

READ IT FIRST



A SAVAGE EMPIRE

TRAPPERS, TRADERS, TRIBES, AND
THE WARS THAT MADE AMERICA

ALAN AXELROD



THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS.
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The Middle Ground



FROM 1492 TO 1580, the year Philip II, king of Castile and Aragon, united for the time being the bulk of Spain with Portugal, thereby consolidating the vast New World holdings of all Iberia, Spain held a monopoly on American conquest and thereby came to control the largest empire in geographical extent the planet has ever known. Founded mainly on agriculture, the cultivation of cotton, sugar, and tobacco, and the raising of cattle, it was maintained by slaves, black as well as Indian. The empire was based on slave labor in one form or another, yet the lure that drew Spain westward was neither vegetative nor fleshly, but metallic overlaid with something resembling divinity. Driving the many Spanish voyages into the sunset lands was gold, gold plated with the thinnest layer of God.

Never mind that few of the Spanish expeditions actually returned with the coveted ore. A handful of discoveries was quite sufficient to inspire many more, the most seductive of which were those of Hernán Cortés. When in 1519 he landed a small force at what is today Veracruz, Mexico, he was greeted by ambassadors of the Aztec king Montezuma II, who bore dazzling gifts, mostly of gold. Doubtless, they were intended to appease the newcomer. Cortés, however, was anything but sated.

“Send me some more of it,” he reportedly told Montezuma’s minions,

“because I and my companions suffer from a disease of the heart which can be cured only with gold.”

From this point on, the story is a familiar one, perhaps too familiar any longer to generate much excitement. Driven by this sickness at the heart, a disorder all of us understand, Cortés and his companions marched on Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital known today as Mexico City. The conquistador took care first to bore holes in the hulls of his ships (“Ship-worm!” he told his men) so that none of them, least of all he himself, could turn back. He recruited allies among the ever-warring city-states of the far-flung Aztec realm, winning some by promising to make common cause against the Aztecs, others by sheer terror, as when he slaughtered three thousand Cholula tribespeople in the space of two hours, stopping only when volunteers answered his call to arms. Perhaps it was word of this and other bloodbaths that made Montezuma go weak in the knees. Or perhaps he believed the Spaniard to be the incarnation of the birdlike god Quetzalcoatl, who created man out of his own blood. In response to whatever prompting, the Aztec ruler threw open Tenochtitlán to Cortés and his conqueror band.

For Montezuma, it meant his death; for his people, their ruin. For Cortés, it meant mountains of gold. For those in Spain who spoke to Cortés—he returned twice to his homeland—or who heard of the reward of his audacity, it inspired envy and emulation. So powerful yet so familiar did the story of Cortés and the conquest of Mexico become that for a long time gold outshone all else as a motive for risking everything on a voyage to the New World. Its glow suffused sober history itself, and generation after generation has been satisfied with this formulaic justification for New World exploration and conquest: *It was all about gold.*

Gold and spices.

In every grade-school text, a dash of spice completed the recipe. European exploration and settlement of the Americas was all about gold *and spices.*

Naturally, the gold was always easier to understand. Universal shorthand for value and worth, when monetized, it is value and worth themselves: a commodity fully fungible, capable of instant conversion into

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real property, the service of slaves or kings, and the satisfaction of every desire.

Spices—well, that requires explanation. Food is life, but food is also dead, and, like all things dead, food rots. Spice fights rot, slows rot, and what it can neither fight nor slow, it disguises with strong taste and intoxicating aroma. Like gold, then, spices possessed power, and their power exercised allure. Ounce for ounce, pound for pound, spice, sovereign against the rot of death and therefore an elixir of life, was even more valuable than gold.

Yet as a motivator of contact and commerce between people uprooted from the Old World and those rooted in the new, neither gold nor spice was as enduring as fur.

Between 30,000 and 130,000 years ago, a member of the subspecies *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*—Neanderthal man—compared himself to a furry mammal, found his own nakedness wanting, and began clothing himself in fur. The physical advantages are obvious enough. Animal hide provides protection against superficial injury, and fur, which traps air in the spaces between its fibers, is a superb insulator, enabling the wearer to conserve one of life's most precious commodities: the energy represented by body heat.

The symbolic, emotional, and cultural advantages of fur are far more speculative. Anthropologists and historians have pointed out that Native American (among other) hunters frequently made it a practice to consume the heart of a freshly killed animal in the belief that by doing so they would take on some of the beast's strength, ferocity, and courage. The early hominid hunters who appropriated animal fur certainly derived the physical advantages of their prey's coat, but perhaps they were driven as well by a belief—at some level of consciousness—that they were also taking on certain aspects of the animal's being, spirit, nature, or virtue.

