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*The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America, 1492-1493* Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelley, Jr., trans.; *The Libro de las profecías of Christopher Columbus* Delno C. West and August Kling

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Much has been written about Columbus during this quincentennial year—perhaps too much. Nevertheless, many questions about the man and his impact on world history remain unanswered; indeed, some of them still remain unasked. A good deal of the writing has been polemical at best and at worst outright nonsensical. Just as happened one hundred years ago during the quadricentennial, many people took advantage of Columbus’s name and notoriety to get into print, knowing that no matter what they wrote on the subject, whether it had any scholarly merit or not, or did or did not adhere to the facts, it would likely be published. Some of the Columbian literature of 1992 carries the additional burden of being motivated by political agendas of various kinds.

Nevertheless, the five hundredth anniversary has also stimulated a number of commendable projects which, just as happened in 1892, have produced some valuable works, both documentary and interpretative. Two of the more significant publications of a century ago were the fourteen-volume collection of Columbian writings and related documents, known as the *Raccolta*,¹ and the other was a remarkably perceptive and balanced interpretative history by Justin Winsor.² Comparable to these monumental works are the current publications in progress called the *Nuova Raccolta Colombiana*³ and the *Repertorium Columbianum.*⁴

Less ambitious yet perhaps having a much wider impact are new editions in English of two of Columbus’s most important

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¹ *Raccolta* (Raccolta) 
² Justin Winsor, *The Spanish and Portuguese Traits*. 
³ *Nuova Raccolta Colombiana* 
⁴ *Repertorium Columbianum*
writings: his shipboard Diario, or Journal as it is frequently called, of the first voyage to America, and his lesser-known but equally significant Book of Prophecies, composed in 1501–1502.

The Dunn and Kelley edition of the Diario is the most complete transcription and accurate scholarly edition of the Las Casas manuscript version of Columbus’s diary, our principal source of information about that unique voyage of discovery. Columbus kept a daily journal of his first voyage, which was not just a position log with navigational data and related information, but was also an account of what he found after he reached land and of many of his personal opinions and feelings. Upon returning to Spain, he presented the diary to the monarchs. They had a copy of the original made for Columbus and gave it to him prior to his departure on the second voyage. Unfortunately, both the original and the copy eventually disappeared (not unusual for documents written five hundred years ago), but before they did, Father Bartolomé de Las Casas, the colonist-turned-historian and widely known “Defender of the Indians,” made an abstract of Columbus’s copy in the 1530s. This abstract is partly a summary of what Columbus wrote and partly direct quotations from the Admiral himself. The Las Casas manuscript, a document of seventy-six large folios, all hand-written by Las Casas, also disappeared for over 250 years but was found again in the 1790s by Martín Fernández de Navarrete, the Spanish naval officer and historian. It is now preserved in the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid.

The present transcription by Oliver Dunn, professor emeritus at Purdue University, and James E. Kelley, Jr., a computer and management consultant and long-time student of medieval cartography and navigation, painstakingly follows the basic structure of the Las Casas original. For those interested in the exact words of the Spanish manuscript, including crossed-out words, corrections, abbreviations, and marginal notations, this edition is a treasure. Folio numbers of the original manuscript have been retained in the transcription, with recto and verso designations added for clarity. In addition, each line has been assigned a number corresponding to its position in the manuscript, so it can be easily identified. Dunn and Kelley have meticulously adhered to the form and spelling of the original, while at the same time clarifying Las Casas’s handwriting, capitalization, and punctuation. For example, the ambiguous interchange of the letters i, j, and y, in both lower- and uppercase,
is clarified according to modern usage (*almirante*, or *almirante*, for instance, is transcribed *almirante* [admiral], *judío*, as *judío* [Jew], and *mui* as *muy* [very]).

Likewise, Dunn and Kelley have rendered the text less ambiguous by separating or combining, according to normal Spanish usage, words that Las Casas compressed or disconnected. Line 16 of manuscript folio 31r, for example, was written *de to dalatormēta dī múdo*, which is almost illegible until it is regrouped to give the clearer *de toda la tormēta dī múdo* ("of all the storms in the world"). The reader soon recognizes also that Las Casas placed bars or tildes over vowels preceding an omitted *n*, and compressed short, single words by omitting intermediate vowels altogether. Thus the complete rendering of the above phrase in modern Spanish is *de toda la tormenta del mundo*.

