blown off course and almost capsized by two fierce storms in February and March—that leads one to assume that the Admiral's need was dire. Yet all he ever said, a few days later, was that he intended to head back home "without detaining himself further," because "he had found that which he was seeking" (January 9) and intended "to come at full speed to carry the news" (January 8)....

Whatever the reasons for his haste, the Admiral certainly made his way along the remainder of the island's coast with great alacrity, and little more than a week after he met up with Pinzón, the two caravels were off on the homeward leg. Only one notable stop was made, at a narrow bay some 200 miles east of La Navidad, where a party Colón sent ashore discovered, for the first time, some Indians with bows and arrows.

The Admiral having given standing orders that his men should buy or barter away the weaponry of the Indians—they had done so on at least two previous occasions, presumably without causing enmity—these men in the longboat began to dicker with the bowmen with the plumes. After just two bows were sold, the Indians turned and ran back to the cover of the trees where they kept their remaining weapons and, so the sailors assumed, "prepared... to attack the Christians and capture them." When they came toward the Spaniards again brandishing ropes—almost certainly meaning to trade these rather than give up their precious bows—the sailors panicked and, "being prepared as always the Admiral advised them to be," attacked the Indians with swords and halberds, gave one "a great slash on the buttocks" and shot another in the breast with a crossbow. The Tainos grabbed their fallen comrades and fled in fright, and the sailors would have chased them and "killed many of them" but for the pilot in charge of the party, who somehow "prevented it." It may fairly be called the first pitched battle between Europeans and Indians in the New World—the first display of the armed power, and the will to use it, of the white invaders.

And did the Admiral object to this, transgressing as it did his previous idea of trying to maintain good relations with the natives so as to make them willing trading partners, if not docile servants? Hardly at all: now, he said, "they would have fear of the Christians," and he celebrated the skirmish by naming the cape and the harbor de las Flechas—of the Arrows.

It was not the first time (or the last) that Colón was able to delude himself—it may indeed have been a European assumption—that violence can buy obedience. Twice before, he had used a display of European arms to frighten the Tainos, to no purpose other than instilling more fear and awe than they already felt: once on December 26, when he had a Turkish longbow, a gun [*espingarda*], and a lombard demonstrated, at which occasion the people "all fell to earth" in terror and the *kaseke* "was astonished"; then again on the eve of his departure from La Navidad, when he ordered a lombard fired from the new fortress out at the remains of the *Santa María* so that Guacanagarí, when he saw "how it pierced the side of the ship and how the ball went far out to sea," would then "hold the Christians whom [Colón] left behind as friends" and be so scared "that he might fear them." Strange behavior at any time; toward this softhearted *kaseke* and his kindly people, almost inexplicable.

NO

Robert Royal

EL ALMIRANTE

Let us hear what their comments are now—those who are so ready with accusations and quick to find fault, saying from their safe berths there in Spain, "Why didn't you do this or that when you were over there." I'd like to see their sort on this adventure. Verily I believe, there's another journey, of quite a different order, for them to make, or all our faith is vain.

— Columbus
Lettera Rarissima

After centuries of controversies, the life of Columbus lies beneath mountains of interpretation and misinterpretation. Sharp criticism of *El Almirante* (the admiral)—and sharp reaction to it—go back to the very beginnings of his explorations, as the passage cited above, written at a particularly threatening moment during Columbus's fourth and final voyage to the New World, graphically shows. Then, as now, it was easy for people who had never dared comparable feats to suggest how the whole business might have been done better. And in truth, Columbus's manifest errors and downright incapacities as a leader of men, anywhere but on the sea, played into the hands of his critics and properly made him the target of protests. His failures in leadership provoked atrocities against the Caribbean natives and harsh punishment, including executions, of Spaniards as well. Stubbornness, obsessiveness, and paranoia often dominated his psyche. Even many of his closest allies in the initial ventures clashed with him over one thing or another. In the wake of the titanic passions his epochal voyages unleashed, it is no wonder that almost every individual and event connected with his story has been praised or damned by someone during the past five hundred years....

FACT AND IMAGINATION

The temptation to project modern categories back upon earlier historical periods is always strong. Reviewing these first late-fifteenth-century contacts now, with knowledge of what befell indigenous peoples later, we are particularly inclined to read large-scale portents into small events. If Columbus mentions how easy it would be to subdue the natives, or expresses impatience

with his failure to find the high and rich civilization of Asia, many historians readily fall into the error of seeing his attitudes as a combination of careless imperialism and greed, or even as a symbol of all that was to follow. We would do well to recall, however, that the Spanish record after Columbus is complex and not wholly bad, particularly in its gradual elaboration of native rights.

