By Patrick McCarthy

"Thus Nature gives us (let it check our pride) The virtue nearest to our vice ally'd"

Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man,* Epistle II, 195-196

Conventional history has not been kind to the reputation of Christopher Columbus of late. He has long been out of favor at the modern university, bastion of liberal thought that it is. According to the historian Howard Zinn in *A People's History of the United States,* Columbus treated the Caribbean population of Arawaks to a combination of exploitation for gold, enslavement and plantation servitude that decimated their population: "In two years, through murder, mutilation, or suicide, half of the 250,000 Indians on Haiti were dead", says Zinn.[i] Such academic thought had so permeated the general population that, in 1992, at the time of the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's famous first landing, widespread protests confronted any attempt to honor the great explorer.

At one such gathering outside a memorial exhibit at the University of Florida, demonstrators Jed by Russell Means of AIM (American Indian Movement) screamed, "Columbus makes Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent!"[ii] The World Council of Churches added religious criticism when it declared that the descendants of the Arawaks subject to Spanish "genocide, slavery, 'ecocide' and exploitation" could not find a "celebration" to be "anappropriate observance of this anniversary." Nor, obviously, should anyone else. A misapplication of the Catholic teaching of repentance occurred when South American Indians wearing loincloths showed up at the famous shrine at Santiago de Compostela. At the burial place of St. James the Greater, they left flowers and a note asking "forgiveness for those who used his name to conquer, murder and destroy peoples." Of course the above is grotesque liberal overstatement. However, making all due allowance for modern academic exaggeration, several of Columbus's actions – at their worst during the Second Voyage of 1493 – are not defensible. Writers as sympathetic to Columbus as Samuel Eliot Morison and Robert Royal concur in this assessment. During Columbus's first landfall in 1492 at one of the Bahama islands, the local Arawaks who greeted him were unaware of the very nature of swords: Columbus noted that he had "showed them swords and they grasped them by the blade and cut themselves through ignorance."[iii] Not surprisingly, Columbus believed that a mere fifty Spanish could subdue the Arawaks who lived in Cuba and Hispaniola (today's Haiti and Dominican Republic). Such domination would inevitably lead to Western exploitation because Columbus and his fellow Europeans had no "other notion of relations between Spaniard and American Indian save that of master and slave."

The exploitation began in earnest during Columbus's terrible Second Voyage of 1493 when

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every Hispaniola native above the age of fourteen had to "furnish every three months a Flanders hawk's bell full of gold dust" or die, a requirement impossible to fulfill because the island simply lacked gold. When some of the Arawaks rebelled, slavery ensued: five-hundred of "the best males and females" were packed off to Spain while women nursing infants and the elderly were left to fend for themselves. One simply cannot palliate such evil behavior. Robert Royal after surveying the human catastrophe of the Second Voyage persuasively concludes: "no amount of admiration for Christopher Columbus can excuse what is simply inexcusable."[iv]

At the same time, one cannot dismiss out of hand the admiration for Columbus that our Western ancestors expressed. Surely their respect is not wholly misplaced. To take our own country of the United States for example, in 1792 – the three-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's First Voyage – the nation's newly selected capital received the name of the District of Columbia in his honor. One-hundred years later, the holiday Columbus Day was chosen for similar reasons. The brilliant historian William Thomas Walsh helps us begin to solve these great contradictions of interpretation. In Columbus he sees a character of nearly superhuman proportions, one blessed with extraordinary vision and talent and yet dogged, like a similarly grand Oedipus or Lear, with a tragic flaw. In Columbus's case, the roots of his defect reside in his humble origins as the son of a second-generation Genoese weaver. He is determined to prove himself and inevitably falls prey to the classic vices of pride and greed; however, his greatness of accomplishment remains and "suffering will bring him to himself."[v]

We will see the depth of humiliation he endured at the end of the Third Voyage and the agony he experienced during his concluding Fourth Voyage. At the same time, this "latter part of his life will be a spectacle of increasing patience" and "of ascetic self control practiced among licentious men in a strange world." In the end the very susceptibility to greed and vanity which combined to bring him low will be transmuted, the greed "into an ambition to spend his gold for the recovery of the Holy Sepulcher" and the vanity "submerged in reverence and hope." Justice to the entirety of Columbus's life and belief will inevitably lead to the conclusion that he was truly one of the great men-of-action who ever lived.

