

A New World: References to the Americas in New College Library's Special Collections

This year marks the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States of America. As such, it is not surprising that American history has taken centre stage in recent historical and political discourse.¹ The study of the United States, though, is of course influenced by the wider history of European contact with the landmass that would later be known as America. Indeed, the discovery of America by Europeans 'brought about profound changes in the knowledge of the globe' and the way it was represented in Europe.² In this anniversary year, this New College Note aims to explore this discovery of America³ and the impact of Columbus's first voyage in 1492 in the special collections of New College Library. Of intense interest to Europeans as soon as Columbus returned to Spain, books about the lands of the New World were published almost immediately across the continent and continuously updated—in total around 4,300 works mentioning the Americas were published between 1493 and the United States declaration of independence in 1776.⁴

This Note explores 12 of these books in New College Library's special collections—such works are of prime importance for historians as they help us to understand 'the means by which knowledge of the Americas was disseminated throughout Europe'.⁵ By exploring their content, illustrations, publication dates, ownership, and printing locations, they reveal a world in flux, reacting to the colonization of the New World over many decades, and revealing the implications that this process would have both at a micro level at New College itself and its much larger implications for both English and American history.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Two main historical arcs are relevant to this discussion of books on the New World at New College Library. The first, of course, is the initial voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492, which left Spain on 3 August 1492 and arrived in the Caribbean on 12 October 1492.⁶ It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this voyage and its long-term effects for the peoples of Europe,

¹ This anniversary has caused many to debate the complex history of European colonization throughout North and South America, particularly the legacy of Christopher Columbus and his first voyage to the New World in 1492. On the one hand, Columbus is deemed to be an American hero, described by President Trump as 'a giant of Western civilization, and one of the most gallant and visionary men to ever walk the face of the earth'. On the other hand, he is considered by his political opponents to be a perpetrator of genocide and a man who enslaved and killed thousands of native peoples. A major, and controversial, event in the celebrations for the 250th anniversary is President Trump's decision to reinstate a statue of Christopher Columbus in the grounds of the White House—a statue that is an exact replica of a previous statue that was destroyed by protestors in Baltimore during Trump's first presidency in 2020. For more information, see the following: Brian Handwerk, 'Breaking Down the United States' Historical Obsession With Christopher Columbus', *Smithsonian Magazine* (2 October 2023): <www.smithsonianmag.com/history/breaking-down-united-states-historical-obsession-christopher-columbus-180956887/>, and Garritt C. Van Dyk, 'Trump Welcomes Columbus to the White House—and Reignites America's History Wars', *The Conversation* (5 April 2026): <<https://theconversation.com/trump-welcomes-columbus-to-the-white-house-and-reignites-americas-history-wars-279746>> (Both accessed: 10 April 2026)

² Pietro Omodeo, *Amerigo Vespucci: The Historical Context of His Explorations and Scientific Contribution* (Venice: Fondazione Università Ca' Foscari, 2020), p. 18.

³ Historical discourse on this topic is so divided that even reference to the discovery of America can seem outdated, considered to be a Eurocentric viewpoint as many millions of native Americans had already 'discovered' the continent several thousand years before Columbus's first voyage. As Meinig (1986) writes, 'instead of a European discovery of a new world, we might better consider it as a sudden and harsh encounter between two old worlds that transformed both and integrated them into a single New World'. D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 65.

⁴ John Eliot Alden with Dennis C. Landis, *European Americana: A Chronological Guide to Works Printed in Europe Relating to the Americas, 1473–1776: Volume I: 1493–1600* (New York: Readex Books, 1980), p. xvii.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. xx.

⁶ Hugh Thomas, *Rivers of Gold: The Rise of the Spanish Empire* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), pp. 78, 83.

Africa, and America—‘before Columbus’ these areas ‘lay largely isolated from each other, shrouded in tantalizing mystery or blissful ignorance’.⁷ Although Columbus believed he had in fact travelled to Asia (hence his use of the term ‘Indios’ or ‘Indians’ to describe the native populations he encountered), it soon became apparent that his discovery was much more significant—many different islands off the coast of a much larger landmass of unknown proportions. In fact, it would be the subsequent explorer Amerigo Vespucci who would be among the first to realise that a new continent had been discovered, one ‘hitherto unknown to Europeans’—with the name ‘America’ deriving directly from Vespucci’s first name.⁸ Once contact had been established between Europe and America, further European exploration was both quick and destructive. By 1504, 20 or 30 ships a year were making the voyage across the Atlantic,⁹ resulting in ‘invasive’ colonization that involved ‘pushing aside, removing, enslaving, or killing’ the native population.¹⁰ Contact between Europe and America helped to create the modern world—the start of globalization,¹¹ and a demographic boom for Europe, and a demographic disaster for the Americas. The native American proportion of the global population fell from seven percent in 1492 to less than one percent in 1800, at the same time that Europe’s population more than doubled in the same period.¹²

The second arc concerns subsequent English colonisation of the lands further north that would later become the United States of America and Canada. The first foray into the New World that was funded by the English crown was John Cabot’s voyage in 1497,¹³ when Henry VII was monarch. Despite this initial voyage, though, English colonisation in the Americas was delayed under the reign of Henry VIII. English colonisation in full, therefore, started once a European presence in the New World had been well established by the Spanish and Portuguese in the Caribbean and South America. England only became a sea power during the reign of Elizabeth I,¹⁴ and this growth in sea power coincided with increasing promotion of the English colonisation of the New World—a deliberate attempt to increase the power of the English state and increase its competitiveness against the rival powers of Spain, France, and the Netherlands. This promotion started in the mid 16th century and was in full swing by the 1580s.

A common thread in all colonisation by European powers—including the Spanish and English—was the importance of print in this process of discovery and its promotion. Thanks to the new technology of printing, monarchs could ensure that the exploits of explorers were known about throughout Europe, with Columbus and Vespucci using the new medium of print effectively to promote their own interests as well. Likewise, many books in England were printed in the 16th century ‘with the clear objective of convincing Englishmen’ to found an empire.¹⁵ Books and printing were foundational tools in the establishment of Empire and the promotion of the New World. As Hruschka points out, ‘for most Europeans, the New World existed *because* it existed in printed books’.¹⁶

⁷ James Axtell, *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 8.

⁸ Ross King, *The Shortest History of Italy* (Exeter: Old Street Publishing, 2024), p. 101.

⁹ Thomas, *Rivers of Gold*, pp. 200–201.

¹⁰ B. W. Higman, *A Concise History of the Caribbean*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 64.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 9.

¹² Alan Taylor, *Colonial America: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 19.

¹³ Rachel Winchcombe, *Encountering Early America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), p. 6.

¹⁴ John Hruschka, *How Books Came to America: The Rise of the American Book Trade* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), p. 44.

