Alwyn Ruddock: ‘John Cabot and the Discovery of America’*

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Abstract

Dr. Alwyn Ruddock was one of the best scholars to work on the North American discovery voyages of John and Sebastian Cabot (1496–1508). For thirty-five years scholars in this field awaited the groundbreaking volume Ruddock was said to be preparing on this subject. Yet, when Dr. Ruddock died in December 2005, aged eighty-nine, she ordered the destruction of all her research. This article examines the research claims she made in her 1992 book proposal to the University of Exeter Press and in her later correspondence with U.E.P. Her findings are so extraordinary that they will, if proved correct, transform our entire conception of the scale, nature and importance of John Cabot’s achievements.

Dr. Alwyn Ruddock (F.S.A., F.R.Hist.S.) was a reader in history at Birkbeck College, University of London (1952–76). A former student of Eileen Power, she was an economic historian of considerable talent, who is probably best known for her work on the Italian merchant community of late medieval England.¹ This interest led her to start investigating the Italian navigator John Cabot, and in her later years she concentrated on the Bristol discovery voyages of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Ruddock published four short but scholarly articles in this field,

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which demonstrated her ability to pursue convoluted chains of evidence through difficult sources. In the third of these articles, she indicated that she would shortly be publishing a book on this topic, to be entitled: *Columbus, Cabot and the English Discovery of America*. After Ruddock retired in 1976, she moved with her husband to Midhurst in Sussex. When he died in 1981, she continued her research from there. In the autumn of 1992 she submitted a proposal to the University of Exeter Press (U.E.P.) to write a book about John Cabot. She noted that she had originally intended to produce a book covering the whole period of the Bristol discovery voyages, up to the year 1512. However, with the approach of the 500th anniversary of John Cabot’s 1497 voyage to North America, she proposed to revise her plans. Her intent was to produce a shorter volume, which concentrated on Cabot’s voyages up to 1500, and would be out in time for the celebrations of 1997.

The University of Exeter press sought advice on the matter and received assurances from some eminent maritime historians that Ruddock’s volume promised to be a highly significant work. Indeed, Professor David Beers Quinn, who was the leading discovery historian of his day, noted that the ‘book she proposes is so revolutionary and so extensively based on new documents that it will change the whole course of the [C]abot celebrations’ of 1997. With such recommendations, U.E.P. did not hesitate to issue Ruddock with a book contract.

What followed is a distressing tale of delay and failing health. Ruddock was seventy-six when she submitted her proposal and her health went into sharp decline shortly thereafter. Nevertheless, by October 1996 U.E.P. felt confident that they would soon have a manuscript on which they could work. They therefore issued a press release about her forthcoming book, to be entitled *John Cabot and the Discovery of America: the Voyages of a Fifteenth-Century Italian Adventurer* (I.S.B.N. 0 85989 433 9). The expected publication date was autumn 1997. It was not to be. The book was delayed, and although U.E.P. continued to try to persuade Ruddock to give them a manuscript, in however rough a form, she never

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3 Alwyn Ruddock to Simon Baker (University of Exeter Press), 4 Oct. 1992. She also noted her hope to produce a ‘slim volume’ on Sebastian Cabot at a later date.

complied. The last contact between Ruddock and U.E.P. occurred in 2002. This reveals that she was still hoping to publish a book, although it appears that by this time she was once more working on the bigger project, which encompassed the Bristol voyages of the early sixteenth century.5

Alwyn Ruddock died on 21 December 2005. Her obituary in The Guardian newspaper, by her friend and former colleague, Dr. Emma Mason, revealed that Ruddock had ‘left strict orders that all research papers were to be destroyed at her death’.6 This was later confirmed by Ruddock’s will, which directed her trustees:

to burn shred or otherwise destroy all my letters and photographs both personal and professional microfilms unfinished writings and other research and notes in my possession at the time of my death if this has not already been done prior to my death.7

One of her trustees was, moreover, to be paid a substantial sum to ensure that the destruction of Ruddock’s work was carried out ‘as soon as possible’ after her death.

For those who had respected and admired Ruddock’s work, the news that she had ordered the destruction of all her research was as shocking as it seemed incomprehensible. Over the years information had leaked out that Alwyn Ruddock had made some extraordinary findings in the field and it was still hoped that she would eventually publish. Failing that, there was always the chance that it might be possible to publish her work posthumously. With Dr. Mason’s obituary, it seemed that decades of research, by a fine scholar, had been entirely lost.

In the slim hope that something might be preserved of Alwyn Ruddock’s work, I contacted the general editors of the Bristol Record Society in March 2006 and suggested that the Society approach Ruddock’s heirs or executors, to see whether it might be possible to save any of her findings. To this end, Dr. Peter Fleming, one of the general editors of the Bristol Record Society, contacted Emma Mason. She informed him that ‘all Dr. Ruddock’s papers and her work in progress was destroyed at her death on Ruddock’s orders’.8 That this had occurred was later confirmed by the friend and trustee whom Ruddock had made responsible for the destruction. This trustee revealed that all the notes, letters, photographs and microfilms, amounting to seventy-eight bags of material, had been shredded and disposed of, in line with her legal obligations and in keeping with the promises she had made to Ruddock.

8 Email communication from Dr. Peter Fleming, 8 July 2006.
At the same time that the Bristol Record Society was contacting Emma Mason, I emailed the University of Exeter Press to see if they had a copy of Alwyn Ruddock’s draft manuscript. It seemed feasible that this would be the case, since Dr. Mason’s obituary indicated that Ruddock had, at one stage, ‘finished a draft of her book’. Moreover, since U.E.P. had issued a press release in 1996 about the forthcoming book, complete with I.S.B.N., it seemed reasonable to suppose that they would have seen the draft and might yet retain a copy of it. Given that Ruddock’s will had not been made public at this stage, I still hoped that, if the original draft survived, it might be possible for U.E.P. to publish the book.

In June 2006, the publisher at the University of Exeter Press, Simon Baker, felt able respond to this query. He revealed that Ruddock had never in fact submitted a manuscript to U.E.P., or even any draft chapters. He noted, however, that the Press did have a correspondence file for her. Given the importance of Ruddock’s work, he was willing to allow me to come down and examine the file, in the hope that it might provide some insight into the nature of her findings. This seemed reasonable, given that Alwyn Ruddock had now died and it appeared that a book would not be forthcoming. Nevertheless, Mr. Baker noted that he would comb through the correspondence file to remove first any documents that were particularly sensitive. He also laid down certain conditions about what could be copied, while I undertook not to publish anything that was not relevant to Ruddock’s research findings or the case she intended to make. Finally, it was agreed that, if I wrote an article based on the correspondence file, Mr. Baker would be given a chance to check it before its submission to a journal, so that he could ensure that none of the material U.E.P. had provided was used inappropriately.9

On examining the file, it quickly became apparent that by far the most useful and valuable document in it was Alwyn Ruddock’s initial 1992 book proposal. This was a seven-page document which outlined the content of the book that she intended to publish. From the proposal it was clear that Ruddock’s claims were, as Quinn said, ‘revolutionary’. For many years it had been rumoured among discovery historians that Alwyn Ruddock had made some important document finds. Indeed, it had been said that her findings were the most important in this field since the discovery of the ‘John Day letter’. This was a reference to a letter discovered in the Spanish archives during the nineteen-fifties by Louis-Andre Vigneras.10 The letter was written in the winter of 1497/8 by John Day, a Bristol merchant, to the ‘Grand Admiral’ of Spain, Christopher

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9 The article was duly checked; no amendments were requested (email from Simon Baker, 30 Aug. 2006).
Columbus. Since the letter describes the 1497 voyage in considerable detail, while also throwing light on an earlier voyage from Bristol, it is regarded as the most important document find in this field to take place in the twentieth century.

Despite the manifest importance of the John Day letter, it was apparent on reading Alwyn Ruddock’s book proposal that the advances she appeared to have made were in fact far more significant than those made by Vigneras. For while it can not be said that any one document was as important as the John Day letter, she had apparently found, and intended to publish in her appendix, transcripts and/or translations of twenty-one documents, or extracts of documents, previously unknown to scholars. To set this in context, it must be noted that almost everything that is currently known about John Cabot’s discovery voyages comes from about twenty-five surviving documents, almost all of which are published in Williamson’s standard work on the subject, _The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery Under Henry VII_. Moreover, many of the documents that Ruddock had found were clearly of immense historical value, including the first letter to report the return of the 1497 voyage. Other documents she mentions revealed what happened to the 1498 expedition, the fate of which has never been established. She also claimed to have discovered evidence of a religious mission to Newfoundland in 1498, which resulted in the construction of the first church in North America.

Having realized the importance of the proposal, the issue remained as to what should be done with it. For me to try to use the proposal as a guide to my own research would have been underhand – this was Ruddock’s research and no one else should claim it for his or her own. Having said this, given the importance of her claims, it was clear that Ruddock’s case needed to be made available to the wider world.

