

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

America is Hard to See

ROBERT FROST

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In this 1951 poem, first published in The Atlantic as “And All We Call American,” poet laureate Robert Frost (1874–1963), unlike many of the other authors, takes a rather iconoclastic approach, both to the achievement of Columbus and to the American “new world” that it made possible. What is Frost’s judgment on Columbus’ voyage? Why does Frost believe that he was deceived by what Columbus did: What did Frost think of Columbus’ achievement when he was a youth, and what does he think of it now? Why, according to the poem, is America “hard to see”? Does Frost himself see America as being better or being worse than it seems to outside fortune hunters? What do you think of Frost’s judgments and his mocking tone?

Columbus may have worked the wind
A new and better way to Ind
And also proved the world a ball,
But how about the wherewithal?
Not just for scientific news
Had the Queen backed him for a cruise.

Remember he had made the test
Finding the East by sailing West.
But had he found it? Here he was
Without one trinket from Ormuz
To save the Queen from family censure
For her investment in his future.

There had been something strangely wrong
With every coast he tried along.
He could imagine nothing barrener.
The trouble was with him the mariner.
He wasn’t off a mere degree;
His reckoning was off a sea.

And to intensify the drama
Another mariner Da Gama

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Came just then sailing into port
From the same general resort,
And with the gold in hand to show for
His claim it was another Ophir.

Had but Columbus known enough
He might have boldly made the bluff
That better than Da Gama's gold
He had been given to behold
The race's future trial place,
A fresh start for the human race.

He might have fooled them in Madrid.
I was deceived by what he did.
If I had had my way when young
I should have had Columbus sung
As a god who had given us
A more than Moses' exodus.

But all he did was spread the room
Of our enacting out the doom
Of being in each other's way,
And so put off the weary day
When we would have to put our mind
On how to crowd and still be kind.

For these none too apparent gains
He got no more than dungeon chains
And such posthumous renown
(A country named for him, a town,
A holiday) as where he is,
He may not recognize for his.

They say his flagship's unlaid ghost
Still probes and dents our rocky coast
With animus approaching hate,
And for not turning out a strait

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He has cursed every river mouth
From fifty north to fifty south.

Someday our navy I predict
Will take in tow this derelict
And lock him through Culebra Cut,*
His eyes as good (or bad) as shut
To all the modern works of man
And all we call American.

America is hard to see.
Less partial witnesses than he
In book on book have testified
They could not see it from outside—
Or inside either for that matter.
We know the literary chatter.

Columbus, as I say, will miss
All he owes to the artifice
Of tractor-plow and motor-drill.
To naught but his own force of will,
Or at most some Andean quake,
Will he ascribe this lucky break.

High purpose makes the hero rude:
He will not stop for gratitude.
But let him show his haughty stern
To what was never his concern
Except as it denied him way
To fortune-hunting in Cathay.

He will be starting pretty late.
He'll find that Asiatic state
Is about tired of being looted
While having its beliefs disputed.

* *An artificial valley that cuts through the continental divide in Panama, forming part of the Panama Canal*

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His can be no such easy raid
As Cortez on the Aztecs made.

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