

ABSTRACT

Christopher Columbus: From Genoese to American

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The character of Christopher Columbus makes appearances in the literature and language in countries and cultures throughout the world. In recent years in the United States Columbus has become most closely associated with the atrocities committed against Native Americans in the earliest colonial period. However, Columbus was once a very popular figure in American literature, most famously popularized by the biography *The Life of Christopher Columbus* written by Washington Irving. Interestingly, Irving wrote the biography while visiting Madrid. Although away from his native country, Irving's biography reflects his purpose of depicting Columbus as an American hero. While others have explored this topic, my discussion of Irving's biography further discusses parallels between the character of Columbus and that of Benjamin Franklin, as depicted in Franklin's autobiography. Irving's biography, while it does contain inaccuracies and invented scenes, is still an important component of our understanding of American identity.

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CHAPTER ONE

Columbus Today and a Review of the Past

Since 1934, Columbus Day has been a federal holiday in the United States. The day commemorates the first voyage and sighting of the Americas by Columbus on October 12, 1492. For centuries this was a joyous holiday in the United States, celebrated nationwide with city-wide festivals. For decades, Columbus was a very important figure in America, and Columbus Day was celebrated in this country without controversy. The backlash against Columbus is a relatively new movement, beginning in the latter part of the twentieth century. For example, compare the difference in celebrations in 1892 and 1992 in the United States for Columbus' landing in America.

The World's Columbian Exposition was held in 1893 to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of the New World. It was originally planned for 1892, but it was postponed for one year due to its ambitious size and scope. It was a part of a series of world's fairs, beginning with London's 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition. Approximately twenty-seven million people visited the fair. The fair promoted nationalistic and imperialistic ideas, and Columbus was seen as an excellent medium for these particular views. At the opening ceremonies for the fair, Columbus was portrayed as a key figure in the success of America and the rise of the

nation as an empire.¹ Furthermore, at the center of the World's Columbian Exposition stood a statue of Christopher Columbus, called *The Columbus Quadringa*, arriving at the Exposition as a triumphant Roman emperor, declaring his victory for the republican empire.² One hundred years later, the celebrations for the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus' discovery were not as complementary.

In 1992, the celebrations were combined with a reexamination of the character of Columbus. Beginning as early as 1990, South Dakota renamed Columbus Day to Native American Day, and Berkeley, California, followed suit in 1992, by celebrating Indigenous Person Day.³ For these communities, "parades celebrating Columbus ignore a violent past that led to hundreds of years of disease, colonial rule and genocidal extermination following the Italian explorer's trip to the Americas, according to the AP."⁴ Many scholars began looking more critically at the character of Columbus as well as his portrayal in American history. The *American Indian Quarterly* reported that seventy percent of their readers characterized the Quincentenary as either "500 years of Native People's resistance to colonization" or

¹ Elise Bartosik-Velez, *The Legacy of Christopher Columbus in the Americas: New Nations and a Transatlantic Discourse of Empire* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press) 2014, 98.

²Ibid., 98.

³ Peter Holley "More Cities Celebrating 'Indigenous Peoples Day' amid effort to abolish Columbus Day" *The Washington Post*, Oct 12, 2015, Web.

⁴ Ibid.

as an “anniversary of a holocaust.”⁵ Preceding the quincentenary celebrations, Native American Indians “overturned and transvalued quincentenary celebrations, and there have been serious demands for more sensitive histories of tribal cultures in public schools and universities.”⁶ Columbus’ role in children’s literature has also come under scrutiny. William Bigelow, author of the article “Once Upon a Genocide: Christopher Columbus in Children’s Literature” argues “children’s biographies of Christopher Columbus function as primers on racism and imperialism.”⁷ In many school textbooks, Columbus was uniformly celebrated for his discovery without mentioning some of the terrible effects of his voyage. Educators like Michael Bigelow called for more critical biographies of Columbus that complicate the history of Early America and draw readers to ask difficult questions.

The characteristics and actions of Christopher Columbus have become a topic for heated debate, especially as it regards education and official celebrations. For minority groups such as Native Americans, the celebration of Columbus is equivalent to the celebration of racism and genocide. The character of Columbus has become closely aligned with the overwhelming effect of his actions, and both have been generally rejected. We are left to wonder what exactly to do with the character

⁵ Gerald Vizenor, “Columbus: Lost Havens in the Ruins of Representation” *American Indian Quarterly*, 530.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 531.

⁷ William Bigelow, “Once Upon a Genocide: Christopher Columbus in Children’s Literature” *Language Arts*, (Feb 1992) 112.

of Columbus, once such an important figure in American history and identity. With this question looming, it is necessary to look back at the treatment of Columbus in American history.

For a large portion of American history, Christopher Columbus was seen as an important figure that encapsulated many American traits and values. Christopher Columbus has been a foundational figure for Americans, integral to the history of the nation, even before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. However, Columbus' story and the stories created about him begin long before 1776.

The Historiography of Christopher Columbus

Columbus is a problematic and controversial figure. Even from his own writings it is difficult to discern who he was and what his intentions were for the New World. Was he Genoese? Italian? Spanish? Jewish? Did he know where he was sailing? Was he the first to arrive there? These questions and many more largely remain unanswered by historical research. The large number of questions and unknowns regarding Columbus allows writers, historians, and biographers flexibility when describing Columbus' character. Because so much of his history is shrouded in mystery, he can be shaped into a specific mold or purpose. Writers have used the figure of Christopher Columbus to further their own ideological agendas. The first to do this was Columbus himself.

Columbus' Words and Intentions

The history of writings about Christopher Columbus begins with Columbus himself. During and after his voyages, Columbus wrote letters to his benefactors, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, as well as other wealthy nobles. Columbus was particularly aware of the politics of his day as well as self-fashioning. He was probably aware that his letters would be preserved in royal archives and that his writings would “set the tone for future representations written by others.”⁸ Columbus portrayed himself as a loyal servant to Ferdinand and Isabella and to their goals as monarchs. At the time of his voyage, Ferdinand and Isabella were completing the *Reconquista*, reclaiming land in the south of Spain that had been held by Muslims for centuries. After the defeat of Granada in 1492, chroniclers declared that Spain was destined to become an empire and expand beyond the peninsula.⁹ Columbus spent approximately seven years in the courts of Spain before gaining support for his voyage, and during this time he would have been exposed to the narratives regarding the empire of Spain. Even with his earliest writings, Columbus portrayed himself as an integral part of the narrative of Spanish empire. For example in his letter to Luis de Sant Angel in 1493 announcing his discovery, Columbus thanks God for giving “...victory to our most Illustrious King and Queen, and to their kingdoms rendered famous by this glorious event, at which all

⁸ Bartosik, 16.

⁹ Bartosik, 18.

Christendom should rejoice...with fervent prayers for the high distinction that will accrue to them from turning so many peoples to our holy faith.”¹⁰ Columbus interprets his discovery as a “victory” for the King and Queen both for the territory for their growing empire and also because of the conversion of Indians to the Catholic faith. He also positions himself as a participant in the imperial goals of Spain, a soldier bringing victory only through the will of God. This interpretation of the voyage and the connection with the end of the *Reconquista* has carried into modern writings about Columbus. However, at the very beginning of Columbus’ project, there was no connection, either natural or explicit, between it and the *Reconquista*.¹¹ Furthermore, at the time of Columbus’ voyage, no one could have predicted the massive effect of the discovery. Columbus interpreted his own enterprise as an extension of the Spanish push for empire as well as a religiously motivated mission.

Columbus is also extremely complimentary of the New World as well as his actions there. In his letter to Luis De Sant Angel in 1493, he declares that he has discovered “extensive” islands that are “most beautiful, of a thousand varied forms, accessible, and full of trees of endless varieties.”¹² He describes the fruit, birds, and

¹⁰ Columbus, Christopher “Letter to Luis de Sant Angel Announcing his Discovery,” The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, Web.

¹¹ Bartosik, 21.

¹² Columbus, “Letter to Luis Sant Angel.”

overwhelming plenty on the islands in order to magnify the significance of his discovery. Columbus also describes the native people, whom he mistakenly calls Indians, and their extreme timidity and capacity for conversion. Columbus shows that the native people will be easily conquered and converted to Spanish purposes. In all things, he amplifies the significance and grandeur of the islands for his own purposes and self-interest. Columbus' account is the first glimpse into the New World, and it is not without bias and intention. From his original writings it is difficult to determine what actually occurred during his first discovery, and this places future writers in a position to interpret and evaluate Columbus' actions.

