

Columbus and the principle of the 'purloined letter'

by Timothy Rush

Columbus, The Great Adventure: His Life, His Times, and His Voyages

by Paolo Emilio Taviani, trans. by Luciano F. Farina and Marc A. Beckwith
Orion Books, New York, 1991,
273 pages, hardbound, \$20

The relative strength of this volume—a condensed version of several longer studies in Italian, one of them available in English as *Christopher Columbus: The Grand Design* (London: Orbis, 1985)—is that it follows the general historiographical method and outlook of Samuel Eliot Morison. That is already saying something in this quincentenary year in which deliberate falsifications of Columbus's achievement and his era are spreading like poisonous mushrooms.

Admiral Morison, in the late 1930s, had personally "sailed the ocean seas" in Columbus's routings on his four voyages, and thus brought a sailor's appreciation of the supreme nautical skills and intuitions employed by Columbus in his travels. He was also able, by retracing those routes, to describe the look and feel of the landfalls, and what Columbus found, with the immediacy and vividness of one who had directly experienced them. The result of this research, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea, A Life of Christopher Columbus* (Boston: 1942), remains to this day, for these reasons, the best single account of Columbus's seafaring achievement and voyages themselves.

Morison, in his "rehabilitation" of Columbus, vaulted the astounding outpourings of fraudulent historiography

which had erupted at the beginning of the century, and revived the knowledge of Columbus as a master mariner and accomplished scientist, which Alexander von Humboldt had demonstrated a century and a quarter before.

The distinguished Italian scholar and member of the Italian Senate, Emilio Taviani, in this school, adds to Morison's work with similar "retracing of the steps" in Columbus's life preceding the great voyages. The earlier volume, *The Grand Design*, had much more of this—the "feel" of Genoa during the period Columbus was growing up; his trip to the Barbary Coast and the Genoese outpost on the island of Chios in the eastern Mediterranean; mastery of the Portuguese Triangle of Lisbon, the Madeiras, and the Azores; his trip to Bristol (England), Galway (Ireland), and Iceland; and his trip to what was then the farthest point of Portuguese settlement in Africa, the Guinea coast at the fort of São Jorge da Mina (today Ghana)—but there are sufficient carryovers into this new volume to make satisfying and suggestive reading. One almost steps off the boat with Columbus at each port of call.

Taviani, however, falls into a mystical conception of the formative influences on Columbus's character, which leaves the door open for the "revisionist" attacks on Columbus dominating this 500th anniversary of his western landfall. On the "Genoese personality," Taviani ridiculously asserts, "The influence of a sea without beaches and shallows yet always open to a wide horizon helped mold analytic intelligence, a serious character, and moral commitment."

Ironically, Taviani nevertheless comes closer to an appreciation of Columbus's character than the other one-volume "general readership" study of Columbus to emerge in the past year: Felipe Fernández-Armesto's *Columbus* (New York: Oxford University, 1991). As noted in a previous review (*EIR*, Feb. 21, 1992), there are merits to Fernández-

Armesto's book; but the constant and gratuitous slanders of Columbus and the dignity of his undertaking, are at heart a 20th-century nihilist's rage against the "one individual can change the world" outlook of the Renaissance.

Fernández-Armesto's 'gray' legend

As an example, look at what Fernández-Armesto, attempting a sophisticated rehabilitation of British "Black Legend" conceptions from his Oxford don's lodgings, says of the process of Columbus's self-education. He first reports the following extraordinary and moving account by Columbus himself:

"Every sea so far traversed have I sailed. I have conversed and exchanged ideas with learned men, churchmen and laymen, Latins and Greeks, Jews and Moors and many others of other religions. To that wish of mine I found that Our Lord was very favorably disposed, and for it He gave me the spirit of understanding. He endowed me abundantly in seamanship; of astrology He gave me sufficient, and of geometry and arithmetic too, with the wit and craftsmanship to make representations of the globe and draw on them the cities, rivers and mountains, islands and harbors, all in their proper places. Throughout this time I have seen and studied books of every sort—geography, history, chronicles, philosophy and other arts—whereby Our Lord opened my understanding with His manifest hand to the fact that it was practicable to sail from here to the Indies." (1501, letter on his Third Voyage)

Fernández-Armesto, after reviewing Columbus's underlinings and marginal notations in his books, cynically comments: "He was bookish but not scholarly; a 'reading man' whose inclinations were low-brow. He liked the sensational and the trivial, the sententious and the salacious. . . . He was interested in Asia for its yellow-press 'marvels' and golden-book wealth. His attitude to scientific authority was a curious mixture of the servile and the reactive."