Columbus, the Self-Made Man

We Americans are familiar with the legend of Abraham Lincoln, of his splitting logs and exploring a meager stock of family books by the firelight. Lincoln had higher than rural aspirations, of course, which he fulfilled first through studying Blackstone on his own and then apprenticing to a local lawyer. Columbus's own social ascent three-and-a-half centuries before shares many of the same characteristics Americans call "self-reliance". Born to

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simple weavers living in Genoa, Columbus had the fortune to discover his sailing knack early. Genoa had enjoyed a maritime empire stretching far to the eastern Mediterranean for centuries, so Columbus had no difficulty shipping abroad at a young age. Morison in his masterly biography states: “Christopher learned seamanship the old way, the hard way and the only way, in the school of experience.” When he was in his teens, Columbus participated in a Genoese relief expedition to a colony on the Greek island of Chios. Later, he was on a fleet bound for Portugal when it was attacked by a French convoy. During the ensuing naval battle, while his ship was sinking, Columbus “leaped into the sea, grasped a sweep that floated free” and “managed to reach the shore, over six miles distant.” He had survived the first of many trials.

Portugal hosted a colony of expatriate Genoese; Columbus, for understandable reasons, joined his fellow Genoese there. Portugal of the 1470s was the perfect place for an aspiring sea captain, which Columbus then in his twenties already was. Lisbon its capital was possibly the most enterprising of European ports of the era. The country’s ruler, Prince Henry the Navigator, had established a first rate naval academy contributing to the adventurous seamanship leading to the successful rounding of the treacherous Cape Bojador, off Africa’s northwest coast, and the discovery of the Azores and Cape Verde islands.

Columbus himself sailed on adventurous Portuguese vessels which wended their way around the African bulge to exotic trading locations like the “Gold Coast” of Guinea. In between voyages, Columbus, like a Lincoln conning his law books at night, sought to improve himself in his chosen profession of captain and explorer. By dint of hard work he became an excellent mapmaker.

Columbus echoed the Lincoln of legend as well in his capacity to bounce back from repeated rejection. Many Americans respect a Lincoln who was elected but once to the House of Representatives, lost his 1858 famous Illinois Senatorial campaign to Stephen Douglas and, when elected President in 1860, saw seven Southern states secede before he even entered the White House. Beginning in Portugal, Columbus worked exceptionally hard only to encounter repeated rejection of his great idea to sail due west to reach Asia. To begin the chronicle of sustained effort followed by defeat, when the teenager Columbus left his home to sail he was “almost if not completely illiterate”. In Portugal, because he understood he needed to be literate in the country’s language to enlist support, Columbus began to learn Spanish, “the favorite language among the educated classes of Portugal. He enlisted the support of the great humanist Paolo Toscanelli on behalf of the feasibility of his sailing plan. Columbus even directly lobbied the King of Portugal, Joao II.

Contemporary science and luck combined to lead to the first of Columbus’s many lobbying

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failures. Nobody doubted that the world was round; rather, the argument turned on the width of the earth's circumference. To be fair to those Portuguese geographers, they were persuaded on good grounds that Columbus unduly minimized the distance to be traveled to reach the Cipangu (Japan) of Marco Polo's description. Morison after thoroughly canvassing the evidence concludes that the "calculation is not logical, but Columbus's mind was not logical. He knew he could make it, and the figures had to fit." Events completed the shutting of the door on Columbus's attempt to convince the Portuguese court. In 1488 Dias returned from his epochal discovery of the route around the southern tip of Africa; King Joao II was now firmly committed to the Africa route to Asia.

Columbus then shifted his efforts to the Spanish court of Ferdinand and Isabella, but here, too, he was stymied for nearly seven years, 1485 to 1492. Columbus worked social contact after social contact, all to no avail. Franciscan friends, including an ex confessor of Queen Isabella, introduced him to important court figures like the Count of Medina Celi. Columbus even got as far as a royal audience which concluded with a subsidy to Columbus's project but that money dried up in 1489. The Salamanca commission established to study Colum bus's sailing proposal then reported negatively, for reasons similar to the earlier Portuguese commission. Isabella's ex confessor, an ardent supporter of Columbus, received her permission for an additional committee examination of Columbus's sailing idea only to have that commission conclude as the earlier two had:

"So that was the result of six and a half years' watching and waiting in Spain. 'By San Fernando' he was through!"

