

1492



1992

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

Celebrate it or bemoan it: the encounter between

No, Columbus didn't discover America. Let's lay to rest that old notion right at the start. First of all, the verb's all wrong for our multicultural, interdependent, ultrasensitive modern world. "Discover" suggests that "we" went out and found a strange and unknown "them." If you

are one of "them," you may justly feel you are being patronized. Then, too, it's pretty clear by now that Columbus was not the first outsider to set foot in the Western Hemisphere. That distinction belongs to the original human settlers, who probably crossed from Asia tens of thousands of years ago. Or, if we're not talking about the aboriginal settlers, claims have been staked for various "discoverers": second-century Jews, a Chinese Buddhist who may have visited Mexico in the fifth century, the Irish monk Saint Brendan, Prince Madoc of Wales and—most likely of all—Leif Eriksson and the Norsemen who landed in "Vinland" in about A.D. 1000. *

*East and West
had vast
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unfolding today*

But even if they did reach the American continent, none of them made a big deal about it—which Christopher Columbus, in 1492, emphatically did. He left European settlers and animals behind, he brought native people and odd vegetables back. He told tales of rich lands and potential treasure. He inspired a wave of explorers and adventurers to

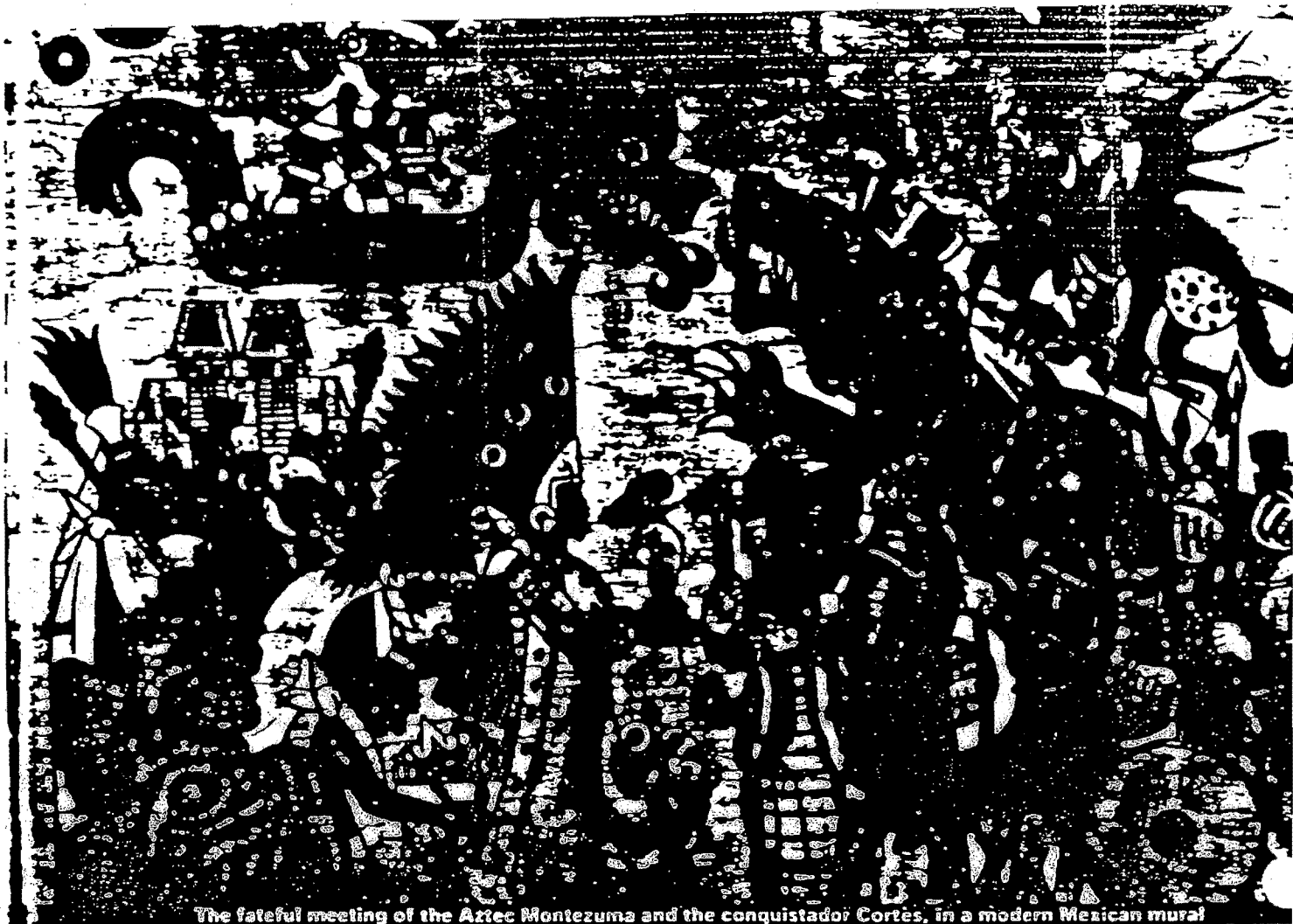
head west. In short, he had consequences.