There can be no doubt that Ruddock’s proposal could be of immense value to discovery historians, for although it contains no formal references to where the documents can be found, it does provide a large number of leads and clues that scholars could use. To facilitate research in this field the aims of the following article will thus be to present Ruddock’s proposal, to highlight what is original about her claims and to provide, where relevant, pointers to future research.

In publishing this article, one important point needs to be made. What lies below are no more than a series of claims that could be used by researchers to assist further investigations. While Alwyn Ruddock was certainly an excellent scholar, it needs to be noted that, even if she had not exaggerated the strength of her position, it is likely that at least some of her suppositions will be proved incorrect. Moreover, the format of the proposal is such that it is not always possible to determine how much

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evidence she had to support particular arguments. In part this is because
the proposal is simply a list of the points that she intended to cover, rather
than a detailed summary of her argument. A subsidiary problem is that
some parts of the proposal are written in a deliberately opaque manner.
This was probably because Ruddock knew that U.E.P. would send the
proposal out to experts in the field for refereeing and she wanted to
protect her key sources from being exploited by others. The difficulty,
for current purposes, is that these features of the proposal make it difficult
to determine where well-supported arguments end and speculation
begins. For this reason, if for no other, it would be imprudent to take
any of Ruddock’s uncorroborated statements at face value.

The approach taken in this article will be to work through Alwyn
Ruddock’s proposal on a chapter-by-chapter basis. Each section will
begin with her own statement of what she intended to cover in her
book. This will be followed by a review of what was original/important
about the proposed chapter. Where evidence from other sources throws
light on her case, it will be considered at this point. Such additional
evidence includes comments found in other parts of the proposal,
statements in the supplementary notes to her proposal and statements
made in later letters. Lastly, where appropriate, the discussion of each
chapter will include suggestions about the most obvious lines of enquiry
for future researchers who wish to investigate Ruddock’s case.

‘John Cabot’: the working-title for Alwyn Ruddock’s
book proposal to the University of Exeter Press,
4 October 1992

Introduction

August 10th 1497. King Henry VII rewards John Cabot for the discovery of
North America with a tip of £10 ‘to hym that founde the new isle’. Why the
absurd reward? Why ‘the new isle’? The many other unanswered problems
relating to the explorer and his voyages. The scanty state of present knowledge
of his life, his voyages, his death and his achievements sailing under the English
flag. New sources of information from English and Italian archives give a more
detailed picture of the man and his supporters, both English and Italian, and his
three voyages from Bristol. Acknowledgments and thanks etc.

The function of this chapter was to set the scene and to highlight the
poor state of current knowledge. While some might quibble about
whether ten pounds, equivalent to two–years’ wages for a common

12 This has been reproduced with the kind permission of Dr. Ruddock’s two trustees and
the assistance of Mr. Oliver Dunn (University of Bristol).
labourer, was such an ‘absurd’ initial reward, Ruddock’s characterization of the subject is fair.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Chapter I John Cabot, Citizen of Venice}

The disputed nationality and birthplace of John Cabot. His grant of Venetian citizenship. His alleged travels in the Levant and the voyage to Mecca. His family and his activities in Venice as shown by recent discoveries in Venetian archives. His flight from Venice to avoid his creditors.

The first part of this chapter, including the discussion of Cabot’s nationality, birthplace and alleged travels in the East, could be little more than a re-evaluation of material that has already been published in English.\textsuperscript{14} The last part could refer to the work of Italian scholars, such as Almagià, Galo and Tiepolo, all of whom are mentioned by Ruddock in later letters.\textsuperscript{15} In particular, the information about Cabot’s ‘flight from Venice to avoid his creditors’ could be based on Tiepolo’s findings, which indicate that Cabot had left Venice as an insolvent debtor by 5 November 1488.\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, in September 1998 Ruddock entered into correspondence with Dr. Edoardo Guiffrida of the Archivio di Stato in Venice. Learning of his recent research into Cabot’s activities in Venice and of Guiffrida’s intention to publish a book on John Cabot’s early life, Ruddock revealed to the University of Exeter Press that she would have to rewrite the first chapters of her book to incorporate his findings, noting that the ‘Venice chapter will be much improved’ as a result.\textsuperscript{17} All this suggests that most, if not all, of this chapter would have been based on the work of others.

\textit{Chapter II The Route to England}

John Cabot pursued by his creditors in Valencia. His plans for harbour improvements rejected. The arrival of Columbus passing through Valencia \textit{en route} for Barcelona in 1493. His triumphant reception at the Spanish Court. Cabot, a Venetian, realizes Columbus has not discovered Marco Polo’s Cathay, as he claimed. He formulates his own plan to sail further to the west and so reach Asia. He seeks support in Seville and Lisbon. The English colony in Lisbon, English ships in the Tagus and merchants from London and Bristol in Lisbon at that time.

As with the last chapter, it is unclear how much of this chapter was based on Ruddock’s own research. Her statement that Cabot was ‘pursued by his creditors in Valencia’ would appear to be a reference to Tiepolo’s findings, which included a ‘lettere di raccomandazione a giustizia’ (‘a letter of recommendation to justice’) sent to Valencia in 1492. This letter confirmed Cabot’s presence in the city and, in so doing, showed that the Venetian known in Valencia as John Cabot Montecalunya was the Italian navigator. As Ruddock indicates, Cabot’s plans for harbour improvements were rejected. Nevertheless, his presence in Valencia in the spring of 1493 meant that he would have been there when Columbus passed through the city in April. That Cabot then sought support for his own planned voyage in Seville and Lisbon is known from Ayala’s letter of 1498. Research by Juan Gil has confirmed that Cabot was in Seville for the whole of 1494, where he proposed, was contracted to build and, for five months, worked on the construction of a stone bridge over the Guadalquivir. This attempt to replace the existing pontoon bridge, known as the ‘Puente de Barcas’, was abandoned following a council decision on 24 December 1494.

Chapter III The Search for Backers

John Cabot comes to London, seeking support for his project. Why London, not Bristol? The need for a royal charter first. London as Cabot saw it in the last years of the fifteenth century. Italian colonies in London and the leading Italian merchants and business firms in the City. Consuls, social and business relationships etc. Italian links with City churches. Like Columbus in Spain, John Cabot in London sought help from a religious community. William Strachey’s misleading clue. The Austin Friars in London and the Lombard Hall at the friary. John Cabot finds his strongest supporter in England among the Austin Friars in London.

All of this is entirely new. That Cabot had any support from the Italian community in London, or from members of a religious establishment, is unknown. Ruddock would, however, have been well placed to talk about the Italian colony in London, since she was the foremost expert on this subject. Her reference to William Strachey is presumably an allusion to the William Strachey who was involved in, and wrote about, the early seventeenth-century attempts to colonize Virginia. It seems likely that the ‘misleading clue’ is Strachey’s suggestion that John Cabot was ‘dwelling within the Black-friers’ at the time he received his royal patent from Henry

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18 Tiepolo, pp. 596–7.
20 Williamson, Cabot Voyages, p. 228.
21 J. Gil, Mitos y utopías del descubrimiento, i: Colón y su tiempo (Madrid, 1989), pp. 77–81.
VII. This would be a clue, in that it suggests that Cabot was staying at a London friary during this period, and it would be misleading because Ruddock apparently found that Cabot’s principal support came from the Austin Friars rather than the Dominicans (Black Friars).

Chapter IV The Friar from Milan

Fra Giovanni Antonio Carbonaro of the order of the Hermit Friars of St. Augustine. His early life in Pavia and Milan. His arrival in England as diplomatic envoy from Lodovico il Moro to King Henry VII. Diplomatic exchanges between England and Milan. Fra Giovanni wins the approval of Henry VII and also Adriano Castelli, the Papal tax-collector in England. His diplomatic mission ended, Fra Giovanni stays in England. His work and his associates among the Italian colony in London. He is made deputy tax-collector when Castelli leaves for Rome. His knowledge of the missionaries who accompanied Columbus in 1493 inspires missionary zeal in Fra Giovanni and gives him an interest in Cabot’s plan to sail westward like Columbus. John Cabot finds a patron with the entry into Court circles who could bring his project to the notice of the king.

Almost nothing is known about what Cabot did when he first arrived in England or how he managed to persuade Henry VII to provide him with his charter. Most historians have assumed that Cabot went straight to Bristol and there persuaded the port’s merchants to support his venture. It seemed logical that this was the order of events, since Cabot’s royal patent, when it was granted, stated that all future trade conducted under the terms of the charter would have to pass through Bristol. This seemed to imply that Bristol merchants were involved from the start. Ruddock, on the other hand, claims to have found evidence that turns this on its head. According to her, Cabot first went to London and was offered support from a well-connected Italian friar. Fra Giovanni’s connections to the court gave Cabot access to the king, while his senior position within the Italian colony helped Cabot to obtain financial support in London. It was only later that Bristol became involved.

