

READING 3

Stephen J. Summerhill and John Alexander Williams, *Sinking Columbus: Contested History, Cultural Politics, and Mythmaking during the Quincentenary*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000).

Reviewed by John E. Kicza, Department of History, Washington State University. Published by H-LatAm (April 2002), <http://www.h-net.org/~latam/>

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Abstract: This review of Summerhill and Williams' *Sinking Columbus* praises the book for its detailed attention to the (generally unsuccessful) global efforts to commemorate the Quincentenary of Columbus' arrival in the Americas. It documents the conflicts that marked preparations to celebrate the Quincentenary in the United States—both between Latinos and Italians and between Native Americans and Columbus enthusiasts—as well as the poor planning and meager successes that marked these preparations. This pattern played out in similar ways all over the world, including in Latin America, Italy, Mexico, and Japan. The only exception to this general rule was in Spain, where several celebrations attracted large numbers of visitors. Even so, all of the commemorations were marked by a lack of attention to the negative aspects of the Columbian encounter.

Getting It Right About Getting It Wrong

Summerhill and Williams have written an excellent, interesting, and sometimes amusing report about the efforts of a representative set of countries (the United States, Spain, Italy, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic) to celebrate the Quincentenary in 1992. The authors can speak with considerable authority about the process. Williams, a professor of history at Appalachian State University, headed the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission from 1986 to 1988. Summerhill, a professor of Spanish and Portuguese at Ohio State University, served as Vice

Provost for International Affairs and directed the university's Center for International Studies from 1986 to 1990.

When planners of the Quincentenary began to make plans in 1982 for its celebration a decade later, there were no indications that the meaning and character of the event would be contested. In fact, the first proposals closely resembled the types of celebrations that had taken place in 1892-93.

Columbia, South Carolina erected a statue to the discoverer in 1987, and Columbus, Ohio developed plans to locate a replica of the Santa Maria near its downtown. New York City prepared a parade of tall ships in its harbor. Chicago aspired to hold a World's Fair that rivaled the famed Columbian Exposition in 1892-93.

In 1985, Secretary of State George Schultz swore into office the members of the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission, which was to preside over the country's 1992 celebration. The Jubilee Commission initially intended the focus of the event to be on Columbus and his 1492 voyage. But scholars had long before moved away from such themes to concentrate on the demographic impact of the discovery and processes of cultural and environmental change. Under its Quincentenary initiative, the National Endowment for the Humanities provided over \$31 million to some 400 projects between 1984 and 1992. Few of them addressed Columbus and his deeds.

Summerhill and Williams point out that patriotic writers of the 1780s and 1790s first introduced Columbus as "a symbolic founder of the United States" and encouraged the use of his name to designate sites in the new nation. His devout Catholicism and service to Spain were neatly overlooked, while his Italian origin was played up. Washington Irving's biography of the great explorer, modeled closely after the biography written by Columbus's son, depicted him as a tragic hero, the view most commonly reflected in subsequent artistic representations.

In 1882, a recently-founded Irish Catholic brotherhood in New Haven Connecticut named itself the Knights of Columbus. At first primarily an insurance club, it soon dedicated itself to the promotion of Catholicism in this militantly protestant country. The KOC supported Columbus Day parades in northeastern cities that contained substantial Catholic immigrant communities and joined in the ultimately unsuccessful campaign to have Columbus made a saint.

But as the Quincentenary approached, Latinos and Spanish nationalists challenged this established tradition. This struggle over how to represent Columbus's cultural identity first flared up in the dispute between Italian-American and Latino politicians over the composition of the Jubilee Commission. When Italian members heavily outnumbered Latinos, a national

Latino organization created a rival private group, the National Hispanic Quincentennial Commission, to run alternative programs.