In Columbus the man, several conflicting currents existed side by side. [Bartolomé de] Las Casas is an important witness here because of both his passionate commitment to justice for Indians and his personal association with Columbus for several years. In a telling remark, Las Casas notes that while Christopher's brother, Bartolomé, was a resolute leader, he lacked the "sweetness and benignity" of the admiral. Columbus's noble bearing and gentle manners are confirmed in many other sources. Nevertheless, Las Casas can be harsh in his criticism. Chapter 119 of *History of the Indies* concludes with the judgment that both brothers mistakenly began to occupy land and exact tribute owing to "the most culpable ignorance, which has no excuse, of natural and divine law."

After five hundred years it may seem impossible to reconcile the contradictory traits Las Casas mentions. He attempted an explanation of his own:

> Truly, I would not dare blame the admiral's intentions, for I knew him well and I know his intentions were good. But... the road he paved and the things he did of his own free will, as well as sometimes under constraint, stemmed from his ignorance of the law. There is much to ponder here and one can see the guiding principle of this whole Indian enterprise, namely, as is clear from the previous chapters, that the admiral and his Christians, as well as all those who followed after him in this land, worked on the assumption that the way to achieve their desires was first and foremost to instill fear in these people, to the extent of making the name Christian synonymous with terror. And to do this, they performed outstanding feats never before invented or dreamed of, as, God willing, I will show later. And this is contrary and inimical to the way that those who profess Christian benignity, gentleness and peace ought to negotiate the conversion of infidels.

As this excerpt shows, Las Casas's style of writing and mode of reasoning do not always yield great clarity, and his assessment here begs several questions. Columbus's policies, and official Spanish policy generally, were much more given to gentleness and kindness in the beginning than Las Casas, who only witnessed later troubled times, allows to appear. There is no question that conflicts with natives and factional infighting among Spaniards drove the admiral to more onerous measures, including enslavement of Indians captured in military actions.

While Las Casas's condemnation is cast in terms of absolute justice and as such has permanent relevance to evaluating Columbus's role in the New World, we should remember that Columbus was placed in unprecedented circumstances and should not be judged in the same way as we would a modern trained anthropologist. Paolo Emilio Taviani, an admiring but not uncritical recent biographer of Columbus, demonstrates the difficulty attending every particular of the first contact:

> The European scale of values was different from that of the natives. "They give everything for a trifle"; obviously what was a trifle on the European scale was not so for the natives. For them "a potsherd or a broken glass cup" was worth "sixteen skeins of cotton." Columbus warned that would never do, because from unrestricted trade between the two mentalities, the two conceptions of value, grave injustices would result, and so he immediately prohibited the cotton trade, allowing no one to take any and reserving the acquisition entirely for the king of Spain. A just prohibition, not easy to impose on ninety men—what strength could it have when nine hundred, nine thousand, or ninety thousand Europeans would arrive? Such were the first troubles in an encounter between two worlds that did not understand one another.

If we wish to task Columbus for all the asymmetries that ensued, we should credit him as well for this initial attempt, later repeated by many Spanish governors and theologians, to find some just route through the thicket of massive cultural difference. He failed and permitted far more wicked practices than unequal trade, but we should not let subsequent events blind us to his authentic concern for justice in the first contacts.

SOME BRIGHTER MOMENTS

In spite of the cultural gulf, mutual affections and understanding did, at times, appear. After over two months of exploration in the Caribbean, Columbus's ship, the *Santa Maria*, went aground on Christmas 1492 in what is now Haiti. There Columbus encountered a people and a chief so helpful that his log entries for the following days view the entire episode as providential. He would never have chosen, as he admits, to come ashore or build the settlement of La Navidad (Christmas) there. He did not like the harbor at all. Yet he concluded that his relations with the Taínos and their chief Guacanagarí must be part of a divine plan in light of the friendship that sprung up between the two peoples.

Some Columbus scholars, perhaps a bit jaded from staring overlong at the historical lacunae and inconsistencies of the man, see in these log entries only an attempt to cover up the disastrous loss of the ship or a propaganda ploy to make the Spanish monarchs think well of the discoveries. Robert H. Fuson, a modern translator of the log, is a marine historian rather than a Columbus specialist. He is sometimes rightly criticized for his rather naive historical interpretations. But it is precisely because he is not predisposed to suspicion that he notices something overlooked by scholars occupied with weighing too many contradictory theories about the Haiti episode:

> Affection for the young chief in Haiti, and vice versa, is one of the most touching stories of love, trust, and understanding between men of different races and cultures to come out of this period in history. His [Columbus's] instructions to the men he left behind at La Navidad, for January 2, clearly illustrate his sincere fondness and respect for the Indians.

