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In: New West Indian Guide/ Nieuwe West-Indische Gids 68 (1994), no: 3/4, Leiden, 309-316

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BEFORE AND AFTER COLUMBUS

Columbus and the Ends of the Earth: Europe's Prophetic Rhetoric As Conquering Ideology. DJELAL KADIR. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. xiv + 256 pp. (Cloth US\$ 30.00)

The Imaginative Landscape of Christopher Columbus. VALERIE I.J. FLINT. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. xx + 233 pp. (Cloth US\$ 30.00)

Terra Cognita: The Mental Discovery of America. EVIATAR ZERUBAVEL. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992. xiv + 164 pp. (Cloth US\$ 17.00)

Imagining the World: Mythical Belief versus Reality in Global Encounters. O.R. DATHORNE. Westport CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1994. x + 241 pp. (Cloth US\$ 49.95)

Three of the books under review were published in 1992, and each of them approaches the significance of Columbus's landfall 500 years earlier in a different way. What they have in common, as their titles and subtitles indicate, is that they all purport to be about a mental framework – an “imaginative landscape” (Flint), a “mental discovery” (Zerubavel), “Europe's prophetic rhetoric as conquering ideology” (Kadir), or “imagining the world” (Dathorne). The 1992 commemoration led to a flood of books on Columbus and on the discovery of America. Now that the commotion has died down, it becomes easier to separate the wheat from the chaff, to distinguish between occasional publications hastily put together for the occasion, and solid contributions to scholarship which, while never immune to their own times, may be expected to retain a value that is more than temporary.

With this proviso in mind, we can dispense with Dathorne's volume in a few words. As the author himself claims in the introduction, he was "not seeking to research one narrow area to death," and the notions that he expresses "may not at times satisfy the whimsies of the expert." This is no false modesty, but an understatement: hardly one of the 190 pages of main text is free of errors, ranging from inaccuracies, misspellings, and misleading comments to sheer howlers (though some of the blame must lie with the failure of his publisher to have the text edited for publication). Dathorne is almost completely at the mercy of the secondary sources on which he relies, combining their insights in an undigested farrago of disconnected statements. On one of the very few occasions when he actually quotes a primary source (the well-known passage from Seneca's *Medea* mentioned below), what he refers to as his own rough translation leaves one feeling that the virtues of his originality hardly outweigh the violence that it does to the rules of Latin syntax.

To turn from the slipshod presentation to the argument itself, this boils down to the thesis, which is reasonable enough in itself, that European perceptions of the Americas were colored by European preconceptions about what one might expect to find there. Couching the discussion in terms of an opposition between "mythical belief" and "reality" raises epistemological problems which cannot be dealt with in the brief space of this review. Not only is Dathorne oblivious to such considerations, however, but he does not even explicate what he means by "mythical belief" and "reality" at all. The former is simply taken to mean references in ancient and medieval sources to beings whose existence is no longer given credence, such as the monstrous human races of Pliny and others, while the latter is implicitly equated with the dictates of common sense. In other words, the argument is teleological, ending, with the last words of the book, in "a final triumph of the human spirit!" Though it is the most recent of the four volumes under review in terms of its publication date, Dathorne's *Imagining the World* is as hopelessly outdated as it is incompetent.

In disciplinary terms, the other three books are written from the various preserves and perspectives of sociology, history, and comparative literature. One of the best ways of comparing the efficacy of these different approaches is perhaps to plunge *in medias res* and to select a topic on which each of the three writers has something to say: Columbus's third voyage.

Zerubavel's argument can be summed up in a single sentence. As he puts it, "America was not discovered on a single day by Columbus (or by anyone else, for that matter)." But if one were to want to date the discovery of the new continent, he continues, defining a continent as "a large chunk of continuous landmass," then it is not Columbus's landfall in 1492 which should

be celebrated, but August 5, 1498, the day he first landed on the Paria Peninsula in Venezuela on his third voyage. No longer able to fit this new continent into the familiar image of the Asian mainland, Columbus's solution was to identify South America as the Earthly Paradise, which was situated in the East on Biblical authority.

