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# Christopher Columbus in United States Historiography: Biography as Projection

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For historical scholarship, 1992 represents an important anniversary –the quincentenary of the first voyage of Christopher Columbus from Spain to the Western Hemisphere. Columbus has long occupied an important position in the cultural tradition of the United States. Although he never saw the mainland of North America, one of the holidays in the national calendar commemorates his first landfall in the western hemisphere. Columbus Day originated as an Italian-American holiday, however, and continues to be identified more with Italy than with the voyage sponsored by Spain. At least forty-seven counties, cities, and towns in the United States, scattered among twenty-nine of the fifty states, are named for Columbus, along with numerous civic and cultural institutions. The place names usually take the form of Columbus or Columbia, but they also include other variations, such as Columbiana in Alabama and Ohio, and Colon in Michigan<sup>1</sup>. The federal government of the United States has its seat in the District of Columbia, and the goddess “Columbia,” a poetic invention of the late nineteenth century, was designed as a symbol of the United States.

In short, the country has absorbed Columbus into its national mythology, which is one of the few points where the United States and Latin America find common ground. For the most part, the early history of the United States concentrates on the English colonial experience, barely mentioning that

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<sup>1</sup> This is based on a search in the Rand McNally Road Atlas: United States, Canada, Mexico, 64th ed. Chicago, New York, and San Francisco, 1988.

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Columbus sailed for Spain, and that the Spanish presence in North America lasted for several centuries. Except for the attention to Columbus, therefore, the founding mythology of the United States is more like that of Canada, which has no holiday for Columbus and no town<sup>2</sup> named for him, even though its westernmost province is British Columbia.

Despite the attention devoted to Columbus and his voyages in the United States, he remains a largely mysterious figure, two-dimensional and remote. His exploits have assumed mythic proportions, but there has been little attempt to probe beyond the myth, even in works devoted specifically to the man and his career. To explore this phenomenon, we will examine some of the ways that Columbus has been presented in historical writing in the United States, particularly in textbooks written for various educational levels.

Columbus appears in virtually every textbook and general history of the United States, and it would be far too time-consuming to survey them all. A good selection of publications is the bibliography included in Frances Fitzgerald's *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century*<sup>3</sup>. In our own research, we examined 245 published works, forty-seven percent of them textbooks, sixteen percent designed for a general adult audience, fifteen percent popular biographies of Columbus, and eleven percent scholarly works dealing with Columbus and related topics. The remainder comprised children's books that were not textbooks, and a very few surveys of Latin American history written for a United States audience. The books ranged in time over several centuries, but about eighty-five percent of them were published since 1890<sup>4</sup>.

We were interested in the way that authors have discussed Columbus and his accomplishments, though a general history of the United States would obviously treat Columbus in a cursory fashion compared to a full biography. We were also interested to trace whether the writers of textbooks have incorporated the results of scholarly research about Columbus into their work. A survey of changes overtime in the treatment of Columbus lay at the center of our inquiry. Among other concerns, we were anxious to see if changes in descriptions of Columbus could be traced to changes in historiographical fas-

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2 *Ibidem*.

3 Little, Brown, Boston, 1979, pp. 227-240.

4 In the notes, we cite many, but by no means all, of the works we consulted.

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hions in the United States. Frances Fitzgerald's analysis of modern textbooks strongly suggested that would be the case, but it was not clear at the outset what changing fashions of historical approach would mean for the treatment of Columbus. In presenting our findings we will proceed chronologically, commenting upon the various themes and sub-themes of our investigation as we go along.

One of the first histories of America, ironically, was published in London in 1777, just after the American Revolution began, and is not therefore a part of United States historiography<sup>5</sup>. Nonetheless, the author William Robertson, a Scottish clergyman of immense erudition and generosity of spirit, influenced writers in the United States for at least two generations. He had read extensively in published works from Spain and elsewhere and provided his English-speaking audience with current scholarship and a gracefully written narrative. His section on Columbus relied very heavily on the biography attributed to the explorer's son Ferdinand, as well as on the writings of the Dominican Friar Bartolomé de las Casas. Once the new nation calling itself the United States of America broke free from England and began to invent its own history, Robertson's elegant narrative served as a model and a starting point.

Robertson provided the precedent for beginning the history of the United States in Europe as a continuation of the centuries' old quest for new commercial routes and markets. He presented Columbus as a Genoese merchant mariner, the intellectual heir of every Mediterranean mariner who had ever sailed. Following Ferdinand's biography, Robertson described Columbus as a sincere Catholic from an honorable Genoese family, with substantial education and an early talent for seafaring. Blessed with an active, curious mind and a scientific spirit, he displayed courage, modesty, genius, persistence in the face of adversity, and steadfastness in pursuit of his ideals. In short, he was the perfect hero. Robertson treated Spain and Portugal and their monarchs with respect but hardly with admiration. Columbus was the heroic individual, rising above the political squabbles and money-grubbing of kings and queens.

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<sup>5</sup> Robertson, William: *The History of the Discovery and Settlement of America*, J. & J. Harper, New York, 1828; 1st ed. London, 1777.