That Fra Giovanni was connected to Cabot is not in doubt. A letter written to the duke of Milan on 20 June 1498 indicates that ‘Messer Giovanni Antonio de Carbonariis’ had accompanied John Cabot’s 1498 expedition. Williamson, moreover, carried out a brief investigation of Fra Giovanni, noting that he was a well-connected cleric who served as an emissary between Henry VII and the duke of Milan. No other historian, however, has sought to pursue the friar. Ruddock did and she

25 Williamson, Cabot Voyages, p. 93.
believed that he was one of the main protagonists in Cabot’s voyages – helping to open both doors and purses for him. Moreover, some of Ruddock’s most important claimed discoveries, as will be seen later, relate to the friar.

An initial re-examination of Fra Giovanni has confirmed a number of Ruddock’s claims in respect to him. He was certainly a member of the Hermit Friars of St. Augustine (that is, Augustinian Friars, O.E.S.A.), he spent part of his life in Pavia and he was, from at least 1494, a deputy to the papal collector in England, Antonio Castellesi. The first mention of the friar that has been found is an ‘authorization’ issued in 1474 by the prior general of the Augustinian Friars. The item comes under matters pertaining to the order’s Lombardy Province, which was the congregation of ordinary observance. This authorization states:

Romae, 22 martii 1474. Fecimus lectorem formandum in conventu et studio Papiensi Generalem fratrem Iohannem Antonium de Carbonariis cum gratiis consuetis si in examine suo fuerit receptus ydoneus et antequam acceptetur pro lectore volimus informari a sua sufficentia ab examinatoribus.26

The document grants permission for Fra Giovanni to proceed to his examination for lector at the order’s general study house in Pavia, located at San Pietro in Ciel d’oro. Since a friar could not profess until he was fifteen, and nine or ten years of study were required before he could become a lector, Fra Giovanni must have been at least twenty-four by this time.27

It has not been possible to establish what Fra Giovanni was doing between 1474 and 1489/90, when he is known to have been serving as an emissary between Henry VII and the duke of Milan.28 It seems likely, however, that after passing as lector he continued his studies, since, when Henry VII granted ‘Anthony de Carbonariis’ a benefice on 9 January 1496, he was described as a doctor of theology (‘sancte pagine doctor’) of the Order of St. Augustine.29 Fra Giovanni’s academic credentials are also alluded to in a papal dispensation of 14 June 1494, which describes him as ‘Johanni Antonio de Carbonariis’, professor O.E.S.A.30 This dispensation granted the friar the right to hold offices normally reserved to secular clerics, and the same document reveals that Fra Giovanni was then serving as a deputy to the papal collector in England, Antonio Castellesi. Indeed, it is likely that the papal dispensation had been

26 Rome, Archivo Generale Agostiniano, Dd. 7, 11v. For finding, supplying and interpreting this document, I credit and thank the Revd. Karl Gersbach, O.S.A. (Villanova University).
28 Calendar of State Papers, Milan, i, nos. 392, 397.
29 Fra Giovanni disposed of this benefice (the rectory of Gosforth parish church in Cumberland) the following year (Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1494–1509, pp. 38, 108). The latter document refers to the friar as ‘John Anthony’. 
30 Calendar of Papal Registers, xvi, no. 324.
obtained by Castellesi since, in 1494, the papal collector had left England to become Henry VII’s proctor in Rome and, slightly later, clerk of the papal treasury. With Castellesi’s departure to the Vatican, Fra Giovanni seems to have become his chief deputy in England. At any rate, this appears to be the implication of a chancery petition written some time after April 1496, which describes ‘Antony Carbonarius’ as ‘generall proctour unto Adryan Castelleus Collectour generall of our moste holy fader the pope in Englond’. The petition also reveals that Fra Giovanni had taken over the lease of Castellesi’s London house following his principal’s departure.

For researchers who might want to go further, Ruddock provides a little extra help. Her supplementary notes indicate that she had used records in ‘Rome and Lombardy’ to reconstruct Fra Giovanni’s early life in Italy and that these records help to ‘explain why he was prepared to listen to Cabot’s plans and give him support’. This could relate to contact between Fra Giovanni and the followers of Francis of Paola (d. 1507), the founder of the Minim Friars. Such contact seems plausible given that at least one prominent Augustinian reformer in north-west Italy, John Baptist Poggi (d. 1497), was a friend of Francis of Paola and, indeed, founded a reformed Augustinian congregation in Liguria and Piedmont, which followed similar practices to the Minims. Such contact would be significant because it was the Minims, under Friar Bernard Buil, who undertook the papal-backed mission that accompanied Columbus’s 1493 expedition. Ruddock may therefore have intended to argue that Fra Giovanni’s knowledge of the Minims made him particularly interested in emulating their missionary endeavours. It can be noted, lastly, that Ruddock found Fra Giovanni to be ‘very well documented’. This has been borne out by initial investigations and should make the friar a fruitful topic for further study.

Chapter V The Charter for Exploration

Charters granted to Columbus and to Portuguese Donatory Captains for exploration overseas. John Cabot seeks a similar charter from Henry VII. Italians at the Court of Henry VII. The diplomatic quandary. Papal bulls and the claims of Spain and Portugal to a monopoly of new discoveries overseas. The Spanish ambassador in London warns his sovereigns of the presence of ‘another man like Columbus’ in the English capital. The source of his information. The grant of a charter and its terms. The link with Bristol.

33 Alwyn Ruddock, supplementary notes to her 1992 book proposal to U.E.P.
34 Gutierrez, pt. ii, pp. 80–1.
This chapter outline shows little evidence of new documentary research. That Cabot would have needed royal approval for his voyage is obvious, considering the diplomatic sensitivities involved. These were that the papal bull *Inter Caetera* (4 May 1493) granted Spain and Portugal a duopoly over exploration and exploitation of the non-European world. The bull, as modified by the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), divided the world into two hemispheres, with the Atlantic division running along the modern meridian $46^\circ37'\ W$. The result was that the Spanish would regard any English-sponsored voyages across the Atlantic as an intrusion into ‘their’ territory. If Cabot was to launch a western voyage of exploration from England, he thus needed the support of Henry VII. Cabot would, moreover, have wanted to obtain some form of monopoly rights of his own for his expeditions, which would at least be recognized in England. This was required because, without such rights, other Englishmen would be able to exploit any success that Cabot had. The Spanish ambassador’s warning to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain about Cabot’s presence in London is clearly a reference to a letter of 28 March 1496, which noted the arrival of ‘one like Columbus’ (‘uno como Colon’) in the city.36 The 1496 charter has been published many times and its terms considered, including the charter’s stipulation, to which Ruddock alludes, that all voyages and future trade would have to pass through Bristol.37 Given that all this is well established, it appears that the only demonstrably novel aspects of this chapter were to be Ruddock’s study of the Italians at court and her identification of the person who had informed the Spanish ambassador about Cabot’s plans.

*Chapter VI The Search for Money*

A royal charter from Henry VII but no money. Cabot a poor man lacking money to hire ships and crews. He seeks financial backing in the Italian colony. In Spain, Columbus had borrowed from Italian compatriots once his Capitulations were signed. Cabot tried to do likewise in London once possessed of a charter. Fra Giovanni Antonio’s financial business and his Italian bankers in London. Their establishment in the City. Members of the firm and their house in London in 1496. Their trading and banking associates in London. Cabot finds a new supporter and a loan ‘to go and discover new lands’. Other members of the Italian colony involved. John Cabot goes down to Bristol.

That Cabot lacked the money to finance his voyages himself is not a new observation; that he received financial support from the Italian colony in London is. Most of this chapter would therefore have been entirely original. It seems likely that the bulk of the records for this research would be in the archives of Fra Giovanni’s bankers, whose house, she

later stated, was located ‘off Lombard Street’. In the supplementary notes to the proposal, Ruddock indicates that she had come across this material while working in both ‘public and private archives’ in Italy. She states that, while searching for business papers from branches of Italian firms in London, she had the ‘luck to find the account books and letters from the London branch of a firm that made a personal loan to John Cabot to contribute to his own investment in his voyage’. She also says that these commercial records ‘give a much more detailed picture of the Italian merchant colony in London than any other source we have today’. The papers also showed the members of the firm with which Cabot dealt, the condition of the firm, the reactions of the ‘two managers’ to his project and, later, ‘their estimate of what had been found in 1497’. This archive must therefore have included both the copy of the loan for Cabot ‘to go and discover new lands’ and the letter of 10 August 1497, which will be discussed in chapter IX.

This chapter proposal, and the supplementary notes, are interesting in part because they provide a clue as to how Alwyn Ruddock became involved in researching the Cabot voyages. It seems that she came across this information about Cabot while doing research in Italy on her established area of expertise – the Italian merchant colony in England. This was a subject on which she had worked since the nineteen-thirties and it was a topic on which she had at one point intended to write a ‘big book’ to follow her *Italian Merchants and Shipping* volume. Finding this archive, with its references to Cabot, would have been a coup in itself. It would also have made Ruddock aware of his early connection to Fra Giovanni.

