BOOK REVIEWS:

GOODBYE COLUMBUS
A Review of Selected Quincentennial Literature
by Peter McDonald

There is an old saw that says there’s more than one way to skin a cat. And nowhere is this adage more apparent than when sorting through the responses to the Quincentennial of Christopher Columbus’ voyage across the ocean blue in 1492. The official response began about four years ago, at the stroke of the presidential pen, when Ronald Reagan created the official Columbus Quincentenary Commission and placed at its helm a Miami real estate broker by the name of John Goudie. Barely two years later, Goudie was hounded from office under a cloud of allegations concerning nepotism, embezzlement and gross financial mismanagement. Funny how little things change, for this is precisely what happened to Columbus himself after his third voyage, for he was hauled back to Spain in leg irons for gross malfeasance as the governor of Espaniola.

Columbus supporters brush aside minor quibbles such as these. And even though a crop of new biographies have shown the man to have been a consummate liar, a cold-blooded murderer of women and children, and one who condoned rape among his crew, there are many doddering scribes on the Right, who have gone full tilt on the attack against anything that smacks of “revisionist” history, anything in fact which would place this half-mad adventurer alongside other messianic adventurers like Pol Pot and Idi Amin. Of course the rank irony of making a murderer like Columbus a hero is itself the ultimate in revisionism, but this is lost on the pundits of academe and their colleagues in mainstream media. History, alas, is written by the victors and this is most certainly true with Columbus. Unfortunately things have not quite gone the way the free marketeers might have wanted, for the poor Admiral in this fifth hundredth year of his enterprise has suffered at the hands of a rowdy coalition of naysayers and activists. So loud, in fact, have the counter-Quincentennial coalitions become, that the purveyors of our new and improved version of Manifest Destiny (now the New World Order of the White House teleprompter) have had to become deviously subtle in re-packaging the accepted wisdom with a refurbished blitzkrieg of euphemisms. We see this in other arenas, of course, where the David Dukes and the Pat Buchanans of the world no longer rant on about “shiftless niggers”, but instead talk about “welfare mothers”. This was not lost on the planners of the Quincentenary celebrations. For the supporters of Cristobol Colon, having had a similar epiphany of semantics, have been busily inflating the patched balloon of their blue-eyed adventurer, leaking though it is. We now have “encounters of cultures” (from George Bush) and “when worlds collide” (from the cover of Newsweek) and other half-baked nonsense which the somnambulant media serves up with the usual obfuscation in the guise of revealed truth.

We see this velveteen approach best in the way the status quo has dealt with such thorny issues raised in many new biographies, such as Columbus’ guilt in the slaughter of children. Always a bit rough for the spin doctors of the Right to repackage nasty bits like that, though by God they try. But what any school child can now read is that the preferred method of Admiral Colon’s necromania was dismemberment of hands, ears, noses, occasionally genitalia. Not for any real offense, mind you, but simply because the innocent Indians he had enslaved could not bring in enough gold to satisfy his avarice. The fact that there was barely a pound of gold to be found on the islands he governed was lost on our jolly adventurer. The more the locals swore there was no gold, the more convinced Columbus became that they were a shiftless bunch of liars deserving of punishment for thwarting his grand designs. The indigenous populations of the Indies were slaughtered by the thousands, and poor bewildered Columbus never did get to take home the gold he had promised his king and queen. So instead he hauled back the Indians he hadn’t dismembered as slaves in the hopes of getting a profit from them. Alas, almost to a man they died en route. Thus began the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The euphemistic approach to the Columbian legacy is most apparent with the current crop of curated museum exhibits touring the country with Quincentennial themes. These muse-
ums have capitulated to the row on the Left just enough to avoid such loaded words as "Discovery" and "Noble Savage" or even "New World" by reaching deeper into the conquerors' lexicography to find blandishments like "First Encounters" (the touring exhibit of the University of Florida's Museum of Natural History) and "Seeds of Change" (the National Museum of Natural History's show in Washington DC, officially supported and sponsored by the ALA). These titles imply a sort of meeting of equal minds, where ideas and commerce were exchanged in an atmosphere of curiosity and mutual benefit. The fact that the conquistadors (and the Pilgrims after them) came with their swords drawn and stole every inch of the Americas from the Indians, whom they slaughtered as fast as they could grab their land, is never addressed except in terms of an inevitable sense that this was Europe's grand destiny.

The curators of these shows are not entirely to blame for the lack of substance in their exhibits, although it seems that they too often allow themselves to be constrained by the powers of big money and the noisy guardians of the status quo. More culpable are museum directors, their boards of trustees and the entire cozy apparatus of museum funding which systematically squelch alternative exhibits and almost never offer radical perspectives. But whatever the reasons for the lack of incisive revisions of our past in museum exhibits, the museum community has learnt with aplomb that the best way not to rock the apple cart, thereby preserving the textbook vision of history is A) perfect the conscious omission of unpleasant facts and B) make constant use of the passive voice. These are the great weapons in the curatorial armamentarium. Otherwise, perhaps some patriotic viewer from the boonies will be upset by the too horrible truth and make a fuss and who needs that with the likes of Jesse Helms waiting in the wings to clamor about public funding for anti-American plots? To avoid just this scenario, everything is thus made passive and safe and antiseptic. Here's an example from a wall panel in the "Seeds of Change" exhibit.

