

## Reviews

**META INCOGNITA: A DISCOURSE OF DISCOVERY. MARTIN FROBISHER'S ARCTIC EXPEDITIONS, 1576–1578.** Thomas Symons (Editor). 1999. Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization. 2 volumes. xlvii + 636 p, illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 0-660-17507-X (set).

On the top of the island I found the ruins of a house, which had been built of stone, cemented together with lime and sand. The foundation still remained, and was of 'lyme and stone.' It was about twelve feet in diameter, and every portion of it was covered with aged moss. From appearances, some of the stones had been turned over, as if done by Innuits seeking treasure. (Hall 1865: 427)

The above is the description by Charles Francis Hall, the American Arctic explorer, of a structure that he found on Kodlunarn Island in Frobisher Bay in September 1861, having been led to the island by detailed oral traditions of the local Inuit concerning earlier European visitors. What he was describing was the remains of a small house, built experimentally in 1578 by members of Martin Frobisher's expedition to see how it stood up to the Arctic climate. An assortment of foodstuffs, including bread baked in a nearby oven, was left in the house for the Inuit, prior to the expedition's departure. Almost 300 years old when Hall discovered them, these were in fact the ruins of the first permanent building erected by English-speaking people in North America!

These ruins, and an array of other evidence on Kodlunarn Island and adjacent locations are the tangible relics of three remarkable expeditions led by Sir Martin Frobisher in 1576, 1577, and 1578. The first expedition was a relatively modest affair involving two ships, and with the aim of locating the Northwest Passage. One ship returned home after a storm in the North Atlantic, but Frobisher's ship, *Gabriel*, reached Frobisher Bay. On his return, as proof of what he had discovered, he produced a live Inuk, some plants, and a piece of black rock. While three English assayers could find no gold in this rock sample, an Italian assayer claimed it contained gold.

This claim totally changed the emphasis of the subsequent two expeditions. In 1577, financed by a group of 'venturers' calling themselves the Cathay Company, and led by Queen Elizabeth, who invested £1000, Frobisher sailed west again, this time with three ships, including *Ayde*, one of the royal warships. This time gold mining was the prime objective. The expedition returned to England with some 200 tonnes of ore from Kodlunarn Island, along with three Inuit, a man, a woman, and her child. All three died soon afterwards.

Encouraged by promising indications from the assayers to whom the ore was entrusted, a third expedition was

mounted by the Cathay Company in 1578. It sailed in 15 ships, of which 12 exceeded 100 tonnes, representing 10% of all English ships of that size. In terms of number of ships, this is still the largest commercial fleet that has ever sailed to the Arctic. It was intended that a group of 100 colonists should be left on Baffin Island, but this idea had to be abandoned when the ship *Dennys*, carrying much of the lumber for the house, was crushed by the ice and sank. The small house, the ruins of which Hall found, represented a greatly reduced version of this original plan. On this occasion, a staggering 1200 tonnes of ore was mined and transported back to England. A massive furnace complex, the largest in England to that date, was built at Dartford to smelt the ore. But despite the best efforts, no gold could be found in the ore. Some of it may still be seen, recycled as building stone, in a wall in Vicarage Lane, Dartford. The Cathay Company collapsed, a financial failure.

Even after Hall publicized his discovery, there was little interest in the history of this remarkable endeavour, despite the fact that there were several contemporary accounts of the expeditions extant. Richard Collinson, the Arctic explorer, published some of these accounts through the Hakluyt Society in 1867 (Collinson 1867). Working from this as his starting point, in 1938 another Arctic expert, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, published an even more exhaustive treatment of the journals from the Frobisher voyages (Stefansson and McCaskill 1938). But thereafter interest in the voyages again waned, until 1974. In that year Walter Kenyon of the Royal Ontario Museum mounted a two-week expedition to Kodlunarn Island and adjacent sites, with the aim of properly marking the impending four hundredth anniversary of the Frobisher voyages. The result was a slim volume on the expedition results (Kenyon 1975).

