The Idea of the West

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There lies your way, due west.
Then westward-hoe . . .

Twelfth Night

ONCE upon a time, dragons lived in the west, and sirens whose sea voices
gave men to the sea, and monsters who preyed on fools, and to the west was
darkness and danger and death. In its wisdom the sun daily searched the
western sky in its flight from the east. At that point where the sun crossed
the horizon, there was a happy otherworld hidden from men, and toward
that place earthly glory and power tended. Perhaps the creatures who de-
defended this place could be slain, perhaps men could turn deaf ears to the sea
voices, perhaps the storms could be weathered and the darkness pierced.
Then the promise of the west would be known as men tasted the fruits of
their yearnings and hopes, as the brave fools who sailed in ignorance be-
came wise in their victory. If men were brave enough, strong enough, and
perhaps good enough, they would be able to climb the mountains or cross
the seas or placate or vanquish the creatures that stood just east of Elysium.
And, once there, the condition of men would be profoundly altered, for
there nature's bounty was endless, happiness was certain, and death was
banished forever.

As a whole, this composite west was not the usual inspiration of any
single man; the shadings of the idea would lighten and darken in time
and place. But one of these strands seems virtually constant in the human
story: a yearning for a land of laughter, of peace, and of life eternal. The
location of this land, whether Elysium, Eden, or the Isle of Fair Women, en-
gaged the attention of poets and sailors, and frequently it was located to the
west of the man who wondered where it was. Another important strand re-
volved around the concept of the destiny of nations, the notion that the secular
sword must be taken by a nation to the west. From Troy to Greece, Rome,
and England, "westward the course of empire takes its way." Sometimes
eternity, happiness, and millennial themes were woven into one conception
of the west; sometimes the imperial theme stood alone. At other times

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different arrangements and combinations were needed to serve the purposes of those who utilized some idea of the west, a west that might be either a place, a direction, an idea, or all three at once.

Where do the gods live, where do they most bless the earth, where is God’s garden, or where does His spirit still walk? From Menelaus to Columbus and beyond, it was thought that there was a magic otherworld hidden somewhere on earth, and all men had to do was find it.

Homer's description of a happy land, because it was vague as to location, created a problem for those who came later. On his authority it could be assumed that the Elysian Plain existed. Where was it? After capturing the ever-changing Proteus, Menelaus asked this herdsman of Neptune to foretell his destiny. Proteus replied that Menelaus was not ordained to die, that the gods would take him “to the Elysian plain and the world's end, where is Rhadamanthus of the fair hair, where life is easiest for men.” And then came a picture of Elysium: “No snow is there, nor yet great storm, nor any rain; but always ocean sendeth forth the breeze of the shrill West to blow cool on men. . . .”1 As a son of Zeus, and not because of particular human qualities, Menelaus would be translated to Elysium. Could mere mortals go, could they get there themselves, and just where was this world's end on which the west wind blew? Resting on this fair plain, one may recall the song of the west as sung by those who dreamed and sailed after the fortunate Menelaus, those who followed in his wake, in the salt spray of a distant sea.

Hesiod helped somewhat. When Zeus created the fourth race of men, “a god-like race of hero-men,” those who fought at Thebes and Troy, the god gave them “a living and an abode apart from men, and made them dwell at the ends of the earth. And they lived untouched by sorrow in the islands of the blessed along the shore of deep swirling Ocean. . . .” The land was still god-given and was still at the end of the earth, but it was now an island, on the shore of the ocean, probably to the west, where “the Hesperian nymphs . . . guard the beautiful golden apples.”2 This was an ocean, however, that made men quake; “when they looked out upon the empty and spectral Atlantic,”3 the otherworld seemed beyond man’s reach.

Increasingly now, this remote happy land was speculated about and used by the Greeks. They might use Elysium in a didactic fashion, as a land


whose perfection was the measure of the evils of their own society, or as a counterpoise to their conception of Hades,4 or simply as a genuine place without immediate relevance. Plato, for instance, described the glories of ancient Athens in her war against the kings of Atlantis, of a whole lost world west of the Pillars of Hercules, an island “larger than Libya [Africa] and Asia together” long since sunk beneath the seas, leaving only shallow water that made navigation in the western ocean impossible.5 Pindar, whose didacticism took the form of making the nature of this life a condition of entrance to Elysium, saw the westward Pillars “as far-famed witnesses of the furthest limit of voyaging.”6 The general belief, as in Euripides,7 was that this usually western land of flowers was reserved for descendants or favorites of the gods,8 where even blood guilt might be washed away.9 For those who would search for this land, Aristotle had cheering information: “the earth is spherical and ... its periphery is not large. ... For this reason those who imagine that the region around the Pillars of Heracles joins on to the regions of India, and that in this way the ocean is one, are not ... suggesting anything utterly incredible.” Only the sea, he said, “prevents the earth from being inhabited all round.”10

The west was thought to hide this land of happiness and also to be “the natural goal of man’s last journey.” Both happiness and death, in ancient thought, formed the dialectic of the west, which the Egyptian legend of Isis implied.11 The west was the region of death, whose personification was often headless, that is, lifeless, or who wore an ostrich feather on top of her head, or in place of a head. As a hieroglyph an ostrich feather signified both “west” and “justice,” and in time Isis became also the goddess of justice. Thus both death and justice lived in the west. As justice, Isis was present when Osiris judged the dead, and she, in fact, introduced “the dead to

Osiris and to their second life." Thus it turned out that Isis of the west (death) was the goddess of the second life, and the region of one death was the region of new life. And so it may be true that "sunrise inspired the first prayers," but "sunset was the other time when again the whole frame of man would tremble." The dawn was promise, and dusk a mystery. Perhaps the life of man was reflected in the sun's own travels, so that the west became the region of death. For those people who had a concept of a second life the west, as death, necessarily signified the life which comes from death.

