Part I

Part II – Conclusion

Note: Last article we covered Columbus' first two travels to the New World, noting that Columbus was "a character of nearly superhuman proportions, one blessed with extraordinary vision and talent and yet dogged like a similar grand Oedipus or Lear with a tragic flaw."

Punishment and Suffering

To be sure, a Spain ruled by a Queen Isabella would not long allow Columbus to be shackled. As soon as she learned of Columbus's plight, the Queen "ordered Columbus's chains removed immediately."[1] However, neither the Queen nor King Ferdinand was prepared to maintain Columbus in his combined viceroy status and ten percent take on all precious object discoveries: the sovereigns were fully persuaded they would not send "back an administrative failure to misgovern Hispaniola". When they authorized his Fourth (and last) Voyage, the King and Queen restricted his prerogatives to exploring the waters west of Cuba to find a "western passage to India." Government on Spain's behalf was explicitly taken out of Columbus family hands on September 3, 1501, when governorship of the West Indies was explicitly granted to Don Nicolas de Ovando.

Columbus at the head of a four-ship fleet well equipped for direct exploration set sail from Cadiz on May 11, 1502. Fifty-one years of age and in greatly weakened health, Columbus entered a crucible of fear and suffering that readily shaded into the penitential. What lingering attachments he had to colonizing and gold acquisition were steadily ground down. Nor was his crew spared; of the 135 men who departed, a quarter did not return. Torrential rain sounded a first expiatory note. When Columbus raised the coast of present-day Honduras, he immediately met terrible weather. For twenty-eight consecutive days, Columbus and his men endured torrential downpours so bad that "all distinction between sea and sky seems lost." Everything got soaked; the cooking fire would not start so each sailor consumed "a wormy biscuit and a hunk of salt horse" and, when the rain moderated, each man had to fend off blood-engorged mosquitoes.

The weather nightmare abated on September 14, 1502. Conditions on neither the land (essentially, to day's Mosquito Coast off Nicaragua through Panama) nor sea improved appreciably during the ensuing months. So much rain fell on the land itself "as to make agriculture on any large scale unprofitable." Boats could make little progress up the creeks and streams because the water usually occurred in freshets. Animal life was comparably daunting. Columbus's son Ferdinand, who accompanied the expedition and would later

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become an important biographer of his father, took note of “the vast great lizards or crocodiles” which “if they find a man asleep ashore they will drag him into the water to devour him”. Nor did the weather offshore relent. In December, 1502, the thunder and lightning were so terrifying, Columbus recorded in his journal, that nearly all his men eventually “were so worn out that they longed for death to end their dreadful sufferings.” Only Columbus’s devout Faith, iron will and first-rate seamanship enabled his men to avoid utter disaster during those terrible days.

Moral progress is usually by fits and starts. If Columbus started to understand that his talents resided primarily in sailing and exploration, he continued to hold on to unrealistic dreams of colonizing. His Fourth Voyage settlement attempt, started in January, 1503, at Belen (of today’s Panama) makes the point quite well. Columbus rarely had full control of his (largely) Spanish crew; almost as soon as he had landed at Belen, “Spaniards in twos and threes had been stealing off to the bush, and by arms extorting gold from the natives.” Nor had Columbus learned from earlier colonization disasters such as Navidad from the First Voyage earlier related. He began construction of a permanent fort for better exploration of gold just as he had before. Not surprisingly, the local natives began to arm for resistance to which Columbus responded by seizing a local chief, his family and several villagers. The natives retaliated. A Spanish party that had gone up a stream to cask fresh water was killed. Their bodies were discovered “floating downstream, covered with hideous wounds and at tended by carrion crows.” At roughly the same time, wretched native hostages who had been confined in the dank interior of one of Columbus’s ships, “had collected ropes in the hold and hanged themselves to the deck beams”. Columbus knew he had to leave but, of his three remaining ships, none were truly seaworthy: while “the fleet had been lying idle … the teredos or shipworms had been getting in their deadly work.” While Columbus could have been fulfilling a primary responsibility of caulking his vessels, he was too busy with ultimately secondary activities.

