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## John Cabot and Britain's Fictitious Claim on Canada: Finding our National Origins in a Royal Licence to Conquer

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By Richard Sanders

Creation myths are as important to the formation of nationalist cults as they are to formulating the identity of religious groups. In fact, “[f]oundation myths are the primary organizing myths of nations,” says Brock University history professor Joanne Wright, because “they establish a common history, a common origin, ... a national identity .... and sanctify an imaginary beginning to the nation ....”<sup>1</sup>

In Canada's case, the age-old Peaceable Kingdom myth is built on the bedrock of creation stories that celebrate those brave explorers who led the way for European conquest. The history of these symbolic heroes, says University of Guelph history professor Alan Gordon, is used to “legitimize the possession of North America by Christian Europeans.” Despite what Gordon calls “the specious logic inherent in such claims,” the narrative of these “founding fathers ... provides a binding social myth” and “strengthens the bond of brotherhood that nationals are supposed to feel for one another.”<sup>2</sup>

The business of constructing Canada's pantheon of mythic founders was aided in 1911 when the national archives published what it called “the chief manuscript sources of the earliest history of Canada.”<sup>3</sup> This, it said, brought together for the first time key documents about the European navigators who supposedly “discovered” Canada between 1497 and 1534.

This Government of Canada publication exemplified the definitive process that Gordon described as

reinvigorating and repackaging real historical people in order to fit them for the needs of the present in a continuous negotiation between history and politics.<sup>4</sup>

For instance, virtually every page of this 1911 book on “*The Early History of the Dominion of Canada*,” was awash in references to the importance of seagoing ships in the creation and development of Canada as a nation. This official document resurfaced Cabot, and other founding European mariners, at a pivotal point in Canada's naval history. It was in 1911 that Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier's ship of state finally ran aground and foundered in a federal election. After four majority governments, this dramatic upset for the Liberals was due, in large part, to the pas-

sage of a 1910 bill to create Canada's first navy. This Liberal initiative was controversial in Quebec because Canada's newly established navy was being set up to dutifully serve the British Empire. With a naval war brewing with Germany, and World War I on the horizon, opposition to Canada's new navy was the key 1911 election issue in Quebec. It was the wind in the sails that allowed Sir Robert Borden's Conservatives to sail to a federal victory.<sup>5</sup>

Canadian culture has long been filled with inspiring tales of great seafaring captains. Such myths have often submerged the fact that these globe-trotting fortune-seekers were driven by a voracious greed to acquire power, prestige and fabulous wealth. Also largely ignored is the fact that the selfish goals of Canada's earliest European heroes were blessed by church authorities, made legal by kingly contracts, conducted with cunning guile and executed with the latest military technologies of death and destruction that the world had yet seen. And, lest we continue to forget, these European icons of Canadian heritage set the course for centuries of genocide against Indigenous peoples.

A case in point was the Italian Giovanni Caboto, a.k.a. John Cabot. As noted in the *Canadian Encyclopedia*, Cabot's “voyages provided the basis for England's claim to North America.”<sup>6</sup> A “Heritage Minute” even reported that Cabot's “voyages of discovery” to “unknown lands”(!) were “responsible for the creation of Canada as we know it.”<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, *Canadahistory.com*, which calls itself “the #1 web site in the world about Canadian history, heritage and culture,”<sup>8</sup> does not even hint at the racist dreams of conquest that characterized Cabot's imperial voyages. Instead, this website's main article on Cabot — written in 1990 by a U.S. undergraduate student — describes Cabot as “the second European to discover North America,” and speaks uncritically of his “general accomplishments” and his “heroic travels.”<sup>9</sup>

