

Christopher Columbus

UK : 1949 : dir. David MacDonald : Gainsborough / Rank : 104 min
 prod: A Frank Bundy : scr: Muriel & Sydney Box, Cyril Roberts : dir.ph.: Stephen Dade
[David Cole](#)
 Fredric March; Florence Eldridge; Francis L Sullivan; Kathleen Ryan; Derek Bond; Nora Swinburne; Abraham Sofaer; Linden Travers; James Robertson Justice; Dennis Vance; Richard Aherne; Felix Aylmer; Francis Lister; Edward Rigby; Niall McGinnis; Ralph Truman

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 € M ☼	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Crazed with thirst, a dying sailor babbles to Columbus of lands to the West – gridlocked freeways, twenty-four hour shopping malls, 100-channel television, McDonalds, smog, country & western music. "What an earthly paradise!" gasps Columbus. Son Diego (David Cole, centre) looks on and keeps his own counsel.

Source for all colour stills: The Boys' and Girls' Cinema Clubs Annual 1944

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 2001 review:

"Stark, slowly paced biography of the explorer, with an earnest portrayal by

March in the title role; good period setting.
 *** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"Columbus seeks and receives the patronage of the Spanish court for his voyage to the West. An extraordinarily tediously paced historical account of basically undramatic events; interesting without being stimulating."

"Even ten-year olds will find it about as thrilling as an afternoon spent looking at Christmas cards" – **Time**

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"This Rank attempt to capture the US market roped in Fredric March to play Columbus and his wife Florence Eldridge as Isabella of Spain. The first half, as he hangs about the Spanish court, is often hilarious; the second half, the voyage out, is merely dull. With Linden Travers, Derek Bond, Felix Aylmer, Francis L Sullivan and other supporting British luminaries of the time."

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

"Lavish but empty production concerning the attempts of the explorer to get permission from the Spanish court to sail to the New World. Very slow, talky, dull. **1/2 "

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

"Yawnful attempt to make the organisation of the expedition to discover America into drama¹. Fredric March and an English cast struggle but David MacDonald's direction and a talky script bogs them down. 7"

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"Gainsborough's flailing attempts to add "class" and international prestige to their

¹ *Hate to be pedantic with the Sunday Times – well no, I don't actually – but he didn't discover America, Vespucci did. And nor was it the purpose of his expedition.*

more interestingly low-key "domestic" output resulted in this expensively-mounted dodo, elegantly consigned to the scrapheap of film history by contemporary critic Richard Winnington with the withering opinion that it "contrives with something like genius neither to inform, excite, entertain, titillate or engage the eye".

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"A lavishly-mounted, British-made account of Columbus' efforts in the late 15th century to prove that the world is round. There's too much talk and not enough action until near the end, but sterling performances come from Fredric March, Derek Bond, Felix Aylmer, and that 200-pound master of menace, Francis L Sullivan. Director David MacDonald was one of Britain's brightest young directing hopes in pre-war years, with a series of comedy-thrillers in "**THIN MAN**"-style, usually starring Barry K Barnes. But both star and director lost their popularity in the years following the end of World War Two, and this Technicolor epic fared no better at the box-office than the two financial flops made of the Columbus story in more recent times. ** "

The Films of Fredric March review:

"..The Marches went to England to do J Arthur Rank's "**CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS**", which proved to be long on pageantry and short on drama, with March garnering so-so reviews and critics complaining that the real Columbus didn't show through amidst stilted tableaux and lifeless pageantry. "

"The Marches went to England to appear for J. Arthur Rank in "**CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS**". Unfortunately, their splendid luck with their two previous pictures did not hold. Certainly the film would appear to have all the earmarks of a promising enterprise – March's first centuries-past costume picture in some years, an exciting, glamorous historical subject, Miss Eldridge as Queen Isabella, scads of extras, lavish production mounting, loads of fifteenth-century atmosphere, beautiful photography in colour processes carefully antiqued, authenticity in settings and furnishings,

and so on. Yet the net result was disappointing.



What should have emerged from the screen as buoyant and exciting proved pedestrian, slow-moving, flat, elephantine

*"But father!" grumbles Diego, "I don't **want** to be a monk, "I want to be a public relations consultant". "I'll put in a good word for you when I get to the States" promises dad.*

of pace, and the characters never seemed to come alive. Too much time was given in the first half of the film to Spanish court intrigue, and rather dull intrigue at that, and by the time everybody got around to the discovery of America the audience interest had slackened to the point of no return.