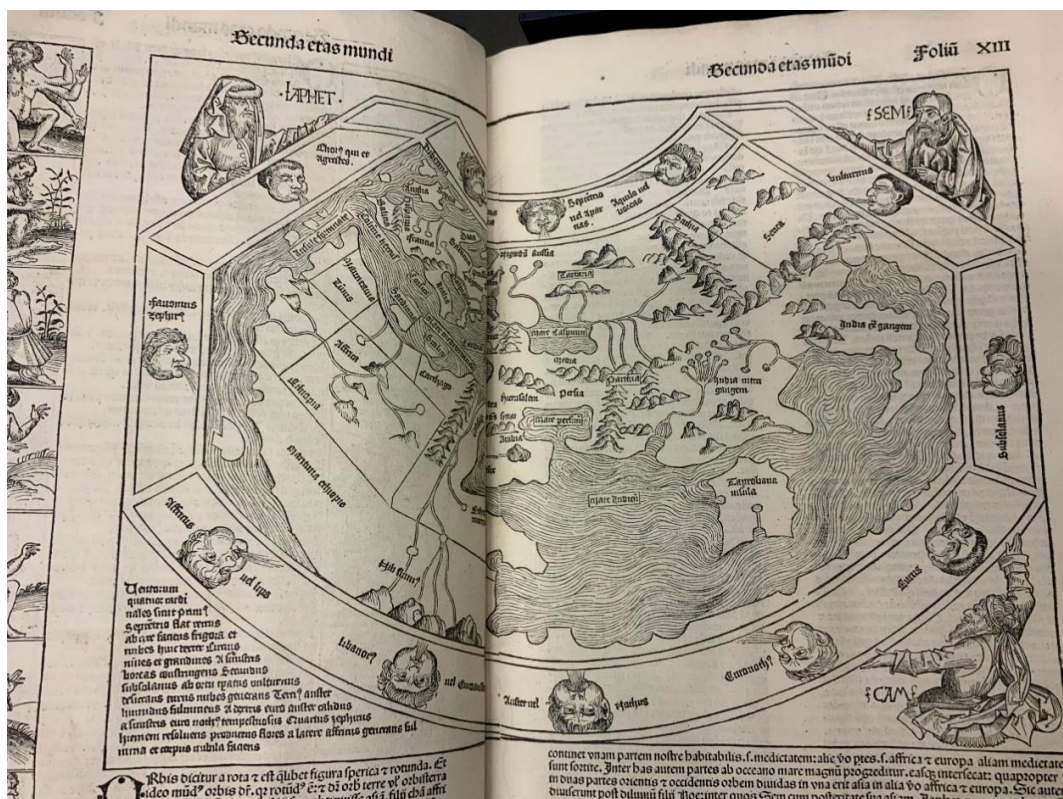
¹⁵ Francisco J. Borge, *A New World for a New Nation: The Promotion of America in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 11.

¹⁶ Hruschka, *How Books Came to America*, p. 30.

I: THE BOOKS
THE FIRST THIRTY YEARS AFTER THE VOYAGE

The Nuremberg Chronicle (1493)—New College Library, Oxford, BT1.15.4

Now we can turn to a discussion of the books themselves, with this first section focusing on the very earliest books at New College printed shortly after Columbus's first voyage in 1492. The first is of interest not because it references the New World, but for its conspicuous absence. Below, you can see the world map printed in the *Nuremberg Chronicle*. One of the most famous early printed books ever produced, this book was essentially an encyclopaedia of the known world, containing both biblical history and information about cities across Europe. Before Columbus's voyage, educated Europeans had a profound belief in authoritative texts—knowledge was unchanging and was contained mostly in 'the Bible, the philosophical, historical, and literary works of the Greeks and Romans, and a few modern works of unusually high authority'.¹⁷



New College Library, Oxford, BT1.15.4, folio xiii

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This book reflects a world that was about to be changed forever. In this fascinating map, you can still glimpse this medieval world view, with Jerusalem at the centre of the known world and western Europe very much on the periphery. This book was printed in July 1493, so after Columbus had returned from America in March 1493. Reports of the New World, though, travelled slowly across the continent, so this first edition of the *Chronicle* was printed just before the revolutionary knowledge of Columbus's voyage reached Germany. The medieval viewpoint it expressed, therefore, had already been shattered even as the printing presses were used to create this map.

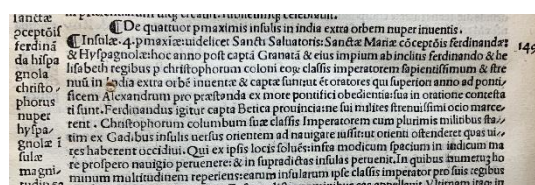
¹⁷ Anthony Grafton with April Shelford and Nancy Siraisi, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 2.

Nouissime historiaru[m] omniu[m] repercussio[n]es (1506)—New College Library, Oxford, BT1.11.6

Unsurprisingly, it soon became clear that the Nuremberg Chronicle would need to be updated following Columbus's return to Europe. Fortunately, this updated version is also held in New College Library's special collections. Published in 1506—just 14 years after Columbus sailed—this book contains the oldest explicit reference to the American landmass in the library. Indeed, it was envisaged to be an updated version of the Nuremberg Chronicle, providing a useful comparison of just how much the world had changed in a short period.



New College Library, Oxford, BT1.11.6, title page

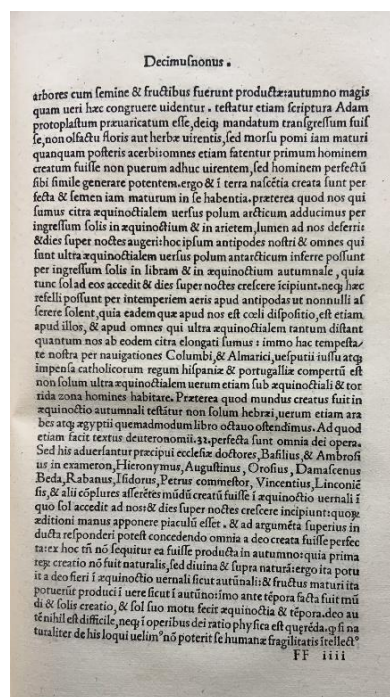
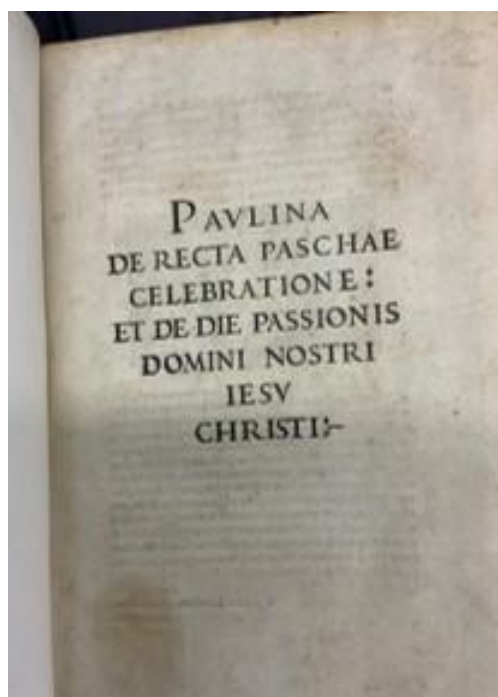


New College Library, Oxford, BT1.11.6, verso of leaf 440

The monumental nature of this 'new world' is expressed right from the start this section, which appears on the verso of leaf 440. As you can see from the picture here, it reads 'De quattuor per maximis insulis in India extra orbem nuper inventis' [Of the four largest islands in India recently discovered outside the world]. The use of the term 'extra orbem' [outside the world] is significant—this discovery is literally world-changing. At the same time, this book also reflects initial assumptions about the New World, arguing that the islands are part of the Asian continent, not part of a previously unknown continental landmass. Even if the precise location of the landmass is unknown, European attitudes towards it are revealed immediately. In the description that follows, the author mentions that shortly after these islands were 'inventae' [found], they were immediately 'captae' [captured] by the Spaniards on behalf of their king. Discovery is immediately followed by possession and plans for colonisation. This process would only accelerate as increasing numbers of Europeans made their way to the New World.