But this candy-coated pop history pales in comparison to the all-you-can-eat buffet of government tripe dished out for the 500th anniversary of Cabot's landfall in North America. In 1997, the Government of Newfoundland and federal authorities spent \$20 million to celebrate Cabot's first voyage.<sup>10</sup> The province kicked in \$2.9 million, including \$1.2 mil-

lion for “over 1,300 artists and artisans.”<sup>11</sup> In critiquing this generous exuberance, Ovide Mercredi, then chief of the Assembly of First Nations, said Canadian governments “always say they haven't got the money” to improve living conditions for native people, “[b]ut they can sure find the money to celebrate something as flimsy as John Cabot.”<sup>12</sup>

Even Queen Elizabeth II made the effort to grace Canada with her regal presence for the “Cabot 500” celebrations. The Innu Nation of Nitassinan, whose unceded land is claimed by Labrador and Quebec, took the opportunity to send a message to “Her Royal Highness.” It read, in part:

colonization here has been lamentable and has severely demoralized our People. They turn now to drink and self-destruction. We have the highest rate of suicide in North America .... We feel powerless to prevent the massive mining projects .... We have never ... signed any treaty with either Great Britain or Canada. Nor have we ever given up our right to self-determination .... We have been treated as non-People, with no more rights than the caribou [on] which we depend and which are now themselves being threatened by NATO war exercises and other so-called ‘development.’<sup>13</sup>

Canada's joyous celebrations culminated on June 24, 1997. On that day, Queen Elizabeth, Prince Philip, then-Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, countless dignitaries and 30,000 gleeful celebrants crowded into the tiny Newfoundland village of Bonavista, where Cabot is said to have landed 500 years earlier. His journey, said the Queen, “represents the geographical and intellectual beginning of modern North America.” And as a hagiographic “Tribute to Her ... Golden Jubilee” explained in 2002, when Cabot planted the banner of King Henry VII of England ... [it] was the beginning of the Canadian Monarchy, as the authority exercised by the Queen began with that claim.<sup>14</sup>

During 1997 celebrations of the half millennium since Cabot's “discovery,” Katie Rich, then president of the Innu Nation, said that:

When Cabot ‘discovered’ Newfoundland all he had to do was plant a flag and say ‘This is crown land’ .... Newfoundland wants to celebrate that. We feel there is nothing to celebrate.<sup>15</sup> “Along the way a whole nation, the Beothuks, were wiped out,” declared Rich.

“We don’t want that to happen to us.”<sup>16</sup>

At a native-led protest, largely drowned out by the huge “Cabot 500” festivities in Bonavista, an Indigenous elder held a poignant sign saying, “It should be Remembrance Day for Native People.” The placard had the image of a Beothuk named Demasduit, who had been captured by Englishman John Peyton Jr. and eight other armed men in 1819. Demasduit’s husband Chief Nonosabasut and his brother were murdered while trying to prevent her abduction. Her niece, Shanawdithit, the last known Beothuk, was taken captive in 1823. Her mother and sister were also kidnapped and soon died of tuberculosis. Shanawdithit was made Peyton’s servant for five years.<sup>17</sup> By that time the Beothuk had endured more than 300 years of kidnapping, slavery and murder by Europeans.