The idea of the imperial west came from imperial Rome, and this was a west which presumably rested on fact. Poets could sing of this west too, but, unlike the west of Elysium, this west was proved by history, that is, by the historical myths of the poets of the imperial west. Moving Aeneas from Troy to Italy, "an antique land, well warded, possessed of a rich soil," Virgil set the direction for Rome and clearly expressed the imperial theme of the west.

The Islands of the Blest were thought to be westward from Rome, in a specific place, discoverable by unaided mortals. Horace emphasized not empire but the west of the hidden happy land:

See, see before us the distant glow
Through the thin dawn-mists of the West
Rich sunlit plains and hilltops gemmed with snow,
The Islands of the Blest!

By the first century B.C. the Elysian Plain of Homer had been located. Plutarch had Sertorius meet some sailors in Spain who had just returned from a voyage to two distant Atlantic islands.

These are called the Islands of the Blest; rain falls there seldom, and in moderate showers, but for the most part they have gentle breezes, bringing along with them soft dews, which render the soil not only rich for ploughing and planting, but so abundantly fruitful that it produces spontaneously an abundance of delicate fruits, sufficient to feed the inhabitants, who may here enjoy all things without trouble or labour... so that the firm belief prevails, even among the barbarians, that this is the seat of the blessed, and that these are the Elysian Fields celebrated by Homer.

The ocean goes only west from Troy, and the journey to Elysium for any Mediterranean voyager by now was westward. Rome knew of the globe,

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13 Firestone, *Coasts of Illusion*, 205, quoting Max Muller.
17 Patch, *Other World*, 20.
guessed about the existence of a westward continent, and speculated about circumnavigation. Seneca’s prophecy was unequivocal:

The times will arrive later on . . . in which the ocean will remove the impediments which now retard human affairs, and a new earth will be opened up to mankind, and the votaries of Tiphys will discover fresh worlds, and the present Thule will not be the Ultima Thule in future worlds.\(^{18}\)

Seventh- or eighth-century Ireland produced a pagan tale of lasting importance in the evolution of the idea of the west. There is a place in the west, sang the lady of the silver wood in her invitation to Bran to come to the Isle of Fair Women, whose land is

Without grief, without sorrow, without death,  
Without any sickness, without debility. . . .  
There will come happiness with health  
To the land against which laughter peals. . . .

Following her call, Bran was told, in one of the earliest imrama, of a place where

There are thrice fifty distant isles  
In the ocean to the west of us;  
Larger than Erin twice  
Is each of them, or thrice.

This timeless otherworld of sensual and sensuous delights could be reached only by mortals who were invited by the inhabitants. Manannan, the guardian of the islands, would not molest those whose invitation was in good order.\(^{19}\)

Among the contributions of Christianity to the Roman world was the popularization of the idea that Horace and others were wrong about the west. “And Jehovah God planted a garden eastward in Eden . . . .”\(^{20}\) The eastward Eden, as the westward Elysium, was characterized by abundance and ease, where the sweat of one’s brow was unnecessary for the sustenance of life: “Thou wast in Eden, the Garden of God; every precious stone was thy covering, the sardius, the topaz, and the diamond, the beryl, the onyx, and the jasper, the sapphire, the emerald, and the carbuncle, and gold.


\(^{19}\) Meyer and Nutt, *Bran*, I, 3–4, 6, 12, 142–43.

\(^{20}\) Genesis 2:8.
By the twelfth century the Christian idea of an eastward paradise had assumed rather definite form, even though St. Augustine had said that the westward course of empire had divine sanction, but that the concept of a terrestrial paradise was simply allegorical, and even though the pagan tale of Bran remained substantially unchanged in Christian Ireland. In the east also were the fearful people of Gog and Magog who had been barricaded by Alexander but who, just before judgment, would break out and eat all who stood in their way. In some way, by high mountains, impassable seas, or perhaps a wall of fire, Eden was cut off from the rest of the world.

Of the many ideas, tales, and myths concerning the location of the earthly paradise, the land of Bran and the imrama produced the most important. The traditions of the Celtic imrama were, in the tales of the voyages of St. Brendan, wrapped in properly Christian cloth. It is not now possible to piece together the original version of the voyage of St. Brendan, whose exploits were told in virtually every European tongue, and which became one of the most widespread tales of adventure in the western sea in Christendom, with a remarkably similar counterpart even in Japan.

A Celtic version of Brendan's motive in sailing was appropriately fantastic. A mysterious flower from the promised land appeared to the twelve apostles of Ireland, all of whom wanted to set out in search of that land. The lot fell to the aged Brendan of Birr, the oldest saint of Ireland. It was decided that Brendan the younger should go, whereupon he and 158 companions set out in one boat. Other versions told how St. Brendan wanted to find a place of peace, remote from the envy and jealousy of men, a place "over the wave-voice of the strong-maned sea, and over the storm of the green-sided waves and over the mouth of the marvelous, awful, bitter ocean. . . ." Wherever Brendan was when the dawn of Easter showed, some huge sea creature would surface so that the saint and his crew could worship on its back. Before he succeeded, according to the Irish version,

24 Patch, Other World, 148; George H. T. Kimble, Geography in the Middle Ages (London, 1938), 24-25, 185.
the saint had sought the promised land for seven years. An attempted amalgam of Christian spiritualism and the sensuality of the earlier imrama produced the *Tir Tairngire*, “the Land of Promise,” desired by Brendan.28