Through history, fur has been associated with warriors, conquerors, and kings. Such modern trappings as the fur trim on the highly ornamented pelisse (jacket) of the hussar—the type of light cavalry soldier that emerged

in Hungary in the fifteenth century and rose to prominence in the early nineteenth—and the busby (tall fur headdress) of the British Horse Guard are meant to convey a kind of animal ferocity. In a far more general context, clothing made of leather or fur connects the wearer to the natural world (though vegans and antifur activists are quick to point out the paradox that this connection comes at the price of nature's destruction). The value of gold is so universally perceived as inherent that it is readily monetized. Although today the value of spices is as a flavor enhancement, for most of history they were inherently valued as powerful food preservatives. The inherent value of fur is chiefly in the warmth it provides, rendering the coldest climates survivable. Yet, as with gold and spices, fur has always had a value beyond its inherent physical properties. Its emotional allure may well be rooted in the intimate connection fur creates between the wearer and the animal world, but, in the course of history, it also became a widely sought emblem of cultural and economic status. Like other badges, articles of fur both denote and confer authority, power, and status. For men of the time and place Samuel Pepys occupied, for example, a fine beaver hat was both token and mojo, symbolic of as well as productive of cultural and economic stature above the ordinary. So the material commanded a sufficiently high price to drive people to cross the ocean, to penetrate the frontier, and to dare death in the many forms the wilderness deals it.

In *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire* (1984), a study of the “confederation” between Indian tribes and the English colonies, Francis Jennings dismisses “the fur trade” as a “misnomer” for “what is usually meant,” namely “exchange between Indians and European, Euramericans, or Euro-Canadians.” Jennings observes that there “were many kinds of such exchange, involving many different commodities,” not just fur. True, of course. Yet Richard White, in his history of “Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815,” *The Middle Ground* (1991), explains that the fur trade “bound people to each other” in unique ways. “Furs . . . acquired a special social meaning because, more than any other goods produced by the Algonquians [by which White means the largely

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French-allied Indians of the Great Lakes region], they could be transformed into [the] European goods” the Indians so strongly desired.

By the seventeenth century, the fur trade was transforming American civilization in ways more profoundly consequential than the trade in gold, spices, or other commodities. For both suppliers and buyers, for Indians and Europeans/Euro-Americans alike, fur was so culturally charged a commodity that it drove the creation of what White calls the “middle ground,” a society, culture, and civilization that blended Native, European, and Euro-American destinies, creating a network of cultural, economic, genetic, and military relationships—blends, alliances, and enmities—that would ultimately express themselves in the revolution by which the colonies broke free from Europe to create a new American nation.

However, it was not to America that Europe looked first to find the furs it craved.

During the early Middle Ages, before Europe knew of the New World, Russia and, to a lesser extent, Scandinavia were the major suppliers of pelts not only to Western Europe but to Asia. Before the seventeenth century, Russian furs were hunted primarily in the west and included wolf, fox, rabbit, squirrel, and marten in addition to beaver. By the mid-seventeenth century, Russian trappers and hunters were venturing into Siberia, and their exports accordingly expanded to include lynx, Arctic fox, sable, and ermine (stoat). Sea otter also came into demand, prompting the Russians to push beyond the Siberian coast and across the Bering Sea to Alaska, the only Russian exploitation of North American peltries.

Russian and Northern European fur so stimulated the Western European demand for the commodity that it soon exploded beyond the capacity of the Old World to supply the market. When this happened, Europeans at last looked west, to America, with which they were already familiar as the source of yet another living commodity: cod.

At least since approximately A.D. 800, Vikings had been fishing, eating, and trading in cod. Norwegian fishermen perfected the art of drying the fish, and by the eleventh century a vigorous market in dried cod had

developed throughout Europe, well down to the south. It was a Norwegian, Bjarni Herjulfsson in 986, who is generally believed to be the first European to set eyes on North America, though, according to the medieval *Grœnlendinga Saga* (*Greenlanders Saga*), he did not go ashore, and no one back in Norway took much interest in this New Found Land—except for the Iceland-born Greenlander Leif Ericson, who about 1002 or 1003 landed at a place he named Vinland, believed to be the present L'Anse aux Meadows on the northern tip of Newfoundland. Ericson and his crew of thirty-five erected a clutch of huts in which they wintered before returning to Greenland in the spring. A few years later, Thorfinn Karlsevni, another Greenlander some believe was Ericson's brother, settled in Vinland, passing two years there, exploring the Newfoundland coast and battling a local people who called themselves the Beothuk, but whom Thorfinn and the other Norsemen dubbed *Skrælings*, an Old Norse word meaning “dwarfs” or, even less flatteringly, “wretches.”

