The Legacy of Christopher Columbus in the Americas

Bartosik-Velez, Elise

Published by Vanderbilt University Press

Bartosik-Velez, Elise.
The Legacy of Christopher Columbus in the Americas: New Nations and a Transatlantic Discourse of Empire.

Vanderbilt University Press, 2014.
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By the eighteenth century, Columbus was commonly represented in Europe according to an interpretive tradition that had enveloped him as a protagonist in the classic Western story of imperial conquest and domination. Many of the texts that formed this interpretive tradition were read either in the original or in translation by European settlers in the Americas. For example, Peter Martyr’s *Decades de orbe novo* and Richard Eden’s translation of Martyr’s text were read by American colonists, as I discuss later in this chapter. Given the colonial projects of the European powers in the Americas, Columbus’s role as the first representative of those powers, and his traditional association as a figure of empire, made him highly relevant to the American colonial experience. One might think that Americans supporting political independence from their respective European metropolises would discard the figure of Columbus as a relic of the Old World, as a symbol of the monarchical political system they sought to end in their land. But instead they adopted Columbus as a symbol of their newly independent nations. How and why this occurred in colonial British America and then the United States is the subject of this chapter.

In the myth of national origins that was popular in the United States in the eighteenth century, if not before, Columbus was commonly portrayed as the seed of individualism and liberty that left Europe, arrived in the New World in the fifteenth century,
and then flowered in 1776 with the Declaration of Independence and the rise of the republic. In this manner, Columbus has long been represented as a founder of the nation, alongside George Washington. The nation’s capital was named in honor of both men in 1791.¹ Beginning in the 1770s with the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, Philip Freneau, Timothy Dwight, and Joel Barlow, British American and US writers helped construct Columbus as a national symbol. Washington Irving’s biography, *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, was also integral to that construction. When the 1492 quadricentennial was celebrated in Chicago at the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, Columbus’s prominence as a national symbol was at an all-time high.

Scholars addressing portrayals of Columbus in the British American colonies and then the United States have adeptly analyzed how Columbus has been employed to represent republicanism, liberty, entrepreneurship, and scientific progress. They have also considered how he has symbolized religious and ethnic identity in the United States. I do not disagree with these analyses, but I do seek to add another dimension to the figure of Columbus in the United States. Previous scholarship has focused mostly on his appearances in American contexts, divorcing those appearances from the international tradition through which Columbus was interpreted for centuries. This study seeks to broaden our approach to the American Columbus in terms of both geography and chronology. It considers the figure of Columbus as a mutable cultural product of a conversation that began in the late fifteenth century about the issues at the crux of the West’s encounter with the New World: the justification of the economic, political, and cultural domination of a people who considered themselves civilized over a people they deemed savage. In a word, that conversation is about empire, which had different meanings in different contexts and which is certainly relevant, as I illustrate in this chapter, in the case of the United States. Some representations of Columbus in the United States, I acknowledge, do not tap into this conversation. The majority of them do.
Sources of the American Columbus

British Americans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries learned about Columbus from European sources. As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the most influential of those was Peter Martyr’s *Decades de Orbe Novo*, in which Martyr characterizes Columbus as a new Aeneas who founds the Spanish overseas empire. Many British colonials read Martyr’s text, either in Latin or in Richard Eden’s 1555 English translation of the first three books of the *Decades* (which is exactly the portion dealing with the admiral), whereby they were introduced to Columbus as a stock character in the Western narrative of colonization and empire building. Eden’s preface certainly frames Martyr’s narrative in a way that assures that the essence of Martyr’s Columbus, the paradigmatic founder of Western empire, comes across unaltered. The preface, for example, contends that the establishment of Spain’s “large Empire” is more worthy of glory than the exploits of Jason and the Argonauts, Alexander the Great, and the Romans. An augmented English translation of Martyr’s *Decades* was published, along with other accounts of New-World discoveries, in 1589, and again in 1598–1600 by Richard Hakluyt, perhaps the greatest champion of English colonization. We know that copies of that work, entitled *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* were carried on the ships of the East India Company to the British colonies. In compiling the *Navigations*, Hakluyt was attempting to lay the moral groundwork for England’s expansion overseas. As one scholar notes, Hakluyt “implicitly compare[d] his own project to Virgil’s *Aeneid*,” seeing his promotion of the British Empire as analogous to Virgil’s promotion of the Roman Empire.

Martyr’s *Decades* are important in the textual genealogy with regard to Columbus not because British colonials simply reproduced Martyr’s characterizations of Columbus. Specifying a particular textual influence, except in certain cases (some of
which I discussed in the previous chapter), is a hazardous exercise, and while I do believe such references are relevant, they are not as important as acknowledging that Columbus continues to be a stock character in the same old story about the transfer of empire and the domination of one people over another. That narrative, which is underwritten by and reinforces the definition of civilization as “requiring transportation from somewhere else, as incapable of being homegrown, as necessitating exile, invasion, reachievement, and refoundation,” was an important part of British American discourse, beginning with the first English settlers. According to the logic of that discourse, it made sense that Columbus would continue to be interpreted in America as an imperial figure.

The first treatment of Columbus published in the American colonies, “The History of the Northern Continent of America,” written by Samuel Nevill under the penname “Sylvanus Americus,” appeared in Nevill’s *New American Magazine* in 1758 and was republished that same year in two newspapers, the *New York Mercury* and the *New York Gazette*. The piece relied heavily on Martyr, Hakluyt and Samuel Purchas, who continued Hakluyt’s publication efforts in England after Hakluyt’s death. As Claudia Bushman notes, Nevill repeats elements of the Black Legend in portraying Spain’s colonization of the New World as a vicious conquest, in contrast to that of the English, which was justifiable. In Nevill’s account, however, Columbus is ultimately a sympathetic character in contrast to the greedy and cruel Spaniards, much like he is in both Martyr’s and Columbus’s own account.

Two of the most influential authors to write about Columbus in English, Washington Irving and Scottish historian William Robertson, acknowledged using Martyr as a source. Robertson’s *The History of America* (1777) was one of the primary sources from which Americans in the eighteenth century learned about Columbus. The biographical information about Columbus that Joel Barlow presented to readers in *The Vision of Columbus* (1787),
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for example, was taken from Robertson’s book, excerpts of which had been republished in American newspapers in the early to mid-1780s. We are familiar with Robertson’s Columbus: he is the model European colonizer. This squares with Robertson’s statement in his introduction that his work illustrates “the principles and maxims of the Spaniards in planting colonies, which have been adopted in some measure by every nation.” By telling the story of the Spanish Empire’s “discovery” and colonization, he was providing what he deemed “a proper introduction to the history of all the European establishments in America.” While the trope of empire is not at the forefront of Robertson’s text, it lies beneath its consistent allusions to the Old World conquering the New. Just as we saw in texts that predate Robertson’s, Columbus imposes European order on America, conquering the savage and civilizing through the construction of cities and churches.