Early Accounts of Columbus

Peter Martyr de Angiheria wrote one of the first accounts about Columbus following the voyage, and Martyr connected Columbus to *Aeneid* imagery. He also coined the term "New World," recognizing the significance of Columbus' achievement. Martyr compares Columbus and Aeneas, positioning Columbus as a "culture-bringer" and founder of empire. Martyr began writing in 1493, and his eight-volume account became a primary source for many future writers, including Bartolome de las Casas, Fernando Columbus, and also Washington Irving. Because future authors frequently cited Martyr the text was very important in framing Columbus as a figure of empire. Martyr's account also positions the New World as an uncivilized "other."

Another influential history that was frequently cited by American authors was the work of Richard Hakulyt. Hakulyt's history of Columbus was essentially an expanded version of Martyr's account. Hakulyt viewed Columbus as an instrument of God. Hakulyt maintained that the spread of Christianity as well as the sizable wealth brought from the New World testified to the righteousness of Columbus.¹³ Based on Columbus' example, Hakulyt encouraged further explorations for the glory of God and the continued spreading of religion. Hakulyt was a major advocate of English colonization, and he used the narrative of Columbus to promote this project. He promoted the comparison of his project to that of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Another European author who was highly influential to American scholars of Columbus is Abbe Raynal, a prominent social, political, and literary figure. In his lengthy volumes entitled *A Philosophic and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*, Columbus is assigned nearly twenty pages of content. According to Bushman, Raynal "admired Columbus as a far-seeing visionary, a brace, mistreated hero."¹⁴ Raynal writes that Columbus was:

not to be discouraged by any difficulties; he possessed, as all men do who engage in extraordinary enterprises, a degree of enthusiasm, which renders them superior to the cavils of the ignorant, the contempt of the proud, the mean arts of the covetous, and the delays of the indolent. At length, by perseverance, spirit, and courage, joined

¹³ Ibid., 26.

¹⁴ Ibid., 31.

to the arts of prudence and management, he surmounted every obstacle.¹⁵

Raynal's enthusiastic and heroic depiction of Columbus is echoed in the works of American writers in subsequent decades.

Accounts of Columbus in America

One of the first mentions of Christopher Columbus in an American text is in the *Magnalia Christi Americana, or Ecclesiastical History of New England* by Cotton Mather, written in the late seventeenth century.¹⁶ In the preface of the book, Mather considers the earliest history of America – the first peopling and then first discovery of America. Mather “interpreted Columbus’ voyage as of providential advantage to the English, a common theme,” and he also sees the providence of God in extending Christianity to “prove the superiority of New England.”¹⁷ However, Mather also does not see the success of the discovery as the achievements of one man. Mather cites the invention of the compass as being particularly important for Columbus’ success. He also promotes the popular theory that Columbus had learnt of the existence of

¹⁵ Abbe Raynal *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies* 1798, 2:409.

¹⁶ Claudia Bushmann, *America Discovers Columbus: How an Italian Explorer Became an American Hero* (University Press of New England: 1992) 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the New World from a Spanish sailor who had been thrown off course by a storm.¹⁸ From the first depictions of Columbus by American writers, the character, life, and story of Christopher Columbus was used to promote ulterior motives. In the case of Mather, Columbus is representative of the spreading of Christianity to the New World and the importance of the freedom of religion in the new colonies. For Mather, Columbus is part of God's plan for New England, and his inclusion in the history of the colonies serves to legitimize their existence as well as their focus on religion.

Narratives about Christopher Columbus expanded into poetry as well as prose in the American colonies. Phillip Freneau's poem "Columbus to Ferdinand," published in 1779, though most likely written in 1770, is one of the earliest works in the English colonies with Columbus as its primary subject.¹⁹ The poem presents the arguments that Columbus supposedly made to King Ferdinand in order to gain royal support for his venture. In 1774, Freneau also published an epic poem entitled *The Pictures of Columbus*, which was composed of eighteen sections or "pictures."²⁰ The epic poem concludes with Columbus alone on his deathbed, without any of the honors he merits. However, Columbus is comforted by the promise of the future empires that will grow from lands that he discovered. In *Pictures of Columbus*,

¹⁸ John Larner, "North American Hero? Christopher Columbus 1702-2002" *American Philosophical Society* (Mar 1993) 49.

¹⁹ Bartosik, 72.

²⁰ Carol A Kyle, "That Poet Freneau: A Study of the Imagistic Success of *The Pictures of Columbus*" *Early American Literature* (1974) 62.

Freneau reinforces the connection between Columbus and empire as Martyr and Halukyt did before him.

One of the most famous depictions of Columbus by an American author before Irving is Joel Barlow's poem *The Columbiad*, published in 1807, which was a revision of his poem *Visions of Columbus*, published in 1787. Although Barlow criticizes the classical epics of Homer and Virgil in the poem, he also echoes the *Aeneid* in the opening lines:

I sing the Mariner who first unfurl'd
An eastern Banner o'er the western world
And taught mankind where future empires lay
In these fair confines of descending day.²¹

Barlow's poem operates in flashbacks, placing Columbus as a passive figure who reacts and observes history rather than participates in it. Barlow's first poem, written in the midst of the American Revolution, possesses "patriotic fervor."²² In his poem, Barlow presents a virtuous America that is separated and protected from the decadence of Europe. In his introduction to *Visions of Columbus*, Barlow states that Columbus "appears to have united in his character every trait, and to have possessed every talent, requisite to form and execute the greatest enterprises."²³ Barlow's Columbus is in despair, believing his toils were all in vain. Through the

²¹ Barlow, Joel. *The Works of Joel Barlow*, ed. By William Bottorff. (Gainseville: Scholars Facsimilies and Reprints: 1970) 120.

²² Bushmann, *America Discovers Columbus*, 76.

²³ Ibid.

poem, the narrator demonstrates otherwise. In the *Columbiad*, Barlow outlines his purposes for writing the second poem, and these included “to sooth and satisfy the despondent mind of Columbus; to show him that he had opened the way to the most extensive career of civilization and public happiness; and that he would one day be recognized as the author of the great benefits to the human race.”²⁴ Although Barlow’s poetry is not as well written as other contemporary poets, such as Freneau, his vision of Columbus prevailed.

Early depictions of Christopher Columbus were nearly consistently charged with specific motives. In her book, *America Discovers Columbus: How an Italian Explorer Became an American Hero*, Claudia Bushman describes how even the earliest chroniclers of Columbus were “no more neutral in their retelling of his adventures than are historians today.” She goes on to say that these historians “used the story to promote their own special interests.”²⁵ Many authors, such as Cotton Mather, were interested in depicting Columbus as a religious figure. Halukyt uses the narrative of Columbus to support the ideas of English colonization. American authors used the figure of Columbus to advocate and create a specific history for their new nation. In the early years of the American republic, Americans were still working to figure out who they were and what their nation would become. During this time, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, American authors claimed that

²⁴ Ibid., 307.

²⁵ Ibid., 25.

the new nation needed “a declaration of literary independence, the creation of a national literature making use of American materials and American themes.”²⁶ With the creation of a new nation, one that was largely an experiment in government and society, it was necessary to have new literary forms and themes. According to John Hazlett, author of the article “Literary Nationalism and Ambivalence in Washington Irving’s *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*,” there were also critics of this body of thought. Some such critics claimed that because no American language existed, it would be impossible to create literature that was not dependent upon English models. Also, according to a fashionable theory of the time that was derived from associationist psychology, “the language of literature could not be imaginatively affective unless its subjects were connected in the minds of the readers with inherited feelings and established associations.”²⁷ In other words, in order to create new imaginative literature, it must be connected to established associations. The challenge in the early nineteenth century was to create these connections that were distinctly American. A lack of American subjects existed; the history, scenes, heroes, and events had not been written about yet. This nationalist and literary problem left a gap in American identity. As a paternal figure in American history, Columbus was seen as an ideal character for the literary nationalism group of thought.

²⁶ John D Hazlett “Nationalism and Ambivalence in Washington Irving’s *The Life and Voyages of Columbus*” *American Literature* Dec 1983: 560.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 560.

