

Father of America: An engraving of 1867 shows Columbus the figurehead of the United States.

seen not as affirmations of a unified world but rather as evidence of the continuing claims of Europe to be top dog. In this atmosphere Columbus is more likely to be hailed as the inventor of New World slavery than praised as the father of world unity. No longer a far-sighted visionary, who romantically overcame every hardship, he seems more a blinkered bigot who brought slaughter and damage in his wake.

As Columbus' statues are daubed, celebrations are boycotted, and reputations are blackened, it may be as well to remember that such protests are part of a process of image-making and image-breaking which began five centuries ago. The doubts of today have a history almost as complex and long-lasting as the positive image of the canny explorer. Columbus himself was not always asked to carry the can for the ill-effects of the encounter between the Old World and the New, but there have always been those who have used reflections upon 1492 for their own ends. Attitudes towards Columbus and to the effects of 1492 have thus provided a telling litmus of many currents in cultural history throughout the centuries since his first landfall. To examine these attitudes may be merely to resurrect some old myths and forgotten figures. It may also show Columbus' current enemies that even if they have history on their side, their protests are as time-bound as they are timely. There is no end to the uses of 1492, nor to the constructions of Col-

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

'An event which ought to have been beneficial to all' – David Armitage looks at how the 'discovery' of America has drawn mixed reviews from the West over five centuries of commemoration.

COLUMBUS! We read of him every day
In books, pamphlets, magazines, papers;
Whilst Italy, Portugal, Spain, USA,
Cut constant, consecutive capers.

So *Punch* lamented the festivities of 1892 which surrounded the fourth centenary of Columbus' first voyage. It is hard to suppress similar apprehensions of overkill in 1992 as at least 'Italy... Spain, USA' celebrate the Columbian quincentenary. Yet the 500th anniversary of that first voyage has attracted as much bile as boredom. Columbus himself is denounced as a mass-murderer. The legacy of the encounter has been called nothing less than 'ecocide'. Meanwhile the various international commemorations are

umbus. Nevertheless, it will be helpful to see who first sang some of the old songs whose strains we hear again in 1992.

The construction of the Columbus' image began, of course, with the explorer himself. The transformation of the son of a Genoese weaver into the Grand Admiral, Viceroy and Governor was an effort into which Columbus put almost as much work as he did into his less clearly successful voyages of discovery. Amid the ambition, the self-righteousness and messianic fervour of his personality there was little room for regret, only for disappointment. In his novel *The Harp and the Shadow*, (André Deutsch, 1992) the Cuban writer, Alejo Carpentier, presents Col-

umbus preparing for his final confession before death, but when he tries to make the final reckoning of his life, Columbus decides 'there will be no reckoning. I will say only *what could be inscribed in marble* about myself. This is fictional, but fits all that Columbus allowed us to know of himself. What one might call the counter-history of Columbus could only begin after his death, but the Admiral himself gave no sanction for it by soul-searching or by regret. If he had, the attempts of Pope Pius IX, the American Knights of Columbus, and others to promote his canonisation at the end of the last century might have had greater success. Those who seek to demonise him now might also have had more precise grounds for their accusations.

Columbus imagined himself as Christopher the Christ-bearer, girding the earth with the Gospel, rather than as Colón the coloniser. To the Spanish it seemed that he was right in his sense of divine mission, in that God had kept the New World hidden from antiquity so that Castile should have the honour of being the first to uncover it from oblivion. That presumption was cold comfort to other European nations who wanted a place in the sun in the decades after Columbus' death. Spain, like her competitors, spawned historical fantasies and thereby reinforced claims of first discovery prior to Columbus which would render 1992 redundant as an anniversary year. In 1535, the Spanish historian of the Indies, Fernández de Oviedo, identified the new lands as the Hesperides which had belonged to the Spanish King Hes-

ced in November 1991, that in 640 AD natives of Alaska had sent ambassadors and tribute to the Emperor Taizhong, thereby proving that the Chinese had earlier discovered the Americas.