March did well enough, all things considered, though he was not in his best form here, and even Miss Eldridge, sterling artist that she is, and who could usually be relied upon for a distinctive performance, managed to be no more than dignified and stately as the monarch who, at long last, sent Columbus voyaging.

The picture opens with Columbus and his son arriving in Spain, where they ask Father Perez (Felix Aylmer), the queen's former confessor, to get them introductions at court. Here Francis L Sullivan proves to be March's implacable foe as he tries to persuade the Spaniards to raise sufficient capital for his exploratory voyage to the west. Much palaver goes on, in stiffish tableaux-style sequences, as Sullivan, who has his own fish to fry, insists that the idea is foolish and visionary. The Queen shilly-shallies, but when Columbus decides all is lost and departs in despair, he is (as in all such films) recalled post-haste by a messenger

from the Queen, and eventually gets his ships.

On to the famous voyage, with the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria, as one film critic so unkindly noted, bobbing about like toy ships in a bathtub, while Columbus March copes with mutinous sailors, adverse weather and what-not. America is duly discovered, Columbus returns home in triumph, knows a brief period of glory and acclaim, and then it's another voyage, catastrophic disgrace, and a return in chains, then the slide to obscurity.

The sad tale is the stuff of historical legends now – but the critics joined in wonderment at the failure of David MacDonald, the director, to take full advantage of his sweeping, actionful, panoramic subject – actionful, that is, in theory. The Marches strove valiantly, but the negatives of the enterprise vitiated whatever positives they doubtless sought to inject, and even March's performance was castigated by one critic as dour and solemn, and the film was compared by another reviewer to a series of handsomely coloured but essentially lifeless picture postcards.

THE CREATORS

David MacDonald (director); A. Frank Bundy (producer); Cyril Roberts and Muriel and Sydney Box (screenplay); a

Sydney Box Production and a Gainsborough Picture; Stephen Dade and David Harcourt (photography); V. Sagovsky (editor); color by Technicolor. Opened at the Victoria Theatre, New York, October 12, 1949. Running time when released, 104 minutes. (Originally opened at the Odeon, London, June 14, 1949.) ”

“In this earnest but slow-paced and rather soporific costume-drama about that most famous of explorers, Fredric March, Florence Eldridge, Francis L Sullivan and some other gifted mimes are as professional and vital as the direction and screenplay permit them to be. It would be pleasant to report that they triumph over the adversities implicit in the below-par contribution of director and writers, but the sad truth is that the finest actors need something minimal to work with – and a succession of extremely well photographed but intrinsically lifeless tableaux, with stilted dialogue and presentation, can defeat the best. The Marches and Mr. Sullivan, being superior craftsmen, indeed artists, are not exactly defeated, but they are, shall we say, neutralized by overwhelming odds. But after those two excellent pictures contributed by the Marches last year... they can afford an occasional miss.”

– Lawrence J Quirk, **Movies in Boston**

“The scriptwriters have managed to transform some fine historical material into a film about as stimulating as a trip through the Hudson tubes. The business lumbers along in Technicolor, constantly contriving tableaux that show off characters sweating under old Spanish costumes, and it takes Columbus so long to get the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria under way that by the time they put to sea one half expects him to meet Lindbergh coming in the other direction.

As Columbus, Fredric March is about the most dour mariner I've ever laid eyes on, and as Queen Isabella, Florence Eldridge seems a bit less lively than Her Majesty was reported to have been. Francis L. Sullivan is the expansive villain, but even his impressive talents are pretty well lost in this overstuffed picture.” – **New Yorker**

“[The film] ...turns an exciting bit of history into a series of dull tableaux in antiqued color. Even ten-year-olds, at whom this

British-made movie is plainly aimed, will find it about as thrilling as an afternoon spent looking at Christmas cards. The discovery of the New World is practically shoved out of the movie by listless court intrigue directed against Columbus by a palace hanger-on (Francis L. Sullivan) who is trying to protect some real estate holdings in the Canary Islands. Columbus' Atlantic journey, viewed mainly by a camera in a fourth boat, shows the Pinta, Nina and Santa Maria in silhouette, bobbing around like toy boats in a bathtub. Columbus' men, weighted down by thick make up, jewelry and rented fancy-dress costumes, do little but grouse about their historic mission and sit around waiting for San Salvador to bump into them. [The film] ...seems to be trying for the pageantry of 'HENRY V' but no one thought to get a script as good as the one Laurence Olivier got from Shakespeare.”