After Thorfinn was killed in an encounter with a *Skræling*, the Norsemen were discouraged from making further settlements, but they did take notice that cod was the staple food of the Beothuk, and that may have further spurred exploitation of the cod fisheries along the coast of north Norway, trade that was, by the fourteenth century, monopolized by the powerful Hanseatic League. As for the New World, for some five hundred years before Columbus's first voyage in 1492, the Old World largely ignored it. Some historians do believe that Basque fishermen began exploiting the Canadian cod fisheries by the early fifteenth century, *before* Columbus set sail, but the main phase of the European cod fishing in North America began here shortly after the Great Navigator's voyages. On June 7, 1494, Spain and Portugal concluded the Treaty of Tordesillas, which resolved a dispute between the two kingdoms over possession of claims in the New World. The treaty drew a line of demarcation that divided all “newly discovered” lands outside of Europe along a meridian halfway between the Cape Verde Islands (already claimed by Portugal) and Cuba and Hispaniola, islands claimed by the Spanish crown. Lands lying east of the meridian would henceforth be Portuguese; those to the west, Spanish. Four years after the treaty was concluded,

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King Manuel I of Portugal granted a letter patent to João Fernandes, giving him leave to explore the Atlantic east of the Tordesillas line. In company with another Portuguese mariner, Pêro de Barcelos, Fernandes discovered and probed Labrador in 1498—a name derived from the Portuguese *lavrador*, “landholder,” which was thereafter appended to Fernandes’s name, so that he is known to history as João Fernandes Lavrador. He did not long enjoy his acquisition or his title. In 1501, this time bearing letters patent from England’s Henry VII, João Fernandes Lavrador embarked on a new voyage in search of lands to claim in the name of England. He never returned.

The discoveries of the ill-fated Portuguese mariner inspired Manuel I to send Gaspar Corte-Real to follow in the earlier navigator’s wake, specifically to search for a Northwest Passage to Asia. For the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century monarchs of Spain as well as Portugal—and for many powerful and influential men who followed them—the New World did not seem a discovery sufficiently valuable in itself. While it might offer many attractive commodities, not the least of which was cod, the land mass was also regarded as an obstacle between Europe and Asia, a proven source of spices and other very fine things. So, like many men after him, Corte-Real, with his brother Miguel, explored Labrador and Newfoundland for the purpose of finding the shortest possible water route to Asia. In the process, he captured sixty Natives to sell as slaves—for, as Columbus himself had pointed out to his patrons Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand—the “Indians” of America were among the most valuable commodities the New World offered. After packing his human cargo onto two of his three ships, Gaspar Corte-Real sent them back to Portugal under the command of Miguel while he continued to explore. Like João Fernandes Lavrador, Gaspar Corte-Real went missing. In 1502, Miguel returned to search for him. Neither brother was ever heard from again.

Nevertheless, though Newfoundland and Labrador seemingly consumed those who sought to possess them, Manuel I sent yet another voyager, João Alvares Fagundes, to Newfoundland and what is today Nova Scotia, enticing him to set off on the hazardous voyage in March 1521 with a grant of exclusive rights to and ownership of whatever he might find.

. . .

Unlike the other Portuguese who came before him, Fagundes did not disappear without a trace. In 1607, the French explorer, diplomat, and entrepreneur Samuel de Champlain stumbled upon “an old cross, all covered with moss, and almost wholly rotted away,” which he believed Fagundes had erected eighty years earlier at a Nova Scotia village now called Advocate.

Champlain, however, was not following in the footsteps of the Portuguese explorer, but in those of a fellow Frenchman. Jacques Cartier was born on December 31, 1491, in Saint-Malo, on the coast of Brittany. Unlike many of his seafaring brethren, Cartier enjoyed a certain respectability and even prominence in his community; he was frequently called upon to bear witness at local baptisms and was more than once even enlisted as a godfather. Indeed, he was highly enough regarded to merit the hand of Mary Catherine des Granches, daughter of one of Saint-Malo’s leading families, in 1520, and in 1534, when Brittany was united with France by the Edict of Union, Cartier was thought sufficiently important in the community to warrant an introduction to King Francis I. He was presented by the bishop of Saint-Malo, Jean le Veneur, who informed the king that Cartier possessed ample ability to “lead ships to the discovery of new lands in the New World.”