The figure of Columbus had been used in a nationalist setting before, in Italy. In poetic depictions, Columbus was seen as an Italian hero.²⁸ Italian poets saw “in Columbus a fellow countryman who had, in recent history, preformed a deed of universal significance as well as of courage and merit.”²⁹ As a fellow countryman and famous navigator, Columbus was positioned as a unifying figure. As a country that had been politically fragmented for centuries, Italy was also searching for historical figures that could be drafted in the name of political unity.

In many ways, Columbus is an international hero. Italy, Spain, the United States, and more all claim Columbus within their national history, although, really, he would not have identified with any of these modern nation-states. Although hailing from Genoa, Columbus was not strictly Italian. Although he sailed on behalf of the newly united Spanish crown, he was not Spanish. Furthermore, a modern Spanish state like the one that exists today, is very different from the Spain in 1492. However, for centuries the Spanish adored Columbus. Across the nation, one can find plazas and statues dedicated to the Genoese explorer. In the capital of Madrid, there is a pristine plaza in the center of the financial district of the city. The plaza features a statue for Columbus that allows the explorer to stand watch over the city. In Barcelona, there is a similar statue, the *Monument a Colon*, in which Columbus

²⁸ Bushmann, *America Discovers Columbus*, 60.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

stands 197 feet above Barcelona, proclaiming his victory for the Spanish monarchs. Indeed, statues to Columbus, commemorating and celebrating his actions in the new world are ubiquitous across Spain. For the Spanish, Columbus was seen as a foundational figure. His journey to the New World occurred during a miraculous time in Spanish history. The year 1492 saw the end of the *Reconquista*, the expulsion of Jews from the peninsula, and the growing strength of the united crown of Ferdinand and Isabel. Columbus' discovery cemented the dominance of Spanish power, and his bravery and genius were often lauded in the Spanish tradition. Columbus is an important figure in Spain at a time when the country was defining what it meant to be from Spain, rather than from Castile, Aragon, or Granada. Spain is also important for the historiography of Columbus because of an American writer – Washington Irving.

Irving's biography of Columbus is one of the most influential accounts of the life of the explorer. At the time of its publication, it was a best-seller and read widely throughout America. Irving's biography deserves particular study because it is often cited as the cause of Columbus' popularity in the United States. Columbus plays an important role in the formation of Spanish national identity, and he is also an important figure in American identity. This thesis will examine Irving's biography in further detail, with the aim of discovering how Irving drafts the Genoese explorer who was trained in Portugal and sailed for the Spanish into an American hero.

CHAPTER TWO

A Biography of the Biographer: Washington Irving in Madrid

Because this paper is focused on biography and intentions, it is important to examine the biography of the writer. Irving's situation in Madrid when he wrote his biography of Columbus is important for a comprehensive understanding of the biography.

Washington Irving came to Madrid in early 1826 following the arrival of a letter from the American Minister to Spain. Alexander Hill Everett, the thirty-five year old minister from Boston, wrote to Irving regarding a potential new project for the writer: the translation of the journals of Christopher Columbus. Before his move to Spain, Irving had been living in Bordeaux, France. He was still recovering from the mixed reviews to the publication of his last book, *Tales of a Traveler*, and Irving characterized his mood at this time in a letter to his friend Henry Brevoort: "My last work has a good run in England, and has been well spoken of by some of the worthies of literature, though it has met with some handling from the press."³⁰ By this time, Irving was very concerned with public opinion regarding his writing, as it

³⁰ Andrew Burstein, *The Original Knickerbocker: The Life of Washington Irving* (Basic Books, 2008), 189.

had become his “only regular source of income.”³¹ Irving would become one of the first American writers financially supported by his writings. Although his entrance to Spain was marked by his poor financial situation, he would leave Madrid with a best-selling book, on track to become a professional writer.

In the spring of 1825, Irving first became interested in Spanish culture, beginning with his intensive study of the Spanish language. As is true of his work with Columbus, Irving’s study of Spanish was more dedicated than his previous ventures in learning languages. Irving had dedicated significant time and effort to study German, as well, but there was something different about Spanish. The culture and the history became intertwined with the learning of the language. He became enthralled with the language, and wrote to his nephew that Spanish is “full of power, magnificence and melody. It has twice the quantities of words that the French has. I do not know any thing that delights me more than the old Spanish literature.”³² When minister Everett’s letter arrived in January of 1826, it was perfect timing for Irving. Mr. Alexander Hill Everett, like other amateur diplomats of his time, was a man of affairs and writer first, and a statesman second.³³ Everett was the kind of diplomat that Irving would become later in his career.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³Williams, *The Life of Washington Irving*, 303.

Financially, Irving was down on his luck at this time, looking for a new means to make a living. The proposal was for Irving to translate the work by Martin Fernandez de Navarrete. The work was Navarrete's *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos que hicieron por mar los españoles desde el fin del siglo XV*, published in 1825. Everett also suggested that the translation might be sold to publishers, a proposal that was appealing to Irving's waning purse.³⁴ Irving wrote to his friend Storror that the project felt, "like a godsend. This thing has come upon me so suddenly that it has thrown me quite in a flurry."³⁵ From the very beginning, Irving was confident in the financial success of the project, understanding that the subject matter appealed to his American audience. Irving wrote to Storror regarding the publication of the translation:

I wish you to make an arrangement with Murray at once for the purchase of the translation, or, if he will not buy it, with Longman or Colburn. I am told it will make about two octavo volume. Mr. Everett thinks I ought to get fifteen hundred or a thousand guineas for it. I shall be content with the last sum³⁶

In Madrid, Irving lived at the residence of Obadiah Rich, a former U.S. Consul and bibliophile.³⁷ Rich's extensive library contained many sources regarding Columbus and the Americas, and these resources aided Irving in his endeavor and

³⁴ Brian Jay Jones, *Washington Irving: An American Original* (Arcade Publishing, 2008) 233.

³⁵ Jones, *An American Original*, 234.

³⁶ Washington Irving *The Life and Letters of Washington Irving* ed. Pierre M. Irving (New York, 1862) 250.

³⁷ Burstein, *Knickerbocker*, 192.

deepened his interest in these subjects. In 1826, when Irving arrived in Madrid, the city was not the emulous capital of today. According to biographer Stanley T. Williams, the city was “still partly Oriental...Compared with thrifty Boredeaux, Madrid seemed a world of opulence and dirt.”³⁸ Spain in 1826 had faced many changes. King Ferdinand VII took the throne in 1814 and “succeeded in abolishing the constitution and reestablishing for a time the Inquisition.”³⁹ From 1820 to 1823, Spain was ruled by a liberal government, but in 1823, the French army forcibly put an end to Spain’s liberal experiment on behalf of King Ferdinand VII. In the 1820s various Spanish colonies, including Chile and Peru, declared independence from Spain. Although Spain had experienced over a decade of instability and political change, the years during which Irving was writing the biography of Columbus were some of the most peaceful times in Madrid in the nineteenth century.⁴⁰

Once settled in Madrid, Irving met with Navarette. The Spaniard had been working on his *Collecion*, which had been assigned by the Spanish government, for three decades. Navarette had compiled the journals of Columbus from various sources, some newly discovered by historians. Furthermore, Navarette had access to sources regarding Columbus that had been unavailable to historians. The Spanish

³⁸Stanley T. Williams, *The Life of Washington Irving*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1935) 299-300.

³⁹ Williams, *The Life of Washington Irving*, 301.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 302.

crown commissioned Navarette's project, and therefore, the royal archives were open and available for him to use. It was this project that Irving was supposed to merely translate for an American and English audience. However, the project would morph into something more cohesive and ultimately more valuable to Americans than a translation of Navarette's original project.

