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Celebrating Columbus, Brave and Bright

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As children, my friends and I knew as a matter of indisputable rhyme that “In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue,” and that, by doing so, he both discovered America and proved that the earth was not flat. Few of us, I’d venture, ever questioned whether or not this was true.

Our ignorance was to the clear advantage of the mythmakers, for Christopher Columbus doesn’t do too well when subjected to the eagle eye of the fact-checker. First off, however you elect to parse “discovery,” Columbus wasn’t the first outsider to discover America. As early as 30,000 years ago, human beings started to move across a Siberia-Alaska land bridge named Beringia and then to fan out throughout the Americas. On the Western side of things, Leif Ericson and the Vikings made it to North America around 1000 A.D. but saw fit not to stick around. Strike one for the fable.

Strike two: Contra Mr. Gershwin, “they” did not all laugh “at Christopher Columbus when he said the world was round” — primarily because they already knew that. As Stephen Jay Gould has observed, “there never was a period of ‘flat earth darkness’ among scholars.” They had accepted the spherical theory from the time of Socrates, and it had reigned without interruption ever since. Insinuations to the contrary, still pervasive in the public imagination, derive first from 17th-century Protestant attempts to paint Catholics as backwards, and then from the 19th-century atheist movement, which picked up the falsehood and propagated it to demonstrate the supposed benightedness of the religious.

Given that he wasn’t looking for it, Columbus’s hitting upon the New World was something of a happy accident. When he eventually bumped into land, he thought that he was in India, “but,” as the song explains, accurately this time, “India the land was not. / It was the Bahamas, and it was hot.” (This, incidentally, is why the West Indies and “American Indians” are so named.) Alas, the accident was not so happy for all. While lateness and disorientation are excusable at most affairs, it is a truth almost universally agreed upon that killing your hosts is not — which made it all the more regrettable that Columbus’s entourage brought with it the unwelcome gift of smallpox and promptly wiped out large swaths of the locals. Strike three, to be sure.

Three strikes, but not *out*. The explosion of certain parts of the Columbus myth, along with some more recent discoveries about his less noble proclivities, has led many to disown the man and a few more to protest against the national holiday in his honor. Berkeley, Brown, and — ironically — Columbia universities have abolished recognition of Columbus Day entirely, while others have substituted nebulous celebrations of “diversity” on that day. Journey into any trendy progressive enclave and you will find that Christopher Columbus is *persona non grata*.

This, like most political correctness, is a grievous mistake. As the historian William J. Connell argues, Columbus may not have been the first of the voyagers to discover America, but he was undoubtedly the most important. “His arrival,” Connell argues, “marks where we as a country and a hemisphere began our identity.” Unlike previous landings, Columbus’s *mattered*. It was the first to lead to a permanent settlement and the first enduring landing from a civilization that boasted modern ideas such as a belief in science, reason, individual achievement, and Christianity. Ultimately, Columbus’s story serves as the

introduction to a story of immeasurable historical importance. To dismiss celebration of the man because he didn't make it to America first would be akin to declaring that we must scorn Isaac Newton's contribution to science because he wasn't actually hit by an apple.

Of the charge that he brought smallpox to the New World and is thus guilty of wiping out untold numbers of the native people, Columbus must be exonerated. The vast majority of the devastation inflicted upon the Indian tribes was inadvertent: As he did not propose that the world was round, he also did not propose germ theory — that would not be proffered until after the invention of the telephone — and it is simply preposterous to postulate that he should have known what would happen when two hitherto unfamiliar worlds collided. If one is to lay the blame at Columbus's feet for the collapse of the Indian population, one also must blame the Indians for unwittingly giving the visitors syphilis, which they took back with them and which subsequently wiped out upwards of 5 million Europeans. It was an unfortunate quid pro quo, to be sure, but not one for which either side should feel much guilt.

Okay, counter the naysayers, but Columbus was a bit of a bastard. Among the further charges leveled against him are that he considered that the natives he met “would make fine servants” and attempted to convert them to Christianity; that on his second voyage he transported slaves, many of whom died; and that, at least by one semi-reliable account, while he was serving as governor of Hispaniola, his men took to “killing, terrorizing, afflicting, and torturing the native peoples” in order to “prevent” them “from thinking for themselves as human beings.”

Heinous as this behavior was, to impose modern morality on the past is to exhibit historical illiteracy. Contrary to the picture painted by modern progressives, the *Pinta*, the *Niña*, and the *Santa Maria* did not sail nonchalantly through a barrier of enlightened protesters — (Don't) Occupy America! — on their way to the shore, only to ignore their modernity. Columbus was a man of his time, and we should judge him by the standards of that age, regardless of how we assess them today. He subscribed to an internationally popular Aristotelian precept that those captured in battle were rendered slaves, which distinguished him from nobody; he was desperately ambitious and something of a social climber, qualities without which he would never have made such astonishing expeditions; he was motivated by glory and greed and evangelical fervor, as was most of the world (as is, perhaps, the world today). The fact that he reflected his society is not the interesting or exceptional thing about him. Columbus's first voyage, like the trip to the moon, is worth celebrating in and of itself, without worrying about whether he'd be invited to the ThinkProgress annual gala.

Judging by the language used against him, one suspects that it is not really Columbus that concerns the anti-Columbus types; rather, they object to Columbus Day because they object to the colonization of America, and they disdain less Columbus qua Columbus than what subsequently flowed from the man's exploits. There we must part company.

A peculiar but popular view holds that, until the brutish Europeans came and violated its innocence in the name of profit, American Indian culture was the last vestige of Man before the Fall. This notion replaces history with fantasy. As the European crime was not to invent but to buy into a slave trade that had afflicted Africa for almost a millennium, Columbus's was to mirror the practices of tribal warfare and slavery that were already rife among the natives. He did not impose barbarism on the American continent, but he did fail in many instances to show the better example that many in Europe were in the process of setting. This is enough to disqualify him from being regarded as a great reformer, but it does not disqualify him from being a great explorer. Quite obviously, it is only the latter to which his champions lay claim.

Columbus's voyage was the overture to a European colonization of the North American continent that has been a net good for the world. He may have practiced much that made the Old World execrable, but he opened the door to a New World that has set itself apart in human history as an incubator and beacon of liberty. Columbus set off a veritable scramble for America that culminated in British triumph, American insurrection, and the eventual glorification of Enlightenment values that have, by virtue of their codification, been protected at home and abroad by American predominance.

As the poem has it:

The first American? No, not quite.

But Columbus was brave, and he was bright.

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