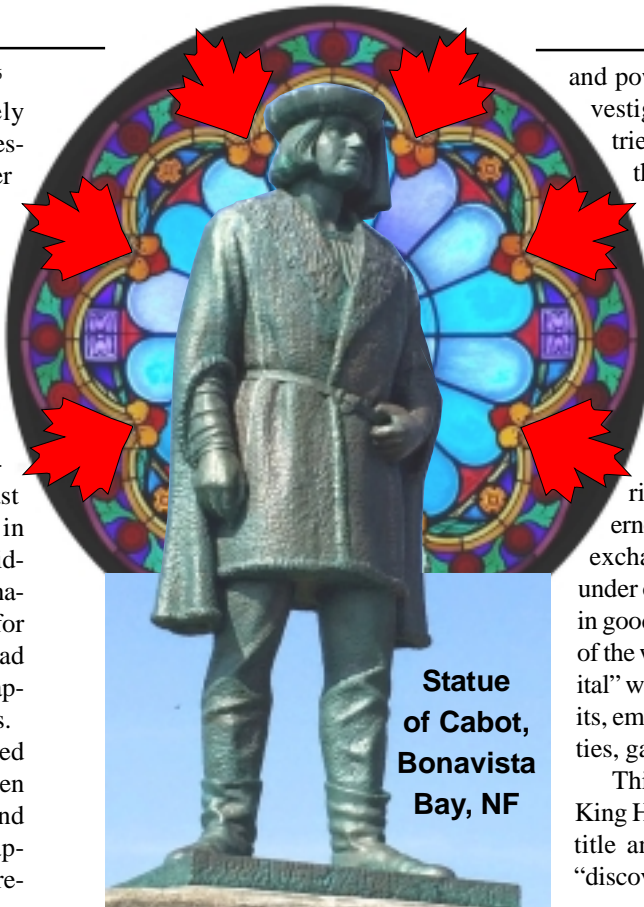
How many Canadians who are led to celebrate Cabot’s legacy have ever even heard of Demasduit, Shanawdithit and their many forebears who were disappeared or killed? In light of Canada’s recent history of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, we should recognise that the European enslavement and genocide of First Nations that has been going on for centuries, including the disappearance of an entire nation of people, the Beothuks.

Ironically, some Newfoundlanders have renegotiated the concept of aboriginality by identifying themselves with the disappeared nation of Beothuks. These Newfoundlanders see themselves and the Beothuks, as fellow victims of exploitation by ruthless, profit-seeking imperialists from away. This process of self-identification as natives of “The Rock,” says University of Guelph professor Alan Filewod, has helped some settlers to resolve the deep and culturally stressful contradiction between the sense of indigeneity and the awareness that it is built upon a history of genocide and invasion.<sup>19</sup>

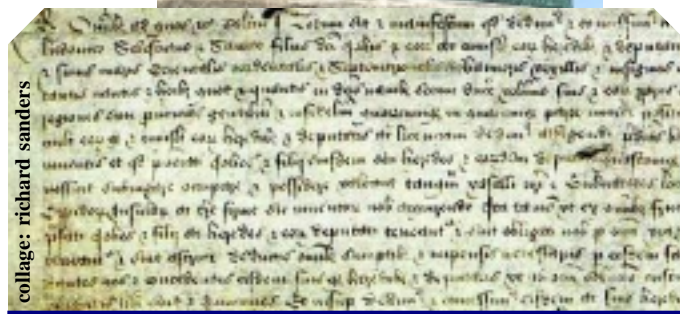
“Newfoundland’s culture of working-class resistance,” Filewod says, “was founded on the only act of total genocide in the British empire”:

Native aboriginal culture was not just enslaved and erased in Newfoundland, but every single indigenous Beothuk had been killed, through disease, famine, and murder, by 1830.<sup>20</sup>

He also notes that “Beothuks pro-



Statue of Cabot, Bonavista Bay, NF



### Cabot’s license to conquer from Henry VII, is the ‘Legal’ Ground on which Canada stands

vide a textual prehistory of oppression” allowing “settler culture” to “displace its complicity in genocide into a shared history, in which the Newfoundland fisherman assumes the role of imperial victim.”<sup>21</sup>