The White House selected the majority of Jubilee Commission members. It chose only individuals with a record of supporting Ronald Reagan since his 1976 run for the presidency. John N. Goudie, a Cuban-American real estate mogul from Miami, was named chairman. Of the twenty-four appointed members, only three had credentials as historians: William McNeill, a global historian from the University of Chicago and a former President of the American Historical Association; Charles Polzer, a veteran Latin American historian at the University of Arizona; and Henry Raymont, a retired journalist who specialized in Latin American issues. Over the next several years in a series of meetings held throughout the United States and Puerto Rico, the Commission decided to take a two-pronged approach to the celebration. It would endorse certain expensive high-profile events, such as the display of tall ships or models of Columbus's fleet, that would be funded by corporate sponsors. These, it was hoped, would capture the public's attention and entice them to attend the many cultural events being planned by museums, arts councils, and the like.

But the Commission enjoyed little success in attracting major corporate sponsors. Goudie could not even attract support from Hispanic American organizations, including his fellow Cuban-Americans. Then Goudie was found personally to be in severe financial straits, and a government audit of the Commission discovered that it was insolvent and had paid a large amount to one of Goudie's friends. Goudie resigned soon thereafter. A new chairman was selected, but the Jubilee Commission accomplished little, and the country's "official" celebration of the Quincentenary was very meager.

The other major effort in the United States to fete the Quincentenary was nearly as great a fiasco. In 1981, Chicago undertook its campaign to sponsor a World's Fair in honor of the famed Columbian Exposition of 1892-93. The Chicago utility and newspaper interests who were the primary promoters of the idea defeated rival efforts by Houston and Miami. But in 1982, a formidable foreign competitor, Seville, announced its intention to gain the exclusive right to sponsor a World's Fair in 1992. Since 1928, the Bureau of International Expositions had chosen between competing proposals. All contestants understood that a World's Fair was doomed to fail if another was scheduled at the same time or even in the near future. The organizers of the Chicago proposal initially dismissed the Seville bid, but over the next few years, the Spanish city improved its plan, while Chicago's floundered, largely over the city's bitter racial politics. Leaders of its many ethnic neighborhoods could not agree on a location for the fair nor how different groups would benefit from it.

Ultimately, the only mega-event held in the United States was AmeriFlora, a horticultural exposition in Columbus, Ohio. But even this project was greatly scaled down from its initial plan because of the difficulty in obtaining corporate sponsorship. The number of visitors likewise resulted much lower than anticipated.

As 1992 neared, Native American spokesmen increasingly denounced the very concept of the Quincentenary as insensitive to the sufferings inflicted on the native population as a consequence of Columbus's discovery. They offered the idea of the "invasion of America" as an alternative to the "discovery of America." When numerous American Indian groups announced plans to actively protest the Quincentenary, the Jubilee Commission designated Dave Warren, a prominent Native American as an honorary member. But he resigned in 1990 and was not replaced.

The growing campaign against Columbus reached a high point with the publication of Kirkpatrick Sale's *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*. This powerful indictment of Columbus and of the environmental and human devastation that followed with Spanish colonization was probably the first anti-Columbus book to reach a popular audience. The growing attack on the explorer and of the concept of a Quincentenary by "progressives" galvanized cultural conservatives to assert more stridently than before the accomplishments of the European settlers and the benefits that mankind had derived from their actions. The American Indian Movement had its greatest public success in San Francisco, where some thousands of demonstrators prevented Italian Americans from staging their traditional mock landing by Columbus and also disrupted the Columbus Day parade.

Summerhill and William introduce Paolo Emilio Taviani, a Genoese scholar of Columbus and an Italian national hero for his service as a partisan fighter during World War Two. He is a dominating figure cutting across their narrative, erupting from time to time to shake things up and to move the debate in new directions through his international stature and strongly-held views.

The United States was only one of more than twenty countries that created centennial planning groups. These include Spain, Portugal, Italy, a number of Latin American countries, and even Japan. No matter the projects pursued and resources committed, these countries all experienced disappointing outcomes. Spain's primary goal in its celebration was to strengthen ties with the Latin American nations. It therefore stressed their common heritage and pursued closer economic and political integration, while also demonstrating that it was untainted by any enduring "colonialist" perspective.

