

## ***Cabot and His World Symposium June 1997: Papers and Presentations.* Iona Bulgin (ed.)**

David B. Quinn

Volume 15, Number 2, Fall 1999

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds15\\_2rv01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds15_2rv01)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Quinn, D. B. (1999). Review of [*Cabot and His World Symposium June 1997: Papers and Presentations*. Iona Bulgin (ed.)]. *Newfoundland Studies*, 15(2), 251–253.

## REVIEWS

*Cabot and His World Symposium June 1997: Papers and Presentations.*  
Iona Bulgin (ed.), St. John's, Newfoundland Historical Society, ix,  
215p., 22 essays, maps, illusts., bibliogs., softcover, \$20.00, 1999,  
ISBN 0-9680803-1-6.

DAVID B. QUINN

THE WORLD-WIDE IMPORTANCE of the Cabot voyage of 1497, which exposed the western hemisphere to view (even if this was not fully recognized until later), certainly deserved celebration, above all in the Newfoundland that he discovered in June 1497. The Newfoundland Historical Society appropriately arranged a five-day symposium in honour of the occasion as an opportunity to survey the surrounding circumstances in the North Atlantic, the adjacent mainland, and the English background and foreground which lay behind and followed the Cabot ventures. This was an ambitious project but one which was carried through with verve and scholarship in this substantial volume. The symposium was held at Bonavista, the spot most favoured for long in Newfoundland as the landfall, even if now it would not meet all scholarly requirements. There is considerable variability in quality between the papers, some taking the widest scope and bringing together European activities in the North Atlantic both before and after Cabot's voyages, others which deal with the character and sad fate of indigenous peoples, and some with rather limited local issues, but with the solid core of emphasis being maintained on the Cabot discovery. The twenty-two contributions vary very much in their interest but a number rely on recent documentary research which places the

Cabot venture in its historical and maritime context and enable one to estimate more precisely than before the precise context of the 1497 venture. Significant, for example, is Birgitta Wallace's paper on the Norse in the North Atlantic which establishes clearly that L'Anse aux Meadows is almost certainly the only pre-Cabotian site in North America and that the literature on other Norse colonies between 1100 and 1500 are mythical. Also, that Englishmen were searching the seas for fishing sites, trading largely with Iceland and in Icelandic waters, and had a good knowledge of the North Atlantic and may conceivably have sighted a western island or landmass in 1480 or 1481. There are three contributions on possible Cabot landing sites, beginning with Bonavista, continuously favoured by Newfoundlanders and the site of the main Cabot celebrations. The historical grounds for this are dependant on substantially later sources. The case for North Cape Breton Island has never seemed to me to have much basis at all. Here may be the place to point out that on p. 102 Williams stated that Vigneras (1957) was for Cape Breton, as latterly is Quinn (1993) .... This is completely false, as it is when repeated by Pope on p. 184. The third site is that near the opening of the Strait of Belle Isle and rests on the John Day letter found by Vigneras in 1955 in the Spanish archives, which represents information almost certainly gleaned from members of the ship's company and is almost certainly correct, even if details remain unclear on Cabot's actions subsequent to the discovery. This is handled most weakly in the *Symposium*. Study of Bristol and Newfoundland 1490-1570 is valuable. It traces maritime efforts up to 1508 but misses a valuable paper by Alwyn Ruddock [*Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 42 (1974), 94-9] on the 1497-1508 voyages. It is also categorically stated that no English voyages to Newfoundland are known between 1508 and shortly before 1570. This fails to take account of the evidence in Quinn (*England and the Discovery of America, 1481-1620*. London, 1973) that English fishing, if on a small scale, was taking place in 1516 and 1536, using Cape Spear as a base. Unfortunately, we have, so far, no details of the extent of the fishery in and around these parts after Cabot. Todd Gray brings out the significant part which fish and fishing played in the English economy and diet, while Evan Jones deals effectively with what is known of Bristol's relations with Newfoundland down to 1570, even if he does not solve the puzzle of the continuity or otherwise of the English fishery at Newfoundland. Olaf Uwe Janzen brings out what evidence there is for an English presence in Newfoundland down to 1604, while Darlene Abreu-Ferreira makes an important revision to the story of the early fishery by a close archival study of the Portuguese fishery, and surprisingly shows that it amounted to very little so far as surviving documents in Portugal go. The latter part of the *Symposium* deals with lesser matters — unlikely proposed sites for Cabot's landing — Grates Cove and Flatrock. It is interesting that Grates Cove Rock, with its supposed inscriptions, proved so attractive to some inquirer that he (or she) removed it wholesale from its situation and that its present whereabouts is unknown. Three final papers deal with the myths and legends about Cabot and his

appearance and influence on subsequent Newfoundland history, straying far from the primary purpose of the symposium. Significant and tragic are the papers on the Beothuk before Europeans arrived, and their elimination by the white settlement and settlers, while the Mi'kmaq perspective is also clarified.

The *Symposium* is thus a valuable, if uneven, survey which deals with pre-Cabot, Cabot and post-Cabot issues, on the whole very effectively and will be of substantial value to students of Newfoundland history, in particular those who have not already delved very far into its earliest appearances in the history of the North Atlantic.