Chapter VII Bristol and Atlantic Exploration

Why Bristol? Already Bristol seamen had made at least two voyages of Atlantic exploration in 1480 and 1481. Bristol was seeking new fishing grounds after the interruption of their normal trade with Iceland through Hanseatic hostility. Bristol seamen had made an unpremeditated discovery across the Atlantic at an earlier date with new fishing grounds nearby. The crew got back to Bristol to tell their story but apparently no attempt made to revisit the landfall until supplies of Iceland cod cut off by Hansard activities. No success by 1482. The secret fishing voyages to Newfoundland hypothesis dismissed. Could such a discovery and secret voyages from Bristol have remained hidden from the rest of England? Henry VII’s informants about affairs in Bristol as shown in Whittington’s revealing letter. Who put John Cabot in touch with the men of Bristol? The lack of any Italian shipping or colony in Bristol at that time.
Little that was to go in this chapter is obviously new. That Bristol undertook Atlantic exploration voyages in the fourteen-eighties has long been known.\(^{41}\) Similarly, the idea that exclusion from the Icelandic fish trade motivated the westward voyages goes back to Carus-Wilson.\(^{42}\) The belief that Bristol had discovered North America some time before 1497 rests largely on the John Day letter, with his statement to Christopher Columbus that ‘it is considered certain that the cape of the said land was found and discovered in the past by the men from Bristol who found “Brasil” as your Lordship well knows’.\(^{43}\) Moreover, Ruddock had herself proposed previously that the fourteen-eighties voyages represented unsuccessful attempts to rediscover North America after Bristol mariners found it, by accident, on an earlier occasion.\(^{44}\) She had also sought at this time to dismiss the hypothesis, propounded most forcefully by Professor Quinn, that Bristol engaged in a secret fishery off North America from 1481 to 1497.\(^{45}\)

What is clearly new in this chapter outline is the reference to ‘Whittington’s revealing letter’. This is probably a reference to John Whittynston, who was the customs searcher at Bristol from 1493 to at least 1509.\(^{46}\) Moreover, while it is not mentioned in this part of the proposal, a later letter from Ruddock suggests that she had found at least some additional evidence to support her claims for a pre-1497 Bristol discovery of America. This information came from a letter of 10 August 1497, which is first mentioned in the proposal in chapter IX. However, she must have intended to consider the letter in chapter VII, given that it apparently gave ‘a new twist to a subject of perennial interest to all students of early Atlantic exploration. Who really discovered North America? John Cabot or the men of Bristol?’\(^{47}\) She also noted in reference to this letter that it provided ‘New evidence supporting the claim that seamen of Bristol had already discovered land across the ocean before John Cabot’s arrival in England’.

**Chapter VIII The Voyage of 1496**

Bristol as John Cabot saw it in 1496. Comparisons with Venice and Genoa. Italian admiration for Bristol shipbuilding. Little enthusiasm in Bristol for Atlantic


\(^{43}\) Vigneras, ‘Cape Breton’, p. 228.

\(^{44}\) Ruddock, ‘John Day of Bristol’, pp. 231–3.


\(^{46}\) Calendar of Fine Rolls, 1485–1509, no. 451; Letters and Papers of Henry VIII, i. i, no. 132 (17). I thank Dr. James Lee for this information, who was not, however, able to cast any light on the letter to which Ruddock referred.

\(^{47}\) Ruddock to Davey, 17 July 1996, sects. 14, 16.
exploration in 1496. The economic revival makes habitual lines of Bristol’s overseas trade more attractive now than speculative Atlantic exploration. Bristol’s former motive for exploration no longer operative when John Cabot arrived. Bristol’s dealings with Italians and the death of Robert Sturmy and his crew earlier in the century had fostered suspicion and dislike of Italians. Cabot’s charter specified five ships but he only got one provisioned and ready for his first voyage. Money comes only slowly from London. Richard Ameryk, the king’s chief official in Bristol. The Bristol legend and his real part in the expedition. John Day’s brief account of the voyage in his letter to Columbus. ‘His crew confused him’. The operation of the Sea Laws of Oléron on English vessels then. Cabot’s ship returned with no success. The visit of Henry VII to Bristol shortly afterwards. Cabot brings his wife and sons to Bristol.

At least some elements of this chapter must have been based on new findings. That Bristol’s international trade was buoyant during the fourteen-nineties is known from the port’s enrolled customs accounts. That Bristol might have been distrustful of an Italian adventurer is not surprising, for in 1458 Genoa had been closely involved in the destruction of a Bristol fleet, led by Robert Sturmy, which had sought to open up direct trade with the eastern Mediterranean. The note that ‘money [came] only slowly from London’ is, of course, new. Richard Ameryk was the chief customs officer in Bristol; the ‘Bristol legend’ refers to the popular myth, first propagated by Alfred E. Hudd, that America was named after this individual. Ruddock’s intention to discuss ‘his real part in the expedition’ suggests that, while she was to dismiss Hudd’s proposition, she believed that Ameryk had a greater involvement in the voyage than the known documents reveal. At present, the only certain connection between Cabot and Ameryk is that the latter was to be responsible for paying John Cabot’s pension from the king’s customs receipts in Bristol. John Day’s account of the 1496 voyage is, as Ruddock states, brief. Vigneras’s translation of the relevant section is that Cabot ‘went with one ship, his crew confused him, he was short of supplies and ran into bad weather, and he decided to turn back’. Since Ruddock was to bring up the Laws of Oléron, it seems likely that she was to point out that, under these laws of the sea, medieval crews had considerable say over the running of a ship and the conduct of discipline aboard it. Their intervention might therefore have resulted in Cabot’s plans being ‘confused’, or, possibly better, ‘confounded’. That the crew

49 S. Jenks, Robert Sturmy’s Commercial Expedition to the Mediterranean (1457/8) (Bristol Record Soc., lvi, 2006).
51 The Cabot Roll, ed. E. Scott and A. E. Hudd (Bristol, 1897).
52 Vigneras, ‘Cape Breton’, p. 228.
may have excercised their legal rights to terminate the voyage is certainly feasible, given that John Day’s letter does not actually state, as Vigneras’s rather free translation has it, that it was Cabot who ‘decided to turn back’. Indeed, an alternative translation of the end of the passage is that ‘there was a vote whether to return’ (’uvo por eleccion de se volver’). 54 Henry VII visited Bristol on 12 August 1496. 55 Any claim that Cabot had arrived back in Bristol shortly before this visit must be based on new evidence, since the sailing dates of the 1496 voyage are unknown. That Cabot’s wife and sons came to Bristol about this time is also a new observation.

Chapter IX Contemporary Observers of the Voyage of 1497

The accounts of Cabot’s voyage of 1497 and his landfall as sent to Europe by observers in London and Bristol. A newly discovered letter from Fra Giovanni’s bankers gives the earliest account, dated August 10th 1497. Lorenzo Pasqualigio, merchant of Venice, reports from London to his brothers in Venice on August 23rd. Agostino and Benedetto Spinola, merchants of Genoa in London, and the report sent to Milan on August 24th. The arrival of a new Milanese ambassador, Raimondo di Raimondi da Soncino. His contacts with Fra Giovanni and his lengthy despatch touching John Cabot and his alleged discovery. In Spain Columbus seeks information about the voyage. John Day’s account. The evidence of the mappemonde of Juan de La Cosa in Madrid.

The most exciting aspect of this chapter outline is clearly the claim about the ‘newly discovered letter’ of 10 August 1497. This would be the first letter to mention the 1497 voyage, so, even if the document were brief, it would constitute a major find. The Pasqualigio letter is well known, as is the letter of 24 August. 56 However, the author of the 24 August letter has never been known. Ruddock suggests that it was written by Agostino and Benedetto Spinola, members of an Italian bank, to the duke of Milan. This seems plausible, given that ‘Agostino de Spinula’ was a London agent of the duke, who was close to Fra Giovanni and who wrote to the duke about the departure of the 1498 voyage. 57 Raimondo de Raimondi’s letter of 18 December is also well known, although the way in which the ambassador became acquainted with Cabot is not. On the other hand, it is known that Fra Giovanni accompanied the 1498 expedition and that the friar was a trusted agent of the duke of Milan. Moreover, Raimondo de Raimondi’s letters indicate that Fra Giovanni was the ambassador’s main source of advice and council following the ambassador’s arrival in

54 Vigneras, ‘New light’, p. 508. I thank Dr. Andrew Redden (University of Bristol) for advising me on the translation of this passage. For the use of ‘elección’ to describe a vote, see Diccionario de la Real Academia Española (Madrid, 1732).
55 Williamson, Cabot Voyages, p. 54.
56 Williamson, Cabot Voyages, pp. 207–9.
57 Williamson, Cabot Voyages, pp. 93, 227.
England in the summer of 1497. That Fra Giovanni might have introduced the ambassador to Cabot would thus be unsurprising. The information about Columbus may, or may not, be based on new findings. It is possible that Ruddock was merely inferring from the John Day letter that Columbus began to seek new information at about this time. The La Cosa map of Madrid, created c.1500, is well known and has been much discussed for what it indicates about the Bristol voyages of 1497 and 1498.