Though paying passing homage to Columbus's accomplishments, Fernández-Armesto makes sure that the image that remains with the reader is of a Columbus obsessed with passing on wealth and the trappings of nobility to his heirs; the "Enterprise of the Indies" was merely a vehicle for this end. The crushing refutation of such a distortion is the fact of Columbus's *four* voyages, when the rewards and prestige of the first alone not only would have sufficed, but to someone of the honor-grubbing mentality attributed to Columbus, *would not have been jeopardized* by the risks of the subsequent three. No; what Taviani and Morison beautifully capture, despite Taviani's mysticism, is Columbus's vocation as an *explorer* par excellence. In his fourth voyage, unarguably his "Calvary" in terms of suffering and mishaps, he had finally recognized that his previous discoveries constituted "Another World" from the Indies—and his objective, as revealed in his writings in preparation for the trip, was nothing less than to circumnavigate the globe!

Unexplored history of the Renaissance

The extraordinarily rich record that has come down to us of Columbus's voyages—from his own log, and from the writings of contemporaries and immediately following historians of high caliber—cheats writers such as Fernández-Armesto of any sustained, successful slander, when even an approximately scholarly treatment is adopted. This means that the reader is well rewarded in dipping into any of these three writers' accounts of Columbus's life *per se*.

The great gap in the saga is not Columbus's life, but the story of how preceding figures created the means and channels for Columbus to fulfill his Enterprise—the conception of "sailing west to reach the east." The "Enterprise of the Indies" was a high project of the Renaissance, embedded in the framework of Henry the Navigator's astounding "Apollo Project" of the era, the 70-year mission to "show devotion to God by making the seas navigable," and given remarkable definition as a combination of scientific expansion and world evangelization at the time of the Council of Florence (1437-41).

This story has not been told. But the clues and leads are in full view. Like C. Auguste Dupin in Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Purloined Letter," it is just a matter of recognizing what we are looking for and understanding the traits of mind of those seeking to conceal the evidence.

There are two channels of Renaissance conceptions in science, geography, and evangelization, which flow into Columbus, or rather find their instrument in Columbus: one, through Portugal; the other, through Spain.

Half of the Portuguese side (Columbus lived in Portugal for eight critical years, 1477-85) is presented by Taviani and Morison. This is the relation between Columbus and the preceding 60 years of interconnected breakthroughs in shipbuilding (invention of the caravel), navigation, astronomy, and colonization efforts, developed by Prince Henry and his Sagres "mission control" center on Portugal's southeasternmost headland. Fernández-Armesto dismisses this whole relation with an astounding one-line reference to "Henry the Navigator's rabble."

But neither Taviani nor Morison proceeds to explore the wonderful material of Portugal's intimate involvement with the unfolding of the Renaissance, particularly the Florentine, and the crucial Luso-Florentine aspects of the conception of a "strategic breakout" for western Christian civilization, then seemingly cornered by the rise of the Ottoman Turks. The letter of Florence's preeminent mathematician and astronomer, Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli, which was made available to Columbus at a crucial moment in the early 1480s, symbolizes, but by no means encompasses, this rich history. Exemplary is the role of the Portuguese royal family's confidential agent in Florence, Dom Gomes Ferreira da Silva, who was a key assistant of Ambrogio Traversari, head of the Council of Florence organizing effort, and who was recalled to Portugal in the early 1440s to reform Portugal's monasteries in the image of the council's deliberations.

The Spanish channel is similarly truncated or obscured in these three benchmark books. Taviani and Morison limit themselves to a review of a handful of figures—the Franciscans Antonio de Marchena and Juan Pérez, Archbishop Hernando de Talavera, the Aragonese privy official Luis de Santángel, Queen Isabella, and a few others—who stepped forward to win Castilian backing for Columbus’s enterprise. There is no effort to present the relationship of this group to the Italian Renaissance—or, in fact, to anything outside Spain.

