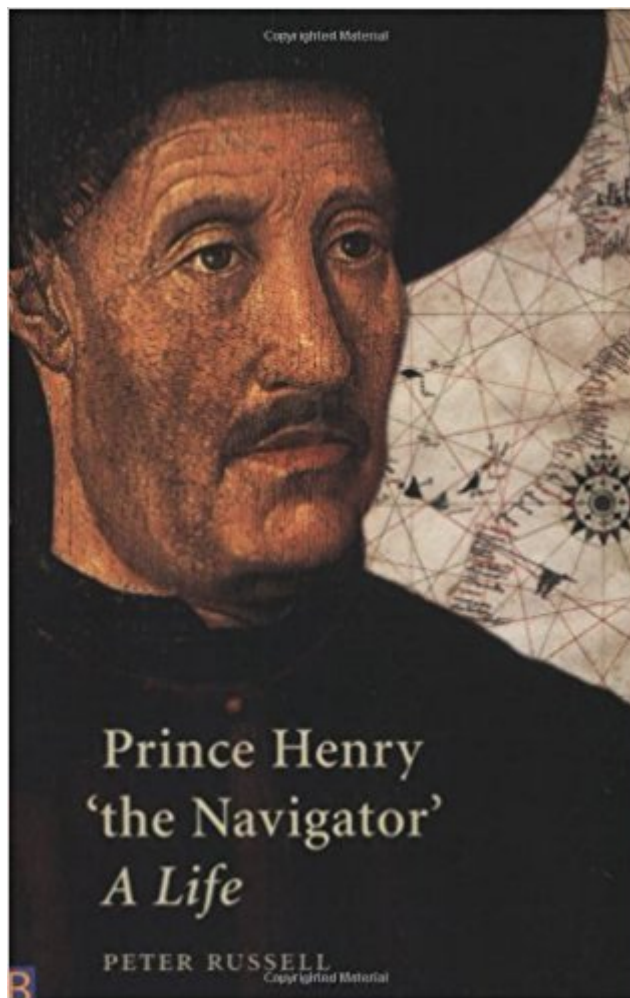


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# Prince Henry The Navigator



## Synopsis

Henry the Navigator, fifteenth-century Portuguese prince and explorer, is a legendary, almost mythical figure in late medieval history. Considered along with Columbus to be one of the progenitors of modernity, Prince Henry challenged the scientific assumptions of his age and was responsible for liberating Europeans from geographical restraints that had bound them since the Roman Empire's collapse. In this enthralling account of Henry's life—the first biography of the "The Navigator" in more than a century—Peter Russell reaps the harvest of a lifelong study of Prince Henry. Making full use of documentary evidence only recently available, Russell reevaluates Henry and his role in Portuguese and European history. Examining the full range of Prince Henry's activities, Russell discusses the explorer's image as an imperialist and as a maritime, mathematical, and navigational pioneer. He considers Henry's voyages of discovery in the African Atlantic, their economic and cultural consequences, and the difficult questions they generated regarding international law and papal jurisdiction. Russell demonstrates the degree to which Henry was motivated by the predictions of his astrologer—an aspect of his career little known until now—and explains how this innovator, though firmly rooted in medieval ways of thinking and behaving, set in motion a current of change that altered European history.

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## Customer Reviews

Prince Henry of Portugal (1394-1460), called "the Navigator," is widely known as a precursor of Columbus, a man who helped set the European world on its great global adventure, and a paragon

of learning who established the first school devoted to the art and science of navigating the open seas. None of this, Russell reveals, is true. Nor is Henry a progenitor of modernity, as he is sometimes described. Russell shows him to have been a thoroughly Renaissance prince, who embodied a mix of faith, science and mystical irrationality. As far cry from modernism. It has been close to a century since a biography of Henry has been written, and Russell, now retired after a long and distinguished career at Oxford, has written a fitting capstone to his work on the history of early modern Iberia. Beginning his biography of Henry with the astrological portents attendant on his birth (which seems to have strongly influenced his unshakable image of himself as a great crusader and a great discoverer of secrets), the author does a masterful job of placing the events of Henry's life in the context not only of his own time but of ours as well. Russell's treatment of the Prester John myth (the belief that there was a Christian king of Ethiopia with whom Henry wanted to ally himself against the Turks) and his analysis of Henry's place in the development of the Atlantic slave trade are especially fine, and by themselves they could recommend this excellent work. The volume is graced with beautifully produced color plates; the map and family tree provided are helpful; the notes are copious and useful; and the bibliography is extensive. This book, like Henry, is a font of virtues but, thankfully unlike the prince, it has no glaring faults. (Oct.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

"An illuminating and well-written life of the founding figure of the Age of Exploration." -- Kirkus Review  
"An outstanding volume that will take decades to supersede." -- Frank McLynn, New Statesman  
"May well be the finest work of history to be published this year." -- J. M. Roberts, Times Literary Supplement  
"[Russell] presents a . . . fascinating man in a superbly written and thought-provoking book." -- Economist

