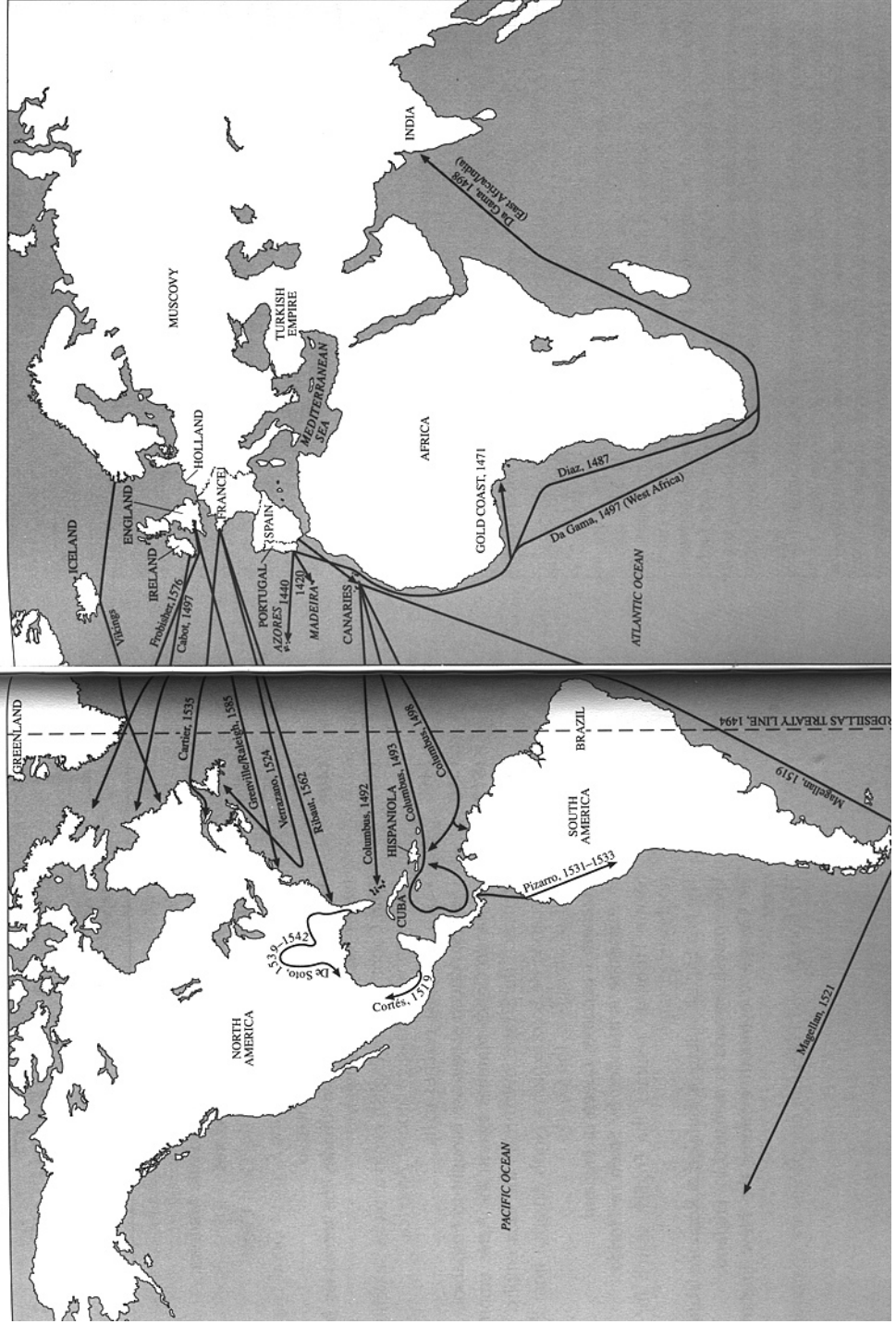


Part One:  
Exploration and Contact to 1600



"The Age of Exploration." From Richard Middleton, *Colonial America*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997). (With permission of the author.)

# Introduction

Although it was the famous voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492 that opened the way for the European exploration of the Americas, many others had adventured to this “new world” before him. Leif Erickson and the Vikings explored up and down the northern coasts of North America, even establishing a short-lived settlement on the tip of Newfoundland around AD 1000. Hints in some accounts suggest the Chinese explored the southern coast of California, and recent evidence indicates that Africans may have traveled to the Americas a century before the Europeans. Columbus’ expedition was actually one of many European attempts to find a sea route to Asia, a competition made imaginable by the travels of the Venetian merchant, Marco Polo, in China in the thirteenth century.

