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Authors: NEAL CONAN
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Talking Columbus On Columbus Day

3:00-4:00 PM , This is Talk of the Nation. I'm Neal Conan in Washington. Everybody has heard the story about how Christopher Columbus convinced the king and queen of Spain that he could reach the riches of the Orient by sailing west, because the world was round, which is wrong. They knew the world was round. The argument was about how big it was. And Columbus was - you should excuse the expression - flat wrong. At this point, we also know that Columbus was not the first European to reach the New World. In a new book, David Boyle argues that Columbus was among a group of men though, who figured out a way to translate exploration into wealth and power - a business plan if you will - a plan that very quickly came to rely on slavery when it was put into effect. Boyle's book is called "Toward the Setting Sun: Columbus, Cabot, Vespucci, and the Race for America."

If you have questions for him about the economics of exploration, our phone number is 800-989-8255. Email is talk@npr.org. You can also join the conversation on our blog at npr.org/blogofthenation. Later in the program, President Bush takes North Korea off the terror list. But first, "Toward the Setting Sun," David Boyle joins us from the studios of the BBC at Western House in London. Nice to have you on Talk of the Nation today.

Mr. DAVID BOYLE (Author, "Toward the Setting Sun: Columbus, Cabot, Vespucci, and the Race for America"): It's very nice to be here. CONAN: And you begin your book not in 1492 in Spain, but half a century earlier in Constantinople.

Mr. BOYLE: Well, it was the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 that cut off Western traders from the Silk Road and from the traditional ways in which they had traded with the East. And so it was kind of the reason people started looking to the West. And so dreamers like Columbus came along and said well, you know, maybe we can just over the Atlantic and there China will be on the other side. So that was the beginning, I think, of the big idea. CONAN: And the big idea, as you described it, was not so much a discovery. It was wealth and power.

Mr. BOYLE: Well, I think so. I think when you - what I've tried to do is to write this one story and I

think there's been sort of tendency over the centuries really, for historians too focus on one or other of those three pioneers or others, and write their stories separately. And often, you know, there are sort of national interests involved. The Italians are very interested in Vespucci and the British are very interested in Cabot and things like that. And their story has not really been woven together before. But it was one story and they knew each other and certainly knew all of each other. Columbus and Vespucci were friends and colleagues.

And so - and I think once you start to do that, you realize the real sort of pioneering moment for Columbus and Cabot was working out how they could go over there and profit by it. People seem to, you know, may had been there before. Certainly, made explorations and they come back and they're thanked by the monarch and wait to be asked to do something again, or they go like the Bristol fishermen was supposed to have done secretly. And then they can't tell anyone for fear that, you know, they will be - they'll miss out on the lucrative business opportunities. And what Columbus and Cabot did, I think, was to come over an idea of how you should go over there - and you make a vast profit if it worked - a vast profit. They would have been very rich. CONAN: The Bristol fishermen - among those - they were of course after the great banks of cod that swarmed then off of the coast of North America.

Mr. BOYLE: Yes. CONAN: And they were - as you argue in the book - one of several groups of explorers or people blown across the water by accident who found North America. Of course, the Vikings established colonies in North America, which didn't last because, well, they didn't have great business plan.

Mr. BOYLE: Well, it's very hard to know who went down, who didn't. But there are so many stories about, you know, what people saw or saw by accident, you know, driven over by storms to the west, or... But you kind of feel that it probably was relatively well-known. And certainly the evidence was - very strong evidence about the Bristol fishermen - that they've been going and certainly sending expeditions, really since 1480, over to North America. So I mean, you can't say for definite, but I think that's more likely to be the case, that Columbus wasn't actually the first. But he certainly was the first, as you say earlier, to stay. CONAN: And the first to stay, and of course, when he did stay, he brought the power of the Spanish monarchy with him and the authority and the - well, to fine a point on it, the guns.

Mr. BOYLE: Well, that was critical to the plan really, because he had to have his expedition license and then return for the license and various percentages on the profits that were made. I mean, if you remember, he was intending to go to some of the richest cities in the world. He was supposed to be going to China and Japan. And so that business of getting a monarch attached to it was pretty important really. It was the monarch that then defends his rights to his discoveries. The same - Cabot had a similar plan, which was agreed by the English. And in fact, I think the fact that they did have such similar plans makes me feel that the overwhelming evidence is once you

stitch the story together, that Cabot and Columbus began as business partners and fell out. CONAN: And fell out though - one of the fascinating parts of the story is that Cabot goes to Mecca to investigate where - they knew that the spices were still coming through Arabia. Where was the origin of these places? How could they get there if they went the other way?