Columbus, understandably despondent, prepared his saddlebags for a try at the French court.

At just this juncture, a quasi-miracle occurred. A courtier informed Columbus that the Queen wished to see him. While court advisers such as the *converso* financier Santangel plausibly argued on Columbus's behalf that the huge potential benefits of funding Columbus's projected voyage far outweighed relatively minor court expenses, inspiration above the purely factual and empirical ultimately swayed the great Catholic Queen. We must conclude, then and now, that the available facts aligned with the scholars' opposition to Columbus's master idea. Catholic historian Warren Carroll notes that Columbus erred by a factor of four in his estimate of the distance to Japan: "No caravel or other ship of the time could have traversed it before the entire crew died of thirst or starvation."[vi] In Columbus, however, Isabella encountered a person of the same age and of the same profound Catholic faith she possessed, a man moreover who had a "vision and a mission … with an absolute confidence that he could triumph" if only given her material support. Had she not been repeatedly told she could not achieve the *reconquista* of Spain and yet, just in that year of

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1492, she had achieved that great Catholic goal? Isabella gave Columbus her crucial support and he in turn "discovered a new world for her and for Christendom." ultimately, the scientists of that day – and, perhaps others as well – measured with too small a compass.

Columbus's First Voyage of 1492 is one about which school children used to know a few of the basics, such as the identity of the two caravels – *Nina* and *Pinta* – as well as that of Columbus's larger flagship, the *Santa Maria.* What is not so well-known were the formidable motivational challenges Columbus had to meet when he departed the Canary Islands (not Spain) on September 9, 1492. While the first ten days of the voyage benefitted from a comfortable trade wind, progress considerably slowed from that day forward. Living conditions aboard ship were consistently penitential. Sailors of that era lived in even closer quarters than even navy enlisted on submarines do today: because the slops were tossed below deck to accumulate with the bilge water and *la cucaracha,* all the main crew perforce slept packed together on the main deck: Lacking privacy and sleep-deprived due to the rotating watches, tempers frayed. By October 9, the Pinzon brothers who skippered the *Nina* and the *Pinta* were ready to turn back. The next day, the crew on Columbus's own *Santa Maria* mutinied.. Columbus, a Genoese, needed all his powers of command to persuade his largely Spanish crew to wait just three more days, until October 12, before turning around for Spain. Their perseverance was rewarded on just that day, October 12, 1492, the annual Feast of Our Lady of the Pillar. Centuries before on that day, Our Lady had appeared to encourage a very discouraged St. James the Greater that the Spanish people would indeed convert some day. Columbus doubtless felt immense gratitude to Our Lady for Her intercession in his own time.[vii]

Columbus's skills as a navigator tend to get short shrift. He had none of the directional tools of the modern captain, but – essentially – an astrolabe and compass. Notwithstanding these limitations, Columbus did not just discover a single island, probably Watling's Island in the Bahamas, turn around and go home. He, with the assistance of "volunteer" Arawak guides, discovered and explored both Cuba and Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and Dominican Republic). On his return voyage, over Atlantic waters whose westerly winds no earlier European explorer had experienced, Columbus had to cope with a terrible storm. The compass was useless while his ship, under-ballasted because provisions were low, tossed about like a cork. When they landed at one of the Portuguese Azores islands, Columbus sent half his crew to the nearest shrine of Our Lady in gratitude for Her care. Similar bad weather nearly sank Columbus's ship later on off the shore of Portugal; to quote Morison, "Only one little sail to save them from crashing …, which would have meant certain death for all hands. "Columbus had had to master human treachery and deceit that complemented Nature's furies during his epochal First Voyage. During the exploration of Cuba, Martin Pinzon, skipper of the *Pinta,* disappeared. In all likelihood Pinzon was trying to discover gold

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on his own. The Genoese Columbus, however, had to suppress his own understandable anger to maintain the (largely) Spanish group's cohesion. When Columbus's returning ship survived to make it to the Azores, the local Portuguese captain initially arrested the first Spanish ashore. Columbus had to draw upon the diplomatic medium between force and capitulation – no mean accomplishment – to have his men released. Columbus later had to draw upon similar reserves of diplomatic skill to persuade the Portuguese king, "his Sovereigns' principal rival and recent enemy D. Joao II", to allow him and his men to return to Spain.

