that as Humphrey Gilbert’s ship sank, he was last seen on the quarterdeck joyfully reading to his men from More’s ‘Utopia.’

In the following passage from his book, *Conquest of Paradise*, Kirkpatrick Sale provides a finely-researched view of Christopher Columbus and his first encounter with the New World. Columbus comes across as a typical fifteenth-century European, uninterested in nature, culturally providental, and above all, arrogant. Columbus and his fellow lords of the Americas, with their flint and flume, primarily as sources of wealth, as empires for personal and national exploitation. Native Americans, as Sale’s account, come across as inhabitants of an Edenic, world free of conflict and perfectly attuned to nature.

1492-93

Kirkpatrick Sale

Admiral Colón (Cristóbal Colón, i.e., Christopher Columbus) spent a total of ninety-six days exploring the lands he encountered on the far side of the Ocean Sea—four rather small caravill islands in the Bahama chain and two substantial coasts of which he finally acknowledged were larger islands—every one of which he named by his Christian allegorical name of his Sovereign.

The first he named San Salvador no doubt as much in thanksgiving for its welcome presence after more than a month at sea as for the Sun of God whom he honored the second he called Santa María de la Concepción after his Virgin whose name his flagship bore; and the third and fourth he called Fernandina and Isabel for his patrons, Honoring Aragon before Castile for reasons never explained (possibly protocol, possibility in recognition of the chief sources of backing for the voyage). . . .

It was not that the inhabitants were in need of names, mind you, nor indeed did Colón, was ignorant of the names the native peoples had already given them, for he frequently used those original names before endowing them with his own. Rather, the process of bestowing new names was along with “taking possession” of those parts of the world deemed suitable for Spanish ownership, showing the royal

banners, erecting various crosses and pronouncing certain oaths and pledges. If this was presumption, it had an honored heritage it was Adam who was charged by his Creator with the task of naming “every living creature,” including the product of his own rib, in the course of establishing “dominion over” them.

This business of naming and “possessing” foreign islands was by no means casual. The Admiral took it very seriously, pointing out that it was his way to bypass any island without taking possession” (October 15) and that “in all regions [it] always left a cross standing” (November 16) as a mark of Christian dominance. . . .

But consider the implications of this act and the questions it raises again about what was in the Sovereign’s mind, what Colón’s. Why would the Admiral assume that the Turkeys would be so impressed that they would be in a rush to hand over their islands to Spain? That they would change the Mediterranean from a great route to the Orient into a great route to the Americas? That they would瞧now the Admiral. . . .

Could there be any reason for the Admiral to assume he had reached “unclaimed” shores, next lands that lay far from the domains of any of the potentialities of the East? Can that really have been in his mind—or can it all be explained as simple Eurocentrism, or Euro-supremacy, mixed with dignity and wissen? . . .

In any case, it is quite curious how casually and calmly the Admiral took to this task of possession, so much so that he gave only the most meager description of the initial ceremony on San Salvador. . . . We are left only with the image of a party of fully dressed and armed Europeans standing there on the white sand in the noon-morning heat while Escobedo, with his parchments and iguana and quilts, painstakingly writes down the Admiral’s oaths. . . .

Once chiefly “possessed,” San Salvador was open for inspection. Now the Admiral turned his attention for the first time to the ‘naked people’ staring at him on the beach—he did not automatically give them a name, interesting enough, and it would be another six days before he decided what he might call them—and tried to win them over with his trinkets. They did go around asking as their mothers bore them and also the women, although I cannot see more than one really young girl that I saw there people (women, none of more than 50 years old. They are very well built with very handsome features and very good faces their hair [af] course, almost like the silk of a horse’s tail and short. They wear their hair overs their eyebrows, except for a little on the back that they wear long and never cut. Some of them paint their lips in black (and they are the color of the Canaries Islanders, neither black nor

Writing, and were painted themselves white, and some red and some with what they called red-neat-fowl. in their faces, and some of them whose whole body, and some the eyes only, and some of them only the nose.