Mr. BOYLE: Well, that seems to be the case. You can kind of imagine what the plan must have been. People always wondered why did Cabot go to Mecca and it was always understood that he was searching for the sources of the spices and the silks. And if you imagine some kind of plan that they were going to go over there and bypass all these traders, they needed to know where the sources were so that they could make contact with them on the other side. I - you know, you can't be sure about this, but that seems to be why he went and it's recorded that he was bitterly disappointed. He found that even in Mecca, nobody knew where he came from originally. They went from hand to hand, you know, across continents and oceans, and their origin was lost. CONAN: And indeed, once Columbus did arrive on the island called Espanola, well, his disappointment - he always insisted that indeed, he had found some islands off the coast of China.

Mr. BOYLE: Yes, he never backed down from that. CONAN: Which he may not quite believed in his heart. But nevertheless, the disappointment must have been palpable.

Mr. BOYLE: Well, I think - you know, you wonder why he got so ill. I think he was sort of holding desperately on to that belief in the face of his mounting evidence to the contrary. I think it would have made lesser a man ill and it certainly didn't do Columbus any good especially as, you know, all his investments had gone into it from the Spanish crown as well as from himself and he could see no way that it could be paid off. You know, it's a tragic story really because that was the beginning of slavery in the new world.

CONAN: Slavery, of course, was a business that all three of these men had been directly or peripherally involved in before they made their voyages.

Mr. BOYLE: Yes, they were all involved in slavery. Cabot perhaps more by - but all of them perhaps by accident - Cabot more peripherally. But they - you know, it's little known really that slavery really was quite widespread at that time. The point was - the rule was that you weren't really supposed to enslave other Christians. You could enslave Muslims or you could enslave Pagans. And what sort of emerged out of Columbus, his discovery was a new doctrine, which the Spanish crowned the Castillion Crown put together, which was that you shouldn't enslave heathens because you could convert them. And there were then this - it appears that, you know, the latest evidence about Columbus was that was preventing his colleagues from baptizing the local Tanos(ph) there, because it would prevent them being taken into slavery. So, there was tension as part of that.

CONAN: We're talking with David Boyle about his new book, "Toward the Setting Sun: Columbus, Cabot, Vespucci, and the Race for America." 800-989-8255 if you'd like to join us, email is talk@npr.org. Let's start with John, John with us from Duluth in Minnesota.

JOHN (Caller): Hello.

CONAN: Hi, John, you're on the air, go ahead please. John?

JOHN: Sorry, I'm in the noisy place.

CONAN: Could you talk to us or should we put you on hold?

JOHN: Oh, sure I can talk with you. I just heard the author refer early on to Columbus as a dreamer. And I think it's really important to remember that he was also responsible - he and his men for the murder of up to three million Arawak Indians on the island of Hispaniola. And so, his history of introducing genocide to the continent is much more important than his dreaming capability in terms of - at least in terms of his ethical history of his legacy.

CONAN: You may be in the noisy place and we're unable to hear what Mr. Boyle was just saying on that point, but if you would just expand on it, David Boyle?

Mr. BOYLE: Well, I mean, I think that's absolutely right, certainly it doesn't mean that he wasn't a dreamer, he certainly was a dreamer. But you know, these were dangerous dreams and dangerous positions that he got into and you know, a century later you had Spanish campaigners like Bartolome De Las Casas claiming that 40 million people had died in the New World because of the discovery. And these are really staggering figures and genocide is certainly not too small a word. And to be fair to the Spanish, actually the Spanish authorities did try, perhaps not hard enough, to limit the damage that was being done, which the English never did, they never did even try, I think, wherever there were discoveries, there was also slavery and/or brutality.

JOHN: Thank you for making it clear. Celebrating Columbus to me is something like, you know, flying a flag in celebration of the Holocaust and these holidays should be abolished. Thank you very much.

CONAN: John, thanks very much for the call. Do they celebrate - the holiday I don't believe is celebrated in Britain, is it celebrated in Spain?

Mr. BOYLE: Actually, I don't actually know the answer to that. Columbus himself is very much celebrated in Spain and especially in Seville. There is an ongoing dispute about where his body is as well which managed to keep everybody happy for years in Spain.

