

2. 1493: The True Importance of Christopher Columbus

In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Christopher Columbus sailed in from the blue. American history books present Columbus pretty much without precedent, and they portray him as America's first great hero. In so canonizing him, they reflect our national culture. Indeed, now that President's Day has combined Washington's and Lincoln's birthdays, Columbus is one of only two people the United States honors by name in a national holiday. The one date that every school child remembers is 1492, and sure enough, all twelve textbooks I surveyed include it. But they leave out virtually everything that is important to know about Columbus and the European exploration of the Americas. Meanwhile, they make up all kinds of details to tell a better story and to humanize Columbus so that readers will identify with him.

Columbus, like Christ, was so pivotal that historians use him to divide the past into epochs, making the Americas before 1492 "pre-Columbian." American history textbooks recognize Columbus's importance by granting him an average of eight hundred words—two and a half pages including a picture and a map—a lot of space, considering all the material these books must cover. Their heroic collective account goes something like this:

Born in Genoa, Italy, of humble parents, Christopher Columbus grew up to become an experienced seafarer. He sailed the Atlantic as far as Iceland and West Africa. His adventures convinced him that the world must be round. Therefore the fabled riches of the East—spices, silk, and gold—could be had by sailing west, superseding the overland route through the Middle East, which the Turks had closed off to commerce.

To get funding for his enterprise, Columbus beseeched monarch after monarch in western Europe. After at first being dismissed by Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, Columbus finally got his chance when Queen Isabella decided to underwrite a modest expedition.

Columbus outfitted three pitifully small ships, the *Nina*, the *Pinto*, and the *Santa Maria*, and set forth from Spain. The journey was difficult. The ships sailed west into the unknown Atlantic for more than two months. The crew almost mutinied and threatened to throw Columbus overboard. Finally they reached the West Indies on October 12, 1492.

Although Columbus made three more voyages to America, he never really knew he had discovered a New World. He died in obscurity, unappreciated and penniless. Yet without his daring American history would have been very different, for in a sense Columbus made it all possible.

Unfortunately, almost everything in this traditional account is either wrong or unverifiable. The authors of history textbooks have taken us on a trip of their own, away from the facts of history, into the realm of myth. They and we have been duped by an outrageous concoction of lies, half-truths, truths, and omissions, that is in large part traceable to the first half of the nineteenth century.

The textbooks' first mistake is to underplay previous explorers. People from other continents had reached the Americas many times before 1492. Even if Columbus had never sailed, other Europeans would have soon reached the Americas. Indeed, Europeans may already have been fishing off Newfoundland in the 1480s.⁴ In a sense Columbus's voyage was not the first but the last "discovery" of the Americas. It was epoch-making because of the way in which Europe responded. Columbus's importance is therefore primarily attributable to changing conditions in Europe, not to his having reached a "new" continent.

American history textbooks seem to understand the need to cover social changes in Europe in the years leading up to 1492. They point out that history passed the Vikings by and devote several pages to the reasons Europe was ready this time "to take advantage of the discovery" of America, as one textbook puts it. Unfortunately, none of the textbooks provides substantive analysis of the major changes that prompted the new response.

All but one of the twelve books I examined begin the Columbus story with Marco Polo and the Crusades. (*American Adventures* starts simply with Columbus.) Here is their composite account of what was happening in Europe:

"Life in Europe was slow paced." "Curiosity about the rest of the world was at a low point." Then, "many changes took place in Europe during the 500 years before Columbus's discovery of the Americas in 1492,"

"People's horizons gradually widened, and they became more curious about the world beyond their own localities." "Europe was stirring with new ideas. Many Europeans were filled with burning curiosity. They were living in a period called the Renaissance." "What started Europeans thinking new thoughts and dreaming new dreams? A series of wars called the Crusades were partly responsible." "The Crusades caused great changes in the ways that Europeans thought and acted." "The desire for more trade quickly spread." "The old trade routes to Asia had always been very difficult."

The accounts resemble each other closely. Sometimes different textbooks even use the same phrases. Overall, the level of scholarship is discouragingly low, perhaps because their authors are more at home in American history than European history. They provide no real causal explanations for the age of European conquest. Instead, they argue for Europe's greatness in transparently psychological terms—"people grew more curious." Such arguments make sociologists smile: we know that nobody measured the curiosity level in Spain in 1492 or can with authority compare it to the curiosity level in, say, Norway or Iceland in 1005.

Here is the account in *The American Way*.

What made these Europeans so daring was their belief in themselves. The people of Europe believed that human beings were the highest form of life on earth. This was the philosophy, or belief, *of humanism*. It was combined with a growing interest in technology or tools and their uses. The Europeans believed that by using their intelligence, they could develop new ways to do things.

This is not the place to debate the precepts or significance of humanism, a philosophical movement that clashed with orthodox Catholicism. In any case, humanism can hardly explain Columbus, since he and his royal sponsors were devout orthodox Catholics, not humanists. *The American Way* tells us, nonetheless, that Columbus "had the humanist's belief that people could do anything if they knew enough and tried hard enough." This is Columbus as the Little Engine That Could!

Several textbooks claim that Europe was becoming richer and that the new wealth led to more trade. Actually, as the historian Angus Calder has pointed out, "Europe was smaller and poorer in the fifteenth century than it had been in the thirteenth," owing in part to the bubonic plague.⁵

Some teachers still teach what their predecessors taught me forty years ago: that Europe needed spices to disguise the taste of bad meat, but the bad Turks cut off the spice trade. Three books—*The American Tradition*, *Land of Promise*, and *The American Way*—repeat this falsehood. In the words of *Land of Promise*, "Then, after 1453, when Constantinople fell to the Turks, trade with the East all but stopped." But A. H. Lybyer disproved this statement in 1915! Turkey had nothing to do with the development of new routes to the Indies. On the contrary, the Turks had every reason to keep the old Eastern Mediterranean route open, since they made money from it.⁶

In 1957 Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff published a book that has become a standard treatise for graduate students of history, *The Modern Researcher*, in which they pointed out how since 1915 textbooks have perpetuated this particular error. Probably several of the half-dozen authors of the offending textbooks encountered *The Modern Researcher* in graduate school. Somehow the information did not stick, though. This may be because blaming Turks fits with the West's archetypal conviction that followers of Islam are likely to behave irrationally or nastily. In proposing that Congress declare Columbus Day a national holiday in 1963, Rep. Roland Libonati put it this way: "His Christian faith gave to him a religious incentive to thwart the piratical activities of the Turkish marauders preying upon the trading ships of the Christian world." *The American Tradition*, *Land of Promise*, and *The American Way* continue to reinforce this archetype of a vaguely threatening Islam. College students today are therefore astonished to learn that Turks and Moors allowed Jews and Christians freedom of worship at a time when European Christians tortured or expelled Jews and Muslims. Not a single textbook tells that the *Portuguese* fleet in 1507 blocked the Red Sea and Persian Gulf to stop trade along the old route, because Portugal controlled the new route, around Africa.⁷

Most textbooks note the increase in international trade and commerce, and some relate the rise of nation-states under monarchies. Otherwise, they do a poor job of describing the changes in Europe that led to the Age of Exploration. Some textbooks even invoke the Protestant Reformation, although it didn't begin until twenty-five years after 1492!

What is going on here? We must pay attention to what the textbooks are telling us and what they are not telling us. The changes in Europe not only prompted Columbus's voyages and the probable contemporaneous trips to America by Portuguese, Basque, and Bristol fishermen, but they also paved the way for Europe's domination of the world for the next five hundred years. Except for the invention of agriculture, this was probably the most consequential

development in human history. Our history books ought to discuss seriously what happened and why, instead of supplying vague, nearly circular pronouncements such as this, from *The American Tradition*: "Interest in practical matters and the world outside Europe led to advances in shipbuilding and navigation."

Perhaps foremost among the significant factors the textbooks leave out are advances in military technology. Around 1400, European rulers began to commission ever bigger guns and learned to mount them on ships. Europe's incessant wars gave rise to this arms race, which also ushered in refinements in archery, drill, and siege warfare. China, the Ottoman Empire, and other nations in Asia and Africa now fell prey to European arms, and in 1493 the Americas began to succumb as well.³

We live with this arms race still. Since the demise of the Soviet Union, the nuclear arms race may have come to a temporary resting point. But the West's advantage in military technology over the rest of the world, jealously maintained from the 1400s on, remains very much contested. Western nations continue to try to keep non-Western nations disadvantaged in military technology. Just as the thirteen British colonies tried to outlaw the sale of guns to Native Americans, the United States now tries to outlaw the sale of nuclear technology to Third World countries. Since money is to be made in the arms trade, however, and since all nations need military allies, the arms trade with non-Western nations persists. The Western advantage in military technology is still a burning issue. Nonetheless, not a single textbook mentions arms as a cause of European world domination.

In the years before Columbus's voyages, Europe also expanded the use of new forms of social technology—bureaucracy, double-entry bookkeeping, and mechanical printing. Bureaucracy, which today has negative connotations, was actually a practical innovation that allowed rulers and merchants to manage far-flung enterprises efficiently. So did double-entry bookkeeping, based on the decimal system, which Europeans first picked up from Arab traders. The printing press and increased literacy allowed news of Columbus's findings to travel across Europe much farther and faster than news of the Vikings' expeditions.