It may fairly be called the birth of American anthropology. A crude anthropology, of course, superficially as Colon's descriptions always were, when his interest was so keen and his observations so thorough, in the fable and fantasy this characterized many earlier (and even some later) accounts of new-found peoples. There was no pretense to objectivity, or any stress that these peoples might be representatives of a culture equal to, or in any way a model for Europe's Colossus immediately preceding the infancy of the American nations. Not merely because (sure enough they were naked, but because (his) society could have no lower measure) they seemed so technologically backward. "It appeared to me that these people were of very great age," he wrote in the last days of his first stay, worse still, "they have no iron." And they went on to prove their inferiority to the Admiral by being ignorant of even such a basic artifact of European life as a sword: "They bear no arms, nor we acquainted with them," he wrote. "I showed them swords and they grasped them by the blade and cut themselves through a likeness of that which". Did European arms spill the first drops of native blood on the sand of the New World, accompanied not with a gap of compassion but with a smirk of superiority?

Then just six sentences further on, Colon clarified what this inferiority meant in his eyes:

They ought to be good servants and good intelligents [ignora]. . . . I believe that they would easily be made Christians, because it seemed to me that they had no religion. Our Lord passing I will carry of six of them at my departure to their Governor, in order that they may learn to speak.

No clothes, no arms, no possessions, no iron, and now no religion—not even speech. Those were not to be servants, and captivity. It may fairly be called the beginning of American slavery.

To be sure, Colon knew nothing about these people he encountered and considered enslaving, and he was hardly trained to find out very much, even if he was moved to care. But the encounters of his men with different peoples was to have a profound and lasting effect on the island's history. Even the most casual observer of the "Naves"—or "Tano"—and his own work for "good" or "niche," and their responses when asked who they were, they were related distantly by both language and culture to the Aztecs, perhaps of the South American mainland, but it is misleading (and needlessly impolite) to call them Aztecs, as historians are wont to do, when the term "Tano" better establishes their ethnic and historical distinctions. They had migrated to the islands from the mainland at about the time of the Pueblo people of the Southwest, and they were traders and farmers, and perhaps also those who were they in the struggle between the different peoples and cultures that would eventually give rise to the modern nations of the world. But as Colon observed, the islanders had a system environmentally appropriate—"conos" agriculture seem to have provided an exceptionally ecologically well-balanced and productive form of land use, according to David White's recent and authoritative West Indies—but it was also highly productive, as is the case in many places, where labor that was employed for a longer time became a part of the fabric of society. In their arts of government, the Tanos seem to have achieved a parallel sort of harmony. Most villages were small (ten to fifteen families) and autonomous, although
many apparently recognized loose alliances with neighboring villages, and they were governed by a hereditary official called a kassele (kisap; in the Spanish form), something of a cross between an arbiter and a procurator, supported by admirers and elders. So little a part did violence play in their system that they seem, remarkably, to have been a society without war (at least we know of no war music or signals or artifacts, and no evidence of intertribal combat) and even within the conflict (Las Casas reports that no Spaniard ever saw two Tainos fighting). And here we come to what was obviously the Tainos' outstanding cultural achievement, a proficiency in the mental arts that led those who first met them to comment unfavourably on their friendliness, their dampness, their openness, and above all—so striking to those of an acquisitive culture— their generosity.

"They are the best people in the world and above all the gentiles," Colón recorded in his Journal (December 16), and from first to last he was astonished at their kindness:

They became so much our friends that it was a marvel. . . . They traded and gave everything they had, with good will (October 12).

I sent the ship's boaos ashore for water; and they very willingly showed my people where the water was, and they themselves carried the full barrels to the boats, and took great delight in pleasing us (October 16).

They are very gentle and without knowledge of what is evil nor do they murder or steel (November 12).

Your Kindnesses may believe that in all the world there can be no better or gentler people (October 15). . . . And can there be banks? All the people show the most singular living behavior and they speak pleasantly (December 24).

I assure Your Kindnesses that I believe that in all the world there is no better people nor better country. They love their neighbors as themselves, and they have the sweetest talk in the world, and are gentle and always laughing (December 25).