– **Time**

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times review:

“Historical biography starring Fredric March. The story of the great explorer and his epic voyage to the New World.”

TV Quick review:

“As Timothy Dalton and Gérard Depardieu are about to set sail in rival versions of the Columbus story, timed for release 500 years after the discovery of the New World, here's a chance to see Fredric March's voyage. It's too slow to get going – you have to endure all manner of courtly intrigue – and not very exciting when it does. American prints of the film (showing here) contain a final "vision" of America that March sees from his deathbed, which was cut from the British cinema release version. ** ”

“Columbus set out to discover the scenic route to India and stumbled across America instead. This is the story of his epic voyage, told very worthily and pictorially, but a mite boring. ”

Indeterminate TV Guide note:

"Adventure based on the life of the famous explorer. Starring Fredric March."

The Boys' and Girls' Cinema Clubs Annual synopsis:

"One evening a Genoese sailor named Christopher Columbus, looking from the window of his house with his young son Diego and a guest, saw a vessel in distress in the bay. The three ran down to the beach, where a handful of men had been swept ashore. To Columbus, one dying sailor gasped out news of a wonderful land that lay only twenty-eight days' sailing to the west. Struggling upright, the man thrust a rough chart into Columbus' hand.

Columbus was greatly excited, for he had long believed that there was a quick route to the riches of the Orient by the west. Surely this was the sign for which he had been waiting!

But it was not until several years later that Columbus and Diego set out for the Court of Spain to seek men, money and ships with which to open up the new route to the Orient in which no one but Columbus himself believed. The travelers rested one night in a monastery, the prior of which, Father Perez, hearing from Columbus of his theory, gave him a letter to a powerful friend at Court and offered to educate young Diego whilst the father carried out his mission.

So it came about that Columbus was granted an interview with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Alas for his hopes! The King made fun of his ideas and dismissed him. Later, however, the Queen, believing that Columbus could acquire for Spain "an empire such as no monarch ever dreamed of", promised that a Royal Commission should consider his plans.

Endless days and humiliations followed, but there came a day when Columbus was granted what he had striven so hard to obtain – ships and money.

For the great adventure into the unknown, the voyage by the western passage, Columbus had only three vessels not

much larger than modern fishing schooners. The crews of these ships numbered less than one hundred sailors in all, and they were mostly criminals and others who had been given the choice between imprisonment and a voyage from which they would probably never return.

On Friday, August 3rd, 1492, after a blessing by Father Perez, Columbus set sail in his flagship, *Santa Maria*, with two smaller caravels, *Nina* and *Pinta*. Dangerous days followed. A month had to be spent at the Canary Islands in refitting the ships and training the crews. Then, as the tiny fleet reached the "Sea of Darkness", many of the sailors began to murmur and be afraid. Some of them, believing that the world was flat, were terrified that they would soon reach the edge of the world and topple over it into space! Finally, led by two brothers named Pedro and Lope, the crew of *Santa Maria* mutinied.

A struggle began, and then, suddenly, a cannon was fired aboard *Pinta*. It was followed by a shout, "Land ho!" The fighting ceased as if by magic, and Columbus decided to ignore the incident. But next morning it was found that the landfall had been a false alarm, and he had to promise that if no land were sighted after three days and nights he would give the order to turn the ships round and sail back to Spain.

The signs were becoming more hopeful, however. The water seemed to be fresher, birds were seen overhead, and then a piece of carved wood and the branch of a tree bearing flowers floated by. On the fateful third night Columbus himself sighted land, and next day he planted the flag of Spain on the beach of an island, claiming it for his country and naming it San Salvador. The date was October 12th, 1492.

The next few weeks were spent in trading with the natives and sailing among the islands of the West Indies charting new discoveries. When at last Columbus returned to Spain he received a tremendous welcome. Until June, 1493, he stayed at the Court, where honours were showered upon him. Then, anxious to get back to sea once more, he left Spain with an armada of 17 ships and more than

1,000 men to colonise the lands of the West.

He had enemies at Court, however, who persuaded the King and Queen that he was guilty of cruelty and misgovernment. The brave old sailor was brought back to Spain in chains. Then he was tried and acquitted on all the charges brought against him. He was not allowed to return to sea, however, and, despite promises, his property was not restored to him. So his end was sad. The discoverer of the New World died in poverty and neglect at Valladolid in 1506.”