Flint devotes a whole chapter to the theme of the Terrestrial Paradise. After quoting long passages from the letter that Columbus wrote to his sovereigns as he returned from the third voyage – a voyage which began in elation and ended in disgrace – she deals one by one with the extraordinary propositions it contains. Far from being the incoherent ramblings of a physically and mentally racked voyager, she argues, they all fit into place within the background of medieval lore with which Columbus must have been familiar. This emerges clearly from the naming activities of the Admiral. The first new island that he sighted on this voyage was called Trinidad, perhaps indicating a connection with the voyage of St. Brendan. Golfo de la Ballena (Gulf of the Whale) Columbus's name for what is now the Gulf of Paria, also brings to mind an episode in the St. Brendan story, Flint suggests. (Brendan and his men land on an island and light a fire on it, at which the island turns out to be a whale!) Boca de la Sierpe (Serpent's Mouth) and Bocas del Dragón (Dragon's Mouths) might recall a sea monster from the same source. El Romero (The Pilgrim) might be a reference to the pilgrim St. Ailbe, referred to in the Life of Brendan. The stories of St. Brendan are not the only source of the Admiral's Adam-like naming activities. Thus Flint finds a source for Los Testigos (The Witnesses) in the two prophetic witnesses of the Apocalypse (11: 3-12). As for the Terrestrial Paradise itself, many of Columbus's details could have been taken from the work of Pierre d'Ailly, though there are other medieval sources, such as the Travels of Sir John Mandeville and the Chronicle of John of Marignolli, that may have been the channel through which some of these ideas reached Columbus.

To turn to Kadir's comments on the third voyage, he interprets it as pivotal in understanding Columbus's self-conception as the divine instrument in the eschatological plot of providential history. The name Trinidad is but part of the triadic scheme with which this third voyage seems to be permeated: Columbus reflects on his first voyage as having taken thirty-three days and having covered 333 leagues; now on the third voyage he discovers the mainland after having gone without sleep for thirty-three days; and at the end of the voyage he takes the Franciscan garb of the Third Order on his way to Granada. The toponyms are a part of the same vision of prophetic fulfilment. Kadir sees the source of the dragons and serpents in the monsters of the Old Testament and of the Apocalypse. Indeed, Columbus has no need of sources besides the books of the Old and New Testament to convince

himself that he could be nowhere but East and West of everywhere at once, "the end of the East where all land and islands ends" (p. 145).

As these various approaches to the third voyage indicate, Columbus is in fact a useful peg on which to hang much broader narratives relating to such diverse themes as the *Nachleben* of the classical tradition, the age of discovery, the history of cartography, the rise of natural history, and a host of others. Kadir (pp. 147-48) sums up the reasons why Columbus is such a malleable character as follows:

He is most fascinating as interstitial character, constantly verging on the brink of one or another orthodoxy, without quite managing to free himself from the diverse traditions that exert their claims on him, traditions that range from the prophetic primitivism of the Hebraic patriarchs to the apocalyptic end-time of Christian millenarianism. An ancient spiritualist, he is also a medieval enthusiast and a Renaissance cosmologist. It is not that he oscillates from one of these poles to another, if these indeed be poles rather than continuities, but that these constellations coexist in him in simultaneity.

It is this Protean pluriformity of Columbus that accounts for the richness of two of the books under review: two professors of humanities go back to the ancient world of the Greeks, Romans, and Jews to trace some of the shaping influences on Columbus's worldview and on how his achievements themselves were seen by others.

First, however, we can be brief in discussing the book – or rather essay – by Zerubavel, a sociologist. The first part of the thesis that he sets out to defend is unobjectionable enough: Columbus was not the first European to discover America, credit on that score probably being due to Norse discoverers of "Vinland" around the year 1000. However, Zerubavel goes on to argue that Columbus did not in fact "discover" it at all – that credit belongs to a long line of Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Russian, and British explorers who came after him. For Zerubavel, discovering a new continent requires recognition of that continent's singularity and of its total separateness as a land mass. Since it was not until James Cook reached the Bering Strait in 1778 that the possibility that Asia and America might be connected could be ruled out once and for all, what Zerubavel calls "the mental discovery of America by Europe" was not fully completed until 286 years after Columbus's landing in the Bahamas.

