

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS: A HERO OR A CRIMINAL?

By James Walden "The Sheaf"

As a child, my brother was the proud owner of three wooden models of Christopher Columbus' Santa Maria, Nina and Pinta. He and his friends would pretend they were sailing the high seas in search of rich new lands not yet discovered. Columbus was their hero and they argued over who would take his name and command that afternoon's expedition. Disappointing for them and many others, their hero is now being raked over the coals. A poster sponsored by a local coalition of groups trying to re-educate the public about Columbus and the type of society he represented states: "WANTED-CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS-[for] Grand Theft, Genocide, Racism, Initiating the Destruction of a Culture, Rape, Torture, Maiming of Indigenous People and Instigator of the Big Lie."

How can it be possible that a man revered by millions of U.S. school children during each October's Columbus Day celebrations be such a criminal? Moreover, how can a man who is reported to have done such things has having governments in Europe, Latin America and North America organizing lavish festivities to commemorate the 500th anniversary of his 1492 voyage of discovery?

It is actually quite simple. Columbus remains a hero to many. He is the man who is admired for daring to sail off into the unknown in search of a new route to India. He is also the man his admirers credit with discovering America (others argue that he was not the first and claim he was and is a part of the "Big Lie") and thus providing new frontiers where people could be free to pursue a new life in a new land, irrespective of the effects on the original inhabitants.

It often occurs that the heroes of an individual people are not those of the rest of the world. For example, Sir Francis Drake was knighted for his exploits under the British Crown and is held today in high regard by the English. To many Latin Americans, Drake was nothing but a pirate who received a knighthood for his adeptness at stealing other peoples property.

Closer to home, Louis Riel remains in the view of many Whites a historic enemy of the Canadian nation; one who should never be remembered as anything but

a criminal who quite deservedly was executed. To the Metis, however, he is a hero and a martyr.

Modern day examples abound. Mr. "Desert Storm", Noram Schwarzkopf is mimicked in the U.S. by children at play and advertising executives who want to capitalize on his admired tough guy image. But to Iraqis and a number of other Arab states he is a symbol of American power and domination over their lives. Yassar Arafat, hero to Palestinians is a terrorist to most Israelis. Rigoberta Manchu, heroine to Guatemala's Natives, is deemed by the non-Native rulers of that country as a subversive threat to the nation's stability. The list could go on and on, but back to Columbus. For the Indigenous peoples of Latin America, Columbus' so called discoveries of their ancient civilizations represents the precursor to their loss of political and economic independence and mass death.

According to Jim Handy, professor of Latin American history, "Columbus' discovery of America initiated the greatest killing in the history of the world, the greatest death in the history of the world. For over one hundred years, Natives die at rates unparalleled at any other time in history or any other place in history."

In the early 1800's, independence from Spain for much of Latin America did not enhance the position of the indigenous population. The descendants of the original conquistadores inherited and maintained systems of control, enriching their small elite at the expense of the masses. Where indigenous populations have survived, as in Guatemala, the oppression continues.

Continue on page 14