At their first meeting, Navarette gave Irving two volumes of the "massive five part history of Spain that he was writing at the request of King Ferdinand."⁴¹ The journals of Columbus were only a portion of the Spanish text that Irving was to translate; Everett's original letter had misinformed Irving of the project at hand. The papers and texts from Navarette contained a wealth of knowledge, but they were dense and esoteric. Irving admitted that the Navarette's papers were "...excellent materials for a work, but which in their present form would repel the general class of readers. I am in hopes of making a work that will be acceptable to the public."⁴² Irving worked dedicatedly at the project. For the first time in his life, he approached writing as an actual job. Waking up early in the morning and working on a regular schedule, Irving was dedicated to his work and worked with a fervor that had not been present in his other endeavors. However, Irving was distracted from his work at times by the arrival of his nephew, Pierre Munro Irving in Madrid. Pierre would later be Irving's biographer, and they established a relationship of trust during their

⁴¹ Jones, *An American Original*, 235.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 236

time together in Madrid.⁴³ It is a wonderful coincidence that Irving established this relationship with his future biographer while simultaneously working on his biography of Columbus. Pierre's appearance in Spain reconnected the author to his native homeland and to his family. To Pierre, Irving confided "he believed his reputation in America was being undermined by some secret enemy who was spreading malicious notions about him for reasons he could not understand."⁴⁴ Irving's confession to Pierre reveals that while he had been living abroad for many years, he was still very connected to America. Irving was concerned with what the public thought of him in his country. On the fourth of July, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the nationhood of the United States, Irving took a rare day off from his work, writing that he was "incapable of work."⁴⁵ Again, Irving was still deeply connected to his country despite his absence.

During his time in Madrid, Irving also made the acquaintance of another important American writer, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Longfellow was only twenty years old when he presented a letter of introduction from a mutual friend to Irving.⁴⁶ When Longfellow came to Irving, he was entranced with the elder's

⁴³ Burstein, *Knickerbocker*, 194.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Williams, *The Life of Washington Irving*, 317.

writings, and he frequently quoted Irving's work.⁴⁷ Longfellow found his idol deep into his work with little time to devote to socializing with the young American writer. However, Longfellow was gracious despite Irving's inattention, and for the time, Irving and Geoffery Crayon, the pseudonym for many of Irving's previous writings, remained an influence for Longfellow's writing.⁴⁸

Across the Atlantic Ocean, America was experiencing the "Era of Good Feelings" with the defeat of the Federalist Party in 1819. President Monroe issued the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 after being elected without any real opposition in 1820. The territory of the United States stretched to the boundary of New Spain, inching ever closer to the Pacific Ocean. Yet, the country was still in its infancy. American citizens were concerned about the character of their fellow citizens because moral, good people were necessary to the success of their new republican system. The beginning of the market revolution in about 1815 significantly altered the lives of many Americans, causing further anxiety. In this environment, many writers began calling for the creation of new American literary models, separate from their European predecessors.

On December 21, 1826, Irving announced that he had completed the translation of Navarette's work and had also included other historians' work.⁴⁹ At

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 318.

⁴⁹ Burstein, *Knickerbocker*, 194.

this time, he wrote to his friend Storrow, “The work is nearly finished. It has cost me, for the time I have been employed upon it, an excessive deal of labour; if it fails to interest the public I shall be grievously disappointed.”⁵⁰ In a letter to Henry Breevort in April 1827, Irving wrote about his concern regarding American opinion of the history: “How it will please the public I cannot anticipate. I have lost confidence in the favorable disposition of my countrymen, and look forward to cold scrutiny and stern criticism, and this is a line of writing in which I have not hitherto ascertained my own powers.”⁵¹ Presumably, Irving is concerned with the American public, and he was still actively and purposely writing for that audience. Irving’s friend and publisher wrote him shortly after the completion of the first draft, requesting the manuscript of Columbus. However, in late January, in a conference with Navarette, Irving lost confidence in his manuscript of Columbus. Irving “clearly believed he had missed something important—so important, in fact, that he started rewriting his manuscripts from scratch.”⁵² Specifically, Irving had lost confidence in the authorial voice of the history. Focusing too much on creating a true narrative, Irving felt he had neglected the actual language of the history. Irving wrote to Everett, the American consul that had originally secured his position in Madrid:

I feel certain that there must be many incorrectnesses in my writings, for though I labor sometimes carefully at parts, I often write very rapidly; and

⁵⁰ Jones, *An American Original*, 240.

⁵¹ Irving, *Letters*, 260.

⁵² Jones, *An American Original*, 241.

what I write with facility and spirit I am not apt to retouch with any great solicitude... Columbus had more slovenliness of style in one stage of its preparation than any work I ever wrote; for I was so anxious about the verity of the narrative, and had to patch it together from so many different materials, that I had no time to think of the language. It was not until I had completely finished it as to facts, that I went over the whole of it and endeavored to bring up the style.⁵³

Irving began rewriting much of the biography, adding a more coherent voice that runs throughout. It might have also been at this point of drafting that he added his many “romantic” asides that are often the most interesting aspects of the biography. Strife also entered Irving’s life through a squabble with his friend Henry Breevort. In his letter written on April 4 to repair the friendship, Irving revealed his anxiety concerning critics that accused Irving of lacking American patriotism. These critics “asserted that he had kowtowed to British sensibilities at the expense of his American heritage.”⁵⁴ Irving wrote to Breevort,

Do not let yourself be persuaded therefore that time or distance has estranged me in thought or feeling from my native country, my native places, or the friends of my youth...The fact is that the longer I remain from home, the greater charm it has in my eyes, and all the colouring that the imagination once gave to distant Europe now gathers about the scenes of my native country.⁵⁵

Longing to be home, Irving made a final push on the work of the manuscript, and by the spring of the next year, at least half of the manuscript pages were in the hands of publishers in both Britain and the United States. Copies of the manuscript were

⁵³ Irving, *Letters*, 278.

⁵⁴ Jones, *An American Original*, 244.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

printed by Breevort and shown to American publishers. Breevort reported back to Irving that there was great enthusiasm in response to Irving's work: "Many persons of the highest literary standing among us...have expressed their satisfaction upon hearing that you were engaged on a subject which they think properly belongs to us...so that you have every reason to expect a candid and friendly reception."⁵⁶

Breevort's initial assumptions regarding the work proved prophetic.

The biography was a success. For twenty-one months, Irving labored on the biography, working with more fervor and diligence than he had contributed to a book thus far. For the first time, the name on the front of the book was actually Irving's, not a pseudonym like Geoffery Crayon. However, Irving's romantic style is still present throughout the biography. The biography was highly regarded by American readers, critics, as well as serious historians.⁵⁷ Irving's style, which he had so meticulously added to his second draft of the biography, was an interesting blend of fact-based history as well as colorful prose. The biography was accessible to the contemporary readers while also being based on important documents and sources.

Irving's interest with the golden age of Spanish history, centered on the reign of the famous monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella was not finished with the biography of Columbus. Soon after leaving Madrid, Irving travelled to the Alhambra in Granada. He would go on to write *The Tales of the Alhambra* as well as a history of

⁵⁶ Jones, *An American Original*, 247.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 248.

the fall of Granada to Ferdinand and Isabella. These two monarchs actively and purposely tried to create a nation-state of Spain with a distinct culture and history. The discovery of America through Columbus and the final defeat of Granada and subsequent end of the Reconquista were two of the most important achievements of the famous monarchs. Perhaps, Irving was fascinated with this time period because his nation was similarly engaged in the process of nation-building, of creating a national identity.

CHAPTER THREE

Irving's Columbus: Formed into the American Mold

Review of Scholarship

Scholarship regarding Irving's biography of Columbus usually falls within two areas of thought. Some scholars discuss whether Irving's biography should be considered a historical biography or whether it should be discussed as non-fiction. Other scholars who accept Irving's biography and its more dubious scenes tend to focus their discussion on Irving's crafting of Columbus into an American hero. One scholar that tends toward the first area of thought is William Hedges. His article "Irving's Columbus: The Problem of Romantic Biography" begins by asserting that Irving's biography is not an appropriate source for historical study.⁵⁸ Although nineteenth century historians once accepted the biography, it was put together "too hurriedly for it to be as accurate and original as historians would like it to be."⁵⁹ He goes on to claim that the biography is not "sufficiently informative" to even be considered a fiction. Instead, Hedges sees Irving's biography, not as a work of historical non-fiction, but as a drama. He states that the biography is "a collection of

⁵⁸ William L. Hedges, "The Problem of Romantic Biography" *The Americas* vol. 13, (1956) 127.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

theatrical characters,” and the details and events of Columbus’ life become insignificant in comparison to the meaning of his character as a whole.⁶⁰ Other scholars similarly dismiss Irving’s biography as irrelevant, and scholarship from recent years regarding the biography is scarce.

