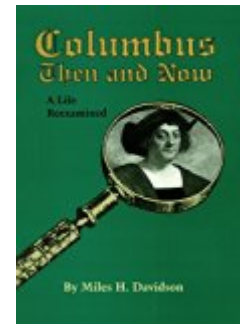


Miles H Davidson. *Columbus Then and Now: A Life Reexamined*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997. v + 609 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-2934-1.

Reviewed by James E. Wadsworth (University of Arizona)
Published on H-LatAm (February, 1998)



A Historiographical Biography of Columbus

The quincentennial celebration of the first Colombian voyage has stimulated a still growing literature reevaluating the European discovery of what came to be the Americas. As might be expected, Columbus has been the focal point of much of that literature. Miles H. Davidson found himself uncomfortable with several of the recent works on Columbus—particularly those published in the United States in the last twenty years—and, at the suggestion of David Henige, he undertook a critique of the “modern versions of the Columbus myth.”[1]

Davidson does not claim to be either a biographer or a historian. He is a writer and a collector of Columbiana who found himself “disturbed by the general lack of use, and the occasional misuse, of the primary and secondary sources for the life of Columbus.”[2] In this book, he has not so much attempted to demythologize the history of Columbus as he has to provide “the archival data with which to judge” Columbus’s biographers.[3] In doing so he also offers the basic outlines for a biography of Columbus based on the available contemporary documentation.

Davidson argues that the works published in the U.S. form a genre—a genre of shared errors, misconstructions, misrepresentations and faulty historiography. He particularly focuses on the works of Samuel Elliot Morison, John Noble Wilford, William and Carla Rahn Phillips, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, Kirkpatrick Sale, and Robert H. Fuson. Davidson is critical of what he sees in these works as repetitious rewrites that use the same sources, lapse into fictitious speculation when the evidence is contradictory or confusing, and perpetuate the historical errors

of “the history agreed upon.”[4]

For this reason, *Columbus Then and Now* is not a biography in the normal sense of the term. It is very much a historiographical biography. In other words, although the book is organized chronologically and deals with every major, and some not so major, events and controversies in Columbus’s life, the real focus of the text is a critical appraisal of recent biographies and the correction of errors using the documentary evidence. Davidson bases his critique on facsimiles, where possible, and always uses his own transcriptions and translations so as not to perpetuate existing transcription or translation errors. Because of the nature of this work, Columbus sometimes fades into the background of the critical commentary and analysis.

Davidson exploits some important documentary sources on Columbus that became available in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1988 and 1989, the Royal Academy of History transcribed and published *El libro copiadador de Cristobal Colon*, which is a collection of nine of Columbus’s letters including some previously unknown letters to the Spanish sovereigns.[5] In 1992, a three volume work edited by Juan Gil entitled *Biblioteca de Colon* contributed translations of some of Columbus’s personal books and of the postils written in them. Davidson also draws upon an impressive array of diaries, private correspondence, court and naval records, and shipping logs—all of which are housed in the Miles H. Davidson Reference Library. None of these sources are new to specialist on Columbus, which is precisely Davidson’s

point. He argues that the errors that he identifies could have been avoided if scholars would have paid closer attention to the existing sources.

Some of the errors he attempts to correct are as follows. Contrary to accepted knowledge, Davidson argues that Marco Polo had very little, if any, impact on Columbus's conceptions of what he expected to find and what he found in the "New World." Based on the postils in Columbus's 1485 Pipino Latin version of Marco Polo's book and the letters in *El libro copiator de Cristobal Colon*, Davidson concludes that Columbus did not refer to Marco Polo in any of his writings and that he did not even own Marco Polo's book until well after his first voyage. The postils in the book also date from after that voyage. One may legitimately ask, however, why Columbus had to own a copy of Marco Polo to be influenced by him when his writings were so well known in Europe at the time.

For similar reasons, Davidson also concludes that Columbus did not go looking for the Great Khan. Rather, he was simply looking for the mythical islands to the West. Davidson argues that Columbus may have acquired his ideas about sailing west from the many stories circulating at that time about lost mariners who had ventured out into the Atlantic and seen or visited islands. He refers specifically to Pedro Vasquez de la Frontera who had sailed west with Diogo de Teive in 1452 and who supposedly passed the information on to Columbus or to one of his captains. Teive apparently had rights granted him by the Spanish crown to explore for unknown islands to the West until he ceded those rights in 1474.[6] Davidson concludes that people had been sent by their governments to look for unknown islands to the West long before Columbus endeavored to do so.