CONAN: So, do you have to make pilgrimages to various parts if you want to see all the reputed places where it lies? So, anyway, we're going to continue our conversation in just a minute. Our guest is David Boyle, his book, "Toward the Setting Sun: Columbus, Cabot, Vespucci, and the Race for America." If you'd like to join the conversation, give us a call 800-989-8255, email us talk@npr.org. Stay with us, I'm Neal Conan. It's the Talk of the Nation from NPR News.

(Soundbite of Talk of the Nation theme)

CONAN: This is Talk of the Nation. I'm Neal Conan in Washington. In his new book, "Toward the Setting Sun," David Boyle writes, if Mariners had traveled regularly, if accidentally to lands on the other side at the Atlantic before then, what was special Columbus and Cabot? The answer is that they had cracked the basic problem, how to profit from their enterprise and that is what is was, not a voyage of discovery but an enterprise of enormous ambition. This was a plan with the dream of fame at its heart, but it was also one that underlies their joint ambition. It was a scheme which, if it that worked, would have made them the richest men in the world.

If you'd like to join our conversation about Columbus, Cabot, Vespucci, and the Race for America, give us a call 800-989-8255, email us talk@npr.org. And let's get Katherine on the line. Katherine is with us from Moraga in California.

KATHRYN (Caller): Hey, this is great. I just turned you on and I've never thought I'd able to ask a scientist this question - that this is such, you know - it's a holiday, sort of a big historical issue, had such a major impact that the actual record, the written record is such that were saying who's on first, who came second? You know, I'm sorry I haven't read your book, but maybe you could highlight some stuff to the written record of the time and why this relationship for who came - who hit the shores first, is so, it creates more of this controversy.

Mr. BOYLE: Well, I can't to some extent, you know, I think we can be pretty sure, where and when Columbus landed, though it's never quite sure exactly where he made land fall - still an going to dispute about that. The date of Cabot's land fall in 1497 on the mainland, and got to the mainland before Columbus in fact, it's pretty clear - though exactly where he landed again, it's a bit mysterious - he's never quite sure whether it was New Finland or somewhere further south. Vespucci is a far more elusive character.

It's pretty clear now that a lot of what you proposed that he'd written was not actually by him and so we can't really blame him for that. But even what he did write was extremely ambiguous and was such - rather imaginative I think about his role in these things. And although it seems clear that he probably reached Brazil before the Portuguese and although on behalf of the Portuguese and some ways because he sort of changed sides halfway along the voyage, it isn't absolutely hear that - so, Vespucci remains the enigma that he always was, and yet he got the big price, you

know, the continent was named after him.

CONAN: And that you argue was the product of map maker and not necessarily Vespucci himself.

Mr. BOYLE: I think it's not Vespucci himself, I mean the famous book by him was not, it may have been included parts by him. But it's certainly wasn't written by him and wasn't written with his knowledge. But it made him extremely famous across Europe - far more famous than Columbus, in fact everybody - thinking people assumed that Vespucci have been the discovery, discoverer of America from a European point of view for the next term, three, or four generations. And this book fell into the hands of enthusiastic, showed the first printers and map makers in Northern Europe. Out of which came this famous map in 1507, where almost exactly - we just slightly missed the anniversary of it which used the word America for the first time as far as anyone knows.

So as far as anyone knows, that that is, is there - because of the reason that the map maker said which is that of calling it after Vespucci, because he was the discoverer and we're calling it after using his first name because it sounds good. Just like Africa sounds good, America sound after Amerigo, Vespucci sounds, sounds good as well. There are - I mean every nation has their own conspiracy theories about the name, just as they do about the discovery, and there is a sort of English conspiracy theory which is that in fact, it was Cabot got there first and Cabot's backer or as a prominent person in the Cabot expedition was called Richard Americk or Atmerick.

And the thought was that Cabot called the place after his financier and came back but everybody forgot why and that this filtered through to the map makers. But it's very hard to prove that and so I think we have to go with - for the most likely explanation. Sorry, that was rather a long-winded answer to you.

KATHREEN: Can I ask the second - part B?

CONAN: Go ahead, Katherine.

KATHREEN: Oh great, thanks. The part B would be, and thank you for that response, but in terms of your work like when you're actually doing your research, what's the quality of the cross referencing material, you know other folks that were actually didn't go. I mean, what does the record look like, from terms of writing your book?

CONAN: And how do you figure out to what's legit and what isn't, because there was a lot written...