The January 2 entry, as we shall see below, indicates that Columbus had some ulterior motives in placating the natives. But that does not negate his genuine good feeling toward them or his gratitude for their generosity. Even if we assume that Columbus is putting the best interpretation on events for Ferdinand and Isabella, some sort of fellow feeling undeniably had arisen, at least temporarily, across the vast cultural divide separating the Taínos and the

Europeans. Despite the great evils that would come later, this altruism was not without its own modest legacies.

An extreme but common form of the over-simple charges often leveled against the Europeans in general and Columbus in particular has come from the pen of the novelist Hans Koning. Writing in the *Washington Post* to influence public sentiments about the quincentenary, Koning insisted that from 1492 to 1500,

> there is not one recorded moment of awe, of joy, of love, of a smile. There is only anger, cruelty, greed, terror, and death. That is the record. Nothing else, I hold, is relevant when we discuss our commemoration of its 500th anniversary.

Riding the wave of revisionism about American history now sweeping over education, Koning made these claims under the title "Teach the Truth About Columbus."

The only problem with his assessment is that every particular in his catalog of what constitutes the truth is false. To take them in order: Columbus certainly records awe at his discoveries throughout his four voyages. His praise of the land's beauty was partly meant, of course, to convince the king and queen of the value of the properties Columbus had discovered for them. But some of it is simply awe; Columbus's enthusiasm for many of the new lands reaches a climax when he describes the sheer loveliness of the Venezuelan coast, which he believed to be the site of the original Garden of Eden, the earthly paradise. If that is not a record of awe, it is difficult to imagine what would be.

The relations between natives and Spaniards before 1500 are not, *pace* Koning, unrelieved darkness either. If anything, they are a frustrating reminder of a road not taken. Smiles there were—recorded smiles—at least on the native Taíno side: "They love their neighbors as themselves, and they have the softest and gentlest voices in the world and are always smiling" (*Log*, Tuesday, 25 December 1492). Columbus had reason to appreciate these people since they had just helped him salvage what was salvageable from the wreck of the *Santa Maria*. In the feast natives and Spaniards held after the rescue, the cacique Guacanagarí placed a crown on Columbus's head. The admiral reciprocated by giving him a scarlet cloak and a pair of colored boots, "and I placed upon his finger a large silver ring. I had been told that he had seen a silver ring on one of my sailors and desired it very much. The King was joyful and overwhelmed." Guacanagarí grew so close to Columbus that he asked if he and his brother might return with him to Castile.

When it came time to leave for Spain, Columbus placed thirty-nine men "under the command of three officers, all of whom are very friendly to King Guacanagarí," and furthermore ordered that "they should avoid *as they would death* annoying or tormenting the Indians, bearing in mind how much they owe these people." The emphasis added to this last quotation has a double purpose. Clearly, Columbus recognized the temptations his men would have; just as clearly he was determined, to the best of his ability, to anticipate and block those temptations. This is the entry of January 2 that Fuson reads as expressing sincere kindness and affection. That reading may be a little too simple, but it is not entirely mistaken.

What this incident and the founding of the settlement definitely are *not*, however, are instances of simple European arrogance and imperialism, or what John Noble Wilford, a recent biographer of Columbus, has called "a personal transition from discoverer to imperialist." Even when full-scale war between some Indians and Spaniards broke out during Columbus's second voyage, Guacanagarí remained loyal to Columbus in spite of—or perhaps in opposition to—commands from another local chief, Caonabó, for a cacique alliance. No source denies this loyalty between the Taíno and the admiral, even under trying cultural tensions and warfare. Though we are right to abhor many far-less-happy subsequent events between the inhabitants of the two worlds, the record of the early interaction is richer and more diverse than most people, blinded by contemporary polemics, think. Hans Koning might do well to calm down and read some of these passages.

THE LIST OF CHARGES

The principal moral questions about Columbus arise essentially from three of his actions:

1. He immediately kidnapped some Taínos during his first voyage for questioning and use as interpreters. In that act he showed not only his contempt for Indian life but his belief that Spanish language, culture, and religion were superior and rightly to be imposed on native peoples.

2. After the destruction of La Navidad and the turmoil that ensued during the second voyage, Columbus foolishly ordered exploratory missions without adequate safeguards to restrain outrageously violent men like Mosen Pedro Margarit and Alonso de Ojeda. He then punished the natives who objected to Spaniards living off the land or who resisted their commands. In addition to setting this evil precedent, he shipped home some natives to become slaves with a very poor excuse:

> Since of all the islands those of the cannibals are much the largest and much more fully populated, it is thought here that to take some of the men and women and to send them home to Castile would not be anything but well, for they may one day be led to abandon that inhuman custom that they have of eating men, and there in Castile, learning the language, they will much more readily receive baptism and secure the welfare of their souls.

