

WESTWARD THE COURSE

(1492–1607)

America comes into view slowly for Europeans, just beyond the western horizon. Led by Christopher Columbus, a series of brave and ruthless explorers race to make new discoveries and lay claim to vast regions. Spain seeks empire, as does Portugal. Having freed the Iberian Peninsula from seven hundred years of Muslim rule, they nonetheless retain a dread practice of the Moors—human slavery. France and England come later, settling respectively in Canada and along the Atlantic seaboard. These latecomers, the English, challenge Spain’s far-flung empire, eventually seizing control of the seas from their former Iberian masters. Despite fears of the unknown—disease, privations, wild animals, and sometimes hostile natives—the Europeans are irresistibly drawn to the possibilities of new life in the New World.

I. COLUMBUS: “THE CHRIST BEARER”

Bartholomeu Dias’s two sailing ships limped back into Lisbon harbor in December 1488, bringing startling news: he had succeeded in rounding the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa. The sea route to the riches of India and the Spice Islands of Asia lay open to the seafaring Portuguese. Among those waiting in Lisbon for Dias to bring his report to his king, John II, was a tall, red-haired sea captain from Genoa, Italy, named Christopher Columbus. Dias’s triumph would mean more years of disappointment for

the Italian mariner. If India could be reached by going *east*, the king would have little interest in financing Columbus's great enterprise—a *westward* voyage to the Indies.¹

The Portuguese had been inching along the coast of Africa for a century. Unlike their neighbors in Spain, who spent most of the fifteenth century fighting to rid their country of the Muslim Moors, Portugal had been united, seeking. Prince Henry the Navigator had established a world famous school at Sagres to bring together all the elements of seamanship, mapmaking, piloting, and navigation.² Prince Henry sent out as many as fifteen expeditions to Africa's Cape Bojador, just south of the Canary Islands. His captains all returned claiming that the shallow waters and fierce currents made that point impassable. Finally, Prince Henry *ordered* Gil Eannes to sail beyond the cape. Eannes did so in 1434 by sailing *west* into the Atlantic before heading back to Africa's coast. He had at last passed the dreaded cape.³ This same Eannes ten years later would bring back the first shipload of two hundred African slaves. Gomes Eanes de Zurara, a Portuguese contemporary of Eannes, wrote that desperate African mothers would "clasp their infants in their arms, and throw themselves on the ground to cover them with their bodies, disregarding any injury to their own persons so that they could prevent their children from being separated from them."⁴ Zurara tried to lessen the horror of these scenes by assuring readers that the slaves were "treated with kindness and no difference was made between them and free-born servants of Portugal." He said they were taught trades, converted to Christianity, and intermarried with the Portuguese.⁵ Still, he gave us insight when he wrote: "What heart could be so hard as not to be pierced by piteous feeling to see that company?"⁶ And the presence of light-skinned Africans among them suggested that some, at least, had been bought in markets from "the ubiquitous Muslim salesmen."⁷

Slavery was an inescapable part of African life. Mansa Musa, a devout Muslim, was the king of Mali (currently part of Niger). He sold fourteen thousand female slaves to finance his journey to Cairo in 1324.⁸ The Arabs were always "seizing our people as merchandise," complained the black king of Bornu (in present-day Nigeria) to the sultan of Egypt in the 1390s.⁹ With

the extension of Islam into West Africa's "Gold Coast" came an increasingly vigorous trade in black slaves.¹⁰ The Christian Portuguese emulated this practice. Three hundred years before adoption of the U.S. Constitution, decisions made in Europe and Africa would have great and terrible consequences for a nation as yet unimagined and a people still unnamed.

Portugal's efforts gained momentum when the Muslim Ottoman Turks finally conquered Constantinople in 1453. This meant that city-states like Genoa and Venice would have to deal with the Turks for such prized goods as pepper, ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves. And it would drive the Atlantic kingdoms *outward*.

Columbus had had to plead for King John II to give him a safe passage to Lisbon because he feared arrest for his debts. Columbus was surely capable of directing such a venture as he proposed. He had traveled as far away as Iceland and Britain and throughout the Mediterranean at a time when most mariners never ventured outside the sight of land. Still, Columbus spent years unsuccessfully appealing for support for his great project.

One thing Columbus did *not* have to contend with was any notion that the earth was flat. Although a popular misconception, in truth all scholars at that time knew the earth was a sphere. What they did *not* know was the circumference of the earth. Here, Columbus radically miscalculated. He thought that Japan lay only 2,400 to 2,500 miles west of the Canary Islands.¹¹

Columbus heard Dias make his report to Portugal's king and returned, empty-handed, to Spain. These were years of great frustration for Columbus as Spain's monarchs—Ferdinand and Isabella—concentrated their attention on driving the Moors out of the Iberian peninsula. Finally, in 1492, the Spanish rulers succeeded in freeing their country of seven hundred years of Moorish domination. Ferdinand and Isabella saw their victory as a gift from God. They styled themselves "their most Catholic majesties." Columbus's devout religious faith clearly helped him in his appeals to them for aid. He took seriously his first name, which means "bearer of Christ." He pleaded for the chance to carry Christianity to the lands beyond the sea.¹²

With three small ships, called *caravels*, Columbus set sail from the port of Palos on 2 August 1492. Favored by fair winds and clear skies, the *Niña*,

the *Pinta*, and his flagship, the *Santa Maria*, made excellent time. Even under such favorable conditions, Columbus's Spanish sailors soon began to grumble. With steady winds carrying them west, how would they return to Spain? And when the little flotilla entered a dense patch of *sargassum* (gulf weed), the men fretted about getting stuck in the thickening growths. Most troubling of all, perhaps, was the fact that they were Spaniards and the *Capitán General* was not. Columbus was Genoese, and centuries of foreign occupation had led these sons of Spain to be deeply suspicious of outsiders. Columbus had to deceive his sailors by keeping double logs of the ships' daily distance covered. Even by his false account, however, the men could tell that they had gone farther west than anyone had ever gone before, and farther west than they had been led to believe they would have to go in order to make a landfall.

