

12-1-1991

The Libro de las profecias by Christopher Columbus

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Recommended Citation

Fuson, Robert H. (1991) "*The Libro de las profecias* by Christopher Columbus," *Tampa Bay History*. Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol13/iss2/7>

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Libro de las profecias of Christopher Columbus. Translation and commentary by Delno C. West and August Kling. Gainesville, Florida. 1991. University of Florida Press. Pp. x, 274. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Cloth. \$49.95.

The *Libro de las profecias* (Book of Prophecies) is a misnomer. Columbus called it a “Notebook of sources, statements, opinions and prophecies on the subject of God’s holy city and mountain of Zion, and on the discovery and evangelization of the islands of the Indies and of all other peoples and nations.” And that is precisely what the *Libro* is, taken from the Bible and from ancient and medieval sources.

Assembled by Columbus between September 1501 and May 1502, the *Libro* consists of 164 manuscript pages, written mostly in Latin (by Father Gaspar Gorricio and thirteen-year-old Ferdinand Columbus), small portions penned by an unknown hand, and some parts in Spanish by Christopher. One of the two known examples of Columbus’s attempts at written Italian is found in a short note. The collection is addressed to the Sovereigns, Ferdinand and Isabela, and includes the famous letter to them from the Admiral. Although the bound holograph is today in the *Biblioteca Columbina* in Sevilla, Columbus intended it to be only a rough draft. His ultimate aim was to turn the whole manuscript into a long apocalyptic poem.

No one knows when Columbus began to collect prophetic quotations. But marginal notes in books that he possessed indicate that he was keenly aware of them as early as 1487. (The authors erred when they stated that some of the notes are as old as 1481.) By 1492 he was driven to liberate the Holy Land, and a portion of his First Voyage log entry for December 26, 1492, reads: “I have already petitioned Your Highnesses to see that all the profits of this, my enterprise, should be spent on the conquest of Jerusalem...” For the great Columbian scholar, John Boyd Thacher, this was a revelation of the “ultimate design” of the Admiral.

If Thacher were correct – and West and Kling contend that Columbus believed he had been ordained by God to Christianize the entire planet – then missionary zeal, not gold and glory, was the driving force behind Columbus. For this reason, the authors suggest that the *Libro* has been ignored by scholars because it contradicts the popular notion that the voyages were scientific, intrinsically tied to advancing technology. Even in Columbus’s time, the forged “Toscanelli correspondence” was created to lend a scientific air to the First Voyage. The thesis of West and Kling would have been greatly enhanced if they had discarded that bit of Columbus mythology.

By 1501 Columbus had completed three of his four voyages, and by his reckoning (with a little help from St. Augustine), he concluded that the world would end in 155 years. This left very little time to accomplish everything set forth by the prophecies. Columbus felt a sense of urgency to complete the mission. In that same year the *conversos* (converted Jews) were in a frenzy in Spain; many believed that the Messiah would come in 1503, and some thought that he had arrived in 1502. Columbus began to sign all of his papers *Cristo ferens*: the one who carries for

the Messiah. He did not sign *Cristum ferens* or Christ-bearer. (West and Kling missed the subtleties of Latin declension; their translation is wrong on page 2.)

The few errors in the book are trivial and seem to be a result of poor proofreading: *dal* instead of *del* in Toscanelli's name (page 13); *Gasper* instead of *Gaspar* (pages 8 and 271); and *Milina* instead of *Milani* (page 76). *Santo Porto* (page 12) should read *Porto Santo*. It is this reviewer's opinion that Columbus was never in Ireland (page 12) and that no such person as "Canon Martins" ever existed (page 14), but these are only opinions.

This version of the *Libro* is a very unusual book, co-authored by two men, Delno C. West and August Kling, who never met. West began his research in 1984 and did not learn of Kling's work on the translation until after the latter's death in 1986. Dr. Kling's widow, Marjory, facilitated an arrangement that allowed West to complete the project, using Kling's translation and notes.

The *Libro de las profecias* is an important book, long overdue in an English language edition. Moreover, in addition to the English translation, this edition contains a printed transcription of the handwritten Latin and Spanish of the original on the facing pages. And, to add icing to the cake, this second volume in the University of Florida's Quincentenary Series is a beautiful publication.

Robert H. Fuson

Florida's Peace River Frontier. By Canter Brown, Jr. Orlando, Florida. 1991. University Press of Central Florida. Pp. ix, 483, Illustrations. Maps. Appendices. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Cloth. \$34.95.

Canter Brown, Jr., has written a thoroughly researched narrative of the history of Florida's Peace River area during the nineteenth century. A major objective of the writer was to recreate the happenings of nineteenth-century South Florida described within scholarly conventions and also in such a fashion to reach non-academics who are interested in local history.

Appropriately, the narrative begins in the prologue with a geographical explanation of Florida's Peace River and its valley. The publisher could have enhanced the maps, photographs, and graphics, producing better quality and making them more readable. Still, the geography of the region is concise, leaving the reader with an eagerness to know more about the area.

The focus of this work is on the people of the Peace River valley. The mixture of races and nationalities encompassed Indian tribal groups, black slaves, runaway slaves, free blacks, and white southerners. Whites played various roles, including frontiersmen and planters, cattlemen and cowboys, farmers and phosphate miners, craftsmen and merchants, militia and professional soldiers, and Unionists and Confederates. The book portrays their impact on the Peace River valley in successive wars and periods of peace, punctuated with recurring frontier violence.

Woven into the narrative is the development of churches, schools, postal offices, and the arts. Brown also addresses the impact of commercial development on the economy of the Peace River valley, which featured land speculation, agriculture, phosphate open-pit mining, railroads, and