3. Columbus instituted a system of gold tribute from the natives that was heavy—nearly impossible, in fact, given the small quantity of gold on the island of Hispaniola—and that was harshly enforced.

Each of these charges is true and no amount of admiration for Christopher Columbus can excuse what is simply inexcusable. Even the argument by Felipe Fernández-Armesto, one of the fairest Columbus historians, that "Columbus and his successors were guilty only of applying the best standards of their time" makes two false assumptions. First, that such behavior represents the best contemporary standards. . . . Second, that individuals should not be criticized for acting like the majority of their contemporaries because they are bound by culture and history. The latter argument draws strength from current philosophical schools that hold there are no privileged or absolute positions outside of historically conditioned views. But if we think we should condemn Aztec human sacrifice as wrong—not simply a different cultural form, but wrong—then we must admit there are universal principles that also allow us to criticize improper

European use of force, enslavement, and exploitation.

Yet just as we try to understand the reasons behind Aztec human sacrifice or Carib cannibalism, and both tribes' imperialism toward other native peoples, we should also try to see what led to Columbus's behavior. Columbus, as Las Casas testified above, was not by nature a brutal man like Ojeda or Cortés. The first sign of harshness by him, in fact, seems to have been his acquiescence, during the second voyage, in a death sentence against some Indians on Hispaniola who had been caught stealing. Significantly, the pleading of another Indian moved him to remit the sentence in that case (the wavering too is characteristic of the uncertainty in handling questions of governance). Though he apparently regarded the Indians as inferior and always approached them with much the same assumption of superiority that Spaniards approached the Guanches of the Canary Islands and African tribes, he seemed at least partly—and when circumstances allowed—aware that good treatment was both morally called for and favorable to Spanish interests.

A fairer reading of the record reveals some mitigating factors, though these by no means add up to an exoneration.

1. Though Columbus did kidnap some Indians, two interpreters among them, he set one of them free immediately upon returning to Hispaniola during the second voyage. He hoped that the Indian set at liberty would tell others of Spain's wonders and of Columbus's good intentions. This was naive, crude, and manipulative on his part, but shows some perspicacity and good will.

2. Slavery was always a bone of contention between Columbus and the Spanish monarchs—they vehemently opposed this way of "civilizing" their subjects in the Indies. Columbus was not clear in his own mind about the issue. As late as the third voyage, the last in which he would be permitted to visit the growing colony on Hispaniola, Columbus ordered that slaves could only be taken during just war. His thinking was muddled, as was the thinking of the world for at least another half century until several crucial questions about Indian rights and just claims were sorted out.

3. The imposition of gold tribute for Spanish services stemmed from the belief that much gold existed on Hispaniola. And Indian failures to meet what seemed to the Spaniards modest levies were mistakenly attributed to laziness. Indians loved the tiny hawk's bells that the Spaniards brought as trinkets; asking them to fill a bell with gold every two months seemed a reasonable request. Since all governments tax in some fashion, Spain was doing only what caciques and Carib conquerors had been doing for time immemorial. The Spanish system did not "introduce" a new evil to an idyllic people without politics, but it proved peculiarly burdensome because it was imposed from the outside and in ignorance of the realities on Hispaniola. Furthermore, contrary to many wild charges, the Spaniards never intended to commit "genocide." A ready supply of native workers served Spanish self-interest. European and African diseases, however, soon laid waste whole tribes.

Fernández-Armesto argues that Columbus's recourse to violence on Hispaniola resulted mostly from his basic inability to rule well, from "misjudgment rather than wickedness." Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo, who became the official Spanish historian of the New World, said that to govern the Hispaniola colony correctly a person would have to be "angelic indeed superhuman." Columbus was far from either; in fact, he was far from possessing even normal political acumen. During his second and third voyages he clearly tried to avoid facing political difficulties on Hispaniola by exploring further. The problem was not merely lack of political skill. As a foreigner, he felt that he could trust only family members and close personal friends. (In fact, recent research has revealed that the Columbus family belonged to an anti-Spanish faction in Genoa, a political embarrassment that may help account for some of Columbus's reticence about his early life.) The resentments arising from difficult conditions, moreover, served to reinforce his tendencies toward paranoia. His rule of both Indians and Spanish oscillated between being too indecisive and too harsh.