Threatened with mutiny by his crew, Columbus was forced to promise his captains on October 9 that if they failed to sight land within *three days*, they would all turn about and head back to Spain. The captains were Martin Alonso Pinzon, commander of the *Pinta*, and his brother, Vicente Yanez Pinzon, who led the *Niña*. They were Spaniards, from a Palos shipping family, and gave Columbus help without which he could never have succeeded. Fortunately for Columbus, stiff breezes sped his ships' way and his crew began to see clear signs of land ahead. Flights of migrating birds covered the moon. Tree branches with still-green leaves floated by, giving assurances of land just over the horizon.¹³

Suddenly, gale winds and rough seas confronted the expectant mariners on the night of October 11. Determined, Columbus refused to shorten sail. Early in the morning of the twelfth, the cry came from Rodrigo de Triana, the lookout on the *Pinta*—"Tierra! Tierra!" Columbus gave orders to stand off the shore to avoid reefs and shoals and, finally, to shorten sail. At dawn, they began their search for a safe place to land.¹⁴

Columbus, the "admiral" as he was now called, put out in a longboat from the *Santa Maria* and headed into shore. It carried the royal flag of Castile (a great province of Spain) and the banner of the expedition, which was a cross of green surmounted by a crown, all on a white field. The brothers Pinzon joined the shore party in their own ships' boats. The men knelt in the sand,

prayed, and gave thanks to God for their safe passage. Then Columbus named the island—a part of today’s Bahamas—*San Salvador*, Holy Savior.¹⁵

Soon, Columbus and his men were exploring—and naming and claiming—other islands in the Caribbean. When natives appeared, docile, nearly naked, and eager to trade with the Europeans, Columbus named them *Indians*. If not India proper, he was certain he had landed somewhere in Asia—though the language and manners of the people did not correspond with anything travelers since Marco Polo had reported of the Orient.

Significantly, many of the Indians wore small, gold nose rings. Columbus had had to assure his seamen that the voyage would be worth their while. They were not the ones who would receive the glory, they knew. Nor would they achieve high office or status for the great discovery. Gold would have to suffice, and Columbus soon felt the pressure to find suitable quantities of the precious metal.

Equally significant, natives also introduced Columbus’s men to tobacco and taught them to inhale its smoke. Tobacco use was ubiquitous throughout the Americas, and the Spaniards found smoking pleasurable. Here, in the earliest hours of the encounter between Europeans and native peoples, the exotic leaf loomed large. It would eventually become the cash crop for a number of American states and a major financial interest for more than five hundred years.¹⁶

On an island he would name *La Isla Española*—The Spanish Island (or Hispaniola), Columbus found more Indians eager to trade. Importantly, these Indians seemed to have plenty of gold.¹⁷

So willing, so easily plied with cheap trinkets—like little brass hawk’s bells worth only pennies in Spain—these Indians were vulnerable to the Spaniards in many ways. They could be dominated as slaves and put to work mining gold. What’s more, the native women seemed sexually open. To sailors who had had no contact with the opposite sex for months at a time and who had little fear of venereal disease, the sensual enticements proved irresistible. Syphilis has been traced to this first encounter of Columbus’s men and the aboriginal peoples of the Caribbean. A contemporary of Columbus, Bishop Las Casas, thinks Indians who came back to Barcelona from the first voyage gave the disease to “women of the town,” a euphemism

for prostitutes, who then gave it to Spanish soldiers. From there, it spread throughout Europe and the world.¹⁸ The Indians, on the other hand, contracted smallpox and measles from the Spaniards; these diseases devastated populations with no previous exposure and built-up immunity.

When the *Santa Maria* wrecked on a coral reef off Hispaniola on Christmas Day 1492, Columbus's men offloaded supplies, trading truck and food. A local chieftain, or *cacique*, named Guacanagari ordered his people to help retrieve the cargo of the stricken flagship. Columbus noted in his journal that the Indians guarded his supplies, taking not so much as "a lace point."¹⁹ From the timbers of the wrecked vessel, Columbus built a fortress he named *La Navidad*—Christmas—that became the first European habitation in America. And when he prepared to return to Spain, he had little trouble recruiting volunteers to stay behind. The prospect of gold proved a powerful incentive.

The *Niña* and the *Pinta* departed 18 January 1493 from Samana Bay for the return trip. Columbus was not what we would call a capable *navigator*. The sextant and accurate chronometers were still centuries away. But he was an extraordinarily good *mariner*, with a keen sense of water and wind. He knew how to recognize currents and signs of land. His early calculations had placed Cuba at the same latitude as Cape Cod. Fortunately, he knew enough to correct that. Most of the return voyage passed uneventfully until, on February 12, the two ships sailed into a fierce winter gale. The admiral and Vicente Pinzon took turns guiding the *Niña's* helmsman. Each wave threatened to capsize the little vessel. There was no hope of rescue in such seas.²⁰ Columbus's men vowed to make a pilgrimage to the nearest shrine of the Virgin Mary if they survived the storm.

When they sighted land in the Portuguese Azores, it took three days before Columbus could come to a safe anchorage near a village called *Nossa Senhora dos Anjos* (Our Lady of the Angels). True to their vow, Columbus's men hurried to the local church, but while praying at the altar in their night-shirts as a sign of penitence, they were arrested! Portuguese authorities suspected the Spanish seamen had been sailing to prohibited parts of the African coast.²¹ With his crewmen in jail, Columbus—still aboard ship—threatened to bombard the town if they were not freed. Fortunately, the captain of the

port finally arrived after being delayed by yet another storm and was sufficiently persuaded that Columbus and his men had indeed come back from the *otro mundo*—the other world—and had not been poaching on Portugal’s rich African preserves.²² He generously provided them with supplies before their departure. The incident—almost a farce—nonetheless shows the extreme lengths to which the Portuguese were willing to go to protect their monopoly on the growing slave trade.

Setting out for the mainland in the *Niña*, Columbus again encountered severe storms. When he finally saw land again, it was at the mouth of Portugal’s Tagus River. Menaced by a Portuguese warship, he applied for permission from the king to land. King João II—who had twice refused to support Columbus’s great enterprise—not only granted the permission and ordered the ship’s resupply, but he summoned the admiral to report to him at a monastery thirty miles away. Some of the king’s jealous courtiers, realizing at last what Spain would gain from this amazing discovery, secretly advised him to have Columbus assassinated. When the Indians who had joined the crew showed the king a crude map of their islands made from beans, João cried out, “Why did I let slip such a wonderful chance?”²³ Despite the king’s disappointment, no attempt was made on Columbus’s life.

Even on leaving Portugal, Columbus’s claim to be the discoverer of the New World was not secure. Martin Alonso Pinzon, captain of the *Pinta*, had missed most of the storms west of the Azores and thus the delays they caused in Columbus’s return. Having arrived first, he sent word across Spain of his coming and asked Ferdinand and Isabella for permission to report directly to them. But the monarchs replied that they would hear the news first from their Admiral of the Ocean Sea. Meanwhile, Columbus made up for lost time and docked in Palos harbor shortly before the *Pinta* arrived. Columbus would not be robbed of the credit by his Spanish sea captain. Within a month, a broken Pinzon died at his country house near Palos.²⁴

In April 1493, Columbus came to the Alcazar, the royal palace, to formally make his report to Ferdinand and Isabella. He knelt before the king and queen, but they arose and gave him the honor of a seat at Isabella’s side. The Indians were presented, and the assembly was awed not only by gold jewelry but also by such oddities as the parrots that had never been seen in

Europe. Less impressive were the “spices” Columbus presented, for the fabled riches of the Indies were not to be seen in his collection of common American plants. Then the company adjourned for a *Te Deum* at the chapel royal. The last line—*O Lord, in Thee have I trusted, let me never be confounded*—moved the brave mariner to tears.²⁵

If only Columbus had stopped there, at that chapel! Nothing that would happen in the remaining thirteen years of his life would add to his fame. Much that he did detracted from it. He proceeded to lead a second, third, and fourth voyage to the New World. The second voyage—the largest—proceeded with seventeen ships. Although he would continue to explore and claim rich islands in the Caribbean, and to range as far as modern-day Panama on the North American mainland, his record as an administrator was a dismal one. After the third voyage, he had even been arrested and returned to Spain in chains! Columbus added immeasurably to mankind’s store of knowledge. Yet he never quite realized that his *otro mundo* was not, in fact, a part of Asia, but an entirely new continent.