One can readily understand Columbus's elation and contentment when, landed in Spain, he embarked overland to the royal court, then being held at Barcelona. His life contained the stuff of a Lincolnian saga, of a commoner forging his way to· the very top. Notwithstanding numerous rejections and severe trials, the humble Genoese had begun to accomplish his great exploring goal. Probably no one has better captured the pageant and excitement of Columbus's jubilant arrival than William Thomas Walsh:

"The first to enter the city were the six Indians he had brought from the lands of Kubla Khan, painted and befeathered, and shivering with cold. After them walked the sailors of Columbus's crew, carrying live parrots, stuffed birds and animals from the Indies, weapons and implements of the Indians. At last came Columbus on horseback, in silken doublet and hose, with a new velvet bonnet and a gorgeous cloak flung over his shoulders – the Admiral of the Ocean Seas attended by the chivalry of Spain."[viii]

When presented to the King and Queen, Columbus, as befitted a commoner, knelt to kiss their hands. Ferdinand and Isabella, "as if he were a person of the highest rank," raised him up and "begged him to be seated in their presence – a courtesy commonly extended only to princes of the blood." Morison fittingly concludes: "This was the height of his fortunes. Never again would he know such glory … "

The Fall of Columbus

On the surface, Columbus continued to ride the crest of glory begun with the royal acclamation at Barcelona. Ferdinand and Isabella fully supported an ambitious Second Voyage, to start on September 25, 1493, from Cadiz. The commoner Columbus had had a modest three ships and about 100 men under command for his First Voyage; for the second, the court-dubbed "Admiral of the Ocean Sea" led a caravan of seventeen ships and about 1200 men. The latter included Fray Buil and other religious for formal conversion work as well as soldiers to protect Spanish interests and colonists to establish permanent settlement. The outward voyage itself "must have been very near to the mariner's dream of perfect sailing." Very appropriately, each day at dawn began in a perfectly Catholic way,

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with Fray Buil or one of the Franciscans celebrating "a 'dry Mass"' on the flagship "while on the other ships men watched for the elevation (sic) of the host (sic) to kneel …" A combination of self-made man and devout Catholic could not have lived life at a higher pitch of success.

Unfortunately, those inner seeds of greed and pride that William Thomas Walsh points out had made Columbus ripe for a great fall. Acutely conscious of his humble beginnings, Columbus had actually composed a work called *The Book of Privileges* in which he revealed to the discerning he "was indeed obsessed with turning himself and his family into lords …"[ix] Years ofloitering at the edges of the royal court had sharpened Columbus's deep resentment of any aristocratic contempt, real or fancied; in fact, unduly sensitive pride nearly wrecked his Spanish exploring bid at its very origins. In all probability the Spanish Talavera commission which inspected Columbus's proposal rejected his proposal in part because of "the high and mighty tone he took, even with monarchs".[x] Cordial relations were certainly not helped when Columbus assured scholarly questioners that "a miraculous voice" assured him he, Columbus, would open "the gates of the ocean, which are closed with strong chains."

He was just as difficult to abide when he got a later chance to make his case directly to Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus insisted that he be declared "Admiral of all the seas and countries" that he discovered, the title to "remain during his life and to descend to his heirs." Moreover, he was to be "Viceroy and Governor of all continents and islands he might find." Last, cupidity was manifested with Columbus's insistence that he receive a tenth of "all merchandise – pearls, gold or any other wealth – to be found, gained, bought or exported from the countries he was to discover." Ferdinand, who had a harder and more grasping personality than Isabella possessed, resisted Columbus's insistence on the title of "Admiral", a designation "reserved for those of the blood royal, or related to it." Isabella, who did not mind "a strong dash of Italian peasant acquisitiveness", had to agree with her husband: "Columbus's demands were preposterous."[xi]

We have earlier seen Isabella's change of mind in Columbus's favor. What did not change were Columbus's demands to which his Sovereigns eventually submitted. In just these royal concessions resided Columbus's political and social toppling. Columbus's very grasping after the levers of colonial political power embodied in the offices of "Viceroy and Governor" revealed a profound lack of self knowledge. While God granted him genius-level gifts of sailing and exploring, He did not give Columbus the gift of governing. The problem was partially the impossibility of simultaneously governing and exploring. As Warren Carroll wittily comments, "Given a choice between governing on land and sailing away across new horizons, Columbus always chose to sail away."[xii] Thus, rather than take as direct a route

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as he could to relieve the settlement of Navidad he had established during his First Voyage, Columbus took time to sail among and map the Lesser Antilles. When he finally arrived at Navidad, the village had been destroyed and the Spanish settlers killed.