Empire and Eighteenth-Century Poetry

The notion that the British territory in the Americas would be an empire, at least in the sense that an empire denoted a territory of great size, was not new at the time of the War of Independence. Many of the original settlers of the eastern seaboard had claimed a divine right to the interior as well, and these claims were supported by several of the first colonial charters, which held that the western boundary of the colonies was the Pacific Ocean (the “South Sea”). In The Rising American Empire, historian Richard Van Alstyne argues that “the attitude, predetermined in Elizabethan England, that the ‘New World’ belonged exclusively to the English as the people capable of colonizing and exploiting it was germinal in the formation of the American idea of empire.” The settlers’ belief in their “right to colonize” into the interior of the continent underwrites the formation of the United States as an empire and its imperial foreign policy throughout the course of its existence:
This concept of the right to colonize, premised upon an assumed ability to implement the right, thus begins to be part of the American mentality in the eighteenth century. John Quincy Adams and James Monroe, employing the same reasoning, gave the doctrine classic expression in 1823; and the Monroe Doctrine became the chosen ideological weapon of the United States in the nineteenth century for warning intruders away from the continent. Manifest destiny, the intriguing phrase utilized by historians to label the expansion of the United States in the nineteenth century, is merely the other side of the coin. It was characteristic of the nineteenth as well as the eighteenth century, moreover, to assert the right before the actual work of colonization had begun. . . . Looked at from the standpoint of the sum total of its history, the abstract formulae and principles being disregarded or at least discounted, the United States thus becomes by its very essence an expanding imperial power. It was conceived as an empire; and its evolution from a group of small, disunited English colonies strung out on a long coastline to a world power with commitments on every sea and in every continent, has been a characteristically imperial type of growth.13

In America, British Americans who had surely read European sources about Columbus commonly portrayed him as a symbol of empire. British American literature of the last third of the eighteenth century reflects a growing contemporary interest in Columbus. Before the mid-1770s the empire with which Columbus was associated was most often British. After that time, the empire with which Columbus was associated by British Americas was, as we would predict, that of an independent American state. Within that conception, British Americans sought to differentiate empire in America from its European counterpart. Most important, in America the empire for which Columbus stood was headed by a republic where science, commerce, and individual liberty were prized, unlike in the British
Empire, which was ultimately unsuccessful in the attempt to join *imperium* and *libertas* because of its monarchist constitution.\(^{14}\)

Philip Freneau’s poem “Columbus to Ferdinand,” likely written in 1770 (but not published until 1779), is one of the earliest works written in England’s American colonies to take Columbus as its subject. Its fifteen stanzas recount the arguments that Columbus, guided first and foremost by reason, purportedly presented to King Ferdinand in the former’s effort to garner royal support for his enterprise. The poem quotes the same lines of Seneca’s *Medea* to which Columbus himself alluded in suggesting he fulfilled prophesy by transgressing the known limits of the ocean and discovering new worlds.\(^{15}\) The allusion to empire here is subtle but unmistakable. This passage from the *Medea*, as we have seen in the European context, suggests that Columbus is successor to Jason and Aeneas, founder of the Roman Empire.

The association of Columbus with empire, and a specifically American empire, is stronger in Freneau’s later work. In 1771 he collaborated with Hugh Henry Brackenridge in writing *A Poem, On the Rising Glory of America*, which the latter delivered at their graduation from the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University).\(^{16}\) The same quote from the *Medea* was reprinted in both the graduation program and the title page of Freneau’s publication of the poem in 1772. In this case, the *Medea* epigraph works together with the poem’s use of the *translatio imperii* trope—which had so often been used by Europeans in telling Columbus’s story—to construct Columbus as a symbol of empire. *On the Rising Glory* begins by referring to the string of past empires that now cede their place to America:

No more of Memphis and her mighty kings,
Or Alexandria, where the Ptolomies
Taught golden commerce to unfurl her sails,
And bid fair science smile: No more of Greece
Where learning next her early visit paid,
And spread her glories to illumine the world,
No more of Athens, where she flourished,
And saw her sons of mighty genius rise
Smooth flowing Plato, Socrates and him
Who with resistless eloquence reviv’d
The Spir’t of LIBERTY, and shook the thrones
Of Macedon and Persia’s haughty king.
No more of Rome, enlighten’d by her beams,
Fresh kindling there the fire and eloquence,
And poesy divine; imperial Rome!
Whose wide dominion reach’d o’er half the globe;
Whose eagle flew o’er Ganges to the East
And in the West far to the British isles.
No more of Britain, and her kings renown’d,
Edward’s and Henry’s thunderbolts of war;
Her chiefs victorious o’er the Gallic foe;
Illustrious senators, immortal bards,
And wise philosophers, of these no more.
A Theme more new, tho’ not less noble, claims
Our ev’ry thought on this auspicious day;
The rising glory of this western world.17

In this passage we note what Eric Wertheimer has called “the poem’s thematic obsession with imperial beginnings.”18 It lists a series of old empires in order to introduce a “Theme more new, tho’ not less noble / . . . / The rising glory of this western world.” In this context, the reader understands the “western world” as an empire, as it concludes the poem’s queue of previous empires. It is a “nobler” empire than the empires of Europe (especially the Spanish Empire) for two reasons. First, its main activity is not war but agriculture (“But agriculture crowns our happy land”)19, which in the West has always been deemed necessary to sustain cities and “civilization.” Second, it is grounded in commerce, which in turn depends on science, which in turn depends on liberty.20 According to the poem, the fertile ground for commerce, science, and liberty is uniquely American.
On the Rising Glory identifies the moment "when first Columbus touch’d / [t]he shores so long unknown" as the origin of "this western world." While the poem does not focus on Columbus, it identifies him as being responsible for bringing empire to the New World, as the epigraphic frame quoting Seneca also suggests. The prosperous future of empire in America is expressed by the character of Acasto, who sees numerous peoples, a great territorial expanse, and nations that will compete with the fame of Greece and Rome:

I see, I see
A thousand kingdoms rais’d, cities and men
Num’rous as sand upon the ocean shore;
Th’ Ohio then shall glide by many a town
Of note: and where the Missis[s]ippi stream
By forests shaded now runs weeping on
Nations shall grow and states not less in fame
Than Greece and Rome of old: we too shall boast
Our Alexanders, Pompeys, heroes, kings
That in the womb of time yet dormant lye
Waiting the joyful hour for life and light.  

The importance of the city as the site of civilization is clear in Acasto’s vision of a “thousand kingdoms rais’d.” That he sees “cities and men” as “num’rous as sand” underscores the great expanse of this western territory, as do the references to the “many a town” and the “nations” that will grace the lengths of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Acasto explicitly compares his vision with Greece and Rome, stating that these “states” will rival the fame of antiquity.

