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A Cultivated World

Reviewed by Alan Taylor
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1491

New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus

By Charles C. Mann

Knopf. 465 pp. $30

As a schoolboy, Charles C. Mann learned that the original American Indians migrated from Asia during an Ice Age about 13,000 years ago. Living in small bands of big-game hunters, they barely affected a wilderness that endured until 1492, when Christopher Columbus initiated a period of European colonization that transformed the Americas, introducing historic change to timeless, primeval continents. "When my son entered school, [he] was taught the same things I had been taught," Mann discovered. That persistent story troubled Mann, who, as a correspondent for Science and the Atlantic Monthly, had encountered dramatic new evidence for a radically different history of pre-Columbian America.

In *1491,* Mann introduces readers to the controversies provoked by the latest scholarship on native America before European exploration and colonization. Many scholars now insist that native settlement began at least 20,000 years ago, when fishing peoples arrived in small, open boats from coastal Siberia. Their descendants developed especially productive modes of horticulture that sustained a population explosion. By 1492, Indians in the two American continents numbered about 100 million -- 10 times previous estimates.

Far from the indolent, ineffective savages of colonial stereotypes, the Indians cleverly transformed their environments. They set annual fires to diminish underbrush, to encourage large, nut-bearing trees and to open the land to berry bushes that sustained sizable herds of deer. In the Andes, they built massive stone terraces for farming. In the Amazon River basin, they improved vast tracts of soil by adding charcoal and a fish fertilizer.

Sometimes they overcrowded the land, straining local supplies of water, wood and game animals. More often, however, the natives ably managed their local nature, sustaining large populations in plenty for centuries. Amazonia, for example, probably supported more people in 1491 than it does today.

Their environmental management came to a crashing end after 1492. Colonizers swarmed over the land, determined to subdue, to exploit and to convert the natives. The newcomers carried destructive

new weapons of gunpowder and steel. They also introduced voracious livestock -- cattle, pigs and horses -- which invaded and consumed native crops. Worst of all, they conveyed diseases previously unknown to the natives. Lacking immunity, the Indians died by the millions, reducing their numbers to a tenth of their previous population by 1800, in the greatest demographic catastrophe in global history.

As Indian populations collapsed, the land lost their management. Underbrush and some species of wildlife surged after the initial epidemics but, significantly, before the arrival of large numbers of colonists. Seeing a wilderness, the colonizers misunderstood it as primeval evidence that the surviving Indians were lazy savages who did not deserve to keep so much promising land. During the 20th century, anthropologists and environmentalists developed a more positive spin, but one still based on misunderstanding: They recast the Indians as simple conservationists who trod lightly on their beautiful land for centuries, setting examples of passivity that we should emulate.

By dispelling these myths to recover the intensive and ingenious native presence in the ancient Americas, Mann seeks an environmental ethos for our own future. Instead of restoring a mythical Eden, we should emulate the Indian management of a more productive and enduring garden. In sum, Mann tells a powerful, provocative and important story -- especially in the chapters on the Andes and Amazonia.

Mann's style is journalistic, employing the vivid (and sometimes mixed) metaphors of popular science writing: "Peru is the cow-catcher on the train of continental drift. . . . its coastline hits the ocean floor and crumples up like a carpet shoved into a chairleg." Similarly, the book is not a comprehensive history, but a series of reporter's tales: He describes personal encounters with scientists in their labs, archaeologists at their digs, historians in their studies and Indian activists in their frustrations. Readers vicariously share Mann's exposure to fire ants and the tension as his guide's plane runs low on fuel over Mayan ruins. These episodes introduce readers to the debates between older and newer scholars. Initially fresh, the journalistic approach eventually falters as his disorganized narrative rambles forward and backward through the centuries and across vast continents and back again, producing repetition and contradiction. The resulting blur unwittingly conveys a new sort of the old timelessness that Mann so wisely wishes to defeat.

He is also less than discriminating in evaluating the array of new theories, some far weaker than others. For example, he concludes with naive speculations directly linking American democracy to Indian precedents that supposedly dissolved European hierarchies of command and control. In the process, he minimizes the cultural divide separating consensual natives from coercive colonists: "Colonial societies could not become too oppressive, because their members -- surrounded by direct examples of free life -- always had the option to vote with their feet. . . . Historians have been puzzlingly reluctant to acknowledge this [Indian] contribution to the end of tyranny worldwide." Mann would be less puzzled if he knew that Indians would not have welcomed thousands of colonial refugees; that colonial societies sustained a slave system more oppressive than anything practiced in Europe; and that the slaveowners relied on Indians to catch runaways.

Despite these missteps, Mann's *1491* vividly compels us to re-examine how we teach the ancient history of the Americas and how we live with the environmental consequences of colonization.

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