

Christopher Columbus

“Letter to Luis de Santangel” (1493)

The European sailor-explorer Christopher Columbus lived from c.1450-1506. He mistakenly imagined that the earth was much physically smaller than it actually is, and as such believed that he could easily reach East Asia by sailing west across the Atlantic. He wished to test this theory, but he needed funds. Fortunately for him, after years of looking for a patron, Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain agreed to sponsor his voyages.

This letter—from his first trip in 1492, and one of the first European accounts of American peoples—gives us a glimpse into Columbus's personality, interests, and motivations. These hopes and assumptions would not be atypical of subsequent European explorers and colonizers.

SIR: As I know you will be rejoiced at the glorious success that our Lord has given me in my voyage, I write this to tell you how in thirty-three days I sailed to the Indies with the fleet that the illustrious King and Queen, our Sovereigns, gave me, where I discovered a great many islands, inhabited by numberless people; and of all I have taken possession for their Highnesses by proclamation and display of the Royal Standard without opposition. To the first island I discovered I gave the name of San Salvador, in commemoration of His Divine Majesty, who has wonderfully granted all this. The Indians call it Guanaham. The second I named the Island of Santa Maria de Concepcion; the third, Fernandina; the fourth, Isabella; the fifth, Juana; and thus to each one I gave a new name. When I came to Juana, I followed the coast of that isle toward the west, and found it so extensive that I thought it might be the mainland, the province of Cathay; and as I found no towns nor villages on the sea-coast, except a few small settlements, where it was impossible to speak to the people, because they fled at once, I continued the said route, thinking I could not fail to see some great cities or towns; and finding at the end of many leagues that nothing new appeared, and that the coast led northward, contrary to my wish, because the winter had already set in, I decided to make for the south, and as the wind also was against my proceeding, I determined not to wait there longer, and turned back to a certain harbor whence I sent two men to find out whether there was any king or large city. They explored for three days, and found countless small communities and people, without number, but with no kind of government, so they returned.

I heard from other Indians I had already taken that this land was an island, and thus followed the eastern coast for one hundred and seven leagues, until I came to the end of it. From that point I saw another isle to the eastward, at eighteen leagues' distance, to which I gave the name of Hispaniola. I went thither and followed its northern coast to the east, as I had done in Juana, one hundred and seventy-eight leagues eastward, as in Juana. This island, like all the others, is most extensive. It has many ports along the sea-coast excelling any in Christendom—and many fine, large, flowing rivers. The land there is elevated, with many mountains and peaks incomparably higher than in the centre isle. They are most beautiful, of a thousand varied forms, accessible, and full of trees of endless varieties, so high that they seem to touch the sky, and I have been told that they never lose their foliage. I saw them as green and lovely as trees are in Spain in the month of May. Some of them were covered with blossoms, some with fruit, and some in other

conditions, according to their kind. The nightingale and other small birds of a thousand kinds
45 were singing in the month of November when I was there. There were palm trees of six or eight
varieties, the graceful peculiarities of each one of them being worthy of admiration as are the
other trees, fruits and grasses. There are wonderful pine woods, and very extensive ranges of
meadow land. There is honey, and there are many kinds of birds, and a great variety of fruits.
Inland there are numerous mines of metals and innumerable people. Hispaniola is a marvel. Its
50 hills and mountains, fine plains and open country, are rich and fertile for planting and for
pasturage, and for building towns and villages. The seaports there are incredibly fine, as also the
magnificent rivers, most of which bear gold. The trees, fruits and grasses differ widely from
those in Juana. There are many spices and vast mines of gold and other metals in this island.
They have no iron, nor steel, nor weapons, nor are they fit for them, because although they are
55 well-made men of commanding stature, they appear extraordinarily timid. The only arms they
have are sticks of cane, cut when in seed, with a sharpened stick at the end, and they are afraid to
use these. Often I have sent two or three men ashore to some town to converse with them, and
the natives came out in great numbers, and as soon as they saw our men arrive, fled without a
moment's delay although I protected them from all injury.

60 At every point where I landed, and succeeded in talking to them, I gave them some of everything
I had—cloth and many other things—without receiving anything in return, but they are a
hopelessly timid people. It is true that since they have gained more confidence and are losing this
fear, they are so unsuspicious and so generous with what they possess, that no one who had not
seen it would believe it. They never refuse anything that is asked for. They even offer it
65 themselves, and show so much love that they would give their very hearts. Whether it be
anything of great or small value, with any trifle of whatever kind, they are satisfied. I forbade
worthless things being given to them, such as bits of broken bowls, pieces of glass, and old
straps, although they were as much pleased to get them as if they were the finest jewels in the
world. One sailor was found to have got for a leathern strap, gold of the weight of two and a half
70 castellanos, and others for even more worthless things much more; while for a new blancas they
would give all they had, were it two or three castellanos of pure gold or an arroba or two of spun
cotton. Even bits of the broken hoops of wine casks they accepted, and gave in return what they
had, like fools, and it seemed wrong to me. I forbade it, and gave a thousand good and pretty
things that I had to win their love, and to induce them to become Christians, and to love and
75 serve their Highnesses and the whole Castilian nation, and help to get for us things they have in
abundance, which are necessary to us. They have no religion, nor idolatry, except that they all
believe power and goodness to be in heaven. They firmly believed that I, with my ships and men,
came from heaven, and with this idea I have been received everywhere, since they lost fear of
me. They are, however, far from being ignorant. They are most ingenious men, and navigate
80 these seas in a wonderful way, and describe everything well, but they never before saw people
wearing clothes, nor vessels like ours. Directly I reached the Indies in the first isle I discovered, I
took by force some of the natives, that from them we might gain some information of what there
was in these parts; and so it was that we immediately understood each other, either by words or
signs. They are still with me and still believe that I come from heaven. They were the first to
85 declare this wherever I went, and the others ran from house to house, and to the towns around,
crying out, "Come ! come! and see the man from heaven!" Then all, both men and women, as
soon as they were reassured about us, came, both small and great, all bringing something to eat
and to drink, which they presented with marvellous kindness. In these isles there are a great

