

The Voyage of the Matthew, John Cabot and the Discovery of North America. Peter Firstbrook.

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The Voyage of the Matthew, John Cabot and the Discovery of North America.

Peter Firstbrook. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1997. 192 pp., cloth, colour photographs, maps, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 0-7710-3121-1.

PETER POPE

THE FOLKLORIST GERRY Pocius observed in June, 1997, that the Cabot commemoration in 1997 revolved around the *Matthew*. We celebrated the ship as much as we celebrated her master, or what this book calls, loosely, "discovery."

Peter Firstbrook is a producer for BBC television Bristol, who created a popular TV special on the Cabot voyages. This volume is, in a sense, the book of the movie. Like the TV special, it is structured around the design, building and sailing of the modern *Matthew*. Firstbrook has aimed at a general audience and takes pains to explain, often in brief sidebars, the late medieval context of Cabot's voyage. The book is exceptionally well-illustrated, with historic paintings, maps and colour photographs of the contemporary *Matthew*, on the stocks and at sea. The text examines Cabot's world, his probable itinerary in 1497 and provides a sensationalistic but not implausible account of his disappearance in 1498. It also examines the challenges facing Bristol's International Festival of the Sea organizers when they decided to commemorate Cabot with a recreation of his vessel.

Firstbrook is at his best dealing with the modern *Matthew*. His own experience as a sailor compliments his journalistic skills, as he outlines the challenges facing Colin Mudie in designing a recreation of a small late-medieval vessel. (This was a recreation, not a replica, for no plan or description of the original *Matthew* survives.) Exposition of the actual building phase is clear and the description of sailing Mudie's *Matthew* is, let us say, tactful. The discussion of latitude observations with a medieval astrolabe is typical of Firstbrook's explanatory skills, pro-

viding a comprehensible practical discussion, with a significant point: modern experimentation suggests Cabot would have been able to fix his latitude within 50 kilometers, north or south. This is thought-provoking for those of us who read John Day's Letter to Columbus as a reliable source for the latitudes Cabot believed he had visited (roughly Cape Bauld to Cape Breton).

Firstbrook's John Cabot is less satisfying. As with the ship, so with the man: the navigator in this book is an imaginative recreation rather than a replica; and we are often in the realm of myth rather than history. This is a close-up of an obscure man about whom we actually know very little: in other words, something bankable for purposes of television production. Thus our mariner appears, colourfully, as "Giovanni Caboto," although extant records call him Zuan or Johann. We are repeatedly told that he was a Genoan, although this rests on convention and a single source. (Firstbrook's assertion that Sebastian Cabot calls his father Genoan is incorrect.) Some errors may be editorial blunders, for example the claim that Day's real name was Say. (112) (Say is either an alias or, just as likely, a misreading.) The implication that Cabot named Bonavista (142) may also fall in this category, as do other minor errors irritating for Newfoundland readers: "Greats Cove" (125) and "Hawanahdit," last of the Beothuks. (88) Other errors simply result from the uncritical acceptance of historical tradition, for example the undocumented assertion that the French put a bounty on Beothuks. (88)

There are a few larger issues which readers may find problematic. Perhaps the most astoundingly uncritical thing in the book is the seriousness with which Firstbrook treats the late Captain Jack Dodd's fanciful account of a lost Irish manuscript recording Cabot's voyage to Flatrock. It makes good myth, it would probably make good television but that doesn't make it history. The text also suffers from the kind of eclecticism typical of television journalism, for it rarely sticks to one subject for long. Some extraneous matter is covered: the Bayeux tapestry springs to mind. The final chapter turns to a discussion of European appropriation of the Americas, which is a commendable choice of theme in a book about "Discovery." The portentous discussion that follows ends up being more or less irrelevant to the rest of the book, for it focuses on the peoples of Central and South America. Firstbrook thus avoids the complex issues of European dominance and displacement in our neck of the woods by dealing with conquest somewhere else.

There is, nevertheless, plenty here to interest the average reader. The book will give new life to many traditions and may even mark the invention of new ones. Nor is this really a criticism, for this is a memorial publication, in other words, a coffee-table book. It has a more literate text than most and is produced at a modest size, making it an espresso-coffee table book, as it were. Firstbrook's *Matthew* is an attractive package, nicely turned out, "ship-shape and Bristol fashion."