The tragic turn in his relations with the Indians cannot be avoided. More importantly, the relations of the Indians with the Spanish settlers for whom Columbus opened the way would turn vicious. The gentle Tainos were not the only new people Columbus encountered. The fierce Caribs—whose warlike ways included cannibalism—presented a challenge to the benign intentions with which Columbus had set forth. Soon, the failure to produce a rich trove of spices reduced the Spanish colonial enterprise to grubbing for gold and enslaving Indians in order to get it. Columbus appealed, vainly, for a better quality of settler. After the initial voyage, in which only three crewmen had been recruited from Spain’s prisons, many of those who came to the New World were criminals. Who else could be recruited? When tales of the Indians’ wiping out the first settlement at Navidad came back to Spain, the initial enthusiasm for conversion of the Indians cooled.

The results of Columbus’s voyages of discovery are truly incalculable. From this new land, Europe received maize, tomatoes, peppers, peanuts, yams, and turkeys. The introduction of the potato, alone, revolutionized European agriculture. Millions were fed from these new crops of the New World. This ironically fueled European dominance. Europeans introduced

into the New World wheat, apples, and grapes, as well as pigs and horses. Horses, in particular, became the basis for an entire hunting culture among the Indians of the Great Plains.²⁶ The courageous and incredibly skilled Plains Indians rode mounts that were all descended from those brought over by the Spaniards.

Columbus's discoveries opened the way for a "triangle trade" that would develop over the centuries. Ships from England and Europe would travel to the "Gold Coast" of Africa to pick up slaves for the dreaded, deadly "Middle Passage" westward across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and, in time, to the English colonies on the Atlantic seaboard of North America. American colonists would then exchange raw materials—tobacco, cotton, and timber—for slaves—and the ships would return eastward across the Atlantic.

To the modern complaint that Columbus brought slavery to the New World and that the Europeans' diseases wiped out indigenous peoples, a response is due. Slavery was a pervasive fact of life among the Europeans, but also particularly among the Arabs, the Africans, and the Indians themselves. In Asia, slavery had always existed. It seems hard to credit an attack on Columbus that singles him out for what was then a fairly universal practice. As much as we deplore slavery today, we cannot ignore the moral development of the West from our present vantage point outside the context of history. It was from the very experience of administering a far-flung empire that Spanish scholars began to elaborate universal doctrines of human rights that led, eventually, to the abolition of slavery in the West.²⁷ A counter-challenge might be offered: Who, in Columbus's time, did *not* practice slavery? One might conclude that far from being slavery's *worst* practitioners, westerners led the world to end the practice.

The very frightful consequences of smallpox and measles—which would continue to take their toll among Indians well into the nineteenth century—could hardly have been known by the European explorers of Columbus's day. Very little of the germ theory of disease was then known. And when it did become known, vaccines to protect against them were the product of that European culture—that same exploring, seeking spirit of Columbus—that is now so widely attacked. Even if Europeans of Columbus's time had had the scientific knowledge to test for diseases, the

only way to have avoided infecting innocent aboriginal peoples would have been to have stayed at home in Spain.

Critics also seem to have discounted the devastation of Europe in the previous century brought on by the Plague. Estimates are that *one third* of Europeans died as a result of this epidemic that scholars believe originated in the Gobi Desert in the early 1300s.²⁸ The Black Death, as bubonic plague was known, had been brought to Europe from Asia. Much less *fashionable* than the moral indictment against Western nations for carrying disease to the New World is the counterclaim against Asia—and equally absurd.

No small part of the denunciation of Columbus and his successors in our times is an update of the *leyenda negra*—the Black Legend—that Protestant countries applied to the Catholic Spaniards. As the gifted writer G. K. Chesterton put it, many of the English histories of Spanish exploration and conquest reflected “the desire of the white man to despise the Red Indian and the flatly contradictory desire of the Englishman to despise the Spaniard for despising the Red Indian.”²⁹

Not all the Spaniards despised. Father Antonio de Montesinos addressed outraged settlers on the island of Hispaniola in 1511, barely a decade after Columbus’s last voyage:

I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. This voice says that you are in mortal sin and live and die in it because of the cruelty and tyranny that you use against these innocent peoples. Tell me, by what right or justice do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible slavery? By what authority do you wage such detestable wars on these peoples who lived mildly and peacefully in their own lands, in which you have destroyed countless numbers of them with unheard of murder and ruin? . . . Are these Indians not men? Do they not have rational souls? Are you not obliged to love them as you love yourselves?³⁰

And Montesinos was not as alone as his words would indicate.

Bartolome de Las Casas became the leading Spanish cleric *opposing* harsh measures against the Indians. He even went so far, in his famous *Confesionario*, to advise priests to deny absolution to any settlers who owned

or abused aboriginal peoples. Las Casas engaged in a lengthy debate with the leading scholar of his day, Aristotle scholar Juan Gines de Sepulveda of Valladolid. Sepulveda argued that the Indians were what the great philosopher had termed “slaves by nature.” Las Casas disputed this and argued that the Indians, because they had been denied access to the Scriptures, were not fully morally culpable for the horrors of cannibalism and human sacrifice.³¹ For his unwavering advocacy of the cause of the Indians, Las Casas was called *defensor de los indios*.³²

Montesinos and Las Casas were not entirely voices crying in the wilderness. Both were active in pressing the Spanish monarchs to approve measures to help the Indians. But it was a long way from Spain to the New World. Speculation about the nature of the Indians—were they fully human?—led such Spanish thinkers as the Dominican friar Francisco de Vitoria to write extensively on the nature of human rights. He deserves to be ranked along with Suarez and Grotius as founders of modern international law.³³ Among Vitoria’s firm principles were these:

Every Indian is a man and thus capable of attaining salvation or damnation.

The Indians may not be deprived of their goods or power on account of their social backwardness.

Every man has the right to the truth, to education . . .

By natural law, every man has the right to his own life and to physical and mental integrity.