The most obvious first point of enquiry for historians who may wish to retrace Ruddock’s footsteps would be the identification of the letter of 10 August 1497. This is likely to excite attention, not only because it is the first letter to mention the voyage but also, as was noted in the commentary on chapter VII, because Ruddock was later to claim that it throws light on the issue of whether Bristol men had discovered America before 1497. Having said this, it seems likely that the letter is fairly brief and does not provide a detailed account of the voyage, since Ruddock herself was to admit in the supplementary notes to her proposal that she had ‘found no new account of any of John’s voyages’. Nevertheless, the letter is clearly worth searching for, partly because there are definite clues that could be used to locate it and partly because, as was noted in chapter VI, the collection it came from also contained other valuable information about both the voyages and Fra Giovanni. Although Ruddock does not reveal the name of the letter’s authors, the fact that she says it was written by Fra Giovanni’s bankers should prove helpful. As has been noted, the friar certainly had connections with the branch of the Spinola bank in London and Ruddock’s new claim that the letter of 24 August was written by Agostino and Benedetto Spinola of Genoa implies that these London-based Italian bankers were well informed about both the 1497 and the 1498 voyages. This suggests that those seeking the 10 August letter could do worse than to start by looking for the banking records of this famous Genoese family.

Chapter X The Voyage of 1497

Toby Matthew’s Chronicle and successive owners of the Matthew of Bristol. Men who sailed with John Cabot in 1497. The conflicting evidence about the voyage from contemporaries. The disputed site of the landfall and the evidence of Sebastian’s map dated 1544. How the discrepancies may be explained. Flemish and Italian compasses and the factor of compass variation. The coasting voyage in the light of new evidence. The return to Bristol.

60 Alwyn Ruddock, supplementary notes to her 1992 book proposal to U.E.P.
There is a fair amount in this chapter outline that appears new. Ruddock’s reference to ‘Toby Matthew’s’ chronicle is interesting, since the author of this lost Bristol chronicle, written in 1565, is generally known as ‘Matthew Toby’. This chronicle is important because, although it contained only a brief entry about the 1497 voyage, it included the exact departure date, the date of landfall and the return date of the expedition. It is also the earliest known source to have named Cabot’s ship, the Matthew. Ruddock may have inverted the author’s name because she believed that the chronicle’s author was Tobie Matthew, archbishop of York 1606–28. The reference to the ‘successive owners of the Matthew of Bristol’ is interesting, since none of the owners of the ship has ever been identified. It would also be very interesting if she had new information about the ‘men who sailed with John Cabot’, since the names of Cabot’s Bristol companions are unknown. While any discussion of the 1497 voyage would almost inevitably have to address the issue of the landfall, it seems likely that Ruddock had nothing concrete in this respect, since she states only that her theories ‘may’ explain the discrepancies. Her point about ‘Sebastian’s map dated 1544’ is a reference to the ‘Paris Map’ held at the Bibliothèque Nationale. The ‘new evidence’ about the coasting voyage that she had uncovered may be no more than a reference to the letter of 10 August 1497, which was discussed under chapter IX.

Chapter XI The Isle of Brasil or Cathay?

The conflicting reports of what had been discovered. Cabot insisted his landfall was on the coast of Asia and hoped to sail southward to Cipangu and Cathay. Two widely differing estimates of the landfall by Italians in London. Bristol men identify it with their former discovery years before, the so-called ‘Isle of Brasil’. The first interview with King Henry and his paltry reward ‘to hym that founde the New Isle’. Fra Giovanni comes to Court to see the king. Cabot’s second interview with Henry VII and the belated grant of an annual pension. The reasons for the delay. Cabot makes a globe and map to illustrate his discovery. He rejoins his family at Bristol. The evidence of the Bristol rent roll. But in Spain John Day was giving the Bristol version of the discovery to Columbus.

The early part of this chapter does not seem to be based on new evidence, relying instead on Ruddock’s analysis of well-known accounts

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62 Tobie Matthew is not an implausible candidate for the chronicle’s author, given that he was said to have been born in Bristol and, in 1565, had just completed his B.A. at Oxford (W. J. Sheils, ‘Matthew, Tobie (1544?–1628)’, O.D.N.B. (Oxford, 2004) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18342> [accessed 11 Jan. 2007]).
63 Although the Bristol merchants Robert Thorne and Hugh Elyot may have been involved in the expedition, the evidence for this is inconclusive (Williamson, Cabot Voyages, p. 62).
of the voyage. The reference to the ‘widely differing estimates of the
landfall’ presumably concerns Pasqualigo’s letter of 23 August and the
letter to the duke of Milan of 24 August. Pasqualigo’s letter suggests that
Cabot had discovered the country of the Grand Kahn, ‘700 leagues away’;
the letter to the duke states that he had discovered ‘the Seven Cities, 400
leagues from England’. The fact that Ruddock does not refer to the 10
August letter would seem to confirm that it does not contain much
information about the voyage.

The middle section of the chapter proposal is more interesting. It is
known that, on 10–11 August, the king granted ‘to hym that founde the
New Isle’ a reward of ten pounds. It would be reasonable to assume
that the granting of this ‘paltry reward’ to Cabot would have followed an
interview with the king. Ruddock’s assertion that Fra Giovanni then
came to court to see the king is new, as is the claim that Cabot was then
granted a second interview and that a decision to pay him an annual
pension was taken at this time. Having said this, it is clear from
Pasqualigo’s letter of 23 August that, a fortnight after Cabot’s return, he
was being well received at court, where it was said ‘he is called the Great
Admiral and vast honour is paid to him’. Ruddock appears to have a
clear notion of why a pension was not granted until 13 December.
Although this has not been greatly discussed before, there are some
obvious potential explanations for the delay, such as Perkin Warbeck’s
landing in Cornwall on 7 September and his subsequent attempt to seize
the throne. That Cabot made a globe and a map in the latter part of the
year is known from Raimondo de Raimondi’s letter of 18 December.
The information from the Bristol rent roll is also well known, as is the
fact that, at about this time, Columbus was receiving an account of the
voyage from John Day.

Chapter XII Preparations for the Voyage of 1498

John Cabot’s supporters in Bristol plan another voyage. The Forster family and
their long tradition of Iceland voyages. The Esterfields and Thomas Bradley.
Their loans from Henry VII. The Thirkell family of London and their links with
Bristol. The friar from Naples and other Italian friars who went. The missionary
impulse and rivalry between different orders of friars. The Reformed houses of
the Hermit Friars in Italy and why William Strachey was misled. Fra Giovanni
Antonio embarks himself as their leader. The departure from Bristol as reported
in Italy by foreign diplomats in London.

65 Williamson, Cabot Voyages, pp. 207–9.
66 Williamson, Cabot Voyages, p. 214.
67 Williamson, Cabot Voyages, p. 208.
Most of this chapter would have to have been based on entirely new research. Almost nothing is known about who was involved in the 1498 voyage, other than that in March–April 1498 Lancelot Thirkill and his partner, Thomas Bradley, received payments or loans from the king, totalling £113 8s, for the preparation of Thirkill’s ship for a voyage to the new land. The terms of the payments suggest that these men were themselves ‘going to the new Isle’. Beside this, on 8 April, a man called John Cair received a reward of 40s for ‘going to the newe Ile.’ Williamson suggests that both Thirkill and Bradley were London men and their ship was presumably the London ship which the king provisioned and which accompanied the expedition. Nothing is known, however, of the Bristol men or the other ships that went. Ruddock’s proposal mentions the importance of the Forster, or Foster, family, who were certainly engaged in the Iceland trade in the fifteenth century. Indeed, at least in the period 1466–78, Bristol’s trade with Iceland was dominated by John Foster. Yet, since John Foster died in 1492, it seems more likely that Ruddock was referring to William Weston, Foster’s son-in-law, who is first mentioned in chapter XV. The Esterfields, or Esterfelds, were also an important Bristol merchant family. Moreover, John Foster and John Esterfeld were certainly closely connected, the latter being appointed Foster’s executor in 1492, charged with the onerous and ultimately very expensive task of establishing Foster’s Almshouse in Bristol. Ruddock’s reference to Thomas Bradley is interesting in that it seems to imply that he was a Bristol man. That the Esterfelds received loans from Henry VII is unknown, as is the information that the Thirkell family of London had links with Bristol.

