

Christopher Columbus to Luis de Santángel, Official Notary for King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, 1493

CHRYSTOPHER COLUMBUS WROTE THIS LETTER on his way home from his first voyage to the Caribbean, believing that he had landed in the Indies. Soon, Europeans would realize that he had found an entire continent that they had not known existed. Columbus's letters had a significant effect on how Europeans thought about and dealt with the peoples of the Americas. Most obviously, the name "Indians," based on Columbus's misunderstanding of geography, stuck. The people that Columbus writes about meeting, the Tainos (sometimes called Arawaks), did not leave written records, so we must use Columbus's version to imagine what tales they told about him, his ships, his men, and the goods that they brought.

Sir: Because I know you will take pleasure in the great victory which Our Lord has given me in my voyage, I write you this, so that you may know how in twenty days¹ with the armada which our lords the most famous King and Queen gave me I reached the Indies, where I found many, many islands inhabited by countless people. Of all of them I took possession on behalf of their Highnesses with oral proclamation and the royal banner flying, and nobody contradicted.

The first one that I found, I named *San Salvador* in honor of his glorious Majesty, who has marvelously given all this (the Indians call it Guanahani). The second, I named the island of *Santa María de Concepción*. The third, *Fernandina*. The fourth, *Isla Bella*. The fifth, *Juana* island.² And so a new name for each.

When I reached Juana, I followed its coastline westward and discovered it to be so large that I thought it must be the mainland of the province of

Cathay.³ For little could they all reach there, they wouldn't have anything there. I wanted to go to the windward side as far as a canoe was a king's night's journey, so that

I kept looking for one island east, ten continued straight east, this one empty, nothing there, rivers there, level, with island of different fortifications, tall and slender leaves, which in May in cordoning the birds of a

There are beautiful plants, honey, an earth and tain range, ing and so towns and

The houses. And the trees. The trees one there have discc

Cathay.³ And since I didn't find any towns or villages along the coast, except for little clusters of people⁴ that we didn't get a chance to speak with because they all ran away, I kept sailing along the same route, thinking that way I wouldn't miss any large cities or towns. And after many leagues, there was nothing new and the coast was taking me to the north, which was not where I wanted to go because it was still winter and I meant to sail south. Besides, the wind was against me. I decided not to wait any longer and turned back as far as a certain harbor, from which I sent two men inland to find out if there was a king or any large cities. They traveled for three days and found an infinite number of little villages and countless people, but no political organization, so they returned.

I kept hearing from some Indians whom we had taken that this land was one island after another, so I followed the coastline eastward a hundred and seven leagues to where it ended, from which point I saw another island to the east, ten or eight leagues off, which I named Española,⁵ and I went to it and continued along the northern side for a hundred seventy-eight great leagues straight east, as with Juana. This island is magnificent, as are all the others, but this one excessively so. Here there are many harbors along the seacoast with nothing that I know of in Christendom to compare them with, and plenty of rivers that are marvelously large and good. Both islands rise well above sea level, with many mountain ranges and high mountain peaks—nothing on the island of Centrefrei⁶ comparable to them—all beautiful, with a thousand different formations, all accessible and full of trees of a thousand species that are tall and seem to reach to heaven. And I have been told they never lose their leaves, which I can believe, because I saw them as green and beautiful as trees in May in Spain. Some have flowers; some, fruit; others, in other stages according to their nature. And the nightingale was singing and so were other birds of a thousand species in the month of November wherever I went.

There are palm trees of six or eight species, and it's amazing to behold their beautiful variety, which is greater than among the other trees and fruit trees and plants. There are all manner of pine groves, and vast meadows, and there's honey, and many kinds of birds and various fruits. There are mines in the earth and countless people. Española is a wonder: the mountains and mountain ranges, the plains and meadows and fields so beautiful and rich for planting and sowing, and for raising all kinds of livestock, and for buildings and towns and villages.

The harbors—here in Spain you would never believe without seeing them! And the rivers—very big, with good water, most of which have gold in them. The trees and fruits and plants are very different from those on Juana. On this one there are many spices, and large mines for gold and other metals that I have discovered and heard about.

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All of the people, men and women, go naked as the day they were born, although some women do cover themselves in a certain place with the leaf of a plant or some cotton material that they make for that purpose. They have neither iron nor steel, nor any arms, nor are they warlike, not because they aren't well built and beautifully proportioned, but because they are wondrously timid.