Even if one allows for some exaggeration—Colón was clearly trying to convince Ferdinand and Isabella that his Indians could be easily conquered and converted, should that be the Sovereigns' wish—it is obvious that the Tainos were caught up in a manner of social discourse that quite impressed the rough Europeans. But that was not high among the traits of civilized nations, as Colón and Europe undersold and, it was courted for little in the Administration of the Spanish. However struck he was with such behavior, he would not have thought that it was the mark of a benign and harmonious society, or that from it another culture might learn. For him it was something like the wonderful behavior of children, the naive guilelessness of prehistoric creatures who knew no better how to chatter and chide than they did to dress themselves: "For a face-point they gave good pieces of gold the size of two fingers" (January 6), and "They even took pieces of the broken hoops of the wine casks and, like beasts [some goats], gave what they had" (San Juan Letter). Like beasts; such innocence was not human.

It is to be regretted that the Admiral, unable to see past their nakedness, as it were, knew not the real virtues of the people he encountered. For the Tainos lived in many ways as dyctic as their surroundings, into which they fit with such skill and comfort. They were well fed and well housed, without poverty or serious disease. They enjoyed considerable leisure, given over to dancing, singing, ballgames, and sex, and expressed themselves industriously in basketry, woodworking, pottery, and jewelry. They lived in general harmony and peace, without greed or covetousness or theft. In short, as Sauer says, "the tropical idyll of the accounts of Columbus and Peter Martyr was largely true."

It is perhaps only natural that Colón should devote his initial attention to the handsome, naked, naive islanders, but it does seem peculiar that he pays almost no attention, especially in the early days, to the spectacular scenery around them. Here he was, in the middle of an old-growth tropical forest the likes of which he could not have imagined before, its trees reaching sixty or seventy feet into the sky, more varieties than he knew how to count much less name, exhibiting a lushness that stood in sharp contrast to the sparse and desolate lands he had known in the Mediterranean, bearing a melodious multiplicity of bird songs and parrot calls—why was it not an occasion of wonder, excitement, and the sheer joy at nature in its full, arrogant abundance? But there is not a word of this; he actually said nothing about the physical surroundings on the first day. . . .

Eventually Colón succumbed to the islands' natural charms as he sailed on—how could he not—and began to wax warmly about how these islands are very green and fertile and the air is very sweet (October 15), with "trees which were more beautiful to see than any other thing that has ever been seen" (October 17) and "so good and sweet smell of flowers or trees from the land" (October 19). But his descriptions are curiously vague and vague, the language opaque and lifeless.

You begin to see the Admiral's problem; he cares little about the features of nature, at least the ones he doesn't use for sailing, and even when he admires them he has little experience in assessing them and less acquaintance with a vocabulary to describe them. . . .

Such was his ignorance—a failing he repeatedly bemoaned ("I don't recognize them, which gives me great grief," October 19)—that when he did stop to examine a species he often had no idea what he was looking at. "I saw many trees very different from ours," he wrote on October 16, "and many of them have branches of many kinds, and all on one trunk, and one twig is of one kind and another of another, and so different that it is the greatest wonder in the world how much diversity there is of one kind from the other. That is to say, one branch has leaves like a cane, and another like mastic, and thus on one tree five or six kinds, and all so different. There is no such tree in existence, much less "many of them," and never was why would anyone imagine, or so conceive, such a thing to be.

This all seems a little sad, revealing a man rather lost in a world that he cannot come to know, a man with a "geographic and naturalistic knowledge that doesn't turn out to be very deep or nearly complete," and "a limited imagination and a capacity for comparisons conditioned by a not very broad geographic culture," in the words of Gaetano Ferro, a Columbus scholar and professor of geography at the University of Genoa. One could not of course have expected that an adventurer and sailor of this era would also be a naturalist, or necessarily even have some genuine interest in or curiosity about the natural world, but it is a disappointment...
will not delay here any longer...[or] go to the town...so as not to delay much, since I see that there's no mine of gold here" (October 23).

