

John Cabot and the 1497 Voyage to Newfoundland

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[See table of contents](#)

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REVIEW ARTICLE

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The Many Landfalls of John Cabot. Peter E. Pope. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Xii, 244 pp., maps, illus. Notes, index, 1997, cloth, 0-8020-0786-4, \$50.00; softcover, 0-8020-7150-3, \$17.95.

John Cabot and Newfoundland. Alan F. Williams. St. John's: Newfoundland Historical Society. 64 pp., maps, illus., bibliog., 1996, softcover, 0-9680803-0-8, \$9.95.

DAVID B. QUINN

IT IS STRANGE that for the Quincentenary of John Cabot's discovery of Newfoundland not a single new document has appeared, and indeed, that no full study of the Cabots has been published, although one has long been promised. We must go back to 1962 to find the fullest and most authoritative study and collection of documents, namely J. A. Williamson's *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery Under Henry VII*, to which Alwyn Ruddock has added one additional item and perhaps also thrown some backward light on John's eldest son Sebastian. All studies of the Cabots contain uncertainties and filling in the gaps in our knowledge by inference

and conjecture has occupied most of the many writers who have attempted to cover the subject. We did not have a detailed, if not entirely full account of the 1497 voyage until the publication by L. A. Vigneras from the Spanish Archives of a letter from John Day (*alias* Hugh Say) to the Grand Admiral, who is clearly Columbus. With this in hand it is possible to provide a narrative of the voyage which *may* be largely correct but it cannot on all points be definitive even if Day may well have suborned the master of the *Matthew* to give him authentic data. We do not know exactly when Cabot, his wife and three sons came to Bristol. It was after 1493 and before 1495. It required time for Cabot to establish his own credentials with the group of Bristol merchants who had been concerned with planning westward voyages intermittently since at least 1480 and quite probably had made a discovery or at least a sighting of an island or mainland during these attempts. It is likely also that Cabot did not arrive penniless as he was able to lease a house in St. Nicholas Street in a respectable quarter of Bristol. Moreover, it appears that Cabot had established, possibly through Bristol's two members of parliament, contact with the royal court and been highly commended to King Henry VII, so much so that on 5 March 1496 he and his sons were granted a patent, with wide-ranging potentials, to find new lands to the north and west of those found by the Spanish. He was to hold the lands for the King and to have many privileges with regard to them. On his return to Bristol he found a vessel already prepared for him and set sail in her — indicating how far he had convinced the Bristol men of his capacity to command such an expedition. The ship sailed sometime in the summer of 1496 but it ran into difficulties with an unruly crew and insufficient foodstuffs, and so was obliged to return to Bristol. However, by May 1497, the 50-ton bark, the *Matthew*, victualled for seven or eight months, was ready. His Bristol crew of 15 or 16 was augmented by a Low Countries' native (his "Burgundian") and a Genoese barber (surgeon), and at least several of the merchants who had backed him, and also, most probably, by his eldest son Sebastian, who, at the age of, probably, twelve was old enough to go as ship's boy, as he was to claim many times in later life. The probable date of leaving Bristol was May 20, 1497, working backward from the length of time the voyage took according to the Day letter. He made for a point from which many later voyages were to be made, namely Dursey Head (Lat. 50° 33' N.) on the coast of Kerry and sailed for 35 days in all until he sighted land, having encountered, a few days before, a gale (probably the cold northern current and the winds that went with it). Later references to him stress his prowess as a skilled navigator and chart maker, so that we can infer from Day that he kept his course by latitude sailing (by sun and North Star sights) on east and north-east winds until land was reached — a distance, Day said, of 1800 miles (by dead reckoning). Considering that Day says he returned from the same landfall where he made a landfall on June 24, we can take it that was near the mouth of the Strait of Belle Isle, probably Cape Dégrat or Cape Bauld (approximately lat. 51° 37' N.) after a voyage of 1800 miles. The island seen would have been Belle Isle. He made his only landing some little way to the

