

*Peter H. Gibbon*

## Apologize For Columbus?

At the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, life-size replicas of the *Nina*, *Pinta* and *Santa Maria* floated across a man-made lagoon. On display were 71 portraits of Christopher Columbus, facsimiles of his ships' logs, his letters. Visitors could stroll through a full-scale reproduction of the monastery where Columbus stayed in Spain before petitioning Queen Isabella for the funding to sail to an uncertain world. One in three Americans attended the Chicago Exposition named after the famous explorer.

Leading up to the exposition had been a year of parades, dedications, ceremonies, sermons and speeches all over the nation commemorating the 400th anniversary of Columbus's first voyage. It was in 1892 that Anton Dvorak composed his "New World" symphony, New Yorkers dedicated their 84-foot Italian marble statue at Columbus Circle, President Benjamin Harrison proclaimed Columbus Day a national holiday, and Francis Bellamy wrote the Pledge of Allegiance, which was recited by millions of schoolchildren for the first time in October 1892 to honor Columbus and became an instant hit.

For the past two years I have been visiting classrooms all over America, talking to students about heroes. Why today should they admire an explorer whose discovery was a blunder, who thought he had reached China, when he was in fact in Cuba.

Why admire a man who was searching for gold and tolerant of slavery? In Mexico and Peru, Indians call this a day of darkness. They blame the Spanish conquistadors who followed Columbus to the Americas for destroying their culture. In an age of contrition, when world leaders apologize for their nations' sins, should we apologize for Christopher Columbus? In 1998, how can students face reality yet still admire the man who first sailed from Europe to the New World?

Students should know that Columbus did not discover America by himself. Thousands of sailors before him had inched down the African Coast and out into the Atlantic. He was enlightened by mapmakers in Florence and Lisbon. The printing press made available the books he read in monasteries. New instruments, the astrolabe and the compass, helped him find his way. Improved ships kept him afloat.

And his motives were complex. Columbus was seeking



adventure, glory, and wealth. At the same time, he believed he was doing God's work. With his Bible, he could convert the citizens of China and Japan.

Columbus was far from perfect. He demanded 10 percent of the profits for himself and titles of nobility he could pass on to his children. Brilliant as a navigator, he failed as a colonizer. Most regretfully, he came to see the Caribbean Indians not as fellow humans but as workers to be exploited, as sources of gold. While smallpox and swine fever inadvertently introduced by the sailors killed far more Caribbean Indians than did Spanish bullets, Columbus's acceptance of slavery also contributed to the destruction of a people.

Further, there were Spaniards who, unlike Columbus, transcended their time and abjured slavery. Bartolome de Las Casas settled in Hispaniola and became a landowner. He treated the Indians kindly but still profited from their labor. In 1512 he became a Dominican priest. Two years later, in a famous sermon, he announced that he was returning his serfs to the governor of Hispaniola.

Thus commenced his 40-year campaign against the cruelty of Spanish colonizers. Las Casas traveled to Spain and harangued the government. In his books and articles, he demanded that the Spaniards return Indian land and end forced labor. By the end of his life, he also proclaimed a revolutionary idea: the equality of all human races.

Columbus was not a humanitarian. Still, while others talked about sailing west to new lands, he did it. Through a combination of intuition, faith, scholarship and reason, he believed he could sail to the Indies. Rebuffed by the king of Portugal, he traveled to Spain where he pleaded his case for six years. Spain was skeptical. He turned toward France. At the last minute, Ferdinand and Isabella, fearing France might acquire colonies before Spain, financed three ships.

It took courage to sail into the unknown. It required faith to

keep going when his crew lost hope and wanted to turn back. Above all, it took extraordinary navigational skills to keep three clumsy ships on course. In the 15th century, ships could languish for days, be blown off course, sink without a trace. Columbus had a mastery of winds and currents. He could predict hurricanes and navigate at night.

Today, with all continents traveled, all mountains climbed, all oceans mapped, it is easy to underestimate the boldness and bravery of an explorer. Accustomed to motorized ships, we take for granted the skill of a sailor. In comfortable times, we forget the misery Columbus endured in his years at sea: the moldy hardtack, rancid wine, rats, lice and dysentery; the arthritis that slowly crippled and killed him.

Columbus discovered land where no European knew it existed. His voyage opened a century of exploration and led to the creation of the American colonies. It also produced a beneficial exchange easily overlooked: From the New World came corn and potatoes that fended off hunger for millions of people in Africa and Europe. From the Old World arrived horses, cattle, pigs, sugar, wheat.

Unlike Americans at the Columbian Exposition of 1893, we are committed to facing the dark side of our heroes. In the 19th century classroom, history was patriotic, heroes perfect. Today we want to educate our students in the complexity of history without extinguishing their idealism.

We must admit that Columbus lacked the sense of justice and charity that made Las Casas a moral hero, but we need not apologize for a brave explorer whose voyage transformed the world. We can recognize Columbus as a visionary, a sailor of incomparable skill and a hero of exploration.

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