Las Casas frequently inserted text between the lines or, in the case of more lengthy insertions, in the margin of the manuscript. The transcribers have followed the original as closely as possible by printing interlinear text exactly where Las Casas wrote it, and marginal insertions opposite the line of text to which they apply. Even blank spaces in the manuscript are reproduced in the transcription, with the length of the blank indicating the extent of the omissions. Cross outs, misspellings, and factual errors in the manuscript are allowed to stand, except for significant errors, which are cited in the footnotes. These also contain explanations and clarifications of the text. Other features that make this book so useful are a carefully selected bibliography, a seventy-three-page concordance of words appearing in the document, as well as a clear and comprehensive index.

In summary, this is the most successful attempt to provide an accurate and readable transcription of the original Las Casas manuscript. It is much more reliable and useful than the previous transcriptions of Fernández de Navarrete (1825); the *Raccolta* (1892); Guillén Tato (1943); Carlos Sanz (1962), which includes a manuscript facsimile; Joaquín Arce and Gil Esteve (1971); Manuel Alvar's two-volume edition of 1976; and the recent text of Consuelo Varela, prepared in 1982 for the quincentennial and reissued in 1989.

Yet Dunn and Kelley do not stop here. For the benefit of English readers, they have provided an up-to-date, literal yet smooth-flowing translation into modern English. The grammatical
structure of the translation parallels that of the Spanish transcription; capitalization and punctuation follow modern practice, making the text easy to read and understand. In most ways, it is superior to the earlier translations of Samuel Kettell (1827), Sir Clements Markham (1893), and Cecil Jane (1930). The latter, based on the Raccotia transcription, was revised in 1960 by L. A. Vigneras. Samuel Eliot Morison’s translation is lucid and colloquial, as is his writing, but it lacks the scholarly apparatus of the present volume and has no Spanish transcription. Two more recent translations, one by Robert H. Fuson and the other by John Cummins, attempt to make the journal more spontaneous by putting it entirely into first person, as though it were Columbus’s original. This gives the text readability and interest but at the expense of authenticity. By all odds, the Dunn and Kelley transcription/translation is the most accurate edition of Las Casas’s manuscript, and probably the closest thing we will ever get to a definitive text.

How accurate is the Las Casas transcript as a source document? That is hard to say. Unless the Columbus original should somehow turn up—not impossible but highly unlikely—we have nothing better. We do not know how faithfully Las Casas adhered to Columbus’s words and meaning. The Admiral had been dead for over twenty-five years when Las Casas took up the project, although they had known each other. Las Casas had access to many of Columbus’s papers (made available by the latter’s son Fernando) and had no apparent reason to falsify the record knowingly. Las Casas had close, friendly relations with the Columbus family. His father and three uncles accompanied the Admiral on his second voyage, and in 1506 Las Casas went to Rome with Columbus’s brother, Bartolomé, to remind the pope of the opportunities afforded by Columbus’s discoveries to spread the Christian faith. A year later he accompanied Columbus’s son Diego to Hispaniola where he was awarded a tract of land. He most likely copied the Admiral’s words from the diary as accurately as he could and believed he was making a correct summary of those parts he abstracted.

However, Las Casas was not a seaman and was not acquainted with the language and lore of the sea. Clearly, he did not fully understand everything he wrote. It is obvious from the many words deleted, changed, inserted, and altered that he made errors. He seems to have had particular trouble with leguas and
millas, leagues and miles. Whether these were jumbled in the original document or confused by Las Casas we have no way of knowing. There are many passages in the account that are open to question, or at least to variant interpretations. The polemics have sometimes become heated as “the diario has become invested with all the emotions and passions that Columbus and his discoveries have evoked,” notes one recent critic. Yet there is insufficient evidence to argue that what Las Casa wrote was not essentially, though perhaps somewhat shortened, what Columbus himself recorded in his shipboard diary.

Columbus’s *Libro de las profecías* is an entirely different kind of document. Composed in 1501 and 1502 in Seville during the interim between his third and fourth voyages, it is the Admiral’s religious testament, written for the king and queen and intended to convince them of the importance of his voyages in the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, and to motivate them to do more in promoting and expanding the Christian faith. “In a sense, the document is a sermon,” writes Delno West in his excellent introduction, “and its author is the preacher and messenger of ‘great events for the world’ to be accomplished by those who have ‘so much faith as a grain of mustard seed,’ and who may, like Columbus himself, ‘be certain that there will be success’ because God ‘makes himself responsible’ for the fulfillment of the prophecies he has disclosed in the Bible.”

