



10-1-2008

Charles C. Mann, *1491—New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*

Laina Farhat-Holzman
lfarhat102@aol.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>

Recommended Citation

Farhat-Holzman, Laina (2008) "Charles C. Mann, *1491—New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 59 : No. 59 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol59/iss59/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Comparative Civilizations Review* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Charles C. Mann, *1491—New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

We are living in an era when historic and anthropological knowledge is burgeoning. Just keeping up with the latest findings and the arguments between and among scholars is daunting. Charles C. Mann is not a specialist in pre-Columbian America, but is an intelligent author and reporter who sought out the leading lights in this discipline and presented their findings and quarrels intelligently. I agreed with Richard Rhodes, one of his reviewers, that Mann writes “in the tradition of Jared Diamond and John McPhee, a transforming new vision of pre-Columbian America.”

The major contribution of this work is to correct the enormous error that has prevailed for half a millennium that North America was practically empty of people. Our Puritan

settlers believed that God had emptied the land so that they could take it. And indeed that was so—if God were Eurasian diseases that proved exceedingly deadly to the Indians. Jared Diamond certainly made this point in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*; however, there is more information available today that genetically the Native Americans did not have the T-cells that provided protection to Eurasians. We know that when even the most deadly plagues raged through the Old World, the mortality rate was rarely above one-third of the population. In the Americas, mortality was sometimes 95 percent. This is a devastating situation for a region hitherto “thickly settled,” as we now know it was. The entire East Coast was settled by hundreds of thousands of people in the early stages of agricultural and town life—all wiped out in a flash.

Introduction

The Introduction focuses on “Holmberg’s Mistake.” A. R. Holmberg, as a graduate student, lived among the Siriono, an Amazon tribe in the Beni region of South America, during the early 1940s. His book, *Nomads of the Longbow*, published in 1950, became a classic and was a source for countless scholarly articles and the popular press. Holmberg reported that the natives of that region were “among the most culturally backward peoples of the world.” He said that they lived in constant want and hunger, had no clothes, no domestic animals, no musical instruments, no art or design, and almost no religion. He believed that for millennia, they had existed almost without change in a landscape unmarked by their presence.

Mann says that Holmberg was wrong. Indeed, the Siriono were as he described, but they had not always been that way. The people in Europe living in the dark ages after the fall of Rome could have been described much the same way.

Roman law, technology, and standard of living plummeted during that period and Dark Age people lived nasty, brutish, and short lives. Mann emphasizes throughout this book that we need to look at the natives of North and South America in the same way we look at the people of Eurasia—not as some sort of exotics or savages. The glowing Athens of the 5th century BC was very different from its tribal, warring ancestors pictured in the Iliad. The insignificant Athens of the 10 century AD was not even a shadow of its greater past. Mann treats Native American history in the same way—and this focus is very illuminating.

The most important finding of modern science (through NASA satellites and other tools) throughout the Americas is that the landscape was not “empty of mankind and its works,” but was just as much shaped by its human beings as was Eurasia. As scholars learned more about the natives of Meso-America and the land of the Incas, it was apparent that these were major imperial civilizations with ingenious agriculture, trade, and governance. What is new in this field is that the natives of North America were not timeless tribal nomads; there were major civilizations that rose and fell in the Mississippi basin, in the Southwest, and in Washington and Oregon. Large towns and agricultural centers were flourishing right to the time of Europeans arriving on the continent. The thickly populated towns along the East Coast were at the same stage of development as that which occurred at the dawn of agriculture in the Fertile Crescent, 10,000 years ago. It was the devastating diseases of the newcomers that “emptied the land as if by God’s hand” for the new settlers.

The recent scientific findings in the Amazon basin were the most surprising to me—and might have correspondences in the scant studies of interior Africa as well. The remnants of human activity are quickly obliterated by the forests and

climate of the tropics. However, significant recent work has provided plenty of evidence that human beings flourished in the Amazon Basin, improved their unpromising soil so that they could grow crops, and shaped the jungles and savannahs to their own purposes. The knowledge that people who were able to live and multiply for millennia in a region that today looks so unpromising could help solve many contemporary problems in this region. There are things that we can and must learn—but minds must be more open than those of today's ideological activists.

Numbers from Nowhere

This section of the book deals with the Puritans and their experience in New England. It is fascinating to revisit this history, including the natives who played such an important role. Mann treats the Indian “Nations” in the same way a scholar would talk about the Greek kingdoms that joined together to sack Troy. The Indian nations of that day were well on the way toward alliances and amalgamation, showing considerable sophisticated political thought.

This section also provides the latest scholarship about The Land of the Four Quarters (the Incas), who significantly transformed their landscapes and provided wealth enough to sustain a huge, well-run empire.

Demographics make up the third part of this section. The newest estimates differ greatly from the notion of empty lands. Mann tells us what we know and how we know it.

Very Old Bones

Apparently the notion of “New World” needs rethinking as we discover how much longer people have lived in these lands. Mann looks at the Pleistocene findings, tracks the agricultural and fishing technologies of two civilizations,

and then examines the other technologies—such as writing and wheels.

Landscape with Figures

Mann fills out our knowledge of human intervention in the landscape—which was considerable—in North America and Amazonia. In addition to this, however, is how man has unwittingly reshaped the landscape, creating wildernesses where before there were none. The biological gap between Europe and the Americas was breached when Columbus arrived, and the animals he brought had major effect on the landscape. The new settlers introduced plants as well as animals—and took back to Eurasia and Africa American plants, some of which had unexpected, and dire consequences.

For better or worse, the process of globalization of humans, flora, and fauna is complete and there are probably consequences that have made life better for millions of us. However, the work of scholarship is not finished yet. There is much more that we need to learn and to apply that could make millions more flourish. I find the new understanding of the real history of the Americas as important as our increasing knowledge of the ancient Eurasian world. And I much admire Charles Mann's ability to write about this scholarship so readably. Mann is a wonderful and endlessly curious researcher, as can be seen in his other books and articles for *The Atlantic Monthly*, *the New York Times Magazine*, *Technology Review*, *the Washington Post*, and *Wired*. His writing was selected for inclusion in *The Best American Science Writing 2003* and *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2003*.

Laina Farhat-Holzman