

## HISTORICAL REVISIONS.

### XX.—CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS AND HIS GREAT ENTERPRISE.

THE outbreak of war in 1914 brought a truce to an interesting historical controversy concerning the discoverer of the New World and his projects that had been pursued with much vigour and great learning since the beginning of this century. M. Henry Vignaud has now returned to the attack by an open letter to Prof. Hermann Wagner of the University of Göttingen and Prof. Carlo Errera of Bologna,<sup>1</sup> in which he presents anew the evidence for a re-telling of the story of Columbus. The memoir restates the arguments brought forward by the learned author in a series of elaborate works between 1901 and 1911. They were reviewed in a sense somewhat adverse to their conclusions by Mr. H. P. Biggar before the American Historical Association in 1912.<sup>2</sup> A survey of some of the conclusions reached by M. Vignaud may be of interest, although it cannot be said that they are as yet generally accepted by Colombian scholars. But before entering upon such a survey it is necessary to recall some facts concerning the early life of Columbus that are now completely proved and have cast an entirely new light on the traditional story. This evidence has been recovered from previously unexplored documentary sources by the labours of many patient investigators like the late Mr. Henry Harrisse<sup>3</sup> and Signore Cesare de Lollis.<sup>4</sup> It is critically assembled together by M. Vignaud in his earlier Colombian studies.<sup>5</sup>

The traditional story of Columbus' origin and of his life until the time when he returned from his great discovery has mainly come down to us from two authors, Ferdinand Columbus, his younger son, and Bartolomé de Las Casas, Bishop of Chiapas, who knew him personally, and many years after his death was entrusted with the family papers. The Admiral's glory is entirely posthumous; his contemporaries found him a difficult and impracticable person who made himself a nuisance by his incessant complaints and his extravagant pretensions. After his death his name sank almost into oblivion, but long afterwards Ferdinand set himself to preserve the full story of his father's achievements, and to rescue his memory from the slurs that had been cast upon it. The original Spanish version of his work

<sup>1</sup> *The Columbian Tradition on the Discovery of America and of the part played therein by the Astronomer Toscanelli*, by Henry Vignaud, President of the Société des Américanistes. Oxford, 1920.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Columbus*, by Henry P. Biggar. Reprinted from the *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1912*. Washington, 1914.

<sup>3</sup> *Christophe Colomb devant l'histoire*, par Henry Harrisse. Paris, 1892. And other works by the same author.

<sup>4</sup> *Scritti di Cristoforo Colombo*, pubblicati ed illustrati da Cesare de Lollis. 3 vols. in folio, in *Raccolta Colombiana*. Rome, 1892.

<sup>5</sup> *Études critiques sur la vie de Colomb avant ses découvertes*, par Henry Vignaud. Paris, 1905.

was written about 1539, but was never published and has completely disappeared. It is only known to us in an Italian version first published at Venice in 1571, which did a good deal to revive the memory of the first discoverer of the New World. About the middle of the sixteenth century Bishop Las Casas, the Apostle of the Indies, took up the task of recounting the glorious deeds of the Admiral in his *History of the Indies*, and had access to the various papers that he had left. But his work remained in manuscript for three centuries, and was only published for the first time in 1875. Las Casas copied his facts about Columbus' earlier career from Ferdinand to a considerable extent, and contributed little fresh before the period of the first discoveries. In 1601 there was published the first volume of a great history of the deeds of the Spaniards in the New World by Antonio de Herrera, who took his story of Columbus' discovery from the pages of Ferdinand and Las Casas jointly. He accepted uncritically their naturally biased views of the great explorer and his deeds, and regarded him as a specially chosen and protected instrument of Providence through whose work the Gospel was first brought to the heathen of the New World. Appearing as it did at the height of the missionary fervour of the Counter-Reformation, Herrera's work consolidated and established the Colombian tradition, and upon it most writers, including Washington Irving, have based their story of the discovery.

According to this tradition the future Admiral was sprung from a noble family resident in Northern Italy since Roman times. Having lost their fortunes in the wars of Lombardy, they settled in Genoa and there engaged widely in maritime commerce. Two famous corsair sea-captains of the name Colombo, whose names resounded throughout Europe in the middle of the fifteenth century, were claimed to belong to the same family, and it was said that Christopher first saw service under one or other of them, and did great deeds in the naval wars of King René of Provence. The young sailor, so the story ran, studied in the University of Pavia and was trained there in the learning of the ancients, and especially in cosmographical science, astronomy and geometry. Columbus himself claimed that he took to the sea in his fourteenth year, and that he sailed to the Greek islands of the Levant and into all parts of the Eastern Mediterranean. Later he passed to Portugal, and thence in 1477 he voyaged to England, to Galway in Ireland, and further north until he reached a hundred leagues beyond the island of Thule. He claimed that he then established himself in Portugal because the king of that country was more favourable than all other monarchs to projects of exploration. He did undoubtedly settle in Lisbon in 1478, and there for the first time his story touches firm ground. Before we pursue it further let us see what modern research has done with the tradition that has come down from the Admiral through the pages of his son and his admiring friend.

