

Life of Christopher Columbus

By Washington Irving

Introduction

Washington Irving, American historian and essayist, was born on April 3, 1783, in New York, of a family which came originally from Scotland. He knew Europe well, and was equally at home in London, Paris, and Madrid; he held the offices, in 1829, of Secretary to the American Embassy in London, and, in 1842, of American Minister in Spain. He was deeply interested in Spanish history, and besides the "Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus," he wrote "The Voyages of the Companions of Columbus," "The Conquest of Granada," "The Alhambra," and "Legends of the Conquest of Spain." He was an industrious man of letters, having an excellent style, wide knowledge, and pleasant humour. His chief work was the "Life of George Washington," of which we give an epitome elsewhere. Other writings include "A History of New York, by Diedrich Knickerbocker," the celebrated "Sketch Book," "Bracebridge Hall," "Tales of a Traveller," and a "Life of Goldsmith." Irving did not marry, and died on November 28, 1859, in his home at Sunnyside on the Hudson River, and is buried at Tarrytown. The "Life of Columbus" was published in 1828 and is now obtainable in a number of popular editions.

Section 1 - The Years of Waiting

Christopher Columbus was born in Genoa about 1435, of poor but reputable parents. He soon evinced a passion for geographical knowledge, and an irresistible inclination for the sea. We have but shadowy traces of his life till he took up his abode in Lisbon about 1470. His contemporaries describe him as tall and muscular; he was moderate and simple in diet and apparel, eloquent, engaging, and affable. At Lisbon he married a lady of rank, Doña Felipa. He supported his family by making maps and charts.

Portugal was prosecuting modern discovery with great enthusiasm, seeking a route to India by the coast of Africa; Columbus's genius conceived the bold idea of seeking India across the Atlantic. He set it down that the earth was a terraqueous globe, which might be travelled round. The circumference he divided into twenty-four hours. Of these he imagined that fifteen hours had been known to the ancients; the Portuguese had advanced the western frontier one hour more by the discovery of the Azores and the Cape de Verde Islands; still, about eight hours remained to be explored. This space he imagined to be occupied in great measure by the eastern regions of Asia. A navigator, therefore, pursuing a direct course from east to west, must arrive at Asia or discover intervening land.

The work of Marco Polo is the key to many of the ideas of Columbus. The territories of the Great Khan were the object of his search in all his voyages. Much of the success of his enterprise rested on two happy errors; the imaginary extent of Asia to the east, and the supposed smallness of the earth. Without these errors he would hardly have ventured into the immeasurable waste of waters of the Atlantic.

A deep religious sentiment mingled with his thoughts; he looked upon himself as chosen from among men, and he read of his discovery as foretold in Holy Writ. Navigation was still too imperfect for such an undertaking; mariners rarely ventured far out of sight of land. But knowledge was advancing, and the astrolabe, which has been modified into the modern quadrant, was being applied to navigation. This was the one thing wanting to free the mariner from his long bondage to the land.

Columbus now laid his great project before the King of Portugal, but without success. Greatly

disappointed, he sailed to Spain, hoping to receive the patronage of Ferdinand and Isabella. It was many months before he could even obtain a hearing; his means were exhausted, and he had to contend against ridicule and scorn, but the royal audience was at length obtained. Ferdinand assembled learned astronomers and cosmographers to hold a conference with Columbus. They assailed him with citations from the Bible. One objection advanced was, that should a ship ever succeed in reaching India, she could never come back, for the rotundity of the globe would present a mountain, up which it would be impossible to sail. Finally, after five years, the junta condemned the scheme as vain and impossible.

Columbus was on the point of leaving Spain, when the real grandeur of the subject broke at last on Isabella's mind, and she resolved to undertake the enterprise. Articles of agreement were drawn up and signed by Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus and his heirs were to have the office of High Admiral in all the seas, lands, and continents he might discover, and he was to be viceroy over the said lands and continents. He was to have one-tenth of all profits, and contribute an eighth of the expense of expeditions. Columbus proposed that the profits from his discoveries should be consecrated to a crusade.

