

Christopher Columbus **An English perspective**

Overview

As part of the EHISTO Project, from September 2013, Hellesdon High School in Norwich, England will run a series of Introductory Skills workshops to incoming History AS-Level students (16-17 year olds). The goal of these workshops will be to hone their critical literacy skills and build upon their evaluative and analytical skills, setting expectations for AS-Level work. This article will be one of those used in these workshops, and the students will work in groups on specific tasks linked to their article.

Reference to the curriculum

Although 'The voyages of discovery' (or in some left wing local education authorities 'The voyages of exploitation'), including Christopher Columbus, were widely taught in English schools up to the 1990s, they were not a compulsory part of the National Curriculum for history, when it was introduced in 1991, and therefore Columbus, Magellan etc are not commonly covered in English text books, nor are they commonly studied in exam syllabuses. Instead, attention has tended to focus on the British Empire in the 19th century; this is the main focus in terms of the issue of imperialism, although the Roman Empire is also taught in many schools.

Learning objectives

As the workshops are designed for all students beginning an AS History and are to be used as a vehicle for developing their critical literacy skills, the tasks are designed to enable students to transfer these skills to a range of texts during their course. When using Armitage's article on Columbus, students will be encouraged to unpick the literary devices used by Armitage to make and develop points. The purpose of this is to develop the students' own writing skills.

Point of view of Columbus in British textbooks

Until the introduction of the first National Curriculum for history in 1991, Columbus was a common topic in UK text books. It was commonly treated under the title of 'The voyages of discovery', with the three main explorers who were covered in text books being Christopher Columbus, Ferdinand Magellan and Francis Drake. The voyages were treated mainly as voyages of discovery/scientific curiosity rather than 'voyages of exploitation'.

However, after the introduction of the compulsory National Curriculum for history in 1991, there was much more emphasis on national history; one Secretary of State argued that at least 80% of the curriculum should be about British history, and textbooks tended to reflect this. So attention focused much more on the development of the British Empire, and very few textbooks mentioned the voyages of Columbus and Magellan; the emphasis in text books was on British explorers (Drake, Cook) and Britain's relations with Canada, America, India, Australia and Britain's African colonies. Columbus became something of a 'black hole'

in terms of British History textbooks, and that remains the case until the present day. Columbus is not mentioned in the new National Curriculum to be introduced in schools in September 2014, and so he is unlikely to feature in British text books in the future.

Point of view of Columbus in Polish history textbooks

In Polish school textbooks the analysis of life and discoveries of Christopher Columbus is not a separate teaching module, but a part of a larger topic concerning expeditions of sailors and travellers in the 15th and 16th centuries, along with the consequences of their discoveries. Both the core curriculum and textbooks based on it focus on such issues as: the most important voyages of exploration and their reasons, inventions allowing for transatlantic travels, factors influencing individual countries' decisions about expansion to other continents and finally social, economical and cultural consequences of discoveries made in that period – both for European countries and the New World. Since Poland did not take part in voyages of discovery in the 15th and 16th centuries, nor in the consequential expansion of the Europeans to other continents, history teaching in Polish schools does not focus much on the relation between Christopher Columbus and later colonial expansion. Founding colonies and the rivalry between European countries in that matter is analysed in the context of the above-mentioned issue only as one of many consequences of the great geographical discoveries, including Christopher Columbus' s expeditions.