

Columbus, *my great* Uncle

Descendant Alex Roncari shares a thirst for discovery

BY ANGELA BIANCHI

The world is flat, Alex Roncari might say, for the purpose of debate. Then, the compact man would shift in his chair, stroke his goatee and deliver an eloquent argument in Italian-inflected tones. Combining logical, footnoted arguments with impassioned speech, he would in all likelihood win heart and mind. The example is an exercise, but a useful one to ponder when studying intellectual and enigma Alex Roncari of Hamilton, the last remaining descendant of Christopher Columbus. It was just this style of argument that Roncari's great, great, great Uncle Chris must have delivered to Queen Isabella of Spain before setting sail to discover America.

Persuasiveness is not the only genetic link with Columbus, an astrologer and cartographer who was interested in many disciplines. This curiosity, bordering on the heretical, led him across the Atlantic to break popular political conventions. Roncari is similarly well-rounded in vision. A scientist who came to McMaster in 1960 to study the environmental effects of radiation, Roncari is a historian and publicist who has devoted himself to archaeology with a political purpose. On regular digs in the Caribbean, he is excavating further proof that the first city of the New World was La Isabela, Dominican Republic. And for research on navigation, he was decorated with the Order of Queen Isabella of Spain.

Well-travelled and well-read, he is also a discoverer of considerable renown in the microscopic new world of genetics. While at McMaster studying the nuclear reactor, he discovered ultrasound radiation waves and developed a genetic mutation technique. Except for this patent of which he is cautious to speak, he bubbles with excitement about his other discoveries and interests. He is fascinated with sea-going vessels, and takes an active interest in the Hamilton and Scourge warships at the bottom of Lake Ontario.

In semi-retirement, his weekly agenda is full. Almost single-handedly he is co-ordinating Canada's participation in the fifth centennial of Columbus' arrival, being celebrated in 1992 throughout the continent and Europe. But the work is exasperating to Roncari, who has found no support from

the federal government for the celebration. The prospect of an interview provides him with the desired political platform to decry the government's refusal to do anything for the centennial. "I get back such beautiful letters from (External Affairs Minister) Joe Clark, but they all say the same thing—that the fifth centennial is an ethnic event." In an act of desperation he raises his hands to gesture at and draw support from the life-size suit of armor standing beside his desk. To resist a man of such lineage and purpose seems to be flirting with destiny.

Roncari's interest in Columbus began as a youth in his birthplace, San Remo, in northern Italy, where he was introduced to the greatest navigator of all time as any child would be—in a classroom. "My knowledge of Columbus was limited to what my relatives and teachers told me," he says. He was aware that he was a distant relative, but his childhood fascination with his forebearer lay with a priceless family collection of hand-made models of the Pinta, Santa Maria and the Nina his grandfather gave him. "It wasn't until later, as I traced Columbus' exhaustive logs and historic documents, that I learned that most of what we know about him was mostly romantic legend."

In research he would discover the steamy side of this icon, who was tight with his money and loose with his women. "It's no secret that Columbus was a womanizer," he laughs. "Women were drawn to him; he never chased them. His rugged good looks seduced his Portuguese wife and his Spanish mistress, who bore him his second child, Fernando." The young Queen Isabella was taken by Columbus' ambitious personality and worldly experience as was the Marquess of Moya. His last fling was with the impetuous Beatrice of Bodadilla, governess of the Canary Islands. Also revealed to Roncari was that Columbus was not the first to sight land on October 12, 1492. He says a shipmate named Ricardo de Triana, on watch at the main mast that day, was reported to have seen a flicker of light at 2 a.m. Columbus is reported to have sighted land at 10 a.m. "A small technicality and not greatly important, but being the first to sight land earned Columbus a reward of 10,000 maraveda (about \$100 in gold) from King Ferdinand of Spain. He wanted to keep all the money to himself,"

The world's only living relative: Roncari's study is a caché of Columbusbilia.



jokes Roncari.