The persistent attempts to derive geography from scripture resulted in countless confusions,29 from which of course paganism had been free. But the halting progress of geographical knowledge toward the level of Aristotle, Eratosthenes, and Seneca eased the tension between the pagan west and the Biblical, and more precisely, Christian east. When, for example, Dante, who probably knew and made use of the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*,30 was amazed at seeing the sun shining on his left as Virgil led him up the island mountain of Eden, Virgil explained:

> Consider Zion: picture how it lies
> On earth directly opposite this mount,
> So that they share together one horizon
> In different hemispheres.31

From Jerusalem therefore the way to Eden became irrelevant, except in terms of convenience. If one considers the opposite side of the earth as east (and it is quite as sensible to think of it as west), still one may get there by moving west. On a round earth, place has more cosmic significance than direction, but direction and route remain the first problem for those in search of Eden. Thus toward the end of the thirteenth century an ill-fated Genoese expedition under the Vivaldi brothers was sent out to find the east by sailing west.32 The roundness of the earth was the knowledge by which Christendom began to revive the pagan idea of the west, though the east lingered as a place while the west, for the Catholic nations, became mere direction.

For some, the proof of the meaningfulness of the west lay not in theology or legend, but in what was supposed to be history. What Virgil did for Italy, Geoffrey of Monmouth tried to do for England in the twelfth century by elaborating the Virgilian imperial theme of the west, virtually ignoring the legendary and millennial wests, and applying it to England. Claiming to have discovered a lost British book that chronicled the history of the British kings, Geoffrey in fact drew from the history of the sixth-century

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29 For example, St. Augustine, *City of God*, XVI, 9; Kimble, *Geography in the Middle Ages*, 37, 163–64.
monk, Gildas, the *Nennius*, and Bede (eighth century), as well as the Roman historians, Welsh chroniclers, popular folk tales, and his own active imagination. Empire moves westward from Troy, and England, said Geoffrey, is west of Rome.

After Aeneas killed Turnus in Italy, according to Geoffrey, Aeneas became king of Italy and married Lavinia, daughter of Latinus. A grandson of Aeneas married a niece of Lavinia who soon became or already was pregnant. Wizards prophesied that the child would be a boy, would kill his parents, and after much travel, would be highly exalted. The mother, giving birth to Brutus, died. When the boy was fifteen, he killed his father in a hunting accident. Brutus' kinsfolk drove him from Italy. He sought refuge in Greece, where he joined the descendants of Helenus, son of Priam, who had been taken in bondage to Greece by Achilles' son. These seven thousand captive Trojans were thus of the same ancestry as Brutus himself, and because of his strength and wisdom he became their duke. In the war of liberation which he led, the Greek King was captured and by torture was compelled to supply the Trojans with 324 ships and provisions, as well as his daughter for the "scion of the house of Priam and Anchises."

Setting sail, Brutus discovered a deserted island on which was a temple of Diana. Asking the goddess where he was destined to dwell, repeating his question nine times, walking around the altar four times, Brutus fell asleep. Then Diana spoke:

Brute,—past the realms of Gaul, beneath the sunset
Lieth an Island, girt about by ocean,
Guarded by ocean—erst the haunt of giants,
Desert of late, and meet for this thy people.
Seek it! For there is thine abode for ever.
There by thy sons again shall Troy be builded;
There of thy blood shall Kings be born, hereafter
Sovran in every land the wide world over.34

Brutus returned to his ships and set "full sail for the West" in search of the site of New Troy, a search that took him past the Pillars of Hercules where he saw the coaxing sirens. After fighting in Aquitaine, Brutus, about 1100 B.C., finally landed at the island called Albion, which, in honor of him-

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34 Edmond Faral, *La légende arthurienne* (3 vols., Paris, 1929), II, 80, shows that the oracular verses are taken at least in part from Bks. I and VII of the *Aeneid*. 
self, he called Britain, and the city he built on the Thames he called New Troy.\textsuperscript{35}

The reputation of Geoffrey is the subject of much controversy, though most of the experts seem to agree that the "\textit{Historia Regum Britanniae} is one of the most influential books ever written, certainly one of the most influential in the middle ages."\textsuperscript{36} It is clear that his history was believed, and used by Henry VII and James I.\textsuperscript{37} The impact on literature of Geoffrey's stories of Kings Lear and Arthur is too vast to catalogue here.\textsuperscript{38} But by 1700 the reputation of Geoffrey began to suffer as the Enlightenment mood grew increasingly unhappy with "monkish fictions,"\textsuperscript{39} though the twentieth century seems to be kinder.\textsuperscript{40} Regardless, however, of Geoffrey's many trials, he contributed in a popular and powerful way to the idea that empire drifts to the west, "beneath the sunset," and that England, because of her westwardness, was destined for empire. As Brutus had traveled, so must empire; where Brutus stopped his journey, so must empire. John of Gaunt, with his dying breath, showed to what extent Shakespeare accepted Geoffrey's conception of England, the ancient seat of kings.\textsuperscript{41}

The excitement over Columbus' success inevitably led to a more intense and general interest in the west, but still, as everyone knows, the west for the admiral was a way to get to the east. The west as west, as place as well as direction, had not yet been rescued from antique ruins. It was still eclipsed by the glare of the Christian east. Slowly, however, the west was once more to become a place, to assume a glitter of its own, and in fact to be Christianized.