That is why, 500 years later, the world still takes notice. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella . . . the Niña, the Pinta and the Santa Maria . . . the excited shout from the crow's nest . . . the men wading ashore on a Bahamian island may all seem the stuff of school pageants—simplistic, ritualized and more than a bit quaint. But they also mark one of the great collisions of human history. Imagine that a gigantic spaceship descended on our planet tomorrow, filled with four-inch creatures of a color not yet imagined by man. That would perhaps be equivalent to the encounter of the world's two hemispheres half a millennium ago.

It was as if scattered pieces of the human puzzle were fitted together at

* All their claims are engagingly described by Donald Dale Jackson in the September issue of Smithsonian magazine.

by **KENNETH AUCHINCLOSS**



The fateful meeting of the Aztec Montezuma and the conquistador Cortes, in a modern Mexican mural

last. Parts became a whole, and life was transformed in a hundred ways. New foods reshaped the diet of both hemispheres: sugar, cattle and pigs moved west, the tomato and the potato, cocoa and corn, moved east. The horse, hitherto unknown in the New World, changed daily existence for the Indians of the North American plains and made possible the world of the gauchos. The wheel, which the pre-Columbian civilizations of the West used only in children's toys, revolutionized work and travel. Written language spread through the continent, replacing either a ponderous system of hieroglyphics or nothing at all.

Inevitably, there was havoc. Diseases against which they had no natural immunity took a terrible toll among the people of the New World; smallpox alone wiped out many millions. Germs were the conquistadors' most devastating weapon; local populations were so racked by illness that they could offer little resistance to the European conquest. Syphilis may have spread in the opposite direction: it first appeared in Europe after the conquista-

dors began returning from the Americas. Tobacco, its delights masking its dangers, was another gift from the New World to the Old.

Not only Europeans came over; soon Africans began arriving in great numbers, as slaves. They were brought in, at first, to work the sugar plantations springing up on the islands of the Caribbean: the local population was found to be unsuitable for the work—or in many instances, had been decimated by disease. Agriculture based on slavery spread both north and south. The Western Hemisphere's natives were thus not the only ones to suffer from the European advance. Columbus and his followers sowed seeds of racial antagonism that tangle life in many parts of the American continent to this day.

Slavery, conquest, disease and humiliation—these are the legacy of Columbus, in the eyes of some people today. They see nothing to celebrate in the 500th anniversary of his crossing; instead, they think it should be an occasion for protest—or at best a vast, doleful silence. Some

American Indians plan to hold vigils for Mother Earth, stage a mock trial of Hernán Cortés or retrace the 500-mile Trail of Tears, the Choctaw Nation's forced walk from Mississippi to Oklahoma in 1831. Many Latin Americans are torn between pride in their Spanish heritage and outrage at the treatment of Native Americans. In Britain, playwright Harold Pinter has formed a group called 500 Years of Resistance to demonstrate against what it sees as a hateful record of oppression. And Kirkpatrick Sale has written a book, "The Conquest of Paradise," indicting Columbus for crimes against nature: inspired by greed, Sale's Columbus launches a campaign of despoliation against the American environment that continues to the present day.