In the final stanza, Acasto declares that this land, like all great empires, will be a fertile home for the arts and sciences:

This is thy praise America thy pow’r
Thou best of climes by science visited
By freedom blest and richly stor'd with all
The luxuries of life. Hail happy land
The seat of empire the abode of kings,
The final stage where time shall introduce
Renowned characters, and glorious works
Of high invention and of wond’rous art.\(^{22}\)

Here, in the reference to the “seat of empire,” the poem draws on the notion, based on the biblical book of Daniel, that there would be five empires in human history, the fifth being a utopia or, in the alternative, an apocalypse.\(^{23}\)

Freneau also represents Columbus as a figure of empire in his poem entitled “Pictures of Columbus, the Genoese,” written in 1774 and published in 1788. This poem recounts “the shameful story” of Ferdinand’s ungratefulness toward Columbus. It ends with Columbus alone on his deathbed, having none of the honors he merits, his only comfort being the promise of a future “when empires rise where lonely forests grew.”\(^{24}\) The poem suggests that Columbus is responsible for this future, as these “empires” are the reward of his toils.

In 1771, at almost the same time that Brackenridge and Freneau composed their *On the Rising Glory*, nineteen-year-old Timothy Dwight wrote *America: Or, A Poem on the Settlement of the British Colonies*. Like Freneau and Brackenridge, Dwight first portrays Columbus as responsible for introducing the Old World to the New. Near the poem’s end, when Freedom triumphantly addresses America as an empire destined to expand, the poet invokes Columbus’s name:

\begin{verbatim}
  Hail Land of light and joy! thy power shall grow
  Far as the seas, which round thy regions flow;
  Through earth’s wide realms thy glory shall extend,
  And savage nations at thy scepter bend.
  Around the frozen shores thy sons shall sail,
  Or stretch their canvas to the ASIAN gale,
  Or, like COLUMBUS, steer their course unknown,
\end{verbatim}
Beyond the regions of the flaming zone,
To worlds unfound beneath the southern pole,
Whose native hears Antarctic oceans roll;
Where artless Nature rules with peaceful sway,
And where no ship e’er stemm’d the untry’d way.25

The poet envisions a great empire that conquers other peoples (“savage nations at thy scepter bend”). Eventually, the empire itself will be “like Columbus,” expanding its domain to new regions (“through earth’s wide realms thy glory shall extend”). The poem continues with a reference to the Roman Empire:

Earth’s richest realms their treasures shall unfold,
And op’ning mountains yield the flaming gold;
Round thy broad fields more glorious ROMES arise,
With pomp and splendour bright’n’ing all the skies;
EUROPE and ASIA with surprise behold
Thy temples starr’d with gems and roof’d with gold.
From realm to realm broad APPIAN ways shall wind,
And distant shores by long canals be join’d,
The ocean hear thy voice, the waves obey,
And through green vallies trace their wat’ry way.26

The Appian Way was the most famous of the Roman Empire’s many roadways that facilitated its territorial expansion. Dwight’s reference here to “Romes” connected by “Appian ways” that “shall wind” “from realm to realm” further characterizes America as the heir to Western (Roman) empire. Like the empire described in On the Rising Glory by Freneau and Brackenridge, Dwight’s empire in America is unlike its European counterpart. Dwight’s vision of empire is different because it is based on “freedom, and science, and virtue,” instead of war, as in Europe.

A similar casting of Columbus as agent of translatio imperii is seen in Joel Barlow’s The Columbiad, published in 1807. This poem is a reworking of Barlow’s The Vision of Columbus, published in
1787 but composed between 1778 and 1787. Barlow appears to have relied on Sylvanus Americus’s (Nevill’s) “History of the Northern Continent of America” as well as Robertson’s History of America. Although in his preface Barlow criticizes the classical epics of Homer and Virgil—he disdains, for example, the “moral tendency” of the Aeneid, saying that Virgil “wrote and felt like a subject, not a citizen”—he begins his poem by declaring its subject to be Columbus, echoing the first lines of the Aeneid:

I sing the Mariner who first unfurl’d
An eastern banner o’er the western world,
And taught mankind where future empires lay
In these fair confines of descending day.27

Barlow’s language recalls Virgil’s “Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris / Italianam, fato profugus Laviniaque venit / Litora.” (I sing of arms and the man who first from the coasts of Troy, exiled by fate, came to Italy and Lavine shores.)28 Barlow’s appropriation of Virgil’s epic formula is charged with imperial connotations. Steven Blakemore argues that Barlow’s republican critique of the ancient epics shows a measure of “ideological schizophreni[a].”29 The description of Columbus spreading “an eastern banner o’er the western world” echoes Columbus’s own description of his most important imperial act: his taking possession of the New World for Spain with “the royal standard extended.” In Barlow’s poem, Columbus’s pointing out “where future empires lay” serves as the first step in the nation’s journey to fulfilling its future imperial destiny.

Freneau, Brackenridge, Dwight, and Barlow all drew upon current ideas circulating in the British Atlantic world about the changing British Empire and its colonies. In particular, they tapped into the translatio imperii tradition, which was commonly found in poetic and political discourse about the American continent.30 The model of that expression is George Berkeley’s “Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America,”
written in 1725 and published in 1752. In the words of Kenneth Silverman, “virtually every large colonial newspaper and many books and magazines reprinted [Berkeley’s poem] in its entirety at some time during the third quarter of the eighteenth century. Berkeley’s metaphors of Translation—a growing plant, a genial rising sun, the final act of a drama—seeped into colonial speech, so that diaries, orations, poems, and conversation everywhere in the period register a prophetic awareness of growth.”

An important part of the translatio imperii narrative as Berkeley and others applied it to America was the belief that the British Empire was in decline. This widespread belief was based largely on Sallust’s analysis of Roman history and his contention that empires have a natural life span—they rise and fall according to cycles of expansion, glory, corruption, overextension, and decay. This narrative is evident in the criticisms of the Cromwellian Protectorate that surfaced in the 1650s and denounced the Protectorate’s unsuccessful Western Design in the Spanish Caribbean and, more generally, its failed attempt to balance imperium and libertas. Berkeley himself discussed the degeneration of England in “An Essay towards Preventing the Ruin of Great Britain,” published anonymously in 1721. The opening sentence first refers to the recent financial disaster caused by the South Sea Bubble and then concludes, “we are actually undone, and lost to all sense of our true interest.” The rest of the essay elaborates on the corruption of English values and predicts England’s inevitable demise: “we are doomed to be undone,” he bemoans.

