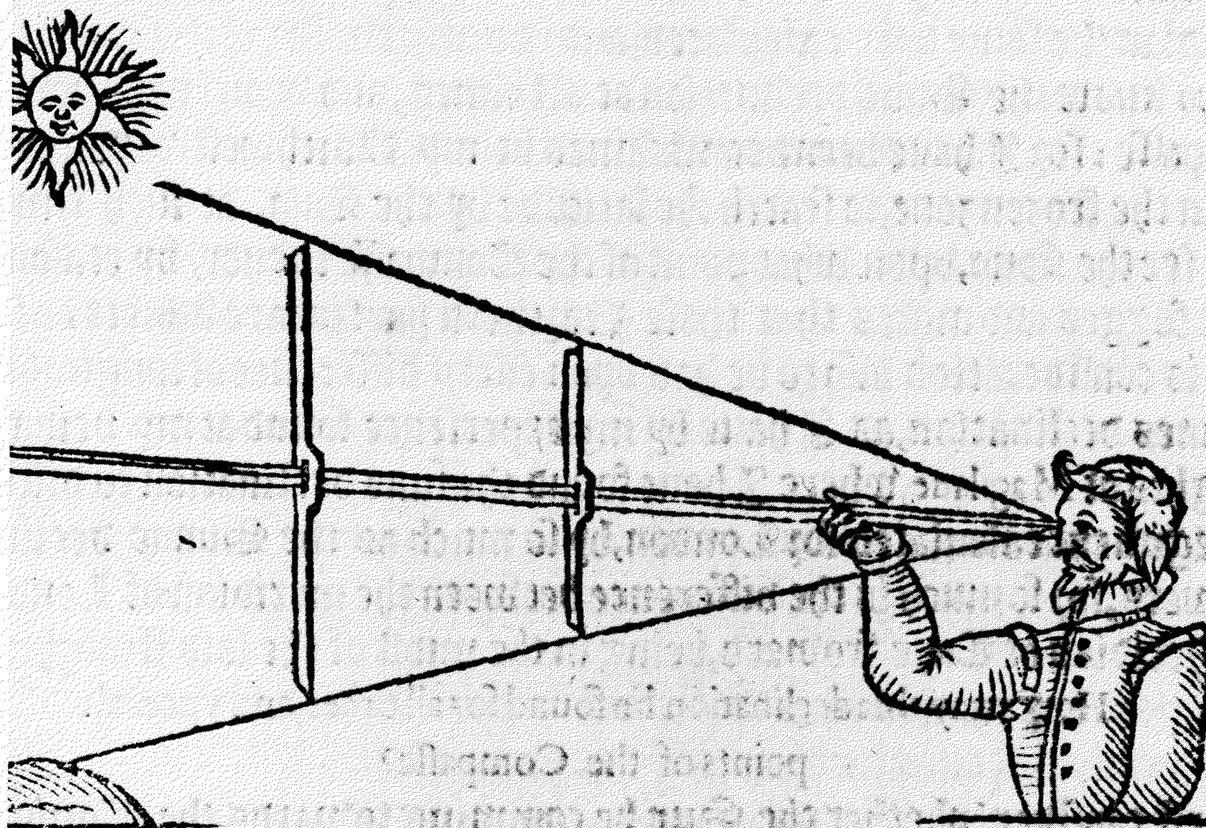
John Davis (ca. 1550-1605)



Photograph courtesy of the Hakluyt Society, British Library, London. First published in The Voyages and Works of John Davis, the navigator, including *The Seamens Secrets 1607*, ed. Albert Hastings Markham, for the Hakluyt Society, London 1880.

John Davis, "The Navigator", is deservedly the favourite of historian and biographer among the early English sailors in Canadian waters. He was dedicated to his work and lacked the greed for money and fame that marked many of his contemporaries; he was of kindly disposition and exerted himself to win the confidence of pilfering Greenland Eskimos. Unlike Frobisher, he was a scientific seaman and, along with Jacques Cartier, may be said to have rough-charted the eastern Canadian seaboard from the Gulf of the St. Lawrence to Cumberland Gulf on Baffin Island. He "fixed" the entrance to Hudson Strait, discovered Cumberland Gulf — later the resort of whalers — and sailed far up Baffin Bay. His career had little drama, but he was fortunate in having aboard John James, the nephew of his merchant-patron William Sanderson, who is vivid in both his narrative and descriptive passages.