A third important development was ideological or even theological: amassing wealth and dominating other people came to be positively valued as the key means of winning esteem on earth and salvation in the hereafter. As Columbus put it, "Gold is most excellent; gold constitutes treasure; and he who has it does all he wants in the world, and can even lift souls up to Paradise."¹⁰ In 1005 the Vikings intended only to settle Vineland, their name for New England or, more likely, the maritime provinces of Canada. By 1493 Columbus planned

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to plunder Haiti. The sources are perfectly clear about Columbus's motivation: in 1495, for instance, Michele de Cuneo wrote about accompanying Columbus on his 1494 expedition into the interior of Haiti "After we had rested for several days in our settlement, it seemed to the Lord Admiral that it was time to put into execution his desire to search for gold, which was the main reason he had started on so great a voyage full of so many dangers,"¹² Columbus was no greedier than the Spanish, or later the English and French. But textbooks downplay the pursuit of wealth as a motive for coming to the Americas when they describe Columbus and later explorers and colonists. Even the Pilgrims left Europe partly to make money, but you would never know it from our textbooks. Their authors apparently believe that to have America explored and colonized for economic gain is somehow undignified.

A fourth factor affecting Europe's readiness to embrace a "new" continent was the particular nature of European Christianity. Europeans believed in a transportable, proselytizing religion that rationalized conquest. (Followers of Islam share this characteristic.) Typically, after "discovering" an island and encountering a tribe of Indians new to them, the Spaniards would read aloud (in Spanish) what came to be called "the Requirement." Here is one version:

I implore you to recognize the Church as a lady and in the name of the Pope take the King as lord of this land and obey his mandates. If you do not do it, I tell you that with the help of God I will enter powerfully against you all. I will make war everywhere and every way that I can. I will subject you to the yoke and obedience to the Church and to his majesty. I will take your women and children and make them slaves. . . . The deaths and injuries that you will receive from here on will be your own fault and not that of his majesty nor of the gentlemen that accompany me."

Having thus satisfied their consciences by offering the Indians a chance to convert to Christianity, the Spaniards then felt free to do whatever they wanted with the people they had just "discovered."

A fifth development that caused Europe's reaction to Columbus's reports about Haiti to differ radically from reactions to earlier expeditions was Europe's recent success in taking over and exploiting various island societies. On Malta, Sardinia, the Canary Islands, and, later, in Ireland, Europeans learned that conquest of this sort was a route to wealth. In addition, new and more deadly forms of smallpox and bubonic plague had arisen in Europe since the Vikings had

sailed. Passed on to those the Europeans met, these diseases helped Europe conquer the Americas and, later, the islands of the Pacific.* Except for one paragraph on disease in *The American Pageant*, not one of the twelve textbooks mentions either of these factors as contributing to European world dominance.

Why don't textbooks mention arms as a facilitator of exploration and domination? Why don't they treat *any* of the foregoing factors? If crude factors such as military power or religiously sanctioned greed are perceived as reflecting badly on us, who exactly is "us"? Who are the textbooks written for (and by)? Plainly, descendants of the Europeans.

High school students don't usually think about the rise of Europe to world domination. It is rarely presented as a question. It seems natural, a given, not something that needs to be explained. Deep down, our culture encourages us to imagine that we are richer and more powerful because we're smarter. Of course, there are no studies showing Americans to be more intelligent than, say, Iraqis. Still, since textbooks don't identify or encourage us to think about the real causes, "we're smarter" festers as a possibility. Also left festering is the notion that "it's natural" for one group to dominate another,¹⁵ While history brims with examples of national domination, it also is full of counterexamples. The contact between Norse and Indians around 1000 A.D., for example, though mostly unfriendly, was not marked by domination. The triracial Native American societies that developed after 1492—from Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, through Florida to Ecuador—also offer evidence that domination is not natural but cultural.

The way American history textbooks treat Columbus reinforces the tendency not to think about the process of domination. The traditional picture of Columbus landing on the American shore shows him dominating immediately, and this is based on fact; Columbus claimed everything he saw right off the boat. When textbooks celebrate this process, they imply that taking the land and dominating the Indians was inevitable if not natural. This is unfortunate, because Columbus's voyages constitute a splendid teachable moment. As official missions of a nation-state, they exemplify the new Europe. Merchants and rulers collaborated to finance and authorize them. The second expedition was heavily armed. Columbus carefully documented the voyages, including directions, currents, shoals, and descriptions of the Indians as ripe for subjugation. Thanks to the printing press, detailed news of Haiti and later conquests spread swiftly. Columbus had personal experience of the Atlantic islands recently taken over by Portugal and Spain, as well as with the slave trade in West Africa. Most important, his purpose from the beginning was not mere exploration or even trade,

but conquest and exploitation, for which he used religion as a rationale.¹⁶ If textbooks included these facts, they might induce students to think intelligently about why the West dominates the world today.

The textbooks concede that Columbus did not start from scratch. Every textbook account of the European exploration of the Americas begins with Prince Henry the Navigator, of Portugal, between 1415 and 1460. Henry is portrayed as discovering Madeira and the Azores and sending out ships to circumnavigate Africa for the first time. The textbook authors seem unaware that ancient Phoenicians and Egyptians sailed at least as far as Ireland and England, reached Madeira and the Azores, traded with the aboriginal inhabitants of the Canary Islands, and sailed all the way around Africa before 600 B.C. Instead, the textbooks credit Bartolomeu Dias with being the first to round the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa in 1488. Omitting the accomplishments of the Afro-Phoenicians is ironic, because it was Prince Henry's knowledge of their feats that inspired him to replicate them." But this information clashes with another social archetype: our culture views modern technology as a European development. So the Afro-Phoenicians' feats do not conform to the textbooks' overall story line about how white Europeans taught the rest of the world how to do things. None of the textbooks credits the Muslims with preserving Greek wisdom, enhancing it with ideas from China, India, and Africa, and then passing on the resulting knowledge to Europe via Spain. Instead, they show Henry inventing navigation and imply that before Europe there was nothing, at least nothing modern.

In fact, Henry's work was based mostly on ideas that were known to the ancient Egyptians and Phoenicians and had been developed further in Arabia, North Africa, and China. Even the word the Portuguese applied to their new ships, *caravel*, derived from the Egyptian *caravos*.¹⁷ Cultures do not evolve in a vacuum; diffusion of ideas is perhaps the most important cause of cultural development. Contact with other cultures often triggers a cultural flowering. Anthropologists call this phenomenon efflorescence. Children in elementary school learn that Persian and Mediterranean civilizations flowered in antiquity due to their location on trade routes. Here with Henry at the dawn of European world domination, textbooks have a golden opportunity to apply this same idea of cultural diffusion to Europe. They squander it. Not only did Henry have to develop new instruments, according to *The American Way*, but "people didn't know how to build seagoing ships, either," Students are left without a clue as to how aborigines ever reached Australia, Polynesians reached Madagascar, or Afro-Phoenicians reached the Canaries. By "people" *Way* means, of course, Europeans—a textbook example of Eurocentrism.

These books are expressions of what the anthropologist Stephen Jett calls "the doctrine of the discovery of America by Columbus."¹¹ Table 1 provides a chronological list of expeditions that may have reached the Americas before Columbus, with comments on the quality of the evidence for each as of 1994.¹¹ While the list is long, it is still probably incomplete. A map found in Turkey dated 1513 and said to be based on material from the library of Alexander the Great includes coastline details of South America and Antarctica. Ancient Roman coins keep turning up all over the Americas, causing some archaeologists to conclude that Roman seafarers visited the Americas more than once,²² Native Americans also crossed the Atlantic: anthropologists conjecture that Native Americans voyaged east millennia ago from Canada to Scandinavia or Scotland. Two Indians shipwrecked in Holland around 60 B.C. became major curiosities in Europe."

The evidence for each of these journeys offers fascinating glimpses into the societies and cultures that existed on both sides of the Atlantic and in Asia before 1492. They also reveal controversies among those who study the distant past. If textbooks allowed for controversy, they could show students which claims rest on strong evidence, which on softer ground. As they challenged students to make their own decisions as to what probably happened, they would also be introducing students to the various methods and forms of evidence—oral history, written records, cultural similarities, linguistic changes, human blood types, pottery, archaeological dating, plant migrations—that researchers use to derive knowledge about the distant past. Unfortunately, textbooks seem locked into a rhetoric of certainty. James West Davidson and Mark H. Lytle, coauthors of the textbook *The United States—A History of the Republic*, have also written *After the Fact*, a book for college history majors in which they emphasize that history is not a set of facts but a series of arguments, issues, and controversies,¹⁴ Davidson and Lytle's high school textbook, however, like its competitors, presents history as answers, not questions.

New evidence that emerges, as archaeologists and historians compare American cultures with cultures in Africa, Europe, and Asia, may confirm or disprove these arrivals. Keeping up with such evidence is a lot of work. To tell about earlier explorers, textbook authors would have to familiarize themselves with sources such as those cited in the three preceding footnotes. It's easier just to retell the old familiar Columbus story.

