



Christopher Columbus 1451–1506

The dramatic story of the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus has become a familiar part of our culture. For years Columbus tried to convince his patrons that he could reach the riches of the East by sailing west, that he would not sail off the edge of the earth. Finally, with the support of Spain's Queen Isabella, he was able to pursue his dream with his three ships, the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria*.

The discovery of the New World brought Columbus fame and an appointment as Admiral of the Ocean Sea. His later attempts to establish colonies in America were not successful, however, and his last years were filled with disappointments and a sense of failure.

Here is Columbus' own account, from his journal, of the final days of his first and most extraordinary voyage and the landing on the island of San Salvador in 1492. Columbus' nonfiction, real-life adventure might be considered the first American story—both a quest for a dream and a record of hard fact.

This version from the Spanish was made by the twentieth-century American poet William Carlos Williams.

- Imagine keeping a diary while on a boat lost at sea. What sorts of entries might you make?

Christopher Columbus

from **The Journal**

A Modern Version by William Carlos Williams

The seventeenth of September, Monday, I proceeded on the west course and made over fifty leagues¹ in the day and night, counting only forty-seven. A favorable current aided us on our way. . . .

At dawn we observed much more weed appearing, like herbs from a river, in which one of the men discovered a live crab. This I kept that all might see it and believe on the land. The sea water was found to be less salt than it had been since leaving the Canaries.² This I caused many to taste. The breezes were al-

ways soft. Everyone was pleased and the best sailors went ahead to sight the first land. Many tunnyfish passed on all sides of us and the crew of the *Niña* killed one. All these signs came from the west, in which direction I trust in that high God in whose hands are all victories that very soon we shall see land. On that morning there appeared a white bird, called boatswainbird, which is not in the habit of sleeping on the sea. . . .

Saturday, September twenty-second, I shaped my course W.N.W. more or less, her head turning from one to the other point, and made thirty leagues. This contrary wind was very necessary to me because my people had become much excited at the thought that in

1. **leagues:** One league is about three miles. Columbus deliberately underestimates the distance for his crew.

2. **the Canaries:** the Canary Islands, off the coast of northwestern Africa.

these seas no wind ever blew in the direction of Spain. In the morning there was no weed but in the afternoon it was very thick. . . .

Tuesday, calm and afterwards wind. . . . At sunset Martin Alonzo went up on the poop of his ship and with joy called out that he had sighted land. I fell on my knees and gave thanks to the Lord, so heavy had been my burdens these latter days at the despair among the men and the murmurs going among them that I should have to turn back. And Martin Alonzo said the *Gloria in Excelsis*³ with his people. My own crew did the same. Those of the *Niña* all went up on the mast and into the rigging and declared that it was land. It seemed distant twenty-five leagues. So it appeared until night. I ordered the course to be altered from west to S.W. in which direction the land had appeared. Four leagues that day on a west course and seventeen S.W. during the night,

3. *Gloria in Excelsis* [glôr'ē ə in ek sel' sis]: *Glory in the Highest*, a Latin prayer of praise to God.

some quite fresh and having fruit. No birds. So I gave it out that we had left the islands behind that were depicted on the chart. Here many called upon me to turn about and search for the land but I did not wish to keep the ships beating about, although I had certain information of islands in this region. It would not have been good sense to do this since the weather was favorable and the chief intention was to go in search of the Indies by way of the west. This was what I had promised to the King and Queen, and they had sent me for this purpose.

Thursday, west sixty-three leagues, counted forty-six. . . . The crew here became even louder in their complaints but I gave as little heed as I was able though many were now openly mutinous and would have done me harm if they dared. . . .

Thursday, eleventh of October. The course was W.S.W. More sea than there had been during the whole of the voyage. Sandpipers and a green reed near the ship. And for this I

in all twenty-one, but I told the men that thirteen was the distance made good. The sea was very smooth so that many sailors bathed alongside. We saw many gilthead and other fish.

Wednesday, what had been said to be land was only clouds and I continued on the west course till afternoon, then altered to S.W. Day and night thirty-one leagues, counting twenty-four for the people. The sea was like a river, the air pleasant and mild. The despair of the crew redoubled at this disappointment but I comforted them as best I could, begging them to endure a while longer for all that would be theirs in the end. . . .

Tuesday, west, day and night thirty-nine leagues, counted for the crew thirty. The weed, many thanks to God, coming from east to west, contrary to the usual course. Many fish seen and one killed. A white bird like a gull.

Wednesday, still the west course, and made good forty-seven leagues, counted forty. Sandpipers appeared, and much weed, some old and

gave thanks to God as it was a sure sign of land. Those of the *Pinta* saw a cane and a pole, and they took up another small pole which appeared to be worked⁴ with iron; also another bit of cane, a land plant and a small board. The crew of the caravel *Niña* also saw signs of land, and a small plant covered with berries.

After sunset I returned to the west course. Up to two hours past midnight we had gone ninety miles, when the *Pinta*, which was the fastest sailer and had gone ahead, found the land and gave the signals. The land was first seen by Rodrigo de Triana. . . .

On Friday, the twelfth of October, we anchored before the land and made ready to go on shore. Presently we saw naked people on the beach. I went ashore in the armed boat and took the royal standard and Martin Alonzo and Vincent Yañez, his brother, who was captain of the *Niña*. And we saw the trees very

4. worked: carved or shaped.

green, and much water and fruits of divers⁵ kinds. Presently many of the inhabitants assembled. I gave to some red caps and glass beads to put round their necks, and many other things of little value. They came to the ships' boats afterward, where we were, swimming and bringing us parrots, cotton threads in skeins, darts—what they had, with good will. . . .

On Saturday, as dawn broke, many of these people came to the beach, all youths. Their legs are very straight, all in one line and no belly. They came to the ship in canoes, made out of the trunk of a tree, all in one piece, and wonderfully worked, propelled with a paddle like a baker's shovel, and go at a marvelous speed.

Bright green trees, the whole land so green that it is a pleasure to look on it. Gardens of the most beautiful trees I ever saw. . . . I

5. **divers** [dī'vərz]: diverse or various.

saw many trees very unlike those of our country. Branches growing in different ways and all from one trunk; one twig is one form and another is a different shape and so unlike that it is the greatest wonder in the world to see the diversity; thus one branch has leaves like those of a cane, and others like those of a mastic tree; and on a single tree there are five different kinds. The fish so unlike ours that it is wonderful. Some are the shape of dories and of the finest colors, so bright that there is not a man who would not be astounded, and would not take great delight in seeing them. There are also whales. I saw no beasts on land save parrots and lizards.

On shore I sent the people for water, some with arms, and others with casks; and as it was some little distance, I waited two hours for them.

During that time I walked among the trees which was the most beautiful thing which I had ever seen.