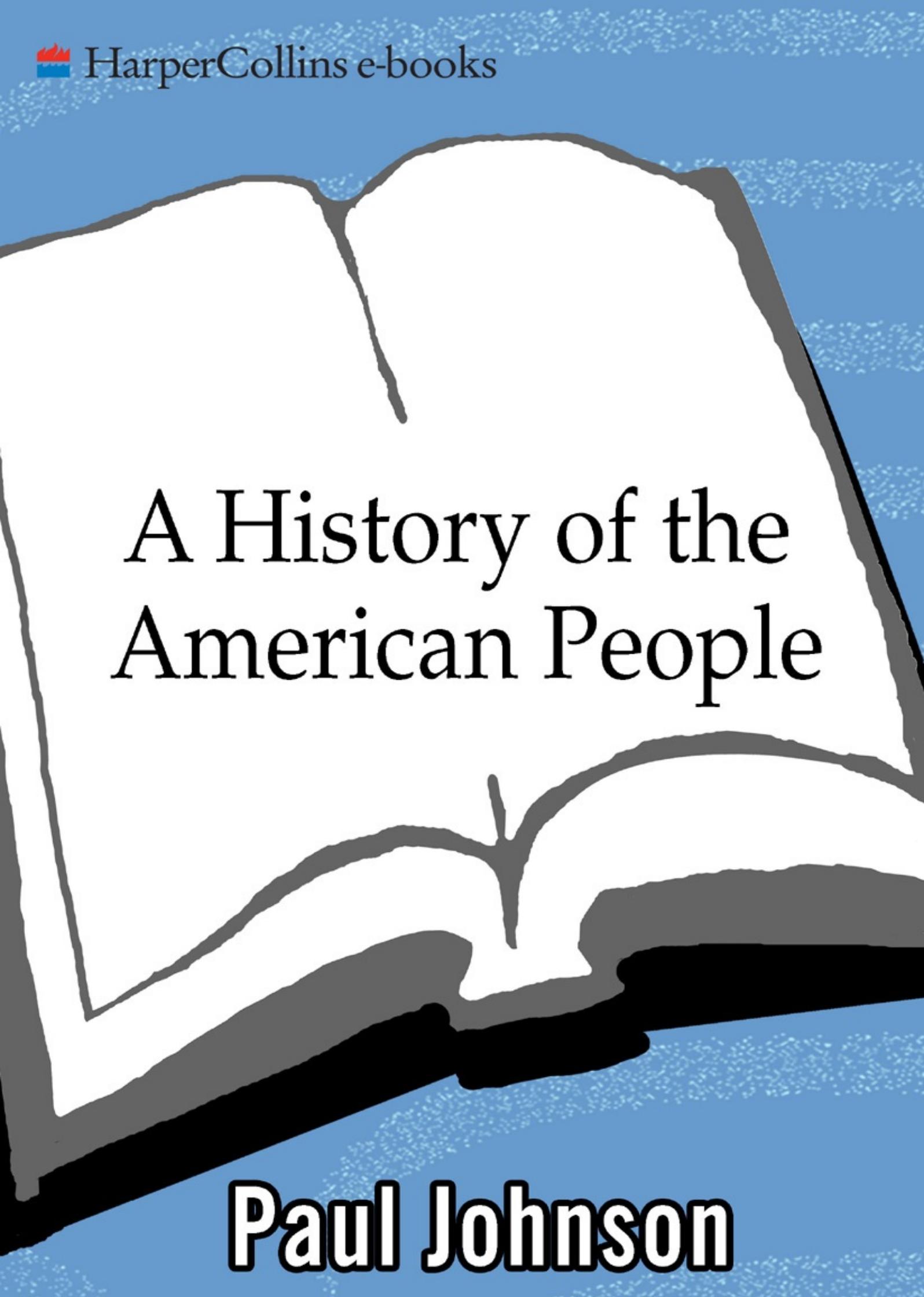




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A History of the
American People

Paul Johnson

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Paul Johnson

'Be not afraid of greatness' Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, II, v

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This book is dedicated to the people of America—strong, outspoken, intense in their convictions, sometimes wrong-headed but always generous and brave, with a passion for justice no nation has ever matched.