The Admiral then ordered that there should be no trading with those who came out to the ships in their canoes with cotton skins and 'other little things,' in order that "they might surmise that the Admiral wanted nothing but gold" (November 11). Still no treasures appeared. Hearing tales of people who "gather gold on the beach by candles at night" (November 12), Colon headed out on a long journey to the southeast, but as he went along not only was there no gold to be found, there were not even any people; all he visited at the first sight of the three white men's ships. Fraternization somewhat further.

By the middle of December, Colon had explored almost all of the smaller islands, and had found no more than the smallest traces of gold, nothing more than a few grains worn as decorations, and he seemed on the verge of despair. "The breeze were like April in Castile," he reported on December 13, "grasping at atmospheric straws, the nightingales and other little birds were singing as in that month in Spain...They saw many mastic trees and aloes and cotton trees," he went on, but—"one feels it was painful to record...gold they found not."

Even the golden trinkets and little pieces Colon did find, given to him freely by the oblige Tainos. If he did no more than admire them, they were never enough in themselves to satisfy his yen for gold. Each week he sent letters to his family in Spain

The Portuguese saw how joyous the Admiral became with their little gifts of gold ("Very much pleased to see the Admiral happy"), but they marveled how, in contrast, the Tainos were so "very backward in the gold," and told him that there would be so much that he "might want" (December 26).

They, had no idea, and it would be a few years before they found out, that there was in truth no such quantity.

SUNDAY, 21 OCTOBER: I sought here to fill up all the containers on the ships with water...and afterwards I depart for another very large island that I believe is Cuba. According to the description of these Indians whom I carry...but in every case I am determined to go the mainland and to the city of Quisque [Quisque] and to present Your Highness' letters to the Grand Khan...and to ask for a reply and come home with it.

It was on October 17, after nearly a week in the islands, that Colon first declared that he was somewhere in the Indies (all earlier references being clearly Castile's words), and was not until October 21 did he put forth the idea that he was somewhere in the vicinity of the Grand Khan. It was perhaps by that he was not actually in Marco Polo's Orient of marble and gold, nor in the fabulously rich islands of monsters and treasures, but his eyes have been congenially perplexed to where he really was. Under the circumstances he had no doubt that he was in the Indies, and to ask for a reply and come home with it.

But it did save something of a dilemma. How was he going to justify this expensive voyage to the Spanish court and the financiers who had put up the money.
some of it personally to him, if there was nothing here of the "Pearls, Precious Stones, Gold, Silver," etc., he was sent to find.

His first thought was that he might be in the vicinity of the Grand Khan, that one of these large islands, in fact, was part of the Chinese mainland, and so twice he went missions inland to make contact with what he hoped would be the Quinany.
The reports back not only were negative but have convinced him that such an idea was false, for after no more than a week he gave up the search for the Chinese ruler—the last reference is on November 1—and soon merely suggested that the cities of the Grand Khan "doubtless will be discovered" (November 14).

His next thought was that if he wasn't on the mainland he must be among the thousands of outfalls in the China Sea—all these islands, he decided on November 12—and that it would be simplicity itself on the next voyage to the court of the Khan. For "from here to terre firma [the mainland] was a journey of ten days" (October 28). All very well and good, but what then had that left him for this voyage? No king, no palace, no great cities—and no gold—but the Admiral finally perceived now that these islands were not nearly so poor as they seemed at first, and in fact held hidden wealth, hidden possibilities for Spanish grandeur.

The Admiral thus began to discover "a thousand kinds of fruit... and all should be very profitable" (November 4), "a tree that he recognized... to be mastic" (November 5), a "very fine" cotton tree that "gives fruit the year round" (November 6), "tremendous quantity of mastic... a great quantity of cotton... an endless quantity of aloes" (November 12), not to mention magnificent harbors, lofty hills, "immense riches and precious stones and spices" (November 14), and, of course, just over the next hill, gold mines of great munificence.

After a month in the islands, in fact, Colón made but one more glancing reference to the Grand Khan and did not mention China or its ruler again, even dropping the use of "indoors" entirely until the journey home.

