
Book Reviews

Defend the Renaissance against the foes of Christopher Columbus

by Mark Burdman

Columbus

by Felipe Fernández-Armesto
Oxford University Press, New York, 1991
218 pages, hardbound, \$22.95

Columbus: His Enterprise

by Hans Koning
The Latin American Bureau, London, 1991
137 pages, paperbound, £4.99

Fernández-Armesto's *Columbus* is worth reading, whether or not one is fully comfortable with his historical method or the portrait of the discoverer that he develops. He is one of Spain's leading experts on Columbus and the period of the age of discovery. He is also general editor of *The Times Atlas of World Exploration*, has been the director-designate of the Oxford University Comparative Colonial History Project until his assumption of a professorial chair on Early Modern Maritime History at Brown University in the U.S. this year, and is one of the most frequently cited English-language experts on the Columbus question. What he has to say carries weight, and the book *Columbus*, with its strengths and weaknesses, should be on the reading list of anybody wanting to know more about the subject during this quincentenary celebration of the 1492 voyage.

As biography, his account of Columbus is a gripping story, filled with paradoxes and contradictions. We witness, on the one side, a series of formidable achievements, carried out by a man possessed of the stubbornness to challenge preconceived "authoritative" notions, positive traits which the author duly recognizes. On the other side, there is much tragedy in the Columbus saga, in part resulting from Columbus's own singular personal obsessions, in part resulting from the ambiguities confronting Spain in the late-15th and early-16th century, when it was not entirely certain how to

respond to the challenges posed by the navigator's discoveries, and in part resulting from operations against Columbus by venal individuals jealous of his breakthroughs. Truly, a good dramatist would find adequate material in all this for an epic drama!

Fernández-Armesto has probably done as much research as anybody into the archives concerning Columbus, and has the merit of using that research to debunk the wilder stories erupting these days against the discoverer and against the Spanish colonization more generally. For example, he shows that the *encomienda* slave system introduced into the "New World" was implemented *against* the wishes of the Spanish Catholic monarchs, and against Columbus's own desires as well, rather than as some horrifying design concocted in Spain and carried out through the evil genius of the admiral.

He also provides hard documentation of a fact that today's anti-Columbus crusaders are so eager to ignore: namely, that life for the "pre-Columbian indigenous peoples" of what later came to be known as the Americas was the opposite of the Garden of Eden. Many of the tribes and/or nations in the areas visited by Columbus spent a good deal of their time trying to escape from the Caribs, a militaristic tribe whose prime activity was to hunt humans from other tribes, so that they could be cooked and eaten! Those practices are described in the book, in the form of an account from a doctor who accompanied Columbus. The reality is clear: Many of the pathetically backward tribes in the "New World" looked on the Columbus entourage as saviors, and even if much brutality was carried out against them by elements of this same entourage during the first years after 1492, their fate, left alone to the tender mercies of the Caribs, would have been ghastly beyond imagination. Clearly, this was a region in the midst of deep cultural-economic degeneration when Columbus arrived.

This reviewer, a layman on the scientific and geographical issues involved in the challenge of navigating the ocean, was fascinated by Fernández-Armesto's discussion of the various views that were being expressed in the 15th century prior to 1492, about what might lie across the ocean: whether it was the "other side" of a mooted single "Eurasian" land mass, a

new continent (the so-called “Antipodes”), or networks of new islands; equally fascinating was the presentation of the way in which these different views shaped both Columbus’s and experts’ reactions to his discoveries when and after they occurred. For reasons that will be discussed below, Fernández-Armesto has methodological biases that lead him to omit certain crucial historical antecedents for this scientific debate (e.g., there is no mention of Plato’s *Timaeus*, nor any discussion of the writings of the 6th century’s Isidore of Seville, etc.), and to misread or distort others, but the author does achieve a dramatic tension about such matters that makes sections of the book a gripping tale of discovery.

Fernández-Armesto’s oft-proclaimed insistence on objectivity and empirical rigor has its drawbacks. His reiterations of Columbus’s personal foibles are overdone, and, in any case, at times one wonders what difference it makes, in comparison to the global transformations caused by what Columbus accomplished. As a professor work at Oxford, he has imbibed British empiricism, and he tends to dismiss out of hand biographers and historians, like Italy’s Senator Taviani, who have tried a more poetical-metaphorical approach that attempts to reconstruct what Columbus’s creative thought-processes might have been. This is too speculative for Fernández-Armesto’s taste. His is not the same quality of passion that moved Friedrich Schiller to extol Columbus’s genius and the early American patriot Joel Barlow to write of Columbus’s vision, in their respective poems on the great discoverer.