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PREFACE

This work is a labor of love. When I was a little boy, my parents and elder sisters taught me a great deal of Greek, Roman, and English history, but America did not come into it. At Stonyhurst, my school, I was given a magnificent grounding in English constitutional history, but again the name of America scarcely intruded. At Oxford, in the late 1940s, the School of Modern History was at the height of its glory, dominated by such paladins as A. J. P. Taylor and Hugh Trevor-Roper, Sir Maurice Powicke, K. B. McFarlane, and Sir Richard Southern, two of whom I was fortunate to have as tutors and all of whose lectures I attended. But nothing was said of America, except in so far as it lay at the margin of English history. I do not recall any course of lectures on American history as such. A. J. P. Taylor, at the conclusion of a tutorial, in which the name of America had cropped up, said grimly: ‘You can study American history when you have graduated, if you can bear it.’ His only other observation on the subject was: ‘One of the penalties of being President of the United States is that you must subsist for four years without drinking anything except Californian wine.’ American history was nothing but a black hole in the Oxford curriculum. Of course things have now changed completely, but I am talking of the Oxford academic world of half a century ago. Oxford was not alone in treating American history as a non-subject. Reading the memoirs of that outstanding American journalist Stewart Alsop, I was intrigued to discover that, when he was a boy at Groton in the 1930s, he was taught only Greek, Roman, and English history.

As a result of this lacuna in my education, I eventually came to American history completely fresh, with no schoolboy or student prejudices or antipathies. Indeed my first contacts with American history were entirely non-academic: I discussed it with officers of the US Sixth Fleet when I was an officer in the Garrison at Gibraltar, during my military service, and later in the 1950s when I was working as a journalist in Paris and had the chance to meet such formidable figures as John Foster Dulles, then Secretary of State, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and his successor at SHAPE Headquarters, General Matthew Ridgeway. From the late 1950s I began visiting the United States regularly, three or four times a year, traveling all over the country and meeting men and women who were shaping its continuing history. Over forty years I have grown to know and admire the United States and its people, making innumerable friends and acquaintances, reading its splendid literature, visiting many of its universities to give lectures and participate in debates, and attending scores of conferences held by American businesses and other institutions.

In short, I entered the study of American history through the back door. But I also got to know about it directly during the research for a number of books I wrote in these years: *A History of Christianity*, *A History of the Jews*, *Modern Times: the World from the Twenties to the Nineties*, and *The Birth of the Modern: World Society, 1815–1830*. Some of the material acquired in preparing these books I have used in the present one, but updated, revised, corrected, expanded, and refined. As I worked on

the study of the past, and learned about the present by traveling all over the world—but especially in the United States—my desire to discover more about that extraordinary country, its origins and its evolution, grew and grew, so that I determined in the end to write a history of it, knowing from experience that to produce a book is the only way to study a subject systematically, purposefully, and retentively. My editor in New York, Cass Canfield Jr of HarperCollins, encouraged me warmly. So this project was born, out of enthusiasm and excitement, and now, after many years, it is complete.

Writing a history of the American people, covering over 400 years, from the late 16th century to the end of the 20th, and dealing with the physical background and development of an immense tract of diverse territory, is a herculean task. It can be accomplished only by the ruthless selection and rejection of material, and made readable only by moving in close to certain aspects, and dealing with them in fascinating detail, at the price of merely summarizing others. That has been my method, as in earlier books covering immense subjects, though my aim nonetheless has been to produce a comprehensive account, full of facts and dates and figures, which can be used with confidence by students who wish to acquire a general grasp of American history. The book has new and often trenchant things to say about every aspect and period of America's past, and I do not seek, as some historians do, to conceal my opinions. They are there for all to see, and take account of or discount. But I have endeavored, at all stages, to present the facts fully, squarely, honestly, and objectively, and to select the material as untendentiously as I know how. Such a fact-filled and lengthy volume as this is bound to contain errors. If readers spot any, I would be grateful if they would write to me at my private address: 29 Newton Road, London W25JR; so that they may be corrected; and if they find any expressions of mine or opinions insupportable, they are welcome to give me their comments so that I may weigh them.

The notes at the end of the book serve a variety of purposes: to give the sources of facts, figures, quotations, and assertions; to acknowledge my indebtedness to other scholars; to serve as a guide to further reading; and to indicate where scholarly opinion differs, directing the reader to works which challenge the views I have formed. I have not bowed to current academic nostrums about nomenclature or accepted the flyblown philacteries of Political Correctness. So I do not acknowledge the existence of hyphenated Americans, or Native Americans or any other qualified kind. They are all Americans to me: black, white, red, brown, yellow, thrown together by fate in that swirling maelstrom of history which has produced the most remarkable people the world has ever seen. I love them and salute them, and this is their story.

