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IN PERSON; In Defense Of Columbus

By **MARY ANN CASTRONOVO FUSCO**

THROUGHOUT time, treasure has typically been measured in trinkets and pennyweights, coins and carats. But to William J. Connell, a historian at Seton Hall University, "there's nothing more precious than a hard fact."

"The more you look for them," Mr. Connell says, "the more you see how many interpretations there are." Lately, the 42-year-old scholar has taken to weighing the facts about Columbus, who at 41 became the most famous treasure-seeker of all time.

The fact that the Genoese explorer was preceded by the Vikings no longer fires up a debate. Arguments over Columbus's ethnic origins -- various groups claim him as Italian, Spanish, Greek, and Jewish -- are as old and usually as good-natured as the celebration of Columbus Day itself.

But one controversy that has tarnished the seafarer's reputation persists, periodically fanned by prevailing political winds. Though many maintain that Columbus was a noble-minded visionary who opened up a new land of opportunity for the oppressed masses of Europe, others see him as a greedy imperialist who slaughtered and spread disease among the indigenous people and institutionalized the slave trade.

"On the one hand, we have people desperate to make him theirs," Mr. Connell said with a chuckle during a recent interview in his campus office, "and on the other hand, we have people who are trying to erase him from history."

Though Mr. Connell briefly flirted with a career in banking after graduating summa cum laude with distinction in history from Yale University, he made his life's work documenting facts, specifically those of the Renaissance. After earning a doctorate at the University of California at Berkeley, he taught history at Reed College in Portland, Ore., then at Rutgers.

In 1998 he became the first professor to hold the La Motta Chair in Italian studies at Seton Hall, where he is usually preoccupied with the Italian humanists and the political and economic strife of Italian city-states.

Mr. Connell, who was raised by parents of Irish, German, and Welsh descent in the Bronx and Westchester, has so enthusiastically embraced Italian culture that he reads fairy tales in Italian to his 16-month-old daughter, Zoe, at the Clinton home he shares with his wife, Nikki Shepardson, who teaches history at Rider University. His first book, *La citta dei crucci* (City of Sorrows), about a feud that destroyed the Tuscan city of Pistoia at the time of the Medici, was written in Italian and will be published next month in Florence.

And as a Renaissance man, Columbus fell within his area of expertise. Last year, Mr. Connell spoke on Columbus and the meaning of Columbus Day before both public school students in Elizabeth and the West Orange Rotary Club. This year, he will address the Columbus Day Dinner Dance in Hanover, sponsored by District 11 of UNICO, an Italian-American civic organization that spearheaded the campaign to endow the chair in Italian studies at Seton Hall.

"Certainly we don't want to downplay the tragedies that happened," said John Sebastiano, president of the Montville chapter of UNICO. "But for a lot of individuals, the symbolism of Christopher Columbus was that of a voyage of freedom. It really was the start of the globalization of our world."

As Mr. Connell noted, "When history is made in this kind of fundamental way, there are also costs."

The arrival of Dutch, Swedish and English to New Jersey in the 17th century, for example, led to smallpox and measles epidemics among the native Lenape communities, which had no resistance to Old World diseases. Although the Lenape, also known as the Delaware, were the first tribe to sign a treaty with the newly formed American government in 1778, most were pushed West and to this day live in Bartlesville, Okla.

Some Indians have urged that Columbus Day -- first celebrated in New York in 1792, the 300th anniversary of Columbus's arrival -- be rescinded as a holiday in their states. One hundred years later, Congress designated Columbus Day a national holiday to be celebrated each Oct. 12. And in 1971 Columbus Day became a federal holiday observed on the second Monday of October.

Throughout the years, Italian-American, Hispanic, and other groups have embraced the holiday as a occasion to celebrate their ethnic heritage, though some Indian groups prefer to refer to the day as "Indigenous Peoples Day."