Much more effective against Spanish claims to legitimacy was the so-called Black Legend, which drew attention to the barbarous treatment of the native peoples of the Americas. This was in fact Spanish in origin, though it was most vigorously propagated and promoted by the Protestant nations of northern Europe. On the Sunday before Christmas 1511, the Dominican friar, Antonio de Montesinos, preached a slashing sermon to the Spanish settlers of Hispaniola upbraiding them for their abuse of the Indians. In his notorious condemnation he was followed more famously by the slave-holder turned Dominican, Bartolomé de Las Casas, whose writings on the cruelties of the Spanish in the New World stoked the fires of Protestant propaganda more effectively than any home-grown materials. Las Casas' works were translated into English late in the sixteenth century, illustrated with horrifying engravings by the Frankfurt firm of Theodor de Bry and Sons, and they were regularly quoted for two centuries as ammunition against the Spanish. The gory illustrations and seething outrage of these works provided useful weapons in European domestic quarrels more than in overseas battles. The New World was called in to redress imbalances in the Old, for example during the Dutch Revolt or the Armada crisis, as much as to justify the predatory advances of other nations in the Amer-

you, the New World has conquered you in turn, and has weakened and exhausted your ancient vigour'. Seventeenth-century historians compared the decline of Spain to the decline of Rome; their eighteenth-century successors then used the history of Spain to explain how Rome fell. The Spanish monarchy, overstretched financially, depleted in its population, seemingly corrupted by luxury, was like King Midas: it had wished for nothing but gold, its critics said, but now the fulfilment of its desire was its greatest bane.

The discovery of the New World itself could be the only root of Spain's evils. As the English poet and historian, Samuel Daniel, put it in 1613, 'The opening of a new world... strangely altered the manner of this... and opened a way to infinite corruption'. Spain's decline, and the apparent cause of this in its discovery of the New World mines, made it seem to other nations that they might have been lucky not to have been first in the race for America. It was known, for example, that Bartolomé Colón had hawked his brother's plans for a voyage to the Indies around the courts of northern Europe, to England and France as well as to Portugal, but with no success. In the sixteenth century, the English and French were kicking themselves for having missed their opportunity, but in the centuries to follow they congratulated themselves on a providential deliverance. Montesquieu, writing in 1748, thought the French had done 'perhaps imprudently, a very wise thing' in not taking up Columbus' offer. A new set of arguments was thus added