While Columbus might not have been able to prevent that calamity, he clearly needed time to stabilize Spain's first colony in Hispaniola; instead, he chose to explore Cuba further. A series of disastrous choices of deputies to govern in Columbus's stead practically guaranteed that already bad Spanish colonial government would become worse. Columbus had earlier established Fort Santo Tomas in Hispaniola's interior. To relieve it he dispatched forces under the direction of the "agile, wiry, hot-tempered" officer, Hojeda. On the way to Fort Santo Tomas, Hojeda, learning from Spanish soldiers about the theft of some of their clothes, "cut off the ears of one of the cacique's (local Arawak ruler) men."

The situation in Hispaniola's interior worsened when Hojeda relieved Santo Tomas's commander, Margarit. That gentleman-adventurer, who had been commissioned by Columbus to explore and record, chose instead to go with his complement of 250 men about the Hispaniola interior "extorting gold from the natives, raping their women and quickly exhausting their food supplies." Columbus had chosen his own brother, Diego, as Hispaniola's substitute Governor. Unfortunately, Diego rebuked but failed to corral Margarit. Angered by Diego's criticism, Margarit commandeered three ships and sailed off to Spain to lobby for the entire Columbus family's removal from political power. Meanwhile Columbus had been sailing along the south shore of Cuba trying – unsuccessfully – to prove that Cuba was an Asian peninsula. Ironically Columbus came very close to establishing that Cuba is in fact a large island but he had to return. While no man can simultaneously explore and govern, Columbus had his own pride to blame for trying to combine both.

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Columbus's fortunes had already fallen considerably when he departed for Spain in March, 1496. Of the hopeful 1200 passengers he had brought over three years before, many were quite sick, principally because they were not accustomed to New World living conditions, cuisine included. Numerous others, disappointed in their dreams, wished to return home when Columbus did: "So many were eager to go home that the caravels were dangerously overcrowded … " When Columbus finally landed in Spain, these unhappy voyagers added their criticisms to the ones Margarit had already made: Columbus "could no longer walk the crowded *sierpes* of Seville without being insulted …" When Columbus reported to Isabella, she was shocked in the change in the "Admiral's" features: "his face had become aged and lined by sickness and care …" Columbus's chastisement for his sins of pride and greed had just begun.

Columbus himself showed some awareness of why he was encountering escalating troubles.

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When he had landed at Cadiz, Columbus "adopted the coarse brown habit of a Minorite friar," which, though "his usual costume when in Spain", had special poignancy in 1496 for Columbus believed "that his misfortunes were chastisements of divine providence for his pride." However his self-understanding only went so far. Columbus drew the wrong conclusions from lessening royal support. We will recall that Columbus secured seventeen vessels and over 1200 men for his Second Voyage; for his Third, to begin in June, 1496, he only received court support for eight ships and 300 people, respectively. By that date, the devout Queen Isabella had made clear her opposition to enslavement of *any* of the West Indies peoples.

To be fair, Columbus had temporarily won her tacit acquiescence during his Second Voyage when he asserted he only enslaved aggressive male warriors. In April 1495, though, when the first big shipload of both male and female slaves arrived in Seville, Isabella quickly changed her mind, becoming so convinced "of the injustice of the sale that she commanded all the Indians to be freed and sent back to their homes".[xiii] Columbus remained deaf to her change of heart and mind. In his Third Voyage letters to his Sovereigns, Columbus "asked without apology for the full legalization of a slave trade in Indians, though Isabella had repeatedly made it clear she would never permit that."[xiv]

Additionally, Columbus continued to fail to understand he lacked crucial governing skills, either directly or by proxy. Because Ferdinand and Isabella still allowed him to act as their viceroy, Columbus possessed full political responsibility for whatever happened in the West Indies. Nevertheless, as occurred during his First and Second Voyages, he remained mainly interested in exploring, at this time discovering the South American mainland and nearby islands such as Trinidad and Margarita. To govern on his behalf Columbus had designated his two brothers, Bartholomew and Diego, to direct the government on Hispaniola, Spain's principal settlement.