Davidson also argues that Columbus did not carry letters addressed to the Great Khan. Indeed, the letters were addressed generically to all heads of state and only made reference to the "regions of India." Columbus also made reference to the regions of India in his letters. Based on these contemporary references and what Davidson calls "simple logic," he concludes that, "Barring the finding of new documentation, we can say that Columbus set sail for the west, where he expected to find islands nearer to Spain than was the Indian mainland of the Far East," not Asia or India.[7] Columbus believed these islands were somewhere in the vicinity of Cipango Japan. Columbus set out to find islands and he found them.

The entire book is structured as a point and counterpoint argument in which Davidson exposes a Columbian

myth, identifies the creators and perpetrators of the myth, and then turns to the documentary evidence to explode the fiction. The book is generally engaging and insightful although there are moments when the reader feels bogged down in the details of Davidson's corrections.

Several times in the book Davidson makes statements that reveal a certain Eurocentric bent to his understanding of what Columbus accomplished. For example, "That he [i.e. Columbus] discovered the Americas is the one fact that sometimes gets buried under erudition." And, "What cannot be taken away from Columbus is the indisputable fact that he, unlike the man who first chances to stumble onto something, was the true discoverer as defined by Burchhardt: a man who finds what he sought. What he found was a new world—America." [8] This last statement is especially puzzling coming as it does after Davidson went to great pains to demonstrate that Columbus sought mythical western islands rather than Asia or India and certainly not a new world. Edmundo O'Gorman argues that Columbus's voyages "were not, nor could they have been voyages to America." [9] America did not exist in the European, let alone in Columbus's, cosmology. "Things are in themselves nothing in particular, but their being depends on the meaning we give them, it becomes evident that Columbus's belief implies that he endowed the lands found by him with a specific being, that of a portion of the Island of the Earth." [10] O'Gorman argues further that the Americas have undergone a process of invention that began with Columbus and continues today. Stating that Columbus "discovered America" certainly ranks as one of the reigning myths about Columbus and Davidson perpetuates it.

In assessing the ultimate import of what Columbus accomplished Davidson assumes that it was the "discovery of America." William D. Phillips, Jr. and Carla Rahn Phillips argue persuasively in their book, that Davidson critiqued so heavily, *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus*, the real significance of the Columbian voyages was that Columbus "placed the world on the path leading" to global interdependence.[11] The Columbian voyages were simply the "culmination of one scene in a much broader drama" that witnessed the unification of the entire globe in which all the major world civilizations have never lost contact with each other up to the present day.[12]

Despite his failure to see the bigger historical picture, Davidson reminds us of the importance of careful scholarship and scrupulous attention to the primary

sources. He also cautions us not to dismiss contradictory or confusing evidence and not to “cheat” when it comes to corroborative detail. Davidson’s thorough critique of Columbus’s biographers may provide a platform for further debate and investigation—I doubt that this work will be the last word on Columbus. Davidson never intended it to be so. His stated purpose is to “clarify, rather than further confuse, the story of Christopher Columbus.”[13] To a limited degree he succeeded –although experts will take issue with many of his interpretations and conclusions. In the end, Latin American scholars, specialists on Columbus, students, and curious lay readers alike will probably all find something of interest in this book. Many readers are likely to find that they knew a lot about Columbus that just was not so.

Notes

[1]. Davidson, ix.

[2]. Ibid., 467.

[3]. Ibid.

[4]. Ibid., xiv.

[5]. Margarita Zamora translated a letter from this volume that reported on the first voyage in Christopher Columbus’s Letter to the Sovereigns: Announcing the

Discovery, in *New World Encounters*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1-11.

[6]. Davidson, 108-109.

[7]. Ibid., 205.

[8]. Ibid., 62, 482.

[9]. Edmundo O’Gorman, *The Invention of America: An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of its History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), 73-74.

[10]. Ibid., 80.

[11]. William D. Phillips, Jr. and Carla Rahn Phillips, *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 241.

[12]. Ibid., 273.

[13]. Davidson, xix.

Copyright (c)1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net at H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: James E. Wadsworth. Review of Davidson, Miles H, *Columbus Then and Now: A Life Reexamined*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. February, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1747>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.