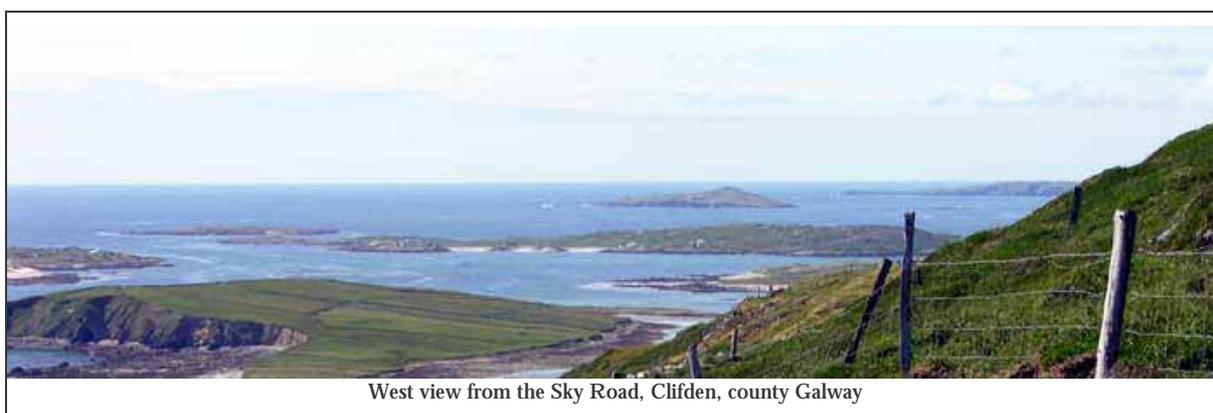


Hy-Brasil: Irish origins of Brazil

By Roger Casement (1 September 1864 - 3 August 1916) *

Edited by Angus Mitchell



West view from the Sky Road, Clifden, county Galway

The name Brazil could only have come to the Portuguese from the Celtic legendary name applied to the 'islands of the blessed', the Tír na nÓg of the land of the setting sun, which the Galway and Mayo peasant still sees in the sunset just as the Galician and Lusitanian wayfarers in Cabral's day dreamt of it before their eyes had actually fallen on the peaks of Porto Seguro rising from the western waves.

Introduction



Catalan Atlas by Abraham Cresques,
showing Hy-Brasil west of Ireland, 1375
(Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)

This lecture, held in the National Library of Ireland Ms. 13,087(31), was written by Roger Casement during his time as a British consul in Belém do Pará at the mouth of the Amazon sometime during 1907-1908. [1] In broad terms it puts forward an argument that the origins of the name Brazil derive from the mythical Hy-Brasil. This imagined island, located to the west of Ireland, is variously described as a 'promised land', the island of the blessed - Tír na nÓg - the land of the setting sun, and features most largely in the voyages of St Brendan. [2]

In arguing such a root, Casement was current with Irish historical study of the day. He believed that Hy-Brasil was a name derived from the legends of the Atlantic sea-board, with Celto-Iberian origins dating from 'Atlantis and the submerged mother-land of the early Irish, Iberians and possibly Phoenicians'.

The name Brazil as a surname is current and common to both Ireland and Portugal today and in Irish place names such as Clanbrassil. Certainly 'Brazil', in a number of variant spellings, can be found in several ancient Irish manuscripts. 'Breasail' is the name used for a pagan demigod in Hardiman's History of

Galway. Another possible derivation is from St Breacan, who shared the Aran islands with St Enda about 480 or 500 and was originally called Bresal. The name appears to have been built upon two Gaelic syllables 'breas' and 'ail'.

On a number of medieval maps Brazil also appears as the name for a land south west of the Skelligs. Elsewhere, it is one of the islands of the Azores, possibly Terceira. The earliest map is one drawn by Angellinus Dalorto of Genoa in 1325, where Brazil appears as a large disk of land to the south of Ireland. But on many later Italian and Catalan maps the name frequently reappears. [3]

Before setting out for America in 1492, Columbus is alleged to have said, when pointing at the Isle of St Brendan on Toscanelli's map: 'I am convinced that the Earthly Paradise is on the isle of St. Brendan, which nobody can reach save by the will of God.'

In looking at how the Irish origins of Brazil had been written out of the history books, Casement was able to show how the Anglo-Saxon interpretation of history had obscured and corrupted the history rooted in a more ancient Irish origin. It gave him the chance to analyse the orthodox view of 'discovery' history and a group of historians who, he felt, had neglected the Irish influence in Atlantic culture through their ignorance of the Irish language and their denial of a more ancient and mystical source of knowledge.