John Harmon McElroy’s article “The Integrity of Irving’s *Columbus*” serves as a response to Hedges’ earlier article. McElroy defends Irving’s work as a serious history. He names Irving as a historian, and refutes the charges against Irving for plagiarism of Navarette’s work saying, “surely it is less than remarkable to charge with plagiarism a historian who cites 150 different sources 900 times particularly when that historian was taken seriously by historians who wrote on the same subject after him and used the same sources.”⁶¹ McElroy acknowledges that better biographies of Columbus have been written since Irving, but he maintains that the biography is durable, thoughtful, and a great achievement by Washington Irving. Many scholars like McElroy focus on the value of Irving’s biography for scholarship and factual historical study.

Scholars that accept Irving’s biography, not as a drama or creation of fiction, but as a romantic biography created within a certain context, tend to focus on Irving’s nationalism and crafting of Columbus into an American hero. In his article “Literary Nationalism and Ambivalence in Washington Irving’s *The Life and Voyages*

⁶⁰ Ibid., 139.

⁶¹ John Harmon McElroy “The Integrity of Irving’s *Columbus*” *American Literature* vol. 50 (Mar 1978) 9.

of *Christopher Columbus*,” John Hazlett discusses how Irving used the character of Columbus for a specific, nationalistic purpose, but this purpose does not mean that Irving’s Columbus is without complexity. Hazlett discusses how Irving helped to “create” an American history through his biography of Columbus.⁶² Hazlett also states that Irving’s other purpose in creating the biography was to “provide the reader with an unmediated version of events and personalities,” and he also recognizes these two intentions were necessarily at odds with one another.⁶³ Hazlett states that the effect of this tension was that Irving actually created two portraits of Columbus, one of which is an imperialist text and the other is an anti-imperialist sub-text.⁶⁴ Hazlett concludes that Irving’s *Columbus* is significant because of the tension between these two portraits, and the tension “developed out of the conflict between Irving’s internalization of the national mythology and his obtrusive skepticism about America’s past and his own role in society.”⁶⁵ Hazlett’s scholarship is both persuasive and nuanced, and it argues that scholars should continue to study Irving’s biography of Columbus.

⁶² John D. Hazlett, “Literary Nationalism and Ambivalence in Washington Irving’s *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*” *American Literature* vol. 55, (Dec 1983) 561.

⁶³ Hazlett, “Literary Nationalism,” 563.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 574.

Irving's Translation of Columbus – Into the American Mold

Columbus' Humble Origins

Irving's biography of Christopher Columbus paints the Genoese explorer as a hero for Americans, exhibiting the traits and characteristics that were cherished by the new nation. In Irving's biography, Columbus is intelligent and a good leader. He has good judgment, and he is self-educated. He hails from a middle class family, and he makes his fortune in the world through hard work, courage, and constancy.

The early life of Christopher Columbus is a topic filled with uncertainty and shrouded with mystery. The only early historian to write about Columbus' early life was his son, Fernando, and his account is problematic, as Irving describes in the Appendix to the biography. The manuscript of Fernando's biography, written originally in Spanish, was lost. However, a corrupted Italian manuscript survived and was translated by Alonzo de Ulloa.⁶⁶ Irving admits that the source is "full of errors in the orthography of proper names and in dates and distances."⁶⁷ In the first book of the biography, Washington Irving most heavily relied on the account from Fernando Columbus; however, there are fewer citations in the first book than in the subsequent sections. The lack of sources regarding Columbus' earlier life allows

⁶⁶ Irving, Washington, *The Life of Columbus*, 623.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Irving flexibility in crafting the character of Columbus, and he drafts Columbus into an American man.

In the first book, which is subtitled “Birth, Parentage and Early Life of Columbus,” Irving discusses that Columbus hails from a middle class family that is involved with a trade.⁶⁸ For Irving, Columbus represents a “rags to riches” story. Columbus’ father was a “wool-comber... and it would seem that his ancestors had followed the same handicraft for generations in Genoa.”⁶⁹ At the very beginning of the history, Irving stresses that Columbus was from a middle or lower class family. While there have been claims on Columbus by “several noble houses” that attempted to claim Columbus for their family trees in light of his fame and success, he is actually from humble origins.⁷⁰ Irving directly quotes Fernando Columbus who had a “true feeling on the subject,” stating, “I am of the opinion...that I should derive less dignity from any nobility of ancestry than from being the son of such a father.”⁷¹ Columbus’ distinction comes not from his noble lineage but from his actions and achievements. Irving’s emphasis on Columbus’ humble ancestry places his achievements into a greater contrast. This contrast is most clearly seen when the King and Queen of Spain greet Columbus in Barcelona after he returns from his first

⁶⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 17.

journey to the New World. Irving writes that upon entering the great hall, “the sovereigns rose, as if receiving a person of the highest rank.”⁷² Although just the son of a wool-comber, Columbus’ actions have made him worthy of the great families and the respect of the monarchs. Through his hard-work, natural brilliance, and courage, Columbus elevated himself and his position. This “rags to riches” story, or in Columbus’ case, a wool-comber to famous navigator story, would have been easily identifiable to Americans. This detail exemplifies the possibilities of social mobility in the new United States.

Self-Education

Columbus was the oldest son of four children, and he was apparently well educated as a child. Irving states that “at a very early age Columbus evinced a decided inclination for the sea” and his education thus followed suit.⁷³ Although Columbus did receive a formal education, he is depicted by Irving as a self-educated man. Although Columbus did receive some schooling at the University of Pavia, which gave him “the rudiments of the necessary sciences,” this education alone would not have been enough for the success of Columbus.⁷⁴ Irving conjectures that Columbus’ thorough acquaintance with science must have been “the result of

⁷² Ibid., 175.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 20.

diligent self schooling, in casual hours of self-study amid the cares and vicissitudes of a rugged and wandering life.”⁷⁵ To be clear, Irving does not have any evidence in his documents to suggest that Columbus pursued this course of self-study. In this section, he expands upon what he already knows of Columbus’ character and also applies characteristics of ambitious, successful people that he admires.

Christopher Columbus: A Self-Made Man

The self-made man was and continues to be an important image in American identity. The American man begins his life with few advantages, but through hard work, self-study, and an un-ceasing work ethic, he is able to rise above his initial station in life and become a successful, well-known member of society. The image of the self-made man can be found in American literature as early as John Smith. Social mobility also plays a vital part in this aspect of identity. Social mobility has been a part of the understanding of America as early as the writings of John Smith. For example, in Smith’s *Description of New England* he asks that each parish, city and village will send their “fatherless children, of thirteen or fourteen years of age, or young married people, that have small wealth to live upon, here by their labour may live exceedingly well.”⁷⁶ Written in 1616, Smith’s report presents an early affinity for the ideas of social mobility and the self-made man. Smith states that, in New

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ John Smith “Description of New England” from *The English Literatures of America*, (Routledge: 1996) 120.

England, young people without fathers, fortune, or hope for a better life in England, may rise above their station through hard work. It is this image of the self-made man, aided by easy social mobility, which Irving latches onto Columbus. Despite difficulties and poverty, Columbus becomes a well-known figure in the world, though the level of success in his life is an object for debate.

In the opening section of Irving's biography of Columbus, there are many similarities in the description of character to Benjamin Franklin's *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. First published in French in 1791 and later published in English in 1818, it is reasonable to suggest that Irving was familiar with the work. There are many similarities between the characteristics of Christopher Columbus, as depicted by Irving and the characteristics of Benjamin Franklin. Franklin saw himself as a self made man. In the first part of his autobiography, he writes to his son about his origins and early life. Franklin claims that he "emerged from poverty and obscurity in in which I was born and bred, to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world."⁷⁷ Franklin frequently refers to his family as "obscure" in order to stress the significance of his achievements. Although Franklin's family had a business, he did not pursue the familiar course, but instead left home and made his fortune on his own. Franklin was also self-educated. He describes himself as a "bookish lad" that was constantly on the hunt for another

⁷⁷ Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) 7.

novel to consume.⁷⁸ He pursued his studies at night, and became a successful, popular, and well-known man. Irving seems to have this image of an American man in mind in the opening chapters of the biography. This image is a man that is self-made and ambitious, a man like Benjamin Franklin. Irving most clearly demonstrates these characteristics of Columbus at the end of the first chapter:

He was one of those men of strong natural genius, who, having to contend at their very outset with privations and impediments, acquire an intrepidity in encountering and a facility in vanquishing difficulties throughout their career. Such men learn to effect great purposes with small means, supplying this deficiency by the resources of their own energy and invention. This, from the earliest commencement, throughout the whole of his life, was one of the remarkable features in the history of Columbus. In every undertaking, the scantiness and apparent insufficiency of his means enhance the grandeur of his achievements.⁷⁹

In this section, Irving stresses that Columbus comes from scanty means, from a “deficiency of resources,” but the strength of his character carried him to success. Furthermore, the lowness in which Columbus begins his life creates a greater contrast to his later glory. Again, Franklin uses a similar rhetorical function, describing his family as obscure and poor. Here, Columbus is a “rags to riches” story, similar to Franklin’s opening section of his autobiography.