AND THE USES OF HISTORY

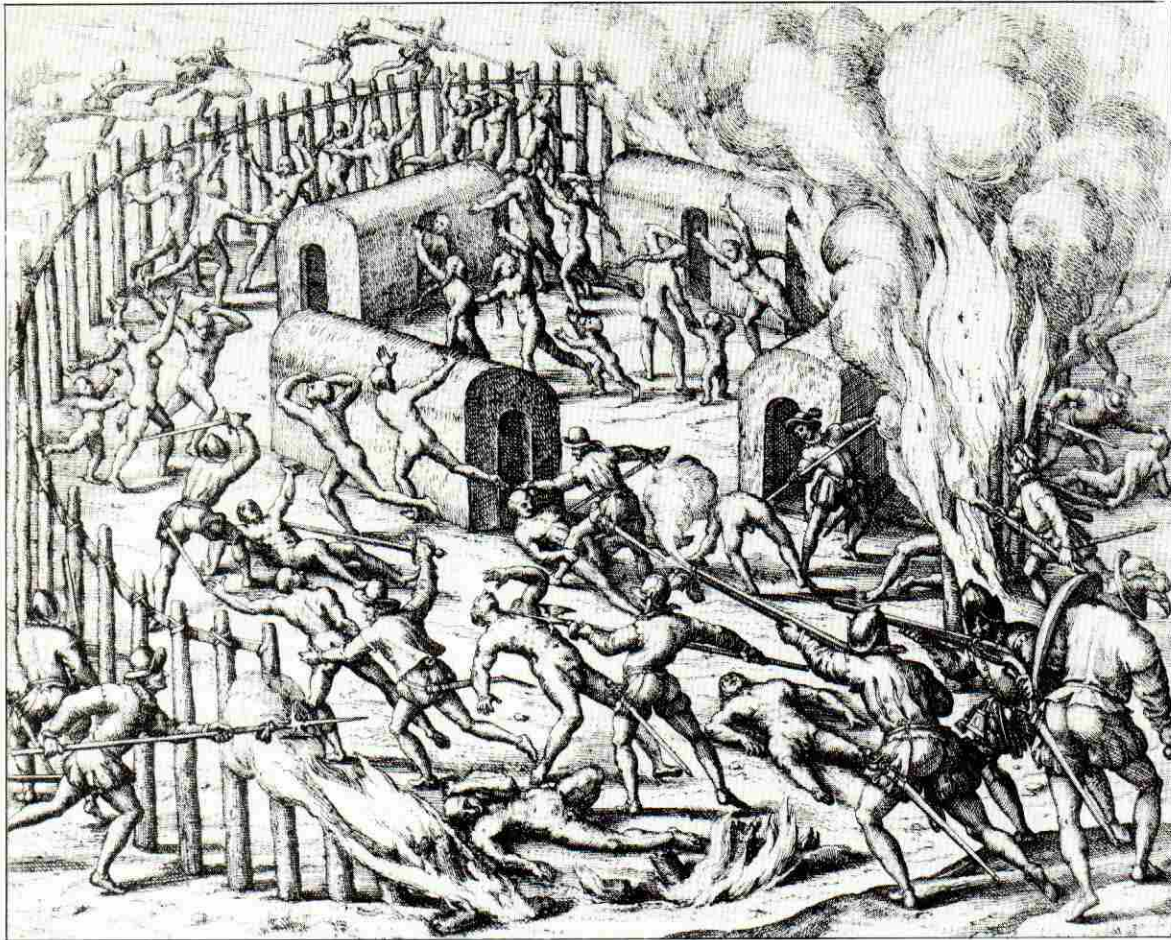
péro two millennia before the birth of Christ. In sixteenth-century France, however, the polymathic Guillaume Postel saw the New World as Plato's Atlantis which had been first colonised by descendants of Noah's son Japheth who had migrated to ancient Gaul. Under the Welsh-born Tudors the English resurrected the voyage of the Welsh Prince Madoc who in 1170 had fled civil war in his homeland and ended up in present-day Alabama. (A plaque in Mobile, Alabama, set up by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1953, still commemorates his landing.) In the light of such attempted revisions of history, one can only speculate on the motives of the Chinese news agency, Xinhua, which announ-

icas. Conscience inspired Montesinos and Las Casas; those who took up their cries could only plead covetousness.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, it seemed to outside observers that greed for gold, rather than concern for souls, had indeed been the prime mover in the expansion of Spain's empire. But such a sin was seen to deserve apt punishment. The Spanish monarchy, especially under Charles V, imagined itself as a new Roman Empire, all-encompassing and ever-expanding. For many others the notion of Rome evoked images not of universal grandeur but of decline and fall. As the Dutch humanist, Justus Lipsius, observed ominously to a Spanish correspondent in 1603, 'Conquered by

to the anti-Columbian chorus. It was now evident that a price was paid by the conquerors as well as by the conquered. On this reading of the discovery of America, Columbus had opened a Pandora's box in 1492.