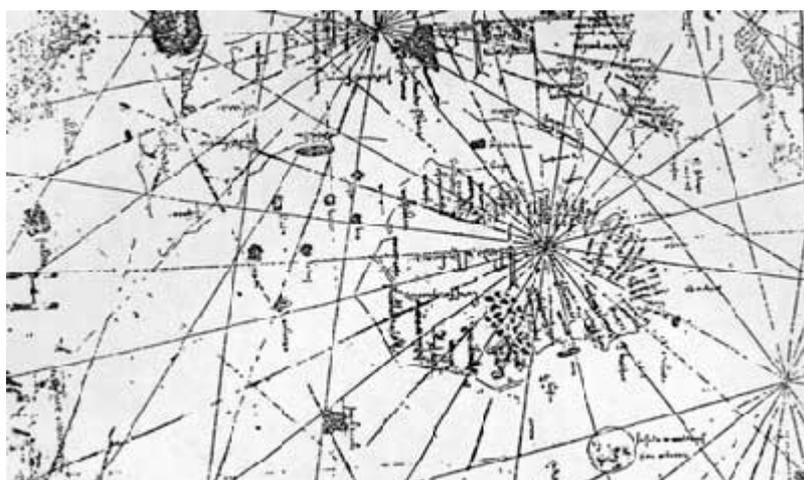
Angus Mitchell

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The name Brazil is probably the sweetest sounding name that any large race of the Earth possesses. How this musical name came to be assigned to the great country of South America did not interest me until after I had landed at Santos [4] in the autumn of 1906. We accept the names of countries and of places as we find them on maps without question taking them as a matter of course just as we accept the Atlantic Ocean or Asia. The name seems a part of the country and if a very inquisitive mind should ask the origin of the name itself, reference is made to a school geography, where the new-comer may find a probable commonplace origin.

Thus it is with the name Brazil.



Map by Dalorto (1325), including Hy-Brasil and Daculi islands

The beautiful name that we are told came from a dye-wood used in the commerce of the middle ages. Whether it be the individual Brazilian we ask, the school book we turn to or the encyclopaedia we appeal to, the answer is the same - brief, unexplanatory and precise - the country was named from the abundance of the dye-wood that was soon exported from its shores after the discovery. It was first called *Terra de Santa Cruz* - Land of the Holy Cross - by Cabral, [5]

its discoverer, a baptism that the King of Portugal his master confirmed. But in spite of official and royal recognition the dye-wood prevailed over the wood of the true cross. Such, in brief, is the universal reason assigned to the naming of Brazil. No writer has even got beyond this: altho' a few have been on the threshold of the truth without knowing it. For there is no doubt at all that in so deriving the name Brazil the country from the dye-wood of medieval commerce, the school book, the individual Brazilian, the encyclopaedia and the dictionary are astray.

They have been satisfied from the first with a half truth only, and not seeking further, or not knowing where to seek they have stopped short with a reason that not only gives no meaning, but leads the mind astray.

One or two of the writers who have dealt with the origin of the name have been quite in sight of the truth, but the limitations of European learning which had been shut off for centuries from the one literature that could have made things more clear.

Strange as it may seem, Brazil owes her name not to her abundance of a certain dye-wood but to Ireland. The distinction of naming the great South American country, I believe, belongs as surely to Ireland and to an ancient Irish belief old as the Celtic mind itself.

It may be asked how it is that none of the standard works upon the discovery of the two Americas contain an inkling of the truth. How comes it that authors, who are claimed as classics, have all failed to trace the origin of a name that covers one of the greatest dominions of the two continents to whose history and professional development they have devoted the genius of their pens and the erudition of great minds.

The answer can only be that the name of those who have undertaken the task have realised that Ireland played a more important part in the life of medieval Europe than later day records assign her, and that her influence on the minds of men was not confined to religious questions, but extended very largely into the commercial and intellectual life of the times. Far from being a remote "island beyond an island" she had fleets on many seas and her speech and shipping penetrated the western and southern seaboard of Europe from Antwerp to Genoa. Her mariners were in every port and while her traders had collected at Lisbon and along the coasts of Spain in numerous and important communities her own ports were for centuries the rendez-vous of Spanish, French and Italian shipping, as in earlier days they had been of Roman.