In the context of this decline, Berkeley brought attention to the role of the American colonies. His remedy for the doomed British Empire, articulated in A Proposal for the Better Supplying of Churches in Our Foreign Plantations and for Converting the Savage Americans to Christianity by a College in the Summer Islands (1725), was to establish a missionary seminary on the island of Bermuda which would serve as an isolated, pristine, incorruptible base from which to launch an English imperial advance on the American continent. America, in Berkeley’s view, was a clean slate upon
which could be written the virtues of England’s empire, the civic virtues that were encoded in the Bill of Rights but were now corrupt in Britain. Hence, while Berkeley portrays Europe in “Verses” as “decay[ed]” and “barren” to the point that “the Muse” who dwells there is “disgusted,” he presents America as the site of the last of the five great empires:

Westward the course of empire takes its way,  
The four first acts already past  
A fifth shall close the drama with the day;  
Time’s noblest offspring is the last.37

It is important to recognize that Berkeley’s prediction of the future glorious America is fully British. His poem “explain[s] and justif[ies] the expansion of British imperial power.”38 In fact, Berkeley’s “Verses” about the westward movement of the empire to America was composed during the Parliamentary debate about his Bermuda project. Its subject deals with the very beginnings of the idea of the British Empire.39 It was believed that English political liberties, the sciences, and the arts would flee to the colonies. (The original title of Berkeley’s “Verses” emphasized this migration: “America; or The Muse’s Refuge: A Prophecy in Six Verses.”) This translatio libertatis et studii would make England’s North American colonies the new “seat of empire,” that is, “the British Empire in America” or “the British Empire of America.”40 Anglo-Americans who shared this line of thinking often saw themselves as more British than their corrupt counterparts in England. But they still saw themselves as part of England’s political framework. It was not until the 1770s, when the political crisis between England and its colonies became acute, that colonists began to advocate political separation in order to maintain their Britishness.41

The Britishness of empire is evident in some of the texts that were discussed earlier in this chapter. Consider, for example, Freneau and Brackenridge’s On the Rising Glory. The translatio imperii et studii to America is clearly described—“Dominion” leaves
the empires of the east, then Britain, and now “hastens onward to th’ American shores”—yet the poets who composed the poem in 1771 identify themselves as “we the sons of Britain.” They employ Columbus in this poem to sing the story of England’s renovated empire in America, which will be “the seat of empire the abode of kings.” The empire described in Timothy Dwight’s *America* is similarly British. He prefaces the description of that empire, whose sons will be “like Columbus” and whose glory and territorial expanse will be like Rome’s, with a section praising the British victory in the French and Indian War: “At length these realms the British scepter own, / And bow submissive at great GEORGE’S throne.” Dwight’s version of America’s “rising glory” was, in the words of one scholar, “a glory conceived as an extension of Britannia’s Protestant sway and submissiveness ‘at great GEORGE’S throne.’” Dwight had yet to declare his support for independence, which according to his own account he did in 1775. After that, in 1777, while he was a chaplain in the Connecticut Continental Brigade, Dwight composed his ode “Columbia,” whose title takes on the feminized form of Columbus’s name, which I discuss later and which continues the “rising glory” theme but refers to an independent American empire:

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COLUMBIA! Columbia! to glory arise,
The queen of the world and the child of the skies!
Thy genius commands thee, with raptures behold,
While ages on ages thy splendor unfold.
Thy reign is the last and the noblest of time,
Most fruitful thy soil, most inviting thy clime;
Let the crimes of the east ne’er encrimson thy name,
Be freedom, and science, and virtue thy fame.
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Again we note here that empire in America, while still British, is distinct from European empire because its fame is rooted in “freedom,” “science,” and “virtue.”
The flurry of cultural production related to Columbus from the 1770s on in British America and then the United States has been well documented. After independence, Columbus became a symbol of the new nation that safeguarded what were considered English liberties by replacing the monarchical system with a republic. American revolutionaries sought to purge the English empire of its faults, to replicate that empire without the weaknesses inherent in a monarchical system that doomed the attempt to secure both imperial grandeur and liberty. In the late eighteenth century, representations of Columbus continued British Americans’ identification not only with empire and the imperial ideal but also with a republican system. Herein lies what was unique in American representations of Columbus: his ties to empire, discursively constructed through the centuries, remained intact, yet he was now also held up as a democratic, anti-monarchical symbol.

The coexistence of republican liberty and empire, which is at the heart of the American Columbus, is also at the center of the discourse of the American Revolution, and its origins lie in the ideology of the British Empire itself. As David Armitage has deftly illustrated, “British republicans . . . attempted to reconcile the convergent, but antagonistic, claims of empire and liberty in the century between the Elizabethan fin-de-siècle and the Glorious Revolution, and beyond.” However, that attempt, according to contemporary critics like James Harrington, failed when the Cromwellian Protectorate did not safeguard liberties while expanding its imperium. British Americans, who had inherited the republican notion of empire embraced by the English, believed that they alone could reconcile imperium and libertas because they were free of the flaws of monarchy. Jefferson’s “empire for liberty,” which was at the foundation of the political experiment embraced by the framers of the new nation, was, in the words of Jefferson scholar Peter Onuf, “an empire without a metropolis, a regime of consent, not coercion.”
One of the rhetorical moves that made possible the combination of the imperial and the republican in the figure of Columbus in the British American context had already been performed in the Columbian interpretive tradition. This is the characterization of Columbus as a victim of the Spanish monarchs, or at least of Ferdinand. We see this portrayal in Columbus’s own writings, in Peter Martyr’s *Decades*, and in Ferdinand Columbus’s biography of his father. All of these texts were widely used as sources by historiographers like Eden, Hakluyt, and Robertson. Their works were in turn read by generations that followed. In British America, a notable early expression of this characterization of Columbus is Freneau’s “Pictures of Columbus.”

The popularity of the *translatio imperii* trope and the adoption of Columbus in the *translatio* narrative in British America reflect the centrality of empire in contemporary political thought in British America. The impulse to expand westward into the interior of the continent, already evident in seven colonial charters and expressed throughout the eighteenth century before independence was declared—most notably in the wars involving territorial disputes with the French and native populations—, was popularly understood as a movement toward empire. Since the Romans, the term “empire” has been associated with great swathes of territory. One of the primary definitions of “empire” in the Oxford English Dictionary, first appearing in the year 1297, is: “An extensive territory (*esp.* an aggregate of many separate states) under the sway of an emperor or supreme ruler; also, an aggregate of subject territories ruled over by a sovereign state.”

British Americans’ desire to conquer more territory is famously expressed in Benjamin Franklin’s pamphlet entitled *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind*, which was published in 1751, twenty years before Freneau and Brackenridge’s *A Poem, On the Rising Glory of America*. In this piece Franklin predicts that the English population in the colonies will double every twenty years and that, although it would take “many ages,” the English would eventually colonize the entire continent.
point here is that the drive to acquire more territory, to acquire what was imagined as an empire of extensive territory, was present long before independence was declared in 1776. The acquisition of the trans-Appalachian territory, so skillfully negotiated by American representatives in the 1783 Treaty of Paris, set the new nation’s territorial boundaries far beyond the settled cities of the eastern seaboard and was the legal expression of this drive to empire. In *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion*, historian Walter Nugent argues that this territorial acquisition was “an absolutely essential platform for America’s further expansion.” Moreover, he writes, it was an early expression of “manifest destiny,” this notion that America had a God-given mission to rule the continent as a great empire:

American assumptions that Transappalachia was indivisibly part of their territory went far back in time to the colonial charters. They also rested on cultural attitudes about English Protestant civilization’s superiority to Catholic French and Spanish pretensions and, more to the day-to-day point, to Indian “savagery.” . . . The American romance with Transappalachia included land-grabbing and moneymaking, but it was hardly just that. It involved patriotism, and even more, many thought, the fulfillment of the plans of God and Nature for America. Diverse American voices—religious, cultural, and economic—converged in the assumption that Transappalachia was and had to be American.\(^52\)

While the term “manifest destiny” was coined much later, in 1845, the sense that British Americans had a right to the continent that would become home to an extensive American empire was present at the beginning of the nation and, indeed, long before then when a British Empire was envisioned. This sense nourished policies of Indian removal and fed into the ideologies that underwrote the War of 1812, the Monroe Doctrine, and the long list of attempts to take over foreign territory during the nineteenth
and twentieth centuries. It is no wonder that Columbus, who had always been interpreted as a figure of empire, became so popular in British America during the last third of the eighteenth century.