*The Indians have the right not to be baptized and not to be forced to convert against their will.*³⁴

Critics have pointed out that these morally sophisticated principles were rarely honored in Latin America. That may be true, but where else were such principles even enunciated and defended? And it should be remembered that these leading thinkers were churchmen, not governors. Few of today’s critics would argue for the state to be run by the church. Still, might the criticism of Spanish conduct in Latin America be not that it was too Catholic, but that it was not Catholic enough?

We can see in these impassioned writings and sermons by Spanish Christians the same moral earnestness and reasoned appeals that would be echoed by American evangelicals three hundred years later in their crusade against Negro slavery in the South. We shouldn't be surprised. They read the same Bible.

Rare is the European and virtually nonexistent is the Asian, African, or Arab writer who can be found to anguish about the condition and treatment of subject peoples. Is it possible that the Spaniards are being pilloried in history not because they were without conscience but because their consciences led them to cry out against the conduct of their own countrymen? The most stinging indictments of Spanish conduct remain those written in Spanish by Spanish witnesses.

The treatment of criminals and heretics at the time gives some idea of the level of public sensibility. In most of the kingdoms of Europe, a convicted traitor would be sentenced to be hanged, drawn, and quartered. This process involved hanging the unfortunate man until he was nearly unconscious. Pulled down, the victim would be disemboweled and his entrails burned before him. Finally, his body would then be pulled apart by four horses hitched to his extremities. Heretics fared little better. Burned at the stake, a slow and excruciating process of execution, they could consider themselves blessed if friends had secreted bags of gunpowder beneath their death robes to hasten their tortured end.

These medieval practices show a civilization that had not yet developed the sense of justice and mercy that was to come later. It is anachronistic and vindictively selective to indict European explorers and colonizers for failing to meet our modern standards of human rights.

II. THE SCRAMBLE FOR EMPIRE

Pope Alexander VI, a member of the notorious Borgia clan, had been supported for election as pontiff by Ferdinand and Isabella. Not surprisingly, therefore, the bull he promptly issued 4 May 1493 divided the world between Spain and Portugal on terms highly favorable to Spain. Prompted by Portuguese protests, and eager to keep their lines of communication

with their newfound lands clear, the Spanish agreed to push the line of demarcation 1,175 miles *west* in the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494. Thus, Portugal would be able to claim Brazil as well as vast territories in Africa, India, and the East Indies.³⁵ This might have ended contention in Catholic Europe had other strong-willed monarchs not seen their opportunities.

France's King Francis I was unimpressed. He noted that the "sun shone for him as for others," and he wittily replied to the pope's carving up by saying he would like to see Adam's will, "to learn how *he* had divided up the world!"³⁶ (Cenu Indians in the Americas were even less reverent. Their reaction to the news that the pope had divided up the world: "The Pope must have been drunk!"³⁷)

But that very sober decision by the pope had vast ramifications for Americans hundreds of years later. It meant, among other things, that Spain and Portugal would not contend for mastery of the North American continent.

As news of Columbus's discoveries sped throughout Europe—aided by the recent invention of the printing press—rulers realized that they would also have to seek new trading routes to the Indies or be forced to see that lucrative traffic monopolized by Spain and Portugal. Continuing their drive *eastward*, the Portuguese succeeded in 1498 in reaching India by an all-water route. The voyage of Vasco da Gama returned to Lisbon in 1499 with the true spices and real contact with the rulers of India that Columbus had markedly failed to achieve. Only two of da Gama's four ships—the *San Gabriel* and the *Berrio*—made it back, and only 55 of 170 seamen survived the arduous trip, but the foundations of Portugal's empire—the first and the last of European states to rule beyond the waves—were laid.³⁸

John Cabot tried to do for England's Henry VII what Columbus had done for Spain's monarchs. Cabot—like Columbus a native of Genoa—persuaded the notoriously stingy first Tudor king to back his attempt to find a Northwest Passage to the Indies. In 1497, Cabot's little ship *Matthew* landed in North America at what he called the New Found Land. Although he stayed less than a month, established no permanent settlements, and brought back no riches, Cabot's claim would form the basis of later English dominance of the continent. Attempting for a second

time in 1498 to reach the fabled Indies via North America, Cabot and all hands disappeared.³⁹

Gradually, Europeans realized that the New World was not a part of Asia at all, but an entirely new land mass, two new continents. What should it be called? An Italian adventurer provided the answer. Amerigo Vespucci was the son of a wealthy family from Florence. The Vespuccis were connected to the powerful Medici family that produced rulers of the Florentine Republic and popes. Amerigo wrote lurid reports of his voyages to South America. “I was more skilled than all the shipmasters of the world,” Vespucci boasted shamelessly.⁴⁰ He vastly exaggerated the full extent of his travels, conveniently leaving out of his accounts any reference to the brave captains under whom he sailed.

But Amerigo could spin a tale. One of his stories told of a band of native women and girls who came down to the shore, along the coast of today’s Brazil. Amerigo’s captain decided to charm these naked women by sending his handsomest young sailor onto the beach to talk to them and offer them gifts. Charmed they may have been, but Amerigo related in vivid terms how one large female suddenly clubbed the young sailor to death and how the Portuguese crew watched in horror as these *Amazons** proceeded to roast and eat the young sailor’s body!⁴¹ Amerigo was the first European writer since Columbus to describe the plants and animals *and people* of the New World in such vibrant and unforgettable detail.⁴² Europe was both horrified and fascinated by such stories. Small wonder that when a German mapmaker, Martin Waldseemüller, decided to publish a book of engravings in 1507, he placed a large *AMERICA* on his map of the southern continent.⁴³ Very quickly the name of this adventurous scamp was taken up as the name for both new continents.

France was not to be left out. In 1524, the cultured Italian Giovanni da Verrazano succeeded in getting backing from King Francis I and a consortium of bankers to seek a passageway to *Cathay*—as China was then known—by sailing west. Verrazano sailed the little *Dauphine* (Princess) up

* *Amazons* were a race of female warriors identified in Greek mythology. Thus, the name came to be applied to these natives of Brazil and, in time, to the great Amazon River.

the coast of North America identifying the broad outlines of the continent. Although he failed to penetrate the natural harbors—Chesapeake Bay, Delaware Bay, and New York—he confirmed that the North American continent was a *new world* and not just a promontory of Asia. He did, however, sail around New York's Staten Island, describing the narrows that today bear his name. He misidentified the Outer Banks of North Carolina as an isthmus leading to the Pacific, but he kept detailed navigational records that aided significantly in mapmaking.

