
The Discovery of Newfoundland

—BY—

JOHN CABOT

—IN—

1497

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THE DISCOVERY OF NEWFOUNDLAND BY JOHN CABOT IN 1497.

ON the 24th June, 1897, four centuries will have elapsed since John Cabot with an English crew from Bristol discovered Newfoundland, and also the coast of North East America. In the Dominion of Canada and in Newfoundland preparations are now being made to celebrate this great event. Around this famous voyage there is no such halo of romance as surrounds the glorious exploit of Columbus, but for the English speaking people the expedition of his Genoese compatriot has had more far-reaching consequences, and more direct influence on our race than the ever memorable discovery of the new world. It gave North America to the English by an indefeasible title—the right of discovery—and above all, it afforded an outlet for the pent-up energy of a great insular people. The first rill of that great stream of maritime enterprise and mighty commerce which now over-spreads the world began to flow in the Newfoundland trade and fishery. The little vessels that sailed from the West of England to the new world were the founders of Greater Britain beyond the seas, the makers of a great Colonial Empire. From the discovery of Newfoundland by the English may directly be traced the modern expansion of England, her vast commerce, her maritime supremacy. The great De Witt says: “The navy of England became formidable by the discovery of the inexpressibly rich fishing bank of Newfoundland.” The most illustrious naval authority in the Tudor age, Raleigh, says, “the Newfoundland fishery was the mainstay and support of the western counties (then the great

maritime centre of England) and "that if any accident should happen to the Newfoundland fleet it would be the greatest misfortune that could befall England."

As we can see from the records, the fishing and trading to Newfoundland begun in 1498 by poor traders and fishing skippers like Bradley and Thirkall, was soon taken up by merchants like Master Grubes, of Plymouth, (whose vessels are mentioned by Rut) and by shipowners like Master Cotton, of Southampton, in whose fine vessel our gallant Whitbourne first sailed to the Island.

We are fully convinced that Newfoundland was the first part of North America seen by Cabot on his great voyage of discovery, and in this paper we shall endeavour to set forth shortly the grounds on which we base our claim.

Historians and antiquarians are still discussing the numerous portraits of Columbus; neither his exact likeness nor his landfall has yet been definitely settled, and so it has fared with Cabot. Three places in North-east America claim the honour of being the first point on which he planted the banner of England and the Standard of Venice, —Labrador, Cape Breton and Newfoundland. To arrive at a true and satisfactory solution of this much discussed question we must be guided by principles and rely on sound historical evidence; all gossiping and unreliable statements made by the mendacious Sebastian Cabot and others years after the event must be eliminated from the enquiry, reliance should only be placed on unquestioned contemporary documents relating to this first voyage written immediately after John Cabot's landing in Bristol, August 5th, 1497.

We must also confine our enquiry entirely to the first voyage, which was simply a voyage of discovery; much confusion has arisen through mixing up the first with the second expedition. For the first voyage the only records that have come down to us and on which we can safely rely are the letters written by the Italians soon after Cabot's return, the official records mainly from the Privy Purse accounts of

Henry VII., and Ayala the Spanish Envoy's letters to Ferdinand and Isabella. We must also bear in mind the primitive navigation of those early days, the clumsy ships, the imperfect nautical instruments, and the leisurely way in which these ancient mariners sailed their vessels, to use a West of England phrase, they were beasts of burthen and not birds of passage—unlike the ocean tramps of our day that run ashore every season through neglect of the lead, the mediæval mariner went by latitude, lead and look-out on dark nights, and in bad weather he lay-to; on a wind he went to leeward like a log. You could not, for such a vessel at that time lay down a straight course on the Atlantic. If Cabot, as the Italians say, had gone north from Ireland and then sailed west, he would undoubtedly in a direct course have made the land at Northern Labrador; but he did not go a straight course, he was driven up and down by light E. and N.E. winds early in May, and, when approaching the land, if the nights were dark or foggy, he would lay-to, and, probably during three days passing across the Labrador current, which extends in June from 250 to 300 miles from Newfoundland, his vessel would be drifting south. Cartier, on the same course, made Cape Bonavista, and John Cabot might make the land anywhere from Belle Isle to Cape Race, though it is probable he would, like Cartier, come up with the great auks off the Funk Islands, and knowing from the appearance of these birds, which had very short wings and could not fly, that he was near the land, he would boldly strike in and make a landfall as Cartier did at Bonavista. It is quite clear that on this westerly course he must have made land somewhere on the Labrador or on the east coast of Newfoundland; to pass all this long line of coast extending north and south 1,200 miles, and then to make Cape Breton, is wildly improbable, if not impossible. There are two other very strong points against the Cape Breton theory; one is the name Cape Breton, which appears in the very earliest maps; no one can doubt that this designation

was given by French fishermen, who were amongst the very first to visit North America; there is no trace of Cabot and his discovery in this name. The other is the undoubted fact that Cape Bretou was not known to be an island, and its insular character is not shewn in any map for forty years after Cabot's landfall. It was not frequented by European fishermen until long after Cabot's voyage, and there are no names on its coast beyond Cape Breton marked on any map prior to 1540.

The claims of Labrador may, we think, be summarily disposed of. All the references in the earliest accounts of the voyage are to an *Island* or Islands. Moreover, Soncino, writing to the Duke of Milan Dec. 18th, 1497, says: "The land is excellent and the climate temperate." Reference is also made to trees on the coast and to the abundance of fish. No discoverer would refer to a great peninsula like Labrador as an island. The great codfishery does not begin until July and its bleak and rugged shores could never be described as wooded or beautiful and pleasant.

That Newfoundland was the land discovered will admit of very little doubt if we carefully examine the scanty records which have come down to us about John Cabot's first voyage. He arrived in Bristol early in August, 1497, from the first expedition. On August 10th there is an entry in the Privy Purse expenses, "To hym that found the *new Isle*, £10. April 1st, 1498, "A reward of £2 to James Carter for going to the *new Isle*. "To Launcelot Thirkil, of London, upon a prest for his shipp going towards the *new Islande*, 22 March, 1498, £20. "April 1st, 1498. To Thomas Bradley and Launcelot Thirkill, going to the *new Isle*, £30."

Ayala, in his letter of July, 1498, writes, "The Genoese went on his course . . . I believe the distance is not 400 leagues, and I told him that I thought they were the *Islands* discovered by your Highness."

In his long and amusing letter Soncino says, "He (Cabot) departed in a little ship from Bristol with 18 persons, pass-

no ice mentions on the voyage
comes not have made Labrador

ing Ibernica (Ireland) more to the west, and ascending towards the north, he began to navigate the eastern part of the ocean, leaving for some time the north to the right hand and having wandered enough he came at last to firm land where he planted the Royal banners, took possession for his Highness, made certain marks and returned. . . . The sea is full of fish . . . and the Englishmen, his partners, say that they can bring so many fish that the Kingdom will have no more business with Islanda (Iceland) and that from this country there will be a very great trade in the fish they call stock fish," (dried codfish) a very safe prediction, and which was certainly fulfilled. We must bear in mind that Cabot made the land on the 24th June.

Now this is the time of the "caplin school" in our Island, the very height of the codfishery. Nowhere in the world is there such an abundance of the lordly cod as on the East coast of Newfoundland at this particular season.

It has been clearly shewn that the very first result of the discovery of Newfoundland was the dropping of the great Iceland codfishery from Bristol, an immense rise in the dry fish trade, and an increase of barrelled fish, all of which came from the *new Isle* (Newfoundland). In Pasqualigo's letter of 23rd August, 1497, he says that Cabot coasted for 300 leagues and landed; he saw no human beings whatever, but he has brought hither to the King certain snares which had been set to catch game, and a needle for making nets; he also found some felled trees, . . . coming back he saw two Islands to starboard . . . It is quite clear that as Cabot and his companions described the newly discovered country as an Island he must have coasted all around it, and 300 leagues, 900 miles, would cover almost the exact distance required to circumnavigate Newfoundland, coming round from the Straits of Belle Isle to Cape Ray he would see St. Paul's and catch a glimpse of the highlands of Cape Breton, or else, if he hugged the shore right along the South coast he would see St. Pierre and Miquelon to starboard. It

would take the explorer fully three weeks to coast around Newfoundland. From Cape Race, with the westerly winds prevailing in July, he would reach Ireland in fourteen or or fifteen days. This calculation will account for the time he spent between the 24th June and 5th August, the date of his arrival in Bristol.

It is quite clear from these records, how the voyage was carried out, they made a great detour to the north on the outward voyage, and so the distance run was 700 leagues, or 2,100 miles, but having found the new Isle, and knowing its latitude and position, they made a straight run home from Newfoundland to Ireland.

There are three facts brought out very clearly by these records—

First,—That the newly discovered land was an island abounding in fish ;

Secondly,—That it lay to the westward of Ireland, and was not distant from it more than about 1,600 miles. Soncino is specific, and says it will only take 15 days if fortune favours from Ibernica. 100 to 120 miles a day was about the usual day's run of these ancient vessels. Ayala, who wished to shew his Sovereign, Ferdinand of Spain, how near was the new island, says it is not more than 400 leagues; now the Spanish league varies from three to five miles, and if we take the average at four miles to the league, this will give almost the exact distance between Newfoundland and Cape Clear in Ireland—1,690 miles ;

Thirdly,—The island they had found was the island they were returning to in 1498, and for this purpose Cabot and his companions Thirkall, Bradley, Carter, &c., were fitting out a fishing expedition in April, 1498. It is a matter of history that they did fish in Newfoundland, and our island was the only part of N. E. America known to the European world resorted to by English and foreign fishermen for the next thirty years. The Portuguese, it is alleged, came here in 1501, at the very beginning of the 16th cen-

ture; our harbours had distinct names, names which have survived to this day; in 1506 Jean Denys refers to Renewes. Mr. Harrisse found in the Paris National Library the following record: "Let a note be made of the mark of my boats and barks which I leave in Newfoundland in the haven of Jean Denys, called Rongnoust (Renews). As Mr. Justin Winsor pertinently remarks, for the first thirty years after the discovery the sole cartography of North America is the east coast of Newfoundland.

If any further corroboration were necessary to shew that Newfoundland was the first land discovered in N. E. America we can point to the inscription on the portrait of Sebastian Cabot, painted by Holbein in the reign of Elizabeth—at that time, what are now Canada and the Maritime Provinces, had distinct names, our island alone was called Newfoundland—it described Sebastian as the son of the discoverer of Newfoundland.

No Newfoundlander will have any question about its being Newfoundland when he learns from the records that the first fishermen going out to the new Isle got supplies for the voyage from no less a person than Henry the Seventh. The first Tudor sovereign was a keen trader, and there is very little doubt that poor Launcelot Thirkall and Bradley had to pay up heavily in the fall for the Royal monarch's outfit and advance.

Long before the discovery of America England had carried on a great trade and fishery in Iceland; they were always subject to restrictions by the King of Denmark; they had to pay rent for their temporary booths erected on the land; many foreign vessels competed with them, and the English fishing fleet were often plundered by daring Scotch pirates. By the fortunate voyage of Cabot Englishmen suddenly found themselves lords over a country entirely different from treeless Iceland, abounding in timber, game and wild fruit, and with an abundance of fish such as had never been known before in Iceland or elsewhere. In this new Isle

they were lords of all they surveyed. When the foreign fishermen found out this piscatorial gold mine, as they did immediately, the English lorded it over the strangers; it was their own island and every Portuguese and Frenchman must submit to their authority, and so, as we learn from the old chronicles, every foreign ship had to furnish the island rulers with boat loads of salt, and wines and fruits for the Sunday feast and lordly spree that inaugurated the appointment of each new English fishing Admiral and Ruler.

If it is admitted that Newfoundland was the first land seen by Cabot, all probabilities point to Cape Bonavista as the first point on our Coast discovered by the great Genoese sailor. An unbroken tradition of four centuries points to Bonavista as his landfall, certified moreover by two maps, one made by John Mason, Governor of Newfoundland, a Captain in the Royal Navy afterwards, Treasurer of the British Navy, and the founder of New Hampshire; the other constructed by the celebrated French explorer and Geographer Dupont, both were published about 1625, but they had been prepared much earlier, Dupont's about 1605 and Mason's about 1617 or 1618. Mason marks on Cape Bonavista "*a Caboto primum reperta*."—First found by Cabot. And Dupont has written in red ink near Cape Bonavista, "*prima inventa*," first found, and has also placed outside of Cape Bonavista an island of St. Marc.

These two maps make it quite clear that little more than one hundred years after the event, and when men were alive who had known Cabot and his companions, the tradition and belief common to both English and French sailors was in Cape Bonavista as Cabot's landfall; strongly corroborative also are the names of King's Cove, the first good Harbour inside the Cape, and the adjoining Cove named Keels. In the foreign maps King's Cove is named the Royal Port, here in all probability Cabot erected the Royal Arms of England and the emblem of Venice. Keels, or Keel's strand, was the name given by the old mariners to the first place where the

keel of their boat grated on the shore; it was their practice not to bring their vessels too close into unto unknown shores, but to send out their great boat and sound and explore the new coasts before venturing to come close in with the land. Bonavista is the landfall usually made by vessels coming to Newfoundland from Scotland and the North of Europe; it was the landfall of Cartier in his celebrated voyage.

The name Bonavista given in very early maps, and Buonaventura and Buonaventura Island, placed on this prominent headland and the Island off the Cape, are very clear indications that this point was Cabot's landfall, no where else in North America is there a Cape Bonavista or a Cape Bonaventura. The names Bonavista, oh! happy sight; Bonaventura, or happy find, are just the names the old explorer would give as coming from his long tempest tossed voyage over unknown seas; he first beheld the bold headland bright and green with the springing verdure of June.

W. H. Prowse

NOTES.

THE early cartography of North America corroborates the view that John Cabot's landfall was Newfoundland. The Cantino map of 1502 shews unmistakably the deeply indented east coast of Newfoundland; both in this very archaic chart and the Schoner globe, which shews Cortereal's voyage of 1501, Newfoundland is placed in fairly correct latitude west and somewhat to the south of Ireland, the 50th parallel of north latitude is drawn from Cape Clear and passes through the centre of the new Island.

The following extracts from the accounts of Henry VII., shew that the voyages to the new Island were followed up, and that there were continuous expeditions going to Newfoundland:—

1502.—Sep. 30.—To the merchants of Bristol that have been in the Newe-Founde-Launde, £20.

1503.—Nov. 7.—To one that brought hawkes from the Newfounde Island, £1.

1504.—April 8.—To a Preste that goeth to the new Islande, £2.