Navigating the Age of Exploration

*by Ted Widmer*

Two thousand and seven seems a worthy year to reappraise the Age of Exploration, and not merely because a season of anniversaries is upon us. Of course, Jamestown’s 400th was widely publicized, thanks to a number of new books and exhibitions, and regal visits from President Bush and Queen Elizabeth. But this is also the 500th anniversary of the Waldseemüller map, the first document to use the word “America,” planted squarely over Brazil in 1511. Coming up quickly are the 400th anniversaries of two communities that are just as American as Jamestown, but couldn’t be more different—Quebec (founded in 1608 by Samuel de Champlain) and Santa Fe (settled circa 1608 by Juan Martinez de Montoya).

If these historical rhymes create a temporary surge of excitement, they also present a conundrum for the teacher of American history. How exactly does an outlier like Champlain fit into our discipline, with its neatly marked temporal and geographical boundaries? If the class in question is US history, then Champlain instantly becomes marginal. How many brave instructors are teaching a full continental and hemispheric perspective? The answer, one suspects, is very small. There are a scattering of courses, at the university level, on “The Atlantic World,” but that term is a bit of a misnomer when applied to places like Peru or Puget Sound. The first English settlers of North America were intensely aware of their French and Spanish neighbors—yet we seem barely to be.

But the questions that vex us can also be the most intriguing. Today, we cannot make a cell phone call without revealing our precise GPS coordinates. But in the Age of Exploration, hardly anyone knew exactly where they were, or whose claims encompassed what territory. That ignorance was an essential fact of American history, and conveniently allowed settlers to roam where they would—well beyond where they were permitted to. Who can precisely say where the West was in, say, 1700? Deerfield? Albany? Lake Superior? California? Why is it that US history books always tell us that the first slaves were brought in 1619 (to Jamestown), when they were in Spanish Florida well before that? In fact, Jamestown was not even the first European settlement on that site—the Spanish had built one of their own in 1570, just a few miles north.

HIDE FULL ESSAY

Should we not, in the spirit of the explorers, try to stretch our boundaries a bit? To expand the geography of American history does more than enlarge our space—it changes the story itself. To spend more time in the century before Jamestown, and to reflect on all of the non-Jamestowns that were also beginning, offers a way to deepen our history considerably. Best, it brings back our polyphony, and the glorious sound of people speaking in a huge range of European and indigenous languages about what it means to be American.

Of course, the “Age of Exploration” is not entirely terra incognita. In the early republic, this was one of the subjects that US historians were quickest to plumb, from Joel Barlow to Washington Irving to Francis Parkman. The year 1492 is probably the most famous date in American history, memorized in rhyming couplets by millions of schoolchildren every year. Could anyone be more famous than Columbus? Even lesser explorers—Verrazano, Champlain—have enormous objects named after them. Pirates never seem to go out of fashion, as Johnny Depp is reminding us again this summer, and the ongoing popularity of *Survivor* indicates that we have not entirely lost touch with the reality show that was early American history.

Yet it is remarkable how little we know, after all of these centuries, about the specific explorers themselves, or where they were trying to go, or their impact when they arrived. It could even be argued that we know less than we did a generation ago. In 1992, many expressed ambivalence over the propriety of celebrating the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ landing in the New World, and the very word “discover” has an uncomfortable air for many, reeking of Eurocentrism. But surely there are ways to encompass these concerns and recognize the discoveries as the extraordinary achievements of courage and knowledge that they were. Before Columbus, the Atlantic was the Mare Tenebrosum, or Sea of Darkness, on most maps. Now, it takes five hours to fly across. We should never entirely forget the fear that there might be nothing on the other side.

Fortunately, we have tools to fight against ignorance, just as they did. There is no shortage of materials for those who wish to look into the first chapter of American history. The ancient maps and manuscripts are lovingly preserved in places like the John Carter Brown Library, the Newberry, the Huntington, and the Library of Congress, where Waldseemüller’s map resides (1000 were printed—this lone orphan survives). And of course, they live on in the European repositories, both princely and public, where all facts about the New World were sent, year after year, to satisfy an insatiable curiosity about America.

Patient sifting through these records offers numerous rewards to the diligent. It confirms that what we see as inevitable “history” often felt highly tentative to those involved at the time. What would have happened if the Pilgrims had settled in Guyana, as they contemplated, rather than Plymouth? Or if the natives had not been decimated by disease at precisely the moment of the Pilgrims’ arrival? Surely fortune was smiling on these early experiments. But there was more to it than a few bits of good luck (dice are among the many artifacts that have been excavated at Jamestown). The discovery and settlement of the New World was a vast collective enterprise, embracing forms of knowledge from a thousand traditions. Every journey across the Atlantic brought back improvements to the science of navigation, allowing explorers to pull the veil back a little further. Every moment of contact with the inhabitants of the Americas brought deeper understanding of flora and fauna, which revolutionized the way Europeans ate, drank, and looked at the world (often, after 1492, through tobacco smoke). Without doubt, much of this knowledge was purchased with extraordinary violence, a fact that the early historians were loath to explore. Some are still loath to embrace that truth. Only this spring, the Pope raised a tempest throughout South America when he gave a speech in Brazil that claimed the natives were “silently longing” for Christianity before it was presented to them—and that this was in no way “the imposition of a foreign culture.”

A close study of the Age of Exploration is rewarding in other ways as well. For one thing, it gives the lie to one of the prevailing assumptions of American history—that we are a new people, inhabiting a new world. A quick glance at the publication that announced Columbus’s discovery—the Epistola of 1493—makes it clear that he was in many ways closer to the Middle Ages than to our own time. In fact, the primitive woodcut that purported to show his arrival in the Indies was borrowed from another book, about a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. On the day that President Bush visited Jamestown, in May, an object was dislodged from the ground, and it turned out to be a metal sword hilt, ca. 1590—an object that seemed as Arthurian as American.

Too often, we historians tend to tell our story with the knowledge of the end result to come—the creation of an enormously powerful nation called the United States. But it is strangely liberating to look at the old maps, and see the vast stretches not-yet-filled-in, and populated instead with mermaids and unicorns and other figments of Europe’s overheated imagination. Champlain’s earliest and supposedly scientific renderings of the New World include a large winged dragon, ready to take flight. Well into the eighteenth century, maps of the Atlantic continued to include completely fictitious islands that had been legends for centuries, but never existed—the Sunken Land of Buss, St. Brendan’s Isle, Hy-Brazil, the Island of the Seven Cities, and a dozen others.

Each age writes history for its own reasons, and another reason to go back to this older past is to see how much of the present we can find there. Environmental history is rapidly rising in popularity as a consequence of our growing anxiety over climate change. Nature is ubiquitous in the Age of Exploration—the cold snaps that drove Europeans (especially English) to leave their home countries, the diseases and foods and medicines that were instantly exchanged upon contact, and the species loss that resulted. All bear further investigation, by scientists as well as historians.

In a similar manner, it may surprise a new generation of researchers to learn how much of Islam can be found in the Age of Exploration. Not only in the debt to Arab astronomers and geographers, which was considerable, but in the way that new commodities found in the Americas (silver) altered traditional trade patterns between Europe and the Ottoman Empire.

Finally, the Age of Exploration can help restore something that we are perhaps unaware that we have lost in the cynical twenty-first century: our capacity for astonishment. The discovery of the New World was many things to many people—liberating, tyrannical, cruel, and generous, all at the same time. But there is no doubt that it was immense, and set in motion a pendulum that will never stop swinging. At the end of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald’s narrator steps back to imagine his Long Island setting as it would have appeared centuries earlier, to the first explorers:

And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

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http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/exploration/essays/navigating-age-exploration