

Columbus and Genocide

By Edward T. Stone

Edward T. Stone was managing editor of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. This excerpt comes from his article in *American Heritage* (October 1975).

Along with the scenery, Columbus never tired of extolling the docility and peaceful nature of the timid people who had welcomed him and his fellow voyagers with such awe and affection to their island Eden. And he kept turning over in his mind how the meek and artless character of his brown-skinned hosts could be made a source of profit.

On the same day that the expedition landed on Guanahani,¹ Columbus noted [in his journal] that the timid natives "should make good servants." Several weeks later he remarked in the journal: "...they are very meek and without knowledge of evil nor do they kill others or steal...and they are without weapons and so timid that one of our people can put a hundred of them to flight."

On Monday, December 3, the admiral assured the sovereigns² that ten men could cause ten thousand of the natives to flee, "so cowardly and faint-hearted are they and they carry no arms except some rods at the end of which are pointed sticks which are fire-hardened."

By December 16 his ideas in that respect had taken definite form. "They have no weapons and are all naked without any skill in arms and are very cowardly so that a thousand would not challenge three," says the journal for that date. "...Thus they are useful to be commanded and to be made to

labor and sow and to do everything else of which there is need and build towns and be taught to wear clothes and learn our customs."

And finally, in a famous letter to Luis de Santangel, his patron at court, he gets right down to business:

In conclusion, to speak only of what has been accomplished on this voyage which was so hurried, their Highnesses may see that I can give them as much gold as they will need with very little aid from their Highnesses. And there are spiceries and cotton, as much as their Highnesses may order and mastic³ in whatever quantity they may order...and slaves in any number they may order and they shall be of the idolaters.⁴

Great evils are apt to have small beginnings, or, as Father Las Casas⁵ put it, "Men are never accustomed to falling into a single error or committing only one sin." So it was that on November 11, 1492, the admiral ordered five young male natives, who had come trustingly aboard his flagship, forcibly seized "to take to the Sovereigns to learn our language so that it might be disclosed what is in the land."

continued

¹ Guanahani was the native name for the first island Columbus encountered. Experts disagree over the exact landing site—some believe Columbus landed on the island now called San Salvador, others believe he landed on Samana Cay.

² The sovereigns are Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain.

³ Mastic is a resinous sap from mastic trees used to make varnishes and other protective coverings.

⁴ Columbus is referring to the non-Christian natives.

⁵ Father Bartolome de las Casas was a contemporary of Columbus who wrote a history of the West Indies titled *Historia de las Indias*. Although a great admirer of Columbus, he was critical of Columbus' attitudes and policies toward Native Americans.

A trifling incident in itself, but to paraphrase Father Las Casas, Columbus was quite ready to multiply his sins.

"Afterwards I sent to a house which is in the area of the river to the west," Columbus says in his journal, "and they brought back seven head of women, small and large and three children. I did this because the men would comport themselves better in Spain having women from their land than without them."

The cynical kidnapping of seven "head" of women to keep the male captives docile in their slavery (Columbus used the phrase *cabezas de mugeres* just as he would say seven head of cattle) was the first act of a tragedy whose last would be the extermination of the Arawak natives of the Antilles.

Columbus, the Man

By Robert H. Fuson

Robert H. Fuson is Professor Emeritus of Geography at the University of Florida. His interest in Columbus' journeys led to his book entitled *The Log of Christopher Columbus*. The following is an excerpt from this book.

The cultural unity of the Taino¹ greatly impressed Columbus; he commented on this harmony over and over. We cannot fault him for viewing these simple people as ripe for Christianity. For a devout person, as Columbus was, such missionary zeal was a way of assuring entry into Heaven and of bringing about spiritual equality on earth. Those who see Columbus as the founder of slavery in the New World are grossly in error. This thought occurred to Morison² (and many others), who misinterpreted a statement made by Columbus on the first day in America, when he said, "They (the Indians) ought to be good servants." In fact, Columbus offered this observation in explanation of an earlier comment he had made, theorizing that people from the mainland came to the islands to capture these Indians as slaves because they were so docile and obliging.