When the three hundredth anniversary of Columbus's first voyage took place in 1792, the United States was a new nation, looking for its own heroes and its own anniversaries. Columbus became the first real American hero because of his legendary exploits, and even more because he represented the virtues that the new nation liked to see in itself. The Society of St. Tammany (alternatively titled the Columbian Order) held a dinner and other celebrations in New York on October 12, 1792. From Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin and other members of the American Philosophical Society sent an emissary to Spain to mark the third centenary. Jeremy Belknap wrote a laudatory essay on Columbus in Boston in 1792, along with other patriotic essays on the beginning of United States history<sup>6</sup>. Like Robertson, Belknap relied almost exclusively on Ferdinand's biography of Columbus. Perhaps the importance of Columbus to the founding myth of the United States was more fortuitous than anything else—a product of the coincidence of the tri-centenary of his voyage with the recent independence of the United States and the creation of its written constitution. Nonetheless, the identification of Columbus as the first American hero persisted, along with the identification of his virtues as quintessentially American virtues.

The first two decades of the nineteenth century saw the development of textbooks in United States history that consciously aimed to create virtuous and patriotic citizens. For the Reverend Charles A. Goodrich, whose history of the United States was reprinted almost 150 times, the story of Columbus illustrated the virtues of “decision, energy and perseverance,” while humbling the reader with the knowledge that virtue could not protect Columbus from dying “the victim of ingratitude and disappointment”<sup>7</sup>. To Goodrich, lessons such as these could shape human character and actions, while revealing the hand of God in history.

William Grimshaw's textbook on United States history, first published in 1821, won the approval of various college presidents, whose endorsements

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6 Belknap, Jeremy: *A Discourse Intended to Commemorate the Discovery of America by Christopher Columbus*, Belknap and Hall, Boston, 1792. For the New York commemoration, see Hatch, Jane D., ed.: *The American Book of Days*, 3d ed., H. W. Wilson, New York, 1978. For that of Franklin and the American Philosophical Society, see Sanchez, Joseph P.: “Hispanic American Heritage,” in *Seeds of Change: A Quincentennial Commemoration*, ed. Herman J. Viola and Carolyn Margolin, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1991, p. 185.

7 Rev. Goodrich, Charles A.: *A History of the United States of America*, D. F. Robinson & Co., Hartford, 1829), p. 20.

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were included in the 1826 edition. One of them praised his effort “to Americanize foreign history for the use of our schools”<sup>8</sup>. Grimshaw used Columbus’s story to exemplify courage, intelligence, and persistence in the face of adversity. Like other writers before and since, Grimshaw illustrated the vicissitudes of fame and fortune by stories of Portuguese treachery and Spanish ingratitude to Columbus. Portuguese treachery followed Columbus’s attempt to interest King John II in his scheme to sail westward toward Asia. After turning him down, the king secretly outfitted voyages to make the attempt. Spanish ingratitude involved the rescinding of many promises made to Columbus regarding the profits and administration of any lands he found. According to the crown, Columbus forfeited those privileges by maladministration.

A great leap forward in Columbian scholarship in the United States occurred in 1828, with the publication of Washington Irving’s three-volume biography of Columbus<sup>9</sup>. Irving already enjoyed fame as a popular writer and as a diplomat working for the United States government. He cultivated the friendship of many of the most noted intellectuals in the nation, entertaining them at his estate in upstate New York. In his diplomatic travels he spent many years in Spain and wrote often on Spanish themes. For his Columbus biography, he was able to rely on a very important collection of documents published in Madrid in 1825. Its compiler, the historian Martín Fernández de Navarrete, had gathered together three volumes of material on the early Spanish voyages of exploration as part of his life-long dedication to publishing document collections; the first volume dealt primarily with Columbus<sup>10</sup>. Irving mined the Navarrete collection thoroughly for his biography—so thoroughly that he was later accused of plagiarism by another American writer<sup>11</sup>.

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8 Grimshaw, William: *History of the United States*, John Grigg, Philadelphia, 1826; revised from 1821 edition.

9 Irving, Washington: *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, first published in a 3-volume edition in New York and a 4-volume edition in London, both in 1828. The definitive scholarly version was edited by John Harmon McElroy, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1981.

10 Fernández de Navarrete, Martín: *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos que hicieron por mar los españoles desde fines del siglo XV*, Madrid, 1825, 3 vols. Vol. 1, *Viajes de Colón*, contained most of the documents dealing with Columbus, many of them not published before.

11 Wallis, Severn Teackle: a lawyer from Maryland, made the initial accusation in a series of articles in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in the 1840s. Other authors picked up the cry thereafter. Irving did not care to dignify the charges by replying to them, and supposedly never read the articles. See the introduction by John Harmon McElroy in the 1981 edition of Irving, *Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, p. lxxiv.

The charge was understandable. Irving openly acknowledged his intellectual debt to Navarrete's work, but sections of the biography followed Navarrete a bit too closely. Irving had access to a wealth of other documents in Madrid while he was writing, but he ignored most of them, relying instead on Navarrete's documents to flesh out the accepted story of Columbus's life as told by his son Ferdinand and by Bartolomé de las Casas. Above all Irving was a popularizer, not a historian. He planned to tell a familiar story in a literary and entertaining way, not to produce anything new<sup>12</sup>.