Fair enough—up to a point. Much of the old "Columbus sailed the ocean blue" lore does need refinement. For one thing, some of it is wrong. Past ages tended to define the Admiral of the Ocean Sea in their own image: the rugged individualist, the heroic pioneer, the commoner who bent kings and queens to his will—that was what was celebrated in the United States 100 years ago, in 1892. Past ages, too, have told the story mostly through European eyes: schoolchildren were taught about Columbus as part of the European Age of Discovery, and they learned how treasures from the New World transformed the economy of the Old. The religious mission of the Spaniards and Portuguese, to spread the Christian

Gospel to the pagan tribes of the New World, was taken for granted. As more is discovered about the indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere, for whom Columbus's

arrival was pretty much a disaster, more of their story can be told.

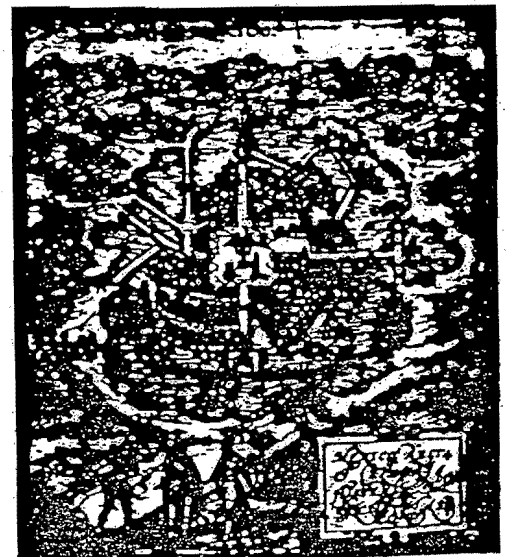
The problem is that those who denounce Columbus today, like those who used to glorify him, are looking at history through contemporary glasses. For all sorts of reasons, minority populations, non-European cultures and tropical forests enjoy a lot of sympathy these days. If these are your primary concerns, it's fairly easy to paint Columbus and the early explorers as people who oppressed the local residents, smashed alien civilizations and chopped down a lot of trees. It's a damning portrait. But it also leaves a lot out.

Above all, it leaves out the fact that this encounter was inevitable. This is not simply to state the obvious: that if Columbus hadn't set sail in 1492, some other European voyager would have made the trip soon afterward. The key point is that whoever made the first crossing and whenever it occurred, the consequences for the people of the Western Hemisphere would not have been much different. To expect otherwise is to ask that history be rolled back long before 1492 and that its course be plotted along other lines entirely.

In particular, European civilization would have to be recast. What drove Columbus westward was not just a search for a lucrative new trade route to Asia. It is too simplistic to picture him and the other European explorers as mere money-grubbers, early real-estate developers who lucked into an entire continent to subdivide. Money was obviously important to them, but they were also animated by a certain restlessness and curios-

CRITICS FASTE

Hub cities: Genoa (left) 11 years before Columbus sailed, and Mexico City 80 years after



ity. The voyage into the unknown, after all, had been part of European culture since the days of Odysseus. To some degree this questing instinct was bound up with religious zeal: look, for example, at the search for the Holy Grail and the history of the Crusades. On a more mundane level, it was often a social necessity: families were large, houses were



Worlds apart: A bust of Lorenzo de' Medici of Florence and a figure from Veracruz, Mexico

ture and human sacrifice. There is a danger that this 500th anniversary of the East-West encounter will be just as distorted as past ones—

though in a different way. That will surely happen if it becomes an occasion for pursuing modern political agendas. Better to do as the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History has done with its "Seeds of Change" show: don't look for heroes and villains, look at the vast changes that were wrought. Because of what happened in 1492, life in much of the world has never been quite the same. Not everyone will find this an occasion to celebrate. But it was indisputably one of the great divides in human history, an event to marvel at and to learn from.