So much for the Grand Scheme. He had not reached Asia, if that's what he had sought, but only the route thereto "over there", he had not found much treasure to speak of, only uncertain promises of it everywhere, and there was no mainland of any kind, eastern or southern, only a strip of small, green islands. The rest of his life—with three more journeys and some seven years in these islands—would be spent trying to justify this strange, uncharacterizable discovery to himself, to his Sovereigns, to his countrymen, to Europe.

Monday, November 5: As dawn, he ordered the ship and the other vessels to be pulled out ashore for cleaning and profiting, but not all at the same time, so that two should always remain in the place where they were for security; although he says that these people were very safe. He says further that this harbor of Mares is among the better ones in the world and has aubé breezes and the most gentle people, and because it has a cape of high rock, where a fortress could be built, so that if that trade became a rich and great thing, the merchants would all be protected there from other nations, and he says that Our Lord, in whose hands are all victories, leads the way to all things that will be done in His service.
SUNDAY, 9 DECEMBER.

This day it rained and the weather was wintry as in Castile in October. . . . The island is very big and the Admiral says it would not be surprising if it is two hundred leagues around. . . . This harbor as its entrance is a thousand passos wide, which is a quarter of a league. . . . Facing it are some plains [vaguas], the most beautiful in the world, and almost like the lands of Castile; rather, these are better, for which he gave the name to the said island Isla Española.

Rain and cold were no doubt fitting companions for the Admiral's mood, which must have been dark indeed as he came to his toilet and (what would turn out to be) last island, Española. For after two months of exploration, there was nothing to show for it, and the whole voyage was likely to be written off by the Sovereigns, and history as a foolish and expensive profligacy. The Indians were singularly uncooperative, most of them running away to the coast, the European ships put in. The weather was rotten and the seas so high and winds so strong that Colón dared not leave his harbor here for days on end. And to top it off, Martín Alonso Pinzón had abruptly deserted the fleet two weeks before, with no explanation and not so much as a by-yourleave, taking the Pinzó offshore as the east wind was blowing and the Spanish ships sailing on a tack north of Cuba—and what if he were the one to find gold and pack on sail to get back to Palos and win all the glory! Island plains, however beautiful—one as lovely that Colón would name it, tellingly Valle del Parayno—were surely scant recompense.

The depleted fleet finally resumed its coasting after five days of this miserable weather, putting into this harbor and that along the north coast of Colón's Ysla Española. And then, finally, on December 17, gold, or at least enough of it for gold leaf "as big as a hand" and some small pieces, and signs that there would be more, "and the Admiral believed that he was very near the source, and that our Lord would show him where the gold comes from." . . . So, at last, the justification for all the hardship, all the peril, seemed to be at hand.

The Admiral was in a most expansive mood. "Your Highnesses may believe," he wrote on December 24, "that in all the world there can be no better or gentler people."

Your Highnesses should take great joy because soon they will become Christians and be instructed in the good customs of your realm, for neither better people nor land there be . . . All are of the most singular loving behavior and speak pleasantly, not like the others [unspecified] who, if they seem when they speak are making threats, and they are of good stature, men and women, and not black . . . And the houses and villages are so pretty [homenjas] and with government in all, such as a judge or lord and all obey him so that it is a marvel. And in all native lords are few words and very attractive manners; and their command is for the most part efficacious by signs of the hand, so soon understood that it is a marvel.

So expansive indeed, that he ordered that these people be entertained on board the ships ("more than a thousand persons had come to the ship" by canoe, and "more than five hundred came to the ship swimming for want of canoes") and after due celebration he even decided that he would sail on that night to visit Guanacarigui.
Atantic would be past its winter storms season. But now, after the wreck of the Santa Maria and with news that the Pinta was not far away, he apparently decided to sail back immediately. It was a risky decision and most unreason-able—as he would soon discover when he was blown off course and almost capsized by two fierce storms in February and March—that leads one to assume that the Admiral’s need was dire. Yet all the other men—a few days later, was that he intended to head back home “without de-
ieving himself farther,” because “he had found that which he was seeking” (January 8) and intended “to come at full speed to carry the news” (January 8).