Some of the evidence on their head has lately been given an abiding place in literature by Mrs J.R. Green [6] in her *Ireland from 1200-1600*. A writer to whom Mrs Green has accorded her grateful recognition, Mr J.R. Kenny, has also in a series of articles, which have appeared in the columns of the Irish press, given us a glimpse of the vast field of international activity - whereon Ireland played so large a part. None of these things were known to the modern authors Washington Irving, [7] or Prescott, [8] or

Robertson, [9] or Southey, [10] who have dealt with American discoveries for the English-speaking world. To them Ireland was a name that denoted a land steeped in poverty and ignorance - the back woods of Europe, a reproach to England it might be, but a people having nothing to offer the scholar. Her only language was unwritten, untaught, unknown beyond the confines of the cabins where a race of senior barbarians lived in squalid misery without parallel in civilization, and of such repute that the great world of thought and culture might deplore. With a vicarious sympathy it dismissed from serious consideration the people and the country where such a condition was known to prevail.

When these scholars came across some reference to Ireland in their researches through Peninsular records their minds were blank by reason of prevailing prejudice, the child of ignorance, their very knowledge of their Ireland of their own day but broadened already a wide range of misunderstanding. What could Ireland possibly offer the scholars who sought the beginning of European thought in its western striving quest for a New World? Clearly nothing. It is thus that we find so delighted an author as Washington Irving confronted by the record which, had he known it, would have unlocked much to his imagination, passing over with contemptuous misreading the story of St Brendan. [11] So ignorant indeed was he of the origin of the story, while admitting that Columbus [12] must have been acquainted with it that he speaks of St Brendan as "a Scottish monk" with no perception of the meaning that attached to the word "Scot" or "Scotia" in the early middle ages. In this he doubtless sinned unwittingly not as Hallam [13] who, with that true quality of British meekness which seeks to inherit the Earth, writes of Duns Scotus [14] as an Englishman.

The Hallams indeed we have always with us.

It is sufficient for an Irishman to be distinguished in any walk of life for him to be at once annexed.

When Washington Irving wrote his history of Columbus the Anglo-Saxon theory of mankind was being invented. Its cult has widened from a variety of motives; its rise synchronised with a far less laudable minor cult which today finds frequent expression in American historical records. I refer to the term "Scotch-Irish" to designate the pioneers who, in the early days of Indian border fighting, or later revolutionary strife, did so much to build up the fabric of

America. I am not sure if Washington Irving may not be held largely responsible for the term Scotch-Irish. In his later literary development of the "Scotch-Irish" ancestor of the innumerable Murphys, Sullivans, MacDonalDs or O'Tooles, he assigns their ancestry to a hybrid whom neither Ireland nor Scotland claims. Certain it is that his Scotch monks allusion to St Brendan has been amplified by American ignorance until in a work published in 1892 to commemorate as "an absolutely complete Colombian memorial (1492-1892)" the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America; we find the Bishop of Clonfert, born and bred in Kerry taking his place among the legendary Scotch-Irish of the revolution.

I refer to a monumental work issued by the Syndicate Publishing Co of Philadelphia entitled *The Discovery and Conquest of the New World*, which among other gifts to the American people, offers them in Chapter II "the fable of St Brendan, a Scotch-Irish priest who was accredited with first having discovered America in the sixth century". On turning to the body of the work dealing with the episode it becomes clear that the compilers of the modern work have merely copied from Washington Irving's pages the



St. Brendan's search for Paradise
(West to the Garden)

scanty references wherein he dismisses the Brendan legend. This modern American work was offered to the American people with an "Introduction by the Hon. Murat Halstead. Most Renowned Journalist and Colombian student of Both Americas" and in this gentleman's introduction we are told that to "properly introduce to the multitudinous readers of this book the subjects, authors and illustrations seemed a task of such gigantic proportions as to create a feeling of awe in the breast of the most intrepid."



Mercator Terrestrial Globe, 1541 (detail)
(Harvard Map Collection)

It must assuredly create regret in the minds of the most sympathetic that the multitudinous descendants of illustrious Irishmen in the United States should have offered to them as history in 1892, the statement that the Bishop of Clonfert in 563 "was a Scotch-Irish abbot who flourished in the sixth century and who is called sometimes by the foregoing appellations (St Brandon or Borondon) sometimes St Blandanns or St Blandanus."

