

# Thinking about Columbus in Bethlehem (4)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Columbus monument September 11, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the Columbus monument* 

*What right had the first discoverers of America to land, and take possession of a country, without asking the consent of its inhabitants, or yielding them an adequate compensation for their territory?"*  
*Washington Irving's "gigantic question"*

Welcome back to the Gadfly seminar on Columbus.

Did y'do yer reading assignment yesterday?

Time to compare notes.

## **Columbus's *Diario*, October 11, 1492**

So Columbus kept a journal/diary/log book on his voyage from August 1492 to March 1493. He spent only about one day at the point where he made first contact with the "New World." For most of his time on this first voyage he was on the move, mapping, charting, and, especially, looking for gold. In this entry on the October 12 touchdown, Gadfly's eyes and mind go ineluctably to the part of Columbus's concluding assessment of the Taino people he encountered where he says that "they should be good servants and intelligent, for I observed that they quickly took in what was said to them." What are the Taino good for? To be good servants. To be — drum roll — slaves. Enslavement is what Columbus envisions from the get-go. Though the Taino are, according to Columbus's own words, peaceful people full of "good will," and thus one can envision the possibility of harmonious relations between peoples of totally different cultures, Columbus's mind is focused on his domination of them. Their lack of clothes, their body paint, their purported lack of religion, their inability to "speak" (in Spanish) show that the Taino are uncivilized — Columbus is not one whit curious about their culture, about what a new culture might teach him — thus virtually demanding domination for their own good, and Columbus's focus on their feeble armaments not only marks their feeble level of human advancement but

promises ease of domination. The other part of Columbus's concluding assessment of the Tainos is the ease with which they will be converted. Columbus is a Catholic, a member of the one true religion, who has a mandate from the Catholic Sovereigns of the Catholic nation of Spain to make Catholics, that is, to save souls, as part of his mission. The Tainos are heathen, damned, who will — by love or force — be redeemed from moral darkness, converted into new beings, erasing their own worthless character and culture in the process.

Do I have all that right, gang? Are you seeing what I'm seeing? If so, it's not a pretty picture.

### **Columbus's First Letter, April 1493**

So what we have here is Columbus's official final report on his first voyage to the "New World" addressed to his bosses, to his financial backers, the King and Queen of Spain (though, to be sure the implied audience of the *Diario* is also this same King and Queen). Like all such final project reports, Columbus is quick to highlight the successes of the journey — to prove that their money was well spent! — but also to lay the basis for funding for another trip. We see the age-old cycle of business reports. This letter is remarkable for several things. First, for the revelation that Columbus took possession of every island for Spain by reading a proclamation at a public ceremony right in front of the Taino owners — "no one making any resistance," of course, because they had absolutely no idea what was going on. Incredible. What balls! That act of formal and legal possession had to be certified by a Notary who was part of the crew and ultimately filed in the Home Office in Spain should some other country contest ownership. Second, Columbus immediately embarks on erasing Taino culture by giving every place a new name, a Spanish name. Columbus knows the Taino call the site where he touched down first Guanahani, but he renames it San Salvador. Insidious. The power of naming is a primal power. The Spanish have it. Columbus layers his map over the Taino map and renders their presence invisible. What balls! The third remarkable thing in this letter is a rhapsodic Columbus swooning over the natural beauty of the part of the world he "discovered." What he describes is an Eden (which many vacationers among Gadfly followers can still to this day attest), and Columbus temporarily falls under a magical spell that rests in stark contrast to his

role as profiteer providing “as many heathen slaves as their majesties may choose to demand” and “as much gold as they have need of.” Ultimately, this Columbus is the serpent in the garden, ruining all.

The letter was successful. Columbus’s funding continued. As did the oppression of the Taino and the raping of Eden.

## **The Columbus picture album**

As you can imagine, the news of “discovery” of a New World was paradigm shattering, and interest in knowing more was high in the Old World. The printing press was still a relatively new resource, and Columbus’s letters were rather quickly published in book form and distributed widely — and sometimes with images like the ones here. Columbus, of course, would have had nothing to do with the creation and choice of these images to accompany his text, but they are a gauge for us of what the culture saw in Columbus’s work and what it anticipated in the future from it. “In composite,” Gadfly asked you yesterday, “what story do such images tell?” The first image depicts the Indigenous people as “fearful and timid” before the advance of the Spanish symbolized in the powerful ship, that marvel of modern technology and high civilization, in the foreground that acts as a kind of portal for the first contact scene displayed in the rear. And after that there is no sign in the images of the Indigenous people at all. None. The culture for which Columbus is the long extended arm turns the inhabitants of the New World into ciphers, writing over their maps and literally removing them from the landscape.

So, to bring us back to this cultural moment of racial reckoning in Bethlehem and the reason for this excursion into history, is Columbus the kind of man we should be honoring and heroicizing? Is his mission one with which we are proud to be aligned?

Terrible destruction and genocidal waves resulted from events Columbus set in motion.

Gadfly thinks again of the soft, thoughtful reminder of **Joyce Hinnefeld**, Clerk of the Lehigh Valley Meeting (Quakers), each Sunday morning: “we worship together on land that was originally the land of the Lenape people.”