

Deepening Understanding

YR5 Information Text

The First Circumnavigation of the World by Laura Curtis



Imagine one day boarding a ship, not knowing where you were heading or when you would be returning home. More than this, you were going to be on a ship with no running water, no fresh food, no home comforts, no medication if you became ill and no modern navigation instruments...for a crew of men this was their reality for three years of their lives and is now regarded as one of the greatest true stories of human endeavour and endurance ever told.

Here's what happened.

Over 500 years ago, on 6th September 1522, a shabby, dilapidated ship called the Victoria, with her 18 sailors on board, sailed into harbour in Southern Spain. She was the sole surviving ship only of a fleet which had set sail three years before. Despite huge losses, both in terms of lives and ships, the Victoria had achieved something unprecedented and remarkable for the time: the first circumnavigation of the globe.

In 1492, on behalf of Spain, the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus had sailed across the Atlantic Ocean and discovered the New World (USA). Wanting to claim these new lands as their own, in 1494, the Catholic Spanish rulers asked the Pope to pre-empt any claims by the Portuguese. The Pope tried to maintain peace between the two countries,



who were the two most important sea-faring powers at the time, by drawing an imaginary line on the world map which ran from Greenland directly south through the middle of the Atlantic Ocean down to Antarctica. Spain was allowed to take control of the territories west of the divide (North and South America) and Portugal to the east.

The two superpowers agreed to the terms in the Treaty of Tordesillas, however Spain had a problem: Portugal had control over the eastern sea routes therefore the extremely profitable exotic lands. Both nations had their sights fixed on the 'Spice Islands' (today's Indonesia) as the spices grown there were worth many times their weight in gold. Spain's only way of accessing these valuable lands was to sail west into uncharted and dangerous territories.

Spain was delighted when a man named Ferdinand Magellan, who was actually a Portuguese defector, claimed that he knew of a westward way to the Spice Islands. Immediately, King Charles I of Spain entrusted him with a fleet of five ships (with 260 men) and ensured he had everything he would need for the long and perilous journey. The crew included a young boy named Enrique - enslaved by Magellan on a previous journey - and Antonio Pigafetta, a Venetian nobleman and explorer who was looking for a great adventure across the seas.

On 20th September 1519, the Victoria set sail across the Atlantic Ocean, first landing in Brazil, before continuing southwards. They hugged the coastline all the way, meticulously searching for the seaway linking east and west. As the weather turned for the worse and time at sea took its toll, the Spaniards grew to resent having a Portuguese captain and a mutiny soon ensued. Magellan immediately reacted with anger, violently smashing the revolt. However, this was just the start of his problems. One of the ships (the Santiago) was shipwrecked in a storm, whilst the Captain of the San Antonio decided to flee and sailed back home.

Yet, Magellan, not one to be deterred, continued the search and on 21st October began investigating a new waterway. Nearly a month later, and nearly frozen to death, the 3 ships reached the end of this stretch of water that we now call The Strait of Magellan into the Mar Pacifico (Pacific Ocean). Nowadays we know this ocean to be the biggest expanse of water on the globe, yet back then, the sailors could not have envisaged the scale of the crossing they would have to endure. After a long 98



days sailing the vast ocean, when they finally reached land, dozens of sailors had perished due to scurvy and famine.

However, things grew worse. Magellan became embroiled in a feud between two rival chiefs: Rajah Humabon of Cebu and Chief Lapu Lapu. Overconfident and mistakenly believing that he could defeat the 'simple' natives, Magellan's force was swamped and he was killed in the Battle of Mactan.

Upon Magellan's death, the Captaincy was handed to Juan Sebastian Elcano, who was one of the pardoned mutineers. Magellan's wish after his death was that Enrique should be freed but the remaining crew were reluctant to grant this given that the expedition still needed an interpreter. Fearing for his freedom, it is thought that Enrique schemed with the Rajah to murder about 30 of the Spanish at a feast on the beach. Enrique was never heard from again.

Meanwhile the survivors were thousands of miles from home and they had no choice but to continue onwards. They finally reached their intended destination in November 1521 - their numbers were few but the voyage had been a success. With the belly of the remaining ships full of precious cargo they finally set sail for home. However, this journey was not without its setbacks - the Trinidad was captured by the Portuguese and sank. Against all the odds, the small vessel survived the voyage and returned to Spain with a complete cargo of cloves and cinnamon. The voyage had been long and arduous but worth it for the spices were sold at a price good enough to cover the expedition and return a profit. Piafetta, who had painstakingly recorded all details of the lands and people he had encountered, created the world's first phrasebook of native languages along with the help of a lowly slave. We can only tell this story today because of the rich writing within his journal. Magellan may have been killed but his name is synonymous with human exploration and lives today in the name of galaxies and space programs. Elcano too was remembered and celebrated in Spain with a coat of arms and his face on currency and stamps for it was he who was the first man to circumnavigate the globe.

Driven by the human drive to explore and survive, the survivors challenged and broke the boundaries of human endeavour and exploration, accomplished what once was deemed to be impossible and completed a journey that will go down in history forever.

