



Spanish explorers bring a little bit of that Old World charm to the "savages" of the New World.

## The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy

By Kirkpatrick Sale  
Alfred A. Knopf, 384 pp., \$24.95

*The hemisphere lay waiting to be touched with life ... cleansed of defilement and cured of weariness, so as to be fit for the virgin purity of a new bride.*

—Woodrow Wilson, *New Freedom*  
*History begins for us with murder and enslavement, not with discovery.*

—William Carlos Williams,  
*In the American Grain*

By Matthew Wills

**C**HRISTOPHER COLUMBUS IS A cipher, to be unlocked and decoded by the reigning zeitgeist or its discontents. So little is definitely known about the man that successive generations of Americans and Europeans have

## Columbus and the New World disorder

molded him into all sorts of shapes, some noble and saintly, others desperate and degenerate. Half a millennium after Cristóbal Colón (he of the many names) sunk his boots into the sands of the "New World," the meaning and effect of that barely recorded but much-mythologized moment still resound through history. As the two quotes above suggest, there are extreme polarities in the understanding of that day in October 1492.

The struggle over the lessons of the Columbian legacy are still at the forefront of the struggle over what it means to be "American," and, indeed, what it means to be part of

Western civilization. A March 13 article in *Chronicle of Higher Education* reveals the struggle to be in full bloom: some scholars charge that the National Endowment for the Humanities is guided by a political agenda (aka, the defense of the great white men of history) in its refusal to give grants to "controversial" (or "multiple points of view") scholarship and programs concerning the 500th anniversary of the landfall.

**Columbus circus:** With next year's promised blowout of a celebration for the Quincentennial, an event potentially overflowing with nationalist signification, a somber, skeptical look is necessary at what

has been wrought by, and since, that footprint in the sand. The hype, after all, suggests a multicontinental (32 nations have quinquennial commissions) extravaganza gone bananas: 12 full-scale replicas of the original ships—the actual plans of which are lost to history—are being built, one of them commissioned by the Japanese; \$50 million worth of flowers will be on display in Columbus, Ohio's "AmeriFlora '92"; an opera by Philip Glass and David Henry Hwang will premier in New York City; the Columbian world's fair will be held in Seville; the Barcelona Summer Olympic Games is to be dedicated to the Discoverer; a 390-foot lighthouse will be erected in the impoverished Dominican Republic at a cost of \$10 million; Genoa will host the fifth international conference of Columbianists; Spain will launch a communications satellite named after the sailor who first spotted land (it was not Colón, though he original-

ly took the credit—and the reward).

No matter that other Europeans—Vikings and cod fishermen, among others—had seen the New World well before Colón's sailor; no matter that Colón's motivation—the route-to-Asia thesis is much debated—is unknown; no matter that no one is sure where Colón's famous footstep was, leading a host of Caribbean islands to claim the honor. No matter: the show must go on. (The Quincentennial's proximity to the next presidential election suggests such non-issue demagoguery as candidates charging that their opponents would have voted against Columbus' mission.)

Not everyone will be complacently watching this all-singing, all-dancing spectacular, however. New York Green Party founder, historian of the Students for a Democratic Society, contributing editor of *The Nation* and small-is-beautiful theoreti-



cian Kirkpatrick Sale is one who is resolutely not riding on the Quinc' flotilla. There are others, of course, notably those representatives of the indigenous populations who find nothing to celebrate in the virtual genocide of the original discoverers and settlers of the Americas, but, typically, their voices will be drowned out in all the victorious shouting. For now, Sale will have to do; he does very well in his dissent, but he does not speak for those who were here before, only for those of us who came afterward, which is as it should be.

**Captain of his destiny?** Part history and part historiography, *The Conquest of Paradise* is a thoroughly researched debunking of all the accumulated and encrusted nonsense surrounding the figure of Colón/Columbus. Historical narrative and quotations from Colón's journal, as well as the rewritten journals (plagiarism being only loosely defined in the 15th and 16th centuries), follow events in both Europe and the (soon-to-be) Americas. Intimately entwined with this examination of man, myth and historical context is an environmental-impact statement for Western civilization. The results of the collage are most instructive, but not at all heartening.