As for the friars, it is known from Raimondo de Raimondi’s letter of 18 December 1497 that certain ‘poor Italian friars’ intended to accompany the 1498 expedition. It is also known that Fra Giovanni Antonio de Carbonariis, went along. That one of the friars was from Naples is, however, unknown. Similarly, while it might be surmised that the friars would have had a missionary impulse, nothing is known about which orders they came from. As discussed in chapter III, the reference to

72 T.N.A.: P.R.O., PROB 11/9 96/83. On 18 May 1480 William Weston undertook a voyage to Madeira, the first such voyage that is known to have taken place from Bristol (The Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Later Middle Ages, ed. E. M. Carus-Wilson (Bristol Record Soc., vii, 1937), p. 285). ‘William Weston of Bristol’ is also mentioned in an official document of 1494 (Calendar of Close Rolls 1485–1500, no. 747).
73 The Bristol Charities, being the Report of the Commissioners for inquiring concerning Charities in England and Wales, ed. T. J. Manchee (Bristol, 1831), i. 80–3; T.N.A.: P.R.O., PROB 11/9 96/83.
74 Williamson, Cabot Voyages, p. 211.
75 Williamson, Cabot Voyages, p. 227.
William Strachey must relate to Strachey’s statement that Cabot, when in London in 1496, had been staying with the Black Friars. Ruddock apparently intended to address the issue of why it might be possible to confuse the Black Friars with the Reformed Augustinian Friars. This might have something to do with modes of dress, given that the black habit of the Austin Friars has sometimes led to their being confused with the Black Friars/Dominicans, whose garb is a black cape over a white habit. That Fra Giovanni was the leader of the friars is unknown but unsurprising, given his high status. Ruddock’s intention to discuss ‘the departure from Bristol as reported in Italy by foreign diplomats in London’ is presumably a reference to letters written to the duke of Milan on 18 December 1497 and 20 June 1498.76

Chapter XIII The Caribbean Voyage

Misconceptions concerning the 1498 voyage. Muddle in sources has led to a story of a voyage to Greenland with a Portuguese pilot. No Portuguese involvement in this voyage. Cabot’s plan for the voyage. The landfall in Newfoundland and the journey southward. The arrival in the Caribbean. Columbus in Hispaniola and Hojeda and Vespucci exploring the South American coast. Evidence from Spanish archives and narratives. The encounter with Cabot’s ship at Coquibaço and the homeward voyage. Repercussions in Spain. A disillusioned shipload of men sail north again. Clearly John Cabot had not discovered Cathay.

This chapter is potentially one of the most important in the book, in that Ruddock felt sure that the 1498 expedition sailed down the whole coast of North America, claiming it for England in the process. The expedition then went on to trespass into the Caribbean, a region that even Henry VII acknowledged belonged to Spain. Here she has Cabot encountering the Spanish explorers at Coquibaço, on the coast of Venezuela. What is frustrating about the proposal is that it is unclear what, if anything, Ruddock had found out about the voyage that was new. First, it may be noted that the confusion about the Greenland voyage has been addressed before and it is unclear whether Ruddock had anything new to add.77 Second, in respect to the voyage south, there is certainly evidence, from known sources, to support what Ruddock claims.78 In particular, the La Cosa map of c.1500 seems to mark the coastline of North America, accompanied by five English flags to indicate that it had been claimed by the English. Since the 1497 expedition only landed once, it has been suggested that the information from the map must be based on Cabot’s 1498 expedition. Second, in 1501 the Spanish explorer, Alonso de Ojeda, was granted a Spanish licence to ‘follow that coast which you have

78 For a sensible discussion of all this evidence, see Williamson, Cabot Voyages, pp. 107–12.
discovered [the north coast of Venezuela], which runs east and west, as it appears, because it goes towards the region where it has been learned that the English were making discoveries’. This suggests that officials in Spain believed that English explorers had already intruded into the southern Caribbean. If they were correct, it seems likely that the English explorers were part of John Cabot’s 1498 expedition.

On the basis of this evidence, combined with some more circumstantial fragments, it would have been possible for Ruddock to argue the main case outlined in her proposal. What is unclear is whether she had found any new documents to support such conjectures. It is possible that some of the ‘evidence from Spanish archives and narratives’ to which she refers was new. It also seems likely that the records she claims to have discovered that relate to Cabot’s return to England in the spring of 1500, which will be discussed under chapters XV and XVI, also threw light on the voyage. In particular, such documents would presumably have indicated that, when Cabot sailed ‘north’ from the Caribbean, he returned first to Newfoundland. This would explain the gap, of at least six months, that would have lain between an encounter at Coquibaçoa in the summer of 1499 and Cabot’s return to England in the spring of 1500. A return via Newfoundland would also explain how Cabot was later able to report on what the friars had been up to in 1499.

Chapter XIV The Friars in Newfoundland

Separated from the other ships, the friars’ vessel arrives later off Newfoundland. The value and limitations of place-name study. Early maps of Newfoundland and the work of G. R. Prowse. The origin of the name Carbonear. The Neapolitan friar and the Reformed house of friars in the charcoal burners’ clearing outside the walls of Naples. The naming of the Friars’ church in Newfoundland. The failure of Cabot’s ship to reappear before the onset of winter. The fishing vessels sail for home, leaving only the Dominus Nobiscum and the friars. The hardships of winter in Newfoundland. The evidence for a voyage northward from Carbonara by the Dominus Nobiscum. The earrings and the Venetian sword found by the first Portuguese explorers in Newfoundland, area evidence of Europeans exploring there before the Corte-Real vessels arrived. Hakluyt’s confusion over the Dominus Nobiscum voyage. Other evidence of their route. The Isle of Frey Luis on early Portuguese charts. The idealized cult of the hermit life-style among the Reformed houses of Hermit Friars in Italy. Frey Luis and the remembrance of his Italian nationality in the traditions of this area in the seventeenth century. The continued attempt to supply a priest for the fishermen in Newfoundland in the reign of Henry VII.

Of all the chapters in the book, it may well be this one that excites the most attention, since Ruddock claims to have found out a considerable amount about a previously unknown attempt to establish a religious

colony in Newfoundland. If she were correct, this would be the first European Christian settlement in North America, with the church Ruddock mentions being the first built on the continent.

That the friars had their own ship, or that it was called the Dominus Nobiscum (‘The Lord be with us’), is unknown. Indeed, none of the known documents provides any hint that the friars had their own ship. On the other hand, a letter of 25 July 1498 from Pedro de Ayala, the Spanish ambassador in London, does at least fit with Ruddock’s account. This letter mentions that one of the five ships in the 1498 expedition had been badly damaged in a storm and was forced to land in Ireland, leaving Cabot to sail on. The ambassador notes that on the damaged ship was ‘another Friar Buil’. This was a reference to the missionary who accompanied Columbus’s 1493 expedition with twelve of his brothers. The ‘Friar Buil’ to whom the ambassador refers is almost certainly Fra Giovanni Antonio de Carbonariis. This document could thus be the source of Ruddock’s claim that the friars’ ship was separated from the others, causing them to arrive later in Newfoundland. The discussion of place-name evidence was presumably intended as a prelude to Ruddock’s theories about Carbonear, the Isle of Frey Luis and, possibly, St. John’s. Her mention of the work of G. R. Prowse implies that she intended to discuss his theory that the early Portuguese maps, produced from 1502, were based on knowledge derived from the English 1497 and 1498 expeditions. Given that Ruddock was to bring up the ‘origin of the name Carbonear’ it seems likely she was to argue that this Newfoundland town was established by Fra Giovanni. This, however, is not an entirely original suggestion, a possible connection between Carbonariis and Carbonear having been noted previously.

Ruddock was then to look into ‘The Neapolitan friar and the Reformed house of friars in the charcoal burners’ clearing outside the walls of Naples’ and the naming of the church in Newfoundland. This appears to be a deliberately opaque reference to the church of San Giovanni a Carbonara in Naples. This church was established by the Augustinian Friars in the fourteenth century and became the centre for an influential Augustinian reform congregation, called the Carbonaria, in the fifteenth century. It appears that Ruddock believed the Newfoundland church was named after San Giovanni a Carbonara, the locative element ‘a Carbonara’ presumably being carried across because it was key to the congregation’s identity. The nature of the connection between

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80 Williamson, Cabot Voyages, pp. 211, 227.
81 Williamson, Cabot Voyages, p. 228.
83 Williamson, Cabot Voyages, p. 93, n. 5.
Fra Giovanni Antonio de Carbonariis and the congregation of San Giovanni a Carbonara is, unfortunately, unclear. Although ‘de Carbonariis’ could, in theory, indicate that the friar was a member of this congregation, the authorization granted to him in 1474, discussed under chapter IV, indicates that Fra Giovanni was neither a ‘reformed’ friar nor from southern Italy. His name, ‘de Carbonariis’, is therefore almost certainly a family name. This appears to be confirmed by the fact that, during the fourteen-nineties, a man called Christopher de Carbonariis (alias Carbonaro, Carbonari) was also, like Fra Giovanni, in the service of the duke of Milan.\(^85\) Since both Fra Giovanni and Christopher accompanied Francesco Pagano’s diplomatic mission to London at the start of 1490, it seems almost certain that there was a connection between the two men.\(^86\) This was most likely to be a family connection, rather than a mutual religious affiliation, given that none of the letters that mentions Christopher indicates that he was in holy orders.