south on June 24, but it would be unwise to indicate precisely where. He proceeded to go through whatever ceremonies that were thought necessary to claim the land for the English crown, erected a banner for England (most probably the Red Cross), another for the Pope, to indicate the bringing of the land within the Christian realms and (according to Sebastian much later) a banner for Venice, also. He saw no human beings but Day says they found a trail going inland, the site of a fire, and, most significantly, “a stick half a yard long pierced at both ends, carved and painted with brazil [iron oxide],” which seemed to establish that the land was inhabited. He took on fresh water from a nearby stream, stood off the land and, so far as possible, keeping land in sight, traversed the east coast of Newfoundland southward, commenting on the forests and the apparent fertility of the land. It appears that at least he may have reached Cape Race and, possibly, continued southward (but here controversy is unresolved). He turned north again, going in close to land and marking and naming the capes of the mainland and the islands. Since (says Day) most of the land was sighted after turning back, he reached his landing point about the middle of July and setting his course along the same latitude as he had followed westward, made very rapid progress eastward. As they progressed his crew or some wiseacres among them, insisted that he was sailing on too northerly a course, but he was proved right. The coast of Brittany (Cape Ushant) was sighted on August 6 (a remarkable voyage on the westerlies of only 15 days) and in about two further days arrived safely in Bristol to report what Day thought to have been the Islands of the Seven Cities (a myth current in the fifteenth century) and Cabot himself the westward extension of Asia — the land of the Great Khan (last active in 1398) but implying the mainland of Asia. The one great question mark which lies over this reconstruction is the absence of reference to floating ice, and, even more striking, the fog which so often surrounds these coasts. No certainty can be claimed for this reconstruction of the voyage, but it seems to this writer far nearer what happened than any alternative he has seen.

It would appear that the *Matthew* reached Bristol on August 6, but we have no evidence on how this achievement was regarded by his Bristol backers, although it would certainly have confirmed their earlier suppositions. What they would have specially appreciated was his information that the seas near to the new “island” were swarming with cod, as this had been their main object in sending out earlier westward voyages since they had lost their valuable Iceland fishery to the Hanseatic League. But they could not keep him long: he rode post-haste to London and sent his report to King Henry (or may have been received by him). His reward of £10 on August 10 or 11 set the seal on his achievement, to be fortified by the grant of a pension of £20 a year — a large sum for that time — by a patent of December 13 following. We know that his discoveries had gone to his head (from letters sent to Venice and Milan, respectively, on August 23 and December 18). By the former date it is said he was being referred to as the Great Admiral, that he was dressed in silk, and that he had been promised a royal fleet to make a great voyage the

following year. He was already enjoying great popularity in London. The latter report stated that he had made a world map and a globe which he was evidently exhibiting. He was being regarded as a very expert navigator. He now proposed to sail to Cipango which was then regarded vaguely as being farther south in Asia than where he had been. Probably on account of his tale of erecting a papal banner in the new land, some poor friars were said to be anxious to accompany him on his next voyage. John Day's crucially important letter followed, either towards the end of the year or early in 1498, which laid out systematically Cabot's route and basic achievements. What he says about the chart he sent Columbus is important. He described it as only a "copy," which R. A. Skelton described as apparently a "sketch chart," that is one without scale or orientation — while his "map," he told Columbus, was not completed before he left England. He considered that the limits of the lands found lay between Dursey Head (at 51° 37' N.) and the mouth of the Garonne approximately 45° 37' N. (which he could only guess at), which would have brought Cabot, at his most southerly, at least one degree south of Cape Race (46° 39' N.) and at least into the orbit of the Maritimes. But Columbus was told the chart would give the capes of the mainland and the islands as given by Cabot. A Spanish diplomat in July 1498 told his royal masters that he had seen a map made by Cabot but does not say that he had obtained a copy of it. He considered that Cabot had infringed the limits set in the papal grant to Spain. The alleged royal promise of a fleet of some ten ships for a 1498 voyage was, as we know, never implemented. But this is not an account of the 1498 voyage. To sum up we may say that Cabot was both skillful and fortunate and that he achieved as much or more than could be anticipated in a reconnaissance voyage across the Atlantic ocean.

There are two further questions to be considered. One is the map of Juan de la Cosa of 1500 (or a little later) which is in the Museo Naval, Madrid. It should, R. A. Skelton states, be oriented anticlockwise 22° to conform with the 22½° declination established by Cabot. It has a long coastline, lying north-east — south-west, containing twenty-two names (a number corrupt or incomplete), with five English flags erected at successive points, and culminating with "Sea discovered by the English." If we carry the southern limit of this zone eastward to Europe it extends from approximately 51° 30' in northern Newfoundland to the mouth of the Garonne suggested as the southern limit to the voyage by John Day (this ignores the fact that the western side of the map is on a larger scale than the eastern and passes over the fact that the Old World is not only on a smaller scale but is indeed a separate map). Many theories have been put forward as to the origin of the depiction on the map. It seems least unlikely that it was based on John Day's unscaled sketch chart, which had been recopied and modified as a result. Many of the names are corrupt but "Lisarte" is near enough to Cornwall's Lizard to be convincingly English.