Section 2 - The First Voyage (August, 1492--March, 1493)

Columbus set out joyfully for Palos, where the expedition was to be fitted out. He had spent eighteen years in hopeless solicitation, amidst poverty, neglect, and ridicule. When the nature of the expedition was heard, the boldest seamen shrank from such a chimerical cruise, but at last every difficulty was vanquished, and the vessels were ready for sea. Two of them were light, half-decked caravels; the Santa Maria, on which Columbus hoisted his flag, was completely decked. The whole number of persons was one hundred and twenty.

Columbus set sail on August 3, 1492, steering for the Canary Islands. From there they were wafted gently over a tranquil sea by the trade wind, and for many days did not change a sail. The poor mariners gradually became uneasy at the length of the voyage. The sight of small birds, too feeble to fly far, cheered their hearts for a time, but again their impatience rose to absolute mutiny. Then new hopes diverted them. There was an appearance of land, and the ships altered their course and stood all night to the south-west, but the morning light put an end to their hopes; the fancied land proved to be an evening cloud.

Again the seamen broke forth into loud clamours, and insisted on abandoning the voyage. Fortunately, the following day a branch with berries on it floated by; they picked up also a small board and a carved staff, and all murmuring was now at an end. Not an eye was closed that night. Columbus took his station on the top of the cabin. Suddenly, about ten o'clock, he beheld a light. At two in the morning the land was clearly seen, and they took in sail, waiting for the dawn. The great mystery of the ocean was revealed.

When the day dawned, Columbus landed, threw himself upon his knees, kissed the earth, and returned thanks to God. Rising, he drew his sword, displayed the royal standard, and took possession in the names of the Castillian sovereigns, naming the island San Salvador. It is one of the Bahama Islands, and still retains that name, though also called Cat Island.

The natives thought that the ships had descended from above on their ample wings, and that these marvellous beings were inhabitants of the skies. They appeared to be simple and artless people, and of gentle and friendly dispositions. As Columbus supposed that the island was at the extremity of India, he

called them Indians. He understood them to say that a king of great wealth resided in the south. This, he concluded, could be no other than Cipango, or Japan. He now beheld a number of beautiful islands, green, level, and fertile; and supposed them to be the archipelago described by Marco Polo. He was enchanted by the lovely scenery, the singing of the birds, and the brilliantly colored fish, though disappointed in his hopes of finding gold or spice; but the natives continued to point to the south as the region of wealth, and spoke of an Island called Cuba.

He set sail in search of it, and was struck with its magnitude, the grandeur of its mountains, its fertile valleys, sweeping plains, stately forests, and noble rivers. He explored the coast to the east end of Cuba, supposing it the extreme point of Asia, and then descried the mountains of Hayti to the south-east. In coasting along this island, which he named Hispaniola, his ship was carried by a current on a sandbank and lost. The admiral and crew took refuge in one of the caravels. The natives, especially the cacique Guacanagari, offered him every assistance. The Spanish mariners regarded with a wistful eye the easy and idle existence of these Indians, who seemed to live in a golden world without toil, and they entreated permission to remain.

This suggested to Columbus the idea of forming the germ of a future colony. The cacique was overjoyed, and the natives helped to build a fort, thus assisting to place on their necks the yoke of slavery. The fortress and harbour were named La Navidad.