KATHREEN: Yeah, I think we have the benefit of the Internet now, so if someone says something we can just get four or five different versions on that and cross reference whether it's not true or not. How would you do that from 14, the 1400s?

Mr. BOYLE: Well, it's very hard and although I think, you know, compared to generation ago, there's a good deal more certainty about exactly who Columbus was. I mean, even, you know, in the middle of the century, the people were still arguing about that. Certainly who Cabot was, who you know, in the last 25 years we know a great deal more about Cabot and Vespucci as I say remains enigmatic - although we know exactly who he was, no difficulty about that, because he was a friend of Leonardo Da Vinci, a friend of Boticelli and so it's sort of interesting, sort of by, the sort of back story about Vespucci as far as that's concern.

But it's some - the peculiar thing is that this vast. great and libraries of documents in Spain and Seville in particular is still, you know, coming up with new stuff even now, and of course they're very ambiguous, some of them. But the sort of crucial letter which revealed so much about Cabot which was written by, what appears to be an English spy to Columbus saying you know, I've been to one of Cabot's lectures, he's saying this, he's going back there and I'm going to pass you on the globe soon, and saying that the English have been doing these expeditions since 1480. That letter came to light only in 1955 with somebody was, it had been wrongly filed centuries before in Seville.

And somebody found it and realized that it must be about Cabot. So you know, this is still an ongoing story, I mean in fact the latest information about Columbus, which has only just come to light in the last few years, which is the allegations against him for which he was arrested and sent back to Spain in chains, which is all the sort of cruelties that he and his brother meted out, not so much on the local Indians, but only on the colonists.

KATHREEN: With some kind of written record?

Mr. BOYLE: Yes, that's a written record which has just come to light in the archives which nobody knew existed before.

KATHREEN: Do you mind referencing which archive?

Mr. BOYLE: It's the archive in Seville and the great archive where all the archive of the Indies, where all the Spanish documents are.

KATHREEN: OK, thank you so much for entertaining me.

CONAN: OK. Kathreen, thanks, glad we can entertain you, appreciate it. In fact, Columbus did come back in chains once, but he put himself in chains before that, this was a ploy on his part.

Mr. BOYLE: Well, anyway, I mean he is such a complex character really and having been put in chains he - once he was on the ship. They said, for goodness sake, take those off, but he refused, he insisted on carrying the chains all the way across the Atlantic and going in to the presence of

Queen Isabela. Because - partly because they were sort of, I think, this is the reason he did it before - sort of just punishment on himself. I think he felt some of his failings and partly because they were rather good for the public relations for his campaign to show that he'd been very badly treated.

CONAN: And part of this mythology about Columbus is that he died destitute.

Mr. BOYLE: Yes, he certainly felt destitute when he died. But in fact, he was a quite wealthy man by then. But the sad thing about Columbus was that he felt side-lined , he felt he had been betrayed and he felt that this great deal he had done with the Castilian states had been reneged on. And in fact, the king promised to investigate and found that this wasn't the case, that probably what he deserved under the terms of the deal was about a 50th of the complete profits. Rather, that's what he was saying...

CONAN: 50th is still pretty good.

Mr. BOYLE: But 50th would eventually have been vast if he's lived longer. But the complications of his contract were such that his family continued fighting the crown through the courts for the next 200 years. So one of the difficulties of having sort of complex business plans, complex sort of financial instruments, so to speak, is that you end up with nobody really understanding them as we know through our calls this week.

CONAN: He did negotiate for himself one of the grandest titles in history, Admiral of the Ocean Sea.

Mr. BOYLE: It's fantastic title. Yes, an admiral was actually was a Muslim word, which was used in Spain when Muslims were still in Spain until 1492, in fact. And it was used in Spain for about three times, really sort of honorary titles and one of the things that Columbus believed was that the other admirals could take a third of the profits on any business in their territories, which were very small. His was the whole of the Atlantic and he expected at the end of his life to get a third of the profits of anything that came across the ocean. And that was obviously unattainable for all sides.

CONAN: Let's get another caller on the line. This is Glen and Glen is with us is from Little Rock, Arkansas.

GLEN (Caller): Thank you. I really enjoy having the opportunity to talk with you. Earlier in the show, you mentioned European explorations at predate Columbus. My question is, what are your thoughts regarding Ivan van Sertima's assertions that West Africa's explored, temporarily settled and left artifacts in the new world and that these predate Columbus, and that, in his book, they came before Columbus and I'll take my answer off the air. Thanks again.

