His name wasn't Columbus and he wasn't Italian

Autor:
Data de publicació: 29-11-2014

from :confluencecity.blogspot.com

You can't get any farther from having a knife in a fight than my knife is from the fight over whether Christopher Columbus was or wasn't Italian.

The closest I come to Italian is my second cousin Madeline's butcher husband in Jerseyville, who wouldn't recognize me tomorrow if I asked him to trim some fat off the pork loin that looked good to me in his cold meat section.

And as for the coming of Columbus to the Americas (and the millions of other Europeans after him), I'm not sticking up for that as a particularly welcome development. I'm more with the wiseguy who said the Maya and Iroquois should have had a tighter immigration policy.

But I do love early Modern European history, and I can whet my knife on just about any historical tussle if it's sufficiently well written. So I occupied a day or two on my post-op sickbed recently making my way through Colom of Catalonia: Origins of Christopher Columbus Revealed by Charles J. Merrill, a witty writer who makes his way in this wide world as a professor of foreign languages at a 2,100-student Catholic university in Maryland.

Merrill is a bookworm, rather than a shit disturber. He's not trying to rain on anybody's Columbus Day Parade just to see what a bunch of Italians look like when they get wet unexpectedly. He's more interested in getting to the bottom of a genuine historical mystery that has been treated as a given for no good reason - or, maybe, for a lot of bad reasons.

Readers coming to this old knife fight clueless, as I did, will be surprised to find a long list of nations with claims to having sired the man who knew himself as Cristofor Colom. (The last name, by the way, means "dove"; "Columbus" is the Latinate version of it.) My favorite alternate variant of Columbus has the intrepid explorer hailing from Norway, with his actual name "Christopher Bonde." But that's just for the easy, anachronistic joke: "My name is Bonde. Christopher Bonde"; a 007 of the early modern seas.

The theory of origins that Merrill finds most plausible was first proposed in 1927, not by some disgruntled Catalonian nursing a 400-year-old grudge, but by a Peruvian scholar who was sent to France on government business to sort through archives in the interest of resolving South American territorial disputes. At which point, the poor guy entered the Bermuda Triangle of the Christopher Columbus identity question, which also consumed 25 years of Merrill's life before he emerged from the darkness with this interesting book.

The Catalan theory was only two years old when, in 1929, it was assaulted by a fellow Peruvian, a fascist who dedicated his book attempting to reestablish Columbus as Italian (or, more specifically, Genoese) to the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. To drop one more recognizable name, in a book with a blizzard of unrecognizable names of dead men (with nicknames like "The Impotent", "The Fratricide" or "The Spider," many of whom died by poisoning), we briefly meet a defender of the Catalan thesis from the 1960s who talked his way into Iberia, James Michener's discursive travelogue about Spain.

The argument that ultimately convinced me that Christopher Columbus of Genoa was really Cristofor Colom of Catalonia requires keeping track of a significant number of these dead men with strange (and similar) names, which is above the paygrade of this moonlighting blogger. His Catalan identity was obscured, in brief, because his Catalan youth was a rebel youth, and the dynasty Colom and his cronies rebelled against was the same dynasty from which Ferdinand - the co-ruler of Spain who greenlit and funded Columbus' historic voyage to the Indies - descended.

If the pain medicine I was high (or, really, low) on when I read this book is letting me remember this correctly, it was all about political expedience and claims to loads of land and booty. I will say this much checks out against what little I know about power politics as it is played out in 21st century St. Louis. Here, the assimilated Lebonese Catholics pass as "white" when it comes time to get "white" people to vote for you so you get to keep the keys to the towing contracts and the lucrative IT outsourcing and stuff like that.

Here is one catalgue of evidence about Colom from Charles J. Merrill that doesn't require keeping track of too many dead men's strange names:

"Columbus gave an island in the Caribbean the name Montserrat because of his attachment to that Catalan monastery and shrine, and because he was accompanied on the second voyage by Catalan monks expelled from there and replaced by Castilians. So many of Columbus' supporters in the royal court, and so many of his associates on his voyages, were Catalan speakers because he was one also. The Bobadillas who were so important in his career, connected with Catalonia though they're never mentioned as such in the standard histories, were characters from his past life as a rebel against Ferdinand's father (and against Ferdinand's wife, uncles, etc.). And Columbus' handwriting was Catalan, and his Spanish has so many Catalanisms in it, because that's the way people from Catalonia wrote and spoke."

I'd drink to that! If I wasn't still on pain medicine.