Irving's biography of Columbus enjoyed sensational popularity, not only in the United States, but around the world. Besides being reprinted thirty-nine times in English, fifty-one editions in other languages appeared before the author's death in 1859. In all, 175 full editions and abridgements were published between 1828 and 1900, supplanting Robertson and everyone else as the definitive work on Columbus<sup>13</sup>. Navarrete compiled his document collection in part to combat inaccuracies about Spain in the works of Robertson and other European historians. He objected strongly to the portrayal of Columbus as a misunderstood genius who had been scorned in Spain, given minimal help for the historic voyage of 1492, and betrayed thereafter by the crown. Although Irving used Navarrete's documents to correct the record on certain points, he very deliberately retained the heroic portrait of Columbus that had become the staple of United States historiography.

Virtually every subsequent textbook for the next several decades seems to have used Irving's biography of Columbus as its main source, although Robertson continued to be popular as well. Charles Goodrich expanded the 1833 edition of his popular history to incorporate detail from Irving, whom he gratefully acknowledged<sup>14</sup>. The general vision of Columbus the unblemished hero continued to hold sway<sup>15</sup>. As Emma Willard put it:

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12 Hedges, William L.: *Washington Irving: An American Study, 1802-1832*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1965, pp. 236-250.

13 Irving, Washington: *Life and Voyages...*, p. lxxxvi.

14 Rev. Goodrich, Charles A.: *A History...* In the 1833 edition Hartford: H. F. Sumner & Co., the section on Columbus covers pp. 16-43. In the earlier edition it covered pp. 10-20.

15 See, for example Eliot, Samuel: *Manual of United States History*, Hickling, Swan, and Brown, Boston, 1856, p. 483; Murray, M.: *History of the United States of America*, Benjamin B. Mussey & Co., Boston, 1852, p. 441; Willard, Emma: *History of the United States or Republic of America*, A. S. Barnes & Co., New York, 1852; originally published 1828, pp. 484 + xxvii; Niles, Sanford: *Niles's School History of the United States*, American Book Company, New York, 1889, p. 304; Willson, Marcius: *History of the*



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He possessed a teeming imagination, an ardent courage, a glowing zeal, and all those energetic impulses of the soul which lead to high achievement; and, with these noble qualities, he combined judgment the most grave and solid, prudence and patience the most steady and unoffending, piety the most devout, and what chiefly ensured his success, the most untiring perseverance ever manifested by man<sup>16</sup>.

In strikingly similar terms, G. P. Quackenbos noted that Columbus “was distinguished by a vivid imagination, lofty enthusiasm, high moral worth, great inventive genius, and a steadfastness of purpose which overcame all difficulties”<sup>17</sup>. Every misfortune that befell him, especially his disgrace for administrative incompetence, was either ignored or blamed on others, never on Columbus. The warfare and exploitation that devastated the natives of the Caribbean escaped notice altogether. One textbook’s cover enshrined Columbus’ s voyage of exploration as the foundation of American history: the dates 1492 and 1776 framed an evocative display of books, farm machinery, mines, and various advances in transport and communications—the technology that was making the United States a growing world power<sup>18</sup>. The influence of such textbook adulation can hardly be overestimated. One very popular book written by S. G. Goodrich in 1843 was re-printed numerous times. Designed “for the use of schools and families,” the 1868 edition claimed that 500,000 copies had been sold and noted that it was the designated textbook in Maryland and Pennsylvania<sup>19</sup>.

Some authors in the mid-nineteenth century chose to give the edifying story of Columbus their own particular slant. Thomas D’Arcy McGee’s *Catholic History of North America* emphasized the faith and piety of Columbus, and the Catholic nature of European exploration. McGee and

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*United States*, Ivison, Blakeman, Taylor & Co., New York, 1880; previous editions 1853 and 1866, p. 459; Higginson, Thomas Wentworth: *Young Folks’ History of the United States*, Lee and Shepard, Boston, 1880, p. 382; Steele, Joel Dorman: *A Brief History of the United States for Schools*, A. S. Barnes & Company, New York, 1871; reprinted several times, and revised in 1903.

16 Willard: *History of the United States*, 1852, p. 9.

17 Quackenbos, G. P.: *Illustrated School History of the United States of America*, D. Appleton and Company, New York, 1869; earlier copyrights 1857 and 1865.

18 Scudder, Horace A.: *A History of the United States of America*, J. H. Butler, Philadelphia, 1884.

19 Goodrich, S. G.: *A Pictorial History of the United States*, E. H. Butler & Co., Philadelphia: 1843, 1854, 1860, 1868.

others wrote to counter the anti-Catholic bias that colored many historical publications in nineteenth century America<sup>20</sup>. Many non-Catholic authors applauded Columbus's heroic virtues, including piety, but not his Catholicism. At least a few school texts and popular books shifted from the exclusively European focus of their precursors, beginning their American histories with the peoples who had arrived millennia before the Europeans, whom Columbus called Indians. However brief their treatment of the Indians was, at least it marked an important shift from the single-minded Euro-centrism of Robertson and his followers<sup>21</sup>.