CONAN: OK, Glen. Thanks.

Mr. BOYLE: Well, I mean there are so many fascinating stories and legends and some of them are more than legends. We know that the Vikings really came, and the Chinese seem to have a good case. When Cabot came over, there is a story that he was astonished that some of the locals spoke Bask and the Bask from what's now Northern Spain. And in fact, some of the words are identical. And there was also a story that some tribes in North America spoke what really amounted to be Welsh. And there is a story about Prince Madoc, the Welsh princeling who went over in the 5th century. And this is a way of saying partly that I really don't know whether the Africans went over. But it isn't impossible and I'm inclined to think that a lot of people probably did and one of the stories by St. Brendan, who's a sort of a semi-mythical monk who's supposed to have gone over in the 9th century, was that when he got there, he was attacked by mosquitoes the size of chickens. And these are elements of. . .

CONAN: And that I believe.

Mr. BOYLE: No offenses, too, about that, I think.

CONAN: We're talking with David Boyle about his book called 'Toward the Setting Sun: Columbus, Cabot, Vespucci, and the Race for America.' You're listening to Talk of the Nation from NPR News. And I have to ask you one of the fascinating parts of your book is you go on toward the end of your book to discuss the meaning of the new world and the exchange which then developed between the flora, fauna, the minerals, everything else that was exchanged between what we think of as the old world and the new.

Mr. BOYLE: Well, the Columbian Exchange. Well, that's right and on the one side, you have seeds and crops, diseases of course, techniques and I think perhaps one of the tragedies about the Columbian Exchange is that so little in the way of knowledge was brought back by Columbus immediately.

CONAN: Well, all he was looking for gold.

Mr. BOYLE: He was looking for gold and he believed that the natives that he met had no idea of value. I mean, in fact in many ways, it was Columbus, I think, who is making a mistake about value. But many of the agricultural techniques in the new world were somewhat ahead. Many of the pharmacological, I mean, both sides of the Atlantic actually developing pharmacological knowledge at the time, which wasn't swapped and could have been. So it's impossible to say what could have happened, really, it didn't happen. And yet, it's a fascinating thing to speculate about.

CONAN: You write that one of the things the Europeans were fascinated by was the colors which they saw in the Americas and of course, the most impressive one of all was gold.

Mr. BOYLE: They were absolutely fascinated by colors and the only thing they were fascinated by whenever they came across a new animal, they would describe it normally in terms of first, to its color and then what it tasted like which was - not really quite the way we see things now. And there was this sense that the people they were meeting fitted into categories which they already had. I think that was the difficulty about the exchange in some ways. There was story by Vespucci of meeting, some very, very tall teenage girls and following them to their village and saying, we'll take them home with us across the Atlantic because we'd like to show off these amazing women, and they're just sort of discussing how they should seize them.

When a haunting party came and turned up with these enormous men and the men said, who are you? And they said, oh, we're just visiting, honestly. And they escorted them back to their boats. And of all these stories about encounters between the old world and the new, that was the closest you got towards a sense of equality. And you sort of realized what could have happened if the rhetoric Columbus had begun with these wonderful people, these innocent people he said he'd met. This is a sort of sense of a spiritual utopia that he found there. If only that had been followed through, how different it would have been.

CONAN: Indeed, everywhere else, they encounter people who have encountered Europeans for the second time, the reception was quite different.

Mr. BOYLE: I know. Well, exactly. But, if you want to see the bright side to all of these, what I felt about it by the end was, it's an extraordinary achievement in a way that in 1492, they were using maps where Jerusalem was always at the hearts on where there were pictures of sea monsters and where the outside the immediate environment of the Mediterranean, you really had no idea what was there or even though you had banks which had branches in Florence, and Moscow and London and Navagraha and all those things. They didn't know. Just 20 years later, pretty much the whole map of the world have been sketched out through the impetus really of a handful of individuals with very few resources. They banished to solve that whole problem and really, it's extraordinary, I think, what human beings are capable in that respect. So if you want find a hopeful sign, that's one.

CONAN: David Boyle tell their story in 'Toward the Setting Sun: Columbus, Cabot, Vespucci, and the Race for America.' Thanks very much for your time today.

Mr. BOYLE: Thank you.

CONAN: Coming up, the axis of evil is now a point. On Saturday, the Bush administration removed North Korea from the list of states that sponsor terrorism. We'll talk with Victor Cha about that decision, next. Stay with us. It's Talk of the Nation from NPR News.

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