Now in the age of the discoveries, the earlier myths, ideas, and attitudes about the west were to play an important role in providing at least some of the explorers and early settlers with a framework useful in understanding, explaining, and justifying their activities. It is perhaps too much to say

\textsuperscript{38} See, e.g., Gordon, "Trojans," \textit{Essays and Studies}, 23.
\textsuperscript{39} Jones, Geoffrey, 376–78.
\textsuperscript{40} "I should like to see the Fables of the Britons restored to their place in the first chapter of our histories." Gordon, "Trojans," \textit{Essays and Studies}, 25.
\textsuperscript{41} Shakespeare, \textit{King Richard II}, II, 1.
that the myth of St. Brendan's voyage, for instance, "drove forth adventurers into the Western Sea, and was one of the contributory causes of the discovery of the New World,"\(^{42}\) but it was clear that the search for Eden, Antillia, Brasil, a new Canaan, El Dorado, the Amazons, Ophir, the Country of Cinnamon, the Enchanted City of the Caesars, the Sepulchres of Zenu, the Seven Cities of Cibola, Quivira, or simply a fountain of eternal youth was the purpose of some of the explorers and early settlers.\(^{43}\)

The special significance of the St. Brendan stories is illustrated by the fact that a number of the early cartographers located the saint's islands on the maps used by some of the explorers. Brendan thus moved easily from myth to ostensible fact, and the wonderful *Tir Tairngire* he had found, now, if the map makers were right, could be found again. On the Hereford map of about 1275, approximately where the Canaries belong, the saint's islands made their debut as "Fortunate Insulae sex sunt Insulae Sct Brandani." In 1339 Angelinus Dulcert located Brendan's islands in the Madeiras, as did the Pizigani brothers in 1367, and Battista Beccario in 1426 and 1435. Others in the fifteenth century located the islands elsewhere, though on the controversial map which Paolo Toscanelli may have made for Columbus they are resting in their accustomed place southwest of the Canaries. By the sixteenth century the islands had floated up to the North Atlantic, so that by 1608 they were between Ireland and America.\(^{44}\) For at least four hundred years, then, Brendan's *Tir Tairngire* was discussed in literature and located on some of the best maps of the period. So powerfully did Brendan assert himself that in the Treaty of Evora (1519), for example, Emmanuel of Portugal specifically relinquished his claim to the saint's islands. At different times expeditions were sent in search of them; always, however, when the sailors got close, a storm or a mist would cloud their view. Search parties were set afloat in 1526, 1570, 1604, 1633, and in 1721 when "two holy friars as apostolical chaplains" were sent along as special assistants.\(^{45}\)

Columbus' son believed that among his father's motives in sailing was

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Brendan's voyage and some other myths associated with the discovery of America have been popularized in *Life*, XLVII (Aug. 31, 1959), 55-67.


\(^{45}\) Dunn, "Brendan Problem," 462-64.
the desire to search for these perverse islands "of which so many marvels are told."48 Later, on his first voyage, the admiral himself referred to a western isle which, according to information he had, was "Antillia y San Borondon."47 Some must have believed that Columbus was motivated "to seek out the Antipodes, and the rich Cipango of Marco Polo, because he had read in Plato's *Timaeus* an argument respecting the great island of Atlantis, and of a hidden land larger than Asia and Africa," since an Italian traveler to the New World repeated the story, though he declared it to be "fabulous."48 The admiral did cite the authority of Aristotle, Pliny, and Seneca for some of his notions of geography,49 and his son thought such authority "did more than all else to convince the Admiral that his idea was sound."50 That Columbus was in search of the garden planted eastward in Eden is well known. He had learned from one of his masters, Pierre d'Ailly, of Taprobane, an island which "lies in the east where the Indian Ocean begins," and which "is full of pearls and precious stones." The people, wrote D'Ailly, "are powerful in body beyond all measurements; with red hair, blue eyes and harsh voices. . . . With them life is prolonged beyond human infirmity, so that one who dies a centenarian comes to his end immaturely." To get to this eastern isle, according to D'Ailly, was not impossible since, agreeing with Aristotle and Seneca, "the water [of the ocean] runs down from one pole toward the other into the body of the sea and spreads out between the confines of Spain and the beginning of India, of no great width. . . ."51 Columbus agreed that the garden in the east must be approached from the west.52

Because of their relevance, some of the details of the admiral's own thought are worth repeating. On a calm summer day of 1498 he recorded in his journal a conclusion made up of his notions of geography and his belief in the reality of the garden. He had become convinced that he had just found, not an island, but a continent, on which Eden was located "because all men say that it's at the end of the Orient, and that's where we are." What he

50 *Life of the Admiral*, 17–19.
believed about the geography of Eden seemed to coincide with his observations of the land, including the alleged discovery of the river that became four. The admiral, however, was not one to rely only on observation. Because of his puzzlement over the fact that elevations of Polaris varied on the same latitude, he concluded that the earth "is not round . . . but [is] of the form of a pear, which is very round except where the stalk grows . . .; or like a round ball, upon one part of which is a prominence like a woman's nipple, this protrusion being the highest and nearest the sky." On the nipple of this breast, the point of earth closest to heaven, would be found the desired garden, "where," he said, "I believe in my soul that the earthly paradise is situated. . . ." Unfortunately we do not know how the sovereigns reacted to this contribution to knowledge. Others like Gerónimo de Mendrieta, Bartolomé de Las Casas, and Amerigo Vespucci while more skeptical than Columbus, agreed that somewhere on the shores of the Caribbean the seat of the terrestrial paradise would be found.53