About Colón, Sale is certainly no mythographer or "historiografist" (another type of magic realist). His Admiral of the Indies is a shifty autobiographer, bad navigator, lousy record-keeper, even worse observer and wretched administrator who spent time in prison courtesy of the king and queen who sponsored his first voyage. The admiral ended his last years as an "increasingly demented malcontent," producing paranoid, apocalyptic and self-pitying tracts that are only now being translated into English.

Sale suggests that Colón suffered from Reiter's syndrome, a persistent series of inflammations of the joints, eyes and urinary tract that sometimes results from dysentery and strikes with gout, arthritis and temporary blindness; whether the admiral was actually driven insane by his agonies is, of course, like most things about him, impossible to know. But Sale suggests that Colón did suffer from something we might call European's syndrome: a combination of suicidal "eco-hubris" and a destructive kind of social/cultural schizophrenia whose manifestations in Colón sound all too familiar:

*"It is almost as if he had an imperfect understanding of the line between truth and falsity—or perhaps more accurate, he did not consider that distinction morally or technically important, so long as higher ends were involved. ... For Colón, at any rate, these distinctions were regularly blurred, and the resultant deception and deceit, conscious and unconscious, have created a good deal of confusion about the man and his motives, even among his contemporaries and companions and certainly among his subsequent chroniclers. They created, too, as we shall*

*see, that failure to distinguish the real world from the illusory, the experienced from the imagined, which we call madness."*

What did he know and when did he know it?

For Sale, the restless Colón's greatest sin was his homelessness. Permanently adrift, without a homeland (his place and year of birth are

## It is almost as if Columbus had an imperfect understanding of the line between truth and fantasy.

contested; his name was very mutable, even in his own mind), Colón knew no environment to call his own. "Colón, alas, was a man never to know *querencia*, never truly to inhabit any one environment, always to go through his life without that most basic of touchstones, a home." (*Querencia* is the Spanish sense of and love of home, environment, place.) Hence, he was utterly unequipped to catalogue the natural wonders of the New World—his journal and its imitators are barren of descriptions—or, often, even mentions—of flora and fauna, and, significantly, he was completely free to look at land as only something to be exploited to its maximum capabilities.

**Europe adrift:** Sale comes back to this point many times, extending Colón's individual placelessness to Europe's bursting "rootlessness and restlessness." The Renaissance centering of man above God/nature and the dynamo of an emergent capitalism (with its handmaiden, newly rational science), combined with this lack of home to forge the mad rush to despoil the New World, a rush that continues to this day. "For the society as for the individual, rootedness is health," argues Sale. Europe, mired in the post-plague, Inquisition-ridden strife of violently birthing nation-states, beset by "turmoil, poverty, repression, misery and bewilderment," spewed its children forth upon the seas, as if new lands—presumed "virgin lands"—could clean up the mess.

But, alas, people always carry their baggage with them. Eradication of human and animal and plant followed in the wake of the fleeing Europeans (see Peter Matthiessen's *Wildlife in America* for a chronicle of the species-by-species decimation); the very land itself was radically transformed. The Europeans were so bogged down in their own cultures that transplanting them to the New World initially resulted in near-starvation amid the plenty: both the Spanish in New Grenada and the English in Jamestown refused to eat the local produce, even when their own ludicrously inappropriate European crops failed.

It's easy to sympathize with Sale's need to find out what went so disas-

trously wrong with this first contact of two peoples, but talk of homelands and homelessness and rootedness stirs up haunting echoes in this century where politics has so swiftly corrupted ideals. Nationalists of various sorts have had their bloody day with mother/father lands, nationalities, ethnicities, races and "rootless cosmopolitans." The North American right (Peggy Noonan and Newt Gingrich, for example) claim that the homeless are "pathological" or "anecdotal," diseased or non-existent; the South American right's sense of place—the boundaries of the state—is one of the foundations of "national security" terrorism. These are not good precedents. Being rooted in the environment is not the same as fetishizing the land as a source of ideological identity, but the line between the two can be dangerously manipulated. Sale needs to be careful moving about this deeply disturbing minefield.

**Feast of nostalgia:** Reading *The Conquest of Paradise*, one feels anew the tremendous loss for what might have been had two alien cultures

succeeded in coming together peacefully, and an even greater sense of tragedy for what has been vanquished. Millions of native Americans were killed by disease and war, and the societies born amid all that destruction are to this day paying the price of the destruction in the wake of European discovery, conquest and colonization. In Guatemala and the Amazon, remember, the conquest continues unabated.