The story was accepted with little question until the nineteenth century, when fresh investigations were undertaken. At last, among the papers of the notaries of the city of Genoa and the neighbouring town of Savona, the true story of the family of Colombo was revealed by a series of unimpeachable documentary extracts relating to their legal actions over a long series of years. It may be summarised briefly, and it will be seen that it completely explodes the extravagant claims recited above.

Christopher Columbus was born at Genoa in 1451 of a poor family

of weavers, who had been settled in that city or its environs since the beginning of the fifteenth century and possibly earlier. They had no connection whatever with any noble house but were all humble artisans. Nor had they any connection with the sea or with the foreign commerce of the Republic. Domenico Colombo, the father of the Admiral, was himself a weaver by trade who at one time kept a tavern, and having got into financial difficulties went with his family to Savona, but did not recover himself and died deeply in debt some time between 1494 and 1500. Christopher, the eldest of a family of five, was brought up to the trade of weaver and received his only education at the common school in Genoa. Until the age of nineteen he practised the trade of weaver and assisted his father in the business of tavern-keeper, and he is still found in Savona in 1473, two years later. We then lose track of him until 1475, when he sailed to Chio, the Genoese colony in the Levant, in the employ of the firm of di Negro and Spinola. He remained there some months and then returned to Genoa, whence he sailed to England in 1476 in a fleet belonging to the same firm. The story of his being engaged in the naval wars of King René is entirely apocryphal, but on August 13, 1476, he saw his first battle, when off Cape St. Vincent the fleet of galleasses was attacked by the French corsair, Guillaume de Casenove, called Colombo or Coullon, with whom Christopher had not the remotest relationship. The fight ended badly for the Genoese. Certain of their ships were burned and many of their crews threw themselves into the sea. Among them was probably Columbus, and there is no reason to doubt Ferdinand's story, that his father saved himself by swimming ashore helped by an oar, though he is nine years wrong in date and puts the fight in 1485. Others of Spinola's ships escaped into shelter in the harbour of Lisbon, and thence later resumed their voyage to England. It is probable that Columbus sailed with them, and he may have visited Galway and Bristol, but it is practically certain that he did not reach Iceland, for he had not time to undertake the voyage, which was a seasonal one of many months' duration. He returned to Lisbon late in 1477 and determined to settle there, not because he had yet conceived his grand design, but because he saw an opening for commerce there in the large Genoese colony where his employers di Negro and Spinola had many mercantile interests. He was lucky enough to make a good marriage with a lady, Felipa Moniz, belonging to the family of Perestrello, who held the island of Porto-Santo in the Madeira group, which had been granted to them as a fief by the Infante Dom Henrique, whom we know as Prince Henry the Navigator. Through the relationships in good Portuguese society that he thus formed, Columbus for the first time came into contact with men interested in schemes of oceanic exploration, and this marked the turning-point in his career. His younger brother, Bartholomew, also settled in Lisbon about the same time and took up a new trade as a maker of sea-charts and portolans, so that the two brothers turned their thoughts towards the ocean together.

Ferdinand and Las Casas say little of Columbus' life in Portugal, and he himself was very reticent about it, but from documentary sources a few facts have been gleaned. In July 1478 he was commissioned by di Negro to buy a cargo of sugar at Madeira, but the bargain failed, as he stated before a notary at Genoa in August 1479, when he gave his age as twenty-seven years and swore that he possessed

100 crowns and was about to return to Lisbon, where he was settled. Five years later, in 1484, he fled from Portugal to Spain, filled with projects for exploration in the Atlantic, in which he strove to interest powerful patrons; first the Dukes of Medina Sidonia and Medina Celi, and later through them the great Queen of Castile, Isabella the Catholic. Into those efforts we need not follow him, for the traditional story of them is well authenticated. But concerning his great design, its genesis and its character, which undoubtedly was fixed during his sojourn in Portugal, matters are very different, and with them historical controversy is still acutely concerned. Immediately after his return from his great discovery in 1493 and down to his death in 1506, Columbus maintained that his great design had always been to reach the coasts of Cipangu in the extreme east of Asia by sailing directly to the west, that he had been led to it by scientific and theoretical considerations, which proved that by keeping a westward course for so many thousand leagues one must come at length to the Indies, that it was this plan that he proposed to the Catholic Kings, Ferdinand and Isabella, and that it was for this that they furnished him the means. No statements could be more explicit, and if Columbus' public assertions were always worthy of belief, there could be no possible room for doubt. But unfortunately, as we have seen, others of his statements concerning the nobility of his ancestors and their maritime enterprises, his relationship with celebrated admirals, his university education, his warlike exploits, and his many years of voyaging to the uttermost parts of the earth, are not merely doubtful, they are flagrantly opposed to the truth. What credence, therefore, can be placed in the assertions he made concerning the project that, once accomplished, did so much to change the course of history?