Columbus chose thirty-nine of those who volunteered to remain, charged them to be circumspect and friendly with the natives, and set sail for Spain. He encountered violent tempests, his small and crazy vessels were little fitted for the wild storms of the Atlantic; the oldest mariners had never known so tempestuous a winter, and their preservation seemed miraculous. They were forced to run into Tagus for shelter. The King of Portugal treated Columbus with the most honourable attentions. When the weather had moderated he put to sea again, and arrived safely at Palos on March 15, having taken not quite seven months and a half to accomplish this most momentous of all maritime enterprises. Columbus landed and walked in procession to the church to return thanks to God. Bells were rung, the shops shut, and all business suspended. The sovereigns were dazzled by this easy acquisition of a new empire. They addressed Columbus as admiral and viceroy, and urged him to repair immediately to court to concert plans for a second expedition. His journey to Barcelona was like the progress of a sovereign, and his entrance into that city has been compared to a Roman triumph. On his approach the sovereigns rose and ordered him to seat himself in their presence. When Columbus had given an account of his voyage, the king and queen sank on their knees, and a *Te Deum* was chanted by the choir of the royal chapel. Such was the manner in which the brilliant court of Spain celebrated this sublime event.

The whole civilised world was filled with wonder and delight, but no one had an idea of the real importance of the discovery. The opinion of Columbus was universally adopted that Cuba was the end of Asia; the islands were named the West Indies, and the vast region was called the New World.

Section 3 - The Second Voyage (September, 1493--June, 1496)

Extraordinary excitement prevailed about the second expedition, and many hidalgos of high rank pressed into it. They sailed from Cadiz in September 1493; all were full of animation, anticipating a triumphant return. When they reached La Navidad they found the fortress burnt. At length, from some natives they heard the story of the brawls of the colonists between themselves, and their surprise and destruction by unfriendly Indians. Columbus fixed upon a new site for his colony, which he named

Isabella. Two small expeditions were sent inland to explore, and returned with enthusiastic accounts of the promise of the mountains, and Columbus sent to Spain a glowing report of the prospects of the colony.

Soon, however, maladies made their appearance, provisions began to fail, and murmuring prevailed among the colonists. In truth, the fate of many of the young cavaliers, who had come out deluded by romantic dreams, was lamentable in the extreme. Columbus arranged for the government of the island, and set sail to explore the southern coast of Cuba, supposing it to be the extreme end of Asia. He had to contend with almost incredible perils, and was obliged to return. Had he continued for two or three days longer he would have passed round the extremity of Cuba; his illusion would have been dispelled, and a different course given to his subsequent discoveries.

During his absence from Isabella the whole island had become a scene of violence and discord. Margarite, the general left in charge of the soldiers, and Friar Boyle, the apostolical vicar, formed a cabal of the discontented, took possession of certain ships, and set sail for Spain, to represent the disastrous state of the country, and to complain of the tyranny of Columbus. The soldiers indulged in all kinds of excesses, and the Indians were converted from gentle hosts into vindictive enemies.

Meanwhile, a commissioner was sent out to inquire into the distress of the colony and the conduct of Columbus. He collected all complaints, and returned to Spain, Columbus sailing at the same time. Never did a more miserable crew return from a land of promise.

The vessels anchored at Cadiz, and a feeble train of wretched men crawled forth, emaciated by diseases. Contrary to his anticipation, Columbus was received with distinguished favour. Thus encouraged, he proposed a further enterprise, and asked for eight ships, which were readily promised; but it was not until May 1498, that he again set sail.

Section 4 - The Third Voyage (May, 1498--October, 1500)

From the Cape de Verde Islands, Columbus steered to the south-west, until he arrived at the fifth degree of north latitude. The air was like a furnace, the mariners lost all strength and spirit, and Columbus was induced to alter his course to the northwest. After sailing some distance they reached a genial region with a cooling breeze and serene and clear sky. They descried three mountains above the horizon; as they drew nearer, they proved to be united at the base, and Columbus, therefore, named this island La Trinidad. He coasted round Trinidad, and landed on the mainland, but mistook it for an island. He was astonished at the body of fresh water flowing into the Gulf of Paria, and came to the conclusion that it must be the outpouring of a great unknown continent stretching to the south, far beyond the equator. His supplies were now almost exhausted, and he determined to return to Hispaniola.