Seven of the twelve textbooks I studied at least mention the expeditions of the Norse. These daring sailors reached America in a series of voyages across the North Atlantic, establishing communities on the Faeroe Islands, Iceland, and

Table 1. Explorers of America

YEAR	FROM	TO	QUALITY OF EVIDENCE
70,000? B.C.- 12,000? B.C.	Siberia	Alaska	High: the survivors peopled the Americas.
6000? B.C.- 1500? B.C.	Indonesia (or other direction)	South America	Moderate: similarities in blowguns, pottery making, etc.
5000? B.C.	Japan	Ecuador	Moderate: similar pottery, fishing styles.
10,000? B.C.- 600? B.C.	Siberia	Canada, New Mexico	High: Navajos and Crees resemble each other culturally, differ from other Indians.
9000? B.C. to present	Siberia	Alaska	High: continuing contact of Inuits across Bering Sea.
1000 B.C.	China	Central America	Low: Chinese legend; cultural similarities.
1000 B.C.- 300 A.D.	Afro-Phoenicia	Central America	Moderate: Negroid and Caucasoid likenesses in sculpture and ceramics, Arab history, etc.
800 B.C.	Phoenicia, Celtic Britain	New England, perhaps elsewhere	Low: megaliths, possible similarities in script and language.
600 A.D.	Ireland, via Iceland	Newfoundland? West Indies?	Low: legends of St. Brendan, written c. 850 A.D., confirmed by Norse sagas.
1000-1350	Greenland, Iceland	Labrador, Baffin Land, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, possibly Cape Coo and further south	High: oral sagas, confirmed by archaeology on Newfoundland.
1311?-1460?	West Africa	Haiti, Panama, possibly Brazil	Moderate: Portuguese sources in West Africa, Columbus on Haiti, Balboa in Panama.
c. 1460	Portugal	Newfoundland? Brazil?	Low: inference from Portuguese sources and actions.
1375?-1491	Basque Spain	Newfoundland coast	Low: cryptic historical sources.
1481-91	Bristol, England	Newfoundland coast	Low: cryptic historical sources.
1492	Spain	Caribbean, including Haiti	High: historical sources.

Greenland. The Norse colony on Greenland lasted five hundred years (982-c. 1500), as long as the European settlement of the Americas until now. From Greenland a series of expeditions, some planned, some accidental, reached various parts of North America, including Baffin Land, Labrador, Newfoundland, and possibly New England.

Textbooks that mention the Viking expeditions minimize them. *Land of Promise* writes, "They merely touched the shore briefly, and sailed away." Perhaps the authors of *Promise* did not know that, around 1005, Thorfinn and Gudrid Karlsefni led a party of 65 or 165 or 265 homesteaders (the old Norse sagas vary), with livestock and supplies, to settle Vineland. They lasted two years; Gudrid gave birth to a son. Then conflict with Native Americans caused them to give up. This trip was no isolated incident: Norse were still exporting wood from Labrador to Greenland 350 years later. Some archaeologists and historians believe that the Norse got as far down the coast as North Carolina. The Norse discoveries remained known in western Europe for centuries and were never forgotten in Scandinavia. Columbus surely learned of Greenland and probably also of North America if he visited Iceland in 1477 as he claimed to have done."

It may be fair to say that the Vikings' voyages had little lasting effect on the fate of the world. Should textbooks therefore leave them out? Is impact on the present the sole reason for including an event or fact? It cannot be, of course, or our history books would shrink to twenty-page pamphlets. We include the Norse voyages, not for their ostensible geopolitical significance, but because including them gives a more complete picture of the past. Moreover, if textbooks would only intelligently compare the Norse voyages to Columbus's second voyage, they would help students understand the changes that took place in Europe between 1000 and 1493. As we shall see, Columbus's second voyage was ten times larger than the Norse attempts at settlement. The new European ability to mobilize was in part responsible for Columbus's voyages taking on their awesome significance.

Although seafarers from Africa and Asia may also have made it to the Americas, they never make it into history textbooks. The best known are the voyages of the Afro-Phoenicians, probably launched from Morocco but ultimately from Egypt, that are said to have reached the Atlantic coast of Mexico in about 750 B.C. Organic material associated with colossal heads of basalt that stand along the eastern coast of Mexico stand has been dated to around 750 B.C. The stone heads are realistic portraits of West Africans, according to the anthropologist Ivan Van Sertima, who has done much to bring these images into popular consciousness.[^] Around the same time Indians elsewhere in Mexico

created small ceramic and stone sculptures of what seem to be Caticasoid and Negroid faces. As Alexander von Wuthenau, who collected many such terracotta statues, put it, "It is contradictory to elementary logic and to all artistic experience that an Indian could depict in a masterly way the head of a Negro or of a white person without missing a single racial characteristic, unless he had seen such a person."²⁷ Although some scholars have dismissed the Caucasoid images as "stylized" Indian heads and the Negroid faces as representing jaguars or human babies, the faces nonetheless stare back at us, steadfastly Caucasoid or Negroid, hard to explain away. Ivan von Sertima and others have adduced additional bits of evidence, including similarities in looms and other cultural elements, identical strains of cotton that probably required human intervention to cross the Atlantic, and information in Arab historical sources about extensive ocean navigation by Africans and Phoenicians in the eighth century B.C.¹⁸

What is the importance today of these African and Phoenician predecessors of Columbus? Like the Vikings, they provide a fascinating story, one that can hold high school students on the edge of their seats. We might also realize another kind of importance by contemplating the particular meaning of Columbus Day. Italian Americans infer something positive about their "national character" from the exploits of their ethnic ancestors. The American sociologist George Homans once quipped, explaining why he had written on his own ancestors in East Anglia, rather than on some larger group elsewhere; "They may be humans, but not Homans!" Similarly, Scandinavians and Scandinavian Americans have always believed the Norse sagas about the Vikings, even when most historians did not, and finally confirmed them by conducting archaeological research in Newfoundland.

If Columbus is especially relevant to western Europeans and the Vikings to Scandinavians, what is the meaning to African Americans of the pre-Columbian voyagers from Africa? After visiting the Von Wuthenau museum in Mexico City, the Afro-Carib scholar Tiho Narva wrote, "With his unique collection surrounding me, I had an eerie feeling that veils obscuring the past had been torn asunder. . . . Somehow, upon leaving the museum I suddenly felt that I could walk taller for the rest of my days."¹⁹ Von Sertima's book is in its sixteenth printing and he is lionized by black undergraduates across America. Rap music groups chant "but we already had been there" in verses about Columbus.*⁰ Obviously, African Americans want to see positive images of "themselves" in American history. So do we all.

As with the Norse, including the Afro-Phoenicians gives a more complete and complex picture of the past, showing that navigation and exploration did



Rock heads nine feet tall face the ocean in southeastern Mexico. Archaeologists call them Olmec heads after their name for the Indians who carved them. According to an archaeologist who helped uncover them, the faces are "amazingly Negroid." Today some archaeologists believe that the mouth lines resemble jaguar-like expressions Mayan children still make. Others think the statues are of "fat babies" or Indian kings or resemble sculptures in Southeast Asia.

not begin with Europe in the 1400s. Like the Norse, the Afro-Phoenicians illustrate human possibility, in this case black possibility, or, more accurately, the prowess of a multiracial society. Unlike the Norse, the Africans and Phoenicians seem to have made a permanent impact on the Americas. The huge stone statues in Mexico imply as much. It took enormous effort to quarry these basalt blocks, each weighing ten to forty tons, move them from quarries seventy-five miles away, and sculpt them into heads six to ten feet tall. Wherever they were from, the human models for these heads were important people, people to be worshiped or obeyed or at least remembered." However, archaeologists have not agreed that they were Afro-Phoenicians, so including the story opens a window through which students can view an ongoing controversy.

Of the twelve textbooks I surveyed, only two even mention the possibility of African or Phoenician exploration. *The American Adventure* simply poses two questions: "What similarities are there between the great monuments of the Maya and those of ancient Egypt?" and "Might windblown sailors from Asia, Europe, Africa, or the South Pacific have mingled with the earlier inhabitants of the New World?" The textbook supplies no relevant information and even claims, "You should be able to deal with these questions without doing research." Nonsense. Most classrooms will simply ignore the questions.³² *The United States—A History of the Republic* mentions pre-Columbian expeditions only to assure us that we need not concern ourselves with them: "None of these Europeans, Africans, or Asians left lasting traces of their presence in the Americas, nor did they develop any lasting relationships with the first Americans." Unsatisfactory as these fragments are, they are the entire treatment of the issue in all twelve textbooks.

American history textbooks promote the belief that most important developments in world history are traceable to Europe. To grant too much human potential to pre-Columbian Africans might jar European American sensibilities. As Samuel Marble put it, "The possibility of African discovery of America has never been a tempting one for American historians."³ Teachers and curricula that present African history and African Americans in a positive light are often condemned for being Afrocentric. White historians insist that the case for the Afro-Phoenicians has not been proven; we must not distort history to improve black children's self-image, they say. They are right that the case hasn't been proven, but textbooks should include the Afro-Phoenicians as a *possibility*, a controversy.

Standard history textbooks and courses discriminate against students who have been educated by rap songs or by von Sertima. Imagine an eleventh-grade classroom in American history in early fall. The text is *Life and Liberty*; students are reading Chapter Two, "Exploration and Colonization," What happens when an African American girl shoots up her hand to challenge the statement "Not until 1497-1499 did the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama sail around Africa"? From rap songs the girl has learned that Afro-Phoenicians beat Da Gama by more than 2,000 years. Does the teacher take time to research the question and find that the student is right, the textbook wrong? More likely, s/he puts down the student's knowledge: "Rap songs aren't appropriate in a *history* class!" Or s/he humors the child: "Yes, but that was long ago and didn't lead to anything. Vasco da Gama's discovery is the important one." These responses allow the class to move "forward" to the next topic. They also contain some truth: the Afro-Phoenician circumnavigation didn't lead to any new trade routes or national alliances, because the Afro-Phoenicians were already trading with India through the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Textbooks don't name Vasco da Gama because something came from his "discovery," however. They name him because he was white. Two pages later, *Life and Liberty* tells us that Hernando De Soto "discovered [the] Mississippi River." (Of course, it had been discovered and named Mississippi by ancestors of the Indians who were soon to chase De Soto down it.) Textbooks portray De Soto in armor, not showing that by the time he reached the river, his men and women had lost almost all their clothing in a fire set by Indians in Alabama and were wearing replacements woven from reeds. De Soto's "discovery" had no larger significance and led to no trade or white settlement.⁴ His was merely the first *white* face to gaze upon the Mississippi. That's why ten of the twelve American history textbooks include him. From Erik the Red to Peary at the North Pole to the first man on the moon, we celebrate most discoverers because they were

first and because they were white, not because of events that flowed or did not flow from their accomplishments. My hypothetical teacher subtly changed the ground rules for Da Gama, but they changed right back for De Soto. In this way students learn that black feats are not considered important while white ones are."