For those like Columbus,54 to whom the east was a place while the west was mere direction, the New World could not assume independent importance. For this mentality, long active, the New World was an obstacle to westward progress toward the east. The search for a southwest or north-west passage occupied men's attention for over four hundred years. One of the earliest was Hernán Cortés who, in his third letter to Charles V, had made more precise the lure of the eastern ocean that lay to the west: "Most of all do I exult in the tidings lately brought me of the Great Ocean; for in it . . . are scattered innumerable isles teeming with gold and pearls, abounding in precious stones, as well as in spices, and where . . . many wonderful secrets and admirable things may be discovered."55 As more exact knowledge of the Atlantic was gathered, that ocean was demythologized by the Catholic nations, while the South Sea, or Pacific, was invested with all the romance earlier lavished on the Atlantic. While the Atlantic


54 Cf. Vignaud, Columbian Tradition, 47: " . . . the object of the enterprise was not to reach the East by way of the West, but to carry out the contract made with their Catholic Majesties for the discovery of an island the existence of which Columbus declared that he knew, an island which is not named, but which in all likelihood was Antilla."

continued to excite some, others who turned west to face east sought that elusive passage that would bring the wealth of Cipango and the ease of Eden within the reach of sail.

In his conception of Eden, Columbus also referred to a fountain that was the source of the four principal rivers of the world. Nowhere in the Bible is this fountain mentioned, and again Columbus was showing that the distinctions between theology, legend, and fact were blurred in his mind. But he was a creature of time, and his conceptions, with the possible exception of the cosmic breast, were common property of men of some education. This fountain of paradise belonged, along with Brendan's islands, to a literary tradition, one whose impact was even greater on Juan Ponce de León.

The fountain of youth seems to have first appeared in the forged twelfth-century *Letter of Prester John*, in which a lush land, richer, more Christian, and more powerful than all of Europe was described, along with the magical water which, in one version, was said to be "full of the grace of the holy goost and who so we in this same water washed his body he shall become yonge of.xxx.yere." The fountain, according to other editions of the *Letter*, was to be found on an island, at the eastern edge of the world. As the cartographers began to dot the Atlantic with many islands heavy with Edenic association, it was an easy step for one engaged in the real business of exploration to assume that on one of these islands the magic fountain might be found, and the farther west (east) the better. Thus Ponce's party searched for the fountain on Bimini Isle in an archipelago supposedly at the easternmost rim of Asia. Columbus had said nothing of the rejuvenating qualities of his fountain, but in 1514 Peter Martyr, the first historian of the New World and a messenger of the Renaissance from Italy to Spain, wrote that to the west "is an island . . . [which] is celebrated for a spring whose waters restore youth to old men." Martyr himself rejected the story because it violated his theology, but reported that the story of Ponce's exploits had made "such an impression that the entire populace, and even people superior by birth and influence, accepted it as a proven fact." In the patent of 1514,
Ponce was authorized to colonize the tantalizing Bimini, whose name was to continue to awaken "Dreams of youth, with youth that perished." A

The imagination of the age was ablaze with the marvels to be found to the west. Columbus and Ponce were not unique. Virtually nothing was too much to imagine in the place where God had planted His garden. There was agreement not only about the reality of the garden, but its general equatorial location. A man of God who had accompanied Sir Francis Drake described their voyage into the area:

being now entered into torrida Zona that is the burning Zone we found the vaine guesses & imagined conjectures to be vntrue & false concerning the same & the surmised opinion of the antient & great philosophers to be contrary to appear-ance & experience. & indeed to Reason: for wheras Aristotill Pithagoras Thales & many others both Greekes and Latins haue taught that Torrida Zona was not habitable . . . we proved the same to bee altogether false & the same Zone to be the Earthly paradise in the world both at sea & lande yea the increase of things & the Excellency of all Gods creatures in that Zone is 7 degrees above all other parts in the Earth. . . .

Contact with the Indians of South America probably introduced the exploring white men to at least some of the myths of the various tribes. Some of these myths may have helped to reinforce the idea of the west in the minds of the Europeans, as the Indians repeatedly told the white men that what they were looking for could be found further west. One of these tribes, the Guarayú, migrated from Paraguay in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to raid the Inca Empire, settling finally in the vicinity of the cordillera, where they were encountered by Jesuits in the sixteenth century and by Spaniards exploring Bolivia in the seventeenth. The eschatology of this tribe is a good example of the west of eternity:

Soon after burial, the soul starts a long dangerous journey to the land of Tamoi, which is located in the west. The soul is ferried across a river on the back of a caiman, jumps on a tree trunk . . . , passes by the Grandfather of the worms. . . . Before reaching the abode of Tamoi, the soul must endure the ordeal of being tickled by a monkey without laughing, must walk past a magic tree without heeding the voices issuing from it, and must look at colored grasses without being blinded by them. After all of these ordeals, the soul is received by Tamoi, who washes it and restores its youth and good looks.

Another tribe living in the same general area was the Yuracare, who did not make contact with the invading Europeans until the seventeenth century, but


whose creation and judgment myth suggested again that eternity was to be found in the west:

Tiri [the son of the first parents of the world, and creator of most of the world] decided to retire [after his creations] to the end of the world. In order to know its extent, he sent a bird to the four directions of the horizon. On the fourth trip, from the west, the bird returned with beautiful new plumage. Tiri went to the west, where he lives with his people who, upon reaching old age, rejuvenate.62

Because most of the Elizabethans thought of the west imperially, as a place as well as a direction, they could dismiss much of the fabulous which was accepted by those in search of Eden. But the Elizabethans made their own contribution to the idea of the west. As early as about 1519, an English versifier of the imperial west, and brother-in-law of Thomas More, found it intolerable that England had missed the chance at the wealth of the southern New World. And it was the fault of Englishmen without vision, without a grasp of the imperial west, the fault of Englishmen

Which wold take no paine to saile farther
Than their owne lyst and pleasure.