They carry no weapon except that when they are planting they attach a pointed stick to the end of a cane, and they don't even dare to use it, because many times I have put two or three of my men ashore at some town to speak with them, and countless of the inhabitants have come out, and, at the sight of my men approaching, run away, not one father waiting for his son, and not because anybody has done any harm to them, because at every point where I have landed and had occasion to speak with them, I have given to them of everything I had—fabric and many other things without getting anything in return—but because they are hopelessly timid. The truth is, though, after we reassured them and they lost their fears, they were so artless and so generous with what they owned, you wouldn't believe it without seeing. Anything they own, all you have to do is ask for it and they never say no, but give themselves with it and show so much love that they would give their hearts, and whether they are wanting something valuable or of little value, they are satisfied with any little thing you give them in exchange.

I forbade my men to give them anything so trashy as pieces of broken bowls or broken glass or bits of needles, although when they did get them, they held them like the finest jewels in the world, and there was one sailor who for a needle got gold weighing two and a half castellanos,⁷ and there were other sailors who, for other, less valuable things, got much more. In exchange for new pennies they gave whatever they had, even if it were two or three castellanos of gold or twenty-five to fifty pounds⁸ of spun cotton. They were even taking pieces of broken barrel hoops and giving back whatever they had like dumb beasts, which seemed wrong to me, and I forbade it. And I was gratefully giving them a thousand good things that I had brought to win their love. And so they will become Christian, because they are well disposed to the love and service of their Highnesses and all the land of Castille and they try to be close with us and give us things that we need and that they have in abundance.

They have no acquaintance with religious sects or idolatry, but they all believe that power and goodness is in the heavens. They firmly believed that I came down with these people and these ships from the sky, and at every point they receive me with that kind of respect as soon as they lose their fears. And this is not because they are ignorant—indeed, they have very subtle minds and navigate these seas so well that it's wonderful how good an account they give of them—but because they never saw people wearing clothes before or ships like ours.

As soon as some of them they understood since I come from there were the first house and to the sky!" So even came, not leave eat and drink.

On all the islands larger, some in galley boat, on our galley boats ways you would lands, bringing with seventy c

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As soon as I arrived in the Indies, on the first island I came upon I seized some of them to get them to tell me about the region, and they did, because they understood us and we them by words and signs, which have much improved since then. I am bringing them to you now, and they still believe that I come from the sky, in spite of all the conversations I've had with them. These were the first to proclaim it when I arrived, and others ran from house to house and to the nearby towns crying out, "Come! Come see the people from the sky!" So everybody, men and women, as soon as they were reassured of us, came, not leaving a child or a grownup behind, all of them bringing things to eat and drink, which they gave with wonderful love.

On all the islands they have many canoes, somewhat like galley boats, some larger, some smaller, and some—many—are larger than an eighteen-bench galley boat, only not so wide because they are carved from one tree. One of our galley boats wouldn't be able to catch one of theirs, because they move in ways you wouldn't believe. With them they navigate all those countless islands, bringing their merchandise with them. I have seen some of these canoes with seventy or eighty men, each with his oar. . . .

I have already mentioned how I had gone a hundred seven leagues along the coast of Juana in a straight line from west to east. From having taken this route, I can say that the island is larger than England and Scotland together, because eastward beyond those hundred seven leagues lie two provinces that I didn't reach, one of which is called Avan, where the people are born with tails, and these provinces cannot extend for less than fifty or sixty leagues, according to what I hear from the Indians I have, who know all these islands.

The other island, Española, is larger in its circumference than all of Spain. . . . Española [is] the most convenient place and best region for gold mines and for trade with both the continent of Europe and the land of the Great Khan, with whom there will be great trade and profit. I have taken possession of a large town which I have named Villa de Navidad, where I have established a force and a fortress which by this time should be completely finished. And I have left people there with enough arms and artillery and provisions for a year as well as a boat and a master shipbuilder with all the skills to build more boats and in great friendship with the King of that land, so great that he was proud to call me and hold me as a brother. And even if they did change their minds and attacked, these people—neither he nor his subjects—know nothing of weapons and they go naked, as I have already mentioned. They are the timidest people in the world. So only the men who remained behind are capable of destroying the whole land, and it is an island without danger for those who know how to govern it.

It seems to me that all the men on all the islands are content with one wife, and to the chief or King they give as many as twenty. It also seems to me that

the women work harder than the men, nor have I been able to ascertain whether they own private property, because I think I observed that whatever one person owned, everybody shared, especially food supplies.

Up until now I have not discovered on these islands any men that are monsters, as many people expected; rather, they are all lovely people. Nor are they black, as in Guinea, except for their flowing hair. They aren't reared where the rays of the sun would burn them, although the sun there is very strong, since it is twenty-six degrees from the equator. On the islands where there are high mountains, the cold was harsh this winter, but they bear it by force of habit and with the help of their foods, which they eat with many extremely hot spices.