By the time he was afloat, Columbus had lost the trust of his men, ironically in the area of navigation which he truly knew because of his colonizing which he did not. Columbus and his men paid for the erosion of morale he had himself triggered. Colum bus understood upon sailing from Belen that the best course to Hispaniola, the one location where Spanish towns and provisioning existed, was the one he plotted. His less knowledgeable pilots successfully insisted on a worse course. The expedition landed, as Columbus expected, in an isolated portion of Cuba. Worse, the worm-eaten vessels increasingly leaked; “pumping a hopelessly leaking vessel is the worst; the labor is back breaking … and you know it can never improve.” Just as bad, the prevailing winds and currents meant Columbus and his men could not go directly to Hispaniola; rather, they had to head for the much less Europeanized Jamaica.

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Survival itself was in question at that juncture. Columbus did what he could to provide beach quarters at the Jamaica landing for his men. He used the rotting ships themselves for shelter and arranged his meager artillery and small arms so that his men "could beat off attack either from the shore or from a flotilla of canoes." Notwithstanding he had to keep to his bed with arthritis, Columbus had to secure food for his famished men. Knowing that too many of his men would seize food if left to their own devices, Columbus became even less popular by ordering everyone to keep within the camp. For a while the nearby Jamaican natives were willing to exchange food for trading truck but hawk's bells and glass beads, essentially all the Spanish could offer, would only go so far. In increasing desperation for himself and his men, Columbus was inspired to use his knowledge of astronomy. Using a copy of Regiomontanus's Ephemerides, which contained predictions of "eclipses for thirty years ahead", Columbus warned local chiefs that "God observed with deep disapproval how negligent they were in bringing provisions" and "would presently send them a clear token from Heaven of the punishment they were about to receive." When the eclipse occurred, "the Indians took heed, and were so frightened that with great howling and lamentation" they came from "every direction to the ships laden with provisions". The stratagem had worked to allay famine, if only temporarily.

Columbus ultimately had to get word to Hispaniola, which could only be done by volunteers manning canoes. The loyal Diego Mendez and those who accompanied him had to paddle 105 miles "against wind and current" just to arrive at Hispaniola, whereupon they had 350 additional miles of canoeing to reach the capital, Santo Domingo. Just the voyage to Hispaniola was so terrible that no one, other than the intrepid Bartolomeo Fieschi, was willing to return to Jamaica to let Columbus know Hispaniola had been reached. Mendez, the group leader, had his own difficulties with the new governor, Ovando, Ferdinand and Isabella's replacement for the Columbus brothers. Perhaps viewing the Columbus family as a political rival, Ovando took his time about granting Mendez' petition for help: Mendez reached Ovando deep within Hispaniola in August, 1503, but only got Ovando's permission to proceed to the port of Santo Domingo in March, 1504. At that, Mendez had to equip a rescue vessel at his own expense.

During the time Mendez was away, Columbus and his brother Bartholomew had to deal with a rebellion led by the Porras brothers. Francisco and Diego de Porras, increasingly anxious about their marooned condition and fully rejecting Columbus's leadership, gathered a mutiny of roughly half the remaining men. Rather than resist, the bed-ridden Columbus, who "would probably have been murdered if three or four of his devoted servants" had not restrained him, counseled his brother Bartholomew to let the rebels go. The Porras brothers seized ten canoes and departed, "robbing the Indians wherever they could, and telling them to collect their pay from the Admiral". Because of their lack of navigating skills, the Porras

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brothers had to abort their voyage to Hispaniola. When they returned to Jamaica, the mutineers had the nerve to attack Columbus and the sickly minority who remained; for Columbus had stores of food which they lacked. When the bloody fight concluded, Columbus and his loyalists had won. With great magnanimity – doubtless related to the nobility of soul issuing from accepting the abundant suffering his own sins had at least partially generated – Columbus issued a full pardon to all save the ringleader, Francisco de Porras, who was shackled. Not too long afterward, the rescue ship Diego Mendez had chartered arrived.