Because the early explorers had put person above nation, England, in the age before her navy and her God had defeated the Armada, could only dream of what might have been:

O what thynge a had be than
Yf that they that be englyshe men
Myght haue ben the first of all
That there shuld heue take possesyon
And made first buyldeynge and habytacion
A memory perpetuall
And also what an honorable thynge
Both to the realme and to the kyng
To haue had his domynyon extendyng
There into so farre a grounde.63


Regret was to become exultation when it was realized that it was not yet too late even though Pope Alexander VI had already divided the undiscovered world between Spain and Portugal, that even the Englishman could sail for his king.

The sea itself, as Columbus had earlier suggested, presumably moved from "east to west continually." One result of Sir Martin Frobisher's voyages was the conclusion that "... water being an inferior element, must needs be governed after the superior Heaven, and so to follow the course of Primum mobile from east to west." For Henry Hudson, still seeking the east by way of the west, in search of the Northwest Passage, the west wind was, he wrote in 1607, "the meane of our deliverance," an uncommon wind sent specially by God. The conspiracy of sea and wind led this generation westward, whether for the greater glory of England, or the pay of Holland, whether to explore or settle this new land, or to find a waterway through the New World.

Of Elizabethan thought none perhaps is as illustrative as Sir Walter Raleigh's, whose wife rightly feared her husband's destiny in the west and secretly asked a friend to "rather draw Sir Walter towards the East, than help him forward toward the sunset..." In his History of the World, Raleigh denied Geoffrey's tale of the Trojan origin of Britain, though he knew that "the British language hath remained among us above 2000 years..." Rejecting Geoffrey's Brutus, he retained Geoffrey's idea of imperial England. He could not treat the "mighty, rich, and beautiful empire of Guiana, and... that great and golden city which the Spaniards call El Dorado," with exactly equal skepticism, but even here his eye for the practical rather than the romantic seldom failed. "Guiana is a country that hath yet her maidenhead, never sacked, turned, nor wrought..." Thus, for Raleigh, the lands to the west were divested of magic and invested with the main chance. Here were undreamed of riches, unlimited fertility, and the mine which imperial England should exploit in the interest of both her glory and her power. The preacher-geographer, Richard Hakluyt, who influenced and was influenced

64 "I hold it for certain, that the waters of the sea move from east to west with the sky..." Select Letters of Columbus, 138.
65 George Best, The Three Voyages of Martin Frobisher (London, 1867), 244. It was on the voyage of 1578 that the Busse of Bridgewater reported the discovery of perhaps the last of the fabulous islands of the Atlantic. Named in honor of the ship which "sayled three dayes amongst the coast," Busse Island was vainly sought by others, including, for example, Henry Hudson in 1609, who "could not find it." Ibid., 280; Henry Hudson the Navigator, ed. G. M. Asher (London, 1860), 49.
69 Id.: The Discovery of Guiana (New York, 1910), 313, 391.
by Raleigh, similarly took the business approach to exploration, hardly troubling himself with the romance of the west. He was concerned with the use of the material abundance of the west for the strengthening of England, with the state of the economy at home, and with the fact that Spain had power and riches he thought England should have.70

Unable to divorce theology and religion from ideas about exploration, the Catholic nations could make little use of the essentially secular west of empire. But the west for these Elizabethans was primarily a device utilized to maintain and strengthen the view of England held by Geoffrey and Shakespeare. In demythologizing the west they hoped to remythologize England as the most recent and—hopefully—final repository of empire. The lands to the west of the civilized west should be squeezed dry of the juices healthful to “this earth of majesty.” Because civilization is anterior to empire, the primitive west, so long as it remained primitive, was no threat to the Renaissance mythology of England. Occupying the westernmost reaches of civilization, England could wear the cloak of Troy with grace; to the west of the European west could be found the raw stuff necessary to reinforce and beautify that cloak.71

Another of these Englishmen was the vicarious traveler and the intellectual heir of Hakluyt, Parson Samuel Purchas, whose work was devoured by James I and lingered on to inspire later English poets.72 Because of his commitment to Geoffrey’s notion that empire had moved to England, where it would stay, Purchas rejected the other ideas of the west, the wests of happiness and eternity. He rejected Plato’s Atlantis, Plutarch’s report of voyages, and asserted that the Roman Island of the Blest was simply one of the Canaries or some other quite normal island. Purchas dismissed Columbus’ notion that he had been close to the Ophir of King Solomon, though Purchas was convinced of the existence of Ophir in India (where it had been located by some cartographers73). Purchas, however, began to suggest what was eventually to become the English contribution to the idea of the west. Medieval romances and legendary islands made little impression on his thinking,