Veneur well knew that Francis had, ten years earlier, invited Giovanni da Verrazano to explore North America in the name of France, and he also understood that Cartier had accompanied the intrepid Italian and had therefore seen a long stretch of the eastern seaboard, from South Carolina north to Nova Scotia. With Verrazano, he had also sailed to Newfoundland. The king was sold, and later in 1534 he commissioned Cartier to—what else?—seek out a Northwest Passage to Asia, admonishing him to take care as well to “discover certain islands and lands where it is said that a great quantity of gold and other precious things are to be found.”

On this first voyage, which explored parts of Newfoundland and parts of what are now Canada’s Atlantic provinces, Cartier and his men encountered a New World bounty of natural abundance—the profusion

of birds at what today is called Rocher aux Oiseaux (Bird Rock) in the Magdalen Islands—and responded to the wonder by wantonly slaughtering perhaps a thousand birds of all kinds. On a note of greater humanity and hope, Cartier and his crew briefly made two contacts with some Micmac Indians on the north side of Chaleur Bay and, in what was the first exchange of its kind, traded knives for their furs.

These exchanges were peaceful and productive, but when, on July 24, Cartier planted on the shore of Gaspé Bay a large cross inscribed with the legend “Long Live the King of France,” the Indians who looked on—members of an Iroquoian tribe—were clearly displeased. Noting signs of their growing hostility, Cartier summarily kidnapped the two sons of the Indian he referred to as “their captain,” apparently intending to hold them hostage to ensure the good behavior of the locals. Surprisingly, the “captain” told Cartier that he could take his sons with him back to France on condition that he return not only with them but with goods to trade.

Cartier did return in the spring of 1535, with a crew of 110 (and the “captain’s” sons) in three vessels, which carried a modest cargo of trade goods. This time, he called on an Iroquoian chief, named Donnacona, then ventured to Hochelaga—the site of Montreal—arriving there on October 2, 1535. He was met by more than a thousand Indians, with whom he did some trading. Here, he noted, at Hochelaga, the St. Lawrence River roiled into a wild rapids, which prevented further navigation, yet also, however incongruously, persuaded Cartier that he had discovered the Northwest Passage. The idea that, once a way was found to negotiate the rapids, the river would set a person en route to China proved enduring. Sometime in the mid-seventeenth century, the town that sprang up along the riverbank at this point, along with the rapids, was named Lachine—*la Chine*, French for China—and today is a Montreal neighborhood still known by that name.

Cartier spent a bitter winter in the area, during which scurvy broke out both among the local Indians and among his own crew, all but ten of whom fell seriously ill. Domagaya, one of the hostages Cartier had taken to France and returned, introduced Cartier to a native medicine made from the bark of the arborvitae tree, which he called annedda, and

promised it would cure the scurvy. It did. Eighty-five of 110 Frenchmen survived the winter.

When he returned to France in May 1536, Cartier took Chief Donnacona with him. The Indian told King Francis I of the existence of the Kingdom of Saguenay, north of his own realm, where there was to be found an abundance of rubies, gold, and other wonders. This was quite sufficient to prompt the French monarch to send Cartier back to Canada in the spring of 1541. The objective this time was to locate not the Northwest Passage but the “Kingdom of Saguenay” and also to establish a permanent settlement on the St. Lawrence. Cartier built a fortress town at the site of present-day Cap-Rouge, Quebec, and set up a modest fur-trading operation there, concentrating on obtaining the kinds of fur that were used to trim cloth coats. That he largely ignored beaver, the stuff of hats, coats, and other major articles of clothing, suggests that he was more interested in dispatching his men into the countryside to look for jewels and gold rather than seek out Native hunters with beaver pelts to offer.

Cartier’s men soon returned with quartz and fool’s gold, which, taking them for diamonds and real gold, the eager Frenchman immediately sent back to France aboard one of his five ships. At this point, however, the local Iroquoians suddenly called a halt to the friendly trading that had so recently begun. There was apparently a battle, in which something like thirty-five Frenchmen were killed before everyone was able to retreat into the safety of the fortified town. Cartier returned to France, disheartened, but cheered by the prospect of the boatload of “gold” and “diamonds” that was waiting for him. There is no record of his disillusionment, but that this proved to be the final voyage of the still-vigorous fifty-year-old suggests he had written off Canada.



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