

CHAPTER ONE

COLUMBUS AND THE INDIANS

ARAWAK MEN AND WOMEN CAME OUT OF their villages onto the beaches. Full of wonder, they swam out to get a closer look at the strange big boat. When Christopher Columbus and his soldiers came ashore, carrying swords, the Arawaks ran to greet them. Columbus later wrote about the Indians in his ship's log:

They . . . brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they exchanged for the glass beads and hawks' bells. They willingly traded everything they owned. . . . They were well-built, with good bodies and handsome features. . . . They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They had no iron. Their spears are made of cane. . . . They would make fine servants. . . . With fifty men we could subjugate [overpower] them and make them do whatever we want.

(left, detail)
Captain Mason's attack
on the Pequots'
fortified village, 1637.



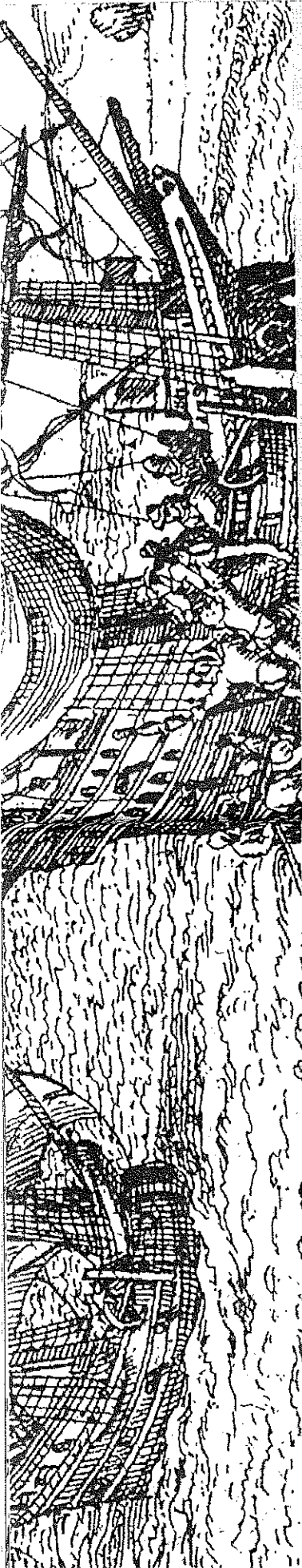
European to reach Asia by sailing across the Atlantic Ocean.

Like other informed people of his time, Columbus knew that the world was round. This meant that he could sail west from Europe to reach the East. The world Columbus imagined, however, was small. He would never have made it to Asia, which was thousands of miles farther away than he thought. But he was lucky. One-fourth of the way there he came upon an unknown land between Europe and Asia.

Thirty-three days after leaving waters known to Europeans, Columbus and his men saw branches floating in the water and flocks of birds in the air. These were signs of land. Then, on October 12, 1492, a sailor called Rodrigo saw the moon shining on white sands, and cried out. It was an island in the Bahamas, in the Caribbean Sea. The first man to sight land was supposed to get a large reward, but Rodrigo never got it. Columbus claimed that he had seen a light the evening before. He got the reward.

The Arawaks lived in the Bahama Islands. Like Indians on the American mainland, they believed in hospitality and in sharing. But Columbus, the first messenger to the Americas from the civilization of western Europe, was hungry for money. As soon as he arrived in the islands, he seized some Arawaks by force so that he could get information from them. The information that Columbus wanted was this: Where is the gold?

Columbus had talked the king and queen of Spain into paying for his expedition. Like other European states, Spain wanted gold. There was gold in the Indies, as the people of Europe called India and southeastern Asia. The Indies had other valuable goods, too, such as silks and spices. But traveling by land from Europe to Asia was a long and dangerous journey, so the nations of Europe were searching for a way to reach the Indies by sea. Spain decided to gamble on Columbus. In return for bringing back gold and spices, Columbus would get 10 percent of the profits. He would be made governor of any newly discovered lands, and he would win the title Admiral of the Ocean Sea. He set out with three ships, hoping to become the first



CHILD SAILORS

LIKE MOST HISTORIANS, I WRITE ABOUT COLUMBUS and his "men," but many of those who sailed with Columbus in 1492—on the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria—were children. One of those children was twelve-year-old Diego Bermúdez, a page who sailed with Columbus on the Santa Maria. Of the ninety sailors who sailed on the three ships, nearly twenty were boys!