Three major events marked Spain's celebration of 1992: the Barcelona Olympics, which were not an official Quincentenary event, but which had been awarded to the country because of the importance of that year to its history; Expo '92 in Seville; and the designation of Madrid as Cultural Capital of Europe. Expo '92 received some 15.5 million visitors, a half million more than projected. So by that measure it certainly seemed a success. Further, the Socialist government of Spain, which had strongly backed the project, declared that the Expo had earned a profit of \$120 million. However, when a Conservative government came to power in the 1996 elections, its investigation revealed that the event actually lost some \$250 million. Enormous corruption was discovered in the awarding of bids and in cost overruns.

Hundreds of other celebrations took place in Spain in 1992. The seventeen autonomous regions, the fifty provinces, and many more municipalities, universities, and cultural institutions participated. But the larger national goals of closer ties with the Latin American countries and enhanced prosperity did not occur.

The Quincentenary celebration in Italy was modest and focused. The country emphasized the places of Columbus's youth, so most events occurred in or near to Genoa. Taviani devised and used his political clout to implement this traditional approach. He also stressed cultural and scholarly undertakings, rather than commercial endeavors, as the heart of the commemoration. Hence the publication of the *Nuova Raccolta Colombiana*, a modern set of important documents and writings from the Columbus era drawn from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

Of course, in Latin America itself, the impact of the discovery and conquest of the Americas had long been a controversial issue, so the disagreements that so transformed both scholarly and popular perspectives in North America and Europe did not erupt there unexpectedly. However, the Dominican Republic is something of an exception to this continental pattern. Partly because it shared the island of Hispaniola with Haiti and the trajectory of history between the two countries, the Dominican Republic had long emphasized its "Spanish" character, however mythical that might be. When the government of Juan Balaguer came to power in 1986, it committed itself to constructing the Columbus Lighthouse by 1992, which it did, at a cost of \$40 million and the displacement of 50,000 people from their homes. This unsightly and unneeded structure had been first proposed in the nineteenth century, and the project had been resurrected many times over the subsequent century. Intended as a final burial spot for Columbus's remains and as a shrine to him, the Lighthouse lauded the blessings that Catholic evangelization had brought to the Americas.

Mexico's early plans for the Quincentenary were substantially shaped by Miguel Leon-Portilla, famed for his lifetime of scholarship on indigenous life and writings. He determined that Mexico should highlight an "encounter" rather than a "discovery" and that it do so with a "commemoration," not a "celebration." Many of the projects undertaken were scholarly and educational in nature. Mexico's most public venture was the marvelous exhibit of Mexican art from across twenty centuries that it displayed in major international cities. In this period, Pope John Paul II ensured that Mexicans would view the papacy favorably by returning the Badianus Herbal, a monument of indigenous cultural achievement from the early colonial period, to its country of origin from the Vatican Library, where it had been held for centuries. Leon-Portilla resigned in 1988, when a new presidential administration came to power. He was succeeded in turn by other scholarly giants, Leopoldo Zea and Enrique Florescano. They downplayed the devastation that the encounter had visited upon the natives, which had been Leon-Portilla's dominant theme, in favor of stressing the impact of the enduring cultural interaction between the Spanish and the natives. But the upshot was to remove much of the edge from Mexico's presentation. When Florescano resigned in the middle of 1992, he was not replaced. The national project never dominated public attention. Official activities ground slowly to a halt.

In their thoughtful conclusion, Summerhill and Williams point out that the Quincentenary, as an official commemoration directed by official commissions in most countries, could not escape being an anachronism. The events, as planned, assiduously avoided examining the darker aspects and implications of the event in favor of defending viewpoints that were increasingly out of date and unconnected to contemporary preoccupations and perspectives. Those few events that were arguably successful, those of Spain and the Dominican Republic, glossed lightly over the important issues and proved to be horribly costly as well. Perhaps, in the end, the most successful Quincentenary project was the Smithsonian Institution's exhibit, *Seeds of Change*, for it addressed in a thoughtful yet accessible manner contemporary issues and perspectives: environmental change, the impact of the introduction of new plants, animals, and diseases, the adjustments that indigenous societies made to cope with massive disruption, and the way that displaced peoples carve out new homes and cultural meanings for themselves and substantially shaped their new identities.