Columbus got little enough compensation for all his efforts and suffering at the end of his searing Fourth Voyage. At Hispaniola where he first stopped, Columbus suffered the hypocrisy of Governor Ovando "making great pretense of joy at seeing the Admiral" but subsequently "showed his real sentiments by setting the Porrases at liberty". Columbus's later treatment in Spain was only marginally better. His greatest supporter, Queen Isabella, had died in November, 1504. King Ferdinand dawdled before granting the ailing Columbus an audience in May, 1505. The royal audience ended with Columbus securing practically nothing of the compensation he believed he deserved. He had declined from being a celebrated explorer to yesterday's stale news.

Not many noticed in the spring of 1506 when the "Admiral's malady was increasing rapidly, and his attendants knew that the end was near". Columbus executed a last will and testament on May 19, 1506, naturally providing for his immediate family but also "leaving small legacies to pay debts of conscience at Genoa and Lisbon", as well as a sinking fund for "the long-hoped-for crusade to Jerusalem". The searing reparation of the Fourth Voyage had melted his remaining pride and greed. Only Columbus's two sons – Diego and Ferdinand – two closest friends, Diego Mendez and Bartolomeo Fieschi, "and a few faithful domestics" were at the bedside of the dying Columbus the next day, May 20, 1506, the Vigil of the Ascension. The Admiral received Last Rites, recited "in manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum" and died.

The Glory of Columbus

To all intents and purposes, Columbus died in obscurity: court "chroniclers" neglected "to record his death" and the bulk of "courtiers" did not bother "to attend his modest funeral at Valladolid." Cumulatively, however, the stupendous nature of his achievement gradually dawned on even the least observant. Nothing could be further from the truth than the idea, commonly found in the classroom, that Columbus simply sailed back and forth between Spain and the first island, San Salvador, he discovered. If he had done only that, his accomplishment would have been no more than the unknown explorer(s) who discovered the Canary Islands and the Azores. European explorers would hardly rush to capitalize on such a limited discovery. Columbus in contrast truly had genius-level aptitude for

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exploration and discovery that sparked the immediate interest of other European explorers. A list of what he himself discovered and mapped is cumulatively staggering. To summarize, during the First Voyage (1492-1493), he charted most of the Baham.as, Cuba and Hispaniola; during his Second Voyage (1493-1496), Columbus discovered both Puerto Rico and Jamaica, not to mention many of the Lesser Antilles;[2] during the Third Voyage (1498), Columbus confirmed the existence of a continent, if not his hoped for Asia; and, by the end of the Fourth Voyage (1502-1503), he accumulated plausible native testimony about a strait that would be the basis for Balboa's famous first European encounter with the vast Pacific Ocean.

Columbus not only added to Europe's – and thereby the world's – geographic knowledge, but also established the way to safely navigate many trans Atlantic and intra-Caribbean routes. Many a time, always with the rudest of navigation instruments, Columbus braved – and charted – waters no European had ever experienced before. In the process he demonstrated a genius for instinctive choice of routes and intuitive means to sail them. that Samuel Eliot Morison, a sailor himself, citing the French seam.an Jean Charcot called:

'*1e sens marin*, that intangible and unteachable God-given gift of knowing how to direct and plot 'the way of a ship in the midst of the sea'."

Here, too, samples of just a few of the seemingly insurmountable sailing obstacles Columbus m.et and conquered are in order. We have already seen how Columbus's sailing skills saved himself and his entire crew on their return from the famous First Voyage. During the Second Voyage, while sailing along the southern coast of Cuba, Columbus proved "his competence at coastal piloting, under the exceedingly difficult conditions of a labyrinth of uncharted cays and shoals" which fully complemented "his ability as a deep-water navigator." On that Voyage's return to Europe, Columbus's pilots guessed their projected landfall at locations that ranged "all the way from England to Galicia." Columbus, initially to their laughter, declared instead for one of the Azores Islands. He was correct, the "neatest bit of navigation that Columbus ever did." Moreover, without benefit of maps Columbus mastered the internal sailing of the Caribbean; most memorably during the Third Voyage, when he navigated roughly five-hundred miles of water between Margarita (off the coast of Venezuela) and Hispaniola.

