

BOOK REVIEW

ADMIRAL OF THE OCEAN SEA

A Life of Christopher Columbus.

By Samuel Eliot Morison

(Boston, 1942). \$3.50.

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No one in American history has stirred up more controversy than the Genoese navigator who was designated as "Admiral of the Ocean Sea" and sent on his westward way by the sovereigns of Spain in 1492. By some he has been exalted as the most courageous and brilliant navigator of all time, one whose dogged perseverance in the face of monumental difficulties brought a new world into the orbit of human knowledge. By others he has been pilloried as a quixotic adventurer who stumbled upon a piece of good fortune and then stole the glory that belonged to other men. Professor Morison has undertaken to find out, by a new and interesting method, just what kind of navigator Columbus was. Himself a good historian and an equally good yachtsman he went over to Spain, chartered a sailing vessel, took a small crew aboard, and crossed the ocean to the Caribbean, checking up on Columbus along the way. With a copy of the Genoese navigator's *Journal* in hand he then trailed the route among the islands and to the mainland, visiting and identifying every coast and harbor that Columbus saw during his four voyages.

The results are interesting and significant. For one thing Professor Morison has established beyond question the fact that Columbus was an uncommonly expert navigator, knew where he was going and knew how to get there. He

arrived exactly where he expected to be, so far as his own calculations of latitude and longitude were concerned; but what he found were the West Indies instead of the East Indies. This was because he figured the rotund earth to be a great deal smaller in circumference than it was. From the explorations of Marco Polo in Asia there were data from which Columbus could roughly estimate the distance eastward from Spain to Cipangu (Japan). He was convinced that this stretch covered a good deal more than half way around the globe, which left only seven or eight hundred leagues intervening westward. In this he was badly astray; but if his mathematics had been correct he probably never would have started.

It has often been said that the invention of the astrolabe by the Arabs made possible the first voyage to America. Columbus, as a matter of fact, did not use the astrolabe to determine his positions. He was a dead-reckoning navigator, but a mighty good one as Professor Morison proves. Occasionally Columbus took a shot at the altitude of a star to verify his figures, but the results were valueless. He was so inexpert in identifying the constellations that on more than one occasion he mistook other stars for Polaris. But when it came to reckonings from log and compass he was as good as the best. He also knew where to find the trade winds and how to use them. Not infrequently, when conditions were good, his caravels scurried along at six or seven knots per hour.

Some historians have suspected that the *Journal* which Columbus kept was faked, — written up after he returned home to prove that he knew where he was when he didn't. Professor Morison disposes of such yarns conclusively. Columbus had his failings, no doubt, but dishonesty was not one of them. He was vain and to a degree self-seeking, with an undue interest in titles and honors. He was not always a good disciplinarian

and his followers sometimes got out of hand. He let them treat the natives badly, although it can fairly be said that had it not been for him the treatment would have been a good deal worse.

The book is a fine combination of sound history and nautical narrative.* It will appeal strongly to those who like the sea and know how a ship can be handled in fair weather or foul. No reader who belongs in that category will fail to marvel at the consummate skill with which this Admiral of the Ocean Sea, with only the most primitive instruments of navigation, plotted his course, kept his three ships together, brought them safely to new shores, and went confidently coursing around the uncharted Caribbean. His descriptions of landmarks on the various islands were so accurate that Dr. Morison was able to depend on them in negotiating a fairway between the reefs.

So here, in a word, is a narrative of the most significant sea exploit in all history by an author who is at once an eminent historian, a skillful navigator under sail, and a writer of good literature. It goes without saying that such a book is considerably out of the ordinary and represents an original approach to the problems and achievements of the first great figure in American history. One cannot too highly praise the quality of the author's style, his power of vivid description, his frequent flashes of humor — even his facility in the effective use of contemporary American slang. A lover of the sea, and all that is therein, Dr. Morison succeeds in transmitting to his readers much of the thrill that he felt as his own barkentine ploughed along the route of the Great Admiral toward the setting sun.

* It is issued in both two-volume and a one-volume edition. The latter omits the extensive footnotes and most of two rather technical chapters.

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