PART ONE

‘A City on a Hill’

Colonial America, 1580–1750

The creation of the United States of America is the greatest of all human adventures. No other national story holds such tremendous lessons, for the American people themselves and for the rest of mankind. It now spans four centuries and, as we enter the new millennium, we need to retell it, for if we can learn these lessons and build upon them, the whole of humanity will benefit in the new age which is now opening. American history raises three fundamental questions. First, can a nation rise above the injustices of its origins and, by its moral purpose and performance, atone for them? All nations are born in war, conquest, and crime, usually concealed by the obscurity of a distant past. The United States, from its earliest colonial times, won its title-deeds in the full blaze of recorded history, and the stains on them are there for all to see and censure: the dispossession of a indigenous people, and the securing of self-sufficiency through the sweat and pain of an enslaved race. In the judgmental scales of history, such grievous wrongs must be balanced by the erection of a society dedicated to justice and fairness. Has the United States done this? Has it expiated its organic sins? The second question provides the key to the first. In the process of nation-building, can ideals and altruism—the desire to build the perfect community—be mixed successfully with acquisitiveness and ambition, without which no dynamic society can be built at all? Have the Americans got the mixture right? Have they forged a nation where righteousness has the edge over the needful self-interest? Thirdly, the Americans originally aimed to build an other-worldly ‘City on a Hill,’ but found themselves designing a republic of the people, to be a model for the entire planet. Have they made good their audacious claims? Have they indeed proved exemplars for humanity? And will they continue to be so in the new millennium?

We must never forget that the settlement of what is now the United States was only part of a larger enterprise. And this was the work of the best and the brightest of the entire European continent. They were greedy. As Christopher Columbus said, men crossed the Atlantic primarily in search of gold. But they were also idealists. These adventurous young men thought they could transform the world for the better. Europe was too small for them—for their energies, their ambitions, and their visions. In the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries, they had gone east, seeking to reChristianize the Holy Land and its surroundings, and also to acquire land there. The mixture of religious zeal, personal ambition—not to say cupidity—and lust for adventure which inspired generations of Crusaders was the prototype for the enterprise of the Americas.

In the east, however, Christian expansion was blocked by the stiffening resistance of the Moslem world, and eventually by the expansive militarism of the Ottoman Turks. Frustrated there, Christian youth spent its ambitious energies at home: in France, in the extermination of heresy, and the acquisition of confiscated property; in the Iberian peninsula, in the reconquest of territory held by Islam since the 8th century, a process finally completed in the 1490s with the destruction of the Moslem kingdom of Granada, and the expulsion, or forcible conversion, of the last Moors in Spain. It is no coincidence that this decade, which marked the homogenization of western Europe as a Christian entity and unity, also saw the first successful efforts to carry Europe, and Christianity, into the western hemisphere. As one task ended, another was undertaken

in earnest.

The Portuguese, a predominantly seagoing people, were the first to begin the new enterprise, early in the 15th century. In 1415, the year the English King Henry V destroyed the French army at Agincourt, Portuguese adventurers took Ceuta, on the north African coast, and turned it into a trading depot. Then they pushed southwest into the Atlantic, occupying in turn Madeira, Cape Verde, and the Azores, turning all of them into colonies of the Portuguese crown. The Portuguese adventurers were excited by these discoveries: they felt, already, that they were bringing into existence a new world, though the phrase itself did not pass into common currency until 1494. These early settlers believed they were beginning civilization afresh: the first boy and girl born on Madeira were christened Adam and Eve.¹ But almost immediately came the Fall, which in time was to envelop the entire Atlantic. In Europe itself, the slave-system of antiquity had been virtually extinguished by the rise of Christian society. In the 1440s, exploring the African coast from their newly acquired islands, the Portuguese rediscovered slavery as a working commercial institution. Slavery had always existed in Africa, where it was operated extensively by local rulers, often with the assistance of Arab traders. Slaves were captives, outsiders, people who had lost tribal status; once enslaved, they became exchangeable commodities, indeed an important form of currency.