There are two more interesting comparisons between the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* and Irving’s *Life of Columbus*. First, the first scene is the hero’s arrival in an unfamiliar city. In Chapter IV of the biography, Irving outlines the

⁷⁸ Franklin, *Autobiography*, 14.

⁷⁹ Irving, *Life of Columbus*, 20.

appearance and character of the young Christopher Columbus upon his arrival to Lisbon. Irving cites the descriptions of Columbus from earlier biographies, namely those by Columbus' son Fernando and Bartolome de Las Casas.⁸⁰ According to these sources, Columbus was, "tall, well-formed, muscular, and of an elevated and dignified demeanor. His visage was long, and neither full nor meager...He was moderate and simple in diet and apparel..."⁸¹ Here, Irving depicts Columbus as a capable, strong man, ready to take on challenges. It is also notable that Columbus is described as "moderate," and it is from this description that one can draw another comparison to Benjamin Franklin. Moderation was an incredibly important tenant in his philosophy in the later chapters of the autobiography. Moderation and self-restraint were also important qualities for aspiring young men and women in the early American republic.

Columbus' entrance into Lisbon, as has previously been described, was a transition that began his rise in fame and fortune. Irving notes that his transition occurred either "by the fortuitous result of a desperate adventure, or drawn thither by liberal curiosity and the pursuit of honorable fortune."⁸² The desperate adventure that Irving refers to is described in Fernando Columbus' biography in which Columbus is engaged in a "desperate engagement" in which Columbus is only

⁸⁰ Irving, *Life of Christopher Columbus*, 29.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 28.

saved through the divine will of God.⁸³ However, in a paragraph marked by Irving's strong authorial voice, this theory is discredited in favor of the theory that Columbus ventured to Lisbon with the explicit intent to pursue fortune and satisfy his curiosity.⁸⁴ The depiction that Irving favors is very important. It shows that Columbus had a driving intent, a future goal towards which he was always striving. He travelled to Lisbon not because fortune brought him there by chance, but because he was actively seeking opportunities for improving his situation. Franklin, serving as the model for the American man, also has a scene in his biography in which he enters a new town, in order to seek his fortune and future. In leaving Boston in route to Philadelphia, Franklin states, "in three days I found myself in New York, nearly 300 miles from home, a boy of but 17, without the least recommendation to, or knowledge of, any person in the place, and with very little money in my pocket."⁸⁵ While Franklin's entrance into Philadelphia is more humorous than Columbus' into Lisbon, the comparison is still worth noting. Both men leave what is familiar in order to seek their fortunes abroad. It is also interesting to note that both men, both Benjamin Franklin and Irving's Columbus express an early interest for the sea.

⁸³ Ibid.,23.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Franklin, *Autobiography*, 24.

The Transformation of Columbus' Catholic Faith

While many Americans would have identified with aspects of Columbus' character such as self-education and his rags to riches story, one important characteristic of Columbus would have been unsavory – his fervent Catholic faith. Anti-Catholicism has a long history in the United States. The earliest American colonists brought a heritage of anti-Catholicism, which was established in Europe after the Reformation. Religiously based colonies such as Plymouth and the Massachusetts Bay Colony firmly established Protestant values and traditions as foundational characteristics for many Americans. America in the early nineteenth century, at this time a predominantly Protestant nation, was largely unfriendly to Catholics. Nuns and nunneries were viewed with intense suspicion, and Catholics were seen as foreigners. Eight years after Irving published *The Life of Columbus*, Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery in Montreal*, a fabricated anti-Catholic story, was published. The book was a fabrication claimed to expose a system of sexual abuse and infanticide within the nunnery. The book was a best seller in the United States, and this demonstrates the sentiment of Americans regarding Catholics. To make Columbus more palatable to his American readers, Irving transformed the Catholic faith of Columbus. Upon Columbus' arrival in Lisbon, Irving notes the character and appearance of Columbus, and he notes, "Throughout [Columbus'] life he was noted for strict attention to the offices of religion, observing rigorously the fasts and ceremonies of the church, nor did his

piety consist in mere forms, but partook of that lofty and solemn enthusiasm with which his whole character was strongly tinctured.⁸⁶ Irving links Columbus' intense devotion to Catholicism with his ambitious and devoted character, which is consistent with American values. His piety is linked to dedication and action, rather than spirituality or worship. While Irving shows that Columbus is dedicated to religion in general, Columbus is not depicted worshipping a specific saint or holy figure, thus linking him to a Catholic faith. Instead, Irving glosses over the more unacceptable aspects of Columbus' intense Catholic faith for his Protestant American audience. Irving makes an effort to normalize or "Americanize" Columbus' Catholic faith while not detracting from its intensity. In fact, Irving goes so far as to position Columbus in a position of conflict with the Catholic clergy.

While visiting Salamanca in 1486, Columbus was brought before a council that was investigating "the new theory of Columbus."⁸⁷ According to Irving, Columbus theorized "the earth was a terraqueous sphere or globe, which might be travelled round from east to west."⁸⁸ The earth was small enough that "the Asiatic shores could easily be attained by a moderate voyage to the west."⁸⁹ At Salamanca, the "great seat of learning in Spain," a council of clergymen was formed to

⁸⁶ Irving, *Life of Christopher Columbus*, 29.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 57.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 34.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 37.

investigate Columbus' theory regarding a western voyage. Columbus is depicted as a man of science who had to contend with "the errors and prejudices, the mingled ignorance and erudition, and the pedantic bigotry" of the men that questioned him.⁹⁰ According to Irving, the council rejected even Columbus' simplest proposition, that the earth is round. The clergymen refute Columbus' geographical claims with citations from the Bible and "the expositions of various saints and reverend commentators."⁹¹ While Columbus answers the biblical citations by claiming that the inspired writers were speaking figuratively rather than literally. However, he is unable to convince the council, and they remain rooted in their ignorance and prejudice. Irving wonders at the "vague and crude notions [that] were entertained by the learned men of the university."⁹² This entire scene is Irving's invention, and no earlier record exists of this supposed council hearing. It is also from this scene that a common myth was created: during Columbus' time, people still believed that the earth was flat. This is fiction; in the late Middle Ages it was common knowledge among the educated and the clergy that the earth was round. It is further significant that Irving assigns this flat earth myth to Catholic clergy. In Irving's fictitious scene, it is the Catholic clergy who are entrenched in superstition and ignorance. Columbus, though also a devoted Catholic, stands apart

⁹⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 61.

from the council as an enlightened man of science, an independent thinker.⁹³ The American public would have accepted Columbus as he was rejected (and in part, because he was rejected) by the council at Salamanca.

Irving frequently notes that Columbus felt that he had been specifically chosen by God, “for the accomplishment of its high purpose...bringing the remote and unknown regions of the earth into communion with Christian Europe, carrying the light of the true faith into benighted and pagan lands...”⁹⁴ Irving’s Columbus believes that he has been specifically chosen by God to carry the Christian faith to undiscovered parts of the world. Irving’s depiction of this aspect of Columbus’ faith would have been recognizable to Protestant Americans emerging from a Puritan or Calvinist background as it related to Predestination. Irving’s Columbus seems to see himself as a member of the Elect, one of God’s chosen people. Part of Columbus’ mission for travelling to the New World is “for the deliverance of the holy sepulcher.”⁹⁵ Through his voyages, Columbus hopes to earn enough money to form an army to retake Jerusalem. Irving’s emphasis of Columbus’ religious inspiration also detracts from the claims that Columbus’ voyage was fueled by greed. For example, when the King and Queen of Spain meet with Columbus upon his return from the New World, Columbus advocates for a second mission to the New World.

⁹³ Michael McGee “Christopher Columbus: Construction and Deconstructions of an American Hero” (master’s thesis, University of Central Missouri 2006) 34.