Moreover England assiduously spread the tale. Just as when she first began her civilizing mission to Ireland in Tudor times, the Lord Deputies of Elizabeth were careful to provide that those "German Earls", who had come from the Courts of Christendom to visit Ireland, should "see as little as might be" of the great Queen's regenerated kingdom beyond the walls of Dublin. So to the modern European questions England had turned a face of firm benevolence, with uplifted deploring hands, and regretted while she double-barred the door, that the condition of her turbulent patient still precluded the visits of enquiring or possibly sympathetic minds. The Irish of the early nineteenth century were as effectually beyond the pale of cultured thought as their language was beyond the ken of the scholar.

Speaking, as Young wrote a generation earlier, "a despised language", with no school wherein their tongue was taught, with no printed book of their language, with no means to make their thought known save in the half-speech of their conquerors; the oldest people in Western Europe, whose unknown literature in truth revealed a character of lofty consistency and high ideal, were ranked with the African slave and at best could offer nothing but a "kitchen midden" to research. The shafts of wilful ignorance that was then a part of English international statecraft flashed wherever the pen of the writer or the soul of the scholar might for a moment have been drawn to Ireland. These shafts indeed are still often bared, but while today impotent to daunt or blind the gaze of the Continent, they play their malicious part in English party strife and in the columns of the English Press. It was but four years ago in 1904 that the *Morning Post*, certainly one of the most cultured and generally best informed of the English journals permitted its leader writer to liken the study of Irish in the schools of Ireland to the teaching of "kitchen kaffir" in South Africa.

The Statute Book of Ireland still makes it a punishable offence in 1908 to report in any newspaper in Ireland, any proceedings in an English Law Court in any language but English. When this Act was passed in 1740, the language of the whole of Ireland, outside a colonist aristocracy and their immediate dependants was Irish - and no proceeding in a Court of Law could have been carried to an issue save by a continuous appeal to that language in which there must on no account be made public or recorded.

The thing was not tomfoolery - it was all part of the great plan for wiping out the Irish mind. It had nearly succeeded.

The scholar today is beginning to realise that the Irish mind has something to reveal in the only tongue that ever gave it expression, or can give it expression. No historical student today would dream of writing a history of Ireland without reference to Irish records. In years to come international scholars will not dream of a complete scholarship which ignored the Irish language.

But when Washington Irving wrote his history of Columbus few scholars knew that there was an Irish language and very few Irishmen themselves believe that their language, although the language of our childhood and of all their fore fathers, has anything to offer even to Ireland that was worth recording or preserving. An ignorance more complete, more dastardly, more debasing never assailed a whole people - and its baneful fruit has been the bread on our school-boys lips for how many generations? If this was the condition of Ireland in say, 1820, what wonder that the student of European records took no thought of her when he turned to medieval times, or if when he found her name recorded, he passed it over as of no import or even, as Irving did, assigned the very name itself to another country and another people. Brendan the Kerryman in quest of Hy-Brassil, is to Washington Irving and millions who have read him, a Scottish monk.

For Washington Irving's ignorance of the true significance of the Brendan legend he had found Columbus studying there is every excuse. He wrote, as Prescott wrote, at a time when much that later research has given to the world was still withheld from the scholar or locked up in the archives of Continental libraries. Just as Prescott knew nothing of the gigantic discoveries in Yucatan and elsewhere in Central America which have since revealed so much to our historical gaze of the past of the Indian peoples, so when Irving compiled his delightful works upon Columbus no historian dreamed that Ireland could offer anything worthy the contemplation of scholars, seeking mid-Continental records to throw light upon that medieval mind which first invented and then discovered a New World. And yet nothing is more certain than that Ireland was the home of the legend which for centuries had turned men's minds westward in search of that fabled land, and that the very name by which the earliest Irish records, called that region St Brendan set out to find, was the very name by which, when the discovery came, the discovering people themselves decided by popular will and all pervading prior use to confer upon this new found possession. That Brazil owes her name to Ireland - to Irish thought and legend - born beyond the dawn of history yet handed down in a hundred forms of narrative and poem and translated throughout all western Europe,



Roger Casement (1864-1916)

until all western Europe knew and dreamed and loved the story, and her cartographers assigned it place upon their universal maps, I think has been made clear enough in the forgoing article.