Continuing down the list of likely pre-Columbian explorations, we arrive at an interesting vantage point from which to consider this debate. Let us compare two other possible pre-Columbian expeditions, from the west coasts of Africa and Ireland.

When Columbus reached Haiti, he found the Arawaks in possession of some spear points made of "guanine." The Indians said they got them from black traders who had come from the south and east. Guanine proved to be an alloy of gold, silver, and copper, identical to the gold alloy preferred by West Africans, who also called it "guanine." Islamic historians have recorded stories of voyages west from Mali in West Africa around 1311, during the reign of Mansa Bakari II. From time to time in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, shipwrecked African vessels—remnants, presumably, of transatlantic trade—washed up on Cape Verde. From contacts in West Africa, the Portuguese heard that African traders were visiting Brazil in the mid-1400s; this knowledge may have influenced Portugal to insist on moving the pope's "line of demarcation" further west in the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494).¹⁶ Traces of diseases common in Africa have been detected in pre-Columbian corpses in Brazil. Columbus's son Ferdinand, who accompanied the admiral on his third voyage, reports that people they met or heard about in eastern Honduras "are almost black in color, ugly in aspect," probably Africans. The first Europeans to reach Panama—Balboa and company—reported seeing black slaves in an Indian town. The Indians said they had captured them from a nearby black community. Oral history from Afro-Mexicans contains tales of pre-Columbian crossings from West Africa. In all, then, data from diverse sources suggest that pre-Columbian voyages from West Africa to America were probable.¹⁷

In contrast, the evidence for an Irish trip to America comes from only one side of the Atlantic. Irish legends written in the ninth or tenth century tell of "an abbot and seventeen monks who journeyed to the 'promised land of the saints' during a seven-year sojourn in a leather boat" centuries earlier. The stories include details that are literally fabulous: each Easter, the priest and his crew supposedly conducted Mass on the back of a whale. They visited a "pillar of crystal" (perhaps an iceberg) and an "island of fire." We cannot simply dismiss these legends, however. When the Norse first reached Iceland, Irish

monks were living on the island, whose volcanoes could have provided the "island of fire."

How do American history textbooks treat these two sets of legendary voyagers? Five of the textbooks admit the possibility of an Irish expedition. *The Challenge of Freedom* gives the fullest account:

Some people believe that . . . Irish missionaries may have sailed to the Americas hundreds of years before the first voyages of Columbus. According to Irish legends, Irish monks sailed the Atlantic Ocean in order to bring Christianity to the people they met. One Irish legend in particular tells about a land southwest of the Azores. This land was supposedly discovered by St. Brendan, an Irish missionary, about 500 AD.

Not one textbook mentions the West Africans, however.

While leaving out Columbus's predecessors, American history books continue to make mistakes when they get to the last "discoverer." They present cut-and-dried answers, mostly glorifying Columbus, always avoiding uncertainty or controversy. Often their errors seem to be copied from other textbooks. Let me repeat the collective Columbus story they tell, this time italicizing everything in it that we have solid reason to believe is true.

Horn in Genoa, of humble parents, *Christopher Columbus* grew up to become an experienced seafarer, venturing as far *O! Iceland and West Africa*. His adventures convinced him that the world must be round and that the fabled riches of the East—spices and gold—could be had by sailing west, superseding the overland routes, which the Turks had closed off to commerce. *To get funding for his enterprise, he baeched monarch after monarch in Western Europe*. After at first being dismissed by Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, Columbus finally got his chance when *Isabella* decided to underwrite a modest expedition. *Columbus* outfitted three pitifully small ships, *the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria*, and set forth from Spain. After an arduous journey of more than two months, during which his mutinous crew almost threw him overboard, Columbus discovered the *West Indies* on October 12, 1492. Unfortunately, although *he made three more voyages to America*, he never knew he had discovered a New World. *Columbus* died in obscurity, unappreciated and penniless. Yet without his daring *American history* u'ould have been very different, for in a sense he made it all possible.

As you can see, textbooks get the date right, and the names of the ships. Most of the rest that they tell us is untrustworthy. Many aspects of Columbus's life remain a mystery. He claimed to be from Genoa, Italy, and there is evidence that he was. There is also evidence that he wasn't: Columbus didn't seem to be able to write in Italian, even when writing to people in Genoa. Some historians believe he was Jewish, a *converso*, or convert to Christianity, probably from Spain, (Spain was pressuring its Jews to convert to Christianity or leave the country.) He may have been a Genoese Jew. Still other historians claim he was from Corsica, Portugal, or elsewhere.¹⁵

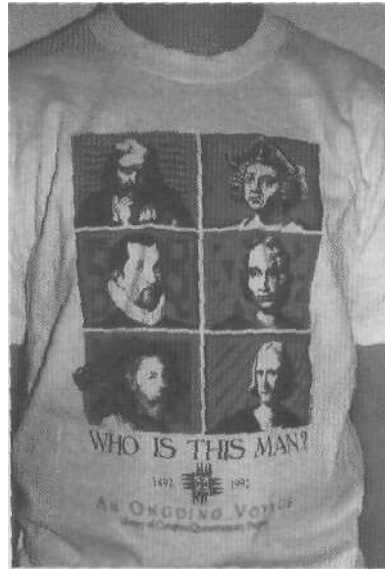
What about Columbus's social class background? One textbook tells us he was poor, "the son of a poor Genoese weaver," while another assures us he was rich, "the son of a prosperous wool-weaver." Each is certain, but people who have spent years studying Columbus say we cannot be sure.

We do not even know for certain where Columbus thought he was going. Evidence suggests he was seeking Japan, India, and Indonesia; other evidence indicates he was trying to reach "new" lands to the west. Historians have asserted each viewpoint for centuries. Because "India was known for its great wealth," Las Casas points out, it was in Columbus's interest "to induce the monarchs, always doubtful about his enterprise, to believe him when he said he was setting out in search of a western route to India."⁴⁰ After reviewing the evidence, Columbus's recent biographer Kirkpatrick Sale concluded "we will likely never know for sure." Sale noted that such a conclusion is "not very satisfactory for those who demand certainty in their historical tales."⁴¹ Predictably, all our textbooks are of this type: all "know" he was seeking Japan and the East Indies. Thus authors keep their readers from realizing that historians do *not* know all the answers, hence history is no! just a process of memorizing them.

The extent to which textbooks sometimes disagree, particularly when each seems so certain of what it declares, can be pretty scary. What was the weather like during Columbus's 1492 trip? According to *Land of Promise*, his ships were "storm-battered"; but *American Adventures* says they enjoyed "peaceful seas." How long was the voyage? "After more than two months at sea," according to *The Challenge of Freedom*, the crews saw land; but *The American Adventure* says the voyage lasted "nearly a month." What were the Americas like when Columbus arrived? "Thickly peopled," in one book, quoting Columbus; "thinly spread," according to another.

To make a better myth, American culture has perpetuated the idea that Columbus was boldly forging ahead while everyone else, even his own crew, imagined the world was flat. *The American Pageant* is the only textbook that still

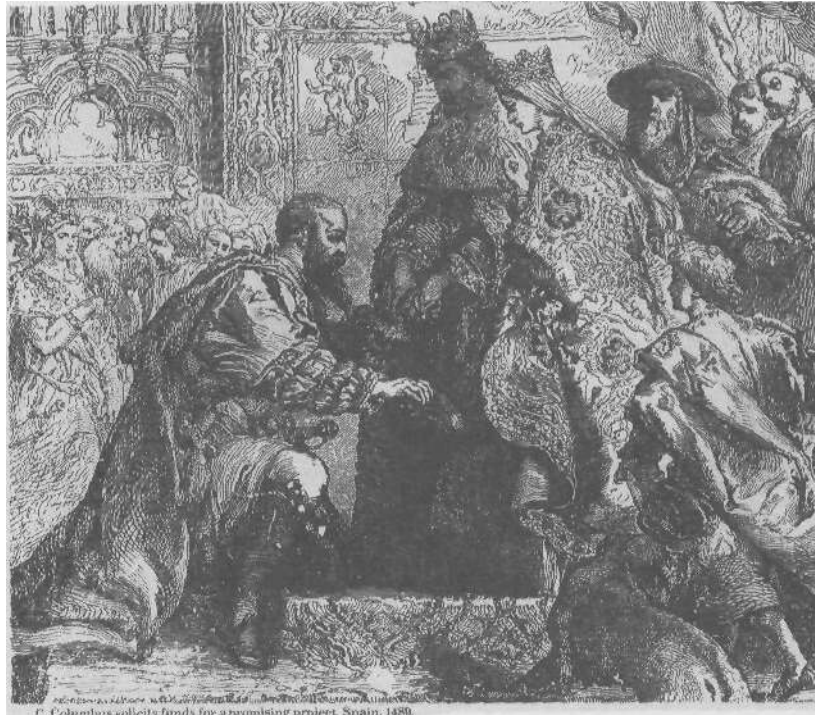
Most textbooks include a portrait of Columbus. These head-and-shoulder pictures have no value whatsoever as historical documents, because not one of the countless images we have of the man was painted in his lifetime. To make the point that these images are inauthentic, the Library of Congress sells this T-shirt featuring six different Columbus faces.



repeats this hoax, "The superstitious sailors . . . , grew increasingly mutinous," according to *Pageant*, because they were "fearful of sailing over the edge of the world." In iruth, few people on both sides of the Atlantic believed in 1492 that the world was flat. Most Europeans and Native Americans knew the world to be round. It *looks* round. It casts a circular shadow on the moon. Sailors see its roundness when ships disappear over the horizon, hull first, then sails,

Washington Irving wins credit for popularizing the flat-earth fable in 1828. In his bestselling biography of Columbus, Irving described Columbus's supposed defense of his round-earth theory before the flat-earth savants at Salamanca University, Irving himself surely knew the story to be fiction,⁴² He probably thought it added a nice dramatic flourish and would do no harm. But it does. It invites us to believe that the "primitives" of the world, admittedly including pre-Columbian Europeans, had only a crude understanding of the planet they lived on, until aided by a forward-thinking European. It also turns Columbus into a man of science who corrected our faulty geography.

