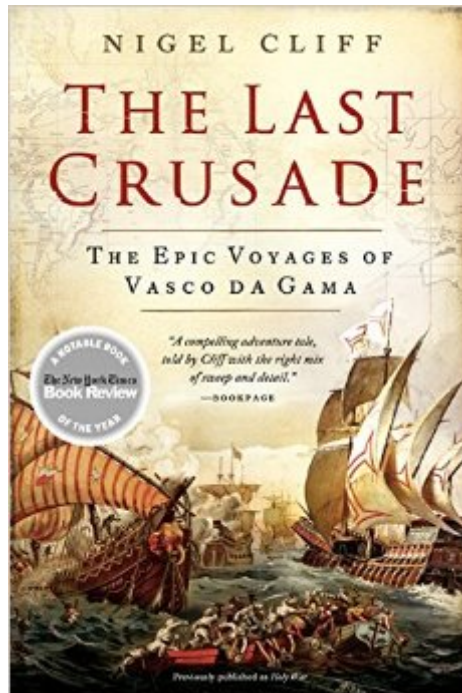


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# The Last Crusade: The Epic Voyages Of Vasco Da Gama



## Synopsis

Historian Nigel Cliff delivers a sweeping, radical reinterpretation of Vasco da Gama's pioneering voyages, revealing their significance as a decisive turning point in the struggle between Christianity and Islam—a series of events which forever altered the relationship between East and West. Perfect for readers of *Endurance: Shackleton's Incredible Voyage*, *Galileo's Daughter*, and *Atlantic*, this first-ever complete account of da Gama's voyages includes new information from the recently discovered diaries of his sailors and an extraordinary series of letters between da Gama and the Zamorin, a king of modern-day Kerala, India. Cliff, the author of *The Shakespeare Riots*, draws upon his own travels in da Gama's footsteps to add detail, authenticity, and a contemporary perspective to this riveting, one-of-a-kind historical epic.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is a biography of Vasco de Gama and when it comes to his particular explorations and actions is quite interesting and accurate. The book is well written and hard to put down once you have started it. However the author makes several assumptions that strengthen his argument but are inconsistent with the realities of what occurred. 1. He claims that there was little value in the trade with Africa. This is untrue the trade goods coming from Africa were quite valuable and led to great profits for the merchants in this trade. One of the reasons for attacking Ceuta was to take over these African trade routes, later the assault on Tangiers was done for the same reasons, after the Portuguese capture of Ceuta the African trade routes had moved their endpoint to Tangiers. When the Muslim traders simply shifted to another endpoint on the other side of North Africa (Tunis) the

Portuguese responded by accelerating their exploration of Africa.<sup>2</sup> He claims that Vasco de Gama was the first to head straight into the Central Atlantic, out of sight of land, and then turn south-east and come back at the bottom of Africa. The Portuguese had been doing this for years before Vasco de Gama's first expedition. In fact because of the way the currents work in order to swing around the West African coast into the Gulf of Guinea with a caravel you must first go straight out to sea, out of sight of land, and swing south east into the Gulf of Guinea.<sup>3</sup> He claims that all Portuguese exploration was done at the behest of the crown. This is untrue. There were several years after the deaths of the Illustrious Generation (the 3 sons of John 1st of Portugal, including Henry the Navigator), the last of which died in 1460, there was no royal support for exploration until John 2nd of Portugal, who didn't ascend to the throne until 1481. This left 20 years when all exploration was funded and carried out by individuals. Usually Portuguese explorers working for Italian and Portuguese merchants backed by Italian banks. It is unlikely that merchants and bankers would have been supporting the exploration of Africa, without royal support, unless they were making large profits.<sup>4</sup> The author claims that Europe had few if any products that were in demand in India and where therefore forced to take what they wanted by force. This is untrue, by the time of Vasco de Gama's expedition to India the Italian city states were producing high quality products, including both wool and silk textiles, which were being exported to the Muslim world. It is possible that Vasco de Gama was not carrying these high quality products, but they did exist in Europe and were already being exported to the Orient through the same trade routes that were bringing spices to Europe. Certainly religion and prestige were one reason behind the Portuguese exploration and may have been the driving force behind Vasco de Gama's, but this book attempts to minimize the effect of trade in Exploration, and in doing so it makes several incorrect assertions. A good biography of an extraordinary man, but could have been much better if the author had simply explained what happened and didn't try to argue a particular point.

