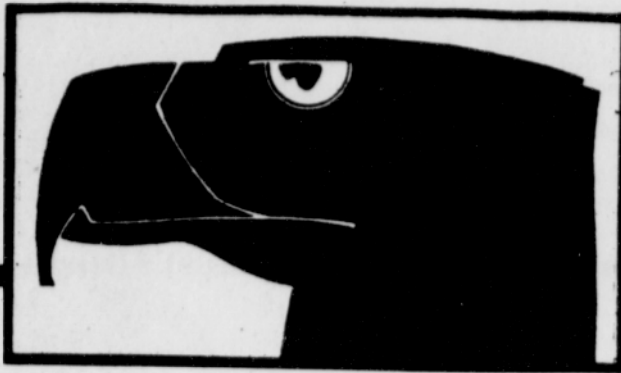


# NORTH COAST

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*In a dark time the eye begins to see.*  
- Theodore Roethke



DOUGLAS SMITH

## HELLO COLUMBUS

Five hundred years ago, on Friday, October 12, 1492, a Genoese seaman stumbled onto the western hemisphere while seeking passage to the far East. One world was born that day but the world that was here began that instant to die.

Christopher Columbus missed his mark by half a world, and by that doubled the world's size. The old civilizations of Europe sent their most favored and dumped their least on the shores of the New World, though they were equals in their fervent obliteration of the worlds they found; and they turned on each other as well.

Two hundred years later the Great Thinkers of the 18th century debated the consequences of the European discovery of the American continents, and concluded the costs had been too high for the gains. The Great Thinkers wished the Great Navigator had never set sail or had perished with his three small ships on the ocean — though someone would have claimed discovery of the New World eventually, and many had made landfalls in the same hemisphere from both Atlantic and Pacific Oceans hundreds, even thousands of years before. And Columbus might himself wished he never sailed either. He died poor and in disgrace.

Unknown at first to the Europeans who sought wealth with murder and torture of the primitive tribes they initially encountered were great civilizations, as autocratic, expansive and cruel as their own; a few matched and even exceeded the European cultures that were themselves just recovering from a prolonged regression. A renaissance of western civilization, a rebirth of lost classical knowledge, culminated in the calamitous error of Columbus who refused to believe that he had blundered upon an entirely unknown landmass that blocked his passage to the ancient East.

And immediately he began the cruel harvest of native inhabitants that was to last for at least four centuries. As the natives perished by the millions from slaughter, forced labor, disease

and despair, half of Africa it seemed was emptied to provide slaves for New World plantations and mines, and millions died before ever reaching the Americas.

New civilizations spawned upon the ruins of the obliterated, often deeply influenced by them, and one in particular emerged from seeds of radical ideas brought across the Atlantic from nations that spurned them into exile. This new culture was uncomfortably germinated by various peoples who had come to stay, some as seekers, others as slaves; and its government was founded on the heretical proposition that people should be free and equally rulers of the