Intense debunking of the flat-earth legend by professional historians has made an impact. Yet even the eleven textbooks that do not repeat Irving's fiction choose wholly ineffectual words to counter it. This passage from *Triumph of the American Nation* exemplifies the problem: "Convinced that the earth was round, a knowledge shared by many informed people of" the day, Columbus



Without project funding, the world might still be flat

American culture perpetuates the image of Columbus boldly forging ahead while everyone else imagined the world was flat. A character in the movie *Star Trek V*, for instance, repeats the Washington Irving lie: "The people of your world once believed the earth to be flat; Columbus proved it was round." Every October, Madison Avenue makes use of the flat-earth theme. This ad seeks clients for daring and courageous stock brokers!

believed that if he sailed far enough to the west he would reach Asia." To be sure, the minor subordinate clause quietly notes that not everyone, perhaps not even most people, believed in flat-earth geography. But the main subordinate clause and the primary clause emphasize Columbus's own belief that the earth was round. The sentence makes little sense unless the reader infers that Columbus's belief was unusual. I have talked not only with students but also with teachers who have read textbooks like *Triumph* without noticing this point. Thus teachers often still believe and still relay to their students the flat-earth legend.

Even the death of Columbus has been changed to make a better story. Having Columbus come to a tragic end—sick, poor, and ignorant of his great accomplishment—adds melodramatic interest. "Columbus's discoveries were not immediately appreciated by the Spanish government," according to *The American Adventure*. "He died in neglect in 1506." In fact, Spain "immediately appreciated" Columbus's "discoveries," which is why they immediately outfitted him for a much larger second voyage. In 1499 Columbus made a major gold strike on Haiti. He and his successors then forced hundreds of thousands of Indians to mine the gold for them. Money from the Americas continued to flow in to Columbus in Spain, perhaps not what he felt he deserved, but enough to keep all wolves far from his door. Columbus died well off and left his heirs well endowed, even with the title, "Admiral of the Ocean Sea," now carried by his eighteenth-generation descendant. Moreover, Columbus's own journal shows clearly that he knew he had reached a "new" continent.⁴¹

The errors textbooks make about Columbus do not result simply from sloppy scholarship. Textbooks want to magnify Columbus as a great hero, a "man of vision, energy, resourcefulness, and courage," in the words of *The American Pageant*. Some of the details the textbook authors pile on are harmless, I suppose, such as the fabrications about Isabella's sending a messenger galloping after Columbus and pawning her jewels to pay for the expedition.⁴⁴ All of the enhancements humanize Columbus, however, to induce readers to identify with him. Here is a passage from *Land of Promise*:

It is October, 1492. Three small, storm-battered ships are lost at sea, sailing into an unknown ocean. A frightened crew has been threatening to throw their stubborn captain overboard, turn the ships around, and make for the safety of familiar shores.

Then a miracle: The sailors see some green branches floating on the water. Land birds fly overhead. From high in the ship's rigging the



As Columbus cruised the coast of Venezuela on his third voyage, he passed the Orinoco River, "I have come to believe that this is a mighty continent, which was hitherto unknown," he wrote,

I am greatly supported in this view by reason of this great river and by this sea which is fresh," Columbus knew that no mere island could sustain such a large flow of water. When he returned home, he added a continent to the islands in his coat of arms. Its presence at the bottom of the lower left quadrant visually rebukes the authors of American history textbooks.

lookout cries, "Land, land ahead!" Fears turn to joy. Soon the grateful captain wades ashore and gives thanks to God.

Now, really. The *Nifia*, *Pinca*, and *Santa Mdrid* were not "storm-battered." To make a better myth, the textbook authors want the voyage to seem harder than it was, so they invent bad weather. Columbus's own journal reveals that the three ships enjoyed lovely sailing. Seas were so calm that for days at a time sailors were able to converse from one ship to another. Indeed, the only time they experienced even moderately high seas was on the last day when they knew they were near land.

To make a better myth, to make the trip seem longer than it was, most of the textbooks overlook Columbus's stopover in the Canary Islands. The voyage across the unknown Atlantic took one month, not two.

To make a better myth, the textbooks describe Columbus's ships as tiny and inefficient, when actually "these three vessels were fully suited to his purpose," as naval author Pietro Barozzi has pointed out.⁴¹

To make a better myth, six of twelve textbooks exaggerate the crew's complaints into a near-mutiny. The primary sources differ. Some claim the sailors threatened to go back home if they didn't reach land soon. Other sources claim that Columbus lost heart and that the captains of the other two ships persuaded him to keep on. Still other sources suggest that the three leaders met and agreed to continue on for a few more days and then reassess the situation. After

studying the matter, Columbus's biographer Samuel Eliot Morison reduced the complaints to mere griping: "They were all getting on each other's nerves, as happens even nowadays,"⁴⁶ So much for the crew's threat to throw Columbus overboard.

Such exaggeration is not entirely harmless. Another archetype lurks below the surface: that those who direct social enterprises are more intelligent than those nearer the bottom. Bill Bigelow, a high school history teacher, has pointed out that "the sailors are stupid, superstitious, cowardly, and sometimes scheming, Columbus, on the other hand, is brave, wise, and godly." These portrayals amount to an "anti-working class pro-boss polemic."⁴⁷ Indeed, the only textbook that still repeats the old flat-earth myth thinks badly of the sailors, whom it characterizes as "a motley crew."

False entries in the log of the *Santa Maria* constitute another piece of the myth, "Columbus was a true leader," says *A History of the United States*. "He altered the records of distances they had covered so the crew would not think they had gone too far from home," Salvador de Madariaga has persuasively argued that to believe this, we would have to think the others on the voyage were fools. Columbus had "no special method, available only to him, whereby distances sailed could be more accurately reckoned than by the other pilots and masters." Indeed, Columbus was *less* experienced as a navigator than the Pinion brothers, who captained the *Nina* and *Pinto*.⁴¹ During the return voyage, Columbus confided in his journal the real reason for the false log entries: he wanted to keep the route to the Indies secret. As paraphrased by Las Casas, "He says that he pretended to have gone a greater distance in order to confound the pilots and sailors who did the charts, that he might remain master of that route to the Indies."⁴⁹

To make a better myth, our textbooks find space for many other humanizing particulars. They have the lookout cry "Tierra!" or "Land!" Most of them tell us that Columbus's first act after going ashore was "thanking God for leading them safely across the sea"—even though the surviving summary of Columbus's own journal states only that "before them all, he took possession of the island, as in fact he did, for the King and Queen, his Sovereigns."⁵⁰ Many of the textbooks tell of Columbus's three later voyages to the Americas, but they do not find space to tell us how Columbus treated the lands and the people he "discovered,"

Christopher Columbus introduced two phenomena that revolutionized race relations and transformed the modern world: the taking of land, wealth, and labor from indigenous peoples, leading to their near extermination, and the transatlantic slave trade, which created a racial underclass.

Columbus's initial impression of the Arawaks, who inhabited most of the islands in the Caribbean, was quite favorable. He wrote in his journal on October 13, 1492: "At daybreak great multitudes of men came to the shore, all young and of fine shapes, and very handsome. Their hair was not curly but loose and coarse like horse-hair. All have foreheads much broader than any people I had hitherto seen. Their eyes are large and very beautiful. They are not black, but the color of the inhabitants of the Canaries," (This reference to the Canaries was ominous, for Spain was then in the process of exterminating the aboriginal people of those islands.) Columbus went on to describe the Arawaks' canoes, "some large enough to contain 40 or 45 men." Finally, he got down to business: "I was very attentive to them, and strove to learn if they had any gold. Seeing some of them with little bits of metal hanging at their noses, I gathered *from* them by signs that by going southward or steering round the island in that direction, there would be found a king who possessed great cups full of gold." At dawn the next day, Columbus sailed to the other side of the island, probably one of the Bahamas, and saw two or three villages. He ended his description of them with these menacing words: "I could conquer the whole of them with fifty men and govern them as I pleased."¹

On his first voyage, Columbus kidnapped some ten to twenty-five Indians and took them back with him to Spain." Only seven or eight of the Indians arrived alive, but along with the parrots, gold trinkets, and other exotica, they caused quite a stir in Seville. Ferdinand and Isabella provided Columbus with seventeen ships, 1,200 to 1,500 men, cannons, crossbows, guns, cavalry, and attack dogs for a second voyage.