Verrazano hoped to establish a New France in this New World, a colonial empire that would stretch from Florida to Newfoundland. He braved a mutiny on his second voyage to the Americas, fooling his men into going the distance to Brazil. There, he was able to obtain a valuable cargo of rare woods to compensate his backers for the lack of Chinese goods. His final voyage, in 1528, ended in tragedy as he came ashore on an island we presume to be Guadeloupe. He was set upon by warlike Caribs in sight of his brother, Girolamo, and his boat crew. The Caribs promptly hacked him to pieces and ate him. His early death and his failure to locate any sea route to China caused Francis I and the French to lose interest for a time. But his explorations did have the effect of turning English and French attentions once again toward a Northwest Passage to the Orient.⁴⁴

More than merely unimpressed, Francis I was also distracted. At one point, he was even imprisoned. Still, he was able to give his support to the vitally important voyages of Jacques Cartier. The father of New France took a northerly course of discovery toward North America in 1534, in his flagship *La Grande Hermine* (The Big Weasel) after an Atlantic crossing of barely three weeks. He spent his days exploring Newfoundland, the Labrador, and Prince Edward Island. The great Gulf of St. Lawrence—the gateway to Canada—he named for the Roman Christian martyr. His men deftly avoided icebergs and feasted on polar bear.⁴⁵

Cartier's skill as a mariner is unsurpassed. He never lost a ship. He never lost a sailor at sea. In his three visits to North America, he entered and left fifty uncharted harbors without incident.⁴⁶ His title was *Capitaine et Pilote de Roy*. King Francis could make him a captain, but it was this hardy

Breton sailor's own skill that made him a *pilot*. As a tribute to Cartier's seamanship and his fairness as a skipper, sailors from St. Malo (a seaport in Brittany, in Northwest France) were eager to ship with him.⁴⁷ Although Cartier's discoveries—including the fur-rich interior of Québec (from the Huron word for "narrowing of the river")—would form the solid basis for the French empire in America, the immediate results of his voyages were meager. He brought back cargoes of pyrite—fool's gold—and quartz, hardly the diamonds he had hoped for. He fell for tall tales of fabulous riches in a kingdom of the Saguenay told him by Donnacona, a chieftain of the Hurons (and he kidnapped the unfortunate Indian to let him tell his story to the king). Soon, France would be embroiled in religious warfare. Francis I's successor, Henry II, had no interest in a Canadian venture—despite the fact that furs and fish could have vastly enriched his realm. And, for a century, cynical Frenchmen dismissed anything phony as a *diamant de Canada* ("a diamond from Canada").⁴⁸

Meanwhile, Spain quickly followed up Columbus's discoveries with major action on land and sea early in the sixteenth century. From their base on the island of Hispaniola that Columbus discovered, Spanish ships ranged throughout the Caribbean. Explorer Ponce de León (called an *adelantado*—advancer) sought out new lands, sailing along the peninsula he named *Florida* (actually, *Pascua Florida*—flowery Easter) in 1513. From there, he advanced to the Florida Keys and to Yucatan, in Mexico. When Vasco Nunez de Balboa crossed the Isthmus of Panama, also in 1513, he was the first European to see the Pacific Ocean.

A generation after Columbus, another foreign mariner was about to add luster to the annals of Spanish exploration and discovery. Ferdinand Magellan was a Portuguese. "God gave the Portuguese a small country to live in but a wide world to die in" goes the old adage, and Magellan was to dramatize it by sailing around the world.⁴⁹ His great voyage of *circumnavigation* almost ended before it began. Rebuffed by the king of Portugal, just as Columbus had been, Magellan sought and received support from Spain's ruler, Emperor Charles V. As his ships were being outfitted for the journey in a shipyard in Seville, he made the mistake of leaving his family banners flying from the stern of his ship while it was being overhauled.

The Spanish flags had been taken down for repainting. Magellan was a nobleman whose family flag clearly showed his Portuguese origins. This was taken as a great affront by the fiercely proud people of Seville. A mob rushed in, threatening to lynch Magellan on the spot. With sword points at his throat, he coolly informed the leaders of the mob that the incoming tide threatened to swamp his ship—a vessel owned by Charles V. If the emperor's ship was lost, *they* would be held responsible. Finally, the mob retreated.⁵⁰ Magellan would show this courage and self-command time and again throughout his voyage.

Setting out in 1519 with a flotilla of five creaking ships with crews numbering 250, Magellan was bound for the Spice Islands (modern-day Indonesia) by going west. There he expected to find supplies of clove, peppercorn, and nutmeg. Virtually unavailable any other place on earth, their scarcity made their trade highly lucrative.

Magellan planned to find a strait at the extreme southern tip of South America.⁵¹ But soon, he was in danger. Wintering over on the coast of Argentina, the men began to grumble. Three of his ships mutinied in Port San Julian.⁵² He had received word warning him that the Spanish captains, who hated him, planned to kill him. Captains Cartagena, Mendoza, and Quesada accused Magellan of violating royal instructions in taking them so far south. Magellan had told them he would rather die than turn back. He sent his man Espinosa to the *Victoria* with a message to Captain Mendoza ordering him to cease his defiance and obey orders. Mendoza laughed when he read the letter, which proved a mistake. Espinosa immediately grabbed Mendoza by the beard and stabbed him to death—exactly as Magellan had commanded him. Magellan then subdued another mutinous ship, the *Concepcion*, with naval gunfire and boarded her, taking Captain Quesada as prisoner. The revolt soon collapsed.

Magellan had Mendoza's body quartered—gruesomely cut into four parts—and “cried” (exhibited) through the fleet as a warning to everyone against mutiny. Quesada was hanged and Cartagena was spared—for the moment. Soon, however, Captain Cartagena was found to be stirring up new discontent, along with a priest. Magellan had the two men tried and marooned. Abandoned on the shores of Argentina, they would die of

exposure, starvation, or Indian attack.⁵³ They were last seen “kneeling at the water’s edge, bawling for mercy.”⁵⁴

Pressing on, after the loss of one of his ships, Magellan finally entered “the strait that shall forever bear his name.”⁵⁵ In October and November of 1520, Magellan carefully made his way through the hazards of these uncharted waters. Strong currents and sudden storms make it one of the most dangerous passages on earth, even today. The Strait is anything but *straight*; it is a maze of treacherous waters and dangerous rocks. Magellan’s task was like the threading of a dozen needles. Magellan had to retrace his steps, searching in vain for one of his four remaining ships. He did not know that the *San Antonio* had headed back to Spain.

His fleet now reduced to three ships, Magellan headed out into the sea he named *Pacific*. Ahead of him lay open waters. Magellan and his men prayed regularly and well they might. Though they did not realize it, they faced a journey more than twice the distance faced by Columbus. Here, Magellan proved his mettle. Antonio Pigafetta, an Italian member of the crew, kept a detailed journal and wrote of him: “He endured hunger better than all the rest . . . and more accurately than any man in the world, he understood dead reckoning and celestial navigation.”⁵⁶

Pigafetta explained the privations of the voyage to Guam:

We were three months and twenty days without any kind of fresh food. We ate biscuit which was no longer biscuit but powder of biscuit swarming with worms. It stank strongly of the urine of rats. We also ate some ox hides that covered the top of the mainyard to prevent the yard from chafing the shrouds. Rats were sold for one-half ducado [about \$1.16 in gold] apiece and even then we could not get them.⁵⁷

The expedition would not have survived at all had Magellan not first hugged the coast of Chile before striking out across the Pacific. Pigafetta realized this: “Had not God and his blessed mother given us so good weather, we would all have died of hunger.”⁵⁸ The trip was three times longer than anyone could have expected. No reliable charts or maps existed.