That gets to the real drawback in the book. Fernández-Armesto identifies, but does not seem to comprehend in any adequate sense, the importance of the 15th-century Golden Renaissance in the epic discovery of America, in contrast to the Senator Taviani whom he so summarily dismisses. Fernández-Armesto’s does elaborate the context in which Columbus was operating, both insofar as he was influenced by certain impulses emanating out of his native Genoa, and as he, like many others, was captivated by an era of great navigational breakthroughs which were firing the imaginations of seafarers, scientists, and politicians in that century. Particularly important, the author points to the influence on Columbus of the geographical treatise of Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II from 1458-1464). And, he does single out the 1439 Council of Florence as a key historical moment in the process leading to 1492, which many self-professed Columbus historians either seem not to know or to deliberately ignore.

But that reference is only one sentence long; one of the main organizers of the council, Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa, is never mentioned, even though there are adequate historical accounts of Cusa’s role in catalyzing and inspiring the discovery and later evangelization (and even though Cusa was a friend of, and key influence on, Piccolomini). Fernández-Armesto’s handling of the relationship between Columbus and the great Florentine mathematician and geographer Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli is also weak. The monumental role of

Prince Henry “the Navigator” of Portugal and of his generations-long development of all the underpinnings of Columbus’s voyage—revolutionary developments in shipbuilding, navigation, use of winds and currents, and cartography—is omitted entirely. In any case, the Renaissance as the generative force of the 15th century is not discussed.

But in truth, the Columbus whom we legitimately celebrate was, in the last analysis, a product, of the Renaissance. That reality can, unfortunately, at best only be inferred from Fernández-Armesto’s account.

Caving in to the ‘Zeitgeist’

His omission ill positions the author to deal with the increasingly violent campaign against Columbus and the 1492 quincentennial. The parting words in *Columbus* are both cynical and clinical. Fernández-Armesto explains what he calls the “quincentennial euphoria” as largely a consequence of the current “Atlanticist” period of history, but asserts that “the judgments of history are notoriously fickle, and depend on the perspective of the time in which they are made. It may not be long now before ‘Western civilization’ is regarded as definitively wound up—not cataclysmically exploded, as some of our doom-fraught oracles have foretold, but merely blended into the new ‘global civilization’ which, with a heavy debt to the western world, but a genuinely distinct identity, seems to be taking shape around us. At the same time, the motors of the world economy are moving or have moved to Japan and California. The Pacific is likely to play in the history of ‘global civilization’ the same sort of unifying role which the Atlantic has played in that of the West. By 2020, when we come to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of Magellan’s crossing of the Pacific, those of us who are still alive may look back wistfully to 1992 with a feeling of *déjà vu*, and irresistible misgivings about the fuss.”

Among other things, this conclusion completely sidesteps the fact that Columbus is now coming under massive and increasingly violent attack. And since *Columbus* was published, matters haven’t much improved: In a recent London *Times* article purporting to defend Columbus against his detractors, Fernández-Armesto likens the arguments for and against him to points scored in a tennis match.

Koning’s apology for eco-imperialism

One would only wish there were more “quincentennial euphoria” to worry about! The sin of omission evident in Fernández-Armesto’s parting words gives creatures like Hans Koning undeserved room to maneuver. If *Columbus* is recommended reading, Koning’s book is recommended for the nearest trash bin, or for wrapping fish, assuming that wouldn’t be insulting to the fish.

Columbus: His Enterprise (sub-titled, “A revealing account of a man and his motives”) is a classic case of psychological projection: Columbus is portrayed as a willful mass-murderer, but the truth is that Koning and his cohorts are

mass-murderers, at least in the ideological sense. They are not merely attempting to “murder” the Renaissance, committing what might be called the crime of historicide. Worse, by idealizing the hunter-and-gatherer cultures of their image of American “indigenous” peoples (“We are discovering that the peoples whom we contemptuously called ‘primitive’ were vastly superior householders and managers of our Earth than we are, and that it may be a do-or-die matter for us to learn from them in time,” he writes) and by defaming European Christian civilization as they do, they seek to condemn the poorer and more unfortunate people of this globe to eternal backwardness. They, not those celebrating the discovery of 1492, are the true imperialists, or, as some today call them, the “eco-imperialists.”