We should also understand the kinds of Indians and colonists he had to govern. Columbus had trouble enough with the natives and complained:

> At home they judge me as a governor sent to Sicily or to a city or two under settled government and where the laws can be fully maintained, without fear of all being lost.... I ought to be judged as a captain who went from Spain to the Indies to conquer a people, warlike and numerous, and with customs and beliefs very different from ours.

Even the Taínos were probably far less gentle than Columbus earlier reported and "not so innocent as Las Casas tried to show." The Caribs, their fierce, cannibalistic enemies, seem to have been as terrified of the supposedly pacific Taínos as vice versa. And recent archeological investigations suggest that the Taínos, contrary to Columbus's impression of them as being without religion, had a complex system of belief and ritual akin to those in Central America and Mexico. They appear to have played a ritual ball game re-enacting the cosmic struggle between light and darkness and ending with the religious sacrifice of one or more human victims. An early Spanish conquistador estimated that twenty thousand people were sacrificed yearly on Hispaniola alone, though that figure may be wildly exaggerated. In any event, native tribes were profoundly *other* to the unsophisticated sailors and explorers in Columbus's day—and remain profoundly other to us today.

The Spaniards with whom Columbus had to deal were not much better. After the second voyage he asked the monarchs to think carefully about whom they were sending on the voyages and to choose "such persons that there be no suspicion of them and that they consider the purpose for which they have been sent rather than their personal interests." Not only were some of the colonists unusually violent, but many Spanish gentlemen who had come expecting easy wealth resented Columbus, the need to work, and the unhealthy conditions on the island. In dealing with these settlers, as Las Casas observed, "The Admiral had to use violence, threats, and constraint to have the work done at all."...

BAD IN ANY CASE

... In Kirkpatrick Sale [*The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*], Columbus is uniquely and doubly condemned for being medieval *and* for being of the Renaissance. His medieval side reflects superstitions, and his Renaissance side shows the destructive force of naked instrumental and

mathematical reason, which Sale largely identifies with Renaissance Europe. Nevertheless, Sale also feels free to castigate Columbus for his lack of interest in numbers, that is, for not giving us the exact mathematical coordinates of the island where he made first landfall. Poor Columbus is merely the product of various opposing evil traditions that define Europe and Europeans—of which we are all the heirs, save, of course, the Kirkpatrick Sales who transcend cultural determinism.

All these attempts at neat categorizations assume that we can define a man, as well as a historical period, with far sharper boundaries than is ever the case. The mixture of human weakness and human greatness in even a key figure is never easy to calculate. The novelist Anthony Burgess has recently created a Mozart who says, "My desire and my hope is to gain honor, fame, and money." That sentence plausibly formulates a great deal of truth about Mozart's life. Yet few music lovers would deduce from this that Mozart's work is, therefore, solely the product of ambition and cupidity, or try to explain the man and his music by sociological analysis of the late eighteenth century. Columbus similarly spoke of "God, gold, and glory," and many of the Europeans who followed him were driven by multiple motives, not all of which were, by any means, merely self-serving.

Kirkpatrick Sale, as usual, well formulates the ultimate issue behind much of the public controversy over 1992:

> In the final analysis, it is not so important whether Columbus was a good man. What matters is that he brought over a culture centered on its own superiority. The failings of the man were and remain the failures of the culture.

This is a strained argument. It certainly does matter, if only for the sake of historical justice, that we try to discern the mix of good and evil in Columbus *per se*. Furthermore, no one can simply be identified with a whole culture. Every individual both draws on and opposes elements in his surroundings. If the preceding pages show anything, they show that Columbus, like the rest of us, was not simply good or bad. As a great human spirit, both his virtues and faults appear larger and more vivid than they do in most people. And his historical influence reflects the dimensions of what he was. The argument about the European sense of superiority, however, can be engaged quite well without dragging in Columbus, as if he were a mere conduit for European culture.

One reason that freedom arose in the West is the traditional Western separation of the City of Man from the City of God.... [M]any of the early missionaries and theologians showed, in the very face of state power and financial interests, that Christian principles pointed toward other paths than those most often taken by settlers in the New World. Columbus and Las Casas were sometimes at odds over specifics, but were not fundamentally opposed on these matters. Las Casas is the greater figure for his moral passion and courage, but Columbus, in spite of his faults, deserves no little admiration. Emblematic, perhaps, of their relationship is the suggestion of Simón Bolívar in 1819 that a newly liberated area of South America be named Colombia and its capital Las Casas: "Thus will we prove to the world that we not only have the right to be free, but we will demonstrate that we know how to honor the friends and benefactors of mankind."