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Book Review

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Book Review

THE ARCTIC VOYAGES OF MARTIN FROBISHER: AN ELIZABETHAN ADVENTURE. By Robert McGhee. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002. 196 pages. Sources and Notes. Index. ISBN 0-295-98163-6. Price $40.00.

This beautiful book is about the life, times, and adventures of Sir Martin Frobisher and his search for a passage to the Pacific through the Arctic. Frobisher (c. 1538–1594) was a sailor, a pirate, an explorer, a miner, and a vice admiral. His fame stems from his three voyages in search of the Northwest Passage (1576, 1577, 1578), which ended in accusations of dishonesty related to his mining adventures on the shores of Baffin Island, and his part in the naval defense against the Spanish Armada in 1588 along with Sir Francis Drake. The book covers the political intrigue of the time, including the role of the Company of Merchant Adventurers (Muscovy Company) versus royal edicts in these early marine adventures. Both powers wanted access to the Pacific: the Company for spices, Queen Elizabeth for her empire. Both wanted gold from America for their coffers.

What sets this historical account apart from many is the liberal use of original notes provided in the original Elizabethan spelling. For example, on page 124: *''whylest the Mariners plyed their work, ye Captaines sought out new Mynes, the Goldfiners made tryall of the Ore, The Mariners discharged their shippes, the Gentlemen for example sake laboured hartily, and honestlye encouraged the inferiour sorte to worke. So that small time of that little leasure, that was lefte to tarrie, was spent in vaine.''*

The book is sprinkled luxuriously with fabulous images of models, drawings, artist's reconstructions, 16th-century charts and maps, and modern aerial photography.

The book covers the life and times of Frobisher but concentrates on his three voyages of discovery, including his crews' early interactions with Inuit. Having read much on 19th-century British exploration for the same Northwest Passage, I was intrigued by the differences 300 years could make in approaches. In many respects, the Elizabethan time appears more civilized by modern standards, where captains and sailors commingle and share in work, whether on shore or at sea. I found interesting the use of beer as an important part of daily sustenance for these early arctic explorers.

Throughout the book, the author easily alternates between his education as a historian and a first-rate field archaeologist. The book is up-to-date and state of the art. Having spent my early career conducting geological exploration along the coasts of Baffin Island, I found it fascinating to learn from Dr. McGhee about the history that laid the foundation for modern scientific discoveries. What a treat; buy this book.

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