

**Record: 1**

**Title:** Interview: William Least Heat-Moon discusses Christopher Columbus and his journeys to the New World

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**Source:** Weekend Edition Sunday (NPR); 10/13/2002

**Accession Number:** 6XN200210131308

**Database:** Newspaper Source

**Notes:** This title is not held locally

**Interview: William Least Heat-Moon discusses Christopher Columbus and his journeys to the New World**

1:00-2:00 PM , From NPR News, this is WEEKEND EDITION. I'm Brian Naylor.

Unidentified Child: In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue. He had three ships and left from Spain. He sailed through sunshine, wind and rain.

NAYLOR: It was 510 years ago that Christopher Columbus ended a remarkable journey with his arrival on a Caribbean island that he christened San Salvador. It's an understatement to say the world would never be the same. William Least Heat-Moon, who has written of his own journeys in the books "Blue Highways" and "River Horse," has chronicled Columbus' four visits to the New World in his latest book entitled "Columbus in the Americas." He joins us from member station KBIA in, appropriately enough, Columbia, Missouri. Welcome.

Mr. WILLIAM LEAST HEAT-MOON (Author, "Columbus in the Americas"): Thank you, Brian.

NAYLOR: Now there is so much about Columbus that we know and so much we don't know. He was Italian, we know, born in Genoa. And what I'm wondering, do we know how he happened on this journey? We know he was searching for Asia when he embarked, but what made him think he could do it?

Mr. HEAT-MOON: He had a notion that the Atlantic Ocean was considerably narrower than anyone else believed at the time, the ocean that he called the Ocean Sea--that was its name, it's not a tautology. And he believed because the Atlantic was actually about the width that it is that he could sail there. The problem was that he didn't realize that there were two huge continental masses between where he was and what he called the Indies. The Indies was a very loose term then. It could refer to China or Japan, India itself and even some places in East Africa. In other words, his conception of the size of the globe, of the Earth, was off.

And in many of the arguments that he was having in Spain with academics of the time, the

learned men of the time, did not take up the issue of whether the world was flat or not. Everybody knew then the world was a sphere. But what they did not know was the exact circumference of it. So in arguing about that, Columbus proved himself wrong, but his mistake actually gave him the confidence that he could sail to the Indies. He didn't get even halfway there, of course, but he got someplace else.

NAYLOR: Mm-hmm. Tell us about how we know about this. He kept a journal, but it didn't survive, apparently, so how do we know about his trips and what he experienced?

Mr. HEAT-MOON: He made four voyages to the Americas. The first is the one that we know the most about. I suppose that's a happy circumstance, since in many ways, that's the most important one, at least to us historically. We know much of what happened from his own words. He did keep a ship's log, one that has not survived, but there was a copy made when he got back to Spain. Queen Isabella ordered that a copy be made--one given to him, she kept the other. Both of those have disappeared, not long after Columbus' lifetime, as a matter of fact. But we have a kind of redaction of it done by a Franciscan friar, Bishop de las Casas, who in places will summarize what Columbus wrote in the log. That often has to do with ship's headings, things of that sort. But on the more interesting details, especially when Columbus begins speaking of his encounters with Native Americans here, then las Casas will quote Columbus directly. So much of what we have, in fact most of what we have, comes through las Casas.

NAYLOR: What happened when he reached the New World? Tell us a little of the first encounter with the Native Americans there.

Mr. HEAT-MOON: He came upon people called the Lacyos(ph). They're a branch of the Taino Indians, who belonged to the Arawak-speaking Indians, who still exist today in South America. But the Lacyos, unlike many of the other people that he would meet in the next few weeks, were more curious than they were fearful of the strange appearance of these ships and these bearded men coming ashore. They did not flee into the bush the way so many other tribes did. They came out to see what was going on, and they stood their ground. More importantly, they were receptive to these Europeans. I say Europeans because not all crew members besides Columbus were Spanish. There were some other Italians there and some Basques.

NAYLOR: Las Casas quotes a rather chilling passage--I guess it's from Columbus' log--in which Columbus writes of the Lacyos, "They would be good and intelligent servants. I believe they would become Christians very easily." So right away, he talks about enslaving these people and converting them.

Mr. HEAT-MOON: Yes. Part of his mission, certainly in his mind, was to bring whomever it was that he would meet on the other side of the Atlantic--to bring them into the influence of Spain, and

that doesn't mean the Christian Church, which at that time, of course, was the Catholic Church, one and the same. And Columbus had experience in slaving along the West African coast. He intended that these people that he would meet would, in fact, be minimally serfs and, perhaps beyond that, slaves.

On the second voyage, he sent something more than a thousand Tainos back to Seville to the slave market in Seville where they were sold on the block, much as African-Americans--the same fate they would undergo here several hundred years later.

NAYLOR: And it didn't take long for the darker side of Columbus and the Europeans on that voyage to show, I guess.

Mr. HEAT-MOON: Columbus was a fine person, really, and certainly a capable leader when he was on the high sea, when he was exploring. When he came to shore and had to become an administrator, a planner, then he did less well, both politically, economically, but also I think most of us would have to say today less well ethically because his compassion for people who helped him simply could, at times, go right out the window. Tribes that had kept his men alive he could turn on.

NAYLOR: So how do we think about Columbus today? The innocence that, you know, Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492 seems to have given way to this guilt over how he treated the Native peoples and what happened in his wake. Yet, if he hadn't come, someone else surely would have, perhaps no less savage than Columbus and his men.

Mr. HEAT-MOON: Yes. It's only a question of time before someone else reached this side of the planet, no question about that. I guess I have to speak from my own point of view. Reading the logs of Columbus and the accounts of las Casas and some other first-hand accounts, I came away with admiration for him in many ways. It was impossible for me to revile him, to hate, even though I have a dollop of Osage Indian blood myself. Nevertheless, the genocide that took place in the Western Hemisphere begins with him. Could he have stopped it? I doubt it. I think there were too many other men with his more or less medieval mind-set that were following. However, I don't agree with people who say, 'That was the mind-set of everybody at that time. Whoever would have come would have been that way.' It's not true because, again, to speak of Bishop las Casas, he frequently--and he knew Columbus. He, at the time, came out and spoke again and again at the way that the Europeans were going into the Caribbean and then later South America, Central America and the southern part of North America--that was not the way to do it. The history of the Indies by las Casas makes clear that other people knew that what was going on was wrong, and they challenged it.

NAYLOR: William Least Heat-Moon. His new book is "Columbus in the Americas." He joined us

from member station KBIA in Columbia, Missouri. Thank you very much.

Mr. HEAT-MOON: Thank you, Brian.

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**Source:** Weekend Edition Sunday (NPR), OCT 13, 2002

**Item:** 6XN200210131308