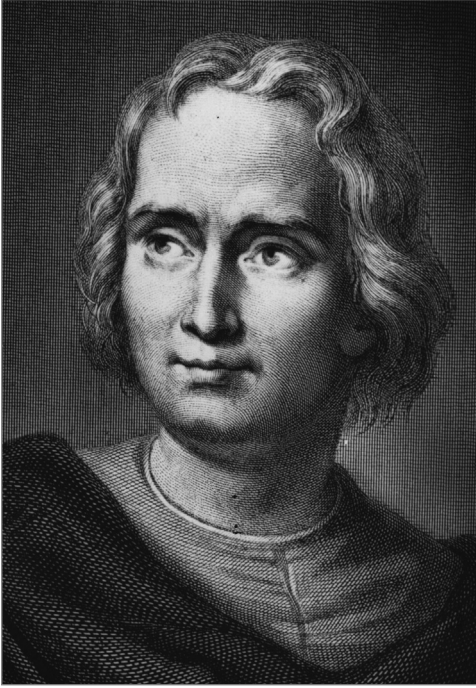
Finally landing on Guam 6 March 1521, Magellan found his three

ships overwhelmed by swarms of natives who, though friendly, carried off much of the cargo of trade. The ships stayed only long enough to resupply and then made for the Spice Islands. Within a week, Magellan had reached the Philippines in the region of Leyte Gulf.* The king of Cebu persuaded Magellan that he had converted from Islam to Christianity and sought the aid of the Spaniards in a battle with a neighboring island of Mactan. Magellan's men pleaded with him not to go, but he felt a duty to aid a fellow Christian. When he came ashore, he left his three ships anchored too far out to give him assistance. He and a small, loyal party, including Pigafetta, were soon overwhelmed by Mactanese warriors using poisoned arrows and scimitars. Magellan covered the retreat of his men but was cut down, pitching facedown in the sand. Pigafetta faithfully recorded:

When they wounded him, he turned back many times to see whether we were all in the boats. Then, seeing him dead, we wounded made the best of our way to the boats, which were already pulling away. But for him, not one of us . . . would have been saved.⁵⁹

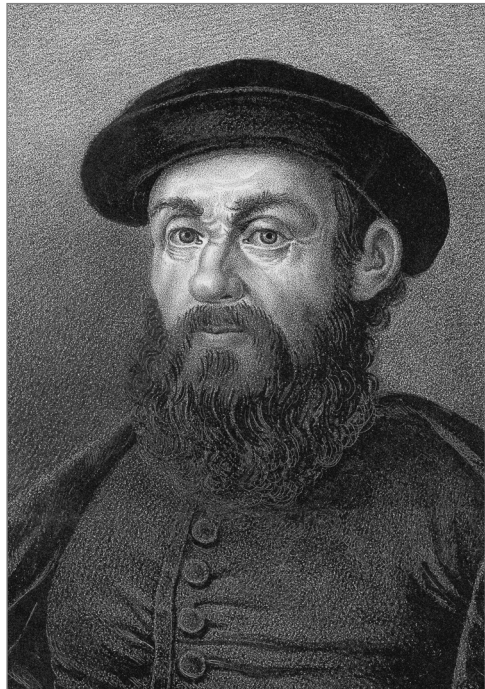
Magellan was mourned by Pigafetta as “our mirror, our light, our comfort and our true guide.”⁶⁰ But his mission had not ended. Captain Juan Sebastian del Cano took command of the *Victoria*, abandoning both the *Concepcion* and the *Trinidad*. Sailing ever westward, del Cano cleared the Cape of Good Hope, only to face on the homeward leg the imprisonment of nearly half his crew by the Portuguese at the Cape Verde Islands. Limping back into Seville on 8 September 1522, Captain del Cano commanded only eighteen sea-weary men of the *Victoria*. As they had promised, the men immediately walked barefoot to the cathedral, clad only in long shirts and each one bearing a candle to do penance and to give thanks for their survival.⁶¹ Thus ended, nearly three years after they set sail, the first voyage of circumnavigation of the earth. Spain was unchallenged as the leading sea power of the world. Magellan's historic voyage coincided with, even as it symbolized, Spain's

* In 1944, Leyte Gulf would see one of the greatest sea battles in history.



Christopher Columbus. *As Admiral of the Ocean Sea, this Italian explorer showed courage, skill, and zeal in his great enterprise. He sought a westward route to the Indies. Instead, he discovered a New World. He gave his Spanish sponsors the chance to rule a vast empire in the Americas. Newly freed from seven hundred years of Muslim rule, the Spaniards seized the opportunity. Despite early conflicts with native peoples, disease, and exploitation, Hispanic culture continues to thrive in Latin America to this day.*

Ferdinand Magellan. *The first man to circumnavigate the earth, Magellan gave his name to the strait at the tip of South America. His voyage across the vast Pacific Ocean brought his men to the brink of starvation. He ruthlessly enforced discipline and braved plots against his life. When he fell victim to natives in the Philippines, he may have been abandoned by envious Spanish subordinates. Magellan's global voyage underscored Spain's dominion over the seas—for a time.*



Jacques Cartier. *A hardy French sailor from coastal Brittany, Cartier explored the fur-rich interior of Canada. Québec is the Huron word for “a narrowing of the river.” Despite the often treacherous and uncharted waters of the St. Lawrence River, Cartier never ran his ship aground. His voyages in his flagship, La Grande Hermine, or “Big Weasel,” laid the basis for New France, an empire based on trade. Cartier disappointed his grasping king, Francis I, however, by bringing back only quartz, not the promised diamonds.*



Sir Francis Drake. *Drake was the most famous of all the English “sea dogs.” He challenged Spanish rule of the seas. Drake could be personally courteous even as he burned towns and looted churches in Spain’s New World colonies. The emeralds he seized from the Spanish treasure ship Cacafuego would appear in the State Crown of England—where they remain to this day. When he returned from his own voyage around the world, he was knighted on the deck of the Golden Hind by Queen Elizabeth I. Soon, he would join in the fight against Spain’s Armada.*

new command of the seas. Her ability to exercise control over her American empire depended entirely on *admiralty*—the ability to control the sea.

There followed, quickly, the incredible Spanish military campaigns against the Aztecs in Mexico by Hernán Cortés (1521) and the Incas of Peru by Francisco Pizarro (1535). These *conquistadors* (conquerors) used methods of cruelty and deception to bring down the two great native empires. The advanced cultures dwarfed in numbers the tiny expeditionary forces of Spanish warriors who boldly advanced on their capitals. But the native rulers were seemingly unprepared for the determination and ruthlessness of their conquerors.