Here in North America, we devour the past and regurgitate it as nostalgic myth. The Quincentennial is a case in point, only writ large across the world. It shouldn't be so odd that Sale, too, verges on the nostalgic, with his portrayal of the original cultures of the Americas as self-sufficient, peaceful, disease-free and one with nature. His desire for paradise is strong, like the Europeans he writes about questing for that "virgin purity of a new bride."

We do have something to learn from the sound agricultural practices and environmentally conscious ways of these people, but in the final analysis little is really known about

them. Accounts are colored by people whose vision was based on paradigmatic "noble savage"/"savage beast" dichotomies; the cultures themselves were quickly eradicated or radically transformed upon contact.

Yet who, in this damaged world, can blame Sale for being influenced by the seductions of a simpler (environmental) primitivism? Sale's interpretation of the past tells us more about our own time than anything else. To paraphrase Bertolt Brecht, unhappy indeed is the world that needs its ideal society. This book should be read to deconstruct such received wisdom as the mythological boilerplate surrounding Colón, but parts of it should be read as skeptically as Sale reads Colón. The past of the pre-Columbian world is DOA—it was murder, premeditated or accidental, but murder all the same—and it can only give us hints toward our own answers.

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## A world of gifts that just keep on giving

### Indian Givers

By Jack Weatherford  
Fawcett Columbine  
272 pp., \$8.95

The cover blurb from the *Washington Post* says that "*Indian Givers* is a book that will last," and for once it seems that those folks in the mysterious East took off the Beltway blinders and saw the real deal. Although *Indian Givers* was first published almost three years ago, the book couldn't be more timely—especially in light of the impending Columbus Quincentennial hoopla (see accompanying article).

Indian giver. It's an expression laced with racism and rife with misunderstanding. An Indian giver is supposedly one who first presents a gift and later reneges on the offering—as in, those treacherous savages. Never mind that most Indians didn't really believe in property or ownership in the European sense—a gift once given might be taken back if there were a real need. But a casual reading of a couple hundred broken treaties suggests that, in a more fundamental way, it's the white man who has had trouble keeping his word.

Jack Weatherford doesn't accentuate the negative side of the idiom,

however, but emphasizes the literal side of things: what the American Indians have given the world. He starts at the bottom. The bottom line, that is.

In the first century after Columbus, Weatherford notes, the amount of gold and silver in European coffers increased eightfold. This booty, secured by Indian slave labor, tilted world power Europe's way. With their economies stabilized, European states increased trade with the Near and Far East (thereby undermining Africa's economies, which, in turn, wound up promoting the slave trade). But not to worry, this is no econ text; Weatherford weaves his economics into an engaging narrative. He begins this section with a slice of life, if you can call it living, from a contemporary Bolivian miner. It's a chilling tale of poverty in the shadow of what was once a literal mountain of silver.

Similarly, other sections start out personal and work through to historical, social and scientific breakthroughs of the native Americans. In the realm of agriculture, for instance, Indians' low-tech high-yield agriculture is just beginning to be understood—their amazing genetic knowledge of corn created endless varieties

adapted to drought or monsoon, mountainside or valley, bad soil or good. Not only corn but potatoes, tomatoes, squash, pepper and countless other foods came to the Old World to change our ways of eating. Italian food without tomatoes and peppers wouldn't be much. Chinese and Indian food, too, would lack many of their characteristic spices and vegetables if not for foods cultivated and perfected by the Indians.

And without the potato not only Ireland but also Germany and the Soviet Union may have had trouble staying in the modern European world. Before the dietary stability brought by the nutritious, easy-to-grow potato, the Northern countries had always been subject to periodic famines, which soon became almost a thing of the past (even the Irish potato famine might have been avoided if the spud-loving Irish had grown more different varieties of the tuber, as was the Indian practice).

Weatherford highlights the ecological, industrial and pharmaceutical breakthroughs of the Indians that virtually created the modern world. Particularly interesting is the section on the Founding Indian Fathers. It turns out that Benjamin Franklin and other influential New World political theorists studied the native American tribal federations to come up with the idea of the U.S. federation. Maximized local control, separation of military and civilian duties, female suffrage and frequent elections were all part of Indian political organization that ultimately influenced the shape of the white American nation.

The author's fluid style and the unsuspected connections he finds turn this into a real adventure story. And ultimately, who knows? It might even help lead to the discovery of the New World.