#### The Discovery and Conquest of Heathens

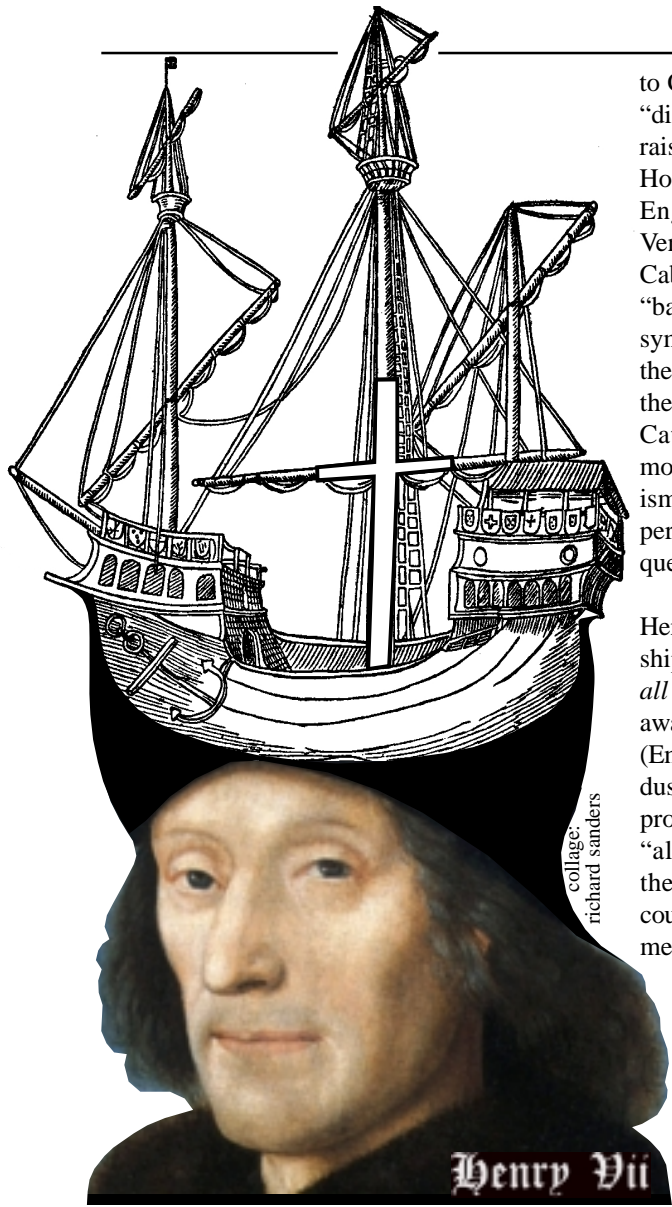
In 1496, England’s last Catholic king, Henry VII, signed a contract or “Letters Patent” at Westminster, which was the centre of Catholicism in Britain. In this legal contract to take dominion over the riches of the “New Founde Land,” Henry declared that he did “give and grant ... to our well-beloved John Cabot” the “licence” to “conquer, occupy and possess whatsoever such towns, castles, cities and islands by them thus discovered.” While the King gave Cabot the “full and free authority, faculty

and power” to “find, discover and investigate whatsoever islands, countries, regions or provinces of heathens and infidels,” there was an important caveat. Cabot’s license only applied to lands that “were unknown to all Christians.” With this imperial licence to wage an unending, plunderous war against undiscovered nonChristians, Cabot and “his sons or their heirs and deputies” gained the exclusive right to rule as the King’s “governors, lieutenants and deputies.” In exchange, they were “bounden and under obligation” to pay Henry “either in goods or money, the fifth part [20%] of the whole capital gained.” The “capital” was defined as “all the fruits, profits, emoluments [earnings], commodities, gains and revenues.”<sup>22</sup>

This royal charter stipulated that King Henry would acquire “dominion, title and jurisdiction” over all lands “discovered” by Cabot. Henry VII thus provided Cabot with the legal paperwork later used to justify England’s extensive land claims over North America. This license — steeped in imperial greed and religious hubris — marked the symbolic birth and legal conception of our legendary Peaceable Kingdom. It is the foundation upon which the Dominion of Canada, as a supposed legal entity, is based. (See “Why ‘The *Dominion* of Canada’?” p.7.)

Contracts are linguistic instruments that capture, hold, constrain, tie, restrict and otherwise force people to behave within the confines of an agreement. They are legally binding. Cabot’s contract created a specific set of boundaries within which he was obliged or indentured to act. Just as in modern corporate law, Cabot’s Letters Patent placed him in a *fiduciary* relationship. In modern legal parlance, Cabot had Henry VII’s “utmost trust and confidence,” and was legally bound to “manage and protect” the monarch’s imperial interests.<sup>23</sup> As such, Cabot and King Henry were held captive by the language of their legal contract.