⁹⁴ Irving, *Life of Columbus*, 38.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

Irving writes that at this moment Columbus' "mind was elevated above selfish and mercenary views...it was filled with those devout and heroic schemes, which in the time of the Crusades had inflamed the thoughts and directed the enterprises of the bravest warriors and most illustrious princes."⁹⁶ Columbus does not want to accrue wealth for himself but instead for his holy mission, his crusade, to regain the Holy Land. This motivation also places him within the Spanish mission of empire towards which Ferdinand and Isabel were striving. It is difficult to discern whether Columbus truly wanted to send an army to Jerusalem to retake the Holy Land, or whether this was a carefully constructed argument to garner support from the Spanish monarchy. However in Irving's depiction, Columbus' motivations are true, pure, and religious. Irving's molding of Columbus' religious motivation also links him to early American colonists such as the Puritans and Pilgrims who also travelled to the New World in search of religious freedom.

The Tension in Irving's Sources

Irving drew upon many different sources for his biography, and these sources do not agree upon the character or guilt of Columbus. Some of these sources had been tucked away in Spanish archives for centuries, and historians and writers were unable to access them. When Irving was writing his biography, which had begun as a translation of Navarette's work, he had access to these long hidden sources through Navarette. The availability of new sources, including the first hand

⁹⁶ Ibid.

accounts from Columbus himself, was one of the factors that led Irving to undertake the project of writing the biography. Irving drew upon Fernando Columbus's *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus* and Bartolome de Las Casas' *History of the Indies*. Fernando was Columbus's second and illegitimate son. His biography of his father covers his entire life, but mostly focuses on the four voyages. Predictably, the biography is heavily biased. For instance, the opening lines of the biography state that Columbus is "a person worthy of eternal glory for his discovery of the West Indies..."⁹⁷ This biography sees all of Columbus' actions in a positive light, and paints him as a hero, worthy of all praises. Fernando Columbus "says virtually nothing ill of his father but alternately praises him for his feats and blames others for his failures."⁹⁸ The wrong-doing that occurs in the New World is assigned to the Spanish sailors, known as the "Christians" who are greedy and corrupt. One scene is often repeated in Fernando's biography in which Columbus leaves an island under the rule of Spaniards. After Columbus leaves, the Spaniards commit crimes against the natives and against the will of the Admiral. For example, upon arriving at the island of Espanola during his second voyage, Fernando writes that Columbus discovers "the island in a pitiful state, with most of the Christians committing innumerable outrages for which they were mortally hated by the Indians, who refused to obey

⁹⁷ Ferdinand Columbus, *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus* ed. By Benjamin Keen, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1959) xxi.

⁹⁸ McGee, "Constructions and Deconstructions" 35.

them.”⁹⁹ Washington Irving frequently cites this biased source in his biography, and Irving calls the book: “The corner-stone of the history of the American Continent.”¹⁰⁰ This heavily biased source is frequently cited in Irving’s biography and might contribute to the overly positive view of Columbus in the book. Irving uses similar language as Fernando Columbus when describing scenes in which Columbus’ absence on an island leads to abuses against the natives by the Spanish. In Irving’s biography, Columbus has left the island St. Thomas and almost immediately receives a note from the commander at the fort that the native chief was assembling warriors. Irving writes that “the moment the admiral had departed, the Spaniards, no longer awed by his presence, had, as usual, listened only to their passions, and exasperated the natives by wresting from them their gold, and wronging them with respect to their women.”¹⁰¹ The similarity between the language of these events shows the extent to which Irving drew from Fernando Columbus’ problematic biography of his father.

Another interesting source is Bartolome de Las Casas who takes a more complicated and darker view of Columbus. Bartolome de Las Casas is thought to have been the first ordained priest in the New World, and he lived on his own

⁹⁹ Ferdinand Columbus, *The Life of the Admiral*, 148.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰¹ Irving, *Life of Columbus*, 249.

ecomienda, land with Indian serfs, until 1514.¹⁰² Las Casas, like Columbus, is a controversial figure in history. After joining the Dominican order in 1522, Las Casas worked toward improving conditions for the Indians in the New World. In *History of the Indies*, Las Casas simultaneously celebrates Columbus' discovery of the Americas while also condemning his treatment of the natives. Like other sources, Las Casas admits that Columbus was far ahead of his contemporaries in terms of geography and science and that Columbus began his voyage with good intentions. However, Las Casas also writes that Columbus soon turned to lusting for gold and abusing the native people. Irving utilizes Las Casas' *History of the Indies*, to illustrate the culture of the native people living in Haiti, Cuba and neighboring islands at the time of Columbus.¹⁰³ Irving offers a complex depiction of the politics and culture of the native populations, even tracing the history and character of some of the native chiefs. However, there is a tension in Irving's biography concerning Columbus' participation with the acts against the native populations. For example, in Irving's chapter entitled "Subjugation of the Natives – Imposition of Tribute," Columbus begins to assert his right as a "conqueror," a role he does not embrace until this point in his voyages.¹⁰⁴ Columbus imposes "heavy tributes on the subjected provinces" and natives that did not produce the specific amount gold or cotton

¹⁰² Emma Marras, "Rediscovering America: The Biography of Christopher Columbus" *I quaderni di Gaia* vol 5 (1992) 65.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁰⁴ Irving, *Life of Columbus*, 312.

“were liable to arrest and punishment.”¹⁰⁵ The imposition of the tributes and punishment should condemn Columbus based on his actions. However, Irving tries to show that Columbus’ intention was pure. While Irving does describe the injustice done to the Native Americans, that injustice is not assigned to Columbus. Columbus remains a shining figure, albeit with disorderly and disobedient Spanish sailors at his command. For example, in the chapter that contains the imposition of tributes on the natives in 1494, Columbus remains faultless. Columbus “asserted his right of a conqueror” in order to pay back the monarchs for their great expenses and to meet the public expectations of his voyage.¹⁰⁶ Irving writes, “In this way was the yoke of servitude fixed upon the island, and its thralldom effectually insured. Deep despair fell upon the natives when they found a perpetual task inflicted upon them...”¹⁰⁷ The yoke of servitude falls, but it is not Columbus who has placed the burden upon them. The tension in Irving’s biography is between Columbus’ actions and his intentions. As the Admiral of the voyages, Columbus should be morally responsible for the actions of his men and their crimes against the natives. However, because his intentions are good and based in religion, Irving largely excuses Columbus’ actions in order to extoll his character. However, at the end of the biography, in Irving’s concluding chapter, he provides a summary of the Admiral’s character and his

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 313.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 312-313.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 314.

actions. Irving writes that because of the bigotry of Columbus' day, "he considered himself justified in making captives of the Indians, and transporting them to Spain to have them taught the doctrines of Christianity, and in selling them for slaves if they pretended to resist his invasions."¹⁰⁸ Irving continues this thought by stating that in taking these actions, Columbus has sinned, not against the Indians, but against "the natural goodness of his character."¹⁰⁹ The enslavement of the Indians was also thrust upon Columbus from the Spanish crown. In Irving's final note regarding Columbus and the enslavement of the Indians he states, "It is proper to show him in connection with the age in which he lived, lest the errors of the times should be considered as his individual faults. It is not the intention of the author, however, to justify Columbus on a point where it is inexcusable to err. Let it remain a blot on his illustrious name, and let others derive a lesson from it."¹¹⁰

If Irving is writing for an American audience, then his concluding word on the matter has further significance. Irving seems to be urging the nation to treat the remaining indigenous populations more fairly as the country pushes farther into western territory. However, this comment carries little weight against Irving's constant celebration of Columbus' character.

¹⁰⁸ Irving, *Life of Columbus*, 606.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 607.

Columbus as Visionary

The final trait of Irving's Columbus is that he is a visionary. In the concluding section of the final chapter of the biography, Irving celebrates Columbus for being a "visionary of an uncommon and successful kind."¹¹¹ This characteristic led Columbus to pursue his theory westward and make his discovery. This visionary spirit also relates to a sense of creativity, which others of his day did not possess. Columbus rose above his own times and looked past the ignorance that was over the intellectuals of his time. However, despite this "visionary fervor of his imagination," Irving writes that Columbus "died in ignorance of the real grandeur of his discovery," believing until his death that he had only discovered new islands in India.¹¹² The real grandeur of his discovery was the many empires that would spread out across the lands he discovered. Irving, writing for his American audience, sees the United States as the complete fulfillment of Columbus' visionary spirit. Furthermore, the United States also contains the same visionary spirit to push boundaries, to innovate, and to revolt against the accepted order. Columbus' visionary spirit is also what Irving wants the United States to embody from this point forward. Irving's support of this characteristic of Columbus and the United States links the country to ideas of "American exceptionalism." Just as Christopher Columbus was a unique and visionary figure for his time, so is the United States an

¹¹¹ Irving, *Life of Columbus*, 607.