One author stood nearly alone in the mid-nineteenth century, using the evidence from Navarrete and a sensitive reading of Irving and others to question the standard portrayal of Columbus. Jacob Abbott, a successful author of children's books, undoubtedly admired Columbus's skill and intelligence. Nonetheless, he frequently questioned the morality of the admiral's behavior, noting that "there was a strange incongruity in the motives which seemed to actuate him in all this exploring cruise among the islands— an exalted religious enthusiasm, which seemed sometimes quite sublime, mingling with a very eager appetite for worldly wealth and power. Crosses and holy banners in one hour, and in the next Cipango, spices and gold"<sup>22</sup>. It is significant that Abbott wrote children's books, but not school textbooks; he had more freedom to make Columbus a more fully rounded character.

As the fourth centenary of the historic voyage approached, other authors were willing to take a less laudatory view of Columbus. W. L. Alden published a breezy, irreverent biography in 1881, aimed at a literate, adult audience with a sense of humor. His flippant approach to serious matters cannot have endeared him either to Columbus's supporters or to his detractors, but at least the Admiral emerged as a believable human being— still a hero, but with serious human flaws<sup>23</sup>. Other authors simply cashed in on the fourth centenary by publishing trash of one sort or another. Some was in the standard adulatory mode of past American writing about Columbus. One admirer claimed that Columbus had actually married his mistress Beatriz de

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20 McGee, Thomas D'Arcy: *Catholic History of North America*, Patrick Donahoe, Boston, 1855.

21 See, for example, Willard: *History*...

22 Abbott, Jacob: *American History*, Vol. II, *Discovery of America*, Sheldon & Company, New York, 1860, p. 102.

23 Alden, W. L.: *Christopher Columbus*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1881.

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Arana, the mother of his son Ferdinand<sup>24</sup>. One detractor named Aaron Goodrich indulged in a systematic debunking of the heroic myth of Columbus. In the process he attempted to degrade the accomplishments of all of southern Europe, particularly Catholic Europe, although he admired certain individuals such as Ferdinand of Aragon and Amerigo Vespucci<sup>25</sup>. His venomous portrayal reflected a certain segment of American popular opinion, but the book was filled with inaccuracies, misreading of evidence, and wild claims that make other popular writers seem like models of scholarly moderation. Predictably, Goodrich's view found little resonance in a nation that wanted a heroic Columbus as part of its founding myth. At least one author wrote specifically to refute Goodrich, basing his point-by-point rebuttal on Washington living's biography<sup>26</sup>.

In 1892 the fourth centenary of Columbus's voyage stimulated a flood of work about Columbus, including a great deal of serious scholarship published in Europe. Undoubtedly the most important was the massive collection of documents published by the Italian government and known as the *Raccolta Colombiana*<sup>27</sup>. The Navarrete collection in Spain was also more widely known by then, and the American scholar Henry Harrisse published a well-documented biography of Columbus in French in 1884, as well as working with the Italian government on other Columbus scholarship<sup>28</sup>. Serious writers in the United States therefore had access to a much broader range of documentation at the turn of the twentieth century than they had when living wrote, especially if they read Italian, Spanish, and French. One biography published in 1892 aimed to present the latest research on Columbus to a general audience, specifically rejecting Irving's approach and presenting Columbus in a balanced fashion, with flaws as well as virtues<sup>29</sup>. Other authors at least glanced at the recent works by Henry Harrisse and various

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24 Marquis de Belloy: *Christopher Columbus and the Discovery of the New World*, trans. from the French, Gebbie & Co., Philadelphia, 1889.

25 Goodrich, Aaron: *A History of the Character and Achievements of the So-Called Christopher Columbus*, D. Appleton and Company, New York, 1874.

26 Abbott, John S. C.: *Christopher Columbus*, Dodd & Mead, New York, 1875.

27 *Raccolta di documenti e studi pubblicati dalla R. Commissione Colombiana*, ed. C. de Lollis, et al., 15 vols., Rome, 1892-1896.

28 Harrisse, Henry: *Christophe Colomb, son origine, sa vie*, Paris, 1884.

29 Adams, Charles Kendall: *Christopher Columbus*, Dodd, Mead and Company, New York, 1892.

European scholars<sup>30</sup>. Nonetheless, their portrayals of Columbus continued to follow in the footsteps of living, merely toning down his overblown prose.

One important American contribution to the fourth centenary's scholarly output in English was the beautifully printed three volume set by John Boyd Thacher. This massive work followed HARRISSE, to whom it is dedicated, and explored the life and character of Columbus with exemplary thoroughness. Thacher printed numerous documents in transcription and translation, and commented on a range of scholarly controversies surrounding Columbus and his exploits<sup>31</sup>. He acknowledged the man's flaws, but he had a tendency to excuse them for one reason or another. In Thacher's treatment, Columbus remained a towering hero, justly remembered for his important contributions to world history. Much more important as a work of American scholarship was the work of Justin Winsor, published in 1892. Winsor's clear-headed and balanced portrayal still rings true after nearly a century. He dealt with Columbus's overweening desire for fame and fortune, his misrepresentations of what he had found across the ocean, and his maladministration in the Indies, as well as with the qualities of mind and character that made him a pivotal historical figure<sup>32</sup>. In the process, Winsor boosted the reputations of the Spanish monarchs and their advisers—persons whom Columbus's admirers usually presented as malevolent obstacles to his greatness. Winsor's views eventually made inroads into the standard heroic myth of Columbus, at least among serious scholars. In the early decades of the twentieth century, many popular books were also willing to temper their admiration of Columbus with a discussion of his failings<sup>33</sup>. A

30 Hale, Edward Everett: *The Life of Christopher Columbus*, G. L. Howe & Co., Chicago, 1891.

31 Thacher, John Boyd: *Christopher Columbus: His Life, His Work, His Remains*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, vol. 1 and vol. 2, New York, 1903; vol. 3, New York, 1904.