many canoes, something like rowing boats, of all sizes, and most of them are larger than an
90 eighteen-oared galley. They are not so broad, as they are made of a single plank, but a galley
could not keep up with them in rowing, because they go with incredible speed, and with these
they row about among all these islands, which are innumerable, and carry on their commerce. I
have seen some of these canoes with seventy and eighty men in them, and each had an oar. In all
the islands I observed little difference in the appearance of the people, or in their habits and
95 language, except that they understand each other, which is remarkable. Therefore I hope that
their Highnesses will decide upon the conversion of these people to our holy faith, to which they
seem much inclined. I have already stated how I sailed one hundred and seven leagues along the
sea-coast of Juana, in a straight line from west to east. I can therefore assert that this island is
larger than England and Scotland together, since beyond these one hundred and seven leagues
100 there remained at the west point two provinces where I did not go, one of which they call Avan,
the home of men with tails. These provinces are computed to be fifty or sixty leagues in length,
as far as can be gathered from the Indians with me, who are acquainted with all these islands.
This other, Hispaniola, is larger in circumference than all Spain from Catalonia to Fuentarabia in
Biscay, since upon one of its four sides I sailed one hundred and eighty-eight leagues from west
105 to east. This is worth having, and must on no account be given up. I have taken possession of all
these islands, for their Highnesses, and all may be more extensive than I know, or can say, and I
hold them for their Highnesses, who can command them as absolutely as the kingdoms of
Castile. In Hispaniola, in the most convenient place, most accessible for the gold mines and all
commerce with the mainland on this side or with that of the great Khan, on the other, with which
110 there would be great trade and profit, I have taken possession of a large town, which I have
named the City of Navidad. I began fortifications there which should be completed by this time,
and I have left in it men enough to hold it, with arms, artillery, and provisions for more than a
year; and a boat with a master seaman skilled in the arts necessary to make others; I am so
friendly with the king of that country that he was proud to call me his brother and hold me as
115 such. Even should he change his mind and wish to quarrel with my men, neither he nor his
subjects know what arms are, nor wear clothes, as I have said. They are the most timid people in
the world, so that only the men remaining there could destroy the whole region, and run no risk if
they know how to behave themselves properly. In all these islands the men seem to be satisfied
with one wife except they allow as many as twenty to their chief or men. The women appear to
120 me to work harder than the men, and so far as I can hear they have nothing of their own, for I
think I perceived that what one had others shared, especially food. In the islands so far, I have
found no monsters, as some expected, but, on the contrary, they are people of very handsome
appearance. They are not black as in Guinea, though their hair is straight and coarse, as it does
not grow where the sun's rays are too ardent. And in truth the sun has extreme power here, since
125 it is within twenty-six degrees of the equinoctial line. In these islands there are mountains where
the cold this winter was very severe, but the people endure it from habit, and with the aid of the
meat they eat with very hot spices.

As for monsters, I have found not trace of them except at the point in the second isle as one
enters the Indies, which is inhabited by a people considered in all the isles as most ferocious,
130 who eat human flesh. They possess many canoes, with which they overrun all the isles of India,
stealing and seizing all they can. They are not worse looking than the others, except that they
wear their hair long like women, and use bows and arrows of the same cane, with a sharp stick at
the end for want of iron, of which they have none. They are ferocious compared to these other

135 races, who are extremely cowardly; but I only hear this from the others. They are said to make
treaties of marriage with the women in the first isle to be met with coming from Spain to the
Indies, where there are no men. These women have no feminine occupation, but use bows and
arrows of cane like those before mentioned, and cover and arm themselves with plates of copper,
of which they have a great quantity. Another island, I am told, is larger than Hispaniola, where
140 the natives have no hair, and where there is countless gold; and from them all I bring Indians to
testify to this. To speak, in conclusion, only of what has been done during this hurried voyage,
their Highnesses will see that I can give them as much gold as they desire, if they will give me a
little assistance, spices, cotton, as much as their Highnesses may command to be shipped, and
mastic as much as their Highnesses choose to send for, which until now has only been found in
Greece, in the isle of Chios, and the Signoria can get its own price for it; as much lign-aloe as
145 they command to be shipped, and as many slaves as they choose to send for, all heathens. I think
I have found rhubarb and cinnamon. Many other things of value will be discovered by the men I
left behind me, as I stayed nowhere when the wind allowed me to pursue my voyage, except in
the City of Navidad, which I left fortified and safe. Indeed, I might have accomplished much
more, had the crews served me as they ought to have done. The eternal and almighty God, our
150 Lord, it is Who gives to all who walk in His way, victory over things apparently impossible, and
in this case signally so, because although these lands had been imagined and talked of before
they were seen, most men listened incredulously to what was thought to be but an idle tale. But
our Redeemer has given victory to our most illustrious King and Queen, and to their kingdoms
rendered famous by this glorious event, at which all Christendom should rejoice, celebrating it
155 with great festivities and solemn Thanksgivings to the Holy Trinity, with fervent prayers for the
high distinction that will accrue to them from turning so many peoples to our holy faith; and also
from the temporal benefits that not only Spain but all Christian nations will obtain. Thus I record
what has happened in a brief note written on board the Caravel, off the Canary Isles, on the 15th
of February, 1493.

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Source: Independence Hall Association/ushistory.org
<https://www.ushistory.org/documents/columbus.htm> (accessed 5/25/20)