M. Vignaud asserts, and goes very far indeed to prove his case, that the real genesis and purpose of Columbus' great enterprise was quite different from what he afterwards claimed. The story of a search for the Indies was invented after the new lands were discovered, and the scientific reasoning employed to support the practicability of the western route to Asia and the Spice Islands was only put together in 1493 or 1494, and then not upon a basis of wide learning, but solely upon such facts as could be culled from one or two works on cosmography that had been published in the earlier years of the fifteenth century. Such is the case for the prosecution, and it is supported by an almost embarrassing mass of evidence.<sup>1</sup> But we can here do no more than summarise certain of M. Vignaud's conclusions. The intricate historical reasoning must be sought in their author's pages.

The expedition of 1492 had for its sole object the discovery of new islands in the Atlantic beyond the Cape Verde Islands, and according to the evidence of a member of the commission to which Columbus' proposals were submitted for examination by Queen Isabella, they dealt only with the discovery of such islands. This evidence is confirmed by all those who took part in the expedition and all writers of the time until Herrera, who published his work many years afterwards. The contract between the Catholic Kings and Columbus makes no mention of the Indies, and when they rewarded him for his services the sovereigns expressly state that it was for his discovery of new lands. Columbus himself never mentioned Asia or the Indies

<sup>1</sup> The evidence is fully examined in *Histoire de la Grande Entreprise de 1492*, par Henry Vignaud. 2 vols. Paris, 1911.

before his return, but always stated that he wished to search for islands which he *knew* existed beyond the Atlantic. Las Casas affirms this, and Columbus' certainty seemed so strange to men at the time that the story went abroad that he had been told of the existence of such lands by a pilot of Huelva who had once been driven there by a storm. This story cannot be confirmed, but there is a clause in the explorer's contract with the Catholic Kings wherein he declares that he has information about what he is going to find. To his crew he stated that the lands lay 700 or 750 leagues to the west, and when he did not find them there he was exceedingly disappointed and persisted in his search. The idea of searching for Cipangu came from his partner, Martin Pinzon, and it was he who secured from the Catholic Kings letters of credence to the Great Khan who ruled there, as Pinzon had heard tell in his visits to Rome. When Columbus failed at first in his search for Antilia he changed his course and took up Pinzon's idea of looking for Cipangu in a different direction, which at last brought him to the islands of the Antilles.

Before Columbus' death a long series of cosmographical reasons had been put together by him and his brother Bartholomew to prove that the new lands to which they had come were the easternmost parts of Asia, though this was not generally believed, and only a few years later it was conclusively disproved by Balboa's discovery of the Great South Sea, which Ferdinand Magellan reached by discovering the Straits that now bear his name. When Ferdinand Columbus and Las Casas came to write the life of the Admiral, the general belief was that he had only discovered islands of the existence of which he had known before. His powers of scientific reasoning and as a cosmographer were considerably discredited, and it was necessary to re-establish them by showing that he had derived his information not from an obscure pilot, but by correspondence with learned cosmographers of acknowledged repute. According to M. Vignaud it is to this need that we are indebted for the story of Columbus' correspondence with the great Italian astronomer and cosmographer, Toscanelli. Though among the many celebrated men to whose authority he appealed, Columbus never mentioned Toscanelli, and in the same way the astronomer in those of his works that have been preserved never speaks of Columbus nor of dealings with the Portuguese explorers of the route to India, it was said by Ferdinand and Las Casas that in 1474 Toscanelli had written to the King of Portugal, through a Portuguese Canon Martins, advising him to search for the Indies westwards. When he learned that Columbus was thinking of an exploring voyage, it is said that Toscanelli supplied him with a copy of his letter of 1474 and a map which proved that the Indies could be reached by the west. No copy of this map has ever been discovered, and M. Vignaud maintains with a great show of probability that it never existed and that the whole story of Columbus' dealings with Toscanelli is apocryphal. This is the point about which a great deal of the controversy has raged, and it cannot yet be claimed that a generally accepted conclusion has been reached; but it does appear probable that in 1492 Columbus set out simply to discover the islands of the Antilles.

ARTHUR PERCIVAL NEWTON.