32 Winsor, Justin: *Christopher Columbus and How He Received and Imparted the Spirit of Discovery*, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, Boston, 1892.

33 Channing, Edward: *A History of the United States*, 2 vols., Macmillan Company, New York, 1923; earlier copyright 1905. Another book by Channing: *A Student's History of the United States*, Macmillan, New York, 1919, went through 22 printings and 4 revised editions between 1897 and 1919. Other critical treatments of Columbus are in Henry William Elson, *History of the United States of America* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1904, and reprinted sixteen times. E. Benjamin Andrews, *History of the United States*, 6 vols., Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1916; copyright 1894; Richman, Irving: *Adventurers of New Spain, Part I: The Spanish Conquerors*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1919, Vol. 2 in "The Chronicles of America" series, apparently meant for college libraries; Roll-Wheeler, Francis: *The Quest of the Western World*, George H. Doran Company, New York, 1921.

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variety of foreign books critical of Columbus was also available in the United States<sup>34</sup>.

Yet a large segment of the American public was unwilling to admit the slightest flaw in its heroes, and the reaction against Winsor and other less scholarly critics was swift and long-lasting. Several books vigorously defended Columbus against Winsor specifically<sup>35</sup>. Others simply ignored the critics and wrote modern glosses on living, or tried their hand at epic poetry and drama based on a laudatory view of the Admiral<sup>36</sup>. The tone of many rebuttals to Columbus's critics echoed some of the persistent themes in American historiography, including religious and nationalistic antagonisms. Some supporters of Columbus tended to be anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic. They were willing to forgive Columbus for his Catholicism, because they could use his life to illustrate Spanish perfidy. Some detractors of Columbus also tended to be anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic. Despite the scholarship of Winsor, and despite Irving's debt to Navarrete, anti-Spanish prejudice seems to have grown stronger during the nineteenth century, as legacies of the Mexican War and the Spanish-American War. Some Catholic authors glorified Columbus's achievements as particularly Catholic and often ignored or excused his faults and minimized his association with Spain. There was even a movement to canonize Columbus, which foundered on various obstacles, including his irregular union with Beatriz de Arana. Winsor, in his forceful and honest scholarly analysis, stood nearly alone above the petty and unedifying quarrels of his compatriots.

School textbooks tended to bypass scholarly controversies altogether, aiming to instill the virtues of good citizenship, and defining American heroes with that purpose in mind. Textbooks from the late nineteenth century conti-

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34 See, for example, Nash, William Giles: *America: The True History of Its Discovery*, Grant Richards Ltd., London, 1924.

35 See, for example, Clarke, Richard H.: *Old and New Lights on Columbus*, Richard H. Clarke, New York, 1893.

36 Among the poetic and dramatic efforts, see Durward, Bernard: *Cristoforo Colombo* (privately printed, 1892); Lowell, James Russell: "Columbus," in *The Complete Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell*, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, Boston, 1899; Miller, Joaquin: "Columbus," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Joaquin Miller*, Arno Press, New York, 1972, a reprint of the 1897 edition; Raymond, George Lansing: "Columbus, a play," in *The Aztec God and Other Dramas*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1904; earlier copyright 1900; Alice Merrill Home, Columbus, Westward Ho! (privately printed, 1922), a romanticized dramatization of Columbus's life designed to be performed by children.

nued to be used in the early twentieth, with only minor revisions. And many continued to acknowledge their debt to Washington Irving, published nearly a century before, for their generally laudatory descriptions of Columbus<sup>37</sup>.

With the late 1920s a new approach gained ground in the teaching of United States history, rooted in the political movement known as Progressivism. Rejecting the traditional approach centered on individuals and human character, historians in the Progressive Movement emphasized the social and economic context of history, relegating individuals to the background. Columbus and other explorers became minor actors in the great drama that saw the expansion of markets around the globe. Their characteristic virtues and vices became less central to the main story and were often not even mentioned<sup>38</sup>. This new historical approach gained many adherents, but the traditional emphasis on individuals continued to have strong appeal. One of the masters of the art of historical narrative gave new life to traditional history by his lively and intelligent style. David Saville Muzzey's beautifully written text for high schools, published in 1927 and revised in 1936, presented Columbus as a fully rounded individual, with all the positive and negative attributes of a strong personality. Muzzey knew the available scholarship on Columbus and summarized it persuasively<sup>39</sup>. His subsequent *History of Our Country* became a standard textbook for decades throughout the United States, famous for its vigorous style and intelligent analysis, and

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37 Gibson, J. W.: *A Junior History of the United States*, A Flanagan Company, Chicago, 1910; earlier copyright 1907; Eggleston, Edward: *The New Century History of the United States*, American Book Company, New York, 1907; earlier copyright 1904; Montgomery, David H.: *The Beginner's American History*, Ginn & Company, Boston, 1902; earlier copyrights 1892, 1899; Mitton, G. E.: *Peeps at Great Explorers: Columbus*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1927; Singmaster, Elsie: *The Book of the United States*, George H. Doran Company, New York, 1926; VFW Americanization Department, *America: Great Crises in Our History Told by Its Makers (A Library of Original Sources)*, Volume I, *Discovery and Exploration 1000-1562* (Chicago: Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, 1925); Morris, Charles: *Heroes of Discovery in America*, J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia, 1934; earlier copyrights 1906 and 1919.