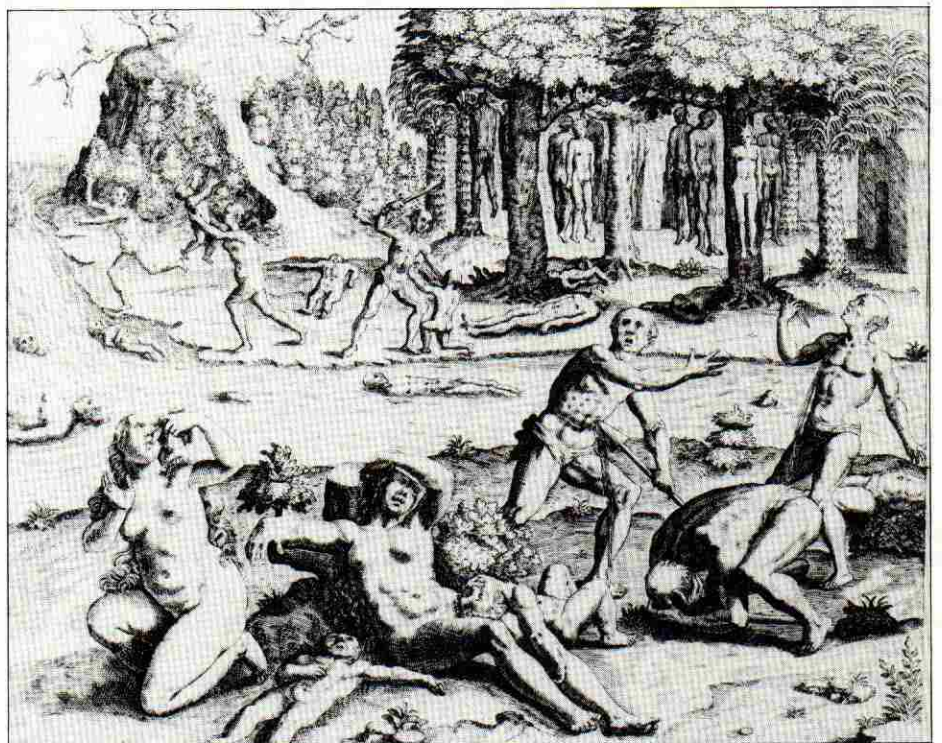
If for Spain the discovery seemed to have been the cause of irretrievable regression, in the battle between the Ancients and the Moderns 1492 stood as the threshold of modernity. On this interpretation, the discovery had defined a new epoch of enlightenment and achievement, since it had occurred in the same era as the discovery of printing, gunpowder and the compass, and just as classical texts were being dusted off to reveal the new worlds of antiquity. In 1757, David Hume, regret-



The Black Legend: engravings such as these by Theodor de Bry accompanied Spanish accounts of their New World experiences and subsequently fuelled the anti-Columbus lobby. (Left) This view of conquistadors sacking a native village illustrated Las Casas' *Narratio Regionum*, in which he describes Spanish atrocities to the natives, some of whom (below) preferred suicide.

ted that he had not begun his famous *History of England* with the reign of Henry VII because 'It is properly at that period that modern history commences. America was discovered; commerce extended; the arts cultivated; printing invented; religion reformed; and all the governments of Europe almost changed'. The elevation of 1492 as a decisive step towards modernity long pre-dated Hume: it was a sixteenth-century commonplace that compared the new worlds of knowledge opened up by printing and humanist scholarship to the New World revealed by Columbus. It was but a short step from such triumphalist views of 1492 to make it into a metaphor for all forms of enquiry, as Galileo found new worlds in the heavens with his telescope and the Dutch scientist Leeuwenhoek saw others in a drop of water with his microscope. As the discoverer himself, Columbus could thus be dressed in the mantle of a proto-scientist, and hailed by the Enlightenment for his rationality and successful hypothesis-testing in overcoming the feeble pooh-poohing of the sceptics.

The discovery and conquest of America, however, also presented an object-lesson in the unintended consequences of legitimate enquiry. The Enlightenment saw it both as a step in



mankind's irresistible march toward the complete comprehension of the natural world and as an emblem of the destruction such curiosity could bring with it. Edward Gibbon, for one, found that knowledge and commerce had tied the civilised nations of Europe together in a lock-step of mutual enlightenment and progress so that the

model of decline and fall which so possessed him in his vision of Rome could no longer be applicable. The only check to his optimism was overseas discovery, which Gibbon thought had 'too often been stained with avarice, cruelty and fanaticism'. Adam Smith echoed this analysis when he concluded that 'it was not the wisdom

and policy, but the disorder and injustice of the European governments, which peopled and cultivated America'. For his contemporary the Abbé Cornelius de Pauw, writing in the Berlin of Frederick the Great, it might not be too late to save the new worlds in the Pacific and the southern hemisphere from a fate similar to that suffered by America:

let us not buy enlightenment on geographical quibbles at the cost of destroying part of the globe; let us not massacre the Papuans so that we can investigate the climate of New Guinea with Réaumur's thermometer.

De Pauw's warning was a sign that even science should have its limits, despite



'Many shall pass to and fro and knowledge shall be increased' – the inscription to the frontispiece to Francis Bacon's *Instauratio Magna* of 1620, whose enthusiasm linked contact with the New World to the rational progress of man.

the confidence of those from Francis Bacon onwards who had seen its realm as boundless. As an intellectual exercise the discovery of America was a landmark in the rational progress of man; nevertheless, its obvious consequences could only be a reproach to humanity's Faustian urge for knowledge at all costs.

