

# Learn

## Setting Forth

The drive to explore, to set out on journeys to distant lands and across horizon-less oceans, may be inseparable from human nature itself, says Stewart Weaver, professor of history. Whether crossing a land bridge over the Bering Strait 12,000 years ago, diving to the depths of the seas, or launching probes to the edge of the solar system, humans seem to have a compulsion to discover what's "out there."

"For all the different forms it takes in different historical periods, for all the worthy and unworthy motives that lie behind it, exploration—travel for the sake of discovery and adventure—is, it seems, a human compulsion, a human obsession even (as the paleontologist Maeve Leakey says); it is a defining element of a distinctly human identity, and it will never rest at any frontier, whether terrestrial or extraterrestrial," says Weaver, the author of a new book, *Exploration: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

In the short primer on human exploration, Weaver offers brief accounts and assessments of explorers well- and little-known and places them in the context of natural history.

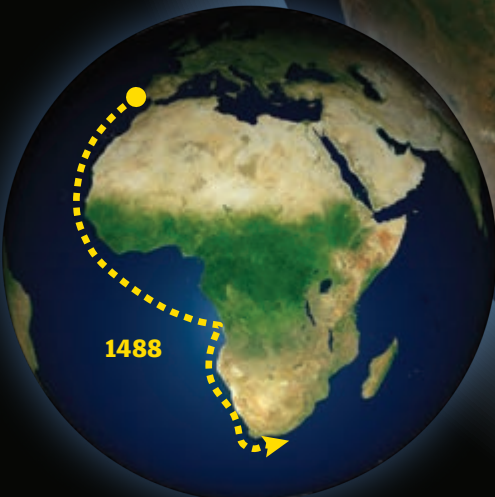
"A true explorer," he writes, "is a traveler who seeks a discovery."

Here's a quick tour of those travels.

—Monique Patenaude

### Bartolomeu Dias 1488

The Portuguese commander was the first European to round the Cape of Good Hope. Dias was trying to find an ocean passage to India when he rounded the southern tip of Africa without realizing it.



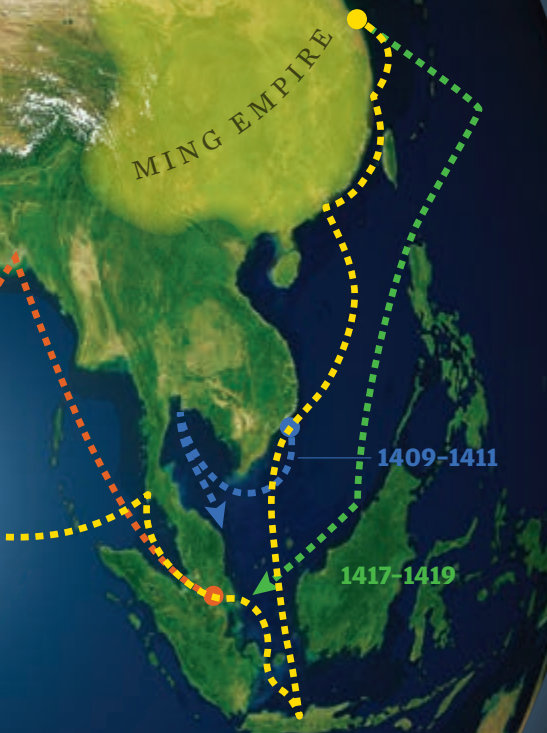
### Pytheas of Massalia 315 BCE

The Greek geographer was the first-known reporter of the arctic and the midnight sun. Conservative estimates credit him with about 7,500 miles of ocean travel, taking him from the Bay of Biscay to circumnavigate the British Isles.



**Zheng He 1405–1433**

The “Grand Eunuch” and court favorite of the Yongle Emperor of China led seven expeditions through the Indian Ocean. The first voyage included 62 ocean-going junks—each one perhaps 10 times the size of anything then afloat in Europe—along with 225 smaller support vessels and 27,780 men. With Zheng He’s death at sea in 1433, the fleet was broken up, travel forbidden, and his name expunged. In 1420, Chinese sailors had no equal in the world. Eighty years later, scarcely a deep-sea-worthy ship remained in China.

**Christopher Columbus 1492**

Columbus was searching for a westward route to China when northeast trade winds swept his flotilla across the Atlantic in just 33 days. The routes he pioneered and the voyages he publicized altered European conceptions of geography and led almost immediately to European colonial occupation of the Americas, permanently joining together formerly distinct people, cultures, and ecosystems.

## A Legacy That’s Not Quite Quixotic

What should we know about Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*—called by many the first modern novel? Ryan Prendergast, associate professor of Spanish, and his students have a few ideas. He’s the author of *Reading, Writing, and Errant Subjects in Inquisitorial Spain* (Ashgate, 2011) and teaches the course *Don Quixote: The Book, the Myth, the Image*. This year marks the 400th anniversary of the publication of *Don Quixote*’s second volume.

**It’s about more than windmills.**

While the idea of “tilting at windmills” comes from *Don Quixote*, Prendergast points out that the memorable account of the character battling windmills in the belief that they’re giants is just one episode early in the massive work. And while windmills have become for most the icon of the novel, they don’t capture its thematic and stylistic complexity.

**It was published in two parts, 10 years apart—in 1605 and 1615.**

In the intervening decade, someone using the pen name Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda published a “false” sequel to *Don Quixote*. Cervantes responds to the sequel in Part II and addresses critiques people made about Part I, even incorporating characters who have read the first volume. And while Part I has a good deal of slapstick humor, Part II is more introspective, emotional, and psychologically dark, Prendergast says.

**It’s narratively complex.**

Prendergast contends that *Don Quixote* is above all a book about the acts of reading



and writing, examining what storytelling is all about. Cervantes even incorporates into Part II a character from the spurious sequel, and makes him swear that the *Don Quixote* of Cervantes’s Parts I and II is the “real” *Don Quixote*. The novel “speaks to the writing process and what narrative allows you to do,” Prendergast says.

**It’s more than a funny book, treating important social and political issues, too.**

While many love the novel for its humorous adventure stories, *Don Quixote* also takes on such weighty subjects as relations between Catholics and Muslims in 17th-century Spain and Inquisitorial practices.

**Sancho Panza is not just a sidekick: comic at times, he’s also the source of profound insights.**

Typically treated as *Don Quixote*’s physical and psychological foil, Sancho is revealed at certain points to be a wiser character.

**In 2002, it was voted the best work of fiction of all time.**

One hundred authors—including Seamus Heaney, Nadine Gordimer, Carlos Fuentes, Doris Lessing, and Norman Mailer—from 54 countries chose *Don Quixote* as the top choice among the “best and most central books in world literature” in a survey organized by the Norwegian Nobel Institute and Norwegian Book Clubs. It earned 50 percent more votes from the writers than any other book.

—Kathleen McGarvey



**CLASSIC VIEWS:** The illustrations of Cervantes (right) and Quixote (left) are from the first deluxe edition of the novel, published in London by Jacob Tonson in 1738. It is the earliest copy of *Don Quixote* owned by the University and features 69 copperplate engravings.