

HAIL COLUMBIA



ROLF KLEP

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

When Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492 he thought he would have a straight passage west around the world to India and trump the competition by opening up the riches of Asia for his employer, the newly reestablished Christian monarchy of Spain. Instead he bumped into a rock, and for three hundred years Europeans looked for a waterway through it, a passage west to the East that connected the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific.

Ever since the Crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries Europe was hungry for the silks and spices of Asia. The Christian hordes were greedy for pagan wealth but were unsuccessful taking it by conquest. The Saracens, as the armies of the Cross called them, once they expelled the infidels were more than happy to trade with them, Europe's gold and silver in exchange for Asia's silk and spice.

For centuries the only door to the East from the West (and vice-versa) was through the narrow Mediterranean (the *Middle Sea*) and the merchants of Venice, who trounced their rivals Pisa and Genoa for virtual monopoly as go-between.

In the 15th century, when Ottoman sultans ruled almost all of western Asia and eastern Europe (including the once magnificent Byzantine empire) the first of the great Atlantic seafaring nations, Portugal, sent its small sailing ships to explore an endrun around Africa to the rich ports of India and China. It took them nearly a century to round the Cape of Good Hope and sail into the Indian Ocean in 1498, six years after the Great Navigator collided with the western hemisphere.

Columbus, who was an unemployed seaman from Venice's rival Genoa, first tried to convince the Portuguese that it would be easier to reach India by sailing west across the Atlantic Ocean. Spain, which had just kicked out the last of its Moslem North African conquerors and reestablished its medieval monarchy, was anxious for global wealth and power after seven centuries of foreign occupation and hired Columbus who, as it turned out, underestimated the Earth's circumference and had not calculated the presence of the American continents.

Spain, though disappointed that India was not so easily reached after all, built a world empire on the riches of American civilizations it destroyed and the gold and silver it mined with the forced labor of incorrectly named Indians and black African slaves.

England and France came late into the action of looting the western hemisphere, and although ancient rivals, each was determined to undermine the Spanish empire. Each independ-

ently sought a passage through North America to Asia primarily because Spain controlled the south Atlantic (*Papal Bull* split the world between Spain and Portugal until the former consumed the latter) — but Francis Drake got through the Straits of Magellan at the bottom of South America, and after raising a great fuss sinking Spanish ships and sacking Spanish settlements, sailed up along what is now the Oregon coast, looking for the Pacific entrance to such a Northwest Passage in 1579. How far up he came and where he stopped to scrape his ship's hull is disputed and almost every developer building a condo in a cove hires an historian to claim Drake landed there. (Even the Nehalem River Valley is claimed to be Drake's '*New Albion*'.) What is not disputed is that he sailed across the Pacific Ocean in a single ship, the *Golden Hinde*, to get back home to England because fleets of angry Spanish were waiting for him on his backtrail.

Nine years later Drake played a major part in wrecking a large Spanish fleet that intended to invade England, called

even today by sardonic Spaniards "The Invincible Armada". That English victory in August 1588 began England's long rise to world power. Along the way it colonized and lost a strip of Atlantic seacoast in North America to rebellious colonists who declared themselves a new nation and immediately set off to grab a large share of Asia's bounty for itself.

Hopes for a Northwest Passage to the Pacific through North America faded over the centuries — Spain lost its lengthy supremacy and ships from the northern European nations took the long ways around Capes Horn and Good Hope — but a new legend replaced it. Now there was thought to be a Great River of the West which was said to be called by Native Americans the "Oregon". People thought the Missouri River was navigable to the Rocky Mountains, and after a short portage, the great western river could be reached and traversed straight to the Pacific.

But like the Northwest Passage, no one could find this Great River. The great English explorer James Cook sailed past it in bad weather in 1778. Ten years later, in 1788, another Englishman, John Mears, a free-lance entrepreneur, tried and gave up, naming Deception Bay and Cape Disappointment to discourage others who might follow him, and George Vancouver and his royal expedition were just off the mouth of the river in 1792 but were deceived as was Mears four years earlier by surf breaking across the bar. The Spanish explorer Bruno Heceta thought he had found the river in 1775 (which he named the "San Roque") but was unable to get in because his crew was too weak from scurvy to man their ship across the tempestuous bar.

In the spring of 1792, the same year Vancouver sailed past, on May 11, an American from New England, Robert Gray, took his ship *Columbia Rediviva* ('Columbus Reborn') through the wild surf at the bar and entered the fabled river, which he named "Columbia" after his vessel — and the Great Admiral of the Ocean Sea himself.

Robert Gray has been rescued from obscurity; at least he is remembered every 'Day of Discovery'. On his first voyage to the Pacific Northwest four years earlier in 1788 (the same year Mears gave up on the Great River) in another ship, *Lady Washington*, Gray sailed into what is now Tillamook Bay. Gray

COLUMBIA EPIC

"Mind the surf," said Captain Gray,
his sailors draped like dying birds,
across the rail,
"It's not the lullaby you think.
Out here the breakers rise
three houses high.
The drop is deeper
than God's frown
scratched hard
into the bottom sand
bejeweled with rusted cups
and sailors' skeletons.
Shoals stretch their rubber mouths
a foot below the foam."
And then he raised his sail.

~LYNDA LESOWSKI

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