The progress of commerce presented a similar conundrum. While Columbus had effectively opened up the world as a single economic unit, trade had also been the motive for the most extreme forms of exploitation in the Americas with 'the richest, the fairest and the best part of the world topsy-turvièd, ruined and defaced for the traffic of pearls and pepper', as Montaigne so bitterly encapsulated the

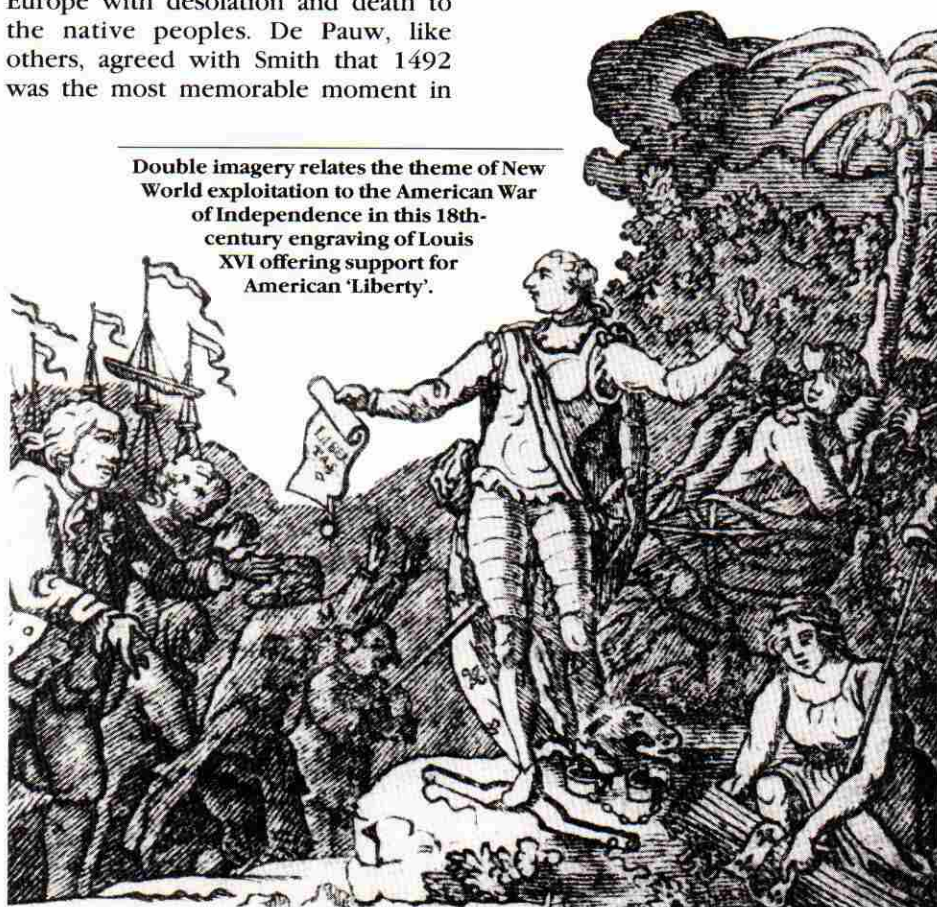
costs of commerce. By the time of the bicentenary of the discovery in the 1690s, it was clear to commentators that trade, not just territorial ambition or confessional loyalty, was now a major motive of international relations. The discovery of America was the root of this great transformation in power politics. As William Paterson, founder of the Bank of England and promoter of Scottish trade in central America, put it in the late 1690s, 'the fruits of those new discoveries of the Spaniards have, within the last two ages, made far greater alteration in Christendom than the sword'. Whether this was a good or a bad thing for the nations of Europe was of course a matter of keen dispute. For thinkers like Adam Smith the admission of the whole world to the civilising effects of commercial society could not but be a benefit, but even he recognised that the 'savage injustice of the Europeans rendered an event which ought to have been beneficial to all, ruinous and destructive to several of those unfortunate countries'.