Fernández-Armesto’s treatment in this area is an outstand-

The great gap in the saga is not Columbus’s life, but the story of how preceding figures created the means and channels for Columbus to fulfill his Enterprise—the conception of “sailing west to reach the east.” The “Enterprise of the Indies” was a high project of the Renaissance, embedded in the framework of Henry the Navigator’s astounding “Apollo Project” of the era.

ing contribution, as far as it goes. He delineates four components of what he calls the “Columbus Lobby,” and provides rich details for each:

- 1) the financial syndicate in the joint Castilian-Aragonese court, centered on treasury official Alonso de Quintanilla, which headed Ferdinand and Isabella’s conquest of the Canary Islands in the decade before Columbus’s voyage;

- 2) the “mini-court” of the heir to the throne, Prince Juan, headed by Juan’s principal tutor, Fray Diego Deza;

- 3) The Palos group, headed by Antonio de Marchena; and

- 4) a faction in the Aragonese court headed by Luis de Santángel.

By far the most intriguing is his description of the “mini-court” around Juan (despite wild slander of the character of Juan himself). But here Fernández-Armesto himself highlights an apparent dead-end: “It is not clear what disposed members of the Prince’s court particularly to favor Columbus; . . . They had no obvious interest in an Atlantic project and it is tempting to suppose that some unknown personal links may have been responsible.”

It is rather that Fernández-Armesto does not want to explore where his own threads lead. For such an investigation would lend a dimension and dignity to the Enterprise of the Indies which would reduce his own snidely expressed psychologizing about Columbus to irrelevance.

Cisernos and the Lull revival

All the material is there for this exercise in discovery à la Dupin. Many works, especially by Spanish historians, delve into the backgrounds of the principal figures in Ferdinand and Isabella’s Renaissance court. The direct connections to the Council of Florence and its protagonists of a generation earlier can be dug out. One fruitful lead is to explore the residence of Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros in Rome, as a youth, during the pontificate of Pius II (1458-64). Pius was a central figure in the exploration projects of the age; Columbus used his masterful geographical treatise, *Historia Rerum ubique Gestarum*, as one of his principal authorities.

I suggest two related, even deeper, areas of investigation to the future historian who accepts this challenge. The first is to relate the revival of the work of Ramón Lull in the Isabelline court to the circles who sponsored Columbus. Lull, Franciscan “Renaissance Man” 150 years before the Golden Renaissance (he lived 1235-1316), led a European-wide intellectual crusade against the Aristotelianism brought in by Averroës to suffocate science and epistemology. This has great relevance in Columbus’s period, because the strength of the Ptolemaist opposition to large-scale exploration rested on a foundation of Aristotelianism. Among other projects of statecraft, Lull proposed a flanking of the emerging threats in the East by completing the reconquest of Spain, jumping the Straits of Gibraltar to take the North African coast, and circumnavigating Africa. Cardinal Cisneros was the center of the Lull revival in Spain of Columbus’s time; the great vicar of the Church in Rome during the time of Pius II, Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa, had played a comparable role one generation earlier.

The other area of work is the absolutely extraordinary role of members of the Franciscan order in European projects of exploration and evangelization from the mid-1200s straight through Columbus. The mid-13th-century forerunners of Marco Polo’s journey to the Great Khan were Franciscans. So were the two great geographical and scientific minds of the same half-century, Ramón Lull and Roger Bacon. So were many others in a line reaching down to Columbus himself, who came in time to dress as a Franciscan, and whose reception at the Franciscan monastery of La Rábida and sponsorship by Franciscans Antonio de Marchena and Juan Pérez were, in all accounts, crucial in his project.

There is no facile answer to this seeming “Franciscan factor”; the order was not homogeneous in belief and outlook over different centuries or even in different countries at the same time. Yet obviously some character imbued in the order from its founding nurtured or attracted those, over a period of almost 250 years, who were to repeatedly push the “Enterprise of the Indies” toward Columbus’s willing and capable hands.

The real story of Columbus’s Enterprise remains to be written.