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### Christopher Columbus, Hero and Villain

By *Christine Gibson*

If a schoolchild graduates with only one date committed to memory, it is likely to be 1492, the year “Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” A really good student may even be able to reel off the names of his three ships. But common knowledge—and consensus—stops there. In recent years the Columbus story has darkened, with the once-heroic explorer turned into a conqueror guilty of rape and genocide. But Columbus’s accomplishments have always been remembered differently by every generation in the land he found, even as his life—apart from that fateful moment 515 years ago today when he stepped ashore in the New World—remains clouded in obscurity. Who is Columbus today?



**Columbus's arrival in the New World, a moment of some pomp and ceremony as imagined by a chromolithographer about a century ago.**  
(LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

The recorded history of his life is a tissue of conjecture and foggy reminiscence, and centuries of Americans have filled in the blanks as best suited their times. Much of what is known about him comes from unreliable sources. He kept a log of his first voyage west, but it has since been lost; all that remains is a summary by the Spanish priest Bartolome de las Casas, who had little nautical knowledge and garbled many passages. Columbus's son Ferdinand helped revive his flagging reputation with a biography in the 1530s, but Ferdinand was only 17 when his father died, and he waited years to record his memories. Columbus himself shares blame, as he himself spun contradictory and frankly untrue accounts of his life. No one can say for sure even where and when he was born (he avoided admitting his age), although most evidence points to Genoa and the summer or fall of 1451.

Genoa at that time was a small but bustling port, and Columbus likely first went to sea at a young age on a trip for his father's textile business. By his early twenties he had crisscrossed the Mediterranean for a variety of local merchants. Hemmed by a Muslim blockade of the Middle East, he moved to Portugal in the 1470s. There, as a merchant mariner, he mastered navigation, and he traveled to Madeira, Africa's gold coast, England, and even Iceland.

But a veritable gold mine hovered just out of reach of a trader even as well traveled as Columbus: the lucrative spices of India and China. He had read the works of Marco Polo, who claimed to have journeyed over land through Persia and India to China in the 1200s. Given the Muslim blockade, however, European merchants needed a route that avoided the Middle East. No one yet had sailed south around Africa, but Columbus had an even better idea. Influenced by Ptolemy and the Florentine cartographer Paolo del Pozzo Toscanelli, he proposed to sail west to reach the east. Most educated people of Columbus's time did know that the earth was round; what was in dispute was its size and whether or not a seafarer could circumnavigate it without starving or dying of thirst. Columbus believed he could.

Had he had better information, the world might have looked very different for some time—or at least Columbia University might have a different name. Basing his estimates on Toscanelli's work, he calculated the circumference of the earth to be 19,000 miles, nearly 6,000 miles too small. He thought Asia stretched much farther east than it does and that Japan lay farther off its coast. He expected to reach Japan 2,700 miles west of

the Canaries, a good 10,000 miles too soon. The king of Portugal rejected his proposal, so he brought it to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. They finally backed him in 1492.

After recruiting 90 crewmen in Andalusia and outfitting three small ships, he set off from the Canary Islands in September. Using a compass, the stars, and an uncanny sense of dead reckoning, he steered through largely calm waters. Most of the voyage was uneventful, but as the ships passed the point where he expected to find land, the crew grew restless. On October 6, after 30 days at sea, the crew of the *Santa Maria* demanded to return to Spain. Columbus met with the captains of the other ships, and they agreed to press on, but by October 10, even they despaired of ever reaching their destination. Dried food was spoiling after weeks in the moist air, and the water, stored in wooden barrels, was good for little over a month. Columbus promised that if they had not found land in two more days, they could turn around. At 2 a.m. on October 12, a crewman on the *Pinta* spotted a white beach in the distance. Hours later, after 36 days at sea, Columbus sailed ashore in the Bahamas.

America tends to remember Columbus only at sea, but he spent two and a half months in the Caribbean islands in the fall and winter of 1492. When he and his men disembarked—where, exactly, is another matter in dispute—members of the peaceful Taino tribe greeted them. Columbus, convinced he had found Asia, called them “Indians” and described them as “gentle” and having “generosity of heart.” He added, “They should be good and intelligent servants, for I see that they say very quickly everything that is said to them; and I believe that they would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to me that they had no religion. Our Lord pleasing, at the time of my departure I will take six of them from here to Your Highnesses in order that they may learn to speak.”