71 Wallace, Raleigh, 36–37, 58, 109–10, 119, 298; Ernest A. Strathmann, Sir Walter Raleigh (New York, 1951), 251–52; Richard Hakluyt, Divers Voyages Touching the Discovery of America, ed. J. W. Jones (London, 1850), xvi; E. G. R. Taylor, Late Tudor and Early Stuart Geography (London, 1934), 4; Rowe, Elisabethans and America, 16, 31–32, 191; cf. Best, Three Voyages of Frobisher, 5–7; Robert G. Cleland, “Westward the Course of Empire,” Huntington Library Quarterly, VII (Aug. 1944), 4–6, suggests that the westward urge was peculiarly Anglo-Saxon, and that their westward expansion began with the fifth-century invasion, and “the conquest of North America by English-speaking peoples is merely the Anglo-Saxon occupation of Britain transferred to another and much vaster theater.”
72 Taylor, Late Tudor and Early Stuart Geography, 56.
73 Wright, Geographical Lore, 275; Hennig, Wo lag das Paradies? 69–71.
but theology grew in stature. "I speak," he said, "not in Poetical fiction, or Hyperbolicall phrase, but Christian sincerity." For the sake of Christendom, God had withheld the knowledge necessary to navigation from "the Persian, the Mogoll, the Abassine, the Chinois, the Tartarian, the Turke." Probably remembering Malachi 4:2, he concluded that "thus hath God given opportunitie by Navigation into all parts, that in the Sun-set and Evening of the World, the Sunne of righteousnesse might arise out of our West to Illuminate the East. . . ." While this sun rose in the west, the world would be at its evening and the kingdom of the apocalypse would be near. Turning from the concept of a lost golden age or Eden, Purchas looked forward to the time when the city of God would exist on earth, the earth of the western New World. The millennium would see Christ walking from the west.

It remained for Edward Hayes, Sir Humphrey Gilbert's rear admiral, to complete the Anglicization of the idea of the west. Arguing that England had a good claim to America, north of Florida, by virtue of John Cabot's discoveries, Hayes adduced also God's consent to English ambitions. Christianization of the heathen was noble work, and the French and Spanish agreed. France and Spain, however, would ensnarl the witless Indian in the net of Rome, so that only England could truly serve God's purpose. It would be folly for the Catholic nations to attempt to impede the progress of England, for her victory was as inevitable as the fact that true religion moved from east to west:

God's word and religion . . . from the beginning hath moved from the east towards, and at last unto, the west, where it is like to end, unless the same begin again where it did in the east, which were to expect a like world again. But we are assured of the contrary by the prophecy of Christ, whereby we gather that after His word preached throughout the world shall be the end.75

There could not be a new beginning for, agreeing with Purchas, Hayes's thinking moved forward to the apocalypse, not backward to Eden. In his eschatology, the creation of English America was the final step necessary to the millennium.76 When the word of Christ had been heard everywhere, the day of doom would follow. After America, judgment.

75 Edward Hayes, Sir Humphrey Gilbert's Voyage to Newfoundland (New York, 1910), 274-75.
With the settlers in English America several strands of the idea of the west were pulled together. Some still searched for Eden or Ophir; more thought with Raleigh and Hakluyt that the west meant economic opportunity for themselves and for England. But the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay occupied what they believed was God's country, that western land where, they said, His word would be obeyed. In no other nation on earth did God walk. These Puritans were merely following the Lord's instructions when they sailed, not merely westward, but to the west, from England:

It is true, that from the first planting of Religion among men, it hath always held a constant way from East to West, and hath, in that Line, proceeded so farre, that it hath extended to the uttermost Western bounds of the formerly knowne world. . . . And they conceive withall, that our Saviours Prophecie, Matth. 24-27. points out such a progress of the Gospell. It is true, that the comparison there used taken from the Lightning, aymes at the sudden dispersing of the knowledge of Christ by the Apostles ministry: but whereas wee know, the Lightning shines from divers parts of the heaven, shewing it selfe indifferently, sometimes in the West, sometimes in the North, or South; why doth our Saviour . . . choose to name the Lightning that shines out of the East into the West, unlesse it be to expresse not only the sudden shining out of the Gospell; but withall the way, and passage, by which it procedes from one end of the world to the other, that is, from East to West?77

It was not merely the true Word that must move westward. Of all the world's nations, wrote Samuel Sewall in 1713, America was best suited for the "Government of Christ" precisely because it was "the Beginning of the East, and the End of the West," for which reason, he supposed, Columbus had pronounced the continent "Alpha and Omega." It was the last new world because it was at the western extremity, and "if the Last ADAM did give Order for the engraving of his own Name upon this last Earth: 'twill draw with it great Consequences; even such as will, in time, bring the poor Americans out of their Graves, and make them live." Because of its western and therefore holy location the new nation was destined, by the inevitable course of affairs, for a future bathed in divine glory: "May it not with more, or equal strength be argued, New-Jerusalem is not the same with Jerusalem: but as Jerusalem was to the westward of Babylon; so New-Jerusalem must be to the westward of Rome; to avoid disturbance in the Order of these Mysteries."78 The city of God had had many capitals, and as each failed, the new emerged to the west. Now, at the last western point, the new capital was

78 Samuel Sewall, Phaenomena quaedam Apocalyptica ad Aspectum Novi Orbis Configurata (Boston, 1713), 2-3, 31.
established and because there was no west left, it was man's last chance. Mankind's prayer for salvation thus depended upon the success of the most western and most holy commonwealth. 79

It was the most inclusive mind of colonial America whose conception of the cosmic significance of the New World was partly determined by the idea that God faced west. Jonathan Edwards, synthesizing the earlier ideas of Purchas, Hayes, and John White, wrote that:

when the Sun of Righteousness, the Sun of the new heavens and new earth, comes to rise . . . , the sun shall rise in the west, contrary to the course of this world, or the course of things in the old heavens and earth. . . . The Sun of Righteousness has long been going down from east to west; and probably when the time comes of the church's deliverance from her enemies . . . the light will rise in the west, until it shines through the world like the sun in its meridian brightness. 80

Rising out of New England the real sun and the sun of righteousness would light and warm the saints throughout the world. Through the past, nature had been preparing for this great reversal, which would signify the greater reversal in man's depraved nature. It can be suggested that the usual course of the sun was itself an aberration, marking man's own fall from grace. Both nature and human nature would be corrected when God led men far enough to the west.