**Washington Irving**

One of the most influential nineteenth-century texts that helped make the Columbus legend part of the United States’ national story was Washington Irving’s *Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. Irving was already a recognized author—his *Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (which includes his famous “Rip Van Winkle”) was published in 1819—when he was invited in 1826 by the American Minister to Spain to translate into English Martín Fernández de Navarrete’s recently published collection of documents about Columbus and Spain’s early explorations in the New World. Irving’s sojourn to Spain lasted three years, until 1829, and included three months spent writing at the Alhambra. Upon his arrival, he almost immediately decided to write a biography of Columbus instead of translating Navarrete’s volume, and he composed the work in less than two years.

Published in 1828, Irving’s biography was the first extended study of Columbus written in English. It was immensely popular, going through 116 editions and reprints in its first eight decades. Its influence was much increased by the 1829 issue of Irving’s abridged edition, which was frequently used in schools and universities. Irving’s most important sources were Ferdinand Columbus’s biography and Bartolomé de las Casas’s *Historia de las Indias*, both of which draw from Martyr’s *Decades*. The Columbus described in Irving’s account represents the values of the new republic: he is a self-made man who became successful, despite many obstacles in his path, by virtue of his goodness, genius, hard work, and faith in science and the benefits of commerce.\(^{53}\) Take, for example, the following passage from the end of chapter 1, which describes Columbus’s general character:
He was one of those men of strong natural genius, who from having to contend at their very outset with privations and impediments, acquire an intrepidity in encountering and a facility in vanquishing difficulties, throughout their career. Such men learn to effect great purposes with small means, supplying this deficiency by the resources of their own energy and invention. This, from his earliest commencement, throughout the whole of his life, was one of the remarkable features in the history of Columbus. In every undertaking, the scantiness and apparent insufficiency of his means enhance the grandeur of his achievements.54

Irving’s Columbus, including his association with empire, conformed to the values of the new nation. Only five years before the biography’s publication in 1828, President James Monroe openly articulated the nation’s imperialist agenda in what became known as the “Monroe Doctrine,” which warned Europe that “the American continents . . . are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers.” Irving’s Columbus-turned-American-hero was very much an imperial figure. Following the model whereby Columbus is portrayed as a new Aeneas, Irving quotes the famous passage from Seneca’s Medea in his epigraph, setting up the characterization of Columbus as founder of empire. We note the manner in which Irving follows Las Casas’s description of Columbus’s entry into Barcelona as a Roman conqueror who has just won more territory for the Empire: “His entrance into this noble city has been compared to one of those triumphs which the Romans were accustomed to decree to conquerors.”55 Shortly after this description, Irving repeats Las Casas’s description of Columbus as he meets Ferdinand and Isabel: “At length Columbus entered the hall, surrounded by a brilliant crowd of cavaliers, among whom, says Las Casas, he was conspicuous for his stately and commanding person, which with his countenance rendered
venerable by his gray hairs, gave him the august appearance of a senator of Rome.” Irving again portrays Columbus as a founder of empire in his last chapter, “Observations on the Character of Columbus”:

His conduct as a discoverer was characterized by the grandeur of his views, and the magnanimity of his spirit. Instead of scouring the newly found countries, like a grasping adventurer eager only for immediate gain, as was too generally the case with contemporary discoverers, he sought to ascertain their soil and productions, their rivers and harbours. He was desirous of colonizing and cultivating them, of conciliating and civilizing the natives, of building cities, introducing the useful arts, subjecting every thing to the control of law, order and religion, and thus of founding regular and prosperous empires.57

This passage is consistent with the Black Legend in distinguishing Columbus from other “contemporary discoverers” who are here described as ‘eager only for immediate gain.” Irving’s Columbus, in contrast, has superior motives. Most importantly, he is an empire builder: a new Aeneas who is “colonizing and cultivating,” “civilizing the natives” by imposing his “law, order and religion,” “building cities,” and “thus . . . founding . . . empires.” Irving’s Columbus also provides a lesson on the faults of monarchical government. His message is clear: because societies based on hereditary kingship and nobility do not value individual liberty and enterprise, the ingenious, hard-working Columbus is scorned by “the cold and calculating Ferdinand,” “a sovereign who was so ungratefully neglecting him.”58 At the end of his life, Columbus is infirm, destitute, and offered no assistance from the Crown, whose empire he increased. “We can scarcely believe,” Irving declares, “that this is the discoverer of the New World, broken down by infirmities and impoverished in his old age, by his very discoveries; that the man who had added such vast and wealthy regions to the crown who is the individual thus weerily
and vainly applying to the court of Spain for his dues, and pleading almost like a culprit, in cases wherein he had been so flagrantly injured. As he describes Columbus on his deathbed, Irving reminds the reader that the admiral is the son of a republic (Genoa), subtly suggesting that his origins explain not only his values and his character but also his aptness as a symbol of the United States.

**Nineteenth-Century Painting**

After Irving, there was an explosion of cultural production with Columbus as its subject. Much of the artwork installed during the nineteenth century at the nation’s capital, for example, threw into sharp relief Columbus’s status as a national symbol of empire. Take, for example, John Vanderlyn’s well-known painting, *Landing of Columbus at the Island of Guanahani, West Indies, October 12th, 1492* (see Figure 1). Prominently displayed on the east wall of the Capitol Rotunda, Vanderlyn’s painting shows Columbus taking possession of the New World for Spain. In one hand he brandishes a sword, and in the other he plants the royal flag of Ferdinand and Isabel. Natives, in awe or fear, hide behind a nearby tree. The painting portrays a paradigmatic moment of imperial conquest of the savage other. “The Italian navigator,” in the words of Vivien Green Fryd, “has invaded the Arawack’s [sic] territory, the darkened area [of the painting], bringing Old World civilization, represented by the highlighted shore and ocean. Not only are the Indians smaller than the dominant arrivals, but they are also painted with thinly applied pigment with loose edges, unlike the more hardened contours of the sculpturally defined central figures.” It is telling that this painting was commissioned for the Capitol in 1837, fourteen years after the Monroe Doctrine and seven years after the Indian Removal Act of the Jackson administration. As Fryd notes, “the subject matter and iconography of much of the art in the Capitol” is consistent with the messages of Vanderlyn’s painting, promoting
a “remarkably coherent program of the early course of North American empire, from the [European] discovery and settlement to the national development and westward expansion that necessitated [or, more appropriately, resulted in] the subjugation of the indigenous peoples.”