This fixation on straits as the defining mark of a continent is peculiar. After all, it would be rather difficult to distinguish Europe from Asia by this criterium. However, the strangest of Zerubavel's geographical conceptions is the distinction he draws between the small group of islands that Columbus discovered on his first voyage, on the one hand, and "what we now call America (see Plate 30)," on the other. The reader who turns to Plate 30 will

find a map of ... North and Central America, with South America stopping in the middle of Venezuela!

The evidence that Zerubavel cites to support his teleological view of the discovery of America is almost entirely cartographic. This fixation on maps, however, only tells a small part of the story. For example, while some features of some maps no doubt prompted Columbus to believe that he had reached Asia (the first chapter of Flint's book is very good on identifying these maps), it was a wide range of other observations pertaining to ethnography, linguistics, and natural history which (understandably) confirmed him in this view. Unless this other material is considered as well, or at least mentioned, Columbus is inevitably presented in a more irrational way than he deserves.

It is a relief to pass from Zerubavel's superficial and repetitive remarks to the scholarly works by Flint and Kadir. Both authors demonstrate a mastery of the relevant texts, all of which have been consulted in the original where possible (contrast the total absence of works written in any language besides English in Zerubavel's bibliography). Kadir's readings are extremely close, and for a reason: as he points out, the grammatical and rhetorical scansions of a text are not just pedantic nit-picking – they may well disclose the particular logic at work. In fact, before examining Kadir's work in more detail, it is worth pointing out a project with which it has much in common: Michel de Certeau's plan to treat American travel narratives at the intersection of history and anthropology. De Certeau (1993) associated a semiotic analysis of documents with a historical problematic; he was fascinated by the travel literature relating to the Americas, haunted by the Other; and eminently at home in the literature of mysticism, which inscribed the space of the Other in a different mode.

As one moves through Kadir's pages, the undertaking itself faithfully reflects the reiterative narrative of Columbus's cosmic career. From beginning to end, the latter is presented as oscillating between grandeur and humility, and at each stage of the pendular swing, the extremes move farther out, describing an arc of greater proportions. The most poignant expression of this movement can be found in Kadir's concluding chapter, in which he discusses the drafts of Columbus's memoranda to court which are now in the archives of the House of Alba. Drawing on Greenblatt's notion of "self-fashioning," Kadir analyzes the importance of words like "but," "rather," and "or," as well as the shifts from second person to first person to third person in these texts as a form of self-fashioning, self-fragmentation, or even self-negation, measuring the abyss between Columbus's prophetic calling and what he regarded as his betrayal by justice.

What was this prophetic calling? Kadir argues that Columbus conceived of his project as a part of providentialist history. This history is purposive

and meaningful within a teleology: events recounted in the Old Testament are interpreted as presaging what is to come within the framework of a divine plan of history that is to run its course. The end of this course – its eschatology – is at the same time its revelation or apocalypse. In other words, the meaningful end of history was precisely that: an end. And just as the movement of teleology and providentialism looked forwards to that end, so the eschatological goal could only be understood by reference to what had gone before, to what made it a goal at all. A key device within this construct is the notion of typology. The typological mode is a New Testament instrument by which all pre-Christian history is refigured as the *type* which reaches its consummation in the Christian *antitype*. In this sense, it is a method of exegesis by which all previous history is revised in the light of, as an adumbration of, the truths of the New Testament.

The particular relevance of all this to Columbus is that this movement in time also has a geographical aspect. The ends of time coincide with the revelation of the ends of the earth. This is what explains the link between Columbus's *Libro de las Profecias* and his voyages of discovery. They both marked the end of millennial aspirations, and mutually reinforced one another's significance.

Not only does this hermeneutic interpretive scheme throw considerable light on the figure of Columbus. Kadir (p. 97, n.40) argues for far-reaching continuities over a period of more than a century, demonstrating – once again through close textual analysis – that many aspects of Columbus's relation to the divine also mark the writings of the seventeenth-century Puritans in New England. To quote:

I would own that "American Genesis" is embedded in scripture, the Genesis of scripture that underlies the foundations of a teleological ideology and an apocalyptic narrative that authorized, in turn, the productive scripture of the charters that engender a territorial reality for their own conquering ends even before its geographic discovery.