Anyway, I haven't found any evidence of monsters, except that one of the islands, the second after entering the Indies, is inhabited by people whom the other islanders consider extremely ferocious, and who eat human flesh. . . . They are ferocious with the other people, who are great cowards, but they are no more of a concern for me than the others are. These are the ones who barter for wives in marriage with the Indian women on the first island we discovered after leaving Spain, an island with no men on it. Those women don't engage in womanly activities. Instead they arm themselves with bows and arrows like those canes I mentioned, and they cover themselves with plates of copper, which they have plenty of.

They tell me there is another island larger than Española where the people have no hair on their heads and there is gold beyond measure, and I am bringing Indians with me bearing witness of those and other islands.

In conclusion, speaking only of this one voyage, which was just a rapid run, their Highnesses can see that I will give them however much gold they need with what little aid they give me now: spices and cotton as much as they call for, and as much as they order to be shipped to them of mastic⁹ . . . and aloe as much as they order to be shipped, and slaves as many as they order to be shipped (from among those who worship idols), and I think I have found rhubarb and cinnamon, and I will find a thousand other significant things. . . . Even though other people had spoken about these lands, it was all conjecture and nothing seen. Rather than understanding, as long as people were hearing about them, most people were listening and making up their minds according to fable more than anything else.¹⁰

Therefore, since our Redeemer has given this victory to our illustrious King and Queen and to their famously successful reigns, all Christians should rejoice, hold grand celebrations, and with solemn prayers give thanks to the Holy Trinity for the exaltation of turning so many peoples to our Holy Faith, and secondly for the temporal benefits from which not only Spain but all Christendom will have comfort and profit.

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This is a very brief account of what was done. Written on board the caravel at the Canary Islands, February 15, 1493.

Translated by John DuVal from facsimile copies of Columbus's original letter, in John Boyd Thatcher, *Christopher Columbus: His Life, His Work, His Remains* (New York, 1903), 2: 17–20, 33–40.

Discussion Questions

1. What was Columbus looking for? How did his goals compare to those of the Vikings?
2. Who was Columbus's audience? Did that audience influence how he wrote? Does any of his information seem suspect? Did he get the geography right?
3. How might the Tainos have described their visitors to their neighbors who did not meet them?
4. How pleased do you think Ferdinand and Isabella were to learn that the "king of the land" was proud to call Columbus brother and that Columbus believed that many of the natives thought he was a god?
5. If you didn't know what happened later, what might you predict for European-Indian relations?

Notes

1. It was actually thirty-three days, as Columbus makes clear in a postscript to this letter and in a separate letter to Ferdinand and Isabella.
2. San Salvador, Santa María de Concepción, Fernandina (Exuma Grande), and Isabella (Larga) are islands in the Bahamas. Juana is Cuba. Columbus puns Isabella and Isla Bella, "beautiful island."
3. Cathay is the name by which Marco Polo in the twelfth century referred to the empire of Kubla Khan and which came to be generally associated with China. Fifteenth-century Europeans employed measurements of latitude but did not have a system of longitude, so estimating east-west distances was difficult.
4. All of the people whom Columbus saw on this voyage were Tainos. They lived in communities across most of the West Indies.
5. Hispaniola, where present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic are situated.
6. Tenerife, Canary Islands.
7. A *castellano* is about a fourth of an ounce.
8. Columbus says an *arroba* or two. An *arroba* is about twenty-five pounds.
9. A resin used as a spice, chewing gum, and varnish.
10. Columbus puns on *fabla*, which here means both "speech" (*habla*) and "fable."

**INTERPRETING A
CONTINENT**

Voices from Colonial America

Edited by
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and
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ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.

Published in the United States of America
by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowmanlittlefield.com

Estover Road
Plymouth PL6 7PY
United Kingdom

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Interpreting a continent: voices from colonial America / edited by Kathleen DuVal and John DuVal.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7425-5182-4 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-7425-5182-2 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-7425-5183-1 (paper : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-7425-5183-0 (paper : alk. paper)

eISBN-13: 978-0-7425-6464-0

eISBN-10: 0-7425-6464-9

1. United States—History—Colonial period, ca. 1600–1775—Sources. 2. North America—History—Colonial period, ca. 1600–1775—Sources. 3. Europeans—United States—History—Sources. 4. Indians of North America—History—Colonial period, ca. 1600–1775—Sources. 5. Africans—United States—History—Sources. 6. United States—Race relations—History—17th century—Sources. 7. United States—Race relations—History—18th century—Sources. 8. Acculturation—United States—History—17th century—Sources. 9. Acculturation—United States—History—18th century—Sources. I. DuVal, Kathleen. II. DuVal, John, 1940–

E187.I58 2009

973.2—dc22

2008040518

Printed in the United States of America

♻️™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.