After 490 years, the West and Kling edition is the first English translation of this important work. The *Libro* has been known all of that time but rarely mentioned except in derision and never read nor analyzed as a document revealing the religious and spiritual sophistication of its author. Columbus began the compilation of the *Book of Prophecies*, which he intended to use later to compose a long apocalyptic poem, at the monastery of Las Cuevas in Seville. His stated purpose was to remind Ferdinand and Isabel of the fulfillment of biblical prophecies concerning the “great events of the world,” past, present, and future. It was also to reveal his own role as “Christ-bearer,” the missionary discoverer, divinely called to announce a new era of enlargement and renewal for Christendom.

He compiled the work with the help of his friend Father Gaspar Gorricho. Although three or four hands are recognizable in the manuscript, which has led some to dispute the book’s authorship, there can be little doubt that the entire project was
conceived and carried out by Columbus himself and that it reflects his views dating back at least to 1481. Furthermore, Father Gorricio testified that the compilation was primarily Columbus's work. In September 1501, the Admiral sent the manuscript to the Carthusian monk, asking him to read it and make any additions or corrections he thought necessary. On March 23, 1502, Father Gorricio replied to Columbus as follows:

My most noble and distinguished lord: In my other letter, I reported to your lordship I having received your letter and book of prophecies and opinions and authorities relating to the matter of Mt. Zion and Jerusalem and the peoples of the islands and all nations. As I am able with my inadequate intelligence, since you command, I have worked at it as best I was able. . . . I have interposed and added a few remaining items, as one who reaches for the leftovers on the branches of the olives. . . . Thus, with your original material, as well as the crumbs, I am very content, and in this way I have been introduced to a subject very remote from my own studies. My lord, the little that I have added, and intermixed, your lordship will find in my handwriting. I send the whole work back again for correction by your spirit and prudent [illegible]. I have not attempted to reorganize the opinions, or the subjects, far less the [illegible] historical material, but I have inserted some rules and opinions of the doctors on the subject.20

The Libro de las profecías begins with an introduction explaining the fourfold scholastic method of interpreting Holy Scripture—"The literal teaching tells facts; the allegory tells what you should believe; the moral interpretation tells how you should act; the analogy tells where you are going."21 The application of this method by several authorities is given, followed by an important prefatory letter from Columbus to the king and queen, stating his "proposal for the restoration of the House of God to the Holy Church Militant" and urging the monarchs to recognize and fulfill their destined role in the unfolding of God's plan.

The letter contains clear illustrations of Columbus’s spiritual dimension, not the ranting of a demented mind, as some would have us believe. "With a hand that could be felt," he wrote, "the Lord opened my mind to the fact that it would be possible to sail from here to the Indies, and he opened my will to desire to accomplish the project. This was the fire that burned within me when I came to visit Your Highnesses. . . . Who can doubt that this fire was not merely mine, but also of the Holy Spirit who encouraged me with a radiance of marvelous illumination from his sacred Holy Scriptures, . . . urging me to
press forward?"  

Further on he declared, "I believe that the Holy Spirit works among Christians, Jews and Moslems, and among all men of every faith, not merely among the learned, but also among the uneducated. . . . The working out of all things is left to the freedom of each individual by the Lord, even though he gives directions to many." He concludes his letter with these apocalyptic words: "I said above that much of the prophecies remained to be fulfilled, and I believe that these are great events for the world. I believe that there is evidence that our Lord is hastening these things. This evidence is the fact that the Gospel must now be proclaimed to so many lands in such a short time." 

The first part of the work introduces the themes he wishes to treat—salvation of the world and the rebuilding of Zion—and summarizes sixty-five Psalms that deal with these themes. He cites God's promises to the Gentiles by quoting extensively from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah and also from St. Isidore of Seville, Rabbi Samuel of Fez, St. Augustine, and Nicholas of Lyra. After quoting Matthew 24:14, "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come," Columbus comments that the gospel has been preached to three parts of the earth and must now be preached to the fourth.

In part 2, Columbus is concerned with prophecies that have already taken place. There he emphasizes the ancient greatness and fall of Jerusalem and the scriptures prophesying its restoration and the rebuilding of the Temple. The third part deals with prophecies of the present and near future, namely, the conversion of all the nations. Here he records the prophecy from Seneca's Medea, which the Admiral takes to refer to his discoveries:

> The time will come  
> In a number of years, when Oceanus  
> Will enfasten the bounds, and a huge  
> Land will stretch out, and Typhis the pilot  
> Will discover new worlds, so  
> The remotest land will no longer be Thule.

