

## Martin Frobisher (ca. 1540-1594)

The Portuguese navigators, who are believed to have been the first to sail up the Labrador coast and to penetrate into Hudson Strait in the early sixteenth century, mistrusted their competitors to such an extent that they hid their operations behind a veil of secrecy which shrouds them to this day. In consequence, the Englishman Martin Frobisher is the first *accredited* pioneer of northern Canadian exploration. He made known to the world the dangers of navigation in the icy seas, the forbidding terrain of Baffin Island, the type of its inhabitants, and the existence of Hudson Strait. Like the Portuguese, he dimmed his credit by failing to fix his discoveries with precision, by diverting his search — perhaps contrary to his own choice — from exploration to a futile gold-hunt, and by failing to emphasize the significance of Hudson Strait. Although his successors in the field — Davis, Hudson, and Baffin — have taken legitimate possession of the honours he neglected, Frobisher's courage and enterprise are indisputable; his original achievements were all in Canadian waters; and he may justly be recognized as the first Anglo-Canadian.

Frobisher was born in about 1540 in Yorkshire, England, of Welsh descent. As far as the record discloses, he was engaged in the African trade in defiance of a theoretical Portuguese monopoly. The Privy Council of Queen Elizabeth once called him to question over an alleged act of piracy, but such charges were not always pressed unless the victim was a fellow-countryman. He never became a skilled navigator, but was an experienced practical officer — masterful, resolute, and bold.

At that time, Spain and Portugal laid claim to all the Americas and barred foreigners from the lucrative Spice Islands trade by prohibitions, which, though not always enforceable, added to the risks of the traffic. In 1576 Frobisher sailed with three ships, backed by London merchants to find an unpoliced route to the East — the Northwest Passage.

Off Greenland they encountered storm and ice. One ship foundered with all hands; another stole away home. Frobisher held right on, assuring his frightened crew that "the sea must needs at last have an ending." Approaching Baffin Island, he passed to the north of Queen Elizabeth's Foreland and sailed more than a hundred miles up Frobisher Bay, which he took to be a strait with America on the left and Asia on the right. He returned to England with samples of ore that were supposed to contain gold. He made another voyage in 1577 and returned with a quantity of ore on which analysts gave a noncommittal but optimistic report.

The precious metals found by the Spanish in Mexico and Peru encouraged the hope that such deposits could be found in the far North. In 1578 Frobisher was sent out with an armada of 15 sail, not for exploration but for a gold-hunt. The fleet was detained off the Baffin Island shore for two weeks by ice and fog, and Frobisher himself sailed many miles up the north shore of Hudson Strait; he afterwards claimed that he could have won through to the Pacific, had he not been detained by his responsibility as captain of the fleet.

The fleet meantime had suffered much discomfort and danger, bewildered in "such a fog and hideous mist" and "so troubled and tossed about in the ice that it would make the strongest heart to relent." The convoy was kept together by the continual sounding of drums and trumpets. When the bark *Dionyse* foundered, the rest manfully took to their boats and rescued her entire crew before the vessel sank. They saved other ships by cutting up their cables and hanging out the fragments to deaden the impact of the ice. Eventually they struggled past Queen Elizabeth's Foreland and anchored in Frobisher Bay with snow a foot deep on their decks.

While the crews were busy in gathering and loading ore, Frobisher and his officers made excursions inland in search of fresh deposits. They failed to establish friendly relations with the local Eskimos.

The plan of leaving a party to winter in "Meta Incognita" was abandoned, but a house built of stone and lime was set up on Kodlunarn Island to test the durability of those materials in an arctic climate. On the way home the fleet was scattered by an "outrageous tempest", but all reached port safely. Considering that the voyage had been undertaken in the irresponsible hurry and enthusiasm of a gold rush, this fortunate deliverance may be credited to the Elizabethan seamen, and not least to the "General" who commanded them.

In consequence of the quickly proved worthlessness of the ore, Frobisher fell into disfavour with the government and the financiers — unjustly, for the gold-hunt appears not to have originated with him. He reappeared as senior officer in the war against Spain, went on a marauding expedition under Drake to the West Indies, and held a command in the fight against the Spanish Armada. He won his knighthood in this operation — and, characteristically, quarrelled with and vehemently abused his superior, Vice-Admiral Drake. He remained in the naval service and was mortally wounded in a petty operation against the Spaniards on the French coast.

Frobisher seems to have been a gentleman by birth, but was poorly educated, rough in manner, often violent, and an indifferent navigator. He did not "fix" his discoveries. For a long time it was supposed that Frobisher Bay was on the east shore of Greenland. John Davis visited the bay without recognizing its identity. The sailor-historian, Luke Foxe, credits Davis, not Frobisher, with "lighting Hudson into his Strait." The identity of Frobisher Bay was only fully confirmed three hundred years later, when the American C. F. Hall found the ruins of Frobisher's house on Kodlunarn Island, and found that the Eskimos had preserved an accurate oral record of the voyages made by Frobisher centuries before.

Though not a scientific geographer, Frobisher was the *pioneer* of the Canadian Arctic. His ignorance permitted him to defy dangers from which better-informed ship masters might have shrunk. Others followed where he had blazed the trail. He pierced the barrier of the realms of frost and opened a breach for more skilled navigators to exploit.



Photo courtesy of National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London. Neg. no. 608.

#### FURTHER READINGS

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L.H. Neatby  
1610 - 1223 Temperance Street  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada  
S7N 0P2