Legends die hard - and doubtless the legends of the dye-wood's origin of the name Brazil, resting as we have seen on no historical proof and abundantly disproved by antecedent application of the name no less

than by the clear and continuous Irish record of the land, the locality, the search and the name, will die slowly. The "Scotch-Irish" origin of so many of the American people already shows signs of failing vitality. As the study of Irish records becomes more general those who today are still ashamed to claim descent from the "mere Irish" will discover that a truly Irish origin may even be fashionable. That it has always carried with it a storied value to the discerning, an inspiration to the brave, and an immemorial claim upon the generous and high souled has been hidden from men's minds, not by the faults of Irish character so much, as by the wanton obscurity in which the home of that people has been plunged.

That darkness was not a chance cloud, and now that it is lifting others besides Irishmen and their multitudinous descendants in the western world, may learn from the enduring legend of Hy-Brassil, to prize the records of a race who have given much to mankind, besides the historic facts of ancient fable and who are destined, if they will still honour their own past, to discover fields of thought and action for "the dauntless far-aspiring spirit of the Gael."

Roger Casement

Belém do Pará, Amazon River, c. 1908

Editor's Notes

[1] One of the three double paged folios contains: "Brazil - at Bathsheba 7 September 1907"

[2] There is further scribbled material on this subject to be found in NLI MS 13,087 (23/ii) - which contains a more scholarly essay on possible Irish manuscripts that contain information on the etymological origins of Brazil and the legend of Atlantis. Casement questions Alexander von Humboldt's belief that Brazil originated in Asiatic culture before entering the parlance of European trade. He also attacks as vague the idea of a Norman-Breton discovery of America by drawing attention to Bergerson *Histoire de la Navigation* (Paris, 1630), p.107. Bergerson argued for a French explanation of the name Brazil, which Casement felt was "grotesque."

[3] See William H. Babcock - *Legendary Islands of the Atlantic: A Study in Medieval Geography* (1922); T.J. Westropp, *Brazil and the Legendary Islands of the West Atlantic* (1912); Donald Johnson, *Phantom Islands of the Atlantic - Legends of Seven Lands that never were* (1994).

[4] Santos is the coffee port on the South Atlantic coast below São Paulo where Casement took up his first consular position in Brazil in 1906. The following year he moved to Belem do Pará, at the mouth of the Amazon, and the following year he was promoted to consul general in the former Brazilian capital of Rio de Janeiro. In 1910 he was recruited for a "special mission" by the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, to investigate rumours of atrocities in the disputed frontier region bordering Peru, Ecuador, Brazil and Colombia. Casement stayed on the case until his resignation from the Foreign Office in the summer of 1913.

[5] Pedro Alvarez Cabral (c.1467-c.1520) - Portuguese navigator, in 1500 he embarked from Lisbon with a fleet of thirteen ships bound for the East Indies. His first landfall was in Brazil in southern Bahia, where he claimed the land for the Portuguese crown. In April 2000 Brazil marked 500 years of official history.

[6] Alice Stopford Green (1847-1929). Historian. Born in County Meath, she was one of the closest of Casement's friends and they travelled together through many areas of Ireland and collaborated in much work. After the death of her husband, the historian J.R. Green in 1883, she became increasingly radical, sympathising with much of the intellectual discontent. She was the force behind the founding of the The Mary Kingsley Society of West Africa, founded in 1900. The Society tried to give African culture a fairer status in the public mind. Among its General Committee members: H.H. Asquith; Rev. Dr Butler, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge; Viscount Cromer, Dr. J.G. Frazer, John Holt, Sir Alfred Lyall,

George Macmillan, Major Matthew Nathan C.M.G. Mrs. Green subsequently became a force behind the Congo reform movement and along with Roger Casement and Arthur Conan Doyle helped organise the Morel Testimonial Luncheon on 29 May 1911. In 1908 she published *The Making of Ireland and Its Undoing*, a work on early Irish history which Casement did much to promote. They also co-operated on *Irish Nationality* (1911) and both shared the platform with Captain J.R. White and the Rev. Armour on Casement's entry onto the political stage at Ballymoney in October 1913. This event, known as the Protestant Protest, was a meeting held by Protestants that hoped to explain to the wider Protestant community of the North how they might better live at peace inside a United Ireland. The recent release of KV files at Kew Public Record Office in London shows how Mrs. Green was branded a "red hot revolutionist" by British Intelligence as a result of her close connection with some of the rebel leaders. After the executions she returned to Ireland and to St. Stephen's Green to live. Her house continued to be a hive of discussion on several matter including how the Irish spirit might be better enlightened. She will remain as one of the most outstanding Irish scholars of her age. Casement's correspondence with Green held in the National Library of Ireland is evidence of how important their discussion was in the construction of a new attitude to Irish history and a counter-history that opposed the Imperial version.