There is no known documentary evidence that suggests, or even implies, either that a Neapolitan friar accompanied the 1498 expedition or that the friars built a church in North America. It may seem that this section would therefore have had to be based on new document discoveries. It is possible, however, that there is less to Ruddock’s case than meets the eye. In particular, her evidence for the building of the church named after San Giovanni a Carbonara in Naples could rest solely on the ‘survival’ of place names in Newfoundland that could derive from such a construction. Apart from the ‘survival’ of Carbonara as Carbonear, she may have noted that the name ‘St. John’, the English form of San Giovanni, dates back to the early sixteenth century. Indeed the use of this name continues to this day, most notably in the capital of the island, St. John’s.

Ruddock’s note that Cabot’s ship failed to reappear before winter and the ‘fishing vessels’ sailing for home is interesting. Since Ruddock implies that Cabot went south with just one ship and the friars had another, it would appear that she believed that the other three Bristol ships that are reported to have gone on the voyage were engaged in fishing. At first sight, this may appear to conflict with accounts of the 1498 voyage that state that the Bristol ships were ‘fraught [that is, laden] with sleight and grosse merchandizes’.\(^87\) On the other hand Ruddock had demonstrated previously that, in the later Bristol voyages from 1502 to 1504, there was an attempt to combine exploration, trade and fishing.\(^88\) It may therefore

\(^85\) Cal. S.P. Milan, i, nos. 493, 511, 603, 612.
\(^87\) Williamson, Cabot Voyages, p. 221.
be that something similar was attempted in 1498. As for a putative voyage northward by the Dominus Nobiscum, which would presumably have taken place in 1499, it seems that this is fairly speculative. It is known that the Corte-Real expedition of 1501, which visited Labrador, claimed to have acquired from the natives with whom they came into contact a fragment of a broken Italian sword and two silver earrings of Venetian manufacture. It has, moreover, been suggested previously that these must have been relics of the 1498 expedition, since Cabot had no contact with Native Americans in 1497.  

Turning to ‘Hakluyt’s confusion over the Dominus Nobiscum voyage’, this must be a reference to Richard Hakluyt’s assertion that one of the ships that took part in a 1527 voyage in search of the North-West Passage was called the Dominus Vobiscum (‘The Lord be with you’). He also suggested that ‘sayling very farre Northwestward, one of the ships was cast away as it entred into a dangerous gulph, about the great opening, betwenee the North parts of Newfoundland, and the countrie lately called by her Majestie, Meta Incognita’. Yet, as Williamson notes, Hakluyt was wrong about both the name of the ship and much of what else he says about the voyage. In particular, contemporary sources indicate that the two ships were actually called the Mary of Gilford and the Sampson. There is also no evidence that either ship sailed as far north as Meta Incognita (Baffin Island). Ruddock clearly thought that Hakluyt had picked up some partial account of the 1498 voyage and believed that it related to the 1527 voyage. This is confirmed by a later letter, where she wrote that, when Hakluyt tried in the late sixteenth century to discover more about the early English voyages, ‘It was not John Cabot but the Milanese friar, Fra Giovanni Antonio, who was still recalled vaguely in the seamen’s traditions gleaned for him by Martin Frobisher and others’. This must be a reference to Hakluyt’s note that Martin Frobisher and Richard Allen had told him that ‘a Canon of Saint Paul in London, which was a great Mathematician, and a man indued with wealth, did much advance the action, and went therein himselfe in person’.  

That Frobisher’s account does relate to Fra Giovanni and the 1498 voyage is something for which there is some evidence. In particular, while Fra Giovanni was not a canon at St. Paul’s, he was deputy to Adriano Castellesi, who had been a canon at St. Paul’s since 1492. As mentioned above, in 1494 Castellesi moved to Rome to become Henry

92 Ruddock to Baker, 29 Sept. 1996.
93 Hakluyt, viii. 2.
94 Cal. Papal Registers, xvi, no. 324; Mayer.
VII’s proctor. Fra Giovanni, in turn, became Castellesi’s ‘general proctor’ in England, even taking over the tenancy of the house in the City that Castellesi had leased from the bishop of London. It is thus not difficult to understand how later commentators might have thought that this wealthy, educated and exceedingly well-connected friar was himself a canon at St. Paul’s, rather than just a deputy to one. Lastly, it should be noted that Ruddock believed that Frobisher had got the name of Fra Giovanni’s ship wrong, believing it to be the Dominus Vobiscum, rather than the Dominus Nobiscum. This suggests that she had come across the ship in some other source.

With regard to the discussion of the ‘Isle of Frey Luis’ it seems likely that Ruddock was to suggest that the Dominus Nobiscum sailed north and, en route, dropped off one of the friars, a Friar Luis, on the island referred to as the ‘Ilha de Frey Luis’ on the c.1503 Portuguese chart known as the Salvat de Pilestrina Map, or Kunstmann III. Ruddock apparently intended to back up her suggestion by reference to folk traditions about the putative Frey Luis and his Italian nationality. The existence of such traditions has not been discussed by other discovery historians. Similarly, no known documents relate to the ‘continued attempt to supply a priest for the fishermen in Newfoundland in the reign of Henry VII’. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the gist of Ruddock’s argument was that Frey Luis continued to live on this island as a hermit for several years after 1498 and was known to the fishermen who began to visit Newfoundland during the first decade of the sixteenth century. Her argument was presumably that the friar provided for some of the fishermen’s religious needs and that, after he had died or had left his island, there were efforts to have another priest appointed.

As with the previous chapter outline, this one is very frustrating. While some of Ruddock’s statements seem to imply the existence of hard documentary evidence, it is unclear how much of this there was, or where such evidence might be found. On the other hand, it seems possible that key elements of her argument were conjectural, being based on her analysis of maps and place-names. Such sources are notoriously open to interpretation.

Chapter XV The Return to England

Spain, Portugal and England all awaiting news of their explorers in 1499. Successes of Columbus and Vasco da Gama reported. The long wait for news in Bristol. John Cabot and his companions given up for lost. Return of the survivors in the spring of 1500. Death of John Cabot. The king compensates Weston for his losses. His last years in Bristol. Arrest of Thirkell and Bradley ordered June 1500. Thirkell and Bradley’s end. Fra Giovanni does not return.

Nothing of permanence left in Newfoundland but traditional place-names such as Carbonear.

The first part of this chapter outline merely sets the scene. In August 1498 Columbus landed on the mainland of South America and the following year further voyages were carried out by Ojeda and Niño.97 Vasco da Gama returned from his voyage to India in September 1499. That Cabot might have been given up for lost by the end of 1499 would not be surprising, given that the Spanish ambassador’s account of July 1498 suggests he had provisions for only a one-year voyage.98 What is new about this chapter is Ruddock’s claim about Cabot’s return in the spring of 1500. That the expedition returned at all is unknown, as is the information about John Cabot’s death, which, in a later letter, Ruddock states occurred ‘less than four months after his return’.99 Similarly, nothing is known of any compensation offered to Weston – a man she more fully identifies in later correspondence as William Weston, noting that he was an ‘important Bristol supporter’, that he was the only man to receive compensation from the king and that his involvement had been with ‘the first North-West Atlantic voyage’.100 The final point suggests that Weston had been involved with the northwards voyage of the Dominus Nobiscum in 1499. As the proposal implies, Weston did not survive many years, since his wife, Agnes Weston, is described as a widow in a will of 5 February 1505.101 Similarly, nothing is known of Lancelot Thirkell’s or Thomas Bradley’s arrest or of their ‘end’, other than that one of the household books of Henry VII indicates that on 6 June 1501 Thirkell was recorded as a debtor to the crown.102 In the supplementary notes that accompany the proposal, Ruddock stated that her evidence came from ‘English records as yet uncatalogued’ and that these show Cabot’s ‘return and death and also which Bristol men and London supporters came back and how the king treated them’.103

This chapter gives researchers something more tangible to go on. The proposal, and Ruddock’s other letters, indicate that the research is based on English sources and that the records are likely to be those relating to 1500. She also indicates the individuals that should be sought. It seems likely that at least some of the documents would be legal records, given Ruddock’s references to the arrest of Bradley and Thirkell and the comment that she would examine ‘how the king treated them’. There

98 Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p. 228.
103 Alwyn Ruddock, supplementary notes to her 1992 book proposal to U.E.P.
are various possible sources that could be examined, such as the king’s memoranda rolls or the exchequer memoranda rolls, both of which are uncatalogued and both of which had been employed by Ruddock previously. It may also be that the household books of Henry VII contain further useful information.

