

REFLECTIONS

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THE RICHARD HAKLUYT OF SPACE

In an essay in her collection *The Common Reader* (1925), Virginia Woolf has this to say about her encounter with Richard Hakluyt's enormous compilation of Elizabethan narratives of travel and exploration, *The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffics and Discoveries of the English Nation*:

"These magnificent volumes are not often, perhaps, read through. Part of their charm consists in the fact that Hakluyt is not so much a book as a great bundle of commodities loosely tied together, an emporium, a lumber room strewn with ancient sacks, obsolete nautical instruments, huge bales of wool, and little bags of rubies and emeralds. One is forever untying this packet here, sampling that heap over there, wiping the dust off some vast map of the world, and sitting down in semi-darkness to snuff the strange smells of silks and leathers and ambergris. . . . For this jumble of seeds, silks, unicorns' horns, elephants' teeth, wool, common stones, turbans, and bars of gold, these odds and ends of priceless value and complete worthlessness, were the fruit of innumerable voyages, traffics, and discoveries to unknown lands in the reign of Queen Elizabeth." And she goes on to express the delights that wandering through this immense, centuries-old compendium of geographies offers.

Hakluyt was born in 1552 or 1553 and died in 1616, which makes him an approximate contemporary of Shakespeare's. He studied for the priesthood at Oxford, served awhile as chaplain and secretary to the English ambassador to France, and later became chaplain to Sir Robert Cecil, a key figure at Elizabeth I's court. But his great passion was geography. While at the embassy in Paris he heard French courtiers deriding the English for their lack of maritime accomplishments, a charge that he knew to be unjust; and he devoted the rest of his life to collecting, editing, and publishing the manuscripts of the bold Elizabethan explorers who even then were carrying the English flag to the most remote parts of the planet. The first edition of his great book appeared in 1589 and filled two fat volumes of closely printed text. But so active were English captains at every one of what John Donne called "the round Earth's imagined corners," that between 1598 and 1600 he produced a greatly expanded second edition, consisting of three even larger volumes. It is, of course, a very rare book today, but it has been reprinted in its entirety twice over the years: a five-volume edition of 1810, the one that Virginia Woolf encountered, and then, in 1903, a twelve-volume set. A new edition is now in preparation.

I have owned the 1903 edition for many years, and often used it for reference in the days when I was writing my own books about early explorers. But I have also dipped into it, now and again, for pleasure. As Woolf indicates, some of it makes dull reading today: Hakluyt tried to include everything relevant to the discovery of the world beyond England's shores, and so we have lengthy listings of latitudes and longitudes, the texts of trade treaties, inventories of ships' cargoes, etc., etc. But many of his sea-captains were splendid writers with a full command of the flamboyant, resonant prose of their era, and their accounts make glorious reading for the armchair traveler—those tales of elephants' teeth and bars of gold, of turbans and silks, revealing for homebound Britishers one realm after another of fabulous and fantastic strangeness. Consider, for example, this typical passage, from Sir Walter Raleigh's account of his voyage to Guiana in search of the gold of El Dorado:

"I never saw a more beautiful country, nor more lively prospects, hills so raised

here and there over valleys, the river winding into divers branches, the plains adjoining without bush or stubble, all fair green grass, the ground of hard sand easy to march on, either for horse or foot, the deer crossing in every path, the birds toward the evening singing on every tree with a thousand several tunes, cranes and herons of white crimson, and carnation perching in the river's side, the air fresh with a gentle Easterly wind, and every stone that we stooped to take up, promised either gold or silver."

The books provide many such vivid descriptions. Hakluyt's adventurers tell of voyages to China, Japan, Siam, Ceylon, Java, Peru, Mexico, Persia, Africa, Virginia, Florida, Sumatra, and just about anywhere else a sailing ship could reach. They enter the Canadian Arctic in search of the Northwest Passage to the Orient, they boldly go into the ice-choked seas that lead to Antarctica, they visit the courts of the Turkish sultan and the Russian tsar. In a way, the Hakluyt books provide the sort of imaginative stimulation that the best fantasy or science fiction gives us nowadays. Narrative after narrative has the magic and mystery that we hope to get from some richly descriptive fantasy novel or some haunting depiction of the far future of Earth. For someone willing to wade through those pages of latitudes and longitudes in search of the rubies and emeralds and sacks of spices, Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* has much to offer. The poets and playwrights of Hakluyt's own era ransacked the books for lively images of the exotic: the pages of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Michael Drayton, and many others are studded with imagery borrowed from Hakluyt's voyagers. But it is not primarily their considerable literary appeal that leads me to think of the great Hakluyt compilation as having relevance for our modern world in general and readers of science fiction in particular. You will note that among the elephants' teeth and unicorns' horns and other exotica Woolf speaks of, so prosaic a commodity as wool is mentioned. And, in fact, though Hakluyt loved a good tale of strange lands as much as anyone, and included plenty of them in his book just for the sheer pleasure of it, his primary purpose in compiling these volumes was to stir interest in maritime trade, and in particular trade in humble goods like cloth and tin and blue dye, not in the horns of unicorns. He was, at heart, a propagandist for English commerce, eager to stir the brave young men of his native land to go forth in search of new markets for English goods and new raw materials for English factories. His first book, *Divers Voyages Touching the Discovery of America* (1582), was an assemblage of documents concerning English colonial expansion in North America; and his "Discourse of Western Planting" (1582) was an attempt to secure support for the colonization of Virginia, pointing out that such settlements as Sir Walter Raleigh's Roanoke colony would, in time, provide markets for English cloth and an outlet for England's surplus population.