In 1497, the Milanese Ambassador in England, Raimundus, wrote that after “having obtained royal grants securing to himself the profitable control of whatever



to Columbus), said Cabot and crew “disembarked ... with a crucifix and raised banners with the arms of the Holy Father and those of the King of England.”<sup>27</sup> A 1497 letter from a Venetian merchant, Pasqualigo, said Cabot planted “a large cross” and a “banner of England.”<sup>28</sup> Using this symbolic magic, Cabot established the supposedly legal possession of these “newly found” lands for the Catholic Church and the English monarchy. But such acts of symbolism are only as effective as the imperial institutions of war and conquest used to enforce them.

Pasqualigo also noted that Henry “promised” Cabot “ten *armed* ships as he desires, and ... *all the prisoners* to be sent away as he has requested.”<sup>29</sup> (Emphasis added.) Raimundus confirmed that the king promised to give to Cabot “all the malefactors, and they will proceed to that country to form a colony, by means of which they hope

to establish a greater depot for spices in London than there is in Alexandria [Egypt].”<sup>30</sup>

The reference to “armed ships” with “all the prisoners” to go with them, is telling, as is the mention of Cabot’s intention to use “malefactors ... to form

a colony.” In the original Italian text, Raimundus called Cabot’s promised recruits, *malfatori*, which is literally the masculine form for evildoers, but refers to criminals, delinquents, ruffians or mobsters.<sup>31</sup> Calling Cabot “the Great Admiral,” Pasqualigo said he “can enlist ... a number of our rogues as well.” (“Rogue,” from the Italian, *furfanti*, meant villain or scoundrel.<sup>32</sup>)

Others were enticed by their religious fervour. “[S]ome poor Italian monks who all have promises of bishoprics” had joined Cabot, said Raimundus. “[H]aving become a friend of the Admiral’s, if I wish to go I should have an archbishopric.”<sup>33</sup>

Licensed by King Henry VII and blessed by the Catholic Church, Cabot set out to “conquer, occupy and possess” the lands of “heathens and infidels.” Using “armed ships,” monks, and violent thugs freed from prisons, they formed a colony, plundered what they could, and set up some bishoprics. The fabrication of Canada was off to an auspicious start!

## The Quest for Slaves

In Cabot’s day, European “explorers” were out to get spices, jewels and gold. But slaves were also expected as plunder from such voyages of imperial conquest. Cabot’s journey came only three years after a fellow Genoese, Christopher Columbus, returned from the “New World” with slaves that he displayed in Barcelona and Seville. And, as Columbus informed Spain’s monarchs, he would “give them as much gold as they need ... and slaves as many as they shall order to be shipped.”<sup>34</sup>

Cabot’s son Sebastian while working for the Spain’s king in 1529, apparently purchased “50 to 60 slaves ... in Brazil, for ... sale in Seville.”<sup>35</sup> But whether

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Blessed by the King and Church, Cabot was licenced to “conquer, occupy and possess” the lands of “heathens and infidels.” Using “armed ships,” monks and thugs freed from the jails, they formed a colony, plundered what they could, and set up some bishoprics. Canada was off to an auspicious start!

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John Cabot took slaves from “the new founde land” to England is unknown, though this was claimed by Sebastian. Relying on Sebastian’s word, a chronicler of the early 1500s, Robert Fabyan, said that “three savage men” were “brought home” and “presented to the King” in 1499.<sup>36</sup>

Until the late 19th century, Sebastian was praised by historians as the discoverer of North America. When his unfounded claims to have led the voyages of his father were exposed as fiction, says Ruddock, Sebastian was seen as “a cheat, a liar and a charlatan.”<sup>37</sup> In 1898, historian Henry Harrisse wrote that despite:

the encomiums lavished by modern historians on Sebastian Cabot..., it is proved beyond cavil and sophistry that he was only an unmitigated charlatan, a mendacious and unfilial boaster.<sup>38</sup>

We do know that Cabot’s voyages were funded, in part, by merchants from Bristol. A major slave port since at least the ninth century,<sup>39</sup> Bristol was a thriving centre for England’s highly profitable slave trade in Cabot’s time, and remained so for another 240 years.