As settlers moved into the Black Hills, the Indians were displaced, and violence ensued.

Say what? You look for something more but that's it, there is nothing more. What on Earth does "violence ensued" mean?

And who are these settlers? The exhibit never explains it. What the curators consciously omit telling the viewer is that what actually happened to the magnificent hunting grounds of the Black Hills was bold faced theft on a grand scale. These lands are sacred to the Lakota Sioux and they were then and still are officially deeded to these tribes unto perpetuity by binding treaties of Congress. Despite these sworn promises of Congress, the Black Hills were overrun not by settlers, but by ruthless white marauders with nothing but greed in their veins. Lured by tales of gold, these murderous squatters shot their way into Indian territory while the US government (supplying the "settlers" with rifles as fast as they could grab them) turned a bemused blind eye as any and all Indians with a scalp, including women and children, were cut down. Indian scalps, by the way, were worth at least a couple of dollars apiece in the good old days at some notorious trading posts, although the hair of an Indian child only brought two bits in Minnesota c1870s. When the Indians fought back, in galloped the cavalry to mop up the hostiles. Heinous scenarios such as this occurred at Sand Creek, Bear River and Wounded Knee and a thousand other sites because these "savages" were not "cultivating the land!" This, at any rate, is what the caption never explains. But then the point of these packaged exhibits isn't to explain and illuminate, but to keep the myth alive.

To accompany the "Seeds of Change" exhibit, a beautiful book full of glossy photographs has been published which bears the same title as the museum extravaganza. From first to last it plays the same coy game of euphemism and omission with the same curatorial skill as the exhibit it purports to explain. Although it tries to be "fair" by superficially describing the enslavement of sugar plantation workers and the decimation of the Indians by disease, it is also a seamless display of just how smoothly the curatorial mentality coopts the misery and slaughter of those who suffered the brutal invasion of Europe in the Americas by letting one or two non-threatening critics have their say in a coffee table book. A few "alternate voices" are sandwiched between richly illustrated chapters penned by "experts" explaining what really happened. Run your finger down the table of contents, and sure enough, near the end you'll find the obligatory bone thrown to the victims: "An American Indian
Perspective" by George P. Horse Capture. However, it follows the chapter by the great Columbus apologist, Joseph Sanchez, director of Spanish Colonial Research at the University of New Mexico. Sanchez, a tireless hack who has crusaded for years in the cause of Spain's dominion in the "New World", claims that the conquest naysayers have been misled by a diabolical plot. In his argument, the supposed brutality of the conquistadors is a pack of "lies" spread by vile persons, who have been "subverted by anti-Spanish propagandists" and who described "Spaniards as depraved and cowardly people who had committed crimes against defenseless natives," as if this wasn't the case. This is the "Hispanic" perspective, of course. So there you have it: one oppressed "alternate voice" vying against another in this Washington DC fantasyland of an exhibit and its accompanying book of talking pictures. For all its glossy pictures and its purported "balance", the context within which the entire book and exhibit are set is one of the sovereign right of Europe to have conquered and made over America in its own image.

To those who demand a less filtered vision of the past 500 years, to whom the cant of conquest is anathema, let me suggest a few selected books that actually are worth reading.

Hans Koning's Columbus: His Enterprise, 2nd ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991) is excellent. Originally published in 1976, it was the first Columbus biography to call a skunk a skunk and defrock the Admiral for the murderer and liar he was. Intended for a high school audience, the text is at times written in simple language, but the author is never dull although anyone who sets out to deflate a cozy childhood myth armed with a violent set of new truths may end up sounding like a preacher of doom at a yuppie cocktail party. However, this is not about deflating Columbian festivities, but about reclaiming the historical record for our children. It is about seeing how the lies of the past infect our present and that the greatest myth of all is that the slaughter and the conquering happened back then, whereas today we are more enlightened. Of course, the slaughter of Indians in the Americas continues unabated in Bolivia, Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico and elsewhere, with the rape of Indian lands being the US specialty, precisely Columbus' ongoing legacy. Koning must be given full credit for opening the door to the actual history of the early conquest without all the "phoney baloney," as he calls it, which the revisionist apologists for the last five hundred years have tried so frantically to propagate.

More scholarly but no less readable is Kirkpatrick Sale's The Conquest of Paradise now in paperback from Plume Books (New York, 1990). The beauty of Sale's work is that he brings to life the historical milieu of Columbus's era, the unimaginable brutality and amorality of Europe in 1492. Consider this for contrast. On January 8th 1992, Michael Berlin, director of the Ayn Rand Institute, wrote a guest editorial for The Los Angeles Times. Here is an excerpt:

Before 1492, what is now the United States was sparsely inhabited, unused and undeveloped. The inhabitants were primarily wandering hunter-gatherers, living hand-to-mouth and day-to-day. There was no change, no growth for thousands of years. There was no wheel, no written language, little agriculture and scant permanent settlement but there were endless bloody wars. With rare exception, life was nasty, brutish and short.

