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# British Romantic Columbiads

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Fiona Robertson

## British Romantic Columbiads

In his preface to *The History of America* (1777) William Robertson describes the development of the Spanish colonies in the Americas following Columbus's voyages of exploration as 'not only the most splendid portion of the American story, but so much detached, that it forms a perfect whole by itself, remarkable for the unity of the subject'.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, he argues, the story of the British colonies in North America is unresolved and untellable. As the War of Independence progressed, Robertson's planned philosophical history was left in a state of permanently suspended animation, with fragments (Books 9 and 10) of his accounts of Virginia and New England appearing posthumously in 1796, edited by his son.<sup>2</sup> The unresolved status of British North America shadows the declared unity of the narrative of Spanish conquest, which in turn comes to seem like a prelude to a fuller account, an integrated colonial history which was never to be. As a significant intellectual and

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<sup>1</sup> William Robertson, *The History of America*, 2 vols. (London: W. Strahan, 1777), 1: vi. Robertson makes this claim while also criticising the 'excess of caution' with which Spain has continued to try to keep its actions in the Americas secret from other nations: he refers to his being refused access to the *Archivo* of Simancas (1: ix), the records of which were to be opened to Washington Irving in the 1820s. The most striking contrast to Robertson's division between Spanish and British colonial history in the Americas is the account of both given in the revised edition of Raynal's *Historie philosophique des ... deux fades* in 1780.

<sup>2</sup> *The History of America, Books IX. and X. Containing the History of Virginia to the Year 1688; and of New England to the Year 1652* (London, 1796); the Advertisement (1: iii–vii) by Robertson's son William tells of the destruction of many papers during his last illness and describes the survival of the present fragments from an earlier period, corrected and revised as usual by the historian. For an analysis of the planned contrasting of Spanish and British histories and the reasons for Robertson's first suspending and later abandoning his integrated project see Jeffrey R. Smitten, 'Moderatism and History: William Robertson's Unfinished History of British America', in *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment*, ed. Richard B. Sher and Jeffrey R. Smitten (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 163–79, and Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 151–66, esp. 161–3.