Henry VII, Cabot’s royal benefactor, was the kingdom’s most avid slave monger. In 1497, the year of Cabot’s first expedition, King Henry smashed the Cornish Rebellion, killing 2,000 and selling

he should discover,” Cabot found that “the sea is covered with fish” so plentiful that the English “kingdom will have no more further need of Iceland.” Raimundus also revealed that Cabot had “set his mind on something greater” than just fish. Cabot wanted to reach Asia to gain access to “all the spices of the world and ... precious stones [jewels].”<sup>24</sup>

Cabot’s most powerful religious backer was Fr. Giovanni Antonio de Carbonariis, an Augustinian friar from Milan who was responsible for collecting papal taxes in England. The Vatican then owned one third of the entire English countryside. Leading Cabot scholar Alwyn Ruddock argued that Carbonariis, who joined Cabot’s expedition in 1498, was the contact who first introduced Cabot to King Henry.<sup>25</sup>

Henry’s contract to conquer and plunder said Cabot had “licence to set up our ... banners and ensigns in any ... island or mainland whatsoever, newly found.”<sup>26</sup> John Day’s 1497/98 letter (likely



## Why “The *Dominion* of Canada”?

By Tonya Gonnella Frichner

The Old World idea of property was well expressed by the Latin word *dominium*: from *dominus*, and the Sanskrit *domanus* (he who subdues). *Dominus* carries the same principal meaning (one who has subdued), and is extended naturally to signify ‘master, possessor, lord, proprietor, owner.’

*Dominium* takes from *dominus* the sense of ‘absolute ownership’ with a special legal meaning of “property, right of ownership” (Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, 1969).

*Dominatio* extends the word into “rule, dominium,” and ... “with an odious secondary meaning, unrestricted power, absolute dominium, lordship, tyranny, despotism.” Political power grown from prop-

erty — *dominium* — was, in effect, domination. (William Brandon, *New Worlds for Old*, 1986, p.121.)

State claims and assertions of ‘dominion’ and ‘sovereignty over’ indigenous peoples and their lands, territories and resources trace to these dire meanings, handed down from the days of the Roman Empire, and to a history of dehumanization of indigenous peoples. This is at the root of indigenous peoples’ human rights issues today.

**Source:** Excerpt, “Impact on Indigenous Peoples of the International Legal construct known as the Doctrine of Discovery, which has served as the Foundation of the Violation of their Human Rights,” UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, February 3, 2010. [tinyurl.com/y8lxjvvh](http://tinyurl.com/y8lxjvvh)

thousands of captured rebels into slavery.<sup>40</sup>

Cabot was also funded by the London branch of an Italian firm, the Bardi, “so that he could go and find the new land.” These Florentine bankers also financed Cabot’s competitors, including such well-armed mariners as Amerigo Vespucci, Vasco da Gama, Bartolomeu Dias and Christopher Columbus.<sup>41</sup> These were Cabot’s fellow Christian “explorers” who — sailing the seas for Spanish and Portuguese monarchs — were opening the world for conquistadors to plunder such lucrative global commodities as slaves.

Cabot was no stranger to the business of slavery. Venetian documents show that in 1483, after purchasing a female slave in the sultanate of Egypt, Cabot sold her in Crete.<sup>42</sup>

These facts about Cabot, his criminal henchmen and the royal and papal mentors who set them loose, reveal that the roots of our “Canadian values” include the crudest forms of greed, racism and xenophobia. These are the core values and belief systems upon which the criminal enterprise to “conquer, occupy and possess” Canada was originally conceived and built.

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