Paulina De recta Paschae celebratione: : t de die Passionis Domini Nostri Iesu Christi:-. (1513)
—New College Library, Oxford, BT1.48.3

The discovery of a new continent was so profound that it was not only referenced in histories, instead it is highlighted and discussed in a wide variety of texts. This next item, whose title page is pictured below left, is a copy of a mainly religious text that describes the Christian calendar and the correct calculation for the date of Easter.



New College Library, Oxford, BT1.48.3, title page (on the left) and leaf 2F4 (right)

The section that mentions the New World is brief, and is shown in the image above right. After describing the voyages of Columbus and Vespucci, it attempts to make sense of the impact of this discovery on existing established knowledge, as these voyages had revealed that it is possible for humans to live ‘sub aequinoctiali et torrida zona’ (below the equinoctial and torrid zone). Since the classical period, it had been widely believed that humans simply could not survive beyond the equator,¹⁸ so this discovery by Europeans in the 15th century was definitely noteworthy.¹⁹ Although the New World is only briefly mentioned, this book is important in the history of America. It not only reveals how important the New World was considered to be—appearing across genres—but also reveals just how quickly this new continent started to challenge existing knowledge. Much of the knowledge of antiquity was taken to be established truth and never changing. This book represents the start of a challenge to this classical knowledge.

Psalterium, Hebr[a]eum, Gr[a]ecu[m], Arabicu[m], & Chald[a]eu[m] : cu[m] tribus Latinis i[n]terp[re]tato[n]ibus & glossis . . . (1516)—New College Library, Oxford, BT1.48.2

Published just three years after the previous text, the next item to discuss is a copy of a beautifully printed polyglot Bible. In this book there is extensive reference to Christopher Columbus and his voyages over several pages. In fact, it contains the ‘earliest sketch of Columbus’s life’, containing several points that are not recorded elsewhere, especially concerning the second voyage and the survey of the second voyage and the survey of the southern coastline of Cuba.²⁰ In the image below right, you can see the start of the section that refers to Columbus, which appears as a commentary to part of the Book of Psalms.

¹⁸ W. G. L. Randles, ‘Classical Models of World Geography and Their Transformation following the Discovery of America’, in *The Classical Tradition and the Americas. Volume I: European Images of the Americas and the Classical Tradition: Part 1*, ed. Wolfgang Haase and Meyer Rinhold (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), pp. 5–76, at p. 15.

¹⁹ Such a worldview would be reflected in many texts written about the New World. For more information, see another New College Note that highlights a later text in New College Library’s collections: Will Shire, ‘[A Tale of Two Books: The Natural and Morall Historie of the East and West Indies at New College Library](#)’, *New College Notes* 20 (2023), no. 5.

²⁰ Justin Winsor, ‘Columbus and His Discoveries’, in *Narrative and Critical History of America*, ed. Jusin Winsor (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1886), II, 1–92, at p. 64.



New College Library, Oxford, BT1.48.2, beautifully printed title-page (left) and signature C7 (right)

It may seem surprising that discussion of Columbus is included in a biblical text. It is, though, no mistake that the editors reference Columbus at precisely this point. Psalm 19 praises the glory of God, reporting that this glory has gone ‘in fines orbae terrae’ (to the ends of the world). This inclusion, therefore, directly links Columbus with the spread of Christianity. Indeed, the overall depiction of Columbus is a positive one. The New World, according to this account, was discovered through Columbus’s ‘ausu’ (daring), with the account describing him as one of the world’s greatest ever explorers—discovering ‘plus terrarum . . . paucis mesibus, quam pene reliqui omnes mortales universis’ (more territories . . . in a few months than almost all the rest of the mortals in the universe).

This is high praise indeed, which is only expanded at the end of the section. The author concludes the account by remarking ‘hic fuit viri celeberrimi exitus, qui ti grecorum heroum temporum netus esset proculdubio in deorum numerem relatus esset’ (this was the success of a most illustrious man, who, if he had been a descendant of the Greek heroes of the times, would undoubtedly have been included in the number of the gods). This text is a more confident European attitude to the colonisation of the New World, a colonisation justified in part through the expansion of Christianity to a new continent.

Ptolemaeus auctus restitutus. Emaculatus. : Cum tabulis veteribus ac nouis.. (1520)
—New College Library, Oxford, BT1.15.9

The fifth book in our collection, an updated version of Ptolemy, is a true gem as it most definitely expands on classical knowledge by including the oldest surviving map of the New World at New College, created by the famous cartographer Martin Waldseemüller (c. 1470–1520). Unfortunately, many do not survive as they are highly collectable, and therefore removed from books to be framed and sold individually. As you can see below, this fascinating map, printed less than 30 years after Columbus’s first voyage, shows the development of exploration in this short period of time.



New College Library, Oxford, BT1.15.9, map of the Americas

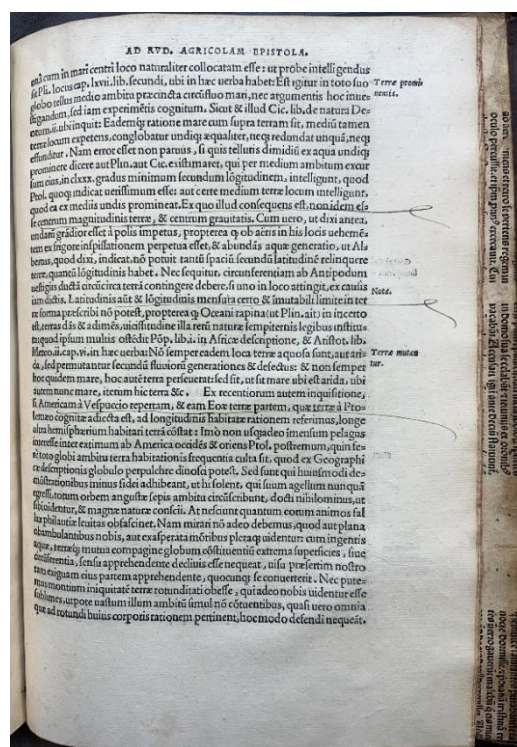
The Caribbean, unsurprisingly, is well explored, with the islands that today make up Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic clearly visible, and the coast of particularly South America starting to take shape. Note, also, the importance placed on the Atlantic archipelagos of the Canary Islands, Cape Verde, Madeira, and the Azores. Thanks to the trade winds, the Canary Islands in particular were a crucial stop on the long journey from Spain to the New World—a chance to restock with fresh water and supplies before the final crossing. Despite this initial exploration, much of the continental landmass, though, still remains ‘terra incognita’. The map is a unique snapshot in time, a fundamental text for historians interested in the development of European exploration and colonisation in the first decades after initial contact was made between Europe and America.

Pomponii Melae De orbis situ libri tres (1522)—New College Library, Oxford, BT1.27.14(2)

As highlighted in the books listed above, this intense period of exploration and discovery had immediate and profound effects on European knowledge. Indeed, as we saw in BT1.48.3 and BT1.15.9, the discovery of the New World would cast particular doubt on classical assumptions of the world and its structure. As the 16th century progressed further, and more of North and South America was mapped, it became clear that these classical texts would need to be more extensively revised, as Europeans began to define the scope and extent of the world discovered by Columbus.²¹

²¹ Frederick R. Goff and Vincent L. Easton, ‘Early Printed Books Relating to America, 1493–1801’, *Quarterly Journal of Current Acquisitions* 8 (1950), pp. 29–39.