Strange locations, those, and never explained: what, after all, had he found; and why exactly did he have to go at full speed, and why he determined to set sail into the Atlantic in midwinter? There is a likely answer, but since it is never stated outright we are forced to tease it out from the few suggestions the journal offers. It was on the day that news came that Pinta and the Pinta were further down the coast of Spain that the Admiral first decided to depart, and it was three days after he finally met up with Pinta on January 6 that he spoke of having found “that which he was seeking.” Could it be that on his departure Pinta had actually found “the names of gold” in the interior of Spain, and had first conveyed that and then demonstrated it to the Admiral? Certainly he had put in at some harbor closer to the interior mountains of Spain, where there were in fact gold nuggets to be found—Columbus confirmed this on the Second Voyage—and where several of the men actually did wash gold dust from the mountains—as Columbus confirmed on January 8, when he explored one such river and called it Rio del Oro because its sand was “all full of gold, and of such quality that it is marvelous.”

And so, might that not be the reason Columbus was so eager to get back to Castile in such unseemly, such unseemly haste, so that the crafty Pinta might not go off by himself again, and supported by all his friends from Palos, claim to Castile that he was the one who really found all that was worth finding in the island? And also the reason Columbus never righted his and gave Pimentel due credit for his discovery, instead burying it in such confusing prose that most historians to this day have concluded, quite wrongly, that there was scant gold on Spain and Pintan, the desertion, had no part in finding it anyway.

Whatever the reasons for his haste, the Admiral certainly made his way along the remainder of the island’s coast with great alacrity, and little more than a week after he met up with Pinta, the two caravels were off on the homeward leg. One notable stop was made at a narrow bay some 200 miles east of La Navidad, where a party Colón sent ashore discovered, for the first time, some Indians with bows and arrows.

The Admiral having given standing orders that his men should buy or barter away the weaponry of the Indians—they had done so on at least two previous oc-
casions, presumably without causing enmity—these men in the longboat began to dicker with the bowmen with the plumes. After just two bows were sold, the Indians armed and ran back to the cover of the trees where they kept their remaining weapons and, so the sailors assumed, prepared...to attack the Christians and capture them.” When they came toward the Spaniards again brandishing ropes—almost certainly meaning to trade these rather than give up their precious bows—

the sailors panicked and, “being prepared as always the Admiral advised them to be,” attacked the Indians with swords and halberds, gave one a “great slash on the buttocks” and shot another in the breast with a crossbow. The Tamus grabbed their fallen comrades and fled in, fright, and the sailors would have chased them and “killed many of them” but for the pilot in charge of the party, who somehow “prevented it.”

It may fairly be called the first pitched battle between Europeans and Indians in the New World—the first display of the armed power, and the will to use it, of the white invaders.

And did the Admiral object to this, transgressing as it did his previous idea of trying to maintain good relations with the natives so as to make them willing trading partners, if not docile servants? Hardy at all, no, he said, “they would have fear of the Christians,” and he celebrated the skirmish by naming the cape and the harbor de las Fieles—or the Arrows. . .

**WEDNESDAY, 16 JANUARY**
He departed three hours before daybreak with the land breeze from the gulf which he called Golfo de las Fieles. . . . He . . . turned to the direct course for Spain northeast by east. . . . After losing sight of the cape that he named San Theramo on the Island España, which was sixteen leagues to the west, he made twelve leagues to the east by north, accompanied by very fine weather.

Thus ended that most portentous event, the first encounter of the Old World with the New, though the representatives of neither one would have known to call it that, any more than they could have begun to imagine its consequences. The depleted fleet, now with about fifty crewmen and perhaps two dozen Tamo captives, both ships taking on water, set their prows to the north and to the latitude where the Admiral believed he would find the westward that would take him back to Spain.

January was especially fitting month for this crossing, for it is the month named for the god Jesus, in ancient times the god of the doorway, and hence of be-
ginnings, of both time and place, of which there has never been a more conse-
quent example. It was after that same god that the first king of Italy was named, the great-grandson of Noah, so it is said . . . and the founder of Genoa.

**SUGGESTED READINGS**

**General**


