

and his trading partner, the colorful and luckless John Kendrick, exchanged ships and Gray set off across the Pacific in *Columbia Rediviva* to China to trade seal, otter and beaver pelts bartered from Indians with cheap trinkets and glass beads (known as "traders' beads"), and returned to Boston. He and his crew were the first U.S. citizens to take the American flag around the world.

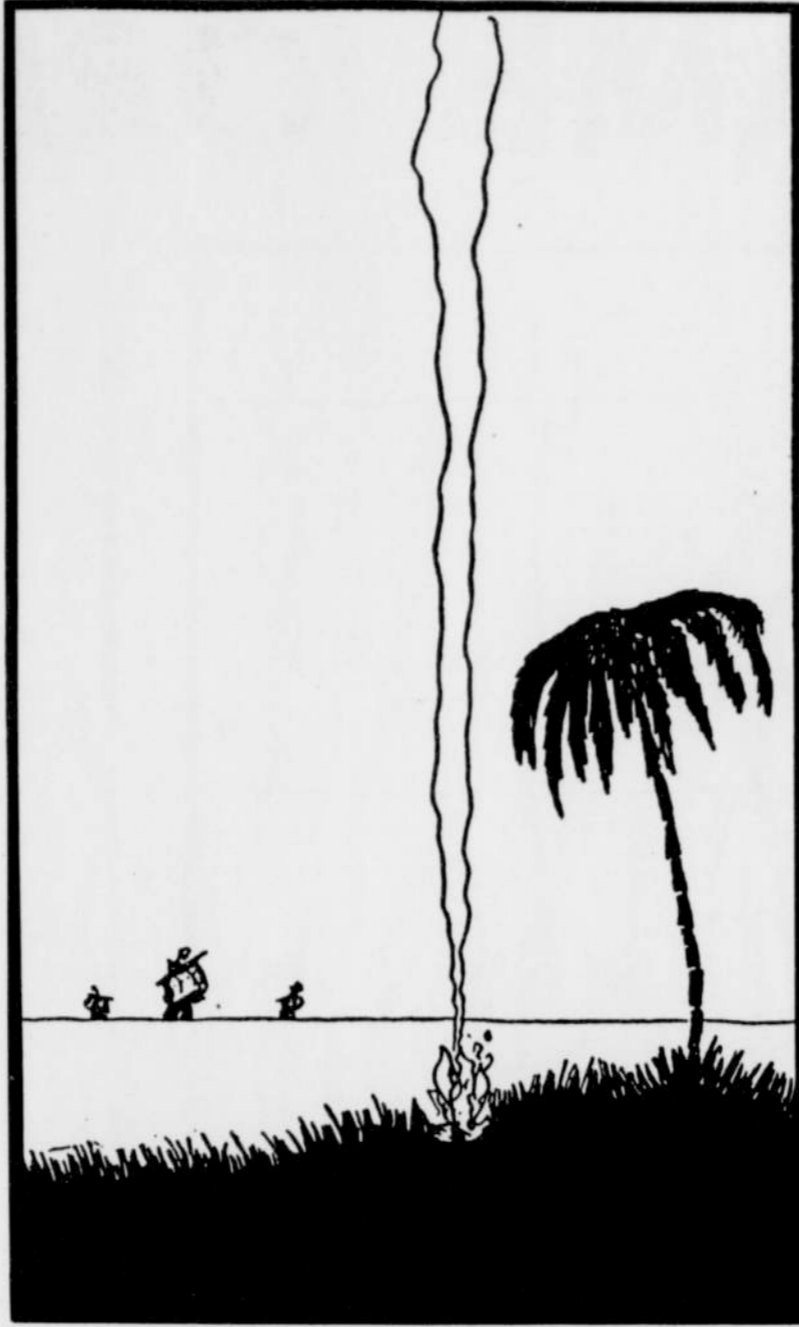
It was on his second voyage to the Pacific Northwest, entering the Pacific Ocean as before through the perilous passage around Cape Horn, that Gray claimed discovery of the Columbia River — which, as a matter of note, would have astonished the people who lived along the river for thousands of years and knew about its presence all along.

Gray stayed two weeks in the river. Afterward he sailed a second time to China. Later that year Vancouver, who had missed the river, sent one of his ships, *Chatham* commanded by Lt. William Broughton, to explore the Columbia after he learned of Gray's claim. Broughton charted 100 miles upriver and named Mount Hood (locals called it Wy'East) after an aristocratic sponsor of Vancouver's Northwest expedition. As a result of his work, Vancouver attempted to claim discovery of the Great River for himself (and, of course, for England's King George III).