This more extensive revision is starting to take place in the book pictured on the right—a copy of a work by the earliest Roman geographer Pomponius Mela (*d.* 45). Originally composed in the first century CE, Pomponius Mela had argued that the earth was surrounded on all sides by the sea and, in line with classical thought, argued that only the known world was habitable, with the opposite side of the world a completely hostile environment for humans.²² On the folio pictured, Mela's original text is expanded upon by the humanist commentators Joannes Camers (1447–1546) and Joachim Vadianus (1484–1551). As Columbus's voyage fundamentally changed Mela's original position, these commentators updated the text, describing the new continent of America as land 'in addition to the land known by Ptolemy'. This process was widespread throughout this period, especially amongst humanists. Among the first 'early modern intellectuals', these humanists edited and added new information to several classical texts,²³ with this New College book just one example of a much wider process.



New College Library, Oxford,
BT1.27.14(2), folio 2F5 recto

EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE OF THE NEW WORLD

The books discussed so far were all published within 30 years of Columbus's first voyage to the New World. They represent, therefore, a more immediate reaction to this momentous change in the European worldview. In subsequent decades, European exploration spread even further throughout both North and South America. This process of continued exploration and settlement can be clearly seen in the collections at New College Library—with the publication of works that would establish certain ideas about the New World and its peoples that would persist in the European psyche for many centuries.

Praeclara Ferdinadi. Cortesii de Nona maris Oceani Hyspania Narratio Sacratissimo. ac Inuictissimo Carolo Romanorū Imperatori semper Augusto, Hyspaniarū, & c Regi Anno Domini. M.D.XX. transmissa (1524)
—New College Library, Oxford, BT1.36.4(3)

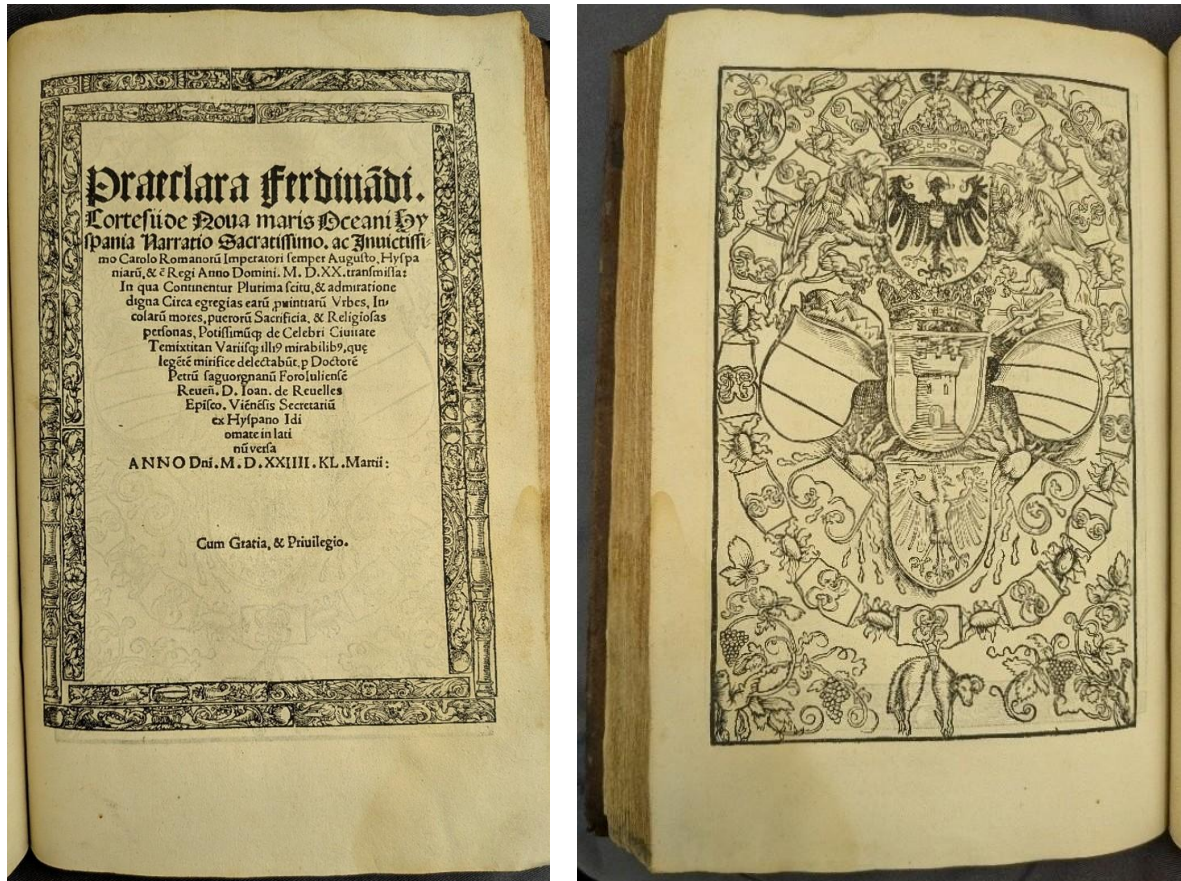
As shown in the books discussed above, a Spanish presence in the New World was quickly established in the Caribbean, but this presence was by no means static. Instead, these original settlements acted as springboards for future exploration, most notably towards the American mainland, a process that began in earnest just one year after the printing of the world map listed in the book above. The most famous of these explorers had a name still known the world over: Hernán Cortés (1485–1547).

New College Library is fortunate to own a copy of a book that contained the first Latin translations of the second and third letters written by Cortés following his exploration and

²² Randles, 'Classical Models', p. 15.

²³ Karl A. E. Enenkel, 'Introduction—The Transformation of the Classics. Practices, Forms, and Functions of Early Modern Commenting', in *Transformations of the Classics via Early Modern Commentaries* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 1–12, at p. 3.

conquest of the Aztec Empire.²⁴ Below, you can see on the left an image of the title page of this book, unique in world history as it offers the best first-hand account of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. On the right, you can see the arms of Charles V on the title page verso. These impressive arms take up the entire page and are intricately decorated—a deliberate inclusion and an attempt to very clearly link imperial expansion to monarchy.



New College Library, Oxford, BT1.36.4(3), title page and title page verso

In the two letters, Cortés gives an engaging account of his exploration and subsequent conquest of the Aztec empire. For a modern historian, it is perhaps most interesting for its descriptions of the Aztec world, a world for which there was clear admiration. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his descriptions of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan (modern Mexico City), which is described as a ‘civitate mirabile’ (wondrous city). To some extent, this was a correct description, with the Aztec capital a much more advanced and particularly hygienic city compared to many European capitals in this period.²⁵

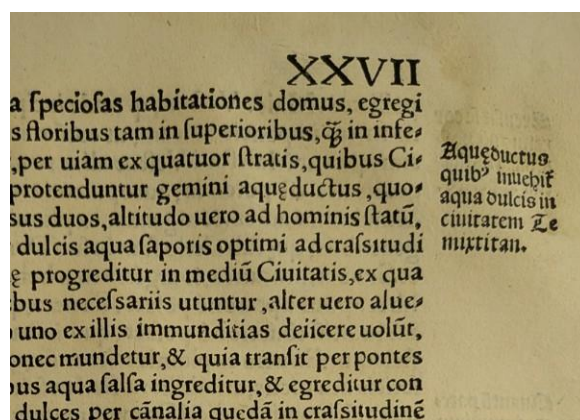
In the picture below, for example, you can see Cortés’s lengthy description of the aqueducts in the city, which brought fresh drinking water right into the city centre. ‘Part of an extraordinary waterworks system’, these aqueducts were supplemented with ‘dikes (sic) and sluices as well as causeways’—a truly remarkable feat of engineering.²⁶ This city was so admired that upon printing this book was originally produced with a beautiful folding map of the Aztec capital. This

²⁴ The first letter by Cortés is famously ‘lost’—it went missing shortly after arriving in Spain. In this printed edition, the first letter is replaced with an appendix with xii numbered leaves that contain a substitute: Peter Martyr’s *De rebus, et insulis noviter repertis*.

