Review of *A Voyage Long and Strange: Rediscovering the New World*. By Tony Horwitz. Henry Holt and Company. 445 pp. $27.50

In Clifton, Arizona, an old mining town, Walter Mares, the editor of *The Copper Era*, sometimes dons a conquistador's helmet and talks to school kids about Francisco Coronado. "Who are you supposed to be—Columbus?," they ask. "They have no idea about their own history," Mares has concluded. Descended from Spanish colonists who followed Coronado, he dismisses the Pilgrims as "boat people, Johnny-come-latelies." On Thanksgiving, Americans "should be eating chili, not turkey."

Despite an expensive education at an elite university—as a history major—Tony Horwitz, the Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist and author of *Confederates in the Attic*, discovered on a chance visit to Plymouth, Massachusetts that he, too, "had a third grader's grasp of early America." He decided to do something about it. Horwitz gave himself a crash course in North American history and archeology. Since, like John Smith, the savior of the Jamestown Colony, he preferred to "beleeve my own eies, before any mans imagination," he took a "pre-Pilgimage," making landfall wherever the European explorers had, to "meet the Natives, mine the past, and map its memory in the present." Instead of beginning his journey at Plymouth Rock, he ended it there.

By turns history and travelogue, *A Voyage Long and Strange* is instructive and charming. Horwitz sure can spin a yarn. He re-creates the wonder—and the horror—of the explorers' encounters with exotic creatures. And his thumb-nail sketches of the first-comers are tight and bright. Christopher Columbus, he reveals, was not "a farsighted modern, battling medieval darkness." By 1492, even the Catholic Church acknowledged that the earth was round. But cosmographers did not agree about its size. Columbus was "the most wrong-headed of them
all." Buttressing his argument by citing the scriptural passage indicating that six-sevenths of the world is land, Columbus convinced Ferdinand and Isabella that he could reach India "in a few days with a fair wind."

An incompetent administrator, Columbus died in 1506, "alone, desolate, infirm." In the ultimate irony, Horwitz writes, two continents were named for his fellow Italian, Amerigo Vespucci, a self-promoter, whose claim to have reached South America in 1497, a year before Columbus arrived there, was almost certainly spurious.

Horwitz' account of the legacy left by the Spanish adventurers—Coronado, DeSoto, and de Leon—is more likely to "affright than delight." After all, they cut a devastating swath through the ancient civilizations of the "New World." At Mavila, an Indian village along the Alabama River, on October 18, 1540, De Soto's men killed about 2,500 natives, and torched their houses. The long-forgotten massacre, Horwitz observes, rivals the battle of Antietam as the deadliest day of combat ever recorded on "American" soil.

Mesmerized by the "gilded hopes" of gold and an Orient express, Horwitz implies, the conquistadores never learned that "America's true promise" lay in timber, game, fish, and fertile land. The settlements the Spaniards established in North America, from Ponce de Leon's "discovery" of Florida in 1513 until the English arrived at Jamestown in 1607, were precarious outposts, "beset by mutinies, pirate raids, plague, fires, Indian hostility, and other woes."

They remain dreary destinations. Following the Mississippi flood of 1927, Arkansas City, which may have the place where De Soto died, is barely a city at all, with no commercial establishments except a liquor store, Laundromat, and grocery. "History's all we got left," an old man told Horwitz as he sat by the levee. And not much history at that. No coffin with De Soto's
remains has ever been found. "Young man, I do believe you've been led on," declares ninety-five year old Dorothy Moore. "Just like those Spanish, always chasing their gold."

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