Chapter XVI The English Achievement

Financially, a dead loss. No commercial cargo of value but an immense addition to geographical knowledge. In two years and in two separate vessels they had made a longer coasting voyage in the New World than any other nation. Yet no acclaim or publication of the voyage on their return. A financial disappointment and a great diplomatic embarrassment to the king. The diplomatic scene. The Anglo-Spanish alliance and the state of the Spanish marriage negotiations in 1500. Cabot and his companions had intruded into the Spanish monopoly zone and had been detected. Their failure must be swept under the carpet. Yet the tradition of the great two year voyage remained in Bristol for generations, as shown by snippets from Bristol local chronicles, now lost. Reasons for a complete lack of accounts from the foreign diplomats and merchants in London who had reported the former voyage from Bristol in 1497. Yet proof that the main outline of the voyage was known in both Spain and Portugal. The Portuguese spy known as ‘Edward le Portyngale’ at the Court of Henry VII. His identity and his commercial links in London and Bristol. Henry’s reticence suited the Portuguese. The first expedition of the Corte-Real brothers dispatched with speed to bolster Portuguese claims to the area explored by the Dominus Nobiscum. Sebastian Cabot tries in vain to interest Henry VII in another voyage of exploration in that area. Unsuccessful but the future lay with Sebastian.

The first part of the chapter was merely to summarize what the 1498–1500 voyage had achieved and why it might have been perceived, in financial and political terms, to have failed. In this respect, Ruddock’s assessment is reasonable. The voyage had been intended from the outset as commercial, with merchants lading goods in the hope that these could be traded in China or Japan.¹⁰⁴ Those who had invested in the voyage might therefore have been understandably disappointed, for not only did the expedition fail to bring back any worthwhile trade goods, but it had apparently established that from the frozen north to the territories occupied by the Spanish lay a solid coastline of an unknown continent which clearly had nothing to do with China. Moreover, the voyage might well have been a diplomatic embarrassment. In part this was because Cabot had exceeded the terms of his 1496 patent, which only granted him the right to explore the 'coasts of the eastern, western, and northern sea' in those regions 'unknown to all Christians'.¹⁰⁵ By doing

¹⁰⁵ Williamson, Cabot Voyages, pp. 204–5.
this, Henry VII had implicitly forbidden Cabot from sailing into the southern latitudes, where the Spanish and Portuguese were making their discoveries. The embarrassment would have been all the more acute because, in the first half of 1500, the negotiations over the marriage of Arthur, the prince of Wales, to Katherine, the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, had reached a particularly sensitive stage.\textsuperscript{106} It is thus plausible that, if things had turned out the way Ruddock suggests, the king would have been displeased by the voyage’s outcome.

Ruddock’s claim about the ‘tradition of the great two year voyage’ surviving in Bristol for generations is slightly perplexing. She states that this was apparent from ‘Bristol local chronicles, now lost’. Quite which chronicles she could be referring to is unclear. Since she is talking of lost chronicles, she cannot have been referring to any of the Bristol chronicles that survive in Bristol Library or the Bristol Record Office. On the other hand, if the chronicles were ‘lost’, she could only have known what was in them if she had seen transcripts of the chronicles or, at least, descriptions of their contents. It can be noted that there are some unpublished transcripts of ‘lost’ Bristol chronicles in the City Library, which were produced by Samuel Seyer in the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{107} None of these, however, seems to contain references to a great voyage occurring at this time. Similarly, writings of the main eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Bristol antiquarians do not throw light on this matter; for while their books were based largely on local chronicles, and these writers certainly had access to some chronicles that have now been lost, these volumes do not mention such a voyage.\textsuperscript{108} It is, however, possible that Ruddock was picking up on references in some obscure work.

As to the issue of why the foreign diplomats who had reported on the events of 1497 did not do the same for the 1498–1500 voyage, it may be that Ruddock was to argue that, without the presence of Fra Giovanni, the diplomats, who were mainly Italian, were simply less interested in the voyage, or had less access to information about it. What Ruddock writes, however, about the ‘proof’ that both Spain and Portugal were aware of the outline of what had happened on the voyage is much more useful. In particular, there has never been any indication that Portugal had special intelligence of Cabot’s voyages. Yet, Ruddock clearly believed the Portuguese had good information from their ‘spy’, ‘Edward le Portyngale’. She had clearly investigated this individual at some length and suggests that it was his intelligence, following Cabot’s return in the spring of 1500,

\textsuperscript{106} Calendar of State Papers, Spanish, 1485–1509, pp. lxxxix–xc.


\textsuperscript{108} W. Barrett, The History and Antiquities of the City of Bristol (Bristol, 1789); S. Seyer, Memoirs Historical and Topographical of Bristol and its Neighbourhood, from the Earliest Period Down to the Present Time (2 vols., Bristol, 1821–3); J. F. Nicholls and J. Taylor, Bristol Past and Present, i: Civil History (Bristol, 1881).
which prompted the king of Portugal to grant a ‘speedy’ licence to Gaspar Corte-Real on 12 May 1500. This allowed Corte-Real to conduct a voyage to the Labrador Sea that summer.\textsuperscript{109} All of this is new, given that all that is currently known about ‘Edward of Portingale’ is that an individual of this name received certain payments from the king’s household book in 1501–2.\textsuperscript{110} Williamson noted these payments and suggested that he was probably some form of official emissary sent by Portugal to contest English claims in the New World. Finally, that Sebastian Cabot tried to interest the king in another voyage in 1500 is unknown.

On the basis of her 1992 book proposal, Ruddock appears to have made more progress in her research on the voyages of John Cabot than any other historian. If her claims can be validated, she may yet be remembered as one of the greatest scholars to have worked in the field of discovery history. It is almost certainly the case, however, that she will also be remembered as one of the most peculiar. For while she may have solved many mysteries, she left one of her own. Why, having apparently made such amazing discoveries about matters of such great import, did she, first, fail to publish her work and, second, order that all her research notes be destroyed after her death?

In Alwyn Ruddock’s obituary, Emma Mason suggested that she had destroyed the first draft of her book because ‘it did not meet her exacting standards’ and that, following this, she was held back by failing health. This does not explain, however, why she should have sought to suppress her basic research. She could, for instance, have made provision for the appendix to her proposed book to be published posthumously. After all, even a slim volume, containing nothing more than her raw transcriptions and translations of the previously unpublished ‘twenty-one documents or extracts from documents’ would have made an enormous contribution to scholarship in a field that Ruddock had spent decades researching.\textsuperscript{111}

In trying to explain Ruddock’s behaviour, there is little to go on. The friend and trustee she made responsible for the destruction of her notes felt unable to comment on Ruddock’s motives, beyond noting what Ruddock wrote in her 2003 will. This trustee did indicate, however, that it had been Alwyn Ruddock’s long-standing intention, going back at least


\textsuperscript{111} At the time of her original proposal, Ruddock estimated that her end matter, including the appendix, would come to about 20,000 words (Ruddock to Baker, 4 Oct. 1992). It seems likely that the number of documents in the appendix would have ended up being slightly higher than 21, given that she was later to note that she had found ‘two more documents from a batch of microfilms from Italy that arrived last summer’, noting that ‘These two must go in with the others’ (Alwyn Ruddock to Simon Baker (U.E.P.), 5 Oct. 1994).
ten years, that her notes should be destroyed at her death.\footnote{112} Having said this, her trustee also noted that, while Ruddock had become increasingly frail and immobile in recent years, she remained mentally competent until at least October 2005, when she was admitted into a nursing home during her final illness. For her part, Ruddock justified her actions in her will by stating simply that:

I much dislike posthumous publication and do not wish anyone to try to finish work left unfinished by me at the time of my death. The only exception to this shall be a book which may be already in the press in course of publication at the time of my death or incapacity. All the work to be destroyed is entirely my own property. The expenses of the collection and revision have been paid for by me without any publishers advance payment or any grant, academic or otherwise, to help pay for the collection or travelling expenses in England, Europe and America. Nothing is to be sold or given to any other person or to any library university or other institution.\footnote{113}

Her comments are interesting in that, while they do not explain why she wanted her research findings destroyed, the above extract does hint at the very great sense of possession she felt for her work. It appears to have been this that she felt gave her the moral right to take her findings to the grave.

Finally, it should be noted and accepted that the very decision of Ruddock both to delay publication and to destroy her notes may promote some scepticism about the claims expressed in the proposal. Some will inevitably wonder whether, fine scholar though she had once been, she lost her sense of historical judgment at some point before 1992. This could, perhaps, have led to the production of a book proposal, at the age of seventy-six, which contained claims that had no factual foundation. The answer to such speculation must surely be that the only way to resolve the matter is to conduct the research necessary to test Alwyn Ruddock’s assertions. This will almost certainly be worthwhile, for it has been shown in this article that Ruddock’s proposal does contain findings that are both valuable and verifiable. It would be curious if it does not contain more.

\footnote{112} Personal communication, 7 Aug. 2006. I thank the trustee for the assistance she provided, which included her checking the accuracy of parts of the introduction and conclusion.  
\footnote{113} ‘Will of Alywn Amy Southward’, sect. 11.