The Aztec practice of human sacrifice stunned the conquerors. Each year, thousands of victims would be taken to the top of magnificent pyramids and their hearts would be cut out and offered up to the Aztec gods. In the case of the Aztecs, Cortés appeared to many of the tribes they held in bondage as one of their deities, *Quetzalcoatl*. Cortés shrewdly took advantage of this to lead a revolt against the imperial Aztecs.⁶² The Spaniards, mounted on horseback and armored, could attack native forces almost with impunity, but even with this advantage they might have been swallowed up by the sheer number of their foes. That these tiny forces could impose their will on such cultures can only be attributed to their nerve and will.

Pizarro will forever be remembered as the man who took the Inca emperor Atahualpa hostage, demanding roomfuls of gold and silver in ransom. When the ransom was paid in full, Pizarro accused Atahualpa of fomenting a revolt and had him garroted.* History records the image of the “weeping Inca” against the name of Francisco Pizarro. That Atahualpa had recently killed his own brother in a civil war hardly mitigates the evil of Pizarro’s deed. Few could have mourned when Pizarro was himself murdered in 1541.

In a period of less than twenty years, the shocking brutality of Cortés and Pizarro added vast regions of Central and South America to the burgeoning Spanish empire. Soon, however, a new Latin American civilization

* To garrote is to kill by slow strangulation.

would arise on the ashes of the old. This new culture would grow and enrich and ennoble the world into our own time.

But Spain would soon see a potent rival. Cold, remote, and small in territory, population, and resources, England was vastly overshadowed by Spain and the other continental powers in the 1500s. In a matter of decades, all that would change.

III. THE RISE OF ENGLAND

Just as Spain's war with the Moors had caused her to fall behind Portugal in the fifteenth century, England in the *sixteenth* century found domestic affairs a barrier to effective exploration and colonization. King Henry VIII succeeded to his father Henry VII's throne in 1509. Henry VIII was young, athletic, well-educated, and charming. Soon he married his brother Arthur's widow, the Spanish princess Catherine of Aragon. Catherine was deeply religious, like her parents, the famed *reyes católicos* Ferdinand and Isabella.

With such a connection, Henry VIII might have been expected to lead a bold, adventurous program of exploration. But it was not so. It was matters at home that occupied him. In twenty years of marriage, Queen Catherine gave the king no sons and only one daughter, Mary. Although a woman could legally inherit England's throne, it was thought to be a dangerous prospect.

Desperate for a male heir to steady his insecure Tudor family dynasty, Henry began to cast about for a way to end his marriage. He appealed to the pope to grant him an *annulment*. An annulment would mean that the marriage of King Henry and Queen Catherine had never been valid. It was awkward, to say the least, because Henry had had to ask the pope for a special dispensation to marry his brother's widow in the first place. The pope, who refused Henry's increasingly urgent pleas, may have been influenced by the threats made against him and church lands in Italy by the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, who just happened to be Queen Catherine's *nephew*.

Henry knew that *two* could play that game. He seized Catholic Church lands in England and redistributed them to his nobles to buy their support. He broke with Rome and created his own national church, which he called the Church of England—*Anglican*. Henry's obedient parliament soon confirmed

him as “Supreme Head of the Church in England.” Boldly, he retained the title “Defender of the Faith” that the pope had given him a few years before when he violently, even obscenely, attacked the Reformer Martin Luther in a widely read pamphlet.*

King Henry brooked no interference. He sent the famous Sir Thomas More and John Cardinal Fisher—both highly revered Catholics—to the block. More, author of *Utopia*, was a leading humanist scholar. In an act of little more than judicial murder, the two were beheaded for opposing the king’s divorce and remarriage to Lady Anne Boleyn.**

But Henry was soon disappointed by his new wife. Their marriage lasted only three years and produced yet another daughter. He soon had Queen Anne framed, tried, and sent to the Tower of London on a charge of adultery with five different men, including her own brother. Henry’s only mercy was to import from France an executioner who used a supposedly painless silver sword to sever the beautifully thin neck of Anne Boleyn. Her death left young Princess Elizabeth without a mother.

Desperate for an heir, the king was to wed again—the very moment the Tower’s cannon boomed the signal that Anne’s head was off. The third wife proved the charm. Jane Seymour provided the frantic king with his long-sought boy.

Henry was devastated when Queen Jane died, mere weeks after their son’s birth. He was to marry *three more wives*, but the increasingly diseased, indulgent king sired no more children.

Europe was in the throes of the Protestant Reformation when King Henry VIII died in 1547. His son, Edward VI, always sickly, was only nine when his father died. Edward VI reigned only for six years but he never ruled. His arch-Protestant Privy Council—a body of powerful nobles—suppressed the Catholic Church in England. The famous Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* was issued in the young king’s name.

King Edward VI died in 1553 at age fifteen. Now, the devoutly Catholic

* British monarchs are, to this day, called “The Defender of the Faith,” despite the curious origins of this title.

** Both men were made saints in the Catholic Church by Pope Pius XI in 1935, four hundred years after their martyrdom.

daughter of King Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, Mary Tudor, came to the throne. Queen Mary I attempted to bring England back into the Catholic fold. When her attempts at persuasion failed, she resorted to force. She began to burn “heretics” at the stake. Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer was sent to the Tower of London. His “sonorous phrases” had formed the basis for the *Book of Common Prayer*. He had written the Anglican Church’s statement of belief, the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. Now, in 1556, he was tortured and forced to recant his Protestant beliefs. Queen Mary was not satisfied that Cranmer had returned to the Catholic Church. She condemned him to death by burning. Cranmer was executed at Oxford. There, he cast the hand that had signed the recantation into the flames first, dramatically saying: “This is that hand that hath offended.”

Other leading Anglicans were executed during the brief, increasingly stormy reign of the queen who came to be known as Bloody Mary. Queen Mary was hated by the people of England. Her marriage to Spain’s King Philip II only deepened their suspicion of her, even though the deeply Catholic Philip tried to persuade Mary to end her bloody persecutions of Protestants. Philip knew they were only turning the English people against their queen. Philip did succeed in having the Princess Elizabeth released from the Tower of London, where she was in grave danger of being murdered. When Philip left England to return home to Spain, Mary thought she was pregnant. Mary *prayed* she was pregnant. But it was only a cancerous tumor that caused her belly to swell. She died, childless, friendless, alone, and unmourned, in 1558 at age forty-two.

When she received word of her half-sister’s death, twenty-five-year-old Princess Elizabeth fell to her knees and recited in Latin the words of the Psalm: “This is the Lord’s doing. It is *marvelous* in our eyes.”