He found the island in a lamentable situation. A conspiracy had been formed against his viceroy, and the Indians, perceiving the dissensions among the Spaniards, threw off their allegiance. After long negotiations Columbus was forced to sign a humiliating capitulation with the rebels. Meanwhile, every vessel that returned from the New World came freighted with complaints against Columbus. The support of the colony was an incessant drain upon the mother country. Was this compatible, it was asked, with the pictures he had drawn of the wealth of the island?

Isabella herself at last began to entertain doubts about Columbus, and the sovereigns decided to send out Don Francisco del Bobadilla to investigate his conduct. This officer appears to have been needy,

passionate, and ambitious. He acted as if he had been sent out to degrade the admiral, not to inquire into his conduct. He threw Columbus into irons, and seized his arms, gold, jewels, books, and most secret manuscripts. Columbus conducted himself with characteristic magnanimity, and bore all indignities in silence. Bobadilla collected testimony sufficient, as he thought, to ensure the condemnation of Columbus, and sent him a prisoner to Spain.

The arrival of Columbus at Cadiz, in chains, produced almost as great a sensation as his first triumphant return. A general burst of indignation arose. The sovereigns sent orders that he should be instantly set at liberty, and promised that Columbus should be reinstated in all his dignities. But Ferdinand repented having invested such great powers in any subject, and especially in a foreigner. Plausible reasons were given for delaying his reappointment, and meanwhile Don Nicholas de Ovando was sent out to supersede Bobadilla.

Section 5 - The Fourth Voyage (May, 1502--November, 1504)

Columbus's thoughts were suddenly turned to a new enterprise. Vasco da Gama had recently reached India round the Cape of Good Hope, and immense wealth was poured by this route into Portugal. Columbus was persuaded that the currents of the Caribbean Sea must pass between Cuba and the land which he had discovered to the south, and that this route to India would be more easy and direct than that of Vasco da Gama. His plan was promptly adopted by the sovereigns, and he sailed in May 1502, on his last and most disastrous voyage. He steered to Hispaniola, but was not permitted to land, and then coasted along Honduras and down the Mosquito Coast to Costa Rica. Here he found gold among the natives, and heard rumours of Mexico. He continued beyond Cape Nombre de Dios in search for the imaginary strait, and then gave up all attempt to find it.

Possibly he knew that another voyager, coasting from the eastward, had reached this point. He turned westward to search for the gold-mines of Veragua, and attempted unsuccessfully to found a settlement there. As his vessels were no longer capable of standing the sea, he ran them aground on Jamaica, fastened them together, and put the wreck in a state of defence. He dispatched canoes to Hispaniola, asking Ovando to send a ship to relieve him, but many months of suffering and difficulty elapsed before it came.

Columbus returned to Spain in November 1504. Care and sorrow were destined to follow him; his finances were exhausted, and he was unable, from his infirmities, to go to court. The death of Isabella was a fatal blow to his fortunes. Many months were passed by him in painful and humiliating solicitation for the restitution of his high offices. At length he saw that further hope of redress from Ferdinand was vain. His illness increased, and he expired, with great resignation, on May 20, 1506.

Columbus was a man of great and inventive genius, and his ambition was noble and lofty. Instead of ravaging the newly-found countries, he sought to found regular and prosperous enterprises. He was naturally irritable and impetuous, but, though continually outraged in his dignity, and foiled in his plans by turbulent and worthless men, he restrained his valiant and indignant spirit, and brought himself to forbear and reason, and even to supplicate. His piety was genuine and fervent, and diffused a sober dignity over his whole deportment.

He died in ignorance of the real grandeur of his discovery. What visions of glory would have broken upon his mind could he have known that he had indeed discovered a new continent! And how would his spirit have been consoled, amidst the afflictions of age and the injustice of an ungrateful king, could

he have anticipated the empires which would arise in the world he had discovered; and the nations, towns, and languages, which were to revere and bless his name to the latest posterity!

Source:

Irving, Washington. "Life of Christopher Columbus." *Worlds Great Books, Volume 10, Lives and Letters*. Ed. Arthur Mee and J.A. Hammerton. Electronic.