Such work led, eventually, to his majestic *Principal Voyages*, the endless volumes of which displayed the full panoply of continents that lay ready for exploitation by British mariners and British merchants. They contain everything and anything relevant to his purpose, and a good deal that is not; the first volume, for example, opens with an account of the (mythical) conquest of Iceland and Norway by the (mythical) King Arthur in A.D. 517, and goes on from there to report the Arctic explorations of a Norman named Ochter in the year 890; but soon we have an account of commerce in the English Channel at the time of William the Conqueror, and other information about European trade. And then, suddenly, Hakluyt prints the text of the lengthy narrative of John of Plano Carpini, an Italian monk whom Pope Innocent IV sent as an ambassador to Kuyuk Khan, the grandson of the fearsome Genghis Khan, in the hope of obtaining Mongol aid in the Crusades. It is full of fascinating detail about Mongol customs and history, but what purpose it could have had in furthering the growth of English commerce is hard to see. Hakluyt the connoisseur of fine travel tales must

have overcome Hakluyt the propagandist here. Soon, though, we are given English trade treaties from the reigns of Henry III and Edward I, and then on and on, volume after volume, voyage after voyage, Francis Drake and Humphrey Gilbert and Martin Frobisher and Sebastian Cabot and all the other great names of Elizabethan maritime adventure.

What, then, do Richard Hakluyt and his book of voyages have to do with our world of today, and the world of science fiction in particular?

Why, that we stand at the brink of a new frontier inconceivably greater—it is infinite, in fact—than the one that confronted the seamen of Hakluyt’s day. And, after a promising start half a century ago, we are not doing much about getting ourselves out into it. I’m talking about the space frontier, of course, and my point is that a new propagandist, as industrious and dedicated as Richard Hakluyt was, is needed to spur us on into a new era of exploration. In his introductory essays, Hakluyt reminds us repeatedly that his goal is not just “the recording of so many memorable actions” or even “the increase and general multiplying of the sea-knowledge in this age,” but primarily the encouragement of English commerce on a worldwide basis to further the prosperity of the realm. He did not mean a government program for sending ships far and wide; that would lead to conflict with foreign powers who had their own territorial claims, and England, having fought off an invasion from Spain as recently as 1588, had no desire to entangle itself in a new war over trade routes. What Hakluyt wanted to encourage was private ventures into distant lands, and in this he succeeded so well that even Queen Elizabeth, as a private investor, put money into these ventures. The result, as we know, was a British presence on every continent and a consequent enrichment of the nation—as well as a vast increase in geographical knowledge.

It is now some sixty years since we launched the great enterprise that culminated in the 1969 landing on the Moon, and very little has been done since then to move outward into space—a space station close to home, a bunch of orbital satellites, various unmanned planetary probes, and that’s about it. No major expeditions are planned. The government can’t do it, because the government is distracted by problems closer at hand, and very few private companies have shown much interest in getting out there. The space program seems to be turning into science fiction again—stories, movies, graphic novels, and not much real action.

What we need, I think, is a new Hakluyt who will compile a huge and inspiring anthology dealing with the exploration of space. Let him start with a few quaint editorials from Hugo Gernsback’s early SF magazines, and an essay or two by Willy Ley, the great propagandist of space exploration who died just on the eve of the first Moon voyage; then go on to reports of the wobbly early space launches, the voyages to the Moon, the sending forth of the space probes—the complete story so far. He will need essays by scientists on the practical benefits of space exploration—the increase in technological skills that our space work has yielded so far, the mineral wealth out there, and so on and so on. And photos, photos, photos. Make it a fabulous interactive e-book, of course. Stir the imagination. Reawaken that outward urge that the Elizabethan explorers felt and that our own space pioneers of half a century ago understood. Produce a classic work of pro-space propaganda that will get us heading out there.

Is today’s Richard Hakluyt already thinking of such a project? I hope so.