¹¹² *Ibid.* 608.

exceptional nation for its time. Finally, Irving links the fate of the United States and the legacy of Columbus in his final sentence. Although Columbus did not receive proper honors and distinctions in his day, he will be exalted through the success and expansion of the United States.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Americans in Madrid

I researched the life and works of Washington Irving while studying abroad in Madrid, where Irving lived and wrote the biography of Columbus. On the metro each day, I read Irving's Spanish works, including the *Legends of the Conquest of Spain*, *Tales of the Alhambra*, and of course, *The Life of Christopher Columbus*.

Through these works, the history of Spain came to life through Washington Irving's pen. His romantic style, present even in the biography, transport the reader.

Reading Washington Irving while living in Madrid helped me to fall in love with the country and its history. When I travelled to Granada, the Alhambra came alive with Irving's words and his stories in the back of my mind. I saw where the apartment he lived in at the Alhambra, and I walked through the opulent halls and palaces where Irving drew inspiration. Like Irving, I was enchanted by the Spanish culture and history as I learned more of the language. I also saw Columbus in nearly every city I visited in Spain. From the Plaza de Colon in Madrid to his opulent tomb in Seville, Columbus is easy to find in Spanish cities. In Barcelona, the walking tour took me to the exact spot where Columbus was welcomed by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel. In Seville, I saw where part of Columbus' body lies in a golden tomb. In Granada, I

learned where Columbus first entered the Spanish court. Although I was not looking for him, Columbus seemed to be everywhere in Spain. Being in Spain while researching for this project brought a different perspective to the biography of Columbus. My travels abroad demonstrated how Columbus is an international figure, utilized differently for specific purposes. In Spain, Columbus is a part of the narrative of nation-building and national identity. This realization turned my eyes towards my own country to examine how we, as Americans, treat this complicated figure. Being abroad, and separated from American culture, helps to clarify what it means to be an American.

Columbus in Review

The character of Columbus has been refashioned and remolded by cultures around the world for centuries. Although this figure has been handled and translated very frequently, Christopher Columbus is still worthy of examination, and the translations of his character by different cultures are often more interesting than the facts about his original voyages. As a figure of discovery and empire, Columbus can frequently be found in the literature of new nation states.

In Spain, a new nation-state consciousness was forming with the reign of Isabel and Ferdinand. Columbus briefly became a part of this national consciousness, and Spaniards took pride in his achievements, aligning them with the other successes of the Catholic Monarchs. Columbus was also embraced as a figure

of empire in much of Western Europe. The navigator was quickly associated with the *Aeneid*, and he became a character that brought culture and civilization to a distant land. In her book *The Legacy of Christopher Columbus in the Americas: New Nations and a Transatlantic Discourse of Empire*, Elise Bartoski-Velez describes how Columbus “as a symbol of Spain’s (and Europe’s) conquest of the New World was quickly incorporated into the dominant Western narrative of colonization and empire.”¹¹³ Many depictions of Columbus contain these associations with empire and Aeneas, and Columbus is seen as a culture-bringer, a founder of civilizations. This depiction of Columbus was also furthered by the biography by Peter Martyr. A Contemporary of Columbus, Martyr wrote one of the first accounts of Columbus’ voyages. Martyr’s biography established the characterization of Columbus as a figure of empire, and for centuries authors utilized Martyr’s work as a foundational text for writings about Columbus. However, eventually, the characterization of Columbus changed, especially in the Americas. As discussed in chapter one, American poets such as Joel Barlow began the construction of Columbus as a national symbol. Columbus became a symbol of the new ideas of American identity and empire. Washington Irving was also an important aspect to this transformation of Columbus in the new American republic.

Irving was brought to Spain for financial considerations as well as his great interest in the culture of Spain. He was fascinated by the language and culture, but

¹¹³ Elise Bartoski-Velez, *The Legacy of Christopher Columbus in the Americas: New Nations and a Transatlantic Discourse of Empire*, 89.

he also could not pass up an opportunity to make some money. Some poor investments in mines in Bolivia as well as the relatively cool reception of *Tales of a Traveller* left Irving in dire financial straits. Although thousands of miles away in Madrid, Irving's eyes were continually fixed upon his native lands. Irving was accused of betraying America, of not being a patriot, and of not having the interests of his nation at heart after laboring so long in Europe. However, through his letters and acquaintances, Irving was still informed about the new nation, still connected to his friends and family to whom he had long since said goodbye. This is also evidenced by the appearance of his nephew and future biographer, Pierre Munro Irving, which refocused Washington Irving's attention back to the United States. His letters and diaries clearly show that Irving began to see the biography of Columbus as a work specifically for the American people. Although Columbus had been reshaped and reinterpreted for cultures for centuries, Irving saw the life and times of Columbus as being particularly relevant to the American people in the early nineteenth century.

In the early nineteenth century, the United States was extremely concerned with the character of its citizens. The United States was a brand new country, and furthermore, the government was new, an experiment in large-scale democracy. The society needed a series of good models for the citizens in order for them to be good. Many Americans at this time believed that the success of the nation rested on the presence of good citizens who would make the best decisions for their nation. At

this same time period, there was also a call for American literature, a literary independence from the European models. Instead of creating new models, heroes, and characters out of thin air that were distinctly Americans; pre-existing models were appropriated to American values. In Irving's *Life of Christopher Columbus*, the author uses a character that has been turned over and retranslated by different cultures for hundreds of years. Despite the multiple translations, Columbus was still a worthy figure to carry the new flag of the United States. John D Hazlett further expresses Irving's intentions with the biography stating,

Irving...saw American history as a useful means of instilling patriotism in his readers, and while his language tended to be more general, his avowed intention toward Columbus was thoroughly nationalist. The trophy he was saving from mutilation was, after all, the discoverer of the Americans, upon whose character the glory and pride of the New World in some measure depended.¹¹⁴

In many ways, Irving is successful in retranslating Columbus as an American hero. He assigns Columbus American characteristics, such as self-education, a diligent work ethic, and a humble beginning. These characteristics can also be found in the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, and the autobiography serves as a good model for the emerging American identity. Not only do these characteristics make Columbus an identifiable character for many Americans, he also becomes a model, a hero from which citizens can model their behavior.

¹¹⁴ John D Hazlett "Nationalism and Ambivalence in Washington Irving's *The Life and Voyages of Columbus*" *American Literature* Dec 1983: 563.

Columbus is not a perfect figure, and there is tension in the biography with the portrayal of the atrocities committed by Columbus' company in the New World. Columbus ends his life as a presumed failure. He does not gain the recognition from King Ferdinand for which he longed, and he apparently did not understand the significance of his discovery. Irving includes these and many other failures of Columbus in his biography, presenting a complex figure, not wholly perfect or heroic. However, these complexities, these tensions in the biography are what make it particularly interesting. Columbus is not a perfect man, and Irving does not portray him as such. The complexities and tensions also demonstrate Irving's difficulties in writing the biography. While motivated by this impulse to create new national heroes, Irving also wanted to create a biography that was true to the new sources and the work of Navarette. There is not a perfect balance between these impulses. At times the biography lags under information and citations. At times, truthfully the more interesting aspects of the book, Irving departs on romantic asides about the character of Columbus. In many of these romantic divulges, Irving addresses his American audience, drawing them back in with his familiar style.

Christopher Columbus has become an ingrained part of our American history, despite his now thoroughly tarnished reputation. Irving's biography is also an important aspect of our history, not only because it helped to establish Columbus as an American hero, but also because it demonstrates how Americans considered their own character. The biography is full of invented scenes and a questionable

level of bias in favor of the explorer. Irving's dedication to extoll the virtues of Columbus is in conflict with his actions in the New World. However, is it this tension that makes the biography so interesting and further reveals Irving's intention in retranslating the figure of Columbus.

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