Thus, as the west once more became a place, as it had been for Horace and Bran, and a direction, as it had been for Virgil and Columbus, America, in the minds of the Puritans, became the best and last refuge for Christ. Standing on what was thought of as the westernmost part of the round earth, it was inevitable, according to this Puritan mentality, that it should be so. All that was necessary now was to revive the still older idea of the course of empire, couple it with the course of Christ, and America would have her ideology of might and right. As seventeenth-century Americans had Christianized the idea of the west by relating it to the kingdom of God, eighteenth-century Americans secularized it by recalling the west of empire.

The imperial idea of the west became one basis of the hope that America would one day be great in power. Before the middle of the eighteenth century, Bishop George Berkeley, employing the same kind of argument that Virgil and Geoffrey had used, applied the imperial west to America:

Westward the course of empire takes its way;
The four first Acts already past,

79 Samuel Stillman, An Oration Delivered July 4th, 1789 (Boston, 1789), 29.
Joel Barlow, the poet of republican virtue, who also identified the apocalypse and America, agreed by writing:

Earth's blood-stain'd empires, with their Guide the Sun
From Orient climes their gradual progress run;
And circling far, reach every western shore,
'Til earth-born empires rise and fall no more.

Just past mid-century, Nathaniel Ames, of almanac fame, took a less political view: "the Progress of Humane Literature (like the Sun) is from the East to the West; thus has it travelled thro' Asia and Europe, and now is arrived at the Eastern Shore of America . . .," and Benjamin Franklin agreed. By 1775, John Witherspoon, preaching at Princeton, could combine every one of these ideas when he articulated what was to become the usual American formula—"some have observed that true religion, and in her train, dominion, riches, literature, and art, have taken their course in a slow and gradual manner, from East to West, since the earth was settled after the flood: and from thence forebode the future glory of America." The secular and sacred ideas of the west were thus brought back together, where they stayed throughout the nineteenth century in the United States, appearing in most marked fashion in the concept of manifest destiny. Remembering Seneca's prophecy, Edward Everett said that with the United States it had finally come true.

81 George Berkeley, Works, ed. A. C. Fraser (3 vols., Oxford, Eng., 1871), III, 232. One curious use of Geoffroy's tale of Brutus was made by the incorrigible Thomas Morton of Merrymount in 1629; he argued "that the original of the Natives of New England may be well conjectured to be from the scattered Trojans, after such time as Brutus departed from Latium." Because these Indians were Trojans it was necessary for Morton to explain the color of their skin: "Their infants are borne with . . . complexion white as our nation, but their mothers in their infancy make a bath of Wallnut leaves and such things as will stain their skinfor ever, wherein they dip and wash them to make them tawny. . . ." Thomas Morton, New English Canaan (n.p., 1632), 16-18, 24, 39-40; cf. Sidney Lee, "The Call of the West," Scribner's Magazine, XLII (Sept. 1907), 313.


85 "There are no more continents to be reached; Atlantis hath arisen from the ocean . . .; there are no more retreats beyond the sea, no more discoveries, no more hopes." Edward Everett, Orations and Speeches on Various Occasions (7th ed., 3 vols., Boston, 1865), I, 42.
The Idea of the West

Appropriately enough, it was Henry David Thoreau who personified the American mythology of the west. The west meant freedom: "Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free." It was the way of the race: "I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe. And that way the nation is moving, and I may say that mankind progresses from east to west." To the east lay history, while westward was the apocalypse, the future, and "adventure." That he involuntarily consented "in his pettiest walk with the general movement of the race," indicated to him that the west excited deep in his consciousness an irresistible urge: "Every sunset which I witness inspires me with the desire to go to a West as distant and as fair as that into which the sun goes down." Feeling this he could understand "the foundation of all those fables" of the west from the report of Atlantis to his own day. But, as an American, his song of the west was tied to the nation; only in America did the west exist, else "why was America discovered?" Clearly, to give men their chance, the last the race would have, to be born again, and to give the nation its chance too. "To Americans," he said, "I hardly need to say,—'Westward the star of empire takes its way.'"86 In his own person, Thoreau, as American,87 combined the west of happiness and eternity, the west of millennium, and that of empire, the west of direction, and the west of place. He could not do more.

As the continent began to fill up, the American West, like Brendan's islands, seemed to disappear as one got closer. From Thomas Jefferson through Frederick Jackson Turner, the American West faded from the Atlantic shore. An American artist saw the problem: "Few people even know the true definition of the term 'West'; and where is its location?—phantom-like it flies before us as we travel...."88 But before the hopeful west flew from America, it had meant salvation for the nation and identity for those who partook of its magic.

For so long then did men turn westward with their cravings and aspirations. And beyond the golden gate of the western world the east began, so that the New World, and finally the United States, was thought of by some as the last refuge for man and God, that western world where woe and wail would be no more. A later poet, himself in this tradition, believed that America had been

88 George Catlin, Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians (Philadelphia, 1859), 110.
Foreseen in the vision of sages,
Foretold when martyrs bled,
She was born of the longing of ages. . . .

The list of sages was long, stretching at least from Horace to Horace Greeley. In this way men made of Columbia the last of the many gems of the ocean, an apocalyptical land where men could hope to plant their seed and live happily ever after.