The Portuguese entered the slave-trade in the mid-15th century, took it over and, in the process, transformed it into something more impersonal, and horrible, than it had been either in antiquity or medieval Africa. The new Portuguese colony of Madeira became the center of a sugar industry, which soon made itself the largest supplier for western Europe. The first sugar-mill, worked by slaves, was erected in Madeira in 1452. This cash-industry was so successful that the Portuguese soon began laying out fields for sugar-cane on the Biafran Islands, off the African coast. An island off Cap Blanco in Mauretania became a slave-depot. From there, when the trade was in its infancy, several hundred slaves a year were shipped to Lisbon. As the sugar industry expanded, slaves began to be numbered in thousands: by 1550, some 50,000 African slaves had been imported into São Tomé alone, which likewise became a slave entrepot. These profitable activities were conducted, under the aegis of the Portuguese crown, by a mixed collection of Christians from all over Europe—Spanish, Normans, and Flemish, as well as Portuguese, and Italians from the Aegean and the Levant. Being energetic, single young males, they mated with whatever women they could find, and sometimes married them. Their mixed progeny, mulattos, proved less susceptible than pure-bred Europeans to yellow fever and malaria, and so flourished. Neither Europeans nor mulattos could live on the African coast itself. But they multiplied in the Cape Verde Islands, 300 miles off the West African coast. The mulatto trading-class in Cape Verde were known as Lancados. Speaking both Creole and the native languages, and practicing Christianity spiced with paganism, they ran the European end of the slave-trade, just as Arabs ran the African end.²

This new-style slave-trade was quickly characterized by the scale and intensity with which it was conducted, and by the cash nexus which linked African and Arab suppliers, Portuguese and Lancado traders, and the purchasers. The slave-markets were huge. The slaves were overwhelmingly male, employed in large-scale agriculture

and mining. There was little attempt to acculturate them and they were treated as body-units of varying quality, mere commodities. At São Tomé in particular this modern pattern of slavery took shape. The Portuguese were soon selling African slaves to the Spanish, who, following the example in Madeira, occupied the Canaries and began to grow cane and mill sugar there too. By the time exploration and colonization spread from the islands across the Atlantic, the slave-system was already in place.³

In moving out into the Atlantic islands, the Portuguese discovered the basic meteorological fact about the North Atlantic, which forms an ocean weather-basin of its own. There were strong currents running clockwise, especially in the summer. These are assisted by northeast trade winds in the south, westerlies in the north. So seafarers went out in a southwest direction, and returned to Europe in a northeasterly one. Using this weather system, the Spanish landed on the Canaries and occupied them. The indigenous Guanches were either sold as slaves in mainland Spain, or converted and turned into farm-labourers by their mainly Castilian conquerors.⁴ Profiting from the experience of the Canaries in using the North Atlantic weather system, Christopher Columbus made landfall in the western hemisphere in 1492. His venture was characteristic of the internationalism of the American enterprise. He operated from the Spanish city of Seville but he came from Genoa and he was by nationality a citizen of the Republic of Venice, which then ran an island empire in the Eastern Mediterranean. The finance for his transatlantic expedition was provided by himself and other Genoa merchants in Seville, and topped up by the Spanish Queen Isabella, who had seized quantities of cash when her troops occupied Granada earlier in the year.⁵

The Spanish did not find American colonization easy. The first island-town Columbus founded, which he called Isabella, failed completely. He then ran out of money and the crown took over. The first successful settlement took place in 1502, when Nicolas de Ovando landed in Santo Domingo with thirty ships and no fewer than 2,500 men. This was a deliberate colonizing enterprise, using the experience Spain had acquired in its *reconquista*, and based on a network of towns copied from the model of New Castile in Spain itself. That in turn had been based on the *bastides* of medieval France, themselves derived from Roman colony-towns, an improved version of Greek models going back to the beginning of the first millennium B.C. So the system was very ancient. The first move, once a beachhead or harbour had been secured, was for an official called the *adelantano* to pace out the street-grid.⁶ Apart from forts, the first substantial building was the church. Clerics, especially from the orders of friars, the Dominicans and Franciscans, played a major part in the colonizing process, and as early as 1512 the first bishopric in the New World was founded. Nine years before, the crown had established a Casa de la Contracion in Seville, as headquarters of the entire transatlantic effort, and considerable state funds were poured into the venture. By 1520 at least 10,000 Spanish-speaking Europeans were living on the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean, food was being grown regularly and a definite pattern of trade with Europeans had been established.⁷

The year before, Hernando Cortes had broken into the American mainland by assaulting the ancient civilization of Mexico. The expansion was astonishingly rapid,

the fastest in the history of mankind, comparable in speed with and far more exacting in thoroughness and permanency than the conquests of Alexander the Great. In a sense, the new empire of Spain superimposed itself on the old one of the Aztecs rather as Rome had absorbed the Greek colonies.⁸ Within a few years, the Spaniards were 1,000 miles north of Mexico City, the vast new grid-town which Cortes built on the ruins of the old Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán.