The famous essay competitions organised by the Abbé Raynal and the Academie Française in 1787 and 1792 to determine whether the discovery had been a boon or a bane for the world reached similarly balanced and dyspeptic conclusions. If 1492 had opened the world to the enlightening effects of commerce and science, it had also brought inflation and disease to Europe with desolation and death to the native peoples. De Pauw, like others, agreed with Smith that 1492 was the most memorable moment in

the secular history of mankind, but he also feared that the world could not stand the shock of a such an event if it were to happen again. Such attempts to weigh the consequences of 1492 fed a strain of historical pessimism always evident in Enlightenment thought, and inspired a political and intellectual hostility to imperial expansion which lay at the root of modern anti-colonialism.

The fruits of such scepticism were also evident in the debate on the nature of America itself which preoccupied naturalists and historians on both sides of the Atlantic in the wake of the French zoologist Buffon's conclusion that the New World was a degenerate cousin of the old, its peoples feeble and impotent, its animals shrunken, and its climate dank and unhealthy. The late eighteenth-century 'Dispute of the New World' occupied the greatest minds of Europe and America in a seemingly futile diagnosis of the development of nature in which much was at stake both for European science and for American pride. America for the European critics truly was a New World, not for its primal innocence or political innovation, but for the immaturity of its species and the relative modernity of its geology. Men and animals exported from Europe became frail and diminished in the Americas, charged the critics: what chance then had America to produce great men to compare with the historic achievers of

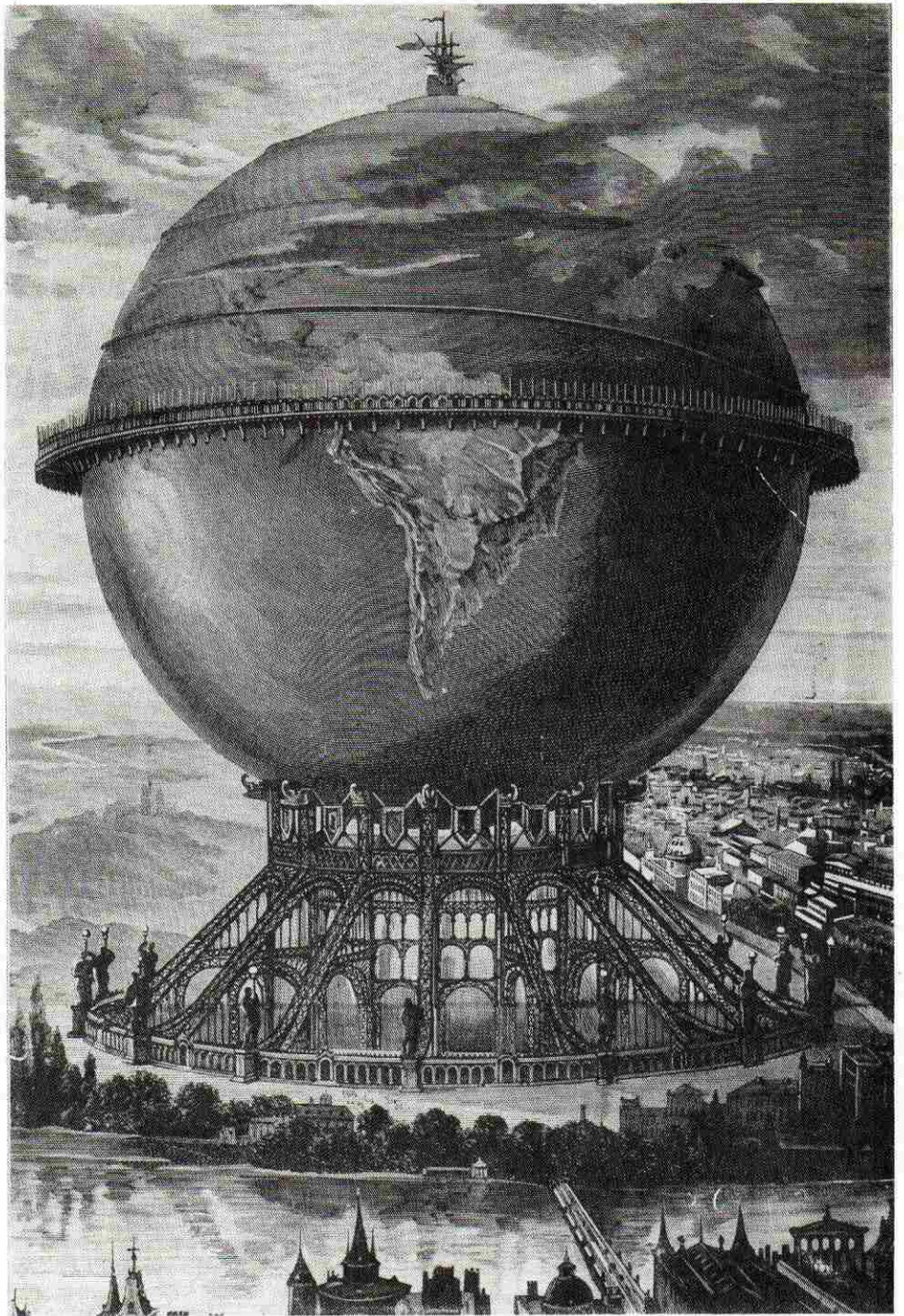
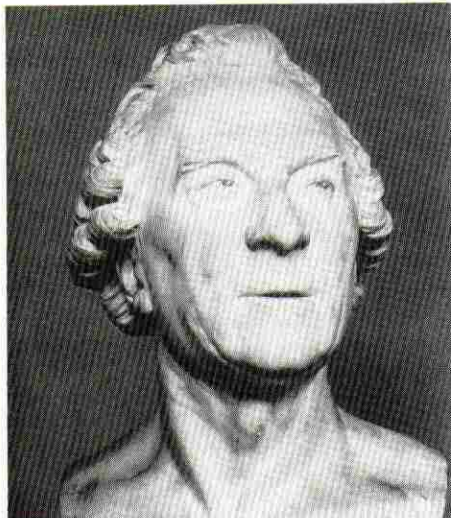
Double imagery relates the theme of New World exploitation to the American War of Independence in this 18th-century engraving of Louis XVI offering support for American 'Liberty'.