Dee Ketchum, chief of the Delawares, said his tribe "recognizes various holiday events in North America and allows paid time off to its tribal employees, but Columbus Day is not one of them."

Other tribes are more vocal in their opposition. "We believe that Columbus came and conquered," Mark (Quiet Hawk) Gould, tribal chairman of the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Indians, said in a telephone interview, "We really think that it was like a genocide."

Roy Crazy Horse, chairman of the New Jersey Commission on American Indian Affairs and chief of the Powhatan Renape Nation, based at the Rankokus Indian Reservation in Westhampton Township, put it this way: "Why celebrate a man who started looking for India and landed in the Caribbean, who never put down his foot in the United States, who brought slavery to this continent?" Neither American Indian leader, however, is involved in protesting the holiday. Instead, they say they concentrate on educational programs.

The controversy over Columbus Day doesn't bother Mr. Connell, who said: "The whole discussion around Columbus Day has been useful to the extent that it has reminded us of many of the tragic consequences of the contact."

And he doesn't believe the holiday should be replaced with a celebration of ethnic diversity, which "sounds like a hodgepodge."

"We have ethnic diversity anyway; we celebrate it every day," Mr. Connell said. "It's one of the best things about this country."

As for doing away with the holiday, he said, "I don't think that it should go to the point of taking away from the tremendous achievement of Columbus."

Though modern textbooks no longer state that Columbus discovered the New World, his arrival marks "where we as a country and as a hemisphere began our identity," said Mr. Connell. "It's a question of the contact that matters. There wasn't a significant or important tradition that survived from the voyages of the Vikings."

On the other hand, he noted, Columbus's contact with the New World had a profound effect, largely because of the time -- an era when Europe was still reeling from the psychological effects of the Black Death of 1348, fierce competition among the various monarchs and the newly invented printing press, which enabled accounts of Columbus's findings to spread rapidly.

"Columbus strikes me as a person of his time," said Mr. Connell. "He was eager to push the envelope to go farther, to take the skills and the learning of the Renaissance in order to do something glorious."

As a man of the Renaissance, Columbus operated under a set of assumptions that "sound terrible to modern ears," Mr. Connell allowed. "He justified slavery in the Caribbean as being a way of bringing people into the Christian faith."

But the European concept of slavery was rooted in the Aristotelian concept that "if a person is captured in war, they're legitimately a slave," he explained. "There was nothing racial about it."

Moreover, widely spread accounts that Columbus's followers wiped out the Taino people of the Caribbean were inaccurate, says Jorge Estevez, himself of Taino lineage, who is a program coordinator at the National Museum of the American Indian in Manhattan. Mr. Estevez says that although many natives were murdered, fell victim to European diseases, or were taken captive, others intermingled with the Spanish settlers. And the settlers who were given Tainos as slaves were required to pay taxes on them, resulting in the undercounting of the Tainos as a form of tax evasion and leading to reports of their eradication.

"Columbus didn't start slavery," said Mr. Connell. "He brought the entrepreneurial form of slavery to the New World. It was a phenomenon of the times. With all great figures of the past, we need more understanding, critical understanding that sees the person's flaws and the inaccuracies and myths that have arisen around him, but we shouldn't forget the tremendous changes that they created."

The scholar went on: "I think we have to be very careful about applying 20th-century understandings of morality to the morality of the 15th century."

That said, Mr. Connell does not consider himself an apologist for Columbus. "I'm just doing my job as a historian," he said. "'Celebrate' is a word we could use for Columbus's genius, his persistence against the odds in getting people who were much more powerful than he was to back him in a risky enterprise that had results way beyond anyone's imagination. We can celebrate his enterprise and ingenuity. A more appropriate word for what happened would be 'commemorate.'"

Photos: "Columbus strikes me as a person of his time," says William J. Connell, the chairman of Italian studies at Seton Hall University. (Photographs by Jill C. Becker and Norman Y. Lono, top left, for The New York Times)