This incursion from Europe brought huge changes in the demography, the flora and fauna, and the economics of the Americas. Just as the Europeans were vulnerable to yellow fever, so the indigenous Indians were at the mercy of smallpox, which the Europeans brought with them. Europeans had learned to cope with it over many generations but it remained extraordinarily infectious and to the Indians it almost invariably proved fatal. We do not know with any certainty how many people lived in the Americas before the Europeans came. North of what is now the Mexican border, the Indians were sparse and tribal, still at the hunter-gatherer stage in many cases, and engaged in perpetual inter-tribal warfare, though some tribes grew corn in addition to hunting and lived part of the year in villages—perhaps one million of them, all told. Further south there were far more advanced societies, and two great empires, the Aztecs in Mexico and the Incas in Peru. In central and south America, the total population was about 20 million. Within a few decades, conquest and the disease it brought had reduced the Indians to 2 million, or even less. Hence, very early in the conquest, African slaves were in demand to supply labor. In addition to smallpox, the Europeans imported a host of welcome novelties: wheat and barley, and the ploughs to make it possible to grow them; sugarcanes and vineyards; above all, a variety of livestock. The American Indians had failed to domesticate any fauna except dogs, alpacas and llamas. The Europeans brought in cattle, including oxen for ploughing, horses, mules, donkeys, sheep, pigs and poultry. Almost from the start, horses of high quality, as well as first-class mules and donkeys, were successfully bred in the Americas. The Spanish were the only west Europeans with experience of running large herds of cattle on horseback, and this became an outstanding feature of the New World, where enormous ranches were soon supplying cattle for food and mules for work in great quantities for the mining districts.⁹

The Spaniards, hearts hardened in the long struggle to expel the Moors, were ruthless in handling the Indians. But they were persistent in the way they set about colonizing vast areas. The English, when they followed them into the New World, noted both characteristics. John Hooker, one Elizabethan commentator, regarded the Spanish as morally inferior ‘because with all cruel inhumanity...they subdued a naked and yielding people, whom they sought for gain and not for any religion or plantation of a commonwealth, did most cruelly tyrannize and against the course of all human nature did scorch and roast them to death, as by their own histories doth appear.’ At the same time the English admired ‘the industry, the travails of the Spaniard, their exceeding charge in furnishing so many ships...their continual supplies to further their attempts and their active and undaunted spirits in executing matters of that quality and difficulty, and lastly their constant resolution of plantation.’¹⁰

With the Spanish established in the Americas, it was inevitable that the Portuguese would follow them. Portugal, vulnerable to invasion by Spain, was careful to keep its

overseas relations with its larger neighbor on a strictly legal basis. As early as 1479 Spain and Portugal signed an agreement regulating their respective spheres of trade outside European waters. The papacy, consulted, drew an imaginary longitudinal line running a hundred leagues west of the Azores: west of it was Spanish, east of it Portuguese. The award was made permanent between the two powers by the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, which drew the lines 370 leagues west of Cape Verde. This gave the Portuguese a gigantic segment of South America, including most of what is now modern Brazil. They knew of this coast at least from 1500 when a Portuguese squadron, on its way to the Indian Ocean, pushed into the Atlantic to avoid headwinds and, to its surprise, struck land which lay east of the treaty line and clearly was not Africa. But their resources were too committed to exploring the African coast and the routes to Asia and the East Indies, where they were already opening posts, to invest in the Americas. Their first colony in Brazil was not planted till 1532, where it was done on the model of their Atlantic island possessions, the crown appointing ‘captains,’ who invested in land-grants called *donatorios*. Most of this first wave failed, and it was not until the Portuguese transported the sugar-plantation system, based on slavery, from Cape Verde and the Biafran Islands, to the part of Brazil they called Pernambuco, that profits were made and settlers dug themselves in. The real development of Brazil on a large scale began only in 1549, when the crown made a large investment, sent over 1,000 colonists and appointed Martin Alfonso de Sousa governor-general with wide powers. Thereafter progress was rapid and irreversible, a massive sugar industry grew up across the Atlantic, and during the last quarter of the 16th century Brazil became the largest slave-importing center in the world, and remained so. Over 300 years, Brazil absorbed more African slaves than anywhere else and became, as it were, an Afro-American territory. Throughout the 16th century the Portuguese had a virtual monopoly of the Atlantic slave-trade. By 1600 nearly 300,000 African slaves had been transported by sea to plantations—25,000 to Madeira, 50,000 to Europe, 75,000 to Cape São Tomé, and the rest to America. By this date, indeed, four out of five slaves were heading for the New World.¹¹