—Jeff Reid







Photographer Peter Goin visited nuclear bomb test sites to capture the battered desolation of ground zero and environs.

### Nuclear Landscapes

By Peter Goin  
Johns Hopkins University Press  
176 pp., \$29.95

By Will Nixon

## Nuclear ghosts and the blood of the land

**P**HOTOGRAPHER PETER GOIN moved to the basin and range province of Nevada in 1984 and soon grew curious about the chunky wing of military reservations that spreads northwest of Las Vegas on the map, a tan-shaded no man's land marked only by some dry lake beds and 7,000 peaks. Back in 1952, then-Gov. Charles Russell had sounded only too happy to cede several hundred square miles to our blossoming nuclear-bomb program, proclaiming, "We had long ago written off that terrain as wasteland, and today's it's blossoming with atoms!" The Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce gave out tourist maps directing the curious to watch the boiling mushroom clouds made of fire as pure as the sun.

But that early naiveté has given way to anxiety about radioactivity, the invisible poison we've spilled out of the weapons bottle and can't seem to clean up. "Nuclear landscapes are landscapes of fear," Goin writes in the preface to this remarkable collection of photographs that turns the Earth itself into the red menace we sought to defeat with such unbridled testing.

After much cajoling, Goin got the Department of Energy to drive him onto the Nevada Test Site, where there is little that might catch your eye: the dry distant mountains lie like the tangled laundry of the last great geological era turned to stone. The dry white bed of Frenchman Lake interrupts the flat plain of baked brown dirt tufted with sagebrush. Even the blue sky seems tiring, with its bleached color reminiscent of cheap postcards. But Goin knew this landscape had been changed: he shot the sink holes that pock-mark the terrain after so many

underground blasts, the giant Martian-red crater left by the Plowshares program, undertaken to see if we could use nukes to excavate canals and road cuts.

Goin shoots within some strict formal standards: no people, slightly bleached colors as if everything has sat in the sun too long, and an expansive composition often dominated by one central object that grandly breaks the horizon line. This approach turns the debris from above-ground testing into timeless monuments.

We see a rusted railroad bridge mounted on concrete slabs like an

abstract sculpture, a circle of wire fence and wood stakes that once held test animals, a full house gone the color of driftwood. To study the impact of an atom bomb on the typical '50s American family, the testers filled such houses with furniture and well-dressed mannequins.

Goin then traveled to the Hanford Nuclear Reservation on the Columbia River in eastern Washington, where the government appropriated 570 square miles in 1943 to build its

### PHOTOGRAPHY

first plutonium-processing plant. His first picture shows rows of weathered tree stumps in golden grass, the graveyard remains of fruit orchards that once covered the land. Now the reservation has become acres of tilled dirt and smoothly bulldozed trenches as the government seeks to bury radioactive waste. There's a tunnel entrance that leads nowhere, yellow stakes marking potentially hot dirt, and the twin cylinder slices from a nuclear submarine meant to hold the decommissioned reactors for 1,000 years.

So far, enough radioactive fluid has been spilled into the reservation land to flood Manhattan Island 40 feet deep. Goin writes, "The Centers for Disease Control recently concluded that residents of Hanford received higher amounts of radioiodine in their thyroid glands than people

living in the immediate vicinity of the Chernobyl reactor explosion that occurred in the Soviet Union in 1986."

Goin finished his nuclear journey at the Bikini and Enewetak atolls in the western Pacific, a lush contrast to the semi-arid West. Here, the weather-stained concrete bunkers that once held explosion monitors are gradually disappearing down into spindly bushes and sweeping palm trees. Their odd boxy shapes now make them seem like Mayan ruins designed by Le Corbusier. Life goes on among the flora and fauna here, and in Nevada and at Hanford, although not without the clattering of the Geiger counters. It's we people who have driven ourselves from these places. After shooting the Burial Gardens at Hanford, an impressively bulldozed trench slowly filling up with neat rows of barrels, Goin climbed back into the truck. "My guide asked me if I had on a bathing suit under my clothes," he writes. "That way," he said, "if you do have to go into the showers, your modesty will be protected. All the decontamination personnel are women."

Years ago, Tom Lehrer wrote a lighthearted tune about cowboys at home on the testing range in their lead BVDs. It's a song that's starting to lose its humor.

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