38 Fite, Emerson: *History of the United States*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1929; earlier copyrights 1916, 1919, 1923, 1926; Gordy, Wilbur Fisk: *History of the United States*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1929; earlier copyrights 1922, 1925, 1927; Chadsey, Charles; Weinberg, Louis and Miller, Chester: *America in the Making*, D. C. Heath and Company, Boston, 1928; Barnes, Harry, Elisabeth Dexter, and Mabel Walker, *The Making of a Nation*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1929; Beard, Charles and Beard, Mary: *History of the United States*, Macmillan Company, New York, 1949 reprinting of 1934 revised edition; first edition 1921; West, Willis Mason: *American History and Government*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1913.

39 Muzzey, David Saville: *History of The American People*, Ginn and Company, Boston, 1927.

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clearly aimed at encouraging good citizenship and the pursuit of common goals<sup>40</sup>. For younger grades, however, the unmixed heroic portrayal of Columbus continued to dominate<sup>41</sup>.

Despite the considerable scholarship on Columbus in the nineteenth century and thereafter, the approach of the 450th anniversary of his voyage saw no consensus about him in the United States. Popular authors could portray Columbus in wildly different terms. Few new documents had been discovered, so scholars and interested amateurs continued to gnaw on the old ones. Most of the scholarship had been done by Europeans, but their periodic controversies were followed avidly in the United States. For example, various authors had tried to prove that Columbus was other than Genoese, but their proof generally consisted of unfounded supposition and great leaps of inference. The most serious claim was launched by Celso García de la Riega, who published a series of articles and a 1914 book arguing that Columbus was a Spaniard from a family of converted Jews<sup>42</sup>. The documents that García presented to support his claim were ultimately branded as forgeries by a panel of distinguished Spanish scholars in 1928, after García had died<sup>43</sup>. Nonetheless, the claim found its way into numerous publications in the United States<sup>44</sup>.

The most important American contribution to scholarship on Columbus in this period was provided by Alice Bache Gould, who identified virtually all of the crew members on his first voyage and provided brief biographies of many of them. The daughter of a distinguished intellectual family, Ms. Gould spent decades searching the archives of Spain for documents related to

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40 Muzzey, David Saville: *A History of Our Country*, Ginn and Company, Boston, editions from 1936 through 1955. Other high school texts also mentioned Columbus's flaws along with his virtues: Asa Earl Martin, *History of the United States*, 2vols. (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1946; earlier copyrights 1928 and 1934); Moon, Glenn W.: *Story of Our Land and People*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1942; earlier copyright 1938.

41 Heard, Sarah Dow and King, M. W.: *Stories of American Explorers and Settlers*, John C. Winston Company, Philadelphia, 1933; Johnston, Charles H. L.: *Famous Discoverers and Explorers of America*, L. C. Page & Company, Boston, 1941; earlier copyrights 1917, 1928, 1932; McGuire, Edna: *A Brave Young Land*, Macmillan Company, New York, 1937; Burnham, Smith and Jack, Theodore: *The Story of America for Young Americans*, 2 vols., John C. Winston Company, Philadelphia, 1932.

42 García de la Riega, Celso: *Colón español*, Madrid, 1914.

43 The history of this controversy is discussed fully in Ballesteros y Beretta, Manuel: *Historia de America*, vol. IV. *Cristóbal Colón y el descubrimiento de América*, Madrid, 1945, pp. 103-121.

44 For example, David, Maurice: *Who was "Columbus"?*, The Research Publishing Co., New York, 1933.

Columbus. The articles she published from 1924 to 1944 have recently been re-edited, indexed, and published by the Royal Academy of History in Madrid<sup>45</sup>. She died in 1953 at the doorway of the Archive of Simancas near Valladolid, where a plaque commemorates her devoted scholarship. She is one of the very few Americans cited by Columbus scholars today. Other work by foreign scholars clarified Columbus's relations with the Spanish crown and with Spanish mariners and settlers in the Americas. The new scholarship tended to undercut Washington living's heroic version of the admiral's life and to support Justin Winsor's critical biography, which enjoyed an enhanced reputation in the United States as a result<sup>46</sup>.

In 1942 the 450th anniversary of Columbus's voyage saw the publication of a major American contribution to Columbian scholarship, Samuel Eliot Morison's *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*<sup>47</sup>. An erudite sailor and a skilled storyteller, Morison shifted the emphasis to Columbus's talents as a mariner and geographical visionary, downplaying other aspects of his life and career. Morison's biography became very popular, especially in its one-volume abridgement (without documentation). His picture of Columbus the scientist and technician fit well with the twentieth-century development of American technology, and many authors of textbooks subsequently used Morison to shape their portrayal of Columbus.