Inside his modest brick home with bright blue and white awnings, Roncari and his wife, Dona Lilly, are surrounded by Florentine paintings, blood-red-upholstered furniture and enough swords to outfit another crusade. With wrought-iron bars on its windows, the house needs only a moat to provide the latest in urban fortification. In his study, a converted bedroom, lays his treasure—volumes of books and reference texts lining all four walls, and maps, maps, maps. An essential counterpoint to the two-dimensional maps, a globe proudly sits beside his desk. Here, Roncari wrote the *Nine Arguments in Defence of Christopher Columbus*, a comprehensive history published in 1983 with 15 century script. And in this small room, Roncari studied Columbus' personal letters and documents, conducting research that has earned him international acclaim and a dozen medals and letters proudly displayed. Among them is the medal received in 1983 from the King of Spain.

Like his predecessor, Roncari is directed and motivated in his research. Columbus set out to discover America with the aim of colonizing, not conquering, and for that reason, brought seeds, shingles and cornerstones in his hold instead of conventional rock ballast. He was confident before he set out that land would be found. Likewise, Roncari has a purpose: to further establish the importance of the first colony of the "Indies", La Isabela, founded in 1493. It was here in 1984, when cornerstones of Columbus' own house were unearthed, that irrefutable evidence emerged of the first colony. And to unearth further mysteries, Roncari has set himself to work. It involves the bones of Columbus, once thought to have been located in a tomb in Santo Domingo. They have since been proved not to belong to Columbus. Roncari's own belief is that his body remained in Valladolid, Spain, where it had originally been buried and, as history tells us, shipped to Santo Domingo at the request of his daughter-in-law. "I suspect someone else's body was shipped," says Roncari, who suspects the Franciscans sought to keep the corpse of this famous envoy at the monastery. "So it wouldn't be surprising if the Franciscans switched corpses and sent someone else to Santo Domingo. Reports show that no one examined the corpse when it was unearthed by the Franciscans and a closed coffin was sent." He concludes: "I believe that the body of the man who discovered America lies underneath a billiard hall in an old cafe in Valladolid," where once stood the monastery.

Roncari shared his fascination for Columbus with his cousin, Cristobal Colon de Carvaga, Duke of Veragua, who headed the restoration project of Columbus' three favorite ships. But his brutal assassination last year by terrorists who ambushed his

car left Roncari (known in his home and as Count Vistarino) alone to carry a name and lineage that is well-documented in the Italian "Who's Who."

In the scientific world Roncari is also renowned. To him is credited the discovery of ultrasound waves, a phenomenon he observed at McMaster while a natural sciences professor and researcher from 1960 to 1975. "I had the intuition for some time, but it took 10 years to prove," he says of work that exhausted all of his time. "I didn't have Sundays, Easter or holidays off—it was all donated to research." His only son, Daniel (the genealogical link), would be so enamoured with his father's life in the laboratory that he would pursue a career in epidemiology.

However, the product of Roncari's research would have far-reaching and potentially horrifying implications. Using ultrasound waves, he discovered a means to mutate genes, alter sex types and produce embryonic changes in first seeds and later chickens and some lower order mammals. Potentially dangerous, the genetic formula was patented by McMaster University in 1964 and put on a shelf. "In the beginning it was a disaster," recalls Roncari of the experiments with chicken eggs. But by the time the process was perfected, the sex of a brood of chickens could be predetermined. As well, creatures could be mutated in size. The process would have found useful application in the poultry industry, says Roncari, but other fears presided and the patent was instead sold to the U.S. government, the only world power Roncari says had the authority to protect the patent from abuse. "If it fell into the wrong hands, a monstrosity or giant would result."

A discoverer with an altruistic vision, Columbus would inadvertently pave the way for invaders or "conquistadors" seeking quick wealth by plundering the new frontier, and the righteousness of his quest is tainted by this sequence of events. But, as Roncari suggests, the Americas would eventually have been discovered anyway; all Columbus did was hasten the process. Roncari's genetic research discovery he views the same way: if it were not pioneered by him, another would have developed the process. So, in summing up Columbus, Roncari may easily be reflecting, on his own character when he says, "Whatever he did, right or wrong, he had the guts to prove something."

And with this tenacious view, he will persist with his latest quest to see Columbus' fifth centennial celebrated in Canada. Already, celebration discussions are underway in Hamilton, says Roncari, who wants to bring the three replicas of Columbus' ships to Hamilton harbor in the summer of 1992 after they retrace the voyage of the great navigator who changed the face of the world forever. Insists Roncari: "Columbus is not a person who belongs to Italy, he belongs to the world." ●