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Caboto -- or Cabot, as the British called him, -- is credited, of course, with the first historically-recorded landing in Canada; but, in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the waters off our coasts were literally swarming with foreign navigators -- almost as much as they are today with foreign fishing fleets, at the expense of Canadian fishermen!

Archaeologists, of course, have found evidence of Viking and Armorican landings on the eastern coast of North America; and no one will ever convince me that fearless Scots from Lewis or Skye or Mull did not also make the perilous transatlantic voyage -- and regularly! Nevertheless, chroniclers list, after the Italian's first crossing, those of the Portuguese Cortereal in 1500, of the English Warde in 1502, of the Scottish Elliott in 1503 -- a distant ancestor, perhaps, of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau -- and of the French Denys in 1506.

These navigators were drawn to the fog-bound, uncharted and icy stretches of the Northwest Atlantic by the riches of the New World; and, of those riches, only one had then been proved -- the fisheries. After all, it was Cabot's father, Giovanni, who gave Newfoundland its first name -- and it was not "Terra Nova" but "Terra de Bacalão" -- "the land of the Cod"?

In retrospect, this great international adventure seems like an anticipation of contemporary Canada, of what we call the Canadian Mosaic, of people from many lands, brought together within a common political framework by the challenge of building a new society but intent upon preserving their many cultural and ethnic filiations. Look at Cabot: an Italian, hired by an English King, setting foot on an island first settled by the French and peopled later by Scots. The same nations -- and many others -- who sired the great navigators were later to provide Canada with what remains today its scarcest resource: people.

I hardly need say more to establish the ancientness of Canada's maritime orientation, which has led the Canadian Government to play a leading role in current attempts, sponsored by the United Nations, to reform, revamp and modernize the law of the sea. I hardly need explain why a Canadian foreign minister from Nova Scotia would take a most active interest in the sessions of Caracas, Geneva and the third one scheduled to take place next March in New York.

But Canadian interests in the law of the sea are far more than historical. The exhibits before us show that Canada's coastline stretches for some 150,000 miles -- almost 24 times the length of Scotland's, itself one of the longest and most ragged in Europe.

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