The competition was set off in 1415 by Portugal, which possessed considerable maritime expertise and was well situated geographically for ocean exploration. Portugal established its first colony in Ceuta, in Northern Africa, which gave it control of the western Mediterranean. From the 1420s, Prince Henry the Navigator sponsored many expeditions along the coast of Africa and the eastern Atlantic. In the 1440s Portugal established sugar plantations in the Azores, the first outside the Mediterranean to be worked by African slaves. In 1487, Bartholomew Diaz navigated past the Gold coast and rounded Africa’s Cape of Good Hope. Vasco de Gama completed the route to the East in 1498 when he reached India, thus avoiding the Turks who held the eastern Mediterranean. Spain, newly united and strengthened by the marriage between Ferdinand and Isabella, wanted to gain control of the Atlantic. Seeking another route to Asia that bypassed Turkey, the Spanish crown sent out Columbus, an Italian explorer. Working under the completely speculative assumption that the world was round, not flat as the medieval world had thought, Columbus was trying to sail west to Asia when he stumbled upon the Americas. What would become the largest component of Europe’s western expansion was, at first, just a barrier to the east.

It was also a disappointing barrier. Little if any gold, precious metals or exotic spices and silks were found among the native inhabitants, and little else seemed of interest. As a result, Columbus fell into disgrace and distraction, maintaining till the end that he had discovered India; hence, the name “Indians” from *los indios*, the name he gave the indigenous peoples. Still, the idea of the “discovery” – from a European perspective – of a New World caught the European imagination. Explorers like John Cabot and his sons, Giovanni da Verrazzano, Jacques Cartier, and Henry Hudson continued to search for a Northwest Passage to Asia, making

unforeseen discoveries and bringing back stories that fascinated avid readers. It was another Italian, Amerigo Vespucci from Florence, whose account of his exploration of the South American coast in 1499 really sparked European interest, and so the lands he explored were named “America” in his honor. Fascination with geography and exploration, for both trade and conquest, increased. Spain took the lead in exploring and settling the Americas, repeating the success it had on the Mediterranean coast and Canary Islands of establishing ranching, sugar and tobacco production in the West Indies. Not to be outdone, and embracing the Spanish model – down to employing an adventurous Italian mariner – England’s King Henry VII issued the following “letters patent” in 1497 to John Cabot which express succinctly the imperialistic Eurocentric attitude of the early explorations:

Be it known that we have given and granted . . . to our well beloved John Cabot, citizen of Venice full and free authority, leave and power to sail to all parts, countries, and seas of the East, of the West, and of the North under our banners and ensigns . . . to seek out, discover and find whatsoever isles, countries, regions or provinces of the heathen and infidels whatsoever they be, and in what part of the world soever they be which before this time have been unknown to all Christians. We have granted to them . . . license to set up our banner and ensigns in every village, town, castle or mainland newly found by them which they can subdue, occupy and possess as our vassals and lieutenants, getting unto us the rule, title and jurisdiction of the same villages, towns, castles and firm land so found.

“Subdue, occupy and possess” they did. Spain’s influence would spread all through South and Central America, and into Florida and southwestern North America, while England and France vied over eastern North America until the mid-eighteenth century, when English influence would eventually prevail.

When disputes began to brew over who controlled these far-flung lands, Pope Alexander VI intervened, and Spain and Portugal simply divided the non-Christian world between them. According to the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494, everything west of an imaginary line in the Atlantic 370 leagues (about 1,000 miles) from the Cape Verde islands belonged to Spain and everything to the east to Portugal. The discovery of Brazil in 1500 by the fleet of Pedro Alvares Cabral, suggests that Portugal knew of its existence before the treaty, and negotiated the division of power accordingly. Initially, Portugal’s territories in Africa and Asia were its main focus, while Spain only gradually realized the enormous possibilities of the New World. Spain continued occupying and subjugating islands in the Caribbean. Expeditions sent by Diego Velázquez, Governor of Cuba, made contact with the great Maya civilizations of Yucatán, and brought reports of the untold wealth of Aztec Mexico. In 1519 Hernán Cortés entered Mexico, and with the help of Native groups who were enemies of the Aztecs, overthrew Montezuma and conquered the extensive Aztec empire. By the 1520s the mines of Mexico and those of Bolivia two decades later were providing Spain with large quantities of gold and silver. Some years later, the reports of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca of golden cities to the north prompted expeditions to the southern part of what is now the United States, by Hernando de Soto and Francisco Vázquez Coronado. In the meantime, Francisco Pizarro and his step-brothers Gonzalo and Hernando proceeded with the conquest of the Inca empire in 1531.

