

Guest Editorial: Discovering

With the 1992 calendar zeroing in on next year's quincentenary celebrations of Columbus's voyage and discovery of the New World, it seems timely to reflect on the incredible impact that an accidental landing on Guanahani Island in the Bahamas had on the entire native population in the Americas. It leads one to ask serious, perhaps uncomfortable, questions about the events to be celebrated and what it meant to be discovered by European explorers who took ethnocentric arrogance to dizzying heights.

In the sixties I had the privilege of teaching a course in anthropology to native high school students at the University of Alaska. The summer program was designed to expose the students to university rules and regulations and prepare them for the heavy dose of culture shock that understandably sent most of them home in disillusioned failure before the first semester was over. About to begin a lecture on Alaskan prehistory, I asked the class to tell me who discovered America. After a long silence a girl finally raised her hand and suggested that Columbus discovered America. To me, that answer was a sad example of one culture's successful attempt to destroy the identity of another and it provided an appropriate beginning for a discussion about the human presence in Alaska dating back at least 15 000 years. It seems obvious that the first people to discover the New World were the ones who initially crossed the Bering land bridge. But, then again, at that time the New World was part of the Old World, so all those people really discovered was a new part of the Old World. It gets very complicated. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to think of the first people who voyaged across the flooded land bridge about 8000 years ago as the real discoverers of the New World?

A definition might be helpful. According to *Webster's*, discovery is "to find out what one did not previously know." That seems reasonable enough, and in that sense we constantly discover all sorts of things. A few summers ago I discovered that I don't sleep well in a tent when a polar bear rubs against it. Actually, I probably knew that. Unfortunately the European definition of discovery in the Middle Ages had an altogether different scope. It didn't take the friendly Arawak natives on the Bahamian Islands long to find out that Europeans like Columbus brought with them a very alien definition of discovery, meaning taking proprietary rights, possession and ownership, both of land and people. That others already lived on the islands didn't trouble anyone's sensibilities. On the contrary, indigenous people were assets. With an Arawak pilot on board, Columbus continued to discover more islands, and he returned to Spain with caged parrots, gold artifacts and a few human specimens he called Indians, believing, as the story goes, that he had been somewhere else. Proudly he could report that he had discovered and placed under the sovereignty of the king and queen of Spain another world. The sovereigns ordered that the natives be treated lovingly.

On his second voyage, 500 natives were rounded up for the slave markets in Europe; half of them died en route to serve their new masters. On the third voyage Columbus finally set foot on the American continent in Venezuela, apparently still under the impression that he was in the Indies. Three short voyages of discovery had become the introductory chapter to a story about one of the greatest acts of cultural genocide the world would ever witness.

Most Euro-American explorers navigated wild rivers, climbed mountains and struggled over hill and dale to discover new lands, all the while assisted and often saved from disaster by the people who already lived in those lands. To equate discovery of new lands with ownership had become a great European tradition in the 15th and 16th centuries. The Spanish and the Portuguese went one step further and divided a whole world between them, most of which they had never seen. They were neither the first nor the last to carry along such acquisitive plans in their explorations of the New World. They were, unfortunately, the most successful. The Norsemen, and possibly the Celts before them, beached their crafts on American soil long before the Basques, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Dutch and so on. A little over a century after chasing Celtic monks out of Iceland, the Norsemen discovered and settled Greenland, where they were fortunate enough to find most or all of the land uninhabited. No debates, no fights, at least not for the first couple of centuries. When they tried the same stunt in the New World their attempted settlements were short-lived. The people who had been discovered in Markland and Vinland strongly resented the intrusion and did something about it. The Norsemen were few in numbers and possessed no technologically frightening marvels like primitive, noisy guns. They might have brought a few horses to the New World, long before the Spaniards, but if they did their presence did not have the same effect as it did later when Cortez and other conquistadores began their systematic destruction of the vast Aztec and Inca empires.

