

The New World in the Old World Imagination

Valerie I. J. Flint was a British historian who later taught at Princeton University. She was a leading expert in medieval intellectual studies. In her book, *The Imaginative Landscape of Christopher Columbus* (Princeton University Press 1992), Flint analyzes the beliefs that Columbus took with him to the New World, and considers how his fantastic descriptions of the Caribbean were meant also to spread excitement and gain support for his ventures.

I shall attempt... to reconstruct, and understand, not the New World Columbus found, but the Old World which he carried with him in his head. This Old World held great power. It gave energy to, and directed, many of Columbus's endeavors in the first place, and much of it remained obdurately in place in his head to the last. Thus, though some of it could later, with justice, be described as fanciful, it was so real at the time to so many of the most important actors upon this particular stage, that it had a decisive impact upon the eventual establishment of "objective reality." Here fact and fantasy become so hard to distinguish that the word fantasy loses its usual meaning, and fantasy of a certain sort becomes proper, indeed vital, to the complete understanding of fact itself.

The admiral's chosen habitation, the support for many of the most inventive of his energies, was a world very different from the one in which he lived from day to day. This world may, in addition, have been the source of some of the shrewdness of his schemes. I touched earlier upon the word manipulative. A word such as this carries certain implications with it. It might suggest, for example, that Columbus used his inner world, his imaginative landscape, deliberately; perhaps to draw others into it with him, perhaps to make, with its help, an impression upon these others which could serve his ends.

An ability to conjure up a shared world soothing enough in its familiar outlines to inspire confidence in the possibilities of the as yet unknown, filled with great adventurers of at least sufficient probity to quiet moral alarms, and replete above all with [a] sense of Christian wonder.... He could attract sovereigns, knights, gentlemen and ladies; even, on occasion, his own sailors. By playing upon carefully chosen instruments he could charm from them ideas they hardly knew they had.

Top Left: Old and New Lights on Columbus by Richard H. Clarke (1893).

Middle Left: Columbus received by the royal court after his first voyage. From In the Wake of Columbus by Frederick A. Ober (1893).

Bottom Left: Columbus or the Discovery of America: An Historical Play as Performed at the Theatre-Royal, Covent-Garden, London by Thomas Morton (1794).

Right: Images from Nouveau voyage aux isles de l'Amerique by Jean Baptiste Labat (1742).