Columbus's translation of these verses into Spanish give them sharper focus and meaning in relation to his recent voyages. August Kling's English version maintains this clarity: "In the latter years of the world will come certain times in which the Ocean Sea will relax the bonds of things, and a great land will open up, and
a new mariner like the one who was the guide of Jason, whose
name was Typhis, will discover a new world, and then will the
island of Thule [Iceland] no longer be the farthest land."27

The final section of the *Libro de las profecías*, which deals
with prophecies of the future and the Last Days, reveals
Columbus’s eschatology. Here he begins to mention the pre-
dictions of the thirteenth-century abbot, Joachim of Fiore,
concerning the Second Coming and the Last Days, but at this
point ten pages of the manuscript are missing. No clue is given
as to why, when, or how. Old Testament citations follow, with
particular interest in every mention of King Solomon, his fleets,
the gold they brought from Ophir, and the island kingdom of
Tarshish, spoken of in 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, and in
the apocryphal books of 3 Kings, David, and Judith. Finally, he
cites twenty-six scriptures that talk about the islands of the sea
and their part in the Last Days.28

Like the *Diario*, the *Libro de las profecías* is superbly
edited and well documented. It presents the original version (in
this case Latin, except for the prefatory letter to the sovereigns,
which is in Spanish) on the left pages with the English translation
on the right. The translation is primarily the work of the late
Reverend August J. Kling, formerly research fellow at the
Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton University and
teacher at McGill University and the universities of Mexico,
Edinburgh, Paris, and Vienna. Delno C. West, also a research
fellow at the Princeton Center of Theological Inquiry, and
professor of history at Northern Arizona University, completed
the work, added a valuable ninety-nine-page introduction sum-
marizing Columbus’s intellectual and cultural background, a
commentary on his piety and faith, and a description of the
history and meaning of the *Libro de las profecías*. The intro-
duction concludes with notes, bibliography, general index, and
scripture index.

The transcription, translation, and publication of this
remarkable book by Delno West and August Kling is an occasion
worth celebrating. Those who pay attention to it will find a
great deal of food for thought and a Columbus quite unlike the
arrogant, gold-seeking, Indian nemesis depicted in the popular
press this year. Of course that is why the *Libro de las profecías* has
been ignored for so long. It does not fit the stereotype of a man
interested only in material gain or secular methods. Hopefully, the issuing of this book in English by a prominent university press will widen the spectrum of interest in understanding the mind of the man who ushered in the modern world.

NOTES


2. Justin Winsor, *Christopher Columbus and How He Received and Imparted the Spirit of Discovery* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1892).

3. (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 1988–), re-edit and amplification of the 1892–96 *Raccolta*, with the intention of making it accessible to a larger, general audience. That plan is further promoted by the Ohio State University's coordinating the work of U.S. scholars who are translating twelve selected volumes of the *Nuova raccolta columbiana* into English.

4. The *Repertorium Columbianum* project, under the aegis of the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, is publishing additional source texts in English translation, accompanied by extensive commentaries. The general editor is Geoffrey Symcox; the publisher is the University of California Press.

5. *Viages de Colón*, transcribed by Fernández de Navarrette, in vol. 1 of *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos que hicieron por mar los españoles desde fines del siglo XV* (Madrid: Imprenta Real, 1825).


13. *The Voyages of Christopher Columbus, Being the Journals of His First and Third, and the Letters Concerning His First and Last Voyages* (London: Argonaut, 1930).
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15 Journals and Other Documents on the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus (New York: Heritage, 1963).

16 Robert Fuson, The Log of Christopher Columbus (Camden, Maine: International Marine, 1987), and John Cummins, The Voyage of Christopher Columbus: Columbus’ Own Journal of Discovery Newly Restored and Translated (New York: St. Martin’s, 1992).


18 Libro de las profecías, 85. The book was previously published in Latin by Cesare de Lollis in part 1, vol. 2 of the Raccolta, from the original velum-bound manuscript of eighty-four folio sheets, located in the Biblioteca Colombina in Seville.

19 Libro de las profecías, 3.

20 Libro de las profecías, 84.

21 Libro de las profecías, 101.

22 Libro de las profecías, 105.

23 Libro de las profecías, 107, 111.

24 Libro de las profecías, 111.

25 Libro de las profecías, 151, 153.

26 Libro de las profecías, 225.

27 Libro de las profecías, 227.

28 Libro de las profecías, 239.