This very well written book by Peter Russell conceivably could be an extension of Isabell Stillwell's historical novel, *Philippa of Lancaster*, for it begins where the latter leaves off with the Portuguese taking of Ceuta. Russell's non-fiction detailed work not only digs out the chronicles of the events of Henry's life but provides comparison and argues the respected chroniclers words of the time on their respective reports. This is a fascinating story! Much of the materials revealed in this text was not familiar to me and I thought I knew this biography. What I did know was Henry's horoscope on his birth predicted he would be a crusader and explorer. Chapter 4 reveals Henry laid claim and profited greatly to three groups of Atlantic islands: uninhabited Madeira group, Azores, and Cape Verde Islands during his time on the planet. By continuous coercion over a 40 year period

he attempted to obtain the Canaries from Castile settlers and aboriginals without setting foot on a ship or any of them. Chapter 6 takes the reader into the story of Henry's unsuccessful invasion of the Sultanate of Morocco with originally planned 15,000 men on a shoestring budget. After arguing civil and church law, Henry sets sail with a Christian Army for Tangiers in August 1437. Here he finds himself confronted by Salih ben Salih the ousted Ceuta leader 22 yrs prior. Unfortunately, he could only muster 7,000 and ended up being humiliated (due to his poor planning) by his rival and surrenders at Tangiers, allowing his younger brother Fernando to be held hostage. This cascades into Fernando's dying in captivity in Fez, thus influencing the untimely death of his older brother the king, Duarte I. This overzealous undertaking for such a small kingdom reveals how headstrong and uncivil Henry was toward anyone who opposed his will. A product with his siblings of a very pious union, as favorite son of his father, Joao I, and "The tip Of The Spear" of the Illustrious Generation, Henry, never married, spent the first third of his life proving himself a knight; the middle third as administrator but never knight of the "Order of Christ" discovering and cultivating lands from exploration of Atlantic islands; and the last third exploring (through his monopoly) the West Africa Coast looking for gold from the interior of the continent. This led to a settling for very lucrative trade of horses for African slaves in the name of convenient papal approved christian conversion. As we look at Portuguese history up until this Henrican Period it is quite plausible his time was the spark that caused the economic impetus to propel this small country to great riches and world power status. I personally will be in Sagras, Lagos, and Tomar next month to view this Henrican legacy.

As a boy given a Eurocentric education, I was enamored with the great explorers of the world - Columbus, Cabot, Magellan, Drake, et al. Prince Henry the Navigator was among the "et al", but I don't recall much of what I learned about him as a boy other than that he was a genius of open seas navigation who pushed Portuguese seafarers beyond the bounds of the known pre-Columbian flat earth. Now, a half century later, Sir Peter Russell tells me that that was partly myth. Perhaps the greatest misimpression about Henry (b. 1394, d. 1460) was that he was a skilled seaman. In truth, while he was a sponsor of Portuguese exploration down the western coast of Africa and an avid student of navigational science, he did not personally participate in any voyages of exploration and discovery. Still, he is an historical figure of considerable if not overriding importance and one who merits the sort of knowledgeable and well-written study that Russell has given us. Among other things, Henry was an ardent Crusader against the Muslim infidel (it is primarily due to Henry's zeal along these lines that Portugal ended up with possessions and colonies in Northwest Africa), he

was thoroughly imbued with and practiced the ethos of chivalry, he was an early champion of organized and crown-sponsored oceanic discovery, and he was a driving force behind the model of commercial exploitation of discovered/conquered lands that evolved into European colonialism. He also promoted and profited from slave-trading. It is primarily because of his role in the expansion of slave-trading that Henry's current stature in history is as much villain as hero. And the rationale by which he, as a devout Christian, justified slave raiding and trading is scarcely believable at this remove. "The Prince \* \* \* thought of his role in turning Portugal into a major slave-trading country as an evangelizing achievement of which he could be proud, and one which would make a major contribution to his posthumous fame in history as a tireless battler to bring the Christian message to infidels and pagans." For Henry, conversion and enslavement were essentially interchangeable terms. "[A]ny 'inconveniences' the converted slave might have to endure in this life being as nothing when compared with the certainty of eternal salvation that conversion brings with it." Russell believes that Henry actually believed this malarkey. But lest we overhear opprobrium on Henry, it should be noted that he and the Portuguese did not initiate the Atlantic slave trade: before the first Portuguese slave-raiding expedition landed with its human cargo in Lagos in 1444, Genoese, Catalan, and Castilian merchants had long been in the habit of buying in the Atlantic ports of Morocco black slaves imported from the Sudan by trans-Saharan caravans.

PRINCE HENRY 'THE NAVIGATOR' is solid history. It also, in its magisterial way, is very British history. But even for British history, it is very well-written. Here is one example from early in the book: "A more certain contributory cause of the Prince's future relentless pursuit of personal fame was his status as a third son; from an early age he seems to have made it plain to those around him that he was unlikely to turn out to be a man content to settle for the subordinate role that this accident of birth seemed to have assigned to him." At one point, Russell describes Henry as "a thoroughly traditional late-medieval Christian of his time". That sort of person is now quite alien. Much of the value of this book inheres in its explication of just what is entailed by "a thoroughly traditional late-medieval Christian" of the early 15th Century. PRINCE HENRY 'THE NAVIGATOR' is not only a biography of a notable figure from history, it also is a profile of an age. I cannot pretend that it in any way is "essential reading", but no reader would be poorer for the experience.

P.S.: Javier Marías - as dedicated his magnum opus, the three-volume novel "Your Face Tomorrow", to Sir Peter Russell. Russell, who when he wrote PRINCE HENRY (in his 80s) was the most distinguished scholar in the English-speaking world on matters of Iberian history, had been a mentor of sorts to Marías. Russell also was the thinly disguised model for Sir Peter Wheeler, who is the wise elderly mentor to the protagonist Jaime Deza in "Your Face Tomorrow".

P.S.S.: The quote used as the title for this

review is from Shakespeare's "King Henry the Fourth, Part I". Russell used it as an epigraph to the book and it does encapsulate the complexity of Prince Henry, something this review cannot begin to approximate.

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