²⁵ Matthew Restall, *When Montezuma met Cortés: The True Story of the Meeting that Changed History* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), p. 30.

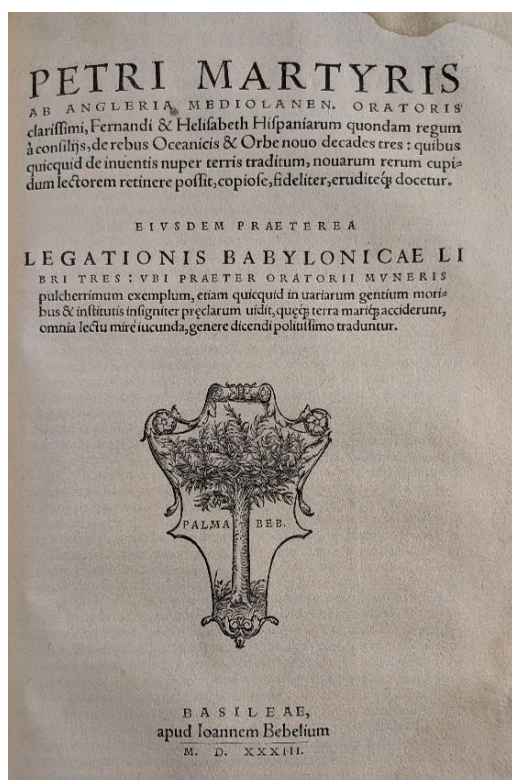
²⁶ Camilla Townsend, *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 64.

map survives in a few copies,²⁷ but is nearly always lacking—as it is in this New College copy of the text. Despite this omission, though, it remains an important text, capturing not only Cortés’s conquest, but also documenting an empire on the brink of collapse in a region that would be changed forever by Spanish colonisation.



New College Library, Oxford, BT1.36.4(3), page xxvii [detail]

De rebus oceanicis & Orbe nouo decades tres (1533)—New College Library, Oxford, BT1.42.3(3)



New College Library, Oxford, BT1.42.3(3)

Published almost a decade after the previous book, this next volume contains yet more detailed discussion of the New World. In comparison to the previous books that either reference the New World or contain more individual accounts, this book was an attempt to establish all knowledge of the Americas in one volume. In it, Peter Martyr d'Anghiera (1457–1526), chaplain to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, collected documents from various explorers, including Christopher Columbus, and published them together.

Here, you can see the title page of the New College edition of this text, dating from 1533.²⁸ As the title of the work implies, it contains the first three ‘decades’ or accounts of Spanish exploration: in total eight were written. These first decades recount the first three voyages of Columbus, the exploration of the Caribbean, and the initial exploration of central America including Darién.

It is particularly noteworthy for its more detailed description of the peoples of the New World. In the first place, there is much negative discussion of the Carib people, described as wild men who feed on human flesh that inhabit obscene islands.²⁹ At one

²⁷ One of these copies belongs to the Getty Research Institute. The digitised version including the map can be found here: <<https://archive.org/details/praeclaraferdind00cort/page/n115/mode/2up>> (Accessed: 6 July 2026).

²⁸ This publication date means that it is not a first edition of this text—the first printed edition of all the ‘decades’ was published in 1530.

²⁹ For more in depth discussion of the Carib people and the negative portrayal of them by Europeans, see Philip P. Boucher, *Cannibal Encounters: Europeans and Island Caribs, 1492–1763* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), especially chapter 1.

point, there is a description of an attack by these cannibals, with them surrounding a Spanish ship in canoes—an attack considered to be so ferocious that it could only be dispersed by cannon fire. Secondly, this book is of further interest as it is more comprehensive than earlier accounts. In this book, readers can learn not only about the indigenous peoples of America, but also about its climate, flora, and fauna. There are extensive descriptions of plant and animal life and a very early description of a hurricane. This book describes the New World in vivid detail for a European audience. The emphasis has most definitely shifted from merely reporting about its discovery to providing more updated information for the European reader, even if this information naturally reflected European biases and attitudes.

Cosmographia. : B[e]schreibu[n]g aller Lender (1544)—New College Library, Oxford, BT3.187.1(2)

This more comprehensive approach to describing the New World is echoed in the next book to discuss. Published in 1544, the *Cosmographia* is a world history, similar to the Nuremberg Chronicle discussed above. Whilst the majority of the entries refer to Germany, there is a more detailed section at the end on the New World, entitled ‘Von den neuen Inseln’ (on the new islands).³⁰ Written in the vernacular German, it reveals that there was a key market for knowledge about the new discoveries across the continent; Europeans were curious about the New World and wanted to read about it in their native language.



Woodcut of sugar cane, p. dcxxxvii



Woodcut of canibals, p. dcxxxix

New College Library, Oxford, BT3.187.1(2)

The highlight of this book has to be its extensive woodcut illustrations, as can be seen above. On the one hand, these woodcuts reflect greater knowledge of the Americas and the history of exploration. The image on the left, for example, depicts sugar cane, and describes its introduction on the Atlantic island of Madeira, a crop that later would have a profound influence on the islands of the Caribbean. On the other hand, though, there is a continued development of the myths surrounding the New World and its inhabitants, myths that we have encountered in earlier books discussed above. The image on the right is a particularly gruesome depiction of cannibalism in the New World. It accompanies a significant amount of text on this subject, which reveals that European authors were particularly interested in this practice. This discussion was deliberate, helping to create a notion of ‘otherness’ between an uncivilised native population in contrast to European civilisation.

³⁰ Discussion of this book here is, naturally, limited to the New World. Further information on it can be found in my ‘[A Changing World: Sebastian Münster’s *Cosmographia* from 1544—BT3.187.1\(2\)](#)’, *New College Notes* 16 (2021), no. 5.

SPECIALISED KNOWLEDGE OF THE NEW WORLD

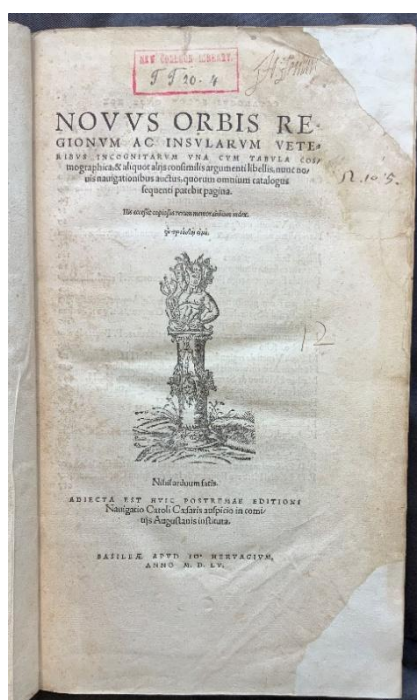
Up to this point, many of the books discussed have not been fully dedicated to the New World. The earliest books referenced the discovery as part of a wider text, and the later works built on this knowledge as a reaction to subsequent exploration. As this exploration and colonisation expanded over subsequent decades and into the continents of both North and South America, books published about the New World became ever more complex, consolidating more specialised knowledge for readers in Europe.