Medieval Europe considered Lisbon in Portugal to be the end of the world. Vasco Da Gama's discovery in 1498 of a direct sea route from Portugal to South India and his epic voyages from Lisbon to Calicut in Kerala, India marked a turning point not only in global commerce but also signaled the start of European colonialism which would convulse the world for the next many centuries. These facts are well known. However Nigel Cliff in this book clearly explains how christian religious fundamentalism also played a major role in motivating this small country of around 1 million people to undertake this fantastic endeavor in the face of high odds, as the final crusade of their centuries old war against Islam. Now it is hard to imagine that it took the English and the Dutch

another 200 years to overcome the lead the Portugal established in commerce with the East through this sea route. Vasco Da Gama is a well known figure in Kerala as well as the rest of India. Growing up in Kerala, the impression I had of Gama was that of a brave but cruel explorer out for adventure, glory and financial gain. A few books and a couple of movies on him that are available in India do not portray anything different. The local christians in Kerala maintain that the Portuguese were 'surprised' to see Christians in India and since the Kerala Christians were following the Persian (Syrian) rituals, the Portuguese fought them and burnt their churches (this did happen, but that was over a 100 years later). But Nigel Cliff paints a much different story. One of the major hopes of the Western World was to find Christian strongholds in the East and use their help in continuing their fight against Islam. Further their world view was so limited at that time (maybe even now to a large extent when you see the Christian right in mid-west US) that they imagined the all non muslims were christians! It is really funny to see Gama and his crew visiting Hindu temples in Calicut and seeing them as crude versions of Christian worship!!The 'Last Crusade' provides a clear explanation of Gama's motives and actions, and the hatred of Muslims and Islam that led to his antagonistic behavior with the local kingdoms of Kerala who were having centuries of good relationship with Muslims. Not only Muslims, but Christians and Jews as well were enjoying a safe sanctuary in Kerala where complete religious tolerance was practiced. It will need another book to understand how in a place that supported the horrible 'caste' system of Hinduism where a large segment of the population was mentally and physically subjugated, could at the same time welcome all religious faiths from across the word and live with them in perfect harmony. One reason might have been the fact that being a small strip of land in the coastal peninsula, protected by a mountain range on one side and the mighty ocean on the other sides, only refugees or traders could come to Kerala - till the time larger ships and canons starting with Gama could venture in. Well researched and well narrated, the Last Crusade is a good read. Definitely written from a Western point of view, it hardly covers the Indian (or Kerala) perspective. However that is understandable. But I was disappointed at the lack of maps which should have been rather easy to include. Since a significant part of the book covers the various voyages a few maps (both current and the old) would have given the reader much more enjoyment. Fortunately with wikipedia access it is not a serious problem. Religion has played a major role in all human civilizations and unfortunately continue to do so today. In spite of generating continuous conflict and inflicting tremendous harm, it is not difficult to imagine it having helped humanity many times in the past in battling and surviving unimaginable odds where maybe only 'faith' was the final weapon. But now with a much better understanding of what we are and how we became us and our place in the Universe, it is high time that we as a

species find better solutions. Books like these are good steps in the right direction for understanding our past mistakes.

In a style that combines the right amount of detail within the grand scope of the age of Portuguese exploration and expansion, Mr Cliff has produced a fine enthralling account of Vasco da Gama's role in the exploration of East Africa and India by Europeans. It is rare to read a work of history and be caught up and absorbed in it as if it were a novel, almost disappointed to have finished it. That's how well written and exciting *The Last Crusade* was for me. Cliff's theme is that the Portuguese explorations were intrinsically tied to the struggle between Christianity and the Islamic world with long reaching historical ramifications that extend to the present day. He makes his case effectively and enlightens and entertains while doing so. I absolutely loved this book and highly recommend it.

I bought this book for my Kindle Reader but half way through I found that I had made so many page marks and notes, that I just had to have the print edition (paperback) and start over again. It's a wonderful overview of the world of Vasco da Gama, and the way Nigel Cliff sets the historical context is quite extraordinary. Anyone with even a mild interest in the Age of Exploration simply must read this book.

I have read parts of the book previously and wanted my own copy. Exploration caught my imagination years ago in school and this is a superb book. All young people should read this. Try to imagine a person in their twenties in charge of a ship and then sailing along an unknown coastline and around the Cape and then across the Indian Ocean to India. It is a marvelous tale of daring, intrigue and a clash between east and west .

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