One way to visualize what happened next is with the help of the famous science fiction story *War of the Worlds*. H. G. Wells intended his tale of earthlings' encounter with technologically advanced aliens as an allegory. His frightened British commoners (New Jerseyites in Orson Welles's radio adaptation) were analogous to the "primitive" peoples of the Canaries or America, and his terrifying aliens represented the technologically advanced Europeans. As we identify with the helpless earthlings, Wells wanted us also to sympathize with the natives on Haiti in 1493, or on Australia in 1788, or in the upper Amazon jungle in the 1990s.⁵¹

When Columbus and his men returned to Haiti in 1493, they demanded food, gold, spun cotton—whatever the Indians had that they wanted, including sex with their women. To ensure cooperation, Columbus used punishment by example. When an Indian committed even a minor offense, the Spanish cut off his ears or nose. Disfigured, the person was sent back to his village as living evidence of the brutality the Spaniards were capable of.

After a while, the Indians had had enough. At first their resistance was mostly passive. They refused to plant food for the Spanish to take. They abandoned towns near the Spanish settlements. Finally, the Arawaks fought back. Their sticks and stones were no more effective against the armed and clothed Spanish, however, than the earthlings' rifles against the aliens' death rays in *War of the Worlds*.

The attempts at resistance gave Columbus an excuse to make war. On March 24, 1495, he set out to conquer the Arawaks. Bartolome de Las Casas described the force Columbus assembled to put down the rebellion. "Since the Admiral perceived that daily the people of the land were taking up arms, ridiculous weapons in reality . . . he hastened to proceed to the country and disperse and subdue, by force of arms, the people of the entire island . . . For this he chose 200 foot soldiers and 20 cavalry, with many crossbows and small cannon, lances, and swords, and a still more terrible weapon against the Indians, in addition to the horses: this was 20 hunting dogs, who were turned loose and immediately tore the Indians apart."⁵⁴ Naturally, the Spanish won. According to Kirkpatrick Sale, who quotes Ferdinand Columbus's biography of his father "The soldiers mowed down dozens with point-blank volleys, loosed the dogs to rip open limbs and bellies, chased fleeing Indians into the bush to skewer them on sword and pike, and 'with God's aid soon gained a complete victory, killing many Indians and capturing others who were also killed."⁵⁵

Having as yet found no fields of gold, Columbus had to return some kind of dividend to Spain. In 1495 the Spanish on Haiti initiated a great slave raid. They rounded up 1,500 Arawaks, then selected the 500 best specimens (of whom 200 would die en route to Spain). Another 500 were chosen as slaves for the Spaniards staying on the island. The rest were released. A Spanish eyewitness described the event: "Among them were many women who had infants at the breast. They, in order the better to escape us, since they were afraid we would turn to catch them again, left their infants anywhere on the ground and started to flee like desperate people; and some fled so far that they were removed from our settlement of Isabela seven or eight days beyond mountains and across huge rivers; wherefore from now on scarcely any will be had." Columbus was excited. "In the name of the Holy Trinity, we can send from here all the slaves and brazil-wood which could be sold," he wrote to Ferdinand and Isabella in 1496. "In Castile, Portugal, Aragon, . . . and the Canary Islands they need many slaves, and I do not think they get enough from Guinea." He viewed the Indian death rate optimistically: "Although they die now, they will not always die. The Negroes and Canary Islanders died at first."

In the words of Hans Koning, "There now began a reign of terror in Hispaniola." Spaniards hunted Indians for sport and murdered them for dog food. Columbus, upset because he could not locate the gold he was certain was on the island, set up a tribute system. Ferdinand Columbus described how it worked: "(The Indians) all promised to pay tribute to the Catholic Sovereigns every three months, as follows: In the Cibao, where the gold mines were, every person of 14 years of age or upward was to pay a large hawk's bell of gold dust; all others were each to pay 25 pounds of cotton. Whenever an Indian delivered his tribute, he was to receive a brass or copper token which he must wear about his neck as proof that he had made his payment. Any Indian found without such a token was to be punished." With a fresh token, an Indian was safe for three months, much of which time would be devoted to collecting more gold. Columbus's son neglected to mention how the Spanish punished those whose tokens had expired: they cut off their hands.⁵⁹

All of these gruesome facts are available in primary source material—letters by Columbus and by other members of his expeditions—and in the work of Las Casas, the first great historian of the Americas, who relied on primary materials and helped preserve them. I have quoted a few primary sources in this chapter. Most textbooks make no use of primary sources. A few incorporate brief extracts that have been carefully selected or edited to reveal nothing unseemly about the Great Navigator.

The tribute system eventually broke down because what it demanded was impossible. To replace it, Columbus installed the *encomienda* system, in which he granted or "commended" entire Indian villages to individual colonists or groups of colonists. Since it was not called slavery, this forced-labor system escaped the moral censure that slavery received. Following Columbus's example, Spain made the *encomienda* system official policy on Haiti in 1502; other conquistadors subsequently introduced it to Mexico, Peru, and Florida.⁶⁰

The tribute and *encomienda* systems caused incredible depopulation. On Haiti the colonists made the Indians mine gold for them, raise Spanish food, and even carry them everywhere they went. The Indians couldn't stand it. Pedro de Cordoba wrote in a letter to King Ferdinand in 1517, "As a result of the sufferings and hard labor they endured, the Indians choose and have chosen suicide. Occasionally a hundred have committed mass suicide. The women, exhausted by labor, have shunned conception and childbirth . . . Many, when pregnant, have taken something to abort and have aborted. Others after delivery have killed their children with their own hands, so as not to leave them in such oppressive slavery."⁶¹



American History reproduces "Columbus Landing in the Bahamas," the first of eight huge "historical" paintings in the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol (above). The 1847 painting by John Vanderlyn illustrates the heroic treatment of Columbus in most textbooks. An alternative representation of Columbus's enterprise might be Theodore de Bry's woodcut, created around 1504 (opposite). De Bry based this engraving on accounts of Indians who impaled themselves, drank poison, jumped off cliffs, hanged themselves, and killed their children. The artist squeezed all of these fatal deeds into one picture! De Bry's images became important historical documents in their own right. Accompanied by Las Casas's writings, they circulated throughout sixteenth-century Europe and gave rise to the "Black Legend" of Spanish cruelty, which other European countries used to denounce Spain's colonialism, mostly out of envy. No textbook includes any visual representation of the activities of Columbus and his men that is other than glorious.

Beyond acts of individual cruelty, the Spanish disrupted the Indian ecosystem and culture. Forcing Indians to work in mines rather than in their gardens led to widespread malnutrition. The intrusion of rabbits and livestock caused further ecological disaster. Diseases new to the Indians played a role, although smallpox, usually the big killer, did not appear on the island until after 1516. Some of the Indians tried fleeing to Cuba, but the Spanish soon followed them there. Estimates of Haiti's pre-Columbian population range as high as 8,000,000 people. When Christopher Columbus returned to Spain, he left his brother Bartholomew in charge of the island. Bartholomew took a census of Indian adults in 1496 and came up with 1,100,000. The Spanish did not count



children under fourteen and could not count Arawaks who had escaped into the mountains. Kirkpatrick Sale estimates that a more accurate total would probably be in the neighborhood of 3,000,000. "By 1516," according to Benjamin Keen, "thanks to the sinister Indian slave trade and labor policies initiated by Columbus, only some 12,000 remained." Las Casas tells us that fewer than 200 Indians were alive in 1542, By 1555, they were all gone.*²

Thus nasty details like cutting off hands have somewhat greater historical importance than nice touches like "Tierra!" Haiti under the Spanish is one of the primary instances of genocide in all human history. Yet only one of the twelve textbooks. *The American Pageant*, mentions the extermination. None mentions Columbus's role in it.

Columbus not only sent the first slaves across the Atlantic, he probably sent more slaves—about five thousand—than any other individual. To her credit, Queen Isabella opposed outright enslavement and returned some Indians to the Caribbean. But other nations rushed to emulate Columbus. In 1501 the Portuguese began to depopulate Labrador, transporting the now extinct Beothuk Indians to Europe and Cape Verde as slaves. After the British established beachheads on the Atlantic coast of North America, they encouraged coastal Indian tribes to capture and sell members of mote distant tribes. Charleston, South Carolina, became a major port for exporting Indian slaves. The Pilgrims and Puritans sold the survivors of the Pequoi War into slavery in Bermuda in 1637. The French shipped virtually the entire Natchez nation in chains to the West Indies in 1731.*³

A particularly repellent aspect of the slave trade was sexual. As soon as the 1493 expedition got to the Caribbean, before it even reached Haiti, Columbus was rewarding his lieutenants with native women to rape.⁶⁴ On Haiti, sex slaves were one more perquisite that the Spaniards enjoyed. Columbus wrote a friend in 1500, "A hundred castellanoes are as easily obtained for a woman as for a farm, and it is very general and there are plenty of dealers who go about looking for girls; those from nine to ten are now in demand."⁶⁵

The slave trade destroyed whole Indian nations. Enslaved Indians died. To replace the dying Haitians, the Spanish imported tens of thousands more Indians from the Bahamas, which "are now deserted," in the words of the Spanish historian Peter Martyr, reporting in 1516.^M Packed in below deck, with hatchways closed to prevent their escape, so many slaves died on the trip that "a ship without a compass, chart, or guide, but only following the trail of dead Indians who had been thrown from the ships could find its way from the Bahamas to Hispaniola."⁶⁷ Puerto Rico and Cuba were next.