Heady stuff, but it is absolutely categorically false. What Sale's book amply shows is that it was Europe, not Native America, which was little more than a stinking hell hole of plague, wars and famine before 1492. Agriculture in Europe was so hopelessly shoddy and stricken with superstition, that between 1427 and 1492 there were no less than forty full-scale famines in Europe. There were dozens of wars. Not a single city in Europe had so much as the barest form of public sanitation save open culverts in the street where you poured your poop bucket out the window straight onto the cobblestones. Europe had no astronomy. Medicine was non-existent unless you liked being bled dry with leeches. Even the holy Popes indulged in endless bouts of fornication and Machiavellian intrigue. And if you were just an average schmoe in Seville or Avignon, never a dull moment, you could dodge the sewer culvert on route to the public square to witness a drunken orgy called an auto-da-fe in which innocent women were burned alive as witches while black-frocked priests gleefully watched. Horrific as this all is,
something in Sale's wry humor makes this a truly enjoyable read, for we finally see corrupted Europe for what it was, an "old bitch gone in the teeth" as one modern poet has put it.

In the Americas, meanwhile, the astronomy of the Aztecs, Mayans and Incas has yet to be matched for precision even by Carl Sagan. The agriculture of the Indians of the Americas was peerless even by the standards of a modern Iowa farmer. The Incas alone cultivated over 2,800 varieties of potatoes and, per square acre, out-produced the modern Iowa farmer three to one. The sewer systems in the larger metropolitan towns such as Teochitlan were magnificent feats of engineering and sanitation. And even the most "uneducated" unclad shaman of the jungle knew more about medicine than all the physicians of fifteenth century Europe put together. The Conquest of Paradise is a must for anyone interested in understanding the Columbus myth and it will remain a fine tonic to counter the gaseous blather of the free marketeers for years to come.

Confronting Columbus, edited by John Yewell and librarians Chris Dodge and Jan DeSirey, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers, 1992) is another must read. This book has the benefit of bringing together an excellent collection of essays covering many facets of the Columbian legacy, especially that legacy's impact upon the Indigenous populations of the Americas. The book includes seventeen essays by as many authors, a useful resource directory, an extensive bibliography, as well as eight separate appendices on a wide range of topics. Included among the authors are such exceptional Native writers as John Mohawk, Ward Churchill and Robert Allen Warrior. Confronting Columbus will not disappoint anyone interested in the ongoing cant of the conquest which thunders unabated against Indian sovereignty to the present day. There is also an excellent critique of the use of the passive voice in museum shows by Jan Elliott, a Cherokee, in a chapter titled "Exhibiting Ideology." It is perhaps the best deflation of the curatorial status quo I have ever read. If only as an antidote to the hooplah, this book should be displayed prominently throughout 1992 in all public libraries, with second copies on the shelves.

Finally, also for high school and college age readers, is an excellent history put out by the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America, titled, Dangerous Memories: Invasion and Resistance Since 1492 (published by the Task Force, 1991). What this book does, which I think is most useful, is to divide each page down the middle with an historical narrative on the one side and quotations by an array of contemporaneous writers on the other. Although this format will make it difficult for anyone who wants a straight-forward bedtime read, as a teaching tool it is brilliantly evocative, offering a living testimony in words as a means to explain the historical horrors of the conquest and the ongoing destruction of the Americas by our purblind markeeters. Unfortunately, the book cuts short its tale of resistance in the 1970s, as if the struggles for justice and racial equality had suddenly stopped at this time, indeed as if the environmental and racist battles were not more dire and hard fought today. They surely could have covered the slaughter of Amazonian Indians in Rondonia and elsewhere, for instance. Also, the ongoing destruction of sacred Indian lands in the Black Hills and Big Mountain by mining interests and corporate profiteers is barely touched. These are struggles which are being hard fought as you read these words. At the expense of sounding didactic, surely we must begin to teach our children that the struggles and injustices go on every day, in every hamlet of the globe, and may well be going on in our very own neighborhoods. Nevertheless, for clear-eyed historical reporting Dangerous Memories is a worthy addition to any library, especially those with a substantial young adult readership. Teachers especially should consider using this book for their classes as an adjunct to their curricula.

Let me finish by saying that for those who want the best resource guide dealing with counter-Quincentennial activities and resistance groups, send $11 to the South and Meso-American Indian Information Center, P.O. Box 289703, Oakland, CA 94604 (Tel# 1-510-834-4263). The beautifully bound and handsomely laid out SAIC 1992 International Directory & Resource Guide is an exquisite piece of work and well worth the investment of any person or library with an interest in these issues.

Goodbye Columbus! What's to celebrate?