There is a second problem which has dominated most discussions of the landing. In 1541 Sebastian Cabot, then pilot-major of Spain, was asked to contribute to a world map to be engraved, most probably, in the Netherlands. It duly appeared

in 1544, though only the copy in the Bibliothèque Nationale survives. This contains a series of lengthy legends (they were reprinted separately in a pamphlet extant only in copies in Munich and in the Henry E. Huntington Library). The eighth legend appeared to mark the point of Cabot's 1497 landing, namely near Cape Breton. This has been the basis for the "southern landing" theory ever since Cabot's voyage began to be seriously studied early in the nineteenth century. In translation it reads "this land was discovered by John Cabot, the Venetian and Sebastian Cabot his son in the year of the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ 1494 (a possible mis-reading by the engraver of Cabot's 7) on the 24th of June in the morning to which they gave the name First Land Seen (*Prima Tierra Vista*) to a large island which is near the said land they gave the name Saint John because it has been discovered on the same day." On John Day's reckoning the island would have been Belle Isle as already indicated. If we accept John Day's letter, with its northern landfall, we should ask why Sebastian should have placed the landfall south of Newfoundland. The answer may lie in Cabot's position of chief pilot of Spain in relation to Spanish interest in Newfoundland. By 1540 Basques were prominent in the Newfoundland cod-fishery and had become interested in the possibility of whale fishing in the Strait of Belle Isle. Selma Barkham reckons that the establishment of the first whaling shore-base there took place about 1543, and that soon after the Spaniards were calling the whole island and southern Labrador "La Provincia de Terra Nova." Occupying the post that he did, Sebastian was in a dilemma as he must not appear to place on the map anything which would cause hostile comment in Spain, yet would wish to record his part in the Cabot discovery of 1497 so that a location of the first landing to the south of Newfoundland seemed necessary. This might appear to be a wild speculation but it is strongly supported by a more northerly depiction. Sebastian had always maintained that he had traversed the opening of a Northwest Passage in 1508-9 (he had even attempted in 1521 to break his Spanish connections and offer the rulers and merchants of England to lead an expedition to Asia by it but had been rebuffed). We can be certain that his preference would be to show such a passage on the world map. Instead he shows, north of Labrador, merely the outflow of a river coming from the west rather than a passage, in deference to official Spanish hostility to any discussion of such a project. This explanation of the southern landing may help to clarify why Sebastian's placing of the landing differs so much from John Day's. If so, he cannot have anticipated the problems he would cause to later historians and politicians.

Of the new books I have seen the only one which is clear and accurate as far as it attempts to go is Peter Firstbrook, *The Voyage of the Matthew* (London and Toronto, 1997) which has already been reviewed in these pages. Alan Williams' *John Cabot and Newfoundland* (Newfoundland Historical Society, 1997) is a sprightly and effective pamphlet, which compresses much of the known material into 64 pages though in spite of the clear statement of the Day letter on the wind (east-north-east) and direction taken by the *Matthew* takes Cabot farther north

before bringing him down to the latitude of northern Newfoundland. But it is a good introduction. Finally there is Peter E. Pope, *The Many Landfalls of John Cabot* (Toronto, 1997). He strongly denies that Sebastian could have accompanied his father in 1497, but he ignores the royal grant made to him on April 3, 1505, "In virtue of his service done unto us in and about the finding of de Newe Founde lands," which, in my opinion, covers the whole period from 1497 to 1504. Moreover he insists that Cabot sailed into an Atlantic where westerly winds were invariable. In fact it was only the easterlies of late spring and early summer which enabled Cabot to sail westerly in reasonably good time, and rendered the later cod fishery to take off early in the year. By late July it is clear the westerlies were dominant again and enabled him to make his remarkable fifteen-day voyage from Newfoundland to Brittany on his return. But his chapter on John Cabot is only a prelude to his book (pp. 11-42). His chapter on Sebastian we need not linger on further: it is at least a little confused, but then Sebastian was a confusing figure. The bulk of the book is concerned with the public history of the Cabot voyage. He works through a very large amount of material from later historians and politicians, which is a valuable indication of what historians can do when evidence is so slight as it was before the Day letter appeared. Most entertainingly, he discusses the 1897 celebrations. The Maritimes and the Dominion of Canada held to Sebastian's 1545 location of the landfall while Newfoundland, then a separate self-governing colony, found a historian, D. W. Prowse, who wrote the classic history of Newfoundland, and who found Cape Bonavista on John Mason's *Map of Newfoundland* (1625) with the inscription "*C Bona Vist a Caboto primam reperta*" (reproduced on p. 74), which has still remained the officially accepted landfall site. It was certainly easier of access than Cape Bauld and was used with acclamation on June 24, 1997. The rivals did not quite go to war in 1897 and by 1997 the Newfoundlanders were dominant; there were still stirrings in the Maritimes but on a small scale. The major part of the book is a discussion of the whole question of tradition and the nature of anniversaries associated with it. He treats the subject critically and in detail, and in his last chapter makes the lynch-pin of his attack the whole question of "discovery" and the myths associated with it. This is both interesting and thoroughly researched.

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