When the 19th-century Norseman Otto Sverdrup discovered and explored new land in the Canadian High Arctic no one had lived there on a permanent basis for centuries. He wasted little time in claiming the land for Norway and might have gotten away with it if Norway had been a little more vigorous in pursuing the matter. It was undoubtedly Canada's good fortune that Norway was ruled by Sweden, whose government showed no interest in the argument. About ten years after Norway achieved self-government, Canada

decided to send a few dedicated RCMP constables to tiny outposts in the High Arctic as a sign of its sovereign rights. It's an interesting twist that on Ellesmere Island the constables were assisted in these duties by Inuit families from Greenland.

It has been an agonizingly slow process for Westerners to recognize that discovering someone else's backyard doesn't mean that you own it. The fact that Native land claim settlements have become a reality leaves some hope for the future. In earlier historic or prehistoric times, no one expended energy on such matters. When the ancestors of the present-day Inuit, the so-called Thule culture Inuit, migrated eastward from their homelands in Alaska, they discovered and settled in lands already inhabited by the Dorset people. These people could claim a cultural ancestry and land use dating back 3000 years in the Canadian Arctic, but there was no one to listen to such arguments then. The Thule Inuit were too dominant and powerful and the Dorset people disappeared. The moral of that brief historical glimpse serves to remind us that Europeans didn't do anything that others in the world had not done before or since.

At least in some parts of the world there is a recognition of sorts that to use one's act of discovery to take other people's land, whether by brute military force or by subtle political shenanigans, is wrong. But the road to justice is long and difficult. Canadian politicians still speak of the two founding nations in our land, expressing the same ethnocentric arrogance displayed by early European settlers. It is true that the British and the French founded the political entity called Canada. However, even in the dim glow of a barely enlightened world, the notion of founding nations based on Old World discoveries and power cannot remain acceptable. To discuss such issues as founding nations and the distinct status of one province without fully recognizing the role of the original peoples of Canada is inexcusable.

It is perfectly understandable that maturing nations see a strong need to establish myths and legends as quickly as possible in order to impart a feeling of tradition and unity among its people — a process often referred to as propaganda when others practise it. Since history is seen to begin only with the arrival of the story writers and time is short, discovery myths become the foundation for such traditions. It is no coincidence that the sagas of Erik the Red, Leif Eriksson, Thorfinn Karlsefni and others relate principally to the discovery period of Norse colonization. The sagas tell us more about the first couple of generations than the following 400 years of Norse life in Greenland. Nation builders understand the need for myths and heroes — people who get medals and are honoured, whether they deserve it or not. Image is important; substance is often incidental. The foundation is made to appear solid because it has to be solid, not necessarily because it is.

And that brings us back to our Italian hero Columbus, who offered the potential spoils of his ventures to so many — his hometown of Genoa, John II of Portugal, Henry the VII of England and Charles VIII of France. They all turned him down and the prize went to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain.

Was Columbus really foolish enough to think that he had reached the Indies, or was all that just a cover-up to ensure that the sovereigns of Spain got what they paid for? If Columbus really did sail to Iceland on a Portuguese vessel in 1477, as is stated from time to time, it's unthinkable that he wouldn't have heard of the difficulties facing the Norse settlers and the Catholic church in Greenland. It would be equally strange if he had not heard of the Vinland voyages and the new continent west of Greenland. Even a sparing description of Vinland would hardly have sounded like the Indies and only about 15° of longitude separates the Vinland region in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Bahamian Islands. There is a certain irony in the fact that concurrently with Columbus's initiation of massive subjugation of the indigenous peoples of the Americas the southward expansion of the Thule culture Inuit in Greenland provided the final inducement for the Norsemen to abandon the land they had called home for about 500 years.

If we accept that substance is not important in myth making and if we can tolerate that our "heroes" are in large measure embroidered historical accidents, then there is nothing wrong with celebrating Columbus. If, however, we decide that truth is a better historical guide than mythological fiction and showmanship, then it may be prudent to place a lid on the extravagant commemorative celebrations that are planned. Considering the human consequences of what the man set in motion, perhaps we should even tighten the lid.

Perhaps, at this very instance, a group of extraterrestrials are discussing their discovery of our world. Let us hope that when they decide to seriously explore earth, their sense of humanitarianism is less easily corrupted by greed than ours and that they will treat us kindly and respect our traditions and values more than we have ever respected anyone else's.

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