

ON THE TRACK OF SIR FRANCIS DRAKE

by Trