

Thomas Dunbabin

SEVEN - BORN JOHN CABOT

SEVEN CITIES CLAIMED to be the birthplace of Homer. John Cabot, who made his last voyage in 1498, and Columbus, who died in 1506, long tied for second place with six reputed birthplaces each. Today Cabot is one ahead of Columbus and equal with Homer.

Cabot, who was the finder if not the founder of English Canada, sailed in a Bristol ship and with a Bristol crew. The birthplaces assigned to him before the latest discovery were: (1) England, probably in Bristol; (2) the Channel Islands, whence came the ancestors of the Boston Cabots; (3) France, where the contemporary Admiral Chabot was later the patron of Jacques Cartier; (4) Spain (Catalonia); (5) Genoa; (6) Chioggia, near Venice.

In 1956 a claim was made that John Cabot was born at Gaeta, a seaside town fifty miles north of Naples. This claim has the qualified support of the notable Italian scholar, Dr. Roberto Almagia, in his work celebrating the four-hundredth anniversary of the death of John Cabot's son Sebastian, which was published at Venice and has not yet been translated into English.

"Great men spring from little places", said the local grocer at Lutjegast near Gröningen. He was speaking to me of the notable Dutch navigator, Abel Tasman (1603-57), born in that landlocked village. Gaeta, which was relatively more important in the fifteenth century, is now a quiet place with 4,500 inhabitants. Its records show that the Cabotos were a leading family there from about 1200 until well into the fifteenth century. The last Cabot to be mentioned there is Giovanni Caboto, who is referred to in a document dated November 27, 1443.

Dr. Almagia points out that there was a great earthquake at Gaeta in 1456. This may have led the Cabots to leave the place. Or they may have been exiled in a political purge that King Alfonso of Naples carried out at Gaeta about this time.

If our Cabot had been domiciled in Venice for the normal term of fifteen

years before he was nationalized on March 30, 1476, he was a Venetian citizen five years after the earthquake. If he was in fact a native of Gaeta, he was the only world-famous navigator to come from southern Italy. While most authorities maintain that John Cabot was a native of Genoa, Dr. Almagia points out that there are no records of Cabotos at or near Genoa in the fifteenth century. There were, however, both Cabutos and Gabotos at Savona near Genoa.

As for Chioggia, twenty-five miles south of Venice, it seems unlikely that Cabot would have needed to be naturalized if he had been born there. Dr. Almagia says that documents show that in 1484 John Cabot owned at Chioggia two houses, two saltworks, and a meadow. His connection with Chioggia, or the island on which it stands, was close. He then lived in Venice with his wife Mattea, who was apparently a Venetian, and two sons. Dr. Almagia believes that Sebastian was one of the two sons, and states that he was born in 1480 or 1482. Dr. J. A. Williamson states in *The Ocean in English History* (1948) that Sebastian was born in 1485. Sebastian does not help the historians. Giving his age on various occasions as a witness in law-suits in Spain, he indicated four birth-years, ranging from 1479 to 1488.

Claims that John Cabot was born in Catalonia seem to be based on the fact that the name Cabot, or Caboto, is found there, and Dr. Almagia thinks that John Cabot may, in fact, have lived in Spain for some years. Documents quoted in 1956 in *La Revista de las Indias* speak of Juan Caboto Montecalayo, a Venetian, who lived at Valencia between 1490 and 1493. King Ferdinand of Aragon mentioned, in a letter dated November 27, 1492, that this Cabot had been in Valencia for two years. He had seen the king at Barcelona about a plan, which Ferdinand approved, for building a breakwater at Grao, the Port of Valencia. Another letter from the king, dated February 26, 1493, refers to Cabot and his project. The breakwater turned out badly, and Juan Cabot appears to have left Valencia by the end of 1493.

Like Dr. Almagia, Professor David B. Quinn of the University of Liverpool inclines to the view that this was the Cabot who sailed to Canada in 1497. He is puzzled, however, by the name Montecalayo. He notes that Raimondo Soncino, writing to the Duke of Milan about Cabot's 1497 voyage, speaks of Cabot's "ingenuity"—which might suggest that he had been some kind of engineer.

Columbus, returning from his first West Indian voyage, reached Spain on March 13, 1493. A little later he was received by the Spanish sovereigns at Barcelona. This may have led Cabot to decide, in the hope of emulating or outdoing Columbus, to try his fortune in England. It does not appear, however, that, when his envoys

in London reported on the Cabot voyage, King Ferdinand identified the navigator with Juan Caboto Montecalayo.

Dr. Almagia quotes Agostino Spinola as giving, in a letter to the Duke of Milan, the names of three men who sailed with John Cabot in 1498. The name of one, the priest Giovanni Antonio de Carbonariis from Milan, is known from a letter of Soncino to the Duke. It is just possible that Carbonear in Newfoundland was named after him and that he was the first priest to reach Canada. The other names are Piero Carmeliano and Piero Penech. Carmeliano might be either Spanish or Italian. Possibly he was the barber, or barber-surgeon, from Castiglione near Genoa whom Soncino mentioned as with Cabot in 1497. The name Penech might well be Catalan. For what it is worth, it supports the Montecalayo theory.

While Dr. Almagia asserts that Sebastian Cabot went on the voyage of 1498, if not on that of 1497, this seems to be only a guess, although since by Dr. Almagia's figures Sebastian was sixteen or eighteen in 1498, it is not impossible that he accompanied his father. Dr. Almagia thinks that in 1498 John Cabot came to eastern Canada and then followed the coast down at least as far as 40°N. If so, he probably discovered the harbour of New York, a theory firmly held by David O. True of Miami, Florida, who thinks that Cabot went much farther south.

Although there is no evidence that Cabot ever returned from his 1498 voyage, Dr. Almagia is cautious and does not concede that Cabot was dead before 1501. John Cabot's end is, in fact, as obscure as his beginning. No one knows, for certain, when, how, or where he died. After he had sailed in 1498 the pension of £20 a year that Henry VII had given him for "discovering the New Found Land" was paid at Michaelmas, 1498, and again on March 25, 1499. Presumably it was paid to his wife, who appears to have been living in Bristol. There is no record of any further payment.

With one possible, but very curious, exception the recorded history of John Cabot began on March 30, 1476, when—by 149 votes to none—he was granted naturalization as a citizen of Venice. If he had complied with the normal requirements of residence, he had been domiciled in Venice since 1461. The record of his naturalization was brought to light by Rawdon Brown (1800-1883), an Englishman who settled in Venice in 1830. He lived there for more than fifty years and had a standing commission from Lord Palmerston to look for material in the Archives.

In 1855-56 Rawdon Brown twice set down in writing a statement that he had found evidence that John Cabot was born in England. These notes are in a book that is now, and has been for the past hundred years, in the Boston Public Library. It is a copy of a work entitled *Ragguagli sulla Vita e sulle Opere di Marin' Sanuto*,

which Brown published at Venice in 1835. Tipped in on the frontispiece is a note in which Brown told Mrs. R. A. Apthorp that if she would call at his house he would be glad to present her with evidence that Cabot was born in England, and had in fact never been in Venice until he went there in 1461. And on pages 103-105 of the book is a note by Brown stating that in 1855-56 he had found evidence in documents in the Archives of Venice that Cabot had been born in England and came to Venice in 1461.

Mrs. Robert A. Apthorp of Boston visited Italy with her husband and son in 1856. It seems likely that Brown gave her the book and that she brought it to Boston. It came to the Boston Public Library as part of the collection of 20,000 volumes left by the will of Theodore Parker, who died on May 10, 1861. Presumably Mrs. Apthorp gave the book to Parker, who was a good Italian scholar, and whose wife, by the way, had been Lydia Cabot. Rawdon Brown does not seem to have left any other record about Cabot's English birth. Nor is there anything to indicate what was the evidence to which he refers so confidently in the letter to Mrs. Apthorp and in the footnote.

There is a record of a sea-captain named Cabot in Bristol in the reign of Henry VI (1422-71). What may be variations of the name appear in the Bristol records about 1450. If John Cabot was in fact a native of Bristol, this explains why he went there to seek support in his venture into the Western Ocean.

There is nothing to indicate the date of Cabot's birth. If he was twenty-one when naturalized, he was born not later than 1440. It is not clear that this was the case. A date as early as 1425 has been given, in which case Cabot was seventy-two when he made his voyage of 1497. It seems highly improbable that he was nearly so old. When it comes to the date of his death, the nearest to any kind of contemporary evidence appears to be a statement in Polydore Vergil's *Historia Anglicana* that Cabot's ship went to the bottom of the ocean and that he went with it. This presumably happened in 1498. This statement, which does not appear in the published book, issued at Basel in 1533, was found in the Vatican MS. of Polydore Vergil's *Historia*. Although the date is not made very clear, it was presumably 1498.

Polydore Vergil was not in England in 1498 or 1499. He had been there before, and a little later he settled down to live there for thirty years, becoming a kind of official historiographer who received favours from Henry VII and Henry VIII.

The omission from the published work of the Cabot passage, as found in the Vatican MS., is puzzling. For other omissions there may well have been politi-

cal reasons, sometimes connected with Henry VIII's break with the Pope. No such reasoning, as far as can be seen, applies to the note on Cabot's death.

There have been various attempts to explain the mystery of John Cabot's end. It has been suggested that in 1498 Cabot sailed right down the American coast and reached the West Indies. It is anyone's guess what might have happened if he did. One guess is that he changed his name and entered the Spanish service, as did his son Sebastian in 1512. His ship may have been lost, or the Spaniards may have sunk her.

When Alonso de Ojeda sailed to the West Indies in 1501, the Spanish sovereigns instructed him to set up marks of Spanish sovereignty along the coast of Tierra Ferme (Venezuela) and to ward off any English intruders. The passage is too vague to build up any strong theory about a Cabot voyage into the Caribbean.

Arthur Davies, Professor of Geography at the University of Exeter, drew a touching if not completely convincing picture of John Cabot and his son Sancius, at the end of their last voyage, being cast ashore, living or dead, on the coast of Newfoundland. He set this out in a paper entitled "The Last Voyage of John Cabot and the Rock at Grates Cove", given to the geographical section of the British Association, meeting in Bristol on September 6, 1955.

Cabot sailed with five ships in 1498. Two were Bristol ships which were presumably under Cabot's direct command. Three were vessels that Henry VII pressed into the service. From the records of payments they seem to have been owned by Lancelot Thirkill of London, Thomas Bradley, and John Carter. The master of one of Thirkill's ships appears to have been William Strickland of Marske in Yorkshire. Professor Davies says that the ships were provisioned for a year and concludes that this means that the voyage was expected to last through the winter of 1498-99. One vessel was damaged by a storm and put into an Irish port. Its men reported that after rounding the south of Ireland Cabot set a course to the northwest. Dr. Davies thinks that the other vessels probably parted company and went to Iceland while Cabot kept on to the westward with his two vessels. The story of the turkeys, to be mentioned later, suggests that this was not so.

Accepting the assertion of Polydore Vergil about the sinking of Cabot's ship, Davies concludes that this disaster took place off the Newfoundland coast; but he doubts whether, as Vergil says, Cabot went down with the ship. He notes that in 1501 the Portuguese navigator Corte Real brought to Lisbon fifty Indians, probably captured on the east coast of Newfoundland. One of these Indians had a broken gilt sword, and an Indian boy had in his ear a gold earring of Venetian make. The sword, he thinks, had been John Cabot's while the earring belonged to John's son

Sancius. He says that if the earring had come from a man it would have been worn by an Indian man. As it was worn by a boy it must, according to Indian custom, have come from a boy. It may seem that we do not know nearly enough about the customs of the Beothuks of Newfoundland, if these "Indians" were Beothuks, to be sure of this. Sancius, according to Dr. Davies, was then fourteen. If he were the youngest son, as has been assumed from the fact that he is mentioned last in Henry VII's patent and if—as appears from Almagia's record—Cabot had only two sons in 1484, Sancius could certainly not have been more than fourteen in 1498, and might have been younger. The conclusion that Davies draws is that John and Sancius either reached the shore alive or that their dead bodies were cast up by the sea, and that in either event the Indians secured the broken sword and the earring.

Davies accepts the statement of Leo English, formerly curator of the Newfoundland Museum at St. John's, that the "Cabot Rock" at Conception Bay has engraved on it the words: "Jo. Caboto; Sancius; Sainmalia." If one assumes that this is a genuine record, it seems reasonable to suppose that John Cabot and others reached the shore alive and made their marks on the rock. Indeed, Professor Davies suggests that if Cabot's consort ship had only gone to the right place its seamen might have seen the record and have rescued Cabot and his companions.

He is puzzled by the name Sainmalia but suggests that it might have been meant for "Santa Maria" and have been an appeal to the Virgin Mary. But it may have been the name of one of Cabot's companions. Raimondo di Soncino states that in 1497 Cabot had with him a "barber" (or barber-surgeon) from Castiglione near Genoa, whose name is not given. He may have been Sainmalia. The name of one of the men who sailed with Cabot in 1498, as given by Agostino Spinola, was Cameliano, which looks a little like Sainmalia.

If John Cabot really perished at or near Grates Cove, it might be a fitting place for a Centenary Year memorial to him. While statues of Columbus are scattered up and down the Old and the New World, the only statue of John Cabot is one in Montreal which was erected by Italo-Canadians. In addition, Bristol has, for a Cabot monument, a tower on top of Brandon Hill.

Writing in 1583, Sir George Peckham noted that a "fair haven" in Newfoundland was called Sancius Harbour. This supports the belief that Sancius sailed on the voyage of 1498. Professor Davies noted that the Reinel map of 1502 has an Ysla de Frey Luis on the Labrador side of the Straits of Belle Isle. He thinks that this "Island of Brother Luis" was named after Luis, the eldest of John Cabot's three

sons. Lewis Harbour and Lewis Island still appear on the map of Labrador. Of Luis, as of Sancius, there is no further record.

Professor Davies suggests that Cabot's consort ship searched for his vessel along the coast and probably named Conception Bay for the Feast of Conception (December 8). Then she may have sailed across to the Nova Scotia coast and been at St. John's Isle (for St. John of Ravenna) on that Saint's day, January 12, 1499. He thinks that that other man of mystery, Joao Fernandez, the "Labrador" of Terceira in the Azores who gave his name to Labrador (and to Le Bras d'Or on Cape Breton Island), brought the consort ship back to England.

That one of the three ships "pressed" by the king reached North America is shown by the crest of William Strickland. In 1550 Strickland, or his son, was granted the family crest of a turkey cock. The family legend, set down by President Jefferson of the United States in a letter written on January 10, 1801, is that Strickland "commanded a ship in the navigation of Cabot" and brought the first turkeys to England. The Stricklands of Marske in Yorkshire still have the turkey crest. William Strickland was the son-in-law of Sir Walter Strickland of Sizergh Castle, Westmoreland. And on May 6, 1501, Walter stood surety for a payment of £20 to be made by Lancelot Thirkill of London. It looks as if the "navigation of Cabot" from which William Strickland brought back England's first turkeys was the voyage of 1498. If so, those turkeys appear to have been the only tangible result of John Cabot's last voyage.