Kenyon's project in turn gave rise to a much more ambitious project mounted by William Fitzhugh of the Smithsonian Institution, who led archeological expeditions to Kodlunarn and other relevant sites in Frobisher Bay in 1981, 1990, and 1991. These gave rise directly to a wide-ranging work entitled *Archeology of the Frobisher voyages* (Fitzhugh and Olin 1993). The Smithsonian Institution worked in close collaboration with the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec, which established its own Meta Incognita Project Committee. The latter committee published two reports, *The Meta Incognita Project: contributions to field studies* (Alsford 1993) and *Martin Frobisher's northwest ventures, 1576–1581: mines, minerals, and metallurgy* (Hogarth and others 1994). To buttress the detailed archeological studies, the Meta Incognita Project spun off the Archival Research Task Force, organized by Sir Ian Gourlay in the United

Kingdom, which first met in July 1992 in London. This Task Force brought together an impressive team of scholars, working on almost every aspect of the Frobisher voyages. Many of their results were presented at the *Meta Incognita* Symposium held at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, in May 1997. Many of the papers presented there are published in the twin volumes now under review, expertly edited by Thomas Symons, who was a prime mover in the *Meta Incognita* Project from its inception, and who also wrote an informative preface.

The collection consists of 21 papers, which between them cover practically every conceivable aspect of the expeditions that might be studied on the basis of archival resources. Most of the topics are what one might expect in such a collection. David Quinn, with his encyclopedic knowledge of the history of early exploration of North America, placed the Frobisher voyages in the context of early English northwest exploration. Ann Savours contributed a succinct but readable précis of the events of the three voyages. James McDermott's contribution is substantial: biographies of both Martin Frobisher and of Michael Lok — one of the major organizers and financial backers of the endeavour, who had the misfortune to be held largely responsible for the financial failure and spent time in debtor's prison — as well as a study of the Cathay Company, the legally unincorporated body responsible for the financing of the expeditions. Along with David Waters, McDermott also wrote an excellent study of the techniques and problems of navigation as used by Frobisher and his fellow captains.

Richard Ruggles drew on his vast knowledge of early cartography of North America to examine the maps available to Frobisher and his colleagues, and the cartographic legacy of the expeditions. The latter was less than felicitous in that Frobisher's Straits subsequently became transferred to Greenland. The details of the ships of the expeditions are the subject of an exhaustive essay by Ian Friel. Robert Baldwin and Bernard Allaire separately focus on different aspects of contemporary knowledge of metallurgy and assaying, and the puzzling topic of how the assayers could have been so badly wrong in their assessment of the 'black rock.' Or were the ore samples 'salted' or the results falsified?

Other essays focus on topics that are perhaps less expected. McDermott makes yet another contribution in the form of a detailed essay on the organization and construction of the Dartmouth furnaces, based on the extensive accounts and documentation that have survived; it should be stressed again that they represented an enormous expansion of English smelting capacity. Sir James Watt writes on the medical climate of Frobisher's England, and along with Ann Savours tackles the topic of the fate of the captured Inuit and their medical history; the man captured on the first voyage and the child taken on the second voyage are buried at St Olave's in Hart Street in London, whereas the man and woman taken on the second voyage are buried at St Stephen's in Bristol.

Kirsten Seaver is the author of two intriguing essays. The focus of one is possible Inuit contacts with Europeans prior to 1576, starting with probable contacts with the Greenland Norse. The other deals with two intriguing discoveries on Kodlunarn Island that may possibly be linked: a carefully arranged row of walrus mandibles, and several iron blooms (first recorded by Hall). Radiocarbon dates from the latter are conflicting, ranging from fifteenth century to eleventh century. The latter might suggest that these are of Norse origin; curiously, a carefully arranged grouping of walrus mandibles has been found outside the wall of the cathedral at Gardar, a major site in Norse Greenland.

Finally, Bernard Allaire and James Hogarth present a fascinating discussion of the fact that Don Bernardino de Mendoza, the Spanish ambassador to England, had recruited a spy on the third expedition; on the latter's return the ambassador was able to forward a remarkably detailed account of the expedition to King Philip, which is presented in translation in full.

This is not an exhaustive summary of the topics embraced by these two large volumes, but one hopes that enough have been mentioned to demonstrate the range of fascinating subjects covered. Representing the product of exhaustive archival research, these papers balance superbly the archeological results presented in the various earlier publications. While one might be tempted to suggest that, in light of the depth of research appearing in these volumes and the three other books that have been published in the past seven years, there can be little more to say on Frobisher's expeditions, a third volume of *Meta Incognita: a discourse of discovery* is planned. (William Barr, Arctic Institute of North America, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta T2N 1N4, Canada.)

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