

1.3 – Differing Viewpoints: Historical Interpretations of Christopher Columbus

As historians write history, they analyze and interpret sources. Because they bring different approaches to their work, they often interpret the past in different ways. Consider the following interpretations of one of the best-known figures in our history—Christopher Columbus. Few historians would disagree that his four voyages to the Americas set in motion events that would change the world. But historians do differ in how they view Columbus and his **legacy**[**legacy: a person's impact on future generations**], or impact on future generations.



Washington Irving: Columbus as Mythic Hero

Nineteenth-century author Washington Irving spent years in Spain researching the life of Columbus. Irving was one of the first American writers to focus on subjects and themes of American life. His four-volume biography of Columbus portrayed the explorer as an American icon, painting him in heroic terms.

Columbus was a man of great and inventive genius . . . His ambition was lofty and noble, inspiring him with high thoughts, and an anxiety to distinguish himself by great achievements . . . His conduct was characterized by the grandeur of his views and the magnanimity [nobility] of his spirit. Instead of ravaging [plundering] the newly found countries, . . . he sought to colonize and cultivate them, to civilize the natives . . . A valiant and indignant spirit . . . a visionary of an uncommon kind.

—Washington Irving, *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, 1828

Irving admitted that Columbus made mistakes, such as enslaving and killing native peoples, but he dismissed them as "errors of the times."

Samuel Eliot Morison: Columbus as Master Mariner

Writing more than a century after Irving, historian Samuel Eliot Morison portrayed Columbus as a real person with both strengths and flaws. Morison, a naval historian, focused on Columbus's skills as a mariner, or sailor and navigator.

Now, more than five hundred years after his birth, . . . [Columbus's discovery of the New World] is celebrated throughout the length and breadth of the Americas, his fame and reputation may be

considered secure for all time. He had his faults and his defects, but they were largely the defects of the qualities that made him great—his indomitable will, his superb faith in God and in his own mission as the Christ-bearer to lands beyond the seas, his stubborn persistence despite neglect, poverty and discouragement. But there was no flaw, no dark side to the most outstanding . . . of all his qualities—his seamanship. As a master mariner and navigator, Columbus was supreme in his generation. Never was a title more justly bestowed than the one which he most jealously guarded—Almirante del Mar Océano, Admiral of the Ocean Sea.

—Samuel Eliot Morison, *Christopher Columbus, Mariner*, 1955

Kirkpatrick Sale: Columbus as Overrated Hero

Writer and environmentalist Kirkpatrick Sale is far more critical of Columbus. In a 1990 book, Sale portrays Columbus as a ruthless fortune hunter who set in motion the destruction of native peoples and the American landscape that continues to this day. Sale also takes issue with the view of Columbus as a "master mariner."

For all his navigational skill, about which the salty types make such a fuss, and all his fortuitous headings [accidental but lucky directions], about which they are largely silent, Admiral Colón [Columbus] could be a wretched mariner. The four voyages, properly seen, quite apart from bravery and fortitude [endurance], are replete [filled] with lubberly [clumsy] mistakes, misconceived sailing plans, foolish disregard of elementary maintenance, and stubborn neglect of basic safety . . . Almost every time Colón went wrong it was because he had refused to bend to the inevitabilities of tide and wind and reef or, more arrogantly still, had not bothered to learn about them; the very same reckless courage that led him across the ocean in the first place, and saw him through storm and tumult to return, lay behind his numerous misfortunes.

—Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise*, 1990

Different Interpretations Serving Different Purposes

You may be wondering how three writers could produce such different interpretations of the same subject. The answer lies, in part, in each one's purpose in writing about Columbus and his legacy.

Irving was an author and essayist looking for a heroic story that would appeal to American readers in the 1800s. His colorful biography of Columbus was filled with dramatic episodes, with many based more on myth than on reliable sources.