Almost 70 years ago, Stephen Vincent Benét wrote "John Brown's Body," an epic poem about another collision that produced tremendous suffering and large consequences, the American Civil War. At the

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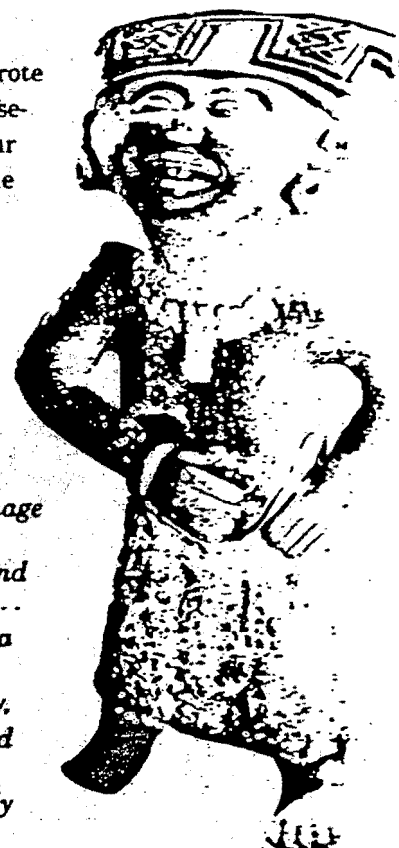
small, land was scarce, and so young people were encouraged to leave home and seek their fortune. Missionaries set out to preach the Gospel. Merchants set out to find new goods and new markets to sell them in. Armies sometimes led this process, sometimes followed. The spread of Western civilization was built on intrusion, intrusion almost as a way of life.

Today, it's fashionable to think of all that as hateful. It is linked with imperialism, colonialism and racism—the great pejoratives of our time. But this intrusive habit is also linked with some qualities that we find more attractive: a fascination with new ideas, a knack for scientific discovery, an ability to adapt and change. The impulses that lay behind the voyage to the New World were by no means so uniformly nasty as they are sometimes portrayed.

By the same token, the civilizations of the Western Hemisphere were not so uniformly admirable. Much is now made of how well native societies were adapted to the environment, how they respected the rain forest and the prairie. Less is made of the more horrific habits of some native societies: endemic warfare, tor-

end of this work, he wrote some lines that might usefully echo through our commemorations of the voyages of Columbus:

*So, when the crowd gives tongue
And prophets, old or young,
Bawl out their strange despair,
Or fall in worship there
Let them applaud the image
or condemn
But keep your distance and
your soul from them...
If you at last must have a
word to say,
Say neither, in their way,
"It is a deadly magic and
accursed,"
Nor "It is blest," but only
"It is here."*



Columbus & Controversy

Reading assignment: Auchincloss, Kenneth. "When Worlds Collide."
Newsweek, p. 8-13.

Before Reading: In 1882, the US celebrated the 400-year anniversary of Columbus' voyage to the New World. In 1992, when this article was published, the US was divided about whether the 500-year anniversary should be celebrated or mourned. What is your opinion? Why? (If you have no opinion, why not?)

As you read: Define the following words from the context of the article or with the aid of a dictionary:

1. patronized (8) _____

2. decimated (9) _____

3. doleful (9) _____

4. pejorative (13) _____

5. endemic (13) _____

Take notes:

1. What were the consequences of Columbus' voyage and discovery?

Positive

Negative

2. What ideas/events/people inspired the voyage?

Positive Influences

Negative Influences

AFTER READING (AND THINKING)

3. What is Auchincloss's major point?

4. In your opinion is the article slanted or biased toward either side of the issue?
Support your answer with reasons and examples. Use own paper if needed.