The Columbus brothers did not fare well.

Francisco Roldan, whom Christopher Columbus had appointed chief justice of the island, led a rebellion while the forceful Bartholomew was away on an expedition and the ineffectual Diego remained ostensibly in control at the new capital, Santo Domingo. Bartholomew's return left Roldan still at large when Christopher arrived at last from his current exploring venture. While conceding that Roldan possibly had more troops than the Columbus brothers and possibly should have been placated, Morison nevertheless concludes, "Columbus had all the prestige of viceregal authority … and he should have dealt with the rebellion firmly." Columbus opted instead to conciliate Roldan and his followers with the beginnings of what would be the *encomienda* system: each of the rebels was allotted a "large plot of cultivated land … with the Indians that were on it … to exploit as the owner saw fit." Rather than

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follow Isabella's desire of conciliating the native peoples, Columbus opted to pacify those Spanish most ruthless for the opposite policy.

Back in Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella had become increasingly concerned about the exorbitant cost and meager return, either in profit or conversions, of a New World run by the Columbus brothers. Columbus's confused letter about his measures to cope with the Roldan rebellion induced the Sovereigns to dispatch a trusted nobleman, Francisco de Bobadilla, to find out the true state of affairs. When Bobadilla arrived in Santo Domingo, he saw immediate visual evidence of questionable governing: from his ship Bobadilla witnessed "the spectacle of a gallows on which were hanging the corpses of seven rebel Spaniards." They were part of a new rebellion led by one of Roldan's lieutenants. Diego Columbus, the Columbus brother in charge when Bobadilla arrived, aptly illustrated a continuing weakness in a Columbus brothers' administration, a "rule of both Indians and Spanish" which "oscillated between being too indecisive and too harsh."[xv]

Diego, normally quite mild-mannered, flew in the opposite direction in response to Bobadilla, refusing "to do anything until the Admiral's return to the city." Bobadilla, exercising his royal commission, then jailed all three Columbus brothers. Christopher Columbus, who in 1493 had been raised directly by his Sovereigns to a seat beside them, returned home "loaded with manacles and fetters." The sympathetic captain offered to remove Columbus's chains but Columbus refused "until the Sovereigns ordered them removed." Columbus's stock of pride, though reduced, would allow no other response.

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[i] Howard Zinn, A People's History of the United States, (New York: HarperCollins), 1995, p. 2.

[ii] Paul Gray, "The Trouble With Columbus", Time, October 7, 1991, p. 54. The succeeding two quotations in the paragraph are from the same source.

[iii] Samuel Eliot Morison, Admiral of the Ocean Sea, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company), 1942, p. 230. Morison's biography of Columbus remains the best in the English-speaking world. For the rest of this essay, unattributed quotations can be assumed to come from this source.

[iv] Robert Royal, 1492 and All That, (University Press of America), 1992, p. 39.

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[v] William Thomas Walsh, Isabella of Spain, (Rockford, Ill: Tan Books), 1930, p. 432. The remaining quotations in this paragraph derive from the same page of the same source.

[vi] Warren H. Carroll, The Glory of Christendom, Vol. 3 (of History of Christendom series), (Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press), 1993, p. 626. The next two quotations come from p. 627 of the same source

[vii]Puritans' Progress, Vol. 1, "Europe Crosses the Water", (Kansas City: Angelus Press), 1996, p. 41.

[viii]Walsh, pp. 402-403.

[ix] Simon Schama, "They All Laughed at Christopher Columbus", The New Republic, January 6 and 13, 1992, p. 35.

[x] Walsh, p. 336. The next quotation is from the same source and page.

[xi] Ibid, pp. 338·339. All direct quotations in the paragraph come from these pages..

[xii] Carroll, p. 643.

[xiii] Walsh, p. 431..

[xiv] Caroll, p.663

[xv] Royal, p. 41.

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