Because the Indians died, Indian slavery then led to the massive slave trade the other way across the Atlantic, from Africa. This trade also began on Haiti, initiated by Columbus's son in 1505. Predictably, Haiti then became the site of the first large-scale slave revolt, when blacks and Indians banded together in 1519. The uprising lasted more than a decade and was finally brought to an end by the Spanish in the 1530s.⁶⁸

Of the twelve textbooks, only six mention that the Spanish enslaved or exploited the Indians anywhere in the Americas. Of these only four verge on mentioning that Columbus was involved. *The Untied States—A History of the Republic* places the following passage about the fate of the Indians under the heading "The Fate of Columbus": "Some Spaniards who had come to the Americas had begun to enslave and kill the original Americans. Authorities in Spain held Columbus responsible for the atrocities." Note that *A History* takes pains to isolate Columbus from the enslavement charge—*others were* misbehaving. *Life and Liberty* implies that Columbus might have participated: "Slavery began in the New World almost as soon as Columbus got off the boat." Only *The American Adventure* clearly associates Columbus with slavery. *American History* levels a vague charge: "Columbus was a great sailor and a brave and determined man. But he was not good at politics or business." That's it. The other books simply adore him.

As Kirkpatrick Sale poetically sums up, Columbus's "second voyage marks the first extended encounter of European and Indian societies, the clash of cultures that was to echo down through five centuries."⁶⁹ The seeds of that five-century battle were sown in Haiti between 1493 and 1500. These are not mere

details that our textbooks omit. They are facts crucial to understanding American and European history. Capt. John Smith, for example, used Columbus as a role model in proposing a get-tough policy for the Virginia Indians in 1624: "The manner how to suppress them is so often related and approved, I omit it here: And you have twenty examples of the Spaniards how they got the West Indies, and forced the treacherous and rebellious infidels to do all manner of drudgery work and slavery for them, themselves living like soldiers upon the fruits of their labors."⁷⁰ The methods unleashed by Columbus are, in fact, the larger part of his legacy. After all, they worked. The island was so well pacified that Spanish convicts, given a second chance on Haiti, could "go anywhere, take any woman or girl, take anything, and have the Indians carry him on their backs as if they were mules."⁷¹ In 1499, when Columbus finally found gold on Haiti in significant amounts, Spain became the envy of Europe. After 1500 Portugal, France, Holland, and Britain joined in conquering the Americas. These nations were at least as brutal as Spain. The British, for example, unlike the Spanish, did not colonize by making use of Indian labor but simply forced the Indians out of the way. Many Indians fled British colonies to Spanish territories (Florida, Mexico) in search of more humane treatment.

Columbus's voyages caused almost as much change in Europe as in the Americas. This is the other half of the vast process historians now call the Columbian exchange.⁷² Crops, animals, ideas, and diseases began to cross the oceans regularly. Perhaps the most far-reaching impact of Columbus's findings was on European Christianity. In 1492 all of Europe was in the grip of the Catholic Church. As *L-rousu* puts it, before America, "Europe was virtually incapable of self-criticism."⁷³ After America, Europe's religious uniformity was ruptured. For how were these new peoples to be explained? They were not mentioned in the Bible. The Indians simply did not fit within orthodox Christianity's explanation of the moral universe. Moreover, unlike the Muslims, who might be written off as "damned infidels," Indians had not rejected Christianity, they had just never encountered it. Were they doomed to hell? Even the animals of America posed a religious challenge. According to the Bible, at the dawn of creation all animals lived in the Garden of Eden. Later, two of each species entered Noah's ark and ended up on Mt. Ararat. Since Eden and Mt. Ararat were both in the Middle East, where could these new American species have come from? Such questions shook orthodox Catholicism and contributed to the Protestant Reformation, which began in 1517.⁷⁴

Politically, nations like the Arawaks—without monarchs, without much hierarchy—stunned Europeans. In 1516 Thomas More's *Utopia*, based on an

account of the Incan empire in Peru, challenged European social organization by suggesting a radically different and superior alternative. Other social philosophers seized upon the Indians as living examples of Europe's primordial past, which is what John Locke meant by the phrase "In the beginning, all the world was America." Depending upon their political persuasion, some Europeans glorified Indian nations as examples of simpler, better societies, from which European civilization had devolved, while others maligned the Indian societies as primitive and underdeveloped. In either case, from Montaigne, Montesquieu, and Rousseau down to Marx and Engels, European philosophers' concepts of the good society were transformed by ideas from America.⁷⁵

America fascinated the masses as well as the elite. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare noted this universal curiosity: "They will not give a doit to relieve a lambe beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian."⁷⁶ Europe's fascination with the Americas was directly responsible, in fact, for a rise in European self-consciousness. From the beginning America was perceived as an "opposite" to Europe in ways that even Africa never had been. In a sense, there was no "Europe" before 1492. People were simply Tuscan, French, and the like. Now Europeans began to see similarities among themselves, at least as contrasted with Native Americans. For that matter, there were no "white" people in Europe before 1492. With the transatlantic slave trade, first Indian, then African, Europeans increasingly saw "white" as a race and race as an important human characteristic.⁷⁷

Columbus's own writings reflect this increasing racism. When Columbus was selling Queen Isabella on the wonders of the Americas, the Indians were "well built" and "of quick intelligence." "They have very good customs," he wrote, "and the king maintains a very marvelous state, of a style so orderly that it is a pleasure to see it, and they have good memories and they wish to see everything and ask what it is and for what it is used." Later, when Columbus was justifying his wars and his enslavement of the Indians, they became "cruel" and "stupid," "a people warlike and numerous, whose customs and religion are very different from ours."

It is always useful to think badly about people one has exploited or plans to exploit. Modifying one's opinions to bring them into line with one's actions or planned actions is the most common outcome of the process known as "cognitive dissonance," according to the social psychologist Leon Festinger. No one likes to think of himself or herself as a bad person. To treat badly another person whom we consider a reasonable human being creates a tension between act and attitude that demands resolution. We cannot erase what we have done, and to alter our future behavior may not be in our interest. To change our attitude is easier,⁷⁸

Columbus gives us the first recorded example of cognitive dissonance in the Americas, for although the Indians may have changed from hospitable to angry, they could hardly have evolved from intelligent to stupid so quickly. The change had to be in Columbus.

The Americas affected more than the mind. African and Eurasian stomachs were also affected. Almost half of all major crops now grown throughout the world originally came from the Americas. According to Alfred Crosby, adding corn to African diets caused the population to grow, which helped fuel the African slave trade to the Americas. Adding potatoes to European diets caused the population to explode in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which in turn helped fuel the European emigration to the Americas and Australia. Crops from America also played a key role in the ascendancy of Britain, Germany, and, finally, Russia; the rise of these northern nations shifted the power base of Europe away from the Mediterranean.⁷⁹

Shortly after ships from Columbus's second voyage returned to Europe, syphilis began to plague Spain and Italy. There is likely a causal connection. On the other hand, more than two hundred drugs derive from plants whose pharmacological uses were discovered by American Indians.*"

Economically, exploiting the Americas transformed Europe, enriching first Spain, then, through trade and piracy, other nations. Columbus's gold finds on Haiti were soon dwarfed by discoveries of gold and silver in Mexico and the Andes, European religious and political leaders quickly amassed so much gold that they applied gold leaf to the ceilings of their churches and palaces, erected golden statues in the corners, and strung vines of golden grapes between them. Marx and Engels held that this wealth "gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry an impulse never before known." Some writers credit it with the rise of capitalism and eventually the industrial revolution. Capitalism was probably already underway, but at the least, American riches played a major role in the transformation. Gold and silver from America replaced land as the basis for wealth and status, increasing the power of the new merchant class that would soon dominate the world.⁶¹ Where Muslim nations had once rivaled Europe, the new wealth undermined Islamic power. American gold and silver fueled a 400 percent inflation that eroded the economies of most non-European countries and helped Europe to develop a global market system, Africa suffered: the trans-Saharan trade collapsed, because the Americas supplied more gold and silver than the Gold Coast ever could. African traders now had only one commodity that Europe wanted: slaves. In anthropologist Jack Weatherford's words, "Africans thus became victims of the discovery of America as surely as did the American Indians."⁶²

Astoundingly, not one textbook I surveyed describes these geopolitical implications of Columbia's encounter with the Americas. Three of the twelve books credit Indians with having developed important crops. Otherwise, the west-to-east flow of ideas and wealth goes unnoticed. Eurocentrism blinds textbook authors to contributions to Europe, whether from Arab astronomers, African navigators, or American Indian social structure. By accepting this limited viewpoint, our history textbooks never invite us to think about what happened to reduce mainland Indian societies, whose wealth and cities awed the Spanish, to the impoverished peasantry they are today. They also rob us of the chance to appreciate how important America has been in the formation of the modern world.

This theft impoverishes *us*, keeps us ignorant of what has caused the world to develop as it has. Clearly our textbooks are not about teaching history. Their enterprise is Building Character. They therefore treat Columbus as an origin myth: He was good and so are we.⁸¹ In 1989 President Bush invoked Columbus as a role model for the nation: "Christopher Columbus not only opened the door to a New World, but also set an example for us all by showing what monumental feats can be accomplished through perseverance and faith."⁸⁴ The columnist Jeffrey Hart recently went even further: "To denigrate Columbus is to denigrate what is worthy in human history and in us all."⁸⁵ Textbook authors who are pushing Columbus to build character obviously have no interest in mentioning what he did with the Americas once he reached them—even though that's half of the story, and perhaps the more important half.