From World War Two on, some textbooks on United States history developed a more internationalist approach, eager to place the nation's history in a global context. To make room for the ongoing march of time, earlier topics such as Columbus and his voyages were given much shorter shrift than before. They were defined as less relevant to contemporary life and contemporary values<sup>48</sup>. In some portrayals Columbus ceased to be the forceful expert mari-

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45 See Gould, Alicia B.: *Nueva lista documentada de los tripulantes de Colón en 1492*, Real Academia de la Historia, Madrid, 1984.

46 For example, Calverton, V. F.: *The Awakening of America*, John Day Company, New York, 1939, vol. I, styled as the "first extended Marxian history of America," relied heavily on Winsor.

47 Morison, Samuel Eliot: *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1942, 2 vols.

48 Craven, Avery and Johnson, Walter: *The United States: Experiment in Democracy*, Ginn and Company, Boston, 1947; Billington, Ray; Loewenberg, Bert and Brockmier, Samuel: *The United States*, Rinehart & Company, New York, 1947; Faulkner, Harold Underwood; Kepner, Tyler and Bartlett, Hall: *The American Way of Life*, Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York, 1945 revised; earlier copyright 1941; Gavian, Ruth Wood and Hamm, William A.: *The American Story*, D. C. Heath and Company, Boston, 1951; earlier copyrights 1945 and 1947.



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ner, and became instead an impractical dreamer whose fame was based on a colossal mistake in geography and a stroke of luck. These portrayals often emphasized as well that Columbus died lonely, destitute, and broken-hearted, having outlived his brief fame<sup>49</sup>.

Moreover, many of the high school and college texts assumed that Columbus and the early days of United States history had been “done” in the lower grades and did not require much discussion later on. As we have seen, the portrayals of Columbus in books designed for the lower grades tended to be overwhelmingly admiring and uncritical. To the extent that high school and college texts abandoned the topic at a more sophisticated level, there was no avenue for the findings of serious scholars to make their way into America’s textbooks. Children in the 1950s seem to have been taught the simplified laudatory view of Columbus in the lower grades, and very little thereafter. As adults they would retain a one-dimensional portrait of Columbus, even as they advanced their historical understanding on other topics. There were exceptions, of course—textbooks at the high school and college level that continued the tradition of Muzzey and others in keeping up with current scholarship and portraying Columbus in all his human complexity<sup>50</sup>.

In the 1960s, social ferment in the United States produced a strong challenge to traditional textbooks and popular histories at all levels. Traditional views had identified the United States with Europe, Caucasians, Protestants, and men, and had stressed a unitary national culture that had absorbed all Americans for the common good. In the late 1960s social activists and scholars redefined the country through its ethnic and racial diversity instead, and stressed the struggles between competing groups that had shaped American

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49 Todd, Lewis Paul and Curti, Merle: *Rise of the American Nation*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1977; earlier copyrights 1950, 1961, 1964, 1966, 1969, 1972; Riegel, Robert and Long, David: *The American Story*, vol. 1, Youth, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1955.

50 See, for example, Abell, Aaron et al.: *A History of the United States of America*, Fordham University Press, New York, 1951. The Roman Catholic authors of this textbook considered Columbus’s character in some detail, portraying him as courageous and tenacious, but also vain, arrogant, greedy, and deceitful. See also Alden, John R.: *Rise of the American Republic*, Harper & Row, New York, 1963; Baldwin, Leland: *The Stream of American History*, 2 vols., American Book Company, New York, 1952; Bining, Arthur: *A History of the United States*, 2 vols., Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1950; Fielding, R. Kent and Campbell, Eugene: *The United States: An Interpretive History*, Harper & Row, New York, 1964.

history. The injustices done to Native Americans and African-Americans became central themes of textbooks, as their writers scrambled to keep up with social trends. In this changed situation, the negative aspects of Columbus' s character received a full airing in many popular publications. In some sensational and a-historical accounts, Columbus became a genocidal maniac who planned the decimation of the native inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere<sup>51</sup>.

In many textbooks of American history published or revised since the late 1960s, Native Americans are given greatly increased space, whereas Columbus and other European explorers receive only brief mention. Typically, authors who pursue this approach spend less time on Columbus than on Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, who sounded the alarm against mistreatment of Caribbean natives in the early decades of exploration<sup>52</sup>. Some authors shove Columbus to the sidelines entirely, because he did not actually reach the shores of North America, as if that were all that mattered<sup>53</sup>. Popular publications regularly carry articles about Leif Erikson and his voyage to the extreme north of the Western Hemisphere in the early eleventh century, to remind us that Columbus was not the first European to accomplish such a voyage—as if being first were all that mattered<sup>54</sup>.

The general tone of many recent textbooks and popular articles seems designed to debunk traditional approaches to American history. The most balanced texts manage to combine the best features from many of these new

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51 Stone, Edward: "Columbus and Genocide," in *American Heritage* 16 (Oct. 1965): 4-7, 76-79; Zinn, Howard: *A People's History of the United States*, Harper & Row, New York, 1980.