The children who sailed with Columbus worked in their bare feet, took showers by dumping buckets of seawater over their heads, and used a toilet that stuck out from the ships' decks over the sea. And even the youngest boys drank strong white wine with their food.

Older boys, called "criados," assisted ships' officers, or apprenticed as "gromets," climbing ropes high above to trim the sails. Gromets became expert at tying different kinds of knots. They hung lengths of rope from their belts and carried knives at all times to help them in their work. Younger boys like

Diego worked as "pages," who cooked and scrubbed the decks, though their most important job was to tell time. There were no clocks on board, so they kept time by using an ampolleta, which was a half-hour glass filled with sand. As soon as all the sand ran out, the page turned it over and ran to the poop deck, where he rang a bell and sang out a prayer to signify that another half-hour had passed. Pages had to learn sixteen different prayers by heart, each one for a different half-hour of the working day. Here is one of them:

Blessed be the hour God came to earth,

Holy Mary who gave him birth,

And St. John who saw his worth.

The guard is posted,

The watchglass filling,

We'll have a good voyage,

If God be willing.

Source: Hoose, Phillip. *We Were There, Too!: Young People in U.S. History*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2001.

The Arawaks' Impossible Task

THE ARAWAK INDIANS who greeted Columbus lived in villages and practiced agriculture. Unlike the Europeans, they had no horses or other work animals, and they had no iron. What they did have was tiny gold ornaments in their ears.

Those little ornaments shaped history. Because of them, Columbus started his relationship with the Indians by taking prisoners, thinking that they could lead him to the source of the gold. He sailed to several other Caribbean islands, including Hispaniola, an island now divided between two countries, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. After one of Columbus's ships ran aground, he used wood from the wreck to build a fort in Haiti. Then he sailed back to Spain with news of his discovery, leaving thirty-nine crewmen at the fort. Their orders were to find and store the gold.

The report Columbus made to the royal Spanish court was part fact, part fiction. He claimed to have reached Asia, and he called the Arawaks "Indians," meaning people of the Indies. The islands Columbus had visited must be off the coast of China, he said. They were full of riches:

(left)
Bartolomé de Las Casas,
1791.



five hundred captives to send to Spain. Two hundred of the Indians died on the voyage. The rest arrived alive in Spain and were put up for sale by a local church official. Columbus, who was full of religious talk, later wrote, "Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold."

But too many slaves died in captivity. Columbus was desperate to show a profit on his voyages. He had to make good on his promises to fill the ships with gold. In a part of Haiti where Columbus and his men imagined there was much gold, they ordered everyone over the age of thirteen to collect gold for them. Indians who did not give gold to the Spaniards had their hands cut off and bled to death.

The Indians had been given an impossible task. The only gold around was bits of gold dust in streams. So they ran away. The Spaniards hunted them down with dogs and killed them. When they took prisoners, they hanged them or burned them to death. Unable to fight against the Spanish soldiers' guns, swords, armor, and horses, the Arawaks began to commit mass suicide with poison. When the Spanish search for gold began, there were a quarter of a million Indians on Haiti.

Hispaniola is a miracle. Mountains and hills, plains and pastures, are both fertile and beautiful . . . the harbors are unbelievably good and there are many wide rivers of which the majority contain gold. . . . There are many spices, and great mines of gold and other metals. . . .

If the king and queen would give him just a little more help, Columbus said, he would make another voyage. This time he would come back to Spain with "as much gold as they need . . . and as many slaves as they ask."

Columbus's promises won him seventeen ships and more than 1,200 men for his second expedition. The aim was clear: slaves and gold. They went from island to island in the Caribbean, capturing Indians. But as word spread among the Indians, the Spaniards found more and more empty villages. When they got to Haiti, they found that the sailors left behind at the fort were dead. The sailors had roamed the island in gangs looking for gold, taking women and children as slaves, until the Indians had killed them in a battle.

Columbus's men searched Haiti for gold, with no success. They had to fill up the ships returning to Spain with something, so in 1495 they went on a great slave raid. Afterward, they picked

Spaniards treated the Indians:

As for the newly born, they died early because their mothers, overworked and famished [starving], had no milk to nurse them, and for this reason, while I was in Cuba, 7,000 children died in three months. Some mothers even drowned their babies from sheer desperation. . . . In this way, husbands died in the mines, wives died at work, and children died from lack of milk. . . . My eyes have seen these acts so foreign to human nature, and now I tremble as I write. . . .

This was the start of the history of Europeans in the Americas. It was a history of conquest, slavery, and death. But for a long time, the history books given to children in the United States told a different story—a tale of heroic adventure, not bloodshed. The way the story is taught to young people is just beginning to change.

The story of Columbus and the Indians shows us something about how history gets written. One of the most famous historians to write about Columbus was Samuel Eliot Morison. He even sailed across the Atlantic Ocean himself, retracing Columbus's route. In 1954 Morison published a popular book called *Christopher Columbus, Mariner*. He said that cruel treatment by Columbus and the

In two years, through murder or suicide, half them were dead.

When it was clear that there was no gold left, the Indians were enslaved on the Spaniards' huge estates. They were overworked and mistreated, and they died by the thousands. By 1550, only five hundred Indians remained. A century later, no Arawaks were left on the island.

Telling Columbus's Story

WE KNOW WHAT HAPPENED ON THE

Caribbean islands after Columbus came because of Bartolomé de Las Casas. He was a young priest who helped the Spanish conquer Cuba. For a while he owned a plantation where Indian slaves worked. But then Las Casas gave up his plantation and spoke out against Spanish cruelty.

Las Casas made a copy of Columbus's journal, and he also wrote a book called *History of the Indies*. In this book, he described the Indians' society and their customs. He also told how the

Europeans who came after him caused the "complete genocide" of the Indians. *Genocide* is a harsh word. It is the name of a terrible crime—the deliberate killing of an entire ethnic or cultural group.

Morison did not lie about Columbus. He did not leave out the mass murder. But he mentioned the truth quickly and then went on to other things. By burying the fact of genocide in a lot of other information, he seemed to be saying that the mass murder wasn't very important in the big picture. By making genocide seem like a small part of the story, he took away its power to make us think differently about Columbus. At the end of the book, Morison summed up his idea of Columbus as a great man. Columbus's most important quality, Morison said, was his seamanship.

A historian must pick and choose among facts, deciding which ones to put into his or her work, which ones to leave out, and which ones to place at the center of the story. Every historian's own ideas and beliefs go into the way he or she writes history. In turn, the way history is written can shape the ideas and beliefs of the people who read it. A view of history like Morison's, a picture of the past that sees Columbus and others like him as

great sailors and discoverers, but says almost nothing about their genocide, can make it seem as though what they did was right.

People who write and read history have gotten used to seeing terrible things such as conquest and murder as the price of progress. This is because many of them think that history is the story of governments, conquerors, and leaders. In this way of looking at the past, history is what happens to states, or nations. The actors in history are kings, presidents, and generals. But what about factory workers, farmers, people of color, women, and children? They make history, too.

The story of any country includes fierce conflicts between conquerors and the conquered, masters and slaves, people with power and those without power. Writing history is always a matter of taking sides. For example, I choose to tell the story of the discovery of America from the point of view of the Arawaks. I will tell the story of the U.S. Constitution from the point of view of the slaves, and the story of the Civil War from the point of view of the Irish in New York City.

I believe that history can help us imagine new possibilities for the future. One way it can do this

is by letting us see the hidden parts of the past, the times when people showed that they could resist the powerful, or join together. Maybe our future can be found in the past's moments of kindness and courage rather than its centuries of warfare. That is my approach to the history of the United States, which started with the meeting between Columbus and the Arawaks.

More Meetings, More Fighting

The tragedy of Columbus and the Arawaks happened over and over again. Spanish conquerors Hernan Cortés and Francisco Pizarro destroyed the Aztecs of Mexico and the Incas of South America. When English settlers reached Virginia and Massachusetts, they did the same thing to the Indians they met.

Jamestown, Virginia, was the first permanent English settlement in the Americas. It was built inside a territory governed by an Indian chief named Powhatan. He watched the English settle

(left)
Captain Mason's attack
on the Pequot's
fortified village, 1637.



on his land but did not attack. In 1607, Powhatan spoke to John Smith, one of the leaders at Jamestown. The statement that has come down to us may not truly be Powhatan's words, but it sounds a lot like what other Indians said and wrote at later times. We can read Powhatan's statement as the spirit of what he thought as he watched the white men enter his territory:

I know the difference between peace and war better than any man in my country. Why will you take by force what you may have quietly by love? Why will you destroy us who supply you with food? What can you get by war? Why are you jealous of us? We are unarmed, and willing to give you what you ask, if you come in a friendly manner, and not so simple as not to know that it is much better to eat good meat, sleep comfortably, live quietly with my wives and children, laugh and be merry with the English, and trade for their copper and hatchets, than to run away from them, and to lie cold in the woods, and feed on acorns, roots, and such trash, and be so hunted that I can neither eat nor sleep.

In the winter of 1609-1610, the English at Jamestown went through a terrible food shortage they called the "starving time." They roamed the woods looking for nuts and berries, and they dug

up graves to eat the corpses. Out of five hundred colonists, all but sixty died.

Some of the colonists ran off to join the Indians, where they would at least be fed. The next summer, the governor of the colony asked Powhatan to send them back. When he refused, the colonists destroyed an Indian settlement. They kidnapped the queen of the tribe, threw her children into the water and shot them, and then stabbed her.

Twelve years later, the Indians tried to get rid of the growing English settlements. They massacred 347 men, women, and children. From then on it was total war. The English could not enslave the Indians, and they would not live with them, so they decided to wipe them out.

To the north, the Pilgrims settled in New England. Like the Jamestown colonists, they came to Indian land. The Pequot tribe lived in southern Connecticut and Rhode Island. The colonists wanted this land, so the war with the Pequots began. Massacres took place on both sides. The English used a form of warfare that Cortés had used in Mexico. To fill the enemy with terror, they attacked civilians, people who were not warriors.

“WHITE INDIANS”

ENGLISH COLONISTS CAPTURED IN BATTLE by Native Americans who found that they preferred life in Native American communities over their own were referred to as “white Indians.” Eunice Williams was one such example. She was seven years old when she was taken prisoner by the Kahnawake Mohawks. Her mother and two of her brothers were among those killed. Her other two brothers were also captured. Two and a half years later, her father, Reverend John Williams, negotiated the return of Eunice and her brothers, but Eunice refused to leave the Native American community. As a Mohawk, she converted to Catholicism and married another Mohawk.

It was said that the Mohawks were kinder to children and that females were respected as the equals of males. Where European parents considered physical punishment essential, the Native Americans

believed that children should be “reproved with gentle words,” and that corporal punishment would weaken character and make children submissive. In Native American cultures, the goal was to imbue children with independence and courage.

Benjamin Franklin wrote in 1753, “When white persons of either sex have been taken prisoners young by the Indians, and lived awhile among them, tho’ ransomed by their Friends, and treated with all imaginable tenderness to prevail with them to stay among the English, yet in a Short time they become disgusted with our manner of life, and the care and pains that are necessary to support it, and take the first good Opportunity of escaping again into the woods, from whence there is no reclaiming them.”

Source: Mintz, Steven. *Huck’s Ruff: A History of American Childhood*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 7, 8, 15, 35.



Women were important and respected in Iroquois society, and the sexes shared power. Children were taught to be independent. Not only the Iroquois but other Indian tribes behaved in similar ways.

So Columbus and the Europeans who followed him did not come to an empty wilderness. They came to a world that was, in some places, as crowded as Europe. The Indians had their own history, laws, and poetry. They lived in greater equality than people in Europe did. Was "progress" enough of a reason to decimate their population and wipe out their societies? The fate of the Indians reminds us to look at history as something more than just a story of conquerors and leaders.

They set fire to wigwams, and as the Indians ran out to escape the flames, the English cut them to bits with their swords.

When Columbus came to the Americas, 10 million Indians lived north of what is now Mexico. After the Europeans began taking that land, the number of Indians was reduced until, in time, fewer than a million remained. Many Indians died from diseases brought by the whites.

Who were these Indians? Who were the people who came out onto the beaches with presents for Columbus and his crew and who peered out of the forests at the first white settlers of Virginia and Massachusetts?

As many as 75 million Indians lived throughout the Americas before Columbus. They had hundreds of different tribal cultures and about two thousand languages. Many tribes were nomads, wanderers who lived by hunting and gathering food. Others, were expert farmers and lived in settled communities. Among the Iroquois, the most powerful of the northeastern tribes, land did not belong to individuals. It belonged to the entire community. People shared the work of farming and hunting, and they also shared food.