Koning’s historicide is not the act of a lone assassin. Koning plays the part of a Josef Goebbels to the Adolf Hitlers, in the form of the Shining Path of Peru, who want to destroy western European civilization, by deploying force to eliminate the legacy of the Renaissance in modern-day Ibero-America. The Shining Path is modeled on Cambodia’s Pol Pot, whose near-success in similar cultural warfare is now legendary with the Khmer Rouge butchery of 3 million people. Koning’s book is published by the Latin America Bureau in London, which is a key organization contributing to a so-called “500 Years of Resistance” campaign. Patronized by the circles of Britain’s Prince Philip, by the Geneva-based World Council of Churches and related species, this campaign seeks to portray Oct. 12, 1492 as the commencement of a horrifying tragedy for the “indigenous” populations of the Americas, and to make that day an occasion for mourning, cultural-political protest, and other forms of “resistance.” Some of the protests might be less than peaceful, and security services of several nations are already on alert, in anticipation of terrorist assaults on the quincentenary celebrations.

Koning’s book is one of the bibles for the fanatics in this absurd and dangerous crusade. The Oct. 7, 1991 *Time* magazine identified Koning as a chief spokesman for the anti-Columbus movement, in the context of a “balanced” article on the 1492/1992 controversy which also reported in some detail the “indigenous peoples” mobilization worldwide. *Time* quoted Koning: “It’s almost obscene to celebrate Columbus because it’s an unmitigated record of horror. We don’t have to celebrate a man who was really—from an Indian point of view—worse than Attila the Hun.” Implicitly, the magazine admitted that the anti-Columbus propaganda is British in origin, when it noted that the discoverer first became popular in the early United States after the 1812 war with Britain, when “American patriots felt an urgent need to link the national cause with non-British heroes.”

Columbus: His Enterprise is often cited by those who are now portraying Columbus as a mass-murdering monster worse than Hitler or Stalin, a fraud, a swindler, a plunderer, a destroyer of the environment, *ad nauseam*. Various of these themes have been put forward during the first days of 1992

by Germany’s Hessische Rundfunk television network, Germany’s liberal *Der Spiegel* magazine, Britain’s *Guardian* daily, and others.

Koning does it all via simplistic Aristotelian logic: a) Columbus was a mass-murderer, both by direct actions and by willfully creating the conditions for mass murder to happen; b) Columbus was a representative of European existing civilization; c) conclusion: European civilization is genocid-

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al. The converse syllogism, from c to a, can also be constructed from Koning’s logic. Either way, he gets to his real point, expressed in his “politically correct” introduction: “The year 1492 opened an era of genocide, cruelty, and slavery on a larger scale than had ever been seen before,” thanks to Columbus, and his backers, of course.

Inclusively, he purveys the usual British-inspired “Black Legend” characterizations of Spain’s colonization efforts, as in this remarkable passage on the subject of “the contempt any Spaniard with two pesos to rub together nursed against manual labor”: “There was a later voyage when Columbus and his ‘gentlemen travelers’ (*hidalgos*) stayed marooned for months on end on a wild coast rather than pull themselves together and build a little boat. If you compare their helplessness with the self-reliance of, for instance, the French fishermen and the English fur-traders in the North, the difference is almost too enormous to understand. But this hard hatred, or at best disdain, for their surroundings, this *gangster* mentality of the Spanish *conquistadores*, goes part way to explain their inhumanity, both toward the inhabitants of the lands they conquered and toward each other.”

And by the concluding pages, we are reading:

“Columbus was a typical man of the (white) West. And the West has ravaged the world for 500 years, under the flag of a master-slave theory which in our finest hour of hypocrisy was called ‘the white man’s burden.’ Perhaps the Master-Race Nazis were different from the rest of us, mostly in the sense that they extended that theory to their fellow whites. (In doing so, they did the subject races of this world a favor.

The great white-race civil war which we call World War II weakened Europe and broke its grip on Asia and Africa. . . . What sets the West apart is its persistence, its capacity to stop at *nothing*. No other race or religion or non-religion ever quite matched the Christian West. Of course those others did not as a rule have the technology and the means to go on and on. The West did, and does. . . . We may end then by saying Columbus was but one frightening example of the corruption of unchecked power, such as precisely the West used to wield. And there was nothing to check the Spaniards, whose steel, horses and gunpowder made them invincible" (emphasis in original).