We should not be surprised to see much of Columbus in this artwork, including the Columbus Doors, designed by Randolph Rogers and installed in 1863 and 1871.

Like Vanderlyn’s painting, which is hanging nearby, the first panel of Constantino Brumidi’s frieze depicting the course of American history also illustrates Columbus’s taking possession of the New World for Spain (see Figure 2). The frieze was commissioned by the supervising engineer of the Capitol extension (1853–59), Montgomery C. Meigs, who described the design of the frieze’s historical episodes to Secretary of War Jefferson Davis:
The gradual progress of a continent from the depths of barbarism to the height of civilization; the rude and barbarous civilization of some of the Ante-Columbian tribes; the contests of the Aztecs with their less civilized predecessors; their own conquest by the Spanish race; the wilder state of the hunter tribes of our own regions; the discovery, settlement, wars, treaties, the gradual advance of the white, and retreat of the red races; our own revolutionary and other struggles, with the illustration of the higher achievements of our present civilization.63

Within this narrative as expressed by Meigs, Columbus plays a role we are familiar with: the bringer of “civilization,” which was understood as European and white and imposed by imperial conquest. This is also the narrative told by Brumidi’s lunette, *Columbus and the Indian Maiden* (c. 1875), painted above the chamber doors of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs (see Figure 3). In this fresco, a patriarchal Columbus stands above a seated Indian woman. In his hand is a rolled parchment, likely the record of his having taken possession of the new territory he “discovered.” He lifts her veil, and she leans away from him as if his advance is unwanted. The scene, regardless of Brumidi’s intent, alludes to the white man’s
disrobing and rape of the indigenous female and is symbolic of the policies of “removal” advocated by the senate committee whose members passed under Brumidi’s fresco.

In the nineteenth century, the allegorical, female figure of Columbia became popular. As discussed in the Introduction, the term “Columbia” has a long history. In an effort to honor Amerigo Vespucci and following in the tradition of designating continents with feminine Latin nouns (e.g., Europa, Asia, Africa), Martin Waldseemüller was the first to employ the name “America” on a map he made in 1507. Shortly thereafter, and for centuries to come, the term “Columbia” and its many variants
were proposed as alternative names for the continent that many believed should honor Columbus instead of Vespucci. The term “Columbia” became a synonym in English of “America” well before the Revolution. I disagree with those who argue that the name “Columbia” became so common that it lost all association with Christopher Columbus. Rather, we should keep in mind Columbus’s role as stock character in the dominant Western narrative of conquest and empire building.

To substantiate this observation, let us consider the 1872 painting by John Gast entitled *American Progress* (see Figure 4). This painting was commissioned by publisher George A. Crofutt, whose magazine *Crofutt’s Western World* and guidebooks about the West were integral in marketing the western territories to the

Figure 4. John Gast, *American Progress*. Courtesy of the Autry National Center of the American West.
nation. Crofutt, who produced chromolithographs of the painting to include in his magazine and guidebooks, instructed Gast on the elements to include in the painting and even what it should be titled. The work features the feminine Columbia, representing the United States, with the “Star of Empire” on her forehead, flying effortlessly westward (toward the left of the painting) as she leads the white settlers in the conquest of territory held by now-fleeing natives. The right side of the painting, the east, where the light of civilization shines, contrasts with the darkness of the left side, the west, where there are “savages” yet to be conquered. Columbia, an emblem for the United States’ westward-advancing empire, holds a book, symbolic of the *translatio studii*, and she brings technology with her, stringing telegraph wires and leading trains in her wake. The scene captures the meaning of Columbus as a symbol of empire in the nineteenth-century United States.

**World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago 1893**

The United States’ insatiable appetite for foreign territory since its inception has been well documented. By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States already had more than a century of experience with “empire building,” to use Nugent’s term. First was the acquisition of Trans-Appalachia, realized in the peace treaties of 1782 and 1783 that ended the Revolutionary War. This was followed by constant acquisitions, the territories of Louisiana, Florida, Texas, Oregon, and Alaska among them. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, the United States had expanded across the continent and was eyeing Hawaii. The last major battle of the “Indian wars” at Wounded Knee occurred in 1890. According to data collected in the census of that year, the frontier had closed. Looking at this scenario in his famous essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Frederick Jackson Turner declared that continued expansion, now abroad instead of “domestic” expansion, was necessary to guarantee the
prosperous future of the nation. Turner presented his essay at a fitting venue: the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, a world’s fair celebrating Columbus and marking the apogee of his popularity in the United States.

This event was initially planned for 1892 to celebrate the quadricentennial of Columbus’s “discovery” of America, but its ambitious size and scope required that it be postponed one year. Approximately twenty-seven million people attended the fair, which contained over 250 thousand displays. It was one in a series of world’s fairs, beginning with London’s 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition, that became increasingly popular as industrialized nations sought to expand their economic activities and influence overseas. World’s fairs articulated especially well nationalist discourses of imperialism and were particularly important before the advent of mass communication media because of their capacity to expose large numbers of people to a coherent interpretation of the nation and its role in the world. Organized and promoted by the socio-economic elites of economically advanced nations of the West, fairs were, as Robert Rydell explains with regard to these fairs in the United States, both “symbolic edifices” and “triumphs of hegemony.” Rydell, citing Antonio Gramsci, defines the term “hegemony” as “the exercise of economic and political power in cultural terms by the established leaders of American society and the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this content is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.” Rydell concludes that “world’s fairs performed a hegemonic function precisely because they propagated the ideas and values of the country’s political, financial, corporate, and intellectual leaders and offered these ideas as the proper interpretation of social and political reality.”

The elites who organized and promoted the Chicago World’s Exposition propagated their hegemonic views about what was
“civilized” and “barbaric,” what was “history” and what was “knowledge.” According to one contemporary history of the Exposition, “Among monuments marking the progress of civilization throughout the ages, the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 will ever stand conspicuous. Gathered here are the forces which move humanity and make history, the ever-shifting powers that fit new thoughts to new conditions, and shape the destinies of mankind.” The emphasis in this statement on “the progress of civilization” reminds us of the translatio imperii narrative that is now told by the United States citizen “victor,” using the term as David Quint does, and imperial subject. That subject benefited from and promoted the expansion of Western capitalism and Western epistemology. The figure of Columbus, I have argued here, has always found a comfortable home within the discourses of imperialism. He himself, after all, played an important role in the expansion of the European economic system across the Atlantic and the beginnings of the modern capitalist system.