I am not proposing the breast-beating alternative: that Columbus was bad and so are we. On the contrary, textbooks should show that neither morality nor immorality can simply be conferred upon us by history. Merely being part of the United States, without regard to our own acts and ideas, does not make us moral or immoral beings. History is more complicated than that.

Again we must pause to consider: who are "we"? Columbus is not a hero in Mexico, even though Mexico is much more Spanish in culture than the United States and might be expected to take pride in this hero of Spanish history. Why not? Because Mexico is also much more Indian than the United States, and Mexicans perceive Columbus as white and European. "No sensible Indian person," wrote George P. Horse Capture, "can celebrate the arrival of Columbus."*" Cherishing Columbus is a characteristic of white history, not American history,

Columbus's conquest of Haiti can be seen as an amazing feat of courage and imagination by the first of many brave empire builders. It can also be under-

stood as a bloody atrocity that left a legacy of genocide and slavery that endures in some degree to this day. Both views of Columbus are valid; indeed, Columbus's importance in history owes precisely to his being both a heroic navigator *and* a great plunderer. If Columbus were only the former, he would merely rival Leif Erikson. Columbus's actions exemplify both meanings of the word *exploit*—a remarkable deed and also a taking advantage of. The worshipful biographical vignettes of Columbus in our textbooks serve to indoctrinate students into a mindless endorsement of colonialism that is strikingly inappropriate in today's postcolonial era. In the words of the historian Michael Wallace, the Columbus myth "allows us to accept the contemporary division of the world into developed and underdeveloped spheres as natural and given, rather than a historical product issuing from a process that began with Columbus's first voyage,"³⁷

We understand Columbus and all European explorers and settlers more clearly if we treat 1492 as a meeting of three cultures (Africa was soon involved), rather than a discovery by one. The term *New World* is itself part of the problem, for people had lived in the Americas for thousands of years. The Americas were new only to Europeans. The word *discover* is another part of the problem, for how can one person discover what another already knows and owns? Our textbooks are struggling with this issue, trying to move beyond colonized history and Eurocentric language, "If Columbus had not discovered the New World," states *Land of Promise*, "others soon would have." Three sentences later, the authors try to take back the word; "As is often pointed out, Columbus did not really 'discover' America. When he arrived on this side of the Atlantic there were perhaps 20 or more million people already here," Taking back words is ineffectual, however. *Promise's* whole approach is to portray whites discovering nonwhites rather than a mutual, multicultural encounter. The point isn't idle. Words are important—they can influence, and in some cases rationalize, policy. In 1823 Chief Justice John Marshall of the United States Supreme Court decreed that Cherokees had certain rights to their land in Georgia by dint of their "occupancy" but that whites had superior rights owing to their "discovery." How Indians managed to occupy Georgia without having previously discovered it Marshall neglected to explain.³⁸

The process of exploration has itself typically been multiracial and multicultural. William Erasmus, a Canadian Indian, pointed out, "Explorers you call great men were helpless. They were like lost children, and it was our people who took care of them."³⁹ African pilots helped Prince Henry's ship captains learn their way down the coast of Africa.⁴⁰ On Christmas Day 1492, Columbus

needed help. The *Santa Maria* ran aground off Haiti. Columbus sent for help to the nearest Arawak town, and "all the people of the town" responded, "with very big and many canoes." "They cleared the decks in a very short rime," Columbus continued, and the chief "caused all our goods to be placed together near the palace, until some houses that he gave us where all might be put and guarded had been emptied."⁹¹ On his final voyage Columbus shipwrecked on Jamaica, and the Arawaks there kept him and his crew of more than a hundred alive for a whole year until Spaniards from Haiti rescued them.

So it has continued. Native Americans cured Cartier's men of scurvy near Montreal in 1535. They repaired Francis Drake's *Golden Hind* in California so he could complete his round-the-world voyage in 1579, Lewis and Clark's expedition to the Pacific Northwest was made possible by tribe after tribe of American Indians, with help from two Shoshone guides, Sacagawea and Toby, who served as interpreters. When Admiral Peary discovered the North Pole, the first person there was probably neither the European American Peary nor the African American Matthew Henson, his assistant, but their four Inuit guides, men and women on whom the entire expedition relied.¹¹² Our histories fail to mention such assistance. They portray proud Western conquerors bestriding the world like the Colossus at Rhodes.

So long as our textbooks hide from us the roles that people of color have played in exploration, from at least 6000 B.C. to the twentieth century, they encourage us to look to Europe and its extensions as the seat of all knowledge and intelligence. So long as our textbooks simply celebrate Columbus, rather than teach both sides of his exploit, they encourage us to identify with white Western exploitation rather than study it.

The passage in the left-hand column of the opposing page is one of the many legends that hang about Columbus like barnacles—"myths, all without substance." The passage in the right-hand column is part of a contemporaneous account of an Arawak *cacique* (leadet) who had fled from Haiti to Cuba,

A man riding a mule moved slowly down a dusty road in Spain. He wore an old and shabby cloak over his shoulders. Though his face seemed young, his red hair was already turning white. It was early in the year 1492 and Christopher Columbus was leaving Spain.

Twice the Spanish king and queen had refused his request for ships. He had wasted five years of his life trying to get their approval. Now he was going to France. Perhaps the French king would give him the ships he needed.

Columbus heard a clattering sound. He turned and looked up the road. A horse and rider came racing toward him. The rider handed him a message, and Columbus turned his mule around. The message was from the Spanish king and queen, ordering him to return. Columbus would get his ships.

Learning that Spaniards were coming, one day [the *cacique*] gathered all his people together to remind them of the persecutions which the Spanish had inflicted on the people of Hispaniola:

"Do you know why they persecute us?"

They replied: "They do it because they are cruel and bad."

"I will tell you why they do it," the *cacique* stated, "and it is this—because they have a lord whom they love very much, and I will show him to you."

He held up a small basket made from palms full of gold, and he said, "Here is their lord, whom they serve and adore . . . To have this lord, they make us suffer, for him they persecute us, for him they have killed our parents, brothers, all our people . . . Let us not hide this lord from the Christians in any place, for even if we should hide it in our intestines, they would get it out of us; therefore let us throw it in this river, under the water, and they will not know where it is."

Whereupon they threw the gold into the river.⁹⁴

The reader will have already guessed that [the passage on the left] comes from an American history textbook, in this case *American Adventures*. Since the incident probably never happened, including it in a textbook is hard to defend. One way to understand its inclusion is by examining what it does in the narrative. The incident is melodramatic. It creates a mild air of suspense, even though we can be sure, of course, that everything will turn out all right in the end. Surely the passage encourages identification with Columbus's enterprise, makes Columbus the underdog—riding a mule, shabby of cloak—and places us on his side.

The passage on the right was recorded by Las Casas, who apparently learned it from Arawaks on Cuba. Unlike the mule story, the *cacique's* story teaches important facts: that the Spanish sought gold, that they killed Indians, that Indians fled and resisted, (Indeed, after futile attempts at armed resistance on Cuba, this *cacique* fled "into the brambles." Weeks later, when the Spanish captured him, they burned him alive.) Nonetheless, no history textbook includes the *cacique's* story. Doing so might enable us to identify with the Indians' side. By avoiding the names and stories of individual Arawaks and omitting their points of view, authors "otherize" the Indians. Readers need not concern themselves with the Indians' ghastly fate, for Indians never appear as recognizable human beings. Textbooks themselves, it seems, practice cognitive dissonance.

Excluding the passage on the right, including the passage on the left, excluding the probably true, including the improbable, amounts to colonialist history. This is the Columbus story that has dominated American history books. All around the globe, however, the nations that were "discovered," conquered, "civilized," and colonized by European powers are now independent, at least politically. Europeans and European Americans no longer dictate to them as master to native and therefore need to stop thinking of themselves as superior, morally and technologically. A new and more accurate history of Columbus could assist this transformation.

Of course, this new history must not judge Columbus by standards from our own time. In 1493 the world had not decided, for instance, that slavery was wrong. Some Indian nations enslaved other Indians. Africans enslaved other Africans. Europeans enslaved other Europeans. To attack Columbus for doing what everyone else did would be unreasonable.

However, some Spaniards of the time—Bartolome de las Casas, for example—opposed the slavery, land grabbing, and forced labor that Columbus introduced on Haiti. Las Casas began as an adventurer and became a plantation owner. Then he switched sides, freed his Indians, and became a priest who

fought desperately for humane treatment of the Indians. When Columbus and other Europeans argued that Indians were inferior, Las Casas pointed out that Indians were sentient human beings, just like anyone else. When other historians tried to overlook or defend the Indian slave trade, begun by Columbus, Las Casas denounced it as "among the most unpardonable offenses ever committed against God and mankind." He helped prompt Spain to enact laws against Indian slavery.⁹⁵ Although these laws came too late to help the Arawaks and were often disregarded, they did help some Indians survive. Centuries after his death, Las Casas was still influencing history; Simon Bolivar used Las Casas's writings to justify the revolutions between 1810 and 1830 that liberated Latin America from Spanish domination.

When history textbooks leave out the Arawaks, they offend Native Americans. When they omit the possibility of African and Phoenician precursors to Columbus, they offend African Americans. When they glamorize explorers such as De Soto just because they were white, our histories offend all people of color. When they leave out Las Casas, they omit an interesting idealist with whom we all might identify. When they glorify Columbus, our textbooks prod us toward identifying with the oppressor. When textbook authors omit the causes and process of European world domination, they offer us a history whose purpose must be to keep us unaware of the important questions. Perhaps worst of all, when textbooks paint simplistic portraits of a pious, heroic Columbus, they provide feel-good history that bores everyone.