This verbiage becomes particularly dangerous at a moment when there *is* much for the nations and peoples of the South to abhor in the policies of the Anglo-American-dominated North. Particularly in the wake of the brutal Gulf war, and also after years of usurious International Monetary Fund austerity policies imposed on Ibero-America, there is a lot to be angry about. Certainly many of the "indigenous peoples" in South America today lead lives characterized by poverty, backwardness, and disease. But to focus that rage in an undifferentiated way on *European civilization* is monstrously cynical and a fraudulent trick, whose effect is only to leave such peoples at the mercies of Shining Path—today's moral equivalent of the Caribs—and the continent's drug mafias.

Aside from all sorts of wild fallacies of composition, the method of fraud used by Koning is typified by his totally unproven contention that Columbus and his fellow seamen *intended* to commit mass-murder. On page 50, after the early sections' meandering discussions of Columbus's background, motivations, etc. , he comes to the point of discussing the 1492 voyage, and writes that "the log of those last days at sea . . . acquire[s] the drama of the murderer coming ever closer to his unsuspecting victims." Now, there is ample documentation, including from some good historians, about the excesses, often horrifying, that occurred during the period of Columbus's administration of the colonies in formation, but any competent historian will find a very complex set of circumstances prevailing under those unprecedented conditions, and will have to take into account a wide range of subjective factors confronting Columbus and his entourage. But to liken Columbus to a murderer *before the fact*, seeking out his victims to be slaughtered, is the contention of a sick mind. In Koning's world, everything is simply ripped out of context, all gray areas are removed, and the result is a bill of indictment of the sort that one would expect from the U.S. Department of Justice or from the office of Virginia's Attorney General Mary Sue Terry. If Columbus were now alive, Koning would probably seek to have Mary Sue Terry electrocute him!

Koning gets away with his fraud by tailoring to the mood of "political correctness" in the U.S. and Europe today, and plays upon the spreading ignorance about history typical of, but not exclusive to, many Americans.

Today, who knows anything about the relation of the

Renaissance to the Columbus mission? How many Americans have ever heard of Toscanelli? Koning *does* know about Toscanelli, and even writes, in one of the few honest assertions in the book, that "if one single item was responsible for firing Columbus's mind, it was the Toscanelli record." Koning then describes Toscanelli as a "Florentine philosopher, which at that time meant he was a person interested in all sciences." (So much for the Renaissance!) But this is by way of implicitly blaming Toscanelli and his associates for Columbus's alleged maraudings: According to Koning, Toscanelli wrote in a 1474 letter to "Fernaõ Martinez"—Cusa's friend Canon Martins—"a churchman in Lisbon," motivating the idea of a westward transoceanic route to Asia, that Asia was (in Koning's paraphrase), "full of gold." Koning then adds in parentheses: "The organizers of these plans never worried about how to get the gold out of the hands of the heathens; it seemed natural to them that it would go to the Christians."

So, here we have the morally jaded, modern-day Dutch-origin Koning self-righteously scorning one of the greatest thinkers mankind has produced, acting like a termite eating away at the foundations of Christian civilization. There is an additional consideration, one which Koning strangely ignores, but one which was uppermost on the minds of Cusa, Toscanelli, and all the major Christian humanists in Europe of the Renaissance. There was, in the 15th century, a bitter war going on pitting Europe against the Ottoman Turks and against the various Venice-centered "enemies from within" who were trying to destroy Christian civilization. "Going West" across the ocean—whatever one might argue today was the intended destination—was seen as a vital *flanking action* against the Turks and their western Gnostic allies. The really great achievement of Columbus was in creating a cultural shock *in Europe*, to the effect of vastly opening the vistas for Europeans in a way that helped European civilization survive the challenge.

From this standpoint, "Goebbels" Koning and his cohorts are guilty again of fallacy of composition by focusing *only* on the Americas (and then fraudulently), to the exclusion of everything else. Or, to put matters another way: Many historians have estimated that the Ottoman Turks, who had quite developed seafaring capabilities, had the potential to eventually cross the Atlantic themselves, and might have gotten there first if Columbus and those propelling him to his achievement had not first succeeded. Would Europe and "the Americas" (or whatever they would have been then called) been better off if that had happened?

Of course, Koning's book may make some wish the great breakthroughs of the 15th century, like the printing press, hadn't happened, so that books like this would not be printed. But then again, no one is obliged to buy the book. Save the money toward a good Italian or Spanish meal, and celebrate it as one of the countless benefits accruing to Americans from Columbus's 1492 voyage.