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^Columbus Proposes What?

If ever a monumentally historical story was meant to be told in exquisite detail, in the context of its own time in western civilization, it is the incredible account of Christopher Columbus's persistent championing for, and then actual, westward launch across the Atlantic Ocean. Ignore the babble of department store and online blockbuster sales that come with Columbus Day, trivialized and manipulated these days, and rescheduled to fall on a Monday, October 9, in 2023. October 12, 1492, is the actual Bahama Islands landfall date, as we all know from elementary school days. But maybe that is all that we know or have retained in the wash of modern retail consumerism.

One author of scholarly history, Samuel Eliot Morison, has made ferreting out the factual, highly detailed, and entertaining Columbus' story, and telling of it, something not to miss. The story has all the grandeur and high drama of NASA's first planting of a human footprint on the moon. The man behind that 15th-century NASA was the Infante Dom Henrique, or Henry the Navigator, who organized discovery, its tools, and knowhow at Sagre on Cape St. Vincent in southern Portugal.

Uniquely, Samuel Eliot Morison was a Rear Admiral in the United States Navy and also Professor of American History at Harvard University, as well as sometime Professor of History at Oxford University. Befitting those accomplishments, he went far beyond simply days of research in dusty Library stacks to find the Columbus story as it deserves to be told. About 450 years after the fact, he went to sea and retraced Columbus' routes, and did so repeatedly. He converged his strong interests in life at sea and history in a way that no other single person likely ever can.

Columbus' world was one of competing European countries and their kings, seeking riches of gold, African elephant tusks, spices and routes to them. Lateen Portuguese carvels led the way to relatively near islands in the Atlantic such as the Azores, seven of them already discovered by 1439, and, in stepwise fashion, eventually around the Cape of Good Hope. Columbus in Lisbon was witness to and benefactor of Portugal's technological and commercial feats and supplicant for his own scheme westward as well.

However, with Portugal's king, his pitch went cold once the Cape was rounded by Bartholomew Diaz in 1488. Columbus was still in Lisbon at year's end when Diaz returned in triumph.

Columbus returned to Spain thereafter, with his pitch for a westward voyage across what was in his imagination a foreshortened Atlantic route to Cipango, or Japan. There you have it, in a nutshell, the beginning of his four voyages for Spain, a Spain in competition with a very enlightened Portugal in that time. To really enjoy the fullest and most reliable telling of this story, you must read, first, Samuel Eliot Morison's "Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus" (1942).

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Morison was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in biography for this book in 1943. He was not a one-trick pony however, but a prolific historian and biographer. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize again in 1960 for "John Paul Jones: A Sailor's Biography." And he is also author of, in two volumes, "The European Discovery of America: I. The Northern Voyages 500-1600" and "II. The Southern Voyages 1492-1616," (1971 and 1974, respectively), with chapters about Columbus.

All of the above Morison books are in the WLN catalogue, as well as others. Enjoy, as much as I have, and I'll offer an entirely different Columbus look next time, thereby bracketing the real date of commemoration, October 12!

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