Although she suppressed the public celebration of the Catholic Mass, Queen Elizabeth was unwilling to search out secret Catholics. “I have no window to look into men’s souls,” she famously said. Despite a number of plots against her life—encouraged by the pope and framed by Jesuit priests—Elizabeth continued to rely on the loyalty of her subjects, including not a few great Catholic noble families. In turn, Elizabeth wanted no religious turmoil in England. She ran the Church of England as a Protestant monarch, but she

wanted to stop arguments *among* the fractious Protestants. After breaking from the Catholic Church, Lutherans and Calvinists disputed with Baptists and with each other over the meaning of communion and baptism. Elizabeth cleverly glossed over such theological disputes. About the Lord's Supper, she said:

*Christ was the word that spake it.
He took the bread and break it;
And what his words did make it
That I believe and take it.*

Elizabeth had an amazing knack for politics and public relations. She turned her greatest liabilities—that she was a woman and unmarried—into her great strengths. She cultivated her image as “the virgin Queen,” and fostered a cult of personality that dubbed her “Gloriana.” English arts and letters flourished under her rule. Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Spenser made everlasting contributions of world literature. Elizabeth created a heightened sense of English nationalism and remained highly popular throughout her long reign (1558–1603). She looked and acted the part, dressing extravagantly and displaying herself before the people as she went forward on as many as twenty-five “royal progresses”—visits to great estates around the country.⁶³ These visits served a dual purpose; they were also a shrewd way of avoiding the cost of maintaining a splendid court, since her hosts were expected to feed and house Elizabeth and her hundreds of nobles and retainers. To keep France and Spain at bay, she held out for nearly twenty years the prospect of her hand in marriage. To undermine their power, she financed rebellions against Spanish rule in the Netherlands and gave aid to the French Protestants, the Huguenots. One of the most remarkable personalities in history, Elizabeth relied on her people's affection to secure her throne: “There is no jewel, be it of never so high a price, which I set before this jewel; I mean your love,” she told Parliament.

Queen Elizabeth encouraged the explorations of Sir Humphrey Gilbert (Newfoundland) and the colonization schemes of Sir Walter Raleigh (in the land he named *Virginia* in her honor). After the pope issued a decree

absolving English Catholics from obedience to her in 1570 (thus inviting her overthrow or assassination), Elizabeth waged a cold war against Spain. Excitement over the discoveries in the northern voyages of Sir Martin Frobisher faded when the ore he brought back from Canada proved to be, like that of Cartier, worthless.

Still, the *idea* of an English greatness at home as well as beyond the seas would not die. Shakespeare's immortal writings fired men's imagination:

*This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,—
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.*

Francis Drake resolved to equal Magellan's great feat and challenge Spain's rule of the seas in the process. Sailing in his flagship, the *Golden Hind*, he led his flotilla southwest to the coast of Argentina. Drake had to contend, as Magellan had, with mutiny. Master Doughty, who had soldiered with Drake in Ireland, was convicted and executed at Puerto San Julian—the same place Magellan had suppressed his mutineers.⁶⁴ Drake continued on through the Strait and then headed north. He raided the Chilean coast, seizing silver and gold and capturing Spanish vessels laden with rich cargoes.

Drake led his "sea dogs" on a merry adventure. Spanish writers long considered him no more than a pirate, Spanish grandees (the noblemen) called him *El Draque* (The Dragon), but documents unveiled in the last century from Spanish archives showed that his prisoners uniformly praised his humanity and good nature.⁶⁵ He did not, however, hesitate to burn Spanish

towns and loot magnificent Catholic churches. Chasing the Spanish treasure ship *Cacafuego*, he took time to grab another prize that yielded a golden crucifix and a clutch of emeralds that would later appear in Queen Elizabeth's crown.⁶⁶ A Spanish prisoner wrote sympathetically of Drake that "he has a fine countenance, ruddy of complexion and fair beard. He has the mark of an arrow wound in his right cheek . . . in one leg he had the ball of an arquebus. . . . He read the Psalms and preached. . . ."⁶⁷ (Apparently not dwelling long on that part of the Good Book that says, "Thou shalt not steal.")

Drake explored the coast of California before setting off across the Pacific. By duplicating Magellan's feat, Drake gave a great boost to English self-confidence. The *Golden Hind* returned to London in November 1580, following three years at sea. She off-loaded silver into the Tower of London by night. Queen Elizabeth showed her great favor by knighting Drake on the deck of his flagship, in 1581. This act of open defiance of Spain's Philip II prompted the king to commence plans for an invasion of England.

Drake was to play a crucial role in his famous raid on Cadiz in 1587. He burned the city and the fleet that Philip II was then preparing for his invasion, a daring exploit known to history as "singeing the beard of the king of Spain." He delayed for a year the fateful clash. The decade of mounting tension between England and Spain came to a head when Elizabeth's ministers lured her captive cousin, Mary, Queen of Scots, into a plot against the queen's life. Brought to trial and beheaded, Mary Stuart became in death what she never was in life, a martyr to the Catholic cause. Elizabeth spat defiance. She played the part of warrior queen to the hilt:

I know I have but the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart of a king, and of a king of England, too; and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realms: to which, rather than any dishonor should grow by me, I myself will take up arms.

Supported by Pope Sixtus V, who renewed the excommunication of Elizabeth and subsidized his costs, Spain's King Philip II in 1588 assembled the greatest war fleet in history—the Armada. One hundred thirty ships—

great galleons, galleasses, galleys, and merchant ships—and thirty thousand men (of whom three-quarters were soldiers primed for the invasion) proceeded up the English Channel. They were set upon by the English sea dogs—Drake, Hawkins, and Frobisher. The Armada was greatly hampered by ineffective leadership. Philip II had insisted that the duke of Medina Sidonia assume command. Brave and honest as he was, the duke was a soldier, completely inexperienced in the ways of the sea. The duke could not rely on the support of English Catholics who, in the main, were energetic in their defense of their island *against* their fellow Catholics from Spain.

Drake and his fellows set upon the great and ponderous ships of the Armada with fire ships. Less maneuverable, burdened by horses and cattle and great masses of supply, the Spanish ships were almost helpless against the fierce English warships. When a great storm came up, the Spanish Armada was dispersed. Many of the ships were wrecked on the forbidding coasts of Scotland and Ireland.

The victory of the English against the Armada broke the back of Spain's sea power, and the empire began its centuries-long decline. This clash marked the transfer of admiralty from great Spain to little England. English sea dogs could go where they wished with confidence. From this time until 1941—with one important local exception—it was England that “ruled the waves.” That temporary exception—in the waters off Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781—would have the greatest consequences for America.

Dominance over the seas assured that England in the next century would be able to send more and more colonists to North America without fear of Spanish interference. It gave the English a sense of national destiny. They knew the battering storm had as much to do with the wreck of the Armada as did English fighting skill. “God blew and they were dispersed,” read the official medallion Elizabeth ordered struck to commemorate England's great victory.

And the English believed it.