Gray's claim, however, prevailed. When Britain and the United States squabbled over territorial claims to the Northwest in the early 19th century, Gray's ship's logbook of his discovery was a critical factor that made Oregon and Washington two of the United States.

Although Gray put an end to the search for a liquid thoroughfare through the Americas (along with an overland jaunt by Lewis and Clark in 1803-06) that started when Columbus found them in his way exactly 300 years earlier, a northern sea route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans was navigated in the years 1903 to 1905 when Roald Amundsen of Norway sailed and drifted across the top of North America. And in 1969, the U.S. oil tanker *Manhattan* plowed a similar course through ice clogged Arctic waters accompanied by ice-breakers. But, of course, the Panama Canal was built and has been operating since 1914. And jet airplanes fly around the world in less than a day, which mocks the hardships and deaths of early globe girdling mariners who lived and died at the mercy of wind, water and disease.

This palindromic year of the new millennium/century the nations of the Americas commemorate the 510th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' first voyage in search of India. Some celebrate, others bitterly denounce the intrusion of Europe upon the western hemisphere and the consequences of half a millennium of conquest and epidemic. The intense eruption of controversy resembles the dispute between intellectuals of the



HENDRICK WILLEM VAN LOON

18th century in which Rousseau, Voltaire, *et al*, argued that the European discovery of the Americas had cost millions of lives and the wholesale destruction of native culture, and was thus a blight upon the history of civilization.

A smaller, less controversial acclaim is paid Robert Gray and the bicentennial + 10 of his claim of discovery of the fabled River of the West on May 11, 1792. Yet the consequences have been a microcosm of all that Europe accomplished or ruined in this half of the world. Almost immediately white Americans and Europeans came in Gray's wake to trade, to settle, to supplant and eventually eradicate native culture. The Great River has itself been tamed with dams, the massive forests on both sides of its banks logged and replaced with cities and farms, and the millions of salmon (which until only recently were so numerous it was claimed a person could cross the wide river on their backs) have dwindled to only an endangered few. The exchange of a natural wilderness for a human wasteland is relatively recent. The Pacific Northwest has been a last small corner for Western exploration, with the exception of the Poles and Antarctica. Gray opened up a major portion of the last frontier, yet the annual celebration has less to do with his discovery of the great river than it does the present and future generations of native strangers who dwell among the vanished ruins of a fatally vulnerable culture our predecessors overran.

The present tenants of the Columbia River basin inherit a legacy of raw exploitation and waste. The riches once so abundant have been despoiled, virtually all used up in only a few generations. Even the big river has not escaped the pollution of modern society, known as one of the most radioactive rivers in the world as a result of Hanford plutonium and Trojan nuclear waste; and it is a garbage dump for towns and cities along its banks — industrial pollution is a major offender.

The present generation is bitterly divided about Gray's legacy, and each side of the controversy utilizes extremes in its arguments to exploit or preserve. On the one hand it might be considered that a great civilization has reached its maximum westward movement on the North American continent in the Pacific Northwest, on the other are the extreme environmental damages which an expanding population and its technology have wrought upon the landscape.

It is unfortunate that what remains of Gray's legacy is coveted by the nation at large, including the water of the river itself. It is likely that the decisions have already been removed from local say-so. Just as likely, a massive earthquake that is predicted for sometime soon will rearrange the region into something very different.

Hail Columbia.

These pages are dedicated to the late Rolf Klep, Founder of the Columbia River Maritime Museum.

HELLO COLUMBUS

Five hundred and ten years ago, on Friday, October 12, 1492, a Genoa 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, although they were equals in their fervent obliteration of the worlds they found; and they turned on each other as well.

200 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 — although 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 have wished he never sailed either. He died poor and in disgrace.

Unknown at first to the invading Europeans, who sought wealth with murder and enslavement of the primitive tribes they initially encountered, were great civilizations as autocratic, expansive and cruel as their own. A renaissance of western civilization, a rebirth of 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 the better part of four centuries. As the natives perished by the millions from slaughter, forced labor, disease and despair, it seemed that half of Africa 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 annual 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 "encountered" "invaded" "conquered" "converged" with the New, depending on the perspective of the speakers.

However one might feel, Columbus and his successors are as inescapable a fact of history as a great meteor that set fire to North America in a matter of minutes and ended the long age of dinosaurs. Columbus' voyage began the end of the long age of seclusion of descendants of stone-age 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 McCUSKER

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