Born in Devon, England, about 1550, John Davis's boyhood association with sons of the local gentry may account for his good education and proficiency in mathematics. He took to the sea early and was a skilled navigator when, in 1585, he was authorized by Queen Elizabeth to search for "the Northwest Passage to China", with the backing of the Queen's minister, Sir Francis Walsingham, and the merchant William Sanderson. He ran up the west Greenland shore, where he showed his good nature in trying to win the friendship of the local Eskimos in spite of their thieving habits. Crossing the strait that bears his name, he went 40 leagues up Cumberland, hoping that it might be the desired passage, but was driven home by foul weather. He complained of the mosquitos of Baffin Island: "They did bite grievously."

In 1586 he entered his strait with two ships, encountering weather so cold that his men grew rebellious. He sent the more mutinous home on one ship, and with the other, *Moonshine*, he coasted down the Baffin and Labrador shores. Owing perhaps to fog, he missed the entrance to Hudson Strait, but far to the south found a gap in the mountainous coast: "A mighty great sea between two lands" (Hamilton Inlet?). Hostile natives attacked his landing party and killed two men. Then a furious gale nearly tore the ship from her anchorage and threatened to cast her ashore, a prey to the "Canibals". Davis lost no time in escaping from this dangerous coast. He had come south to 54°30′N, within 200 miles of Belle Isle Strait.

On his third voyage (1587) his two larger ships deserted him, leaving him in the 20-ton *Helen*. He made his highest north in Baffin Bay at 72°12′N and saw ahead "a great sea, free, large, and very salty and of unsearchable depth". A towering cliff on the Greenland shore he named Hope Sanderson. Being unprovided for a longer voyage, he put about and pried again into Cumberland Gulf. He sighted Frobisher Bay without identifying it — owing no doubt to its discoverer's inaccurate "fix". Later in the day he became aware that he was passing "the entrance or mouth of a great inlet or passage, being 20 leagues broad and situated between 62 & 63 degrees." As he neared Cape Chidley, the flood tide of the Atlantic was moving in, and he "saw the sea falling down into the gulf with a mighty overfall, and the roaring, and with divers circular motions like whirlpools, in such sort as forcible streams pass through the arches of bridges." He had rediscovered — and "fixed" — the mouth of Hudson Strait.

For the next four years Davis's services were claimed by the war against Spain. In the interval, interest in the Arctic faded. Walsingham was no more, "and when his honour died the voyage was friendless, and men's minds alienated from adventuring therein." Davis joined the buccaneer Thomas Cavendish in a plan for harrying Spanish shipping on the west coast of South America, after which the explorer intended to attempt the Northwest Passage in reverse. The expedition broke down: Davis alone pushed up the coast of Chile until forced to turn back by failing supplies. His ship was almost driven ashore by a gale, and his mate, John Pery, cried that they could not clear the cape ahead. Davis replied, "You see that there is no remedy; either we must double it, or before noon we must die; therefore loose your sails, and let us put it to God's mercy." The faith of the dauntless discoverer was justified; a lull in the wind and Pery's and Davis's skillful handling permitted them to weather the point. "I conclude", wrote the captain's friend, John James, "that the world hath not any so skilful pilots for that place as they are." The stubborn captain had exhausted his supplies in the dash up the Chilean coast; he put his men ashore on the mudflats of Patagonia, where they killed enough wildfowl barely to sustain them for the homeward voyage.

The aging and impoverished discoverer now betook himself to the theory of navigation and published a "Treatise" in which he re-stated, with his own additions, the arguments for the existence of a Northwest Passage. But it was granted to few adventurers of that epoch to die in their beds. The author was invited to act as chief pilot, first for the Dutch and then for the English East India fleet. On his third voyage to the Far East he was killed in an affray with Japanese pirates near the site of the present city of Singapore. In his death he symbolized the vast range of Elizabethan maritime enterprise. His bones rest among the Spice Islands, as far as the extent of the globe permits from the rocky shores of Greenland and Labrador, which it had been his life's work to trace.

Davis was not typical of the seagoing adventurers of his age, whether Spanish or English. He indulged in none of their quarrelsome rivalries, and had none of their ravenous greed for wealth and glory. His writing is without the bombast to which some of his contemporaries were addicted. He made no startlingly original discovery: his work was to extend, clarify, and give shape to Frobisher's casual and incoherent observations. The well-informed Luke Foxe credits Davis, not Frobisher, with "lighting Hudson into his strait." His survey of the Labrador from the north nearly overlapped that of Jacques Cartier from the south; in truth, the two of them — oddly, both probably of Welsh descent — had roughly laid down the Canadian seaboard from the Arctic Circle to Gaspé Peninsula and furnished a recognizable outline of our eastern shore.

FURTHER READINGS

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