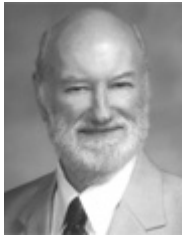




Sierra Sacramento Valley Medicine

Vol. 60 / No. 6 - Nov / Dec 2009

1491



By John Loofbourow, MD

1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus. By Charles C. Mann, 2005, Vintage, ISBN -10:I-4000-3205-9, 541 pages.

Based on extensive objective evidence from the last few decades, the author makes a solid and well documented case that our common concept of the Americas before "discovery" is hugely erroneous. For example:

- The population of many pre-Columbian cities in several areas other than the Maya, Inca, and Aztec, was greater than that of Europe at the time of Columbus.
- The inhabitants were usually taller, more hygienic, and healthier than the colonists or conquistadores.
- Almost everywhere, the pre-Columbians actively managed their environment — the land, the animals, birds, estuaries, and forests. They burned the forests and grasslands to promote feed and to clear land for farming. They managed game aggressively over millions of acres of land.¹ In North America, after the "Indians" were "discovered," and decimated or conquered, the environment which was then no longer managed, changed radically. The open East coast forests retook the land. The deer, antelope, bison and carrier pigeon populations exploded.
- During millennia beginning as early as 3500 BC, Pre-Columbians developed the majority of all crops under cultivation in the world today, including corn (maize), all of the squashes, many varieties of beans, peppers and potatoes, tobacco, tomatoes, cotton, peanuts, manioc. Almost all were the result of long cultivation and selection, as were wheat and rice in Eurasia. How corn was developed is still not understood; it is entirely dependant on people because it cannot readily self-propagate. The list of medically active natural material and of domesticated fruits is too long to include here.
- Many pre-Columbian civilizations were skilled in astronomy, writing, and mathematics, including the concept that zero is different from nothing, something that eluded Europeans until the Renaissance.
- There were no native ungulates, but the pre-Columbians domesticated the llama, alpaca, vicuna, many birds, and animals including the guinea pig (cui), and hairless edible dog.

- They inhabited large regions where the flora and fauna were aggressively managed. These included: the eastern U.S. from the coast to the Appalachians; Florida; Central Mexico; Southern Mexico; Central America; the northeast coast of Brazil; the entire Amazon River basin; the Bolivian and Peruvian altiplano; the entire coast of Peru; and the Serengeti-like flood plains of Eastern Bolivia where there are still hundreds of man-made raised platforms, presumably constructed for farming or living when the land was under water.
- When the indigenous Americans were conquered, or decimated by disease, the native flora and fauna took over explosively. For example, when the area of the great mounds near modern St. Louis were first explored by Ponce De Leon, there were many lakes; the natives numbered in the hundreds of thousands, so fierce, haughty, derisive, and hostile that the frightened conquistadores passed by as quickly and quietly as possible. There were few bison.

The next large expedition about 70 years later found the place completely abandoned, but inhabited by huge herds of bison. Why? Very likely the people fled from the real conquistadores — foreign microbes and viruses — and the bison population exploded as a result. An almost identical history is repeated over and over and over again in the Americas.

- It seems clear that neither gunpowder nor horses nor steel had much to do with the conquest except in the first few days, when they were strange and frightening. Slow-firing, slow-loading, single shot-muskets or pistols, or steel swords and armor, are no match for hundreds of bows and arrows fired from behind cover; the Araucanos, for example, perceived that, and are only now being conquered by the attractiveness of modern conveniences.
- The same microbial conquistadores were even more lethal than the barbarous cruelty of the Spaniards. Smallpox, for example, made it possible for the English colonists to subdue the natives of the East coast of the U.S.; smallpox also invaded the Incas before Pizarro, having traveled among natives arriving from the north.
- Whoever has traveled the Sacred Valley of the Peruvian highland from Lake Titicaca to Cuzco sees thousands on thousands of miles of terraces once irrigated and used for farming. These predate the Inca, evidence of a civilization and many generations who built them.

Mr. Mann's assertions are in sharp contrast to what is still often assumed by the world, and taught in our schools; the findings contradict our view of the American past as a virgin land populated by primitive people who, with few exceptions, lived a nomadic existence in a passive, and reverent, harmony with a timeless and unchanged environment. While this imagined pristine world is one we tend to admire and aspire to recreate, it should not be mistaken for the truth.

Mann is not the first author to present these facts, or the conclusions that can be made from them, but he brings them together in a readable and gripping account that can be easily enjoyed by the non-academic reader.

If you are unfamiliar with this material, read his book. It may change your understanding about whether one hemisphere or civilization is "new" while the other is "old"; or make more palatable the charges and claims of indigenous North, Central, and South Americans; it can help rationalize the racist-sounding holiday of Latin Americans, Dia de La Raza, (Day of the Race), and help explain why the preservation of Native Cultures is

written into the enumerated specific goals of the Mexican Constitution.

Lastly, while I will not try to make the case here for lack of space, I believe that when one civilization is conquered by another, the former doesn't just disappear; it remains, permanently imprinting and shaping the culture that follows. This author helps to explain why the Americas are neither Europe nor Asia, but unique to ourselves. He suggests that we have discovered the Pre-Columbians and they are us!²

john@loofbourow.com

1. I recently returned from a week in the incomparable Chihuahua/Sonoran desert. The hillsides there often show rough, man-made terracing to slow rain runoff, promoting growth of native plants used for food, fiber, and fuel.
2. Disclosure: My father's parents were both formally adopted members of the Concow tribe, a branch of the Maidu. Only a few traditional Concow are left today in Round Valley where tribal remnants were confined in 1863.