It is important to appreciate that this system of plantation slavery, organized by the Portuguese and patronized by the Spanish for their mines as well as their sugar-fields, had been in place, expanding steadily, long before other European powers got a footing in the New World. But the prodigious fortunes made by the Spanish from mining American silver, and by both Spanish and Portuguese in the sugar trade, attracted adventurers from all over Europe. While the Spanish and Portuguese were careful to respect each other’s spheres of interest, which in any event were consolidated when the two crowns were united under the Habsburgs in 1580, no such inhibitions held back other nations. Any chance that the papal division of the Atlantic spoils between Spain and Portugal would hold was destroyed by the Reformation of the 1520s and 1530s, during which large parts of maritime northwest Europe renounced any allegiance to Rome. Protestantism took special hold in the trading communities and seaports of Atlantic France and the Low Countries, in London, already the largest commercial city in Europe, and among the seafaring men of southwest England. In 1561, Queen Elizabeth I’s Secretary of State, Sir William Cecil, carried out an investigation into the international law of the Atlantic, and firmly told the Spanish ambassador that the pope had had no authority for his award. In any case

there had long been a tradition, tenaciously held by French Huguenot seamen, who dismissed Catholic claims on principle, that the normal rules of peace and war were suspended beyond a certain imaginary line running down the mid-Atlantic. This line was even more vague than the pope's original award, and no one knew exactly where it was. But the theory, and indeed the practice, of 'No Peace Beyond the Line' was a 16th-century fact of life.¹² It is very significant indeed that, almost from its origins, the New World was widely regarded as a hemisphere where the rule of law did not apply and where violence was to be expected.

From the earliest years of the 16th century, Breton, Norman, Basque, and French fishermen (from La Rochelle) had been working the rich fishing grounds of the Grand Banks off Newfoundland and Labrador. Encouraged by their rich hauls, and reports of riches on land, they went further. In 1534 the French seafarer Jacques Cartier, from St Malo, went up the St Lawrence River, spent the winter at what he called Stadacona (Quebec) and penetrated as far as Hochelaga (Montreal). He was back again in 1541, looking for the 'Kingdom of Saguenay,' reported to be rich in gold and diamonds. But the gold turned out to be iron pyrites and the diamonds mere quartz crystals, and his expedition failed. As the wars of religion began to tear Europe apart, the great French Protestant leader Gaspard de Coligny, Admiral of France, sent an expedition to colonize an island in what is now the immense harbor of Rio de Janeiro. This was in 1555, and the next year 300 reinforcements were dispatched to join them, many picked personally by Jean Calvin himself. But it did not prosper, and in 1560 the Portuguese, seeing that the colony was weak, attacked and hanged all its inhabitants. The French also set up Huguenot colonies at Fort Caroline in northern Florida, and at Charles Fort, near the Savannah River, in 1562 and 1564. But the Spaniards, whose great explorer Hernando de Soto had reconnoitered the entire area in the years 1539–42, were on the watch for intruders, especially Protestants. In 1565 they attacked Fort Caroline in force and massacred the entire colony. They did the same at Charles Fort the next year, and erected their own strongholds at St Augustine and St Catherine's Island. Six years later, in 1572, French Catholic militants staged the Massacre of St Bartholomew, in which Admiral Coligny was murdered, thus bringing to an end the first phase of French transatlantic expansion.¹³

Into the vacuum left by the discomfiture of French Protestantism stepped the English, and it is from their appearance on the scene that we date the ultimate origins of the American people. The Englishman John Cabot had been off the coast of Labrador as long ago as 1497, and off Nova Scotia the following year. Nothing came of these early ventures, but the English were soon fishing off the Banks in strength, occasionally wintering in Newfoundland. Henry VIII took many Huguenot seamen and adventurers into his service and under his daughter Elizabeth maritime entrepreneurs like Sir John Hawkins worked closely with French Protestants in planning raids on Spanish commerce 'beyond the line.' The West Country gentleman—seafarer Humphrey Gilbert helped the Huguenots to fortify their harbour-bastion of La Rochelle in 1562, was made privy to their Atlantic schemes, and conceived some of his own. He came of a ramifying family clan which included the young Walter Raleigh, his half-brother, and