In fulfilment of eschatological desire, the New World was thus consubstantial with the Promised Land. The rhetorical injunctions of prophetic ideology were held to justify the project of conquest and colonization. Indeed, this explains why Columbus could be issued *capitulaciones* which envisaged conquest before the New World had even been discovered. For the conquest was already underway before any geographical encounter; in this strange, anti-historical, prophetic tradition, America is prophesied – and therefore called into being – before it is found. Thus, as Kadir (p. 61) formulates it: "The American New World is ultimately a product of rhetorical ideology, of a nominalist discourse, a linguistic injunction."

Many of the Biblical sources quoted by Kadir crop up again in Flint's

book, but in her study they rub shoulders with a variety of other texts, some located within the Biblical tradition, others coming from the pagan world. In her patient reconstruction of the sources of Columbus's imaginative landscape, she begins by breaking them down into three categories. There are the maps, containing graphic information not just about the lay of the land but also, in some cases, about the people and animals who inhabit it. Second, there are the books which are known to have been in Columbus's possession and which we know that he read, since they contain his marginal annotations. Third, there is a looser body of material – sea stories – which may have been in the air when Columbus set out, though it is harder, if not impossible, to demonstrate that he was familiar with, say, the stories of Sinbad the Sailor. Then, in the second half of the book, Flint shows time and time again that these were the sources that went into the making of Columbus's conceptions of the Marvels of the East and of the Terrestrial Paradise. In the final chapter, she singles out a particularly neglected source – the *Summula Confessionis* by the Dominican Antoninus Florentius – in an attempt to explain what she calls the “creative tension” (p. 191) between Columbus's worldly desires and his otherworldly aspirations.

As we saw above, Flint deals with a much wider range of sources than Kadir. In particular, it is worth noting the importance she attaches to the stories associated with St. Brendan, a sixth-century abbot from Galway, which were available in a variety of vernaculars by Columbus's time. The suggestion is certainly attractive, especially in view of Columbus's interest in Galway and the possible connections he took to exist between Galway and the Orient after the discovery of two corpses there which he considered to be Chinese. Though Flint herself is puzzled by the name “insula purificatorum,” Island of the Purified, on the so-called Columbus World Map, we might perhaps see in it a reflection of the souls purified in purgatory whom Brendan was said to have encountered on his voyage. Another theme from the Brendan stories, that of the world under the sea, reflects concern with the controversial question of the existence of the Antipodes, which exercised not only Columbus's imagination but also the minds of the members of the Talavera Commission who refused Columbus's request for aid.

As these examples indicate, casting one's net wider can bring in a greater variety of sources, but, as a corollary, it can become harder to demonstrate their direct connections with the Admiral. A case in point is Sir John Mandeville's book of travels. Though there is no firm evidence that Columbus ever read it, this immensely popular work offers so many points of contact with passages in Columbus's writings that it is at any rate implausible to suppose that he was not familiar, in some form or other, with its contents. Yet so many of the sources Flint quotes were involved in a complex network

of filiation, cross-reference, or even downright plagiarism that we cannot always be sure exactly which source he is drawing on. While Columbus could have taken much of his fantastic ethnography from Mandeville's account of the East, he could have found plenty of this material, as Flint points out, in D'Ailly. And some of the details of the Terrestrial Paradise, though they could have been taken from Mandeville or D'Ailly, may come from yet another source: the Chronicle of John of Marignolli.

The important role that Flint assigns to this John of Marignolli is partly based on her careful scrutiny of the *Libro Copiador*, a sixteenth-century copybook of letters by Columbus that was only published for the first time in 1989. She also reports that a new edition of the *Libro de las Profecias* was in preparation at the time of writing (West & King 1991). Some classical scholars have also recently begun to turn their attention to the Columbian corpus, such as his use of Seneca's *Medea* in the *Libro de las Profecias*. Even now, 500 years after Columbus, new discoveries are still being made which may entail revision of the imaginary landscapes that existed both before and after Columbus. And, following in the wake of Kadir's semiotic voyage, close reading of these texts, new and old, can be a powerful instrument, not only in coming to terms with their colonial burden, but also in helping to dismantle – or at least deconstruct – their ideological carapace.

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