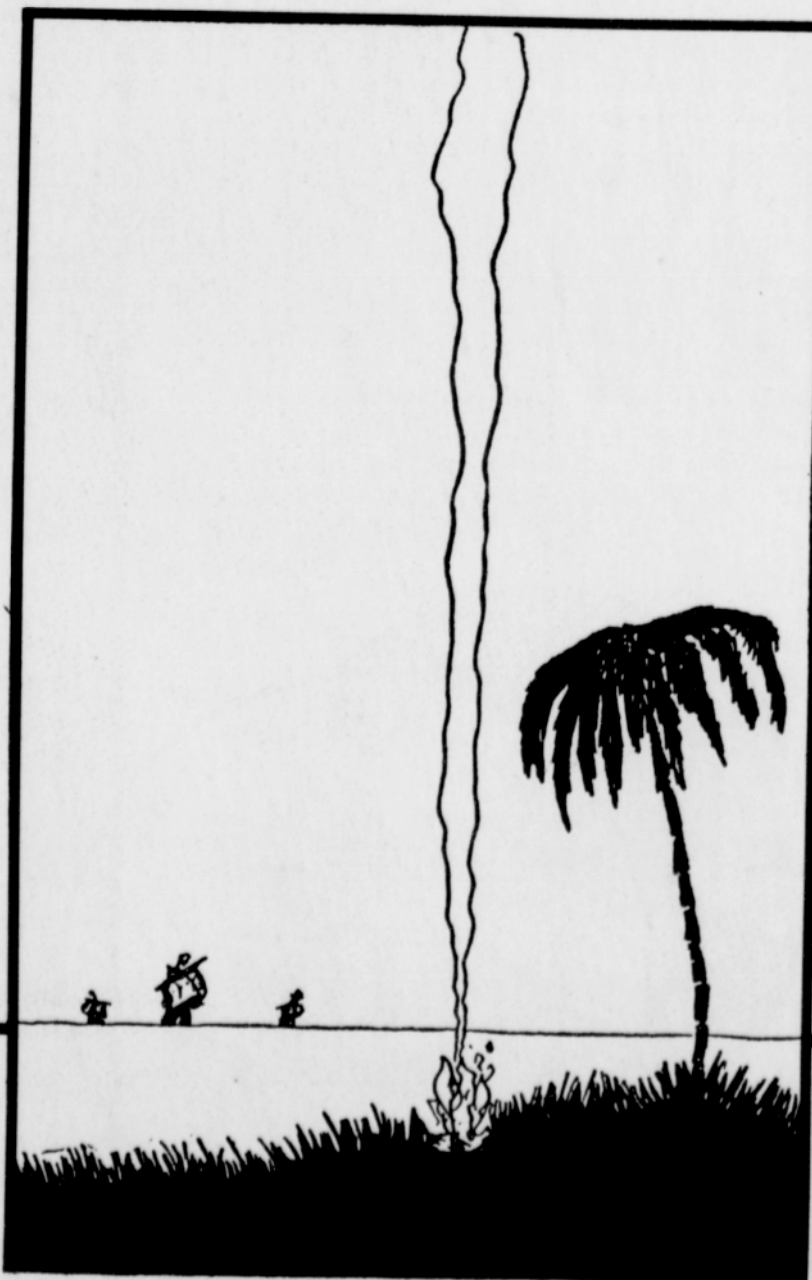
state. The ideal was always in conflict with reality. At times the tension created brilliant advances in civil liberties. Most of the time progress was slow, bloody, and often as not retrogressive. The major contradictions of the growing republic were its long acceptance of slavery and the remorseless extermination of native cultures, an "ethnic cleansing" repeated in other places in more recent times.

The quincentenary observance of Columbus' first voyage to the Americas, named after a later Italian explorer who was not fooled into believing he had reached Asia, is heated and controversial. Some celebrate, others bitterly denounce the intrusion of Europe upon the western hemisphere and half a millennium of conquest, epidemic and cultural genocide. Words of placation or condemnation are exchanged: the Old World "invaded" "encountered" "conquered" "converged" with the New, depending on the perspectives of the speakers.

However one might feel, Columbus and his successors are as inescapable a fact of history as the great meteor that crashed where Iceland is now and which ended the long age of the dinosaurs. Columbus' voyage began the end of the long age of seclusion of descendants of Asian hunters who had crossed over in periods when the Bering Sea was shallow and the continents were connected at their northern extremities, and were subsequently cut off from the rest of the human world when the waters rose again.

The ancient cycles of Pre-Columbian civilizations disappeared under the onslaught of invaders who were oblivious of them; in the same manner, sometime in the future, the civilizations that have grown from their ruins will be devoured, deteriorate, or self-destruct, and in the words of Lafcadio Hearn, who favored the resurgence of Asia over the West, Post-Columbian cultures "will be as missed as the ichthyosaur."

— MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER



HENDRIK VAN LOON