Nouus orbis regionum ac insularum veteribus incognitarum (1555)

—New College Library, Oxford, BT3.185.5

This next book is a perfect example of this process in action, as it is almost entirely dedicated to the New World. It includes a collection of accounts of exploration, starting with the navigations of Alvise Cadamosto (c. 1432–1483) in West Africa before moving through Columbus and Vespucci, comparing their voyages to the travels of Marco Polo and Josephus Indus.

The book was first published in 1532 and then extensively updated. As you can see from the image of the title page here, this New College Library copy dates from 1555. Updates to this edition include the addition of works by Peter Martyr d'Anghiera (discussed in BT1.42.3(3) above) and information about Cortés's conquest of Mexico. Originally, this volume included a rare, folded map of the world that depicted the outline of South America and the extent of exploration in North America. Unfortunately, this map is missing in this book—as with other examples in this Note, it was presumably removed at some point as it would have a high individual resale value. Despite this lack of map, the book remains a key piece of bibliographical history. It shows how sources from the New World began to be combined into single volumes that were also more detailed. That might, perhaps, explain its popularity. There are two copies of this influential text at New College alone, and another five copies at different libraries in Oxford.³¹



New College Library, Oxford, BT3.185.5

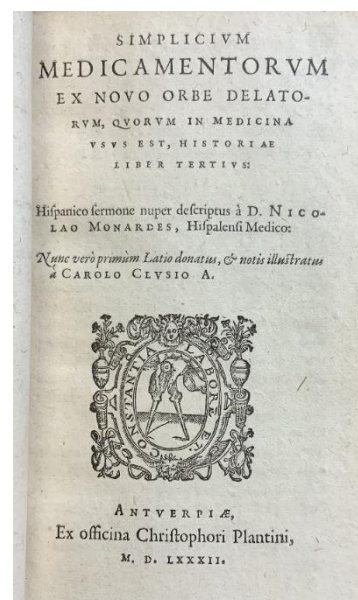
³¹ See <https://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/permalink/44OXF_INST/r148sd/alma990122756830107026> (Accessed: 6 July 2026).

Simplicium medicamentorum ex nouo orbe delatorum, quorum in medicina vsus est, historiae liber tertius (1582)
—New College Library, Oxford, BT3.226.13(2)

In this later period, knowledge of the New World became so specialized that works could be written on one particular aspect of this new landmass. The small book pictured here, for example, was written purely about the impact of the discovery for medicine, focusing completely on the pharmacological uses of a variety of plants indigenous to the Americas.

Written by the Spanish physician Nicolás Monardes (1493–1588), this work contains the third part of a much larger text written on medicine in the Americas. Although Monardes never personally went to the New World, he was based in Seville,³² and therefore had first-hand access to the plants that returned on ships from the Americas. This text was revolutionary when it was first published in Spanish in 1574. As Monardes was a practising physician (so actually worked with patients), he combined the theoretical knowledge of the plants with patient outcomes. Although established practice today, this was a novel idea at the time as the theory and practice of medicine were very much separate.³³

Indeed, Monardes published the book for commercial gain. He had invested in the African slave trade, and wanted to promote the use of American spices and plants in European medicine to encourage this trade.³⁴ Regardless of the ethics of this decision, it most definitely was effective. As this book shows, the work was quickly translated into Latin, with its new editor Carolus Clusius rearranging it into a more convenient herbal for an international audience.³⁵ This Latin version at New College Library reveals that there was clear interest in this topic in Oxford. In fact, this work is actually bound together with seven other medical works. Its inclusion with these other medicinal works acts as a testament to the importance placed on its contents. After Columbus's voyage, there had been some dismissal of plants from the New World, with European plants considered to be superior.³⁶ By the latter half of the 16th century, this attitude had completely changed.



New College Library, Oxford,
BT3.226.13(2)

Principall navigations, voyages, and discoveries of the English nation (1589)
—New College Library, Oxford, BT1.131.24

The final book to discuss moves from merely describing the New World to encouraging its colonisation by the English. Entitled *The Principall navigations, voyages, and discoveries of the English nation* and written by the English writer and priest Richard Hakluyt (1553–1616), this first edition is a true compendium of English exploration.³⁷ The first two parts of the text refer to the voyages of several English explorers to Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, whilst the third part promotes English exploration of the New World.

³² Cristina Bellorini, *The World of Plants in Renaissance Tuscany: Medicine and Botany* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016), p. 146.

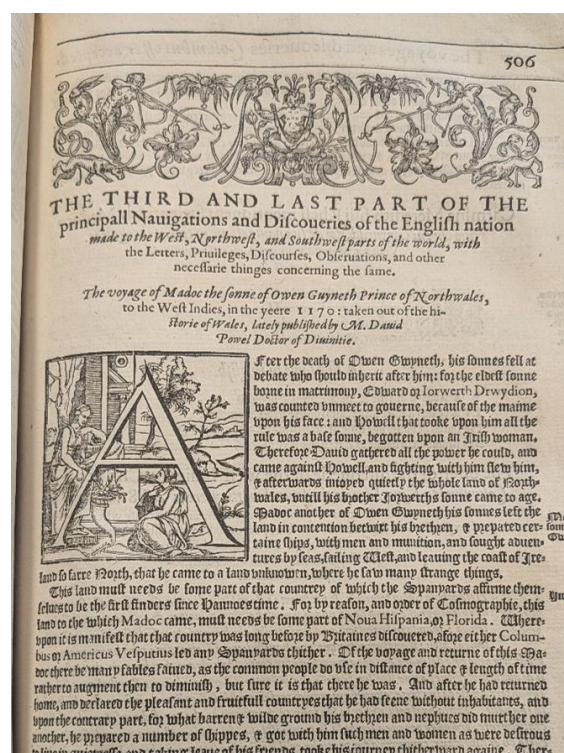
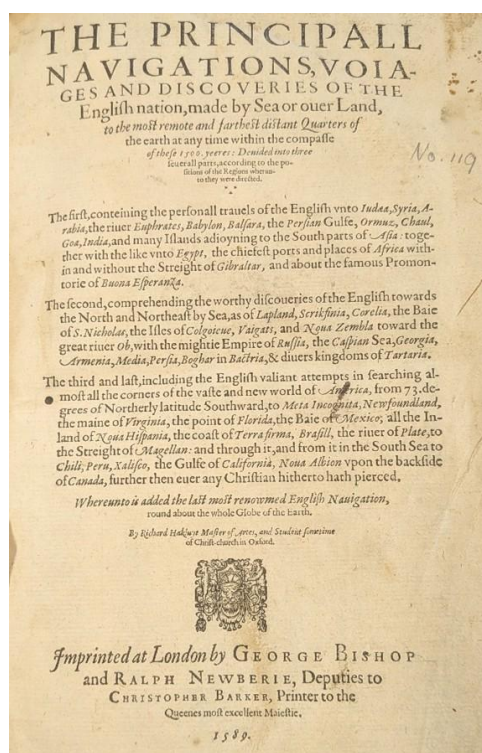
³³ Ralph Bauer, 'The Blood of the Dragon: Alchemy and Natural History in Nicolás Monardes's *Historia medicinal*', in *Medical Cultures of the Early Modern Spanish Empire*, ed. John Slater, Maríaluz López-Terrada, and José Pardo-Tomás (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 67–88, at p. 73.

