



James McDermott. *Martin Frobisher: Elizabethan Privateer.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001. xv + 507 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08380-4.



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South by Northwest and West: An Elizabethan Sea-dog's Life and World

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The name of Martin Frobisher is readily recognizable to students of sixteenth-century England and its maritime history. Recognizable, yes, but not particularly familiar in terms of the details of his career. Popular historical consciousness has not embraced Frobisher to nearly the same degree that it has his contemporary and rival Sir Francis Drake or even Sir John Hawkins or Sir Walter Raleigh. In spite of coming close to joining the first rank of Elizabethan seamen, Frobisher never quite made it in his lifetime or in the years that followed. John McDermott's biography rescues Frobisher from relative obscurity and shows how his social background, the limits of his talents, and luck all contributed to the path that his career took.

Frobisher was born into a modest family of the Yorkshire gentry in 1540. His father's death in 1542 meant that young Martin would be raised by relatives. In 1549 he joined the London household of Sir John Yorke, a maternal uncle. Yorke was a merchant-tailor, financier, and overseas trader who participated in the English efforts to

interlope on the Portuguese trading monopoly in West Africa. Young Martin went on the first successful voyage to Guinea in 1553 but during the second voyage of 1554, things went wrong. To facilitate their trading, the English merchants gave Frobisher as a hostage to some Africans. The untimely arrival of Portuguese authorities necessitated the abandonment of Frobisher who was for many months a Portuguese prisoner, first at their African trading factory of El Mina and later in Portugal. His uncle Sir John Yorke apparently did nothing to rescue him and when Frobisher finally returned he found himself cheated on his wages and his share of the profits of the voyage. The experience arctically chilled any enthusiasm he might have possessed for the life of a merchant.

Frobisher's life during the late 1550s and 1560s is sparsely documented. He married the widow Isobel Rigatt on 30 September 1559, an apparently loveless match which allowed Frobisher to pillage the estate of his wife and her children from her previous marriage. In the meantime, Frobisher had gravitated to the legally marginal enterprise of privateering by no later than 1560. He possessed the talent for it and like many of his fellow

privateers would occasionally cross the line into outright piracy. That illegal activity brought him to the unfavorable attention of the High Court of Admiralty but he was sharp enough and lucky enough to avoid the noose or any long-term imprisonment. By 1572-74 Frobisher made a dubious appearance in the English efforts to conquer Ireland and flirted with the career of a double agent. The accumulation of all these activities earned Frobisher an unsavory reputation for duplicity.

Just when it seemed that Frobisher was destined to exercise his talents solely as a privateer, the perennial quest of sixteenth-century Englishmen for a northern passage to Asia swept him up. Partnering with the London merchant Michael Lok in 1576, Frobisher commanded a small expedition which was to search out a Northwest Passage to fabled Cathay. McDermott is uniquely qualified to write this section of the book since he has done extensive research on Lok's account books for the Northwest Passage expeditions and published on related topics for the Meta Cognita project in Canada. Sailing to the vicinity of Baffin Island, what Frobisher found was not a strait but the dead-end of Frobisher Bay. Fatefully the expedition landed on Little Hall Island and took away a random rock as a souvenir.

That simple rock radically changed the nature of the next two northern voyages of Frobisher. When assayed, the rock supposedly contained a high content of gold. Unfortunately that result was based on wishful thinking rather than reality. Gold fever engulfed the northern enterprise of Frobisher and Lok. Two expeditions followed in 1577 and 1578. Neither spent much time looking for a Northwest Passage but both returned to England carrying tons of rocks from Little Hall Island. Initially hopes were high that Frobisher and his men had discovered a source of fantastic wealth. The refiners failed to squeeze any gold out of the worthless stones. Confidence in the northern enterprise collapsed and left Lok financially crippled while ending Frobisher's career as an explorer.