Europe? America was indeed a 'child of yesterday', replied Thomas Jefferson, but it could claim its share of world-class genius in Franklin and Washington. Its native peoples were no more backward than the northern Europeans had been under the Roman Empire. And who could deny that the mammoth in the New World had been as big as that in the Old? European scepticism that the New World had a worthy past was evidently no check on American confidence that it would have a rosy future.

The burgeoning confidence of the upstart Americans and the long-standing critique of the consequences of 1492 left little for Europeans to celebrate in 1792. In any event, the era of the movement to abolish slavery, of the reaction to the French Revolution, and of Toussaint L'Ouverture's slave revolt in Santo Domingo in the early 1790s was hardly the best time for continental Europe to celebrate the tercentenary of Columbus' voyages. However, Columbus did have his uses for Americans who were struggling to define a national identity a mere four years after their Constitution had been ratified, when he was somewhat incongruously drafted onto the side of their new-found liberty. The Tammany Society, meeting in New York in October 1792, raised the world's first monument to Columbus and toasted the proposition that 'the fourth century be as remarkable for the improvement and knowledge of the rights of man, as the first was for discovery, and the improvement of nautic science'. Speeches in Boston and London hymned Columbus as the revealer of a whole new world for rational speculation, the hardy vanquisher of Spanish bigotry in the interests of geographical truth, and the discoverer not so much of the New

'Degenerate cousin', French zoologist Buffon thus disfavouredly compared the New World to the Old.



Over the top? 19th-century American desire for national unity and historical identity rested on an interpretation of Columbus as progressive and heroic. This extravagant design for the Columbus Monument at the Chicago World's Fair reveals the extent of the fantasy.

World, as of the United States of America. Thereby the messianic plunderer of prophetic texts, the self-promoting egomaniac, and the originator of New World slavery was miraculously rendered the apostle of liberty and founding-father of what the Reverend Elhanan Winchester (an emigrant American in London) hoped would soon rename itself 'the United States of Columbia'. In the light of such confidence, 1492 joined 1776 as 'the first link in a chain of causes, which bids fair to enlarge the happiness of mankind, by regenerating the principles of government in every quarter of the world', as the American historian David Ramsay told a Charleston audience commemorating the

anniversary of Independence in 1794. The discovery had to be seen as a distinctive moment in *American* development before it could shake off the ambivalent heritage of its place in European history.