The figure of Columbus at the Chicago Exposition was an especially apt conduit for the imperialist discourse of the day. Although the tradition by which Columbus had been interpreted for centuries had changed in the United States, where he had become a symbol of the republic, his status as conqueror and his association with empire—as a stock protagonist in the narrative of the translatio imperii—remained. Many of the poems and speeches presented at the Exposition’s October 1892 opening ceremonies characterized Columbus as the agent responsible for the westward transfer of empire. We are familiar with this Columbus from our survey of earlier portrayals of him in US literature. One example is The Columbian Oration, delivered by Chauncey M. Depew, an unsuccessful candidate for the 1888 Republican Party presidential nomination. After first crediting the explorer with “the planting, the nurture and the expansion of civil and religious liberty” in America, Depew soon turned his attention to the translatio imperii trope, addressing history’s record of empires that had been conquered and replaced by new ones to the west.
“Ancient history,” Depew asserted, “is a dreary record of unstable civilizations. Each reached its zenith of material splendor, and perished. The Assyrian, Persian, Egyptian, Grecian and Roman Empires were proofs of the possibilities and limitations of man for conquest and intellectual development.” These empires operated by force, and “their destruction involved a sum of misery and relapse which made their creation rather a curse than a blessing.” In contrast, Depew claimed, the empire in the United States was superior to those of the past largely because of the influence of Christianity. Most importantly for our purposes, it was made possible by Columbus: “The spirit of equality of all men before God and the law, moved westward from Calvary with its revolutionary influence upon old institutions, to the Atlantic Ocean. Columbus carried it westward across the seas.”

In the course of Depew’s speech, a contradiction arises between his negative portrayal of empire and his subsequent characterization of the United States as both empire and home of republican liberty. Depew attempts to negotiate this contradiction by characterizing Columbus, the imperial agent, as the unknowing transporter of the spirit of democracy. The seed of democracy is a stowaway on Columbus’ ship: “Individual intelligence and independent conscience . . . were the passengers upon the caravels of Columbus, and he was unconsciously making for the port of civil and religious liberty.” Columbus’s ignorance allows him to be the symbol of both empire and the res publica. Depew can thus compare Columbus not only to the imperial rulers Caesar, Charlemagne, and William the Conqueror, but also to the national heroes Washington and Lincoln. Columbus, in Depew’s rendition, serves as a hinge connecting the nation with both empire and Europe.

At the Exposition’s second opening ceremonies, held in May of 1893, Columbus was yet again portrayed as playing a key role in the translatio imperii and the rise of the nation as empire. This time it was Thomas Brower Peacock who interpreted Columbus in this manner in The Columbian Ode, which won first prize in
an international poetry contest sponsored by the Exposition’s Board of Managers. At the end of this poem—the main thematic concern of which is the United States as the fifth and final empire of world history—the “Star of Empire” unambiguously alights in America after moving west through Asia, Greece, Rome, and Germany. The primary role of Columbus in the transfer of empire to America is alluded to by the poem’s title as well as by the portrayal of Columbus as the national hero who caused nothing less than the rebirth of man and the redefinition of empire itself. The Columbian Ode begins by alluding to the Exposition’s benevolent imperial mission “to all nations” to which it “extend[s] . . . the hand of fellowship”:

Here Peace her olive branch now brings,
An offering to all nations,
And from the tips of her white wings
Fall Love’s own sweet ovations.
By power of song, we here extend, impearled,
The hand of fellowship to all the world.

These lines echo the Exposition’s interpretation of the imposition of US power abroad as the generous gift of civilization. The imperialist message, which the Exposition articulates in part through its manipulations of the figure of Columbus, is first supported in the poem by Peacock’s naming of his audience as a “congress of imperial minds.” After characterizing the nation as the benevolent friend “to all the world,” the first stanza establishes the importance of “westward movement” (“Westward the pilgrim millions go / From out the shadows of the throne—/ Far from the lands of legends old they teem, / To bathe and live in Hope’s immortal dream”). This movement to the west is associated in the poem with escape from tyranny (“From out of the shadows of the throne”) and progress, a *sine qua non* of the *translatio imperii* narrative, according to which each empire conquers and improves
upon the previous one. The language of power in the first stanza (“power,” “to all the world,” “throne,” “imperial,” “kings”) underscores the message in the following stanzas that the United States is an empire, yet one unlike those that preceded it.\(^74\)

The poem then traces the history of empire before it reached America’s shores. It is a history of war and death, and the situation improves only with the appearance of Columbus, who enters the poem at its midpoint. Peacock insinuates that in bringing empire to America, Columbus is responsible for the rebirth of the individual and his ultimate rise to power: “Not till Columbus crossed the watery main, / Did man, renascent, his true dominion gain.”\(^75\) The poet’s message is supported by the imperial resonances of the word “dominion”: not only was the Latin variant of the term used in the legal code of the Roman Empire to denote ownership, but it was also used in the British Empire to refer to overseas territories under the Crown’s control.

Like the contradictions in Depew’s speech, the contradiction in Peacock’s poem regarding the idea of the nation as an “empire of liberty” requires a slight modification of the \textit{translatio imperii} narrative in which Columbus is the protagonist. Early in the poem, Peacock portrays emperors as tyrants, clearly indicting imperial power itself with the crimes of war and murder. This creates difficulties later in the poem when the empire of the United States is extolled. Peacock’s solution is to position this empire “above the dust of empires and the crash of worlds.” He thus reconceptualizes empire in the United States, casting it as an empire \textit{sui generis}. Affirming its essentially democratic nature, he writes: “Here all are crowned—no potentate alone—/ Each separate altar-fire itself a peerless throne.”\(^76\) In Peacock’s version of American antimonarchical republicanism, the \textit{imperium} of the sovereign is granted to the people. The sovereign is thus severed from the concept of empire, but the sovereign’s \textit{imperium} is preserved in the people, all of whom are now “kings.” Columbus makes possible this vision in Peacock’s poem of the United States as an imperial nation-state.
The Exposition’s geographical layout and architecture also conveyed the notion that Columbus, imperial conqueror, was an apt symbol for the contemporary United States. The centralized cluster of buildings that housed the major exhibits of the Exposition was dubbed the “White City,” because the buildings were covered in white plaster of paris. Its neoclassical buildings and Greek and Roman statues reminded fairgoers of the translatio imperii narrative: while the seat of empire had once been Greece and then Rome, Columbus had brought it westward to the United States. The focal point of the White City was the Court of Honor. Here, in the middle of the Exposition’s central lake, on a forty-foot-high base, stood the colossal sixty-five-foot-high Statue of the Republic, a gilded, robed woman who symbolically controlled the world as she grasped the globe in one hand and the staff of power in the other. Behind her towered The Columbus Quadriga, an impressive statue featuring Columbus arriving at the Exposition as a triumphant Roman emperor in a horse-drawn chariot (see Figure 5). Lastly, the central basin displayed The Columbian Fountain, which featured the allegorical figure of “Columbia” seated on the “Barge of State,” a ship pulled by the “Sea horses of Commerce” and oared by the Industries and the Arts (see Figure 6). These statues, together with the neoclassical architecture and classical allusions of the Court of Honor, contributed to the Exposition’s construction of Columbus as a symbol of republican empire.

