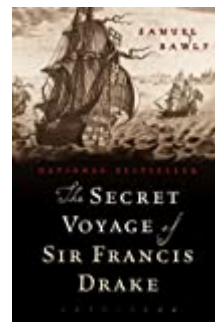


Samuel Bawlf. *The Secret Voyage of Sir Francis Drake 1577-1580.* New York: Penguin Books, 2003. xii + 400 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55365-041-6.



Reviewed by John Gascoigne (University of New South Wales)

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That great icon of Elizabethan power, Sir Francis Drake, has been the subject of many biographies and much myth-making. His exploits and his contempt for Spanish power—most notably his “singeing of the King of Spain’s beard” by burning much of a Spanish fleet in Cadiz harbor—embodied the self-confidence of a newly Protestant England defying its powerful Catholic adversary. This book does not, however, purport to be a fully rounded biography and thus passes lightly over such aspects of Drake’s career as his service in Ireland under the Earl of Essex or his activities as a member of parliament or improver of the town of Plymouth. For the central thrust of this engagingly written book is to put under the microscope one important aspect of Drake’s colorful career: the true nature of his great circumnavigation of the globe in 1577-1580 and the extent of his exploration of the west coast of North America. It is Bawlf’s central contention that Drake explored this coast as far as the Prince of Wales Islands, that is, to near the southernmost point of what is now Alaska.

This claim involves much minute unraveling of the charts that may have been made with secret knowledge that derived from Drake. The author, a former minister in the provincial government of British Columbia responsible for marine and archaeological affairs, knows this coastline intimately and is able to point to various

parallels between what can be deduced from such maps and the lay of the land along the coast from Oregon to Alaska. He regards Oregon rather than California as the site where Drake stopped for repairs and refreshment before heading north for a close survey of the coast with a view to claiming possible sites for English settlement. The place he favored as his new England—the Nova Albion—was Vancouver Island. Certainly, the illustration the book gives of a globe that derives from 1592 now in Middle Temple, London, shows a very persuasive indentation in the coast around Vancouver Island even if the island itself is not depicted. Perhaps that could be attributed to that semi-legendary old man of the sea, Juan de Fuca, a Greek mariner in the service of the Spanish crown, but Bawlf points to evidence that de Fuca had no real first-hand knowledge of the strait that now bears his name; indeed, argues Bawlf, his account probably derived ultimately from Drake.

To make the case for Drake’s charting of the coast of what is now the west coast of Canada, Bawlf is obliged to break various codes which, in his view, Drake was obliged to use to veil his findings. On the one hand, Drake wanted in some way to record his findings but on the other there were compelling reasons why he could not make them explicit. To record clearly and publicly what he had found would give aid and comfort to his great ad-

versaries, the Spanish. It would also embarrass his own monarch, who pursued a changing and rather devious path in her relations with Spain—so much so that Drake, as the embodiment of English anti-Spanish sentiment, found himself not always welcome at court, particularly when his political adversary, Lord Burghley (who favored circumspect dealings with Spain), was in the ascendancy. Burghley indeed refused to accept Drake's lavish presents on the grounds that he "had stolen all he had." Drake, then, had to resort to codes and riddles to record his great achievements. Nonetheless, Bawlf is confident that the code has now been broken through a reconfiguration of the maps and a discounting of Drake's own account of his time in the East Indies—time he greatly exaggerated to cover up the lengthy explorations along the coast of North America.

There is no doubt that secrecy was a feature of map-making well into the eighteenth century—as Bawlf's mention of the extent to which the Russians attempted to cover the tracks of their eighteenth-century forays across the Bering Strait and onto the American coast underline. The Spanish notoriously took the view that any information that might assist their maritime opponents should be suppressed and particularly any charts which might weaken their hold on that putative Spanish lake, the Pacific. On the principle that one comes to resemble one's enemy, Drake, too, could well have attempted to conceal what he had found. However, what is less understandable is that he laid enough of a public trail that it is now possible to reconstruct his true voyage—could Drake simply not keep a secret? Rather mystifying, too, is that, along with this propensity to drop hints to the wide world, Drake did not ensure that his findings were preserved in a form that would have been of advantage to his own country. When the Admiralty issued instructions for Cook's third great Pacific voyage of 1776 to 1780 it referred to the west coast of America using Drake's term, Nova Albion, but beyond that it could furnish Cook with no further details that derived from Drake. The use of the term does indicate that Drake's exploits left a lasting memory in the English mind and a view that the English had some sort of a claim on this area but one wonders why Drake had not done more to allow his countrymen to exploit it more effectively. Of course, it is possible that the information was simply lost or that it was a casualty of the shifting sands of Elizabethan politics. But if the latter is the case, then English notions of keeping exploration secret differed from those of the Spanish. The whole point of secrecy in Spanish eyes was to ensure that they benefited from any new findings so that a record

was kept in the Spanish archives but not made public. And even in the Spanish domain such secrets did sometimes eventually leak out—so that Cook departed on his first voyage with some sense of the accomplishment of the early seventeenth-century Spanish captain, Torres, in demonstrating that there was a strait between Australia and New Guinea even though this finding had been suppressed by the Spanish.

As Drake's near contemporary, Francis Bacon, well knew, knowledge is power and in that age of superheated ideological and great power conflict the European maritime powers did what they could to keep useful knowledge from their opponents—an attitude of mind that has its modern parallels in both the practices of governments and corporations. One of the strengths of this book is the extent to which it firmly locates Drake in the context of the fierce English-Spanish conflicts which were exacerbated by religious differences. The author tends to view such struggles from the English-speaking shore. Where in the Spanish world Drake is viewed as a ruthless pirate, the book takes a rather indulgent attitude towards Drake's robust methods in dealing with his Spanish opponents (e.g. burning the town of Santiago in the Cape Verde Islands to the ground when the inhabitants did not pay the stipulated ransom) or even with the Portuguese who were not directly at war with England. Even Drake's Puritan chaplain was rather worried about Drake's methods and interpreted an encounter with a reef as God's judgment on piracy. The author's rather *parti pris* position extends to Drake himself. In regards to the allegation that he made a slave pregnant and then abandoned her the author counters by suggesting that it may have been Drake's servant who was responsible and, in any case, if it was Drake who was probably doing his duty as captain in keeping the woman to himself rather than have his men fight over her.

Over the book, then, hangs the long shadow of the Black Legend of Spain, a view that took root in the English-speaking world in the Elizabethan era. But such a black and white view of the complex relations between England and Spain adds to the drama and color of this work, which vividly recounts once again the always captivating tale of that great Elizabethan sea-dog, Sir Francis Drake. Against such a background the book advances an interesting case for Drake's greater importance as a discoverer with much intriguing detail—even if the nature of the evidence may defy any final and absolute verdict. Perhaps it might be argued that the claims made, like those advanced for the Chinese discovery of Australia or the Spanish discovery of Hawaii, are about great

might-have-beens that did not change the actual course of history—but Bawlf has taken us on a voyage that adds further texture and resonance to that remarkable figure, Sir Francis Drake.

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