Many a European explorer – the Verrazzanos, Cabots and Hudsons of the coming decades – followed confidently in Columbus's wake, including the captains and pilots Columbus himself had trained "who were to display the banners of Spain off every American cape and island between Fifty North and Fifty South." Additionally, Columbus's efforts sparked new patterns of living on purely the material level between Old World and New that has come to be called the "Columbian Exchange" in his honor. Columbus was one of the first Europeans

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to eat pineapple, sample tobacco and sleep in a hammock, the latter becoming standard sleeping quarters for U.S. sailors until about 1900. Columbus, a careful note-taker of everything he saw, taught his fellow Europeans about the flamingo and the manatee. Other material transformations came after his era: the pork-packing plants of Cincinnati and the Chicago stockyards could not have come about without Columbus's epochal discoveries, because the New World peoples had neither pigs nor cattle. In the opposite geographic direction, the tomato of Italian cuisine and potato of Irish diet only existed after 1492, because those foods were not known in the Old World.[3]

Even Columbus's great failings in government that we have abundantly rehearsed diminish when placed in a fuller context. The historian Jacques Barzun is very helpful in this regard: he notes that the ravages of greed and exploitation are worst "when the scene is vast and sparsely populated, when communication is slow and policing is haphazard."[4] Such aptly describes colonization during Columbus's era, that much worse when one adds that he and his brothers "belonged to an anti-Spanish faction in Genoa,"[5] hardly good preparation for controlling largely Spanish crews and colonizers. Besides, to control the likes of brutal Spaniards like Hojeda and Margarit, an administrator would have needed to be '"Angelic indeed and superhuman"': can we be too critical if Columbus did not reach that high level? He himself drew a contrast between his being "'a governor sent to Sicily or to a city or two under settled government'" and Hispaniola where he actually served as governor, among "a people, warlike and numerous, and with customs and beliefs very different from ours."[6] Professor Barzun, who acknowledges that the Spanish colonists "committed atrocities from. greed and racist contempt that nothing can palliate",[7] at the same time draws attention to a pattern throughout world history of the stronger conquering the weaker; of one tribe displacing another in ancient Greece, of the Anglos and Saxons overcoming the Romans in Britain, of the same sequence occurring in the Caribbean before Columbus arrived and elsewhere after he departed. The myth of native peoples living in harmony with each other and nature is just that – a myth.

Granted these palliations, Columbus held himself to considerably higher standards than the modern politician. He was a Catholic man-of-action, who personally wanted to acknowledge his sins, confess and atone for them. We have seen him do just that during his Third and Fourth Voyages: when adversity struck him, Columbus was no modern man wondering why "bad things happen to good people." Ultimately his Catholic religious motivation was primary in his makeup, deftly captured by Morison when he, conceding Columbus was "far from indifferent" about gold and glory, concludes that "spreading the Faith was far more potent than the desire to win glory, wealth and worldly honors". Columbus's very daily conduct was steeped in a Catholic sensibility.

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Columbus would not curse, substituting “By San Fernando!” instead. Whenever possible, he observed the canonical hours of terce, vespers and compline. Between his famous voyages, Columbus “stopped at monasteries rather than the homes of caballeros or grandees.”[8] These daily personal practices colored his larger religious vision. To open a second front against the Ottoman Turks, Columbus hoped that his voyages to Asia would establish contact “with the mysterious Christian prince Prester John, which might open a second front against Ottoman Islam.”[9] Columbus’s Faith even displayed both a mystical and apocalyptic side. When he confirmed the existence of a continent in his Third Voyage, Columbus, continuing his mistaken belief he had located the Asian mainland, thought he had reached the Garden of Eden, for was he not at the “the Terrestial Paradise at the first point of the Far East, where the sun rose on the day of creation”? Columbus was also persuaded he lived in the end times, perhaps extending to the conviction “that in 1492 there were just 155 days left to mankind before the Apocalypse.”[10]

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[1] Carroll, p. 664.

[2] Roughly, a north-south chain of islands, starting from the U.S. Virgin Islands to Trinidad, off the coast of Venezuela.

[3] John Schwartz, “The Great Food Migration”, Newsweek (special issue), Fall/Winter, 1991, pgs. 58-62.

[4] Jacques Barzun, From Dawn to Decadence, (New York: Harper Collins), 2000, pg. 100.

[5] Royal, pg. 41.

[6] Idem.

[7] Barzun, idem.

[8] Royal, pg. 49.

[9] Schama, pg. 35.

[10] Idem.

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