All through the Log, Columbus expresses nothing but love and admiration for the Indians. His affection for the young chief in Haiti, and vice versa, is one of the most touching stories of love, trust, and

understanding between men of different races and cultures to come out of this period in history. His instructions to the men he left behind at *La Navidad*, on January 2, clearly illustrate his sincere fondness and respect for the Indians.³

There is no contradiction between Columbus' warm feelings for the natives and his desire to secure Spanish authority over them. After all, Europeans were subjects of this ruler or that—and a subject is one who is subjected. Furthermore, to bring Christianity was a noble thing. The fact that today we can point out countless abuses has nothing to do with 15th century morality.

John Boyd Thacher, the great Columbian scholar at the turn of this century, believed that Columbus' ultimate design was expressed in the Log entry of December 26: the conquest of Jerusalem and the restoration of the Holy Land to the Church.⁴ This could only be financed by discovering new lands and gathering enough gold, silver, and precious stones. Slavery was not part of the ultimate design.

¹ Taino refers to the Arawak Indians who inhabited the islands of the Caribbean.

² Samuel Eliot Morison wrote numerous books on Columbus including *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus* (Boston: Little Brown, 1942); and *Christopher Columbus, Mariner* (Boston: Little Brown, 1955).

Reprinted, with permission, from book #60660 *The Log of Christopher Columbus* by Robert H. Fuson. Copyright 1987 by Robert H. Fuson. Published by TAB BOOKS, a division of McGraw-Hill, Blue Ridge Summit, PA.

³ La Navidad was the makeshift colony built on the island of Hispaniola out of the remains of the wrecked Santa Maria. About forty of Columbus' men remained on the island when Columbus returned to Spain. Columbus pleaded with his men not to use any force toward the Indians or to take anything from them.

⁴ Jerusalem was in the hands of Moslems during Columbus' lifetime. European rulers and Christian leaders had waged several Crusades in an attempt to win Jerusalem back for Christianity.

Let Us Sail Together in 1992

By Richard Monette

Richard Monette is a Chippewa Indian who grew up on the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota. Today Monette serves on the staff of the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs. The following is taken from a speech he gave in 1990 at the annual meeting of the National Maritime Historical Society. The speech appears in *Sea History* (Autumn, 1990).

Each day that I...exit Union Station in Washington, D.C., I can't help but maneuver around a magnificent statue of a man with an Indian kneeling at his side. The caption reads: "To the memory of Christopher Columbus, whose high faith and indomitable courage gave to mankind a new world." Leaving alone for the moment the question into what category Indians might belong, if not "mankind," let me say that a significant portion of the Native population might re-word that caption just a bit, to something like this: "To the memory of Christopher Columbus, whose insatiable greed and incompetent seamanship gave to certain of mankind disease, slavery, scalping and the loss of their homelands."

Somewhere between those two gross exaggerations lies a very simple concept called the truth. If there is anything, I believe, that I can tell you unequivocally, it is that all Native Americans want at least one thing to emerge from 1992—the truth....

To the American Indian, Christopher Columbus and the discovery of America has become the guidepost of American honesty, or the lack thereof, in a long line of historical events....

We should not stop at 1492, if we attempt to redress past indiscretions. Let

alone the fact that in 1492 Columbus himself never set foot on North America....Take, for instance, the Boston Tea Party....That the colonists were protesting "taxation without representation" may be a noble thing, but the real reason for dressing up as Indians, which was to drive a wedge between the growing coalition between the British and powerful Indian confederacies, is never taught. And what about the Indian contribution to the making of the U.S. Constitution? The list of such selective truths in our history books is long.

In short, let us be candid. In the 1990s the Indian tribes are at a crossroad—a real opportunity to learn America's ways while preserving their own. America and American communities large and small must allow the Indian people, both as individuals and as tribes, to participate in their societies, to integrate into their economies, in the manner and to the extent that the tribes wish to participate.

Let our children's textbooks be accurate and complete. Let us turn inward to be honest with our children at home....Let truth be our life preserver and let honesty be our unsinkable raft. Let us gather up our own high faith and indomitable courage and, in 1992, let us set sail together.

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