52 Abramowitz, Jack: *American History*, Allyn and Bacon, Inc., Boston, 1983; sixth edition; Bragdon, Henry and McCutchen, Samuel: *History of a Free People*, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York, 1981; earlier copyright 1978; Brown, Richard; Robinson, Wilhelmena and Cunningham, John: *Let Freedom Ring*, Silver Burdett Company, Morristown NJ, 1980; Jordan, Winthrop; Litwack, Leon; Hofstadter, Richard; Miller, William; Aaron, Daniel: *The United States*, vol. 1, *Conquering a Continent*, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1982; earlier copyrights 1957, 1967, 1972, 1976; Weisberger, Bernard A.: *The Impact of Our Past: A History of the United States*, American Heritage Publishing Co., New York, 1972; Bailey, Thomas and Kennedy, David: *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*, D. C. Heath and Company, Lexington, MA, 1983; earlier copyrights 1956, 1961, 1966, 1971, 1975, 1979.

53 Burner, David; Marcus, Robert and Rosenberg, Emily: *America: A Portrait in History*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1978; earlier copyright 1974; Sandler, Martin; Rozwenc, Edwin and Martin, Edward: *The People Make the Nation*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1975.

54 Alexander, Gerard: "Viking America: New Theory" in *American Heritage* 23 (Aug. 1972), 26-29, 106-109.

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directions, recognizing the crucial importance of the voyages of exploration for subsequent world history, and showing due understanding and respect for the historical context and cultures of all the peoples involved<sup>55</sup>. Some children's books and schoolbooks for the lower grades seriously attempt to give a full and accurate account of Columbus and his life<sup>56</sup>. Nonetheless, they can hardly be expected to deal with complex issues fully when their audiences are so young.

The imminent quincentenary of Columbus's first voyage has produced at least one notable work of scholarship in the United States to date—the best edition of the diary of that voyage, with Spanish transcription and English translation presented on facing pages<sup>57</sup>. There were also several new biographies published in the United States in the 1970s and early 1980s, but they have all, to our knowledge, been written by non-Americans and therefore do not fit within our framework. Many other scholarly books and articles, as well as popular presentations, are in press or in progress. The best of them will incorporate the most current scholarship on Columbus worldwide. Nonetheless, there is no guarantee that this scholarship will penetrate to the popular or textbook level any time soon.

There is even less hope that a consensus on Columbus and his accomplishments will develop by 1992. At least three levels of interpretation about Columbus currently coexist in United States historiography, and there is very little contact among them. At the scholarly and semi-scholarly level, the results of research about Columbus are shared in academic meetings and professional journals. Most Columbus scholars would probably agree with the balanced portrait sketched by Winsor in 1892 and embellished since then by

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55 Garraty, John; Singer, Aaron and Gallagher, Michael: *American History*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1982; Kelley, Robert: *The Shaping of the American Post*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1982; earlier copyrights 1975 and 1978; Kownslar, Allan and Fielder, William: *Inquiring About American History*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1972; Morris, Richard; Greenleaf, William and Ferrell, Robert: *America: A History of the People*, Rand McNally & Company, Chicago, 1971.

56 One of the best is Fritz, Jean: *Where do you think you're going, Christopher Columbus?* G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1980; Goodnough, David: *Christopher Columbus*, Troll Associates, Mahwah, NJ, 1979.

57 Dunn, Oliver and Kelley, Jr., James F.: *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America 1492-1493*, as Abstracted by Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK, 1989.

Morison and by new evidence discovered more recently, nearly all of it by Europeans. Unfortunately, the most visible United States scholarship in the past decade has centered around the singularly pointless and unproductive controversy about Columbus's first landfall in the Caribbean<sup>58</sup>. Columbus as an historical actor, and the significance of the Columbian voyages have been largely lost in the shuffle. With luck, the landfall controversy will be forgotten as more important topics emerge from scholarly works now nearing publication.

At the popular level, neither readers nor writers of books and articles about Columbus seem aware of the monumental scholarship that already exists. It is very common for educated and intelligent Americans to believe that very little is known about Columbus, simply because they have been taught very little. Therefore, every new and resuscitated notion—however ill-founded—can find an audience. Depending on who is writing, Columbus can be a saint or a genocidal maniac, a converted Jew or a French corsair, an ecological rapist or a self-absorbed navigator. The historian Charles Nowell's observation that Columbus is "alternately praised and belittled, groomed for canonization and charged with piracy, lauded as a scientist and branded as an ignoramus," is no less true today than it was in 1939 when he wrote it<sup>59</sup>. Without a mature foundation of knowledge about the man and his times, it is possible to believe nearly anything.

Fortunately, at the textbook level some serious-minded writers are trying to make sense of the complex issues that surround European exploration and colonization in general, and the character and actions of Columbus in particular. If they incorporate the scholarship that will result from the quincentenary, perhaps the next generation will be better informed than their parents. Until that happens, the image of Columbus in the United States will remain, not only blurred, but blurred beyond recognition<sup>60</sup>.

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58 *Terrae Incognitae: The Journal for the History of Discoveries devoted a full issue*, vol. 15 (1983), to the landfall controversy. See also "Our Search for the True Columbus Landfall," *National Geographic* 170 (November 1986): 566-605.

59 Nowell, Charles E.: "The Columbus Question. A Survey of Recent Literature and Present Opinion," *American Historical Review* 44 (July 1939): 802.

60 The authors of this article have also written *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus*, Cambridge University Press, New York and London, 1992.