[7] Washington Irving (1783-1859). Historian and man of letters. Irving was born in New York and began his literary career writing satirical history such as *A History of New York by Diedrich Knickerbocker* (1809). For health reasons he lived in Spain from 1826-29 and produced a series of studies including *The History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (1828) and *Voyages of the Companions of Columbus* (1831) and *Tales of the Alhambra*. He was appointed Ambassador to Spain (1842-1846).

[8] William Hickling Prescott (1796-1859). American historian. Prescott was born in Massachusetts into a wealthy legal family. He studied at Harvard where he was half-blinded by a piece of bread thrown accidentally in his eye. He devoted most of his life to the study of Spanish and Spanish-American history. His most well-known works were translated into French, German and Spanish, including *History of Ferdinand and Isabella* (1838); *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843); *The Conquest of Peru* (1847); and an unfinished three volume *History of Philip II* (1855-58). More than any historian Prescott had the most widespread influence on the shaping of Europe's understanding of Ibero-American history until relatively recently.

[9] William Robertson (1721-1793). Scottish historian. Studied at Edinburgh University. He volunteered for the defence of Edinburgh against the Jacobite rebels in 1745 and in 1751 took up a prominent role in the General Assembly and soon became leader of the "Moderates". In 1761 he became a royal chaplain; in 1762 principle of Edinburgh University and in 1764 the Royal historiographer. His most far-reaching work was his *History of Charles V* (1769) which was widely praised by figures such as Voltaire and Gibbon. In 1777 he published his *History of America*, mainly concerned with early Spanish conquest in the New World.

[10] Robert Southey (1774-1843). Historian and Poet Laureate. Born in Bristol. After expulsion from Westminster school for writing an article showing sympathy for the Jacobites, Southey went up to Balliol College Oxford. With the poet Samuel Coleridge he planned to form a communist society in the West Country that came to nothing. He became an authority on the Anglo-Portuguese world following trips there in 1795 and 1800 and wrote an extensive three volume *History of Brazil* and another *History of Portugal*.

[11] St. Brendan (483-577). Navigator, mystic, Bishop of Clonfert. Born Fenit peninsula. The *Navigatio Brendani* relates his legendary voyage to a land of saints far to the west and north, possibly the Hebrides. He founded a number of monasteries in Ireland and Scotland including a monastery-museum at Ardfert and the Church of Ireland cathedral at Clonfert. Brendan, it is said, was buried beside the Romanesque pyramid-tympanum, archway door. His voyage to the Americas was re-enacted by Tim Severin, leaving Brandon Creek on 17 May 1976 showing a proven possibility that by tracing the north west Atlantic sea-board through the Western Islands of Scotland beyond the Faroes to Iceland and thence past Greenland to the north Atlantic shores of America.

[12] Christopher Columbus (1451-1506). Genoese explorer. In 1470 he was shipwrecked on the coast of Portugal. As early as 1474 he had conceived the design of reaching India by sailing westward - a design in which he was encouraged by a Florentine astronomer, Paolo Toscanelli. In 1477 he sailed 100 leagues beyond Thule, probably to or beyond Iceland; with other journeys to the Cape Verde Islands and Sierra Leone. After seven years of searching for a patron his plans were accepted by Ferdinand and Isabella. On Friday 3 August 1492 Columbus set sail in command of the small Santa Maria, with fifty men and attended by two little caravels the *Pinta* and *Niña*. After landfall in Caribbean he returned to Iberia and reached Palos on 15 March 1493. He made a further three voyages before dying in austere poverty in Valladolid.

[13] Henry Hallam (1777-1859). English historian, born in Windsor and educated Eton and Christchurch College, Oxford. Helped by a private income, he was able to leave his study of law to pay for a life of letters and the writing of Whig history. His work includes: *Europe during the Middle Ages* (1818); *The Constitutional History of England from Henry VII to George II* (1827)

[14] Duns Scotus (c.1265-1308) Scottish scholar-philosopher and rival of Thomas Aquinas as the leading medieval theologian. His life is something of a mystery compared to his philosophy which was widely understood. He believed in the primacy of the individual and the freedom of the individual will and considered faith to be an act of the will, a practical issue and not speculative or theoretical. The Franciscan Order followed Duns Scotus.