Seeds, Germs and Slaves

By IAN MORRIS  AUG. 19, 2011

“There’s a chain of events in this best of all possible worlds,” Dr. Pangloss says at the end of Voltaire’s “Candide.” “If you hadn’t been caught up in the Inquisition, or walked across America . . . you would not be here eating candied fruit and pistachio nuts.”

“True,” Candide answers. “But now we must tend our garden.”

Voltaire would have loved Charles C. Mann’s outstanding new book, “1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created.” In more than 500 lively pages, it not only explains the chain of events that produced those candied fruits, nuts and gardens, but also weaves their stories together into a convincing explanation of why our world is the way it is.

Going one better than Voltaire, Mann’s book opens in a garden as well as closes in one. The first is Mann’s own in Massachusetts; the second, a Filipino family plot in Bululacao. Despite being half a world apart, the two gardens grow many of the same plants, hardly any of which are native to either place. This, Mann tells us, is the hallmark of the ecological era we live in: the “Homogenocene,” the Age of Homogeneity.

“1493” picks up where Mann’s best seller, “1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus,” left off. In 1491, the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans were almost impassable barriers. America might as well have been on another planet from Europe and Asia. But Columbus’s arrival in the Caribbean the following year changed everything. Plants, animals, microbes and cultures began washing around
the world, taking tomatoes to Massachusetts, corn to the Philippines and slaves, markets and malaria almost everywhere. It was one world, ready or not.

Mann generously acknowledges how much of this story line comes from Alfred W. Crosby’s classic “Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900,” first published a quarter of a century ago. This book has had a huge influence in academia (it was one of the main inspirations for Jared Diamond’s Pulitzer Prize-winning “Guns, Germs, and Steel”), but Mann has long felt it needed updating. When he met Crosby, he nagged the historian to write a new edition. Finally Crosby told him: “Well, if you think it’s such a good idea, why don’t you do it?”

And so Mann did. “1493” is much more than just “Ecological Imperialism” warmed over, however. Mann takes the argument into new territory by suggesting that only by understanding what Crosby called “the Columbian Exchange” — the transfer of plants, animals, germs and people across continents over the last 500 years — can we make sense of contemporary globalization. The lesson of history, Mann argues, is that “from the outset globalization brought both enormous economic gains and ecological and social tumult that threatened to offset those gains.”

With admirable evenhandedness, he shows how the costs and benefits of globalization have always been inseparable. We cannot have one without the other. Bringing the potato to Europe made it possible for the Irish famine to kill millions when the potatoes were stricken by blight, but it also kept other millions of half-starved peasants alive. Bringing malaria to the Americas depopulated some parts of the New World, but it also kept European armies out of other parts. Mann can even see the point of view of the chainsaw-wielding loggers who deforested the Philippines so that Americans could have cheap furniture: “These agents of destruction were just putting food on the table.”

Mann has managed the difficult trick of telling a complicated story in engaging and clear prose while refusing to reduce its ambiguities to slogans. He is not a professional historian, but most professionals could learn a lot from the deft way he does this. The book takes a roughly chronological approach, beginning in 1493 and continuing to 2011, and ranges across almost every continent. It is thoroughly
researched and up-to-date, combining scholarship from fields as varied as world history, immunology and economics, but Mann wears his learning lightly. He serves up one arresting detail after another (who knew that “No Potatoes, No Popery!” was an English election slogan in 1765?), always in vivid language (as in his description of inland Brazil in the 1970s — “bad roads, poor land and lawless violence: ‘Deadwood’ with malaria”).

Most impressive of all, he manages to turn plants, germs, insects and excrement into the lead actors in his drama while still parading before us an unforgettable cast of human characters. He makes even the most unpromising-sounding subjects fascinating. I, for one, will never look at a piece of rubber in quite the same way now that I have been introduced to the debauched nouveaux riches of 19th-century Brazil, guzzling Champagne from bathtubs and gunning one another down in the streets of Manaus.

All historians struggle to get the balance between human will and vast impersonal forces just right. “Should part of the credit for the Emancipation Proclamation be assigned to malaria?” Mann asks, and while I’m sure he’s right to answer that “the idea is not impossible,” this claim (and one or two others) seems a stretch. But that is part of the book’s appeal. Almost everyone will find something that challenges his assumptions.

As well as making humans share the stage with other organisms, Mann also wants Europeans to surrender more of the limelight to the rest of humanity. In the 1960s, historians began to flip from casting Europeans as heroic adventurers who created the modern world to casting them as wicked exploiters. But they continued nonetheless to put Europeans in the main roles. Mann repeatedly emphasizes that the numbers do not bear this out. “Much of the great encounter between the two separate halves of the world,” he observes, “was less a meeting of Europe and America than of Africans and Indians.” As late as the 19th century, Europeans were still in a distinct minority in the New World.

Mann might be faulted for sometimes seeming to forget that since 1492 it has overwhelmingly been Europeans (not Africans or Native Americans) who have put animals, plants and microbes into motion, but his larger points still stand. In setting
off the Columbian Exchange, humans rarely knew what they were doing. Once begun, the process ran completely out of human control. And now that it has hit its stride, every animal, plant and bug in the world is caught up in it. Back in the 1870s, for instance, the British government, worried about its rubber supplies, offered to buy every rubber seed that could be smuggled out of Brazil. People didn’t ask what this would mean for Laos — why would they? But 140 years on, the chain of events they set off has brought social upheaval and the threat of ecological collapse to this remote corner of the world. There is nowhere to hide from globalization.

Mann shows that Dr. Pangloss was right: Candide’s run-ins with the Inquisition and America’s natives were not just random events. The Columbian Exchange has shaped everything about the modern world. It brought us the plants we tend in our gardens and the pests that eat them. And as it accelerates in the 21st century, it may take both away again. If you want to understand why, read “1493.”

1493

Uncovering the New World Columbus Created

By Charles C. Mann


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