their cousin Richard Grenville. In 1578 Gilbert obtained Letters Patent in which Queen Elizabeth signified her willingness to permit him to ‘discover and occupy’ such lands as were ‘not possessed by any Christian prince,’ and to exercise jurisdiction over them, ‘agreeable to the form of the laws and policies of England.’¹⁴ He was in touch with various scholars and publicists who did everything in their power to promote English enterprise on the high seas. One was Dr John Dee, the Queen’s unofficial scientific adviser; another was the young mathematician Thomas Hariot, friend and follower of Raleigh. The most important by far, however, was Richard Hakluyt.

Hakluyt was the son of a Middle Temple lawyer who had made a collection of maps and manuscripts on ocean travel. What his father followed as a hobby, young Hakluyt made his lifework. His countless publications, ranging from pamphlets to books, reinforced by powerful letters to the great and the good of Elizabethan England, were the biggest single impulse in persuading England to look west for its future, as well as our greatest single repository of information about the Atlantic in the 16th century.¹⁵ Young Hakluyt has some claims to be considered the first geopolitical strategist, certainly the first English-speaking one. What Dr Dee was already calling the future ‘British Empire,’ and exhorting Queen Elizabeth to create, was to Hakluyt not a distant vision but something to be brought about in the next few years by getting seamen and entrepreneurs and ‘planters’ of ‘colonies’—two new words which had first appeared in the language in the 1550s—to set about launching a specific settlement on the American coast.¹⁶ In 1582, Hakluyt published an account of some of the voyages to the northwest Atlantic, with a preface addressed to the popular young hero Sir Philip Sidney, who had already arranged with Gilbert to take land in any colony he should found. Hakluyt complained in it that the English were missing opportunities and should seize the moment:

I marvel not a little that since the first discovery of America (which is now full forescore and ten years) after so great conquest and planting by the Spaniards and the Portugales there, that we of England could never have the grace to set fast footing in such fertile and temperate places as are left as yet unpossessed by them. But again when I consider that there is a time for all men, and see the Portugales’ time to be out of date and that the nakedness of the Spaniards and their long-hidden secrets are at length espied...I conceive great hope that the time approacheth and now is that we of England may share and part stakes (if we will ourselves) both with the Spaniard and Portugale in part of America and other regions as yet undiscovered.¹⁷

Gilbert immediately took up Hakluyt’s challenge and set out with five ships, one of them owned by Raleigh, and 260 men. These included ‘masons, carpenters, smiths and such like requisites,’ but also ‘mineral men and refiners,’ indicating that Gilbert’s mind, like those of most of the early adventurers, was still focussed on gold. But he did not survive the voyage: his tiny ship, the *Squirrel*, which was only 10 tons, foundered—Gilbert was last glimpsed reading a book on deck, a typical Elizabethan touch.¹⁸ So Raleigh took his place and immediately secured a new charter from the

Queen to found a colony. Raleigh is the first great man in the story of the American people to come into close focus from the documents, and it is worth looking at him in detail.

Raleigh was, in a sense, a proto-American. He had certain strongly marked characteristics which were to be associated with the American archetype. He was energetic, brash, hugely ambitious, money-conscious, none too scrupulous, far-sighted and ahead of his time, with a passion for the new and, not least, a streak of idealism which clashed violently with his overweening desire to get on and make a fortune. He was of ancient family, but penniless, born in Devon about 1554 and 'spake broad Devonshire until his dying day.' He was, wrote John Aubrey, who devoted one of his *Brief-Lives* to him, 'a tall, handsome and bold man,' with a lot of swagger, 'damnably proud.' His good looks caught the Queen's eye when he came to court, for she liked necessitous youngsters from good families, who looked the part and whom she could 'make.' But what made her single him out from the crowd of smart-looking gallants who jostled for attention was his sheer brain-power and his grasp of new, especially scientific, knowledge. The court was amazed at his rapid rise in favor. As Sir Robert Naunton, an eyewitness, put it, 'true it is, he had gotten the Queen's ear at a trice, and she began to be taken with his elocution, and loved to hear his reasons to her demands. And the truth is, she took him for a kind of oracle, which nettled them all.'¹⁹ Raleigh was one of the first young courtiers to make use of the new luxury, tobacco, which the Spaniards had brought back from America, and typical of the way he intrigued the Queen was his demonstration, with the help of a small pair of scales, of how you measured the weight of tobacco-smoke, by first measuring the pristine weed, then the ashes. His mathematical friend, Hariot, fed him new ideas and experiments with which to keep up the Queen's interest.²⁰

