

GEOGRAPHICAL REVIEW FORUM

REFLECTIONS ON CHARLES C. MANN'S 1491*

Editors' note: Every now and then—perhaps not as often as we would wish—a new book sparks an extraordinary variety of reactions and stimulating discussions among geographers, and a single review simply cannot do justice to the volume. Such is the case with Charles Mann's 1491. Our solution is to present a "Geographical Review Forum," comprising an introduction that sets the stage, eight critiques, and Mann's response to them. May the forum inspire more thought, more talk, more research and writing, and more revelations!



A YEAR BY MANY OTHER NAMES

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Our world has been turned on its head, and cannot be fixed.

—Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, 1612–1615

The year 1492 was good for some, bad for others. How do we come to terms with all that a year portends?

Fourteen calendar rounds have come and gone since the Columbus Quincenary, an event that witnessed an adipose body of literature wash ashore on the beach of human endeavor. True enough, a high tide did leave behind a handful of titles still worth combing through, titles deservedly kept in print, ones that always yield a return: Eduardo Galeano's *Memory of Fire* (1985–1988), for instance, or Ronald Wright's *Stolen Continents* (2003). Much of the work generated to mark that fateful and fatal landfall has been swept back out to sea, seldom consulted (for very good reasons) in the bibliographical doldrums. Numerous contributions have sunk, Titanic-like, to the bottom, extravagant ventures now glimpsed only rarely by an inquisitive few curious to peek at the relics of Davy Jones's Used Book and DVD Locker—the likes of Kirkpatrick Sale's *The Conquest of Paradise* (1990) or Ridley Scott's flopbuster film by the same telling name.

Like Columbus's offspring, Fernando, I am the son of a merchant seaman, so allow me to toil a bit more with maritime metaphors. Navigating a tricky passage is best achieved with a savvy captain at the helm, one assisted in his task by experienced and able seamen. Our discipline, the Latin Americanist realm of it in particu-

* 1491: NEW REVELATIONS OF THE AMERICAS BEFORE COLUMBUS, by Charles C. Mann. xii and 465 pp.; maps, ill., bibliog., index; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 140004006X; \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 1400032059.

lar, was well served when Karl Butzer accepted a commission from the Association of American Geographers to assemble a special issue of its *Annals*. Butzer (1992) enlisted a crew, chartered a course, weathered more than one or two squalls, and produced an edited log—*The Americas before and after 1492*—that has few equals, a decade and a half on, in geographical literature dealing with the cultural, environmental, and intellectual consequences of empire.

A copy of *The Americas before and after 1492* made its way into the library of Smith College in an England given its “New” designation by one that considered itself “Old”—old and superior. Libraries are lighthouses, sanctuaries of illumination that help readers avoid the reef. It was in the library of Smith College, Charles Mann tells us, that he found himself in September 1992, when a chance encounter exposed him to Butzer’s edited volume. Its contents, with William Denevan’s exposition of “The Pristine Myth” luring Mann in, made him aware of innovative, at times controversial, data in several scholarly fields and sent him on his own voyage of discovery as a science writer for the general public. The evocative *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus* is the result of his activities as one of the best investigative journalists around, an engaged and engaging discussion of what the Americas are thought to have been like on the eve of contact with Europe, the extent to which human intervention made them that way, and how native patterns of land and life changed dramatically in the wake of the Old World’s penetration of the New.

“What’s so ‘new’ about these ‘revelations?’” specialists will ask. “We knew that piece of information already.” But how adept are we at turning the details of our research findings into a compelling narrative, telling the story without boring the reader? Distilling the essence of a vast literature, much of it written by geographers, Mann portrays the pre-Columbian Americas, in certain favored areas, as densely settled and ecologically transformed, a manifestly cultural landscape at odds with earlier depictions of it as sparsely occupied and little touched by human hand.

At the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers (CLAG) held in Tucson in January 2003, a panel was organized to critique an article Mann (2002a) had published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, a twelve-page distillation of his labors to date on the matter he encapsulates by the touchstone title “1491.” That panel generated a forum published in the *Journal of the Southwest* (Lovell and others 2004). A follow-up panel was convened when CLAG met in Morelia in October 2005, on that occasion to subject *1491*, now a 477-page book, to further scrutiny. Our Mexican reprise forms the basis of the present forum, in which we hear not from five commentators, as in the *Journal of the Southwest*, but ten, with Mann himself (as in Morelia) on hand to respond to his critics. Before the author of *1491* has his say, geographers whose professional expertise pertains to the book’s subject matter have theirs.

Jerome Dobson begins by asking bluntly, “Why can’t geographers write their own story?”—a question he confronts in no-nonsense fashion. William Denevan then discusses Mann’s treatment of “humanized landscapes,” and William Doolittle addresses irrigation technologies and the cultivation of maize in arid regions of

North America. Moving south into one of Mesoamerica's pivotal hearths, B. L. Turner II questions not what caused Classic Maya civilization to flourish but what caused such a sophisticated society to collapse. Next, Daniel Gade examines how Mann portrays native life in the Andean world, after which we focus on Amazonia, with William Woods concentrating on precontact scenarios and Susanna Hecht on postcontact ones. Thomas Whitmore draws our attention to issues of population and epidemiology before Mann grapples with the collective critique of his work that our forum constitutes. The words of the Andean "author and prince" Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala (see Adorno 1992) that serve as our point of departure, taken from his *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno* ([1612–1615] 1980, 2: 414–415), resonate throughout. Just as his lament for a lost world—*mundo al revés*—is also a sobering evaluation of the transformed one that replaced it—*no hay remedio*—so too, we trust, will our forum call for us to think again about agency and impact in the New World scheme of things.

Nineteen ninety-two has come and gone, the big splash of the Columbian Quincentenary for the most part all dried up. Move over, 1492; it's time now for 1491.



WHY CAN'T GEOGRAPHERS WRITE THEIR OWN STORY?

Jerome E. Dobson

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When Bill Woods returned from the CLAG conference in Morelia, he recounted to me a dramatic exchange that had occurred in the forum on Charles Mann's *1491*. All of the papers had been given. The audience had had its say. The moderator noticed Dan Gade's pensive gaze. "You've been quiet," he said. "Is there something you'd like to add?"

Dan waited a moment, then somberly asked, "What's wrong with us? Why can't we write our own story?" An intense discussion ensued, without resolution.

It's a question that I myself have pondered (2001) and committed to address (2004). How odd it is that geographers can't excite the public about geography, yet others do so routinely. Why is it so hard for geographers themselves to stir public passions on the matters they hold most dear?

Read *1491* and you'll find the "stealth discipline," geography, operating beneath the public radar. From Carl Sauer on, geographers led the way toward new understandings of the ancient Americas. As startling as the discoveries themselves is how much time passed from Sauer's first inklings (Sauer 1935) or Bill Denevan's 1961 discovery and publication (1966) to Mann's public revelation (2005). Profound ideas reported in geographical literature and widely accepted by geographers did not reach broad public awareness for half a century and more, and then not directly from geographers themselves but from the able pen of science journalist Mann.