³⁴ Bellorini, *The World*, p. 163.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 146.

³⁶ Even Monardes had been dismissive of plants from the New World at the start of his career: see Bauer, 'The Blood of the Dragon', p. 71.

³⁷ New College Library is fortunate to own several copies of this influential text. BT1.131.24, discussed here, is a first edition, but the library also contains copies of the three volumes of the edition printed from 1599–1600, at the shelfmarks BT1.132.1 (volumes 1–2) and BT1.132.2 (volume 3).



New College Library, Oxford, BT1.131.24, title page and page 506

This promotion is achieved right from the start through a deliberate establishing of historical precedence. The earliest voyage presented in the book is that of Prince Madoc of Wales, who reportedly sailed to the New World in 1170 (see right image above). Although false, this is a deliberate inclusion, designed to establish English (as Wales was part of the Kingdom of England at this time) precedence in the New World—crucially before Columbus. Indeed, this whole book was of fundamental importance in promoting English colonisation of America.³⁸ Madoc is followed by a series of actual explorers, most notably John Cabot and John Hawkins, all presented to celebrate English exploration and colonisation of the New World. Later, books would be printed that also included accounts of the famous voyages of Francis Drake.³⁹ All these editions were crucial to the expansion of the English Empire. As Winchcombe writes: ‘Without the public circulation of both printed and manuscript sources, it is likely that English projects in the New World would have continued to flounder’.⁴⁰ It is, after all, no mistake that this book is the first discussed in this collection to be written in English. This book is one written for an English audience, arguing that the colonisation of the New World was fundamentally important to English national security and prosperity.

II: WIDER SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NEW COLLEGE COLLECTION

As we have seen, New College Library has amassed an impressive collection of early works that reference the New World. A particular advantage of such a college library is that it provides an opportunity to compare these books as a collection. Unique institutions such as New College hold unique libraries—libraries that remained in one place and were not dissolved over the centuries like many that belonged to individual families.

³⁸ See Daniel Carey and Claire Jowett (ed.), *Richard Hakluyt and Travel Writing in Early Modern Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

³⁹ Anthony Payne, *Richard Hakluyt: A Guide to his Books and those Associated with Him 1580–1625* (London: Quaritch, 2008), pp. 9–10.

⁴⁰ Wincombe, *Encountering Early America*, p. 16.

If we look at this collection as a whole, it is clear that this collection of books both destroys existing myths around the European sense of place in the world, and quickly establishes new ones in their place. In the first place, we have seen how many of these books first grappled with and then dismantled the existing classical and medieval knowledge around an inhabitable world limited to Europe, Africa, and Asia—presented in the Nuremberg Chronicle (BT1.15.4). BT1.48.3 directly challenged these assumptions, before classical texts were updated in BT1.15.9, and humanists later revised this knowledge in BT1.27.14(2). In place of these classical and medieval ideas around the European place in the world, these books show how quickly they were superseded by the creation of a new myth—one that this New World existed to be exploited for European gain. In BT1.11.6, for example, there is an immediate reference to ‘capturing’ the New World for Spain, whilst the later BT3.226.13(2) refers to exploiting the natural resources of the New World to improve European medicine. As the final book BT1.131.24 reveals, this process was also by no means limited to the Spanish, with English authors also advocating for colonisation of the newly discovered lands at a later date.

These books not only advocate for European expansion but also create myths about the New World to justify this same expansion. It is no coincidence, for example, that BT1.48.2 and BT1.48.3 are overtly religious texts. They help to create the myth that European colonisation was a benign project, designed to spread the word of God to the newly discovered peoples of the New World. As such, the descriptions in many of these books help to create a myth of a civilised Europe and a decidedly uncivilised native population. There is a clear fascination with the cannibalism of the inhabitants of the New World in BT1.42.3(3) and in BT3.187.1(2). The inhabitants of the New World are depicted as monstrous and heathen, even though there is, in fact, ‘no verifiable archaeological evidence . . . to substantiate such claims’ of cannibalism in the Caribbean.⁴¹ These books do not merely report on the discovery of the New World, they also help to establish ideas about it in the European psyche early on, developing them over time to justify continued European exploration and colonisation across the Americas.

Secondly, it is also possible to compare these books at a collection level through their publication dates, as they reflect ongoing interest in the New World at New College in the decades after Columbus’s voyage. In the first place, this collection reveals a clear interest in the New World in the first three decades after Columbus’s voyage. This reality is, perhaps, unsurprising—the discovery of the New World was a revolutionary event in European history, and the fellows of New College would have wanted to update their library to reflect it. Indeed, as Winchcombe points out, the early 16th century was the period in which English men and women ‘grappled with what the “discovery” of 1492 meant for them’—hoping to understand this discovery through texts like the one highlighted in this article that were ‘grounded in a set of European, as well as distinctly English, cultural assumptions’.⁴²

Interestingly, though, the publication dates of this collection of texts show a following period where not as many books were obtained by New College Library, before a renewal of interest in the New World in the later 16th century. This pattern can be explained by the English history of this period. Domestic instability starting in and then following the reign of Henry VIII (most notably, of course, the English Reformation), reduced interest in expanding English possessions in America for several decades.⁴³ Indeed, the whole country was instead preoccupied with the political and religious turmoil caused by the break with Rome—combined with an unstable political situation in England’s closest neighbours of Ireland and Scotland.⁴⁴ When this situation is combined with the fact that English sailors only developed experience of deep water voyages in the 1550s and ’60s, it is easy to see why New College Library only began to acquire

⁴¹ Basil A. Reid, *Myths and Realities of Caribbean History* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2009), p. 119.

⁴² Winchcombe, *Encountering Early America*, pp. 1, 2.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 7.

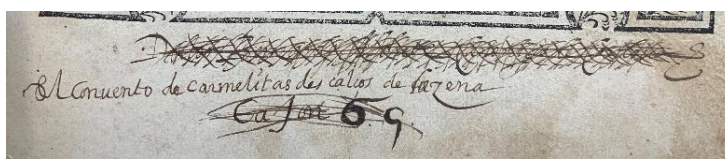
⁴⁴ David MacDonald and Raine Waters, *We Could Perceive No Sign of Them: Failed Colonies in North America 1526–1689* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2020), p. 190.

books relating to the New World once more at the end of the 16th century—when Hakluyt was keen to promote English colonisation across the country. This collection of books, naturally, reflects the wider English history of this period.

