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1492 The Christopher Columbus Quincentenary 1992

THE OPENING OF THE NEW WORLD

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When the three ships of Christopher Columbus, the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria set sail from Spain in 1492 they were, in effect, cockleshells of sailing theory and faith afloat on a dark, uncharted ocean. In so fragile a venture, risk was the only certainty.

But when Columbus returned to Spain from the New World in the spring of 1493, he had launched the Age of Discovery. Humanity's understanding of the round world's possibilities and challenges had been redefined. Europe's burden of decaying empires and old enmities would now be replaced by an almost-universal vision of expansion and change. The Columbus landings launched for centuries wave after wave of political and social revolution by immigration. Profound questions of individuality and human rights — questions that we are still exploring 500 years later — had been seeded in new soil resistant in the Old World's decadent ways.

Christopher Columbus was a child of the Middle Ages. He was an adventurer with roots in brawling, ancient Genoa the medieval city-state to which he gave his lifetime loyalty. But he was also a studious sailor, watchful of winds, currents and tides, careful about maps. He had become convinced he could sail west from Europe into a void nobody knew and return — with great mysteries answered and with riches for the crown he served.

The times in which Columbus lived were harsh. Rulers had absolute power. War and death were common. The daily lives of ordinary men and women and their families were imperiled by disease, disorder, and cruel poverty. In popular belief the world's end was considered near. The conversion of all unbelievers was a Christian duty, and Columbus viewed seriously his given name, Christopher or "Christbearer."

For nine years in royal courts Columbus patiently petitioned kings and queens to send him toward his dream. After Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain finally embraced his plan, Columbus boldly pressed fragile ships and fearful men through 33 days of tension on a landless sea. When he knelt in thanksgiving beneath the flag and cross on October 12, 1492, he was not on the shore of Cipangu (Japan) as he thought. He had come instead to an unknown place in a New World. He had found a new dynamic on the earth, and matched the explorer's horizons of the eye with horizons of the mind that are still unfolding.

Whether "discovery," "encounter," or "invasion" is the apt word for the centuries of change that followed the Columbus landings has become a proper subject for scholarship in this quincentennial.



The achievement of Columbus, however, stands unsullied in time. Bold in spirit, resolute in thought, the Admiral of the Ocean Sea revealed the Americas as a fertile modern source for human progress. Here he doubled the size of the earth his generation knew and renewed for uncounted generations the civilizing ideals of courage, faith, self-confidence and mutual trust. He had shown that a bold and believing mind, and brave heart, at work in the natural world, could change times in decline and refresh all human inspiration.

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