Indeed, when he set sail for home in January 1493 he brought six Tainos. Together they reached Spain in April, bearing pineapples, tobacco, turkeys, and hammocks. The king and queen welcomed Columbus as a hero and made him an admiral, while the Tainos were received ceremoniously, clothed, baptized, and given Christian names.

Columbus’s second trip to America may not be immortalized in children’s verse, but it was far grander than his first—and more indelible. He sailed in style this time, arriving in the Caribbean, with 17 ships and 1,300 Spanish military men, farmers, craftsmen, and clergy, in early November 1493. They ostensibly aimed to convert the natives, but Columbus’s description of “incredible amounts” of gold and spices no doubt provided the real drive. This is the voyage for which he is vilified today. By most accounts a rigid, paranoid man with a messianic sense of destiny about reaching Asia, he as his first act made his crew swear that they’d landed in China. Later he gave each native older than 14 a quota of gold to find per day. Those who failed had their hands cut off; those who resisted were killed. Many fled and were hunted down or starved. The Spanish hadn’t brought any women, and rape was common, as were forced marriages. But disease was the most devastating thing for the native population. With no resistance to European ailments, the Taino succumbed to smallpox and typhoid in droves. By the 1500s, their numbers had dropped from as many as 400,000 to a few hundred.

After exploring hundreds of islands but failing to find much gold, Columbus returned to Spain in 1496. He kidnapped some 500 natives to serve as slaves in the Old World, and half of them died en route. He crossed the Atlantic again in 1498, to act as colonial governor, but administrative weakness and ineptitude subsequently got him arrested in Hispaniola by an envoy of the crown, who escorted him back to Europe in shackles. Still, after acquittal in court, he persuaded the king and queen to allow him one last voyage. Supervised by a comptroller, he dropped anchor in Panama in October 1502. He suspected he’d found an isthmus, but thick jungle and lack of supplies and crew prevented him from discovering the Pacific. He repaired home with four rotting ships in November 1504 and died a year and a half later, convinced to his last breath that he had explored Asia.

In the decades after his death, his son wrote a laudatory biography to restore his name, still sullied by the arrest, to glory. This set in motion the seesaw Columbus’s reputation would ride for the next five centuries, particularly in America. The recent shift in his stature is nothing new; he has been constantly reinvented since the birth of the United States to mirror our evolving national identity. During the anti-British years after the Revolution and War of 1812, he replaced the Englishman John Smith as the country’s premier explorer. During the age of Manifest Destiny, he morphed into the original expansionist, his sins justifying the government’s conquest of Native Americans. By the Gilded Age he was a pioneering trader, and as the United States amassed its first colonies it looked to him as the first American empire builder. Italian and Spanish immigrants deemed him their patron saint.

With his growth in popularity as a national symbol, towns began celebrating Columbus Day in the mid-1860s, and it became a national holiday in 1971. But as minorities have gained a louder voice in mainstream American culture, and as some of the electorate grows less comfortable with the country’s actions as a superpower, Columbus’s maltreatment of the Taino gets more attention. His modern detractors wonder how anyone can

forget his misdeeds and enjoy a holiday in his name, but in fact Americans have always ignored the parts of the Columbus story they didn't like. Expansionists had to overlook the fact that he never set foot in North America, Gilded Age nativists that he was Italian, Italians his allegiance to Spain, and supporters of religious freedom that he sailed for the king who sponsored the Inquisition.

Arguments rage today about whether he even "discovered" America, since not only did people already live here, but Europeans—evidence particularly supports the Vikings—had been here before. But it is inarguable that he was the first to record his findings and make possible ongoing follow-up trips, and so his voyages, unlike those of earlier explorers, acquainted the people of Europe with the existence of the New World. In so doing, he opened the door to European settlement of the Americas—and all the devastation, innovation, and reinvention that came with it.

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