Thirdly, analysis of the printing presses and locations of these 12 books reveals a steady move northwards. The oldest items were produced in Central and Southern Europe, whilst the later items discussed were produced in England and the Low Countries respectively. This reality, in part, reflects the development of printing in Europe over time. As the home of Gutenberg, Germany was a key early centre of printing. Part of this move northwards, though, can also be explained by how news was brought from America into Europe, and then subsequently across Europe. BT1.48.2, for example, was printed in Genoa—the birthplace of Christopher Columbus, and hence an area very much interested in the Americas from the start—this printing location no doubt explains why this text is also very positive about Columbus and his exploration. Likewise, books published in Venice and Basel show how knowledge of the Americas was circulated around Europe. Basel was an important centre for book production in Europe in the 16th century, and Venice, thanks in part to its central role in European trade, soon became a centre of printing on the Americas. Although its hegemony was, in fact, threatened by the discovery of the Americas and the establishment of new trade routes to Asia, ‘Venice also became a city of the Americas’ through the medium of print.⁴⁵ As Winchcombe points out, ‘early English perceptions of America were the product of a century-long engagement with the colonialism of other nations’.⁴⁶ The printing presses used to create this collection of books reveals this reality. Scholars at New College, and across England, first engaged with the concept of America and the New World through books published on the continent, before then starting to produce their own work closer to home.

Finally, the provenance of this collection can reveal the very personal links forged between Europe and the New World over the decades following Columbus’s voyage in 1492. It is clear, for example, that many of these books travelled across the continent, and had many different owners before finally arriving at the library in New College. This can be particularly seen in the Polyglot Bible, BT1.48.2.

At the bottom of the title page, pictured below, there is an inscription that has been deliberately obscured. It reveals that the book once belonged to Bernardo de Alderete (1565–1641), who was a canon of Córdoba Cathedral. Underneath, there is another inscription, which reveals that the book next went to a convent, specifically the ‘convento de Carmelitas des Calcos de Lazena’. It is, though, unclear, how this book then made its way northwards towards Oxford.



New College Library, Oxford, BT1.48.2, ownership inscriptions

If we look at the appendix below that lists the provenance information for each book discussed here, we discover that Thomas Martin (1521–1593) was the cited owner of three of these books. Civil lawyer and fellow of New College from 1540 till 1553, Martin was a very generous donor to New College Library,⁴⁷ and a key figure not only within college, but nationally. A recusant, he served the Lord Chancellor, Stephen Gardiner, under Mary I,⁴⁸ so would have had links to the

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Horodowich, *The Venetian Discovery of America: Geographic Imagination and Print Culture in the Age of Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 3.

⁴⁶ Winchcombe, *Encountering Early America*, p. 4.

⁴⁷ For more information, see Arabella Milbank, ‘[Sixteenth-Century Ownership of the Bohun Apocalypse, New College MS 65](#)’, *New College Notes* 4 (2013), no. 5.

⁴⁸ William Poole, ‘[The 1588 Donations to New College Library of Thomas Martin, Lawyer and Recusant](#)’, *New College Notes* 4 (2013), no. 3.

Catholic Spain of Philip II after Philip married Mary in 1554. Martin donated books on a range of topics to New College Library, but the three books in this collection reveal that he had a clear interest in the Americas—an interest perhaps first kindled by his links to the European country most connected with early colonisation of the New World. Indeed, the latest book that Martin donated, written by Richard Hakluyt, establishes the closest link between New College and the New World. Richard Hakluyt himself has a clear Oxford connection, studying geography at Christ Church;⁴⁹ Hakluyt's brother, Edmund, though, was a Clerk or Singing Man of New College, paid for teaching choristers between 1578 and 1580.⁵⁰ Members of New College and Oxford were at the centre of national life in this period, and the provenance of these texts reveal how the connections between New College and the New World grew over time.

To conclude, this Note has aimed to highlight a remarkable collection of books that record one of the most important events in world history. Of particular note, as they can be studied together as a collection, they are important to the history of the college, revealing the interests of the community of scholars at New College, and their sustained interest in the New World over many decades. At a broader level, though, these books are relevant for English and American history. They not only reveal the links between Oxford and the growing English (and later British) empire, but also show how the Americas were understood by Europeans, and the attitudes they had towards this new landmass. As Alden writes, early books about the Americas are important as 'we can look back and see the term "America" growing from a purely geographical concept to the powerful and complex meaning it has today'.⁵¹ As the 12 books discussed here reveal, it is possible to see this increasing complexity over time at New College—with books about the New World moving from merely reporting facts to justifying colonial expansion.

Will Shire
Deputy Librarian
New College, Oxford

⁴⁹ Payne, *Richard Hakluyt*, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Daniel Carey, '[Edmund Hakluyt: New College Singing Man, Tutor, and Youngest Brother of Richard Hakluyt](#)', *New College Notes* 4 (2013), no. 7.

⁵¹ Alden with Landis, *European Americana*, p. ix.

APPENDIX

The following table includes all the books at New College Library discussed in this article:

Title	Author	Publication Date	Publication Place	Provenance	Shelfmark	Additional copies at New College?
Nuremberg Chronicle	Hartmann Schedel, 1440–1514	1493	Nuremberg	John Smyth	BT1.15.4	1 additional copy, shelfmark BT1.15.4
<i>Nouissime historiaru[m] omniu[m] repercussio[n]es</i>	Jacobus Philippus Bergomensis, 1434–1520	1506	Venice	Thomas Martin	BT1.11.6	No
<i>Paulina De recta Paschae celebratione: : t de die Passionis Domini Nostri Iesu Christi:-.</i>	Paulus Middelburgensis, Bishop, d. 1534	1513	Fossombrone, Italy	John Maxwell Lyte	BT1.48.3	No
<i>Psalterium, Hebr[a]eum, Gr[a]ecu[m], Arabicu[m], & Chald[a]eu[m] : cu[m] tribus Latinis i[n]terp[re]tato[n]ibus & glossis ...</i>	Agostino Giustiniani, 1470–1536	1516	Genoa	Bernardo Aldrete, d. 1645, Convento de Carmelitas des Calcos de Lazena	BT1.48.2	1 additional copy, shelfmark BT1.48.1
<i>Ptolemaeus auctus restitutus. Emaculatus. : Cum tabulis veteribus ac nouis..</i>	Ptolemy	1520	Strasbourg		BT1.15.9	No
<i>Pomponii Melae De orbis situ libri tres</i>	Pomponius Mela	1522	Basel		BT1.27.14(2)	1 additional copy, shelfmark BT1.36.7(1)
<i>Praeclara Ferdinádi. Cortesii de Noua maris Oceani Hispania Narratio Sacratissimo. ac Inuictissimo Carolo Romanorū Imperatori semper Augusto, Hispaniarū, & Ē Regi Anno Domini. M.D.XX. transmissa</i>	Hernán Cortés, 1485–1547	1524	Nuremberg		BT1.36.4(3)	No
<i>De rebus oceanicis & Orbe nouo decades tres</i>	Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, 1457–1526	1533	Basel	Thomas Martin	BT1.42.3(3)	No
<i>Cosmographia.: B[e]schreibu[n]g aller Lender</i>	Sebastian Münster, 1489–1552	1544	Basel	John Owen	BT3.187.1(2)	No
<i>Nouus orbis regionum ac insularum veteribus incognitarum</i>	Simon Grynäus, 1493–1541	1555	Basel	Robert Pinck	BT3.185.5	1 additional copy, shelfmark BT3.185.6
<i>Simplicium medicamentorum ex nouo orbe delatorum, quorum in medicina vsus est, historiae liber tertius</i>	Nicolás Monardes, approximately 1512–1588	1582	Antwerp		BT3.226.13(2)	No
<i>Principall navigations, voyages, and discoveries of the English nation</i>	Richard Hakluyt	1589	London	Thomas Martin	BT1.131.24	1 later edition, dating from 1599–1600, shelfmarks BT1.132.1 (volumes 1–2) and BT1.132.3 (volume 3)