements across most of the continent:

Such wealth allowed for the establishment of vast military, administrative and ecclesiastical bureaucracy, which came to control every detail of social life . . . they established an appropriate socio-economic and political system based on large land holdings and servility to foreign capital, and promoted cultural creativity merely as a local embodiment of foreign cultural traditions.

Thus, *The Voice of the Victims* is a deeply moving expression of the pain that came with Columbus in 1492 and has stayed permanently with the massive extending of his lucrative enterprise through history, and is a powerful repudiation of any celebratory response to 1992.

That the same publisher should produce, simultaneously, two books so implacably different about the same subject as Thomas’s *Christopher Columbus* and Carpentier’s *The Harp and the Shadow*, is perhaps indicative of the way in which contemporary commercial enterprises will treat the historical divide surrounding the navigator. As in the vision of Columbus, the ‘divine metal’ promises to shine for them, too, in 1992. Certainly, David A. Thomas’s *Christopher Columbus: master of the Atlantic* is in the celebratory vein, advertised as ‘a lavishly illustrated, comprehensive and straightforward account of the great man and his achievements to complement the quincentennial celebrations of his discovery of the New World’ – a sort of souvenir brochure to 1992 that is also something of a praise-song to the ‘great
discoverer', and typical of the kind of historical propaganda-piece that can be expected to set the laudatory tone for the quincentenary.

Thomas is not an original researcher, and quite openly admits that he has scoured the research of others. But he is undoubtedly an effective keeper and repeater of the myth, and combines this with a verve for topicalising history in crude and simplistic ways. Queen Isabella, requestor and protector of the Inquisition and directly responsible for the torture, death and pillaging of thousands of Spanish Jews, is considered as an 'enlightened monarch' who 'brought to her reign a Thatcher-like single-minded reforming zeal'. As for the people who Columbus met in the Caribbean, they were 'primitive natives', cannibals who 'ate anyone they managed to capture... As if in a butcher's shop, large cuts and joints from human bodies hung from huts', with those confined 'fattened like capons ready for the eating'. Thomas then adds a sick anecdote worthy of twentieth-century tabloid journalism: 'the natives were made violently sick after eating a friar, which thereafter gave a measure of protection for anyone wearing ecclesiastical clothes'. This is a marker for what threatens to pass as history and objective fact during the quincentenary.

Fortunately, then, that from the same publisher comes Alejo Carpentier's truly heretic novel of 1978 in its first translation from the Spanish: *The Harp and the Shadow* - a genuine discovery for the English language in 1992. Nothing could be a more effective printed rejoinder to the previous volume under review than this novel by the great Cuban innovator of words and the historical imagination, who must have understood, over a decade before, what would need to be confronted and rebutted in 1992.

It is the mid-1880s. As the 'plagues' of socialism and communism and other radical ideas and 'dangerous Utopian visions' sweep across Europe, challenging Christian and conservative shibboleths, Pope Pius IX seeks an ideological antidote. As the 400th anniversary of Columbus's Caribbean landfall approaches, he thinks he has found what he needs in a scheme to beatify and eventually canonise the 'discoverer' himself - a figure of 'planetary wingspan' worthy of a prominent place in 'the litany of saints'. Accomplishing this, declares the pontiff, will counteract this 'dangerous passion of thinking' that is undermining the influence of his Church. This bold conception and its eventual failure comprise the first and last sections of the novel. The middle part is the story of Columbus's life, meditated by himself, as he lies dying and waiting for his confessor, dressed in a Franciscan habit in a 'sad Valladolid dusk'.

This most relentless and remorseful narrative is the 'Discoverer-discovered, uncovered', revealing to his own self-tortured soul the sordid chase for wealth and profit that was his life. It is Columbus
unlearning himself. As he re-lives his career and travels, he begins to bask again in the ‘glory I would achieve as the discoverer’, as well as remembering the life of lies, masks and images of himself as he who ‘defied the rages of nature and man’ – the Herculean figure and ‘magnifier’ of the world who managed the ‘most fabulous undertaking ever made’. Yet also looming into his consciousness are the deceptions and intrigues by which he lived as history’s great charlatan, his lying and dissembling and all for ‘gold, gold dust, gold bars, gold treasure chests, gold casks: the sweet music of gold coins clattering, spilling onto the banker’s table: celestial music’. And with gold and the monstrous system supported by it, also the human material, the ‘shit-assed Indians’ that he enslaved and massacred in his attempts to ‘substitute the flesh of the Indies for the gold of the Indies’ – a labour value even greater than the obsessional gold, the ‘irreplaceable energy of human flesh’. And we are back to, and forward to, the reality of 1992 in the slums of Sao Paulo and Lima, the canefields of the Dominican Republic, the tin mines of Bolivia or the banana lands of Honduras and Guatemala.

*The Harp and the Shadow*, although it spans the world and tells much of its story from Europe, could only have been made through the genius of a Caribbean writer, a novelist from the heart of the arc of islands that Columbus and his successors tore into and despoiled. Its publication is a rare triumph of the quincentenary and comes from a liberated mind in a liberated but isolated land, that has set aside the legacy of Columbus but which, in 1992, stands besieged and vulnerable, facing the hatred and weapons of the new imperialism of the America to the north.

**Books reviewed**