

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Columbus

EDWARD EVERETT HALE

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Edward Everett Hale (1822–1909), Unitarian minister and anti-slavery activist, was a prolific author of stories, essays, and poems, many on patriotic themes. A life-long patriot, Hale was born into a family of active Americans: He was the nephew both of Edward Everett, renowned orator and statesman, and of Alexander Hill Everett, the American diplomat who invited Washington Irving to Spain, where he wrote about Columbus. And Hale’s father, Nathan Hale, was the namesake and nephew of Nathan Hale, executed by the British for espionage during the Revolutionary War and famous for his last words, “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”

In 1882, Hale visited Spain to conduct research on Columbus and his travels, writing his biography on the explorer—The Life of Christopher Columbus: From His Own Letters and Journals—in time to be released for the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ discovery. The present selection, a poem in which he presents a novel view of the reason for, and the meaning of, Columbus’ voyages, comes from his 1903 collection of songs and poetry, New England History in Ballads. Who is it that says, “Give me white paper!” Why is it needed? What, in this poem, is the distinctive virtue of Columbus, and why does he sail? What, according to Hale, is the purpose of America?

Give me white paper!
This which you use is black and rough with smears
Of sweat and grime and fraud and blood and tears,
Crossed with the story of men’s sins and fears,
Of battle and of famine all these years,
When all God’s children had forgot their birth,
And drudged and fought and died like beasts of earth.

“Give me white paper!”
One storm-trained seaman listened to the word;
What no man saw he saw; he heard what no man heard.
In answer he compelled the sea
To eager man to tell
The secret she had kept so well!
Left blood and guilt and tyranny behind,—

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Sailing still West the hidden shore to find;
For all mankind that unstained scroll unfurled,
Where God might write anew the story of the World.

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