

The Big Apple?

Giovanni da Verrazario, a Florentine merchant, first sailed into New York Harbour in 1524. He described the land he found as having ‘commodiousness beauty’, a paradox that was soon to reflect the city’s definitive ambiguity. He saw first the long protrusion into the deep green ocean; at the meeting of salt and freshwater as the Hudson and East Rivers meet. He saw the trees that lined the Manhattan banks and the way their delicate, green leaves fluttered gently in the cool Atlantic breeze. He sailed unwittingly past Liberty Island and past the unusually tall sycamore tree standing at its centre. Giovanni da Verrazario noted the long golden sands on Coney Island and the astounding green wetlands of Jamaica Bay to the east. He first set foot in New York when his ship had anchored a few hundred metres off shore and his crew had patiently rowed him to dry land. He was greeted by the Algonquin tribe, Native Americans who made their living from fishing and hunting. Da Verrazario quickly realised they did not share the European concept of land ownership but did share the very European enthusiasm for trading. The first New Yorkers docked and forced the Natives from their settled areas and infected them with European diseases to which they had no immunity.

He had had a long journey from Europe and was tired and sick. He woke to loud shouts to catch ropes and to tie them tightly to the metal rings as the ship docked in New Amsterdam. His father had been among the first to immigrate to New Amsterdam with the prospect of commerce with the naive Natives. His father left a wife and five sons, of which he was the youngest, and it was his turn now to explore this new world. As he awoke, he stooped underneath the ship’s low ceiling and found a portal. He saw hundreds of black men, carrying box loads of goods from the hull. The shoreline had been littered with small houses and churches and the sea front was dotted casually with large ships. Further into the distance, beyond the squalid streets, he noticed the vast expanses of land on which no person was housed and no being existed. He spotted a line of trees behind the town, their rusty leaves restlessly quivering in the wind. Hugo inhaled a long deep breath and smelt the rancid concoction of excrement and pigs. He rose and clambered out of the hull and made it onto the dock. He started down the long winding streets packed full of houses and people. Hugo made his way past the prison and the great, northern wall to stem the British advances and found himself in a small, open square with a single water pump in the middle. Hugo knew that New Amsterdam was a far cry from the tranquil replica of a European town he had been promised. As darkness fell, rife began to flow through the veins of the town. Screams echoed around the deserted streets and an incoherent clammer escaped the packed taverns full of people drinking to excess.

I flew into JFK the day George Bush was elected President. I was there on business; to write a report about cultural diversity. I could think of no finer example than this, one of the largest cities in the world. Prior to touchdown on runway fourteen, I glimpsed out of the window and captured a fleeting glance of the Jamaica Bay Wildlife reserve and Sheepshead Bay. I trawled through customs, passing check after check, and ducking feverishly through metal detectors. I hired a cab with a rather

dubious looking driver who asked, 'Where, Sir, want you to be?' so I told him. Half an hour later, we were coasting past Lady Liberty, religiously guarding the entrance to Hudson Bay on her giant concrete stage. She gazed across the water with one weary arm holding her torch high. We continued up 4th until we finally reached Times Square. Further down the avenue, I caught sight of the southern tip of Central Park. The trees stood uniformly, bare and brittle in the howling New York winter air. I considered the idea, a garden within a city and wondered whether God ever intended humanity to contain nature. Central Park is 340 hectares of man made glades, copses and rock outcrops. It runs for fifty blocks and provides a welcome escape from the dense urban clutter that fully encloses it. I boarded the elevator and headed to the penthouse suite.

I settled down in my usual chair and stared over the cityscape. A sad irony, I thought. The only high point in Manhattan lies not at the top of the Empire State Building nor on the top floor of the Chrysler, but in the green rectangle engulfed by the metropolis. I chewed my pen lid pensively and stared blankly at the computer screen radiating my face. The Big Apple, I thought. What a name for such a gigantic monstrosity, hanging delicately and perishable in the world's economic climate. A product of nature. I think not.