Meanwhile between 1579 and 1585, England and Spain drifted steadily toward war, a circumstance that provided Frobisher with new opportunities for privateering and other naval activity. His skills as a fighting seaman eventually earned him the position of vice-admiral on Drake's West Indies raid of 1585. Frobisher acquitted himself well on that expedition but came away with a strong and abiding dislike for the flamboyant and mercurial Drake. Meanwhile the impending threat of the Spanish Armada descending on England loomed greater

and greater. During the winter of 1587/8, Frobisher engaged in the harassment of Spanish shipping in the Narrow Seas. Charles Howard, the Lord Admiral of England, recognized Frobisher's qualities as a fighting seaman and gave him command of the 1,000 ton *Triumph*, the largest ship in the English fleet, for the upcoming confrontation with Spain.

Throughout the Armada campaign, Frobisher performed bravely. McDermott reinterprets Frobisher's performance at the action at Portland Bill to debunk accusations of poor seamanship on Frobisher's part. He demonstrates that Frobisher bravely placed his ships in a poor position in order to deprive the Spanish of their last chance to make a landing on the southern coast of England. His ship-handling was brilliant, not flawed, and Frobisher was hailed as one of England's saviors. The Armada campaign helped Frobisher to regain a good reputation that had been tarnished by the mirage of the Little Hall Island goldfields. It also rekindled his hatred of the lucky but unscrupulous Drake.

In the years following the Armada campaign, Frobisher continued to give England and his queen good service. His harrying of Spanish shipping in the Narrow Seas and of Spain's American treasure fleets off the Azores was more effective than most of his contemporaries. Unfortunately for Frobisher, he missed out on the capture of the richly laden Portuguese India carrack, the *Madre de Dios*, in 1592. During 1594 he provided the brave backbone of English efforts to dislodge Spanish forces from the Brittany Peninsula. Wounded by a Spanish bullet while leading an assault, Frobisher returned to England to die of infection from his wound at Plymouth on 22 November 1594.

Martin Frobisher: Elizabethan Privateer is a long book. As a biography, it spends much time placing Frobisher in the various contexts of his age: the African trade, privateering, the search for a Northwest Passage, Elizabeth raids on the Spanish Empire in the Americas, and the Armada Campaign. The result is a study of not just Frobisher's life but also of his times. That is useful and it is also necessary. Large segments of Frobisher's life are either undocumented or very poorly documented, particularly his early years up to 1575 and again from 1579 to 1585. A man of somewhat limited education, Frobisher left few personal papers to illuminate his thoughts and personality. Instead the author McDermott must frequently rely solely on his actions to assess his character, which like most people's was complex and contradictory. Embittered by the callous treatment from his uncle Sir

John Yorke, Frobisher turned to the life of privateering where he showed only limited scruples. His heinous exploitation and neglect of his hapless wife Isobel reveals an unsavory and unattractive side to the man. In contrast, at sea he was a skilled captain. Whether in battle or in dangerous weather, he consistently demonstrated both unflinching personal courage and uncommon concern for his men. McDermott also points out that Frobisher was really an outsider in the generally close-knit fraternity of Elizabethan sea-dogs. Francis Drake, John Hawkins, Walter Raleigh, Richard Grenville, and Humphrey Gilbert were all West Country men and in some cases were blood relatives. Frobisher came from Yorkshire and lacked their smoothness, their common origin, and some of their luck. In addition to being an outsider, McDermott portrays him as a restless spirit, always seeking but never finding, partially because he was himself not ever clear on what he sought.

Unlike Drake, Frobisher has never attracted peren-

nial biographies. The last full-scale biography of Frobisher was William McFee's *The Life of Martin Frobisher* which appeared in 1928 and was written without benefit of footnotes. In contrast, Drake's life has drawn the attention of a steady stream of biographers over the years including two recent ones: John Cummins' *Francis Drake: The Lives of a Hero* (1995) and Harry Kelsey's well researched but somewhat controversial *Sir Francis Drake: The Queen's Pirate* (1998). Thanks to McDermott, Frobisher has once again had his story told, both well and fairly. One may not agree with every interpretation ventured by McDermott but overall *Martin Frobisher* is an impressive achievement. The one thing it lacks is an adequate number of maps to help make sense of some of the actions and events described in the text. McDermott has skillfully used the surviving documentary sources for Frobisher to provide his readers with what will be the definitive biography of Martin Frobisher for many years to come.

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