

## **John Cabot: A Man of the Renaissance**

**Running time: 28:05**

### **Synopsis**

Giovanni Cabotto (John Cabot), a Venetian, was convinced that the riches of the East could be obtained by sailing westward across the Atlantic. While he dreamed of mounting voyages of exploration, Portugal and Spain were considering Christopher Columbus's similar proposals. Although both men were Italian, neither received support from the great Italian commercial cities, since these profited so handsomely from the current trading patterns. As a result, Cabot approached Henry VII of England to back his expedition.

Henry, fearing Spain's reaction and having received poor ministerial advice, delayed granting approval until after he heard of Columbus's great success. Disgusted with his ministers, Henry issues letters patent to Cabot and his sons, permitting them to venture forth as representatives of England.

As the film closes, Cabot's ship is being readied for the voyage that would take him to mainland North America (probably Cape Breton or Newfoundland, though nobody is sure) 13 months before Columbus first set foot on the continent.

### **Historical Context**

During the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the great European powers were occupied with the search for a new trade route to India. Before England appeared on the scene as a maritime power, Portuguese explorations had focussed to the south and east, while Spain supported Christopher Columbus's westward explorations.

The success of early explorations spurred the European powers onward. England's Henry VII, among others, paid close attention to the rumours of new trade routes that threatened to completely refashion global commerce. His actions laid the groundwork for the maritime supremacy England would enjoy for centuries.

Much is unknown about the man we call John Cabot. (A Venetian, his name in his native tongue was Giovanni Cabotto.) The events presented in the film, however, are all based on known facts. Here is an outline of what we know about Cabot.

Born in Genoa, Giovanni Cabotto became a citizen of Venice on March 29, 1476, after having lived in the city for 15 years. An educated man as well as an experienced mariner, he devoted himself to cartography and dreamed of discovering a new spice route lying westward. Between 1484 and 1490 he lived in Bristol, then a major English port.

He won over the merchants of Bristol to his cause, but his repeated attempts to find the fabled route met with failure. In the meantime, the English court had learned of Christopher Columbus's discoveries, and England feared falling behind in the exploration game. On March 5, 1496, Henry VII gave Cabot and his three sons letters patent authorizing him as an official representative of the English Crown. On May 2, 1497, Cabot set sail from Bristol aboard the *Matthew* with a crew of 18 men. On June 24, he became the first European since the Norse to set foot on the North American continent, which he believed was a region of north-east Asia. There is controversy over where exactly Cabot landed as there is no existing documentation concerning the site.

### Pre-Viewing

The dialogue of the film is couched in Renaissance-style English, which may make it hard to follow for some students. Instructors may wish to review some of the more unfamiliar words before screening (such as feckless, felicitous, caravel, solicitous, supplicant, infidel, *paternoster* and counsel).

### Post-Viewing

#### Research, Discussion and Writing Topics

- Using a large map of the Atlantic, trace Cabot's route, as well as those of the other chief explorers of the era.
- Research the reasons that Henry VII hesitated to annoy Spain.
- Research and discuss the factors that led to a change in European trading patterns during the 16<sup>th</sup> century.
- Write a biographical sketch of John Cabot.
- Divide the group into teams and organize a debate on exploration, from a late 15<sup>th</sup>-century European viewpoint, touching on the following topics: the importance of increasing the prestige of cities and city-states; the advantages of colonial empires; the effects of economic downturns; the risk of losing men and capital; the danger that the fabled riches to be had to the West are empty dreams.
- List parallels between the personalities and careers of John Cabot and Christopher Columbus.
- Read the text of the letters patent given to Cabot by Henry VII. Summarize them in your own words. What right do the letters give Cabot and his three sons? (You can find the text of the letters at [www.heritage.nf.ca/exploration/cabotpatent.html](http://www.heritage.nf.ca/exploration/cabotpatent.html))
- Using an atlas, locate the following places: Bristol, Canary Islands, Azores, Cape Verde, Mecca, Cathay.

### Questions

- Why did John Cabot want to lead an expedition westward across the Atlantic?
- Cabot was Venetian. So why did he seek support from England and not Venice?
- How did Cabot know that it would be useless to approach Spain or Portugal for backing?
- Why did Henry hesitate to back Cabot at first?
- What do you think of Cabot's arguments in favour of his expedition at his first meeting with Henry?
- Why do you think the Spanish ambassador, Gonzalès de Puebla, accused Cabot of a secret alliance with the King of France?
- What was the result of Henry's delay, and why did he change his mind?
- What differences does the film depict in the customs and dress of the Italians and the English?