The consequences of contact with the European colonizers were little short of disastrous for the peoples of the New World. The population dwindled drastically, not only from direct violence and ill health resulting from economic exploitation, but also from European diseases such as smallpox and measles. In some areas, the population was reduced by almost 90 percent. Portugal made up for this drastic reduction of available labor with which to exploit the new territories by importing slaves from Africa, with a first shipment arriving in Hispaniola

in 1510. Spain developed the *encomienda* system, in which Native groups were entrusted to Spanish proprietors charged with their physical and spiritual welfare, but who in practice often viewed them as a source of cheap and expendable labor. The *encomienda* system was the natural outgrowth of the belief, defended by Spanish theologians such as Ginés de Sepulveda and based on Aristotelian philosophy, that some peoples were naturally inferior and destined to be slaves. Other Spaniards such as Bartolomé de Las Casas, however, defended the rights of the Native peoples at considerable personal cost. Tragically, the Europeans' initial sense of wonder and strangeness on encountering Native peoples vanished quickly, giving way to a complex, hierarchical caste system based on racial difference and ethnic purity.

Although it is true that European explorers and priests were largely incapable of accepting the different worldviews of the Natives or the validity of their cultures, they were keen observers of the new lands and peoples they had encountered, and their accounts are characterized by the constant attempt to render the New World intelligible to their European readers. References abound to the act of naming islands, bays, regions and even groups of human beings, as though by doing so it was possible to lay claim to them and subjugate them by binding them within language. Other constant preoccupations are the permeability (or resistance) of the Native peoples to European ideology and the constant search of the Europeans for sources of material wealth.

Although France sent out some early explorers, their efforts only began to reap significant success in the seventeenth century. French explorers initially focused on the land around the St Lawrence River, Newfoundland, and Acadia or Nova Scotia, later expanding to much of the Great Lakes region and the West. The name Gallia Nova (New France) first appeared on a map prepared by a brother of Giovanni da Verrazzano, who had explored the coasts of North America on behalf of France in 1524. Ten years later, Jacques Cartier sailed up the Bay of St Lawrence and took possession of New France for King Francis I, later attempting to found a colony near what is now Quebec. Though this attempt ended in failure, it lay the foundations for the extensive French fur trade with the Indians of the St Lawrence area. For the rest of the sixteenth century, French energies were mostly directed to settlements in Brazil at Guanabara Bay, near Rio de Janeiro, and Florida, both ultimately unsuccessful. Jean Ribaut's attempts to found a colony in northern Florida as a refuge for French Protestants who were being threatened with persecution at home, merely encouraged Spain to redouble its efforts.

Like France, England was politically weak and so was also relatively late getting into the race for empire. In the early sixteenth century when Portugal and Spain were busy with their new territories in South America, the Protestant Reformation swept across northern Europe, temporarily stalling England's imperial activities. Queen Elizabeth's ascension to the throne at mid-century helped stabilize the country, and interest in exploration rekindled with Martin Frobisher's attempts to find a Northwest Passage in 1576. Two years later, the Queen granted a patent to Sir Humphrey Gilbert for the discovery and settlement of the vast tract of land called "Virginia" which stretched from Canada to Florida. Both of these attempts ended in failure, and after Gilbert drowned off the coast of Newfoundland in 1583, his half-brother Sir Walter Raleigh took up the patent, enlisted the help of several influential men, and began sending out expeditions. These first attempts tried to reduplicate the Spanish success: at the behest of the crown, groups of armed men came to unknown lands searching for precious metals or pearls, relying on limited food supplies or what they could get or cajole from the natives. The strong-arm tactics of Sir Richard Grenville and his successor Ralph Lane, the first "governors" of the English settlement – really a fortification – at Roanoke Island off the coast of what is now North Carolina, ended in a succession of failures, culminating with the mysterious disappearance of the second colony, which included the first child to be born to English

