

## Peter E. Pope, *The Many Landfalls of John Cabot*

OLAF UWE JANZEN

Pope, Peter F. *The Many Landfalls of John Cabot*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1997. xii + 244 pp., illus., maps, notes, index. Cloth \$50, £37.50, ISBN 0-8020-0786-4; paper \$17.95, £11.75, ISBN 0-8020-7150-3.

Peter Pope opens his book with the lyrics of "The Landfall of John Cabot," a song attributed to Johnny Burke. The song parodies the degree to which Newfoundlanders in 1897 were engaged in heated arguments over the precise location where Cabot had sighted land four hundred years before, after crossing the Atlantic in his little ship, the *Matthew*. As Pope points out, the debate also attracted the attention — and opinions — of Americans and Canadians, and though it was driven ostensibly by scholarly imperatives, it was in fact animated very much by chauvinistic and cultural passions. In considerable measure, this was because the historical record of Cabot's voyage was so very fragmentary. Pope maintains that the absence of conclusive evidence "for any particular landfall has opened a historiographic space in which nationalists of various persuasions have pronounced on the question of what must have been" (p. 7). Though we know more about Cabot's voyage today than in 1897, thanks in no small measure to the discovery at mid-century of the John Day letter in the archive at Simancas, Spain, there is still only sufficient information to fill the pages of a single chapter in Pope's book. The plethora of slim books about Cabot's voyage which have been published over the past two years testifies to this as well.

In the absence of a more complete historical record, the debate about who Cabot was, when and where he sailed, where he made landfall, and the significance of what he found has therefore been shaped (as Pope argues, drawing upon Eric Hobsbawm's paradigm) by those who felt the need to invent differing traditions. In 1897 those traditions were largely nationalistic ones; today, there are additional socio-cultural needs that must be satisfied. In other words, says Pope, since we do not know where Cabot made landfall, it becomes possible for us "to invent what 'must have been', according to our fundamental prejudices" (p. 24). It is this, as much as Cabot's biography and achievement, that

Pope explores in this excellent and highly recommended book.

Following a brief introduction, Pope opens the book by summing up "Everything We Know about John Cabot" in just one chapter. In clear and accessible prose, Pope explains the strengths (few!) and limitations (many!) of the available written and cartographic evidence. A detailed analysis of the various landfall theories is left to a later chapter, though Pope is quick to indicate that he favours a landfall near the top of Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula. Similarly, he includes as much detail on navigational techniques in the first chapter as is appropriate for his examination of the 1497 voyage, but a thorough discussion of the context and technology of sixteenth-century seafaring and navigation is left until later. This reversal of the usual sequence in which such material is presented — the events first, the context later — is a masterful decision, for it allows Pope to explain the landfall debate of 1897 to his readers much more sympathetically than would have been the case, had readers been fore-armed with contextual material not available at the time of that debate. After all, and apart from new sources such as the Day Letter, our ability to further the debate today is based on a substantially better understanding of the social, commercial, and technological context of Cabot's century. It therefore seems appropriate to have this explained after, and not before, Pope describes the passionate arguments of the 1890s. For the same reason, his succinct and sympathetic discussion of the aboriginal population of northeastern North America appears in his final chapter, and not at the beginning of the book as one can expect in other treatments of the early voyages of exploration and discovery. It is this attention to selecting the appropriate moment for particular discussions that makes this such an intelligent book.

Pope's treatment of the historical Cabot voyage is followed by chapters devoted to the way in which Cabot's voyage and even reputation were appropriated by others, beginning with his son, Sebastian. The younger Cabot is a fascinating subject in his own right, for Pope argues convincingly that Sebastian "was one of the vectors through which expertise in the new

celestial navigation reached England" (p. 54) from continental Europe generally, and from Spain in particular, where Sebastian spent many years as a cartographer, cosmographer, and, less successfully, explorer. Yet to consolidate his reputation and promote himself to potential employers, he laid claim to his father's achievements in 1497. Very sensibly, Pope emphasizes that "Sebastian Cabot lied...not to mislead future historians, but to promote himself professionally among his own contemporaries" (p. 63). Nevertheless, the ensuing confusion *did* mislead later historians and added considerably to the confusion that came to characterize the landfall debate in later centuries.

Before plunging into that debate, Pope presents his readers with the five main landfall traditions — Bonavista, Labrador, Cape Breton Island, Maine or southern Nova Scotia, and the Straits of Belle Isle — complete with brief outlines of their individual historiographies as well as explanations of their respective strengths and weaknesses. Pope favours the last of the five, though he concedes that even this one is sufficiently problematical to leave the door open to one of the others. But then, Pope has already made it abundantly clear that there is unlikely ever to be sufficient evidence to support any one of the landfalls to everyone's satisfaction, and he engages in this discussion himself largely to usher in his chapters on the "invention of tradition" in 1897 and on the meaning and nature of discovery. Pope maintains that this process was shaped in part by the American celebration just a few years earlier of

the Columbus voyage of 1492, as well as by English Canada's desire for "their own founder-hero" in the aftermath of the 1884 celebrations in French Canada of the 350th anniversary of Jacques Cartier's first voyage. It is not a completely convincing argument. While the Canadian awareness of, and reaction to, American veneration of Columbus is demonstrable, the reaction to Quebec's cultural traditions is more circumstantial. Pope himself concedes that a distinction must be made between the invention of historical tradition "by what we might call historical artisans," meaning the intellectual and scholarly community, and "state-sponsored mass production of tradition" (p. 92). Neither Canada nor Newfoundland managed to match the American commemoration of Columbus in the mass-production of a Cabot tradition — Canada because of the constraints of its cultural duality, Newfoundland because of its economic constraints.

Pope closes with a discussion of the idea and nature of "discovery." Defying today's conventions, he insists that not only is it legitimate to define Cabot's voyage in 1497 as a voyage of European "discovery," but that efforts to disconnect Cabot from the idea of discovery do both Cabot and the aboriginal inhabitants of North America a terrible disservice. To deny Cabot's role as a "discoverer" is to reject the very implications and consequences of his voyage. This argument alone should make this book required reading for anyone interested in understanding the encounter of the Old World with the New.

## **Peter Watts and Tracy Marsh, *W. Watts & Sons Boat Builders: Canadian Designs for Work and Pleasure, 1842-1946***

**STEVE KILLING**

Watts, Peter, and Tracy Marsh. *W. Watts & Sons Boat Builders: Canadian Designs for Work and Pleasure, 1842-1946*. Oshawa: Mackinaw Productions, 1997. 208 pp., b&w illus., 196 photos. Cloth \$34.95, ISBN 0-9682808-0-3.

My interest in this new book, *W. Watts & Sons Boat Builders: Canadian Designs for Work and Pleasure, 1842-1946* by Peter Watts and Tracy Marsh is more than idle. I have admired the Watts skiff ever since I saw the photo of Collingwood harbour in James Barry's book *Georgian Bay: An Illustrated History* (Boston Mills Press, 1992). The photo, dated around 1880, shows the

harbour packed with handsome 20 to 35 foot boats, many built by Watts with the characteristic fine ends that suggest an easy motion through the water. Since then I have had the opportunity to look through the windows, and peer through cracks of the old W. Watts and Sons boat shop in Collingwood, rewarded by a glimpse of some old patterns, and century-old wood shavings. I can appreciate these boats on several levels; as a designer, their simplicity and pureness of form appeals to me; as a boater, I know how they must feel to sail; and as a keen admirer of historic vessels these are some of the best.