Morison's purpose was quite different. He wanted to rescue Columbus from earlier mythmakers like Irving. A sailor himself, Morison was impressed by Columbus's seafaring skills. He acknowledged that Columbus was not a saint but portrayed him as a master seaman who, through persistence, daring, and courage, changed the course of history.

Sale had yet another purpose. He wanted to show how Columbus's legacy looked from the point of view of its victims—Native Americans and Africans brought as slaves to the Americas. From Sale's perspective, Columbus, and those who followed him across the Atlantic, set in motion a dark history of exploitation and environmental destruction that has been ignored for far too long.

The facts of Columbus's life and legacy have not changed in all this time. But how people view those facts has and will continue to change.

1.4 – Why Study History?

"History is more or less bunk!" said automobile industrialist Henry Ford in a 1916 interview. They were words he would live to regret. Not only was Ford making history by putting Americans into cars they could afford, but he also discovered that learning about the past was fun. Ultimately, he used much of his fortune to create a collection of historic buildings and everyday objects from his era. "We're going to build a museum that is going to show industrial history," he announced when he began his collection, "and it won't be bunk." The result was the largest indoor-outdoor museum in the world.

For the more than 1 million people who visit the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan, each year, history is anything but bunk. As visitors wander through Greenfield Village, they can imagine what life was like more than a century ago. Re-creations of Thomas Edison's workshop and the Wright brothers' bicycle shop bring visitors face to face with the excitement and frustration of inventing a light bulb or an airplane. By touring the automobile collection, visitors learn how this machine has changed our world. Just as Ford had hoped, seeing the past his way is highly entertaining. But that is only one reason to study history.

History Helps Us Develop Empathy for Others

Studying history can help us develop **empathy**[**empathy: the ability to imagine oneself in another's place in order to understand the person's feelings, desire, ideas, and actions**] for others. Empathy is the ability to imagine oneself in another's place and to understand that person's feelings, desires, ideas, and actions. It involves more than just feeling sympathy for other people. Empathy also enables one to "walk in other people's shoes"—to feel "with" them or "as one" with them.

History makes us aware of problems, sorrows, joys, and hardships faced by people in other times and places. As that awareness grows, we have a better chance of understanding our own experiences—both good and bad. We also become more skilled at empathizing with people whose lives are different from our own. As we mature, empathy becomes a useful guide in our relations with other people. As the American writer Robert Penn Warren observed,

History cannot give us a program for the future, but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves, and of our common humanity, so that we can better face the future.

—Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War*, 1961

History Makes Us Better Thinkers

"History is a Greek word," wrote British historian Arnold Toynbee, "which means, literally, just *investigation*." The process of investigating what happened long ago involves analyzing evidence and making judgments about what sources are credible. It also requires evaluating different points of view about what is important and why.

These are all essential critical-thinking skills, not just in the history classroom but also in life. You will need to exercise these skills whenever you make an important decision about your own future. These skills will also help you make more informed decisions about public issues as a citizen and voter.

History Teaches Us to Avoid Errors of the Past

A century ago, Spanish philosopher George Santayana proposed another reason for studying history: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." History is full of examples of failed peoples and nations, and the study of history can reveal what they did—or did not do—that contributed to their doom. Looking at the failures of the past, novelist Maya Angelou wrote, "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again."

The more we learn today about the errors of the past, the better chance we have of avoiding them in the future. Viewed in this way, observed writer Norman Cousins, "history is a vast early warning system."

History Is Interesting

"At the heart of good history," wrote screenwriter and journalist Stephen Schiff, "is a naughty little secret: good storytelling." And he should know. For decades, screenwriters and moviemakers have mined history for good stories and brought them to life on screen. Even movies that do not seem particularly historical are often based in part on historical events or settings. Knowing about the history behind these stories can increase your enjoyment of such films.

At a deeper level, figuring out the what and why of historical events is a lot like solving a puzzle or a mystery. Figuring out what happened can be challenging enough. Deciding what is important and why is even more of a challenge. Even so, anyone can do this detective work. And the more of the mystery of history you solve, the more alive the past will become for you.