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GOODBY COLUMBUS AND ALL THAT: HISTORY AND  
TEXTUAL CRITICISM

*Columbus*. FELIPE FERNÁNDEZ-ARMESTO. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. xxvii + 218 pp. (Cloth US\$ 16.95, Paper US\$ 6.99)

*The Worlds of Christopher Columbus*. WILLIAM D. PHILLIPS, JR. & CARLA RAHN PHILLIPS. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. xii + 322 pp. (Cloth US\$ 27.95)

*In Search of Columbus: The Sources for the First Voyage*. DAVID HENIGE. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991. xiii + 359 pp. (Cloth US\$ 29.95)

*Columbus and the Golden World of the Island Arawaks: The Story of the First Americans and Their Caribbean Environment*. D.J.R. WALKER. Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 1992. 320 pp. (Cloth US\$ 12.95)

By the time this review appears in print, the Quincentenary celebrations and/or deprecations of the event will be slowly fading into most welcomed oblivion. There will be, of course, the unavoidable local commemorations of specific events: the discovery of such and such island, the anniversary of some European misdeed, the struggle for the valley of Mexico; but the collective remembrance of the Encounter/Discovery will have been allowed to run its course. In truth, after a veritable flood of publications, seminars, operas, protests, and ghastly movies, one is not too sorry to see the whole affair put safely away for another century. If there is any consolation to this continuous process of recovered memories and history, it is that a good number of sensible and scholarly works have been published – including some of those reviewed here – which demolish the idealization and glorification of the Atlantic enterprise and set the history of the Encounter/Discovery within a proper historical context.

Among the deluge of books and articles on Encounter/Discovery topics, many of these scholarly and pseudo-scholarly *oeuvres* have advanced specific ideological stances or promoted particular causes which in some cases – despite their attractiveness – compromise the very nature of the inquiry. To cite just one example, Kirkpatrick Sale's popular *The Conquest of Paradise*, while voicing views with which I am not entirely unsympathetic, ends up being yet another example of Whiggish history by failing to contextualize fully the events of 1492 and their aftermath.

The four books under review here range widely, from broad examinations of Columbus and his world to a focused discussion and critique of our main sources for the history of the Encounter to an idealized, and often uncritical, view of the original inhabitants of the Caribbean or "Indies." These four books provide a chronological narrative of the period before and after 1492 and are best described in that natural sequence.

William and Carla Phillips's *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus* is a careful, clear, and well-crafted account of the world at the end of the fifteenth century. It opens with a brief critical review of the historiography and sources for Columbus's life and then proceeds to provide a broad context for his historic voyage across the Ocean Sea. Drawing upon the most recent scholarship, the Phillipses, both of them formidable scholars of late medieval and early modern Spain and the Atlantic world, offer a sober and clear description of the world, both Old and New, before 1492. The known world in the late fifteenth century, above all Europe, was at a crossroads economically, socially, and politically. In that context, Columbus's enterprise was one further chapter in the long history of European expansion, of the search for new trade, and of developing seafaring technology. As such, the voyages of discovery were also embedded in the long rivalry between Islam and Christianity.

Parting from this general overview, the Phillipses turn to Columbus himself and, adhering strictly to the sources, proceed to dismiss the numerous unfounded speculations that have been advanced about Columbus's origins and life. His pursuit of royal support in Portugal and Spain and the final approval of his plans by the Catholic Kings after earlier rejections are placed firmly in the context of Spanish politics and of the final struggle against Granada. There was nothing romantic or mysterious about Ferdinand and Isabella's decision to sponsor the enterprise of the Ocean Sea. It was, at best, an inexpensive gamble, taken without much expectation of success. Similar myths about the composition of the crew, the actual voyage, and the exact location of the Columbian landfall are equally demolished. Their final chapters examine the conquest and settlement of Europeans in the New World and the ecological, medical, economic, and cultural impact of the Encounter on the world at large.

Felipe Fernández-Armesto's *Columbus*, written before *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus*, covers some of the themes explored by the Phillipeses, with certain significant differences. Although also paying attention to the historical context (especially to Columbus's Genoese background – a task that the author had taken on previously in his 1987 book, *Before Columbus*), the focus here is on Columbus himself, a man described as a “socially ambitious, socially awkward parvenu.” As in the previous book, Fernández-Armesto examines the sources critically and strips Columbus and his enterprise of the usual mythification. This does not prevent him, however, from speculating about Columbus's personality and psychological make-up. Carefully tracing the sources for Columbus's mental map of the world (Ptolemy, Marco Polo, Pierre d'Ailly, and others), the author concludes with a detailed and most useful study of Columbus's four crossings, leading to an excellent contextualized summary of the Columbian legacy.

These two books bring us to the New World and to the first encounters between European and natives – at first peaceful enough, but by the second voyage marked by violent conflict and plans for the enslavement of the “Indians.” D.J.R. Walker's *Columbus and the Golden World of the Island Arawaks* is a narrative of this encounter, of the tragic demise of the Arawaks under the violence of contact and conquest, and of their paradisiacal habitat. Following closely upon published sources, Walker traces those final years of Arawak “idyllic” life, and the destruction of this life by sickness and abuse.

David Henige's *In Search of Columbus: The Sources for the First Voyage* is a careful and exhaustive examination of the sources for Columbus's first journal: the so-called *diario*, as rendered by Bartolomé de las Casas, the latter's *Historia de las Indias*, and the *Historie* or *Life of Columbus* attributed to Columbus's son. Henige's textual criticism of these works – of modern editions and translations and their use or misuse by some scholars – undermines their validity and raises questions as to what can really be known about the first voyage and the exact location of landfall. What Henige illustrates in painstaking detail is a long history of willful and/or unconscious accretions, alterations, and interpretations which transform the original texts and diminish their value. His anger is vented as much on early modern renderings of Columbus's writings as it is on modern editions of these texts. In the end, skepticism is the only escape for Henige, as the line between fiction and history is irrevocably blurred.

In these four books, the reader observes a wide range of scholarly approaches to Columbus and the Encounter. The Phillipeses' *The Worlds of Columbus* and Fernández-Armesto's *Columbus* are worthy examples of careful and judicious scholarship. Both of these books examine the evidence in a critical and sober manner, and their assessment of Columbus and

his enterprise is evenhanded and informative. While it is true that our knowledge of the Admiral of the Ocean Sea and his world is, by the very nature of the evidence, limited, what is remarkable is how much we do know and can know about this particular topic. I am not certain that either book will fully dispel the myths about Columbus. Fiction and received opinion is, I fear, often stronger than truth.

Walker's study of Arawaks is well-meaning and written in a loving manner. Alas it suffers from serious flaws. Although he writes with a great deal of earnestness, the author does not read Spanish and this lack compromises his knowledge and use of the sources. There are nagging little mistakes throughout the work; he states, for example, that the population of Spain was 4,000,000 in the late fifteenth century when in reality it was almost double that number. His uncritical reliance on Morison and his dated scholarship (with none of the important work on archeology and no work after 1980 cited) diminish what is otherwise an engaging book.

As for Henige's book, one cannot but admire his fierce critical assessment and his uncompromising search for a text clean of later accretions. In the end, however, no serious historian can ever write history without a critical attitude towards his/her sources. Although Henige's criticism of modern editions is valid, his attacks on the historian's use of these sources is often restricted to local *savants* arguing over the precedence of their homelands or historians who have long been superseded by a more recent and, along the lines of Henige's admonitions, more critical approach to their sources. So let us wave goodbye to Columbus for now and wait for the next century to rewrite anew the diverse histories of discovery, encounter, and conquest.

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