Outside the confines of the White City, the symbolic heart of “civilization” where Columbus was on display in a multitude of venues and forms, was the twelve-block-long Midway. Here the inhabitants of barbarous non-industrialized nations were isolated and on display in several “ethnological villages.” The foreigners on display at the Chicago Exposition functioned as the flip side of the “civilized” world (read: capitalist, white, Western/European) touted in the White City. By their difference, these foreigners defined what it meant to be civilized, and their lack of civilization rendered them objects to be both feared and dominated (see Figure 7).
The practice of exhibiting foreigners at world’s fairs, all of which were hosted by colonial powers, did not originate with the Chicago Exposition. Burton Benedict writes that “almost without exception the major international exhibitions were sponsored by nations with colonial dependencies. Each displayed its colonies, or its internally colonized peoples, to its home population, to its rivals and to the world at large.” At the Paris Exposition of 1889, Otis Mason, the US delegate from the Smithsonian who was later involved in planning the Chicago Exposition, was impressed with the display of France’s colonized subjects. The decision to imitate these exhibits in Chicago by installing a series
of “ethnological villages” reveals the extent to which Mason and other planners identified, whether consciously or not, the United States with imperial France: like France, America was an empire. Many fairgoers had never before seen the different peoples on display at the Exposition. In this, they were like those who witnessed Columbus’s return to Spain in 1493, when he paraded through the streets with a sampling of the booty he had found in the New World, including Amerindians, parrots, stuffed animals, and plants. If we consider the fairgoer’s experience in viewing these displays as an introduction to the world’s “barbarous” others, we can see how these exhibits worked together with the
Exposition’s discourse about Columbus to construct the United States as an empire and the fairgoer as imperial subject. Like European “cabinets of curiosities,” which displayed items collected from the uncivilized world, the collections of foreigners at the Exposition revealed the nation’s dominance over a microcosmic reflection of the diversity of the world. The acts of collecting, categorizing as “other,” and displaying these peoples articulated the dominance of the United States, which set the terms of what was civilized and what was not. The Exposition deemed these peoples “ethnological” and worthy of exhibition because they were the foreign others who fell within the sphere of the nation’s dominance.

Organized by the Exposition’s Department of Ethnography, the “ethnological villages” were placed on the entertainment-oriented
Midway, which contributed to the interpretation of the foreigners as abnormal and uncivilized “curiosities” that existed outside the framework of the “civilized” world. The Midway offered an array of entertainment and exotic shows. Visitors could amuse themselves by riding the world’s first Ferris wheel, viewing belly dancers and sword fights, or riding camels. *Cosmopolitan* magazine editor John Brisben Walker emphasized the contrast between the “playground” of the Midway and the White City, which he termed a “university” because it educated the fairgoer:

But is it [the Exposition] all work and no play? On the contrary, after his morning at the university has been spent in study, the student wends his way to the playground, the Plaisance. . . . Hither have come the nations of the earth to minister to his enjoyment: the Arab, on his splendid steed with nostrils dilated and champing at the bit, spurs, blunted lance in hand, gallops after his fellow. And we may see the sports of the desert and take part in the applause which comes up from the encampment of Arab women and children on the other side of the enclosure, when one spearman has planted his blunted lance fairly in the back of the man he is pursuing.  

In this citation, the words associated with the White City, “university” and “study,” are opposed to the “playground” of the Midway. The comprehensive scope of the collection of foreigners (“Hither have come the nations of the earth”) again reminds the reader that a microcosm of the world is assembled and controlled by the imperial collector. Only one foreign other, “the Arab,” is required as an example after the colon prompts the reader to expect a list of “the nations of the earth.” The Arab’s difference is effectively conflated with and deemed equivalent to the differences of other foreigners. What is most important is not the unique identity of the Arab, but his status—like the status of all foreigners—as a subservient other that “minister[s] to” the “enjoyment” of the American fairgoer (and, on a parallel level, US
foreign policy). Again we see that the foreigner is to be feared: he must be kept in an “enclosure,” and he carries a “lance,” which he “has planted . . . fairly in the back of the man he is pursuing.” And while his difference is to be feared, it also makes him a legitimate object of domination, a status which appears justified by the ease with which he can be dominated: that his lance is “blunted” suggests that his otherness is manageable.

Native Americans were displayed next to the Midway’s collections of foreigners in separate exhibits. Because Native Americans were both popularly viewed and legally treated as colonized subjects, these displays helped to further legitimate the fairgoer’s identification as imperial subject. The nation’s history of internal colonization, of course, provided imperialists at the end of the nineteenth century with important rhetorical weaponry in their arguments for international expansion. They reasoned that the colonization of Native Americans had established a precedent for colonialism abroad.80 The juxtaposition of the nation’s internally colonized peoples and other not-yet-colonized (or, in fact, financially colonized) foreigners on the Midway suggested that the nation was capable of and justified in imposing its power on both groups.

The Midway’s messages regarding colonized Native Americans were reinforced by “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,” the privately owned spectacle that operated a short distance from the Midway. The Wild West show featured historical protagonists and actors who reenacted important scenes from US history, beginning with the colonial period and ending with “Custer’s Last Fight.” The Wild West program claimed that it presented “the story of the gradual civilization of a vast continent,” an assertion that the public surely interpreted in light of the Massacre of Wounded Knee, which had occurred only three years earlier and marked for many the end of the conflict between Native Americans and European Americans, as well as the closing of the domestic frontier.81 Columbus’s usefulness in the narrative of western expansion presented at the Exposition was not lost on the promoters
of the Wild West show. John Burke, Buffalo Bill Cody’s publicist, made the following analogy: “As Columbus was the pilot across the seas to discover a new world, such heroes as Boone, Fremont, Crockett, Kit Carson, and last, but by no means least, Cody, were the guides to the New World of the mighty West, and their names will go down in history as ‘Among the few, the immortal names / That were not born to die.’”

Portraits of Buffalo Bill and Columbus were even featured on Wild West stationery during its 1893 season. The portraits’ captions reveal the deliberate comparison constructed between Cody and Columbus: “Pilot of the Ocean, 15th Century—the First Pioneer” and “Guide of the Prairie, 19th Century—the Last Pioneer.” The Wild West show itself was framed at the beginning and end with a procession of “the Congress of Rough Riders of the World”: skilled horsemen, including US cavalrymen and Native Americans, led by Cody himself, who was described in the program as “Prince of the Border Men,” “King of the Scouts,” and even “King of all the Rough Riders of the World.” The staging of this procession declared the final victory of the white man over the savage Native American and, just as importantly, the latter’s submission to the expanding nation of the United States. Cody’s position of command at the head of the parade, Richard Slotkin notes, “was not merely personal but national, signifying the American assumption of a leading role in world affairs.”

By opening the field of inquiry and going beyond the Anglo-American tradition, we find that the significance of Columbus in the United States had long been constructed by a transatlantic discourse that was originally created by Columbus himself, later perpetuated by historiographers and literati, and eventually taken up by writers in British America and then the United States. Through this discourse, British Americans and later United States citizens constructed Columbus as an archetype of a republican empire, and this rendered him uniquely suited to convey their imperial designs. As we have seen in this chapter, in the US
literary tradition and at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, Columbus was the protagonist in the centuries-old narrative of the westward transfer of empire. This portrayal squared ideologically with the fact that “manifest destiny” and imperial ambition have always had a central place in US public discourse.