

CLAG *Private Sector and Government* award for 2005:

Charles C. Mann

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The Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers is pleased to present its Private Sector and Government Award for 2005 to journalist Charles C. Mann. This award is made “in recognition of contributions to enhancing and disseminating knowledge of the geography of Latin America to government or the private sector.”

Mann graduated with a degree in biology and mathematics from Amherst College in 1976. Most of his professional life since then has been as a journalist, currently as a correspondent for *Science* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, but with contributions also to *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Paris-Match*, *Der Stern*, *Forbes*, *Smithsonian*, *Geo*, and *National Geographic*, among various other magazines and newspapers. Many of his writings are of direct relevance to geography. He has traveled widely throughout Latin America and has published such articles as “The Khipu Code,” “Earthmovers of the Amazon,” “Mexican Biotechnology,” “The Oldest Civilization in the Americas,” “Unnatural Abundance,” and on Amazonian dark earths. He has co-authored books on *The Second Creation* (on physics), *The Aspirin Wars* (on drugs and money), *Noah’s Choice* (on endangered species), and *At Large* (on the internet). Besides his journalistic endeavors, Mann has written for television, including “Law and Order,” and served as editorial coordinator for several best-selling books of photography.

For this considerable body of work, his previous honors include the American Bar Association’s Silver Gravel, the Margaret Sanger Award, the Alfred P. Sloan Science Writing Prize, the American Institute of Physics Award for Science Writing, and Publisher’s Weekly Best Book of the Year. He has been a National Magazine Award finalist four times. Mann’s writing conveys a palpable sense of wonder and engagement. He expresses himself on the printed page with clarity and precision, and thus appeals widely to the general public and teachers. His sound scholarship has been commented on by academics. He bridges journalism and scholarship better than most journalists and most scholars who attempt it. He reads in depth, interviews at length, and takes care to present conflicting views of often complex issues and events.

Mann first came to our attention when he was working on the cover story, “1491,” for the March 2002 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Because that story epitomizes geography at its synthesizing best, a forum was organized to discuss its contents at the CLAG

Meeting in Tucson in 2003. Mann subsequently expanded the piece into a full-fledged book, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (Alfred Knopf, 2005). Another forum, on *1491* the book as opposed to “1491” the article, was held at the CLAG Meeting in Morelia in 2005. For this outstanding work of popular historical geography alone, most of which pertains to Latin America, Mann warrants the recognition that CLAG’s Enlaces Award encompasses. His sustained output, however, on subjects dealing with social and environmental change sets him apart. It’s one thing to have an idea; it’s another thing entirely to work hard and keep at it until the idea becomes a reality. Lots can happen, or nothing at all, in the dark inter-regnum. T. S. Eliot put it better than anyone else we know: “Between the idea and the reality falls the shadow.” Shadows in one form or other fall on every writer, even distinguished men-of-letters like T.S. Eliot. There is no guaranteed way for any writer to keep producing, but being a journalist helps foster a resolute sense of discipline, which in turn sees copy make deadlines and be transformed into print.

One of us recalls a conversation with the late James Parsons, who, before becoming a legendary figure in Latin American geography, himself cut his teeth as a journalist. “I’ve no time for people who tell me they love to write,” Parsons quipped. “What I love is the feeling of having written.” We invoke that recent past tense most warmly in relation to Mann’s felicitous synthesis, *1491*. Mann is not only a journalist whose commitment and dedication Parsons would heartily have approved of, but someone who is surely enjoying the feeling of “having written.”

The idea behind *1491*, Mann tells us in the book’s “Preface,” dates back to the Columbus Quincentenary. Our discipline, the Latin Americanist realm of it in particular, was well-served in 1992 when Karl Butzer accepted a commission from the Association of American Geographers to edit a special issue of its *Annals*. A copy of that issue, *The Americas before and after 1492: Current Geographical Research*, made its way into the library of Smith College. It was there that Charles Mann found himself browsing one evening in September 1992, when a chance encounter exposed him to Butzer’s edited volume. Its contents made him aware of innovative, at times controversial, research findings in several scholarly fields and sent him on his own voyage of discovery. “Gee,” Mann exclaimed to himself, “someone ought to put this stuff together. It would make a really interesting article.” When that elusive article never appeared, he decided to have a go at it himself, not in one but in several articles for *Science* plus the “1491” essay in *The Atlantic Monthly*. These were followed, three years later, by *1491* the book.

Thirteen years had elapsed between the idea and the reality: well worth the wait. A national best-seller across the United States, with dozens of favorable reviews to its credit, Mann’s work is not only sheer good writing, but investigative journalism at its critical best. He provides succinct, accessible, and incisive analysis, making what all too often constitutes a dull, plodding read in the hands of specialists into a veritable page-turner. Sure, any number of academics could claim that they knew most of that information already, but how adept are we at turning the details into a compelling narrative, telling the story without boring the reader? Distilling the essence of a vast scholarly literature, much of it written by geographers (at least 34 are mentioned), Mann portrays pre-Columbian America, in some areas more than others, 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 action.

1992 has come and gone, the big splash of the Columbus Quincentenary for the most part all dried up. Move over 1492, it’s time now for *1491*. Adios 1492, bienvenido *1491*. *The Americas before Columbus*. Thank you Charles Mann for giving Latin American geography public exposure as seldom before.