parents in North America named, appropriately, Virginia Dare. Permanent English settlement in the New World did not begin until John Smith took over the command of the Jamestown settlement in 1608 and enforced a regimen of agricultural cultivation and hunting that would eventually make the colony self-sustaining. Central to the English endeavor was the work of Richard Hakluyt (1553–1616), a scholar and clergyman who as a boy became fascinated with maps and explorations and devoted his life to compiling and editing accounts of European voyages of discovery. In 1589 he published his major compilation, *Principal Navigations, Traffiques, Voyages, and Discoveries of the English Nation*, which was greatly enlarged in 1598–1600. All of the English selections in Part I come from this compilation, which also contained many translations, and stands as a register of what was known about world exploration by the end of the sixteenth century. Hakluyt not only made these narratives available to an eager public, but he also advanced a theory of “plantation,” as opposed to naked military conquest, to influential explorers like Raleigh, and in so doing, energized and redirected the great exploring spirit of the Elizabethan age.

Exploration of the New World generated tremendous excitement among European readers hungry for glimpses of what they thought might be an earthly paradise or Arcadian idyll populated by gentle savages. Sponsors interested in continued support for their ostensibly fruitless and very expensive expeditions wanted to prolong that fascination, and so demanded optimistic accounts from the men they sent into the unknown. Some of the accounts in Part I were written specifically as promotional literature designed to boost public support and private interest and investment in the exploration and plantation ventures. Thus, it is sometimes hard to separate factual content from wish fulfillment, revealing as they do the ways in which Europeans attempted to affirm the superiority of European ideologies and cultures while at the same time justifying their eagerness to learn more about the landscape and peoples of the New World. Often, these writers come to the brink of the unspeakable: how to describe something completely outside of their realms of experience or knowledge, for which they have no words. Often, they fall back on the trope of comparison – the New described in sometimes incongruous terms of the Old – or on allusions to the ancient world and their myths, and certainly on hyperbole and apostrophe. “O brave new world,” Shakespeare’s Miranda exclaims rapturously in his “New World” drama *The Tempest*. She is meant to be the innocent struck with true wonder but, of course, she is only seeing ordinary, Old World men for the first time. Still, just the mention of the “New World” conjures up a sense of pristine vision and utter – here welcomed – difference.

The English poet John Donne also wittily turned the trope of New World exploration to reveal complex erotics beneath the rhetoric of imperial conquest used by his rival and the court favorite, Sir Walter Raleigh. Seeing his mistress before him in all her natural glory, he exclaims:

Oh my America, my new founde lande.  
My kingdome, safeliest when with one man man’d,  
My myne of precious stones, my Empiree,  
How blest am I in this discovering thee.

(from *Elegie* XIX)

Gendered descriptions of the New World had become conventional in this early literature of exploration, and perform a complicated ideological task. Columbus, for example, came to believe that the world “is not round as [Ptolmey and other geographers] describe it, but the shape of a pear; which is round everywhere except at the stalk, where it juts out a long way . . .

something like a woman's nipple." In his speaker's mimicry of Raleigh's proposed seduction of the New World, Donne employs sexual difference to imply the androcentric power hierarchy underlying this fantasy of conquest. The lover is compared to an explorer who discovers and possesses, while the beloved is depicted as the realm explored, an object of great interest and value but without agency. Her silence characterizes her as Europeans imagined and hoped the New World would be, unoccupied and unclaimed, passive and receptive, or desirous for "civilization." Furthermore, as the New World is likened to a new Eden, so the lover is metaphorically the new Adam. But since the beloved is the terrain of newness and pleasure, she is not a new Eve, and the Eden she provides becomes a paradise of one, where her nakedness suggests not sexual innocence but availability without protest and without guilt. This gendered fantasy of conquest reaches its most popular cultural form in the "myth" of Pocahontas from the settlement of Jamestown or the story of Inkle and Yarico from the West Indies, tales in which the romance between a native "princess" and white colonist underwrites Western imperial expansion.

What Columbus could not have known is that the most important product he could bring back from the New World was the knowledge and experience of newness, which provided a mirror for the old European self. Nonetheless, our view of the cultures on the other side of Columbus' mirror, our knowledge of Native oral literatures and cultures and even of the written texts of Central America, is at best diffuse, overlaid by layers of linguistic translation (for example, into Spanish, in the case of the Mayan *Chilam Balam*) and years of cultural accretions, or even more insidiously, distorted by the effort of the Europeans to translate the difference of native cultures into something intelligible for their readers. Indeed, both Europeans and Natives were often literally at a loss for words when they attempted to describe one another, and the texts which follow illustrate not only the interaction between diverse peoples and worldviews but also of language stretched to the limits by the vitality and radical uncertainty of human beings confronted by the opacity of difference.