Raleigh was not just an intellectual but a man of action since youth, having fought with the Huguenots, aged fifteen, and taken part in a desperate naval action under his half-brother Gilbert. He had also been twice in jail for 'affrays.' But his main experience of action, which was directly relevant to the American adventure, was in Ireland. The English had been trying to subdue Ireland, and 'reduce it to civility' as they put it, since the mid-12th century. Their success had been very limited. From the very beginning English settlers who planted themselves in Ireland and took up lands to turn into English-style estates had shown a disturbing tendency to go native and join the 'wild Irish.' To combat this, the English government had passed a series of laws, in the 14th century, known as the Statutes of Kilkenny, which constituted an early form of apartheid. Fully Anglicized territory, radiating from Dublin, the capital, was known as the Pale, and the Irish were allowed inside it only under close supervision. The English might not sell the Irish weapons or horses and under no circumstances were to put on Irish dress, or speak the local Gaelic language, or employ 'harpers and rhymers.' Conversely the Irish were banned from a whole range of activities and from acquiring land in the Pale, and staying there overnight. But these laws were constantly broken, and had to be renewed periodically, and even so English settlers continued to 'degenerate' and intermarry with the Irish and become Irish themselves, and indeed foment and lead revolts against the English authorities. One such uprising had occurred in 1580, in Munster, and Raleigh had raised a band of 100 footmen from the

City of London and taken a ruthless part in suppressing it. He had killed hundreds of ‘Irish savages,’ as he termed them, and hanged scores more for treason, and had been handsomely rewarded with confiscated Irish lands which he was engaged in ‘planting.’ In the American enterprise, Ireland played the same part for the English as the war against the Moors had done for the Spaniards—it was a training-ground both in suppressing and uprooting an alien race and culture, and in settling conquered lands and building towns. And, just as the money from the *reconquista* went into financing the Spanish conquest of the Americas, so Raleigh put the profits from his Irish estates towards financing his transatlantic expedition.²¹

Raleigh’s colonizing venture is worth examining in a little detail because it held important lessons for the future. His first expedition of two ships, a reconnaissance, set out on April 27, 1584, watered at the Canaries and Puerto Rico, headed north up the Florida Channel, and reached the Carolina Banks at midsummer. On July 13, they found a passage through the banks leading to what they called Roanoke Island, ‘And after thanks given to God for our safe arrival hither, we manned our boats and went to view the land next adjoining, and to take possession of the same, in the right of the Queen’s most excellent Majesty.’²² The men spent six weeks on the Banks and noted deer, rabbits, birds of all kind, and in the woods pines, cypress, sassafras, sweat gum and ‘the highest and reddest cedars in the world.’ What struck them most was the total absence of any pollution: ‘sweet and aromatic smells lay in the air.’ On the third day they spotted a small boat paddling towards the island with three men in it. One of them got out at a point opposite the English ships and waited, ‘never making any show of fear or doubt’ as a party rowed out to him. Then:

After he had spoken of many things not understood by us we brought him with his own good liking aboard the ships, and gave him a shirt, a hat and some other things, and made him taste of our wine and our meat, which he liked very well; and after having viewed both barks, he departed and went to his own boat again, which he had left in a little cove or creek adjoining: as soon as he was two bowshots into the water, he fell to fishing, and in less than half an hour he had laden his boat as deep as it could swim, with which he came again to the point of land, and there he divided his fish into two parts, pointing one part to the ships and the other to the pinnace: which after he had (as much as he might) requited the former benefits received, he departed out of our sight.²³

There followed further friendly contact with the Indians, and exchanges of deerskins and buffalo hides, maize, fruit, and vegetables, on the one hand, and pots, axes, and tun dishes, from the ship’s stores, on the other. When the ships left Roanoke at the end of August, two Indians, Manteo and Wanchese, went with them. All were back in the west of England by mid-September, bringing with them valuable skins and pearls. Raleigh was persuaded by the detailed account of one of the masters, Captain Arthur Barlow, that the landfall of Roanoke was suitable for a plantation and at once began a publicity campaign, using Hakluyt and other scribes, to attract investors. He had just become member of parliament for Devonshire, and in December he raised the