Cast:

Christopher ColumbusFredric March
Queen IsabellaFlorence Eldridge
Francisco de Bobadilla ..Francis L Sullivan
BeatrizKathleen Ryan

Diego de AranasDerek Bond
Joanna de TorresNora Swinburne
Luis de SantangelAbraham Sofaer
Beatriz de PerazaLinden Travers
Martin PinzonJames Robertson Justice
Francesco PinzonDennis Vance
Vincente PinzonRichard Aherne
Father PerezFelix Aylmer
King FerdinandFrancis Lister
PedroEdward Rigby
Juan de la CostaNiall McGinnis
CaptainRalph Truman
Columbus' sonDavid Cole

“My god, the crazy fool’s hell-bent on discovering **America!**” hisses Francis L Sullivan, “He’ll destroy everything we cherish and hold dear. He must prevented at all costs!”.

Well alright, he doesn’t *quite* say that (no crystal balls around in the 1490s) but what a blessed relief if he had done. The unanimous critical view is well deserved, this is stultifyingly dull and lifeless from end to end, March’s central performance wooden, not to say taciturn, and though shot in a muddled sort of Technicolor, it has a studio-bound look even when it hobbles across to the new world. For a film about an epic journey, it’s amazingly static.

The script, as usual, is chiefly at fault. Three quarters of the running time are consumed with Columbus loitering tetchily about the court of Spain in hopes of a commission from Isabella, but his impatience comes across chiefly as an irascible priggishness. A subplot about Francis Sullivan attempting to manoeuvre his niece back into court after the wayward King has cast his eyes her way, and seeing Columbus’ ambitions as a threat to his own lucrative trade routes, adds nothing to the history or drama, but fills the yawning space before the three ships set sail. The epic journey is consumed with mutinous mutterings among the crew, who seem to have no other function aboard, and the camera scarcely takes the trouble to glance over the bow. A critical error. Most sailing ship films are preoccupied with the human dramas taking place on deck or below it, but here the essential drama is the fact of the voyage *itself*, and the film sorely needed to convey that sense of perilous travel into a void. Or at the very least, of movement.

Columbus, it seems, made a rather bad, conceited governor of the new lands (chiefly Cuba) he laid claim to for the court of Spain, and was soon replaced, but when he’s brought back in irons and literally flings himself at the feet of the Queen, brandishing his manacles, the man is so consumed with self-pity and indignation that any sense of his grievance we might share is quickly snuffed out. Ferdinand and Isabella restore his private fortune to him, but suggest diplomatically that he should take a rest from his voyages. Columbus slopes off grumbling that this is worse than the shackles, and the end titles roll, so that the film even closes on a sulky, anticlimactic note.

Inevitably, the sesquicentennial in 1992 saw a rash of Columbus pix, least embarrassing of which was Ridley Scott's luscious but untidy "**1492 - CONQUEST OF PARADISE**", with Gerard Depardieu chewing his vowels in the lead, the other contenders being "**CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS - THE DISCOVERY**" and (shudder) "**CARRY ON COLUMBUS**".

"**1492: CONQUEST OF PARADISE**" failed equally badly, but for quite different reasons. Ridley Scott (like Kubrick) is first and foremost a cameraman's director, so there is more visual sweep and grandeur to the whole, but Depardieu was lamentably miscast in the lead, his dialogues with Isabella (Sigourney Weaver) a howling anachronism, and it still somehow fell short of capturing the historical moment when the old world staked its arrogant claim on the new. The film's advance publicity drew analogies with the Apollo missions – a nice intellectual conceit, but space travel films also, in general, utterly fail to convey any sense of a journey. The solution – in "**APOLLO 13**" for example – has been to dazzle audiences with the technical minutiae of spacecraft operation. In the Columbus films, scarcely any thought at all is given to the details of fifteenth-century navigation and shipcraft.

From the archive's perspective, in any case, the film is of only transitory interest. David Cole scarcely utters a line as Columbus' son, and is very quickly packed off to a monastery so his father can sulk and snap his way around the courts. Nothing further is known of Cole. He's not listed in *The Moving Picture Boy*.

See subject index under **EPIC JOURNEYS**, [HISTORY](#) and **SEAFARING / PIRACY**.