If 1792 saw the first stirrings of American nationalism and the appropriation of Columbus to give America a historic sense of mission, by the time of the fourth centenary in 1892 this movement became central to the commemorations. The World's Columbian Exposition, which opened belatedly in Chicago in May 1893, was intended as an extravagant symbol of national unity as well as of worldwide co-operation and achievement. To contribute to this

(Right) 'Conquered by you, the New World has conquered you in turn'. Diego Rivera shows Native America on top, in his *History of Mexico* mural.



sense of a nation pulling together, every state had its own gleaming pavilion to house its products, just as most of the nations of the world had their own buildings (in supposedly characteristic national styles) to showcase their manufactures. Few dissenting voices were raised against Columbus, though the satirist Ambrose Bierce spluttered that Columbus was a greedy, gold-grubbing pirate who deserved no place in American mythology, even if 'some seventy millions of Americans are authenticating the imposture'. Yet that American mythology supported a much greater and more damaging imposture, as a large part of the nation was revealingly excluded from this celebration of American unity. One of the authors of a pamphlet entitled *The Reason Why the Black American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition* noted that:

Theoretically open to all Americans, the Exposition practically is literally and figuratively a 'White City', in the building of which the Colored American was allowed no helping hand, and in its glorious success he has no share.

For Frederick Douglass, perhaps the most powerful voice among the authors of the protest, the Chicago World's Fair was no less than a 'whited sepulchre' that could not disguise the continuing legacy of slavery in the United States in the aftermath of Civil War and Reconstruction.

White Americans successfully appropriated the efforts of Columbus and the achievements of 1492 to bolster their own self-image in 1892 as they had in 1792. The discoverer had begun, and their own age had completed, the conquest of a continent. By the quatercentenary year, a turning-point in American history as momentous as Columbus' own landing seemed to have been reached with the comple-

tion of the westward course of empire across North America. At the American Historical Association Meeting of 1893, held alongside the Chicago Exposition, Frederick Jackson Turner proposed his famous 'frontier thesis' to explain the course of American history. The westward expansion across the continent which had begun with the coming of the first Europeans was now over, and an historical epoch had ended: 'four centuries from the discovery of America the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history'. Yet as the Spanish-American War of 1898 showed, the Columbian legacy of conquest and expansion was far from dead: one of Las Casas' works was reprinted as anti-Spanish propaganda, while the Philippines were overrun by the United States.

To Columbus the Christ-bearer, Columbus the scientist, and Columbus the father of America, the 1990s have added Columbus the environmental hatchet-man and Columbus the scapegoat for genocide. All of these are time-

ly, if not entirely historical, constructions of the explorer's image. At the time of the centenary of Columbus' first voyage, there were many who wished to deny that he had been the first to land in America at all. A century later, the effects of the discovery on a declining Spain had become a spectre for the rest of Europe, even as it realised that the whole world had been transformed, for good or ill, by the commercial possibilities opened up by the encounter. At the time of the tercentenary the newly-independent Americans used the discovery as an assertion of blossoming confidence and as a landmark in their progress toward nationhood. In 1893 that nationhood was proclaimed to an awed world with few dissenters questioning the view of a united, white, industrial America the World's Columbian Exposition implied. In the light of these constructions of 1492, both those who celebrate the encounter with their own expositions and impostures and those who seek to shake the accepted images of Columbus should recall that there are precedents, both silly and serious for their uses of history today.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Henry Steele Commager and Elmo Giordanetti (eds.), *Was America A Mistake? An Eighteenth-Century Controversy* (New York, 1967); Edward F. De Lancey, 'The Columbian Celebration of 1792', *Magazine of American History* 29 (1893); J.H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New 1492-1650* (Cambridge, 1970); Antonello Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic, 1750-1900* (English translation, Pittsburgh, 1973); Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's A Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions 1876-1916* (Chicago, 1984), ch. 2; Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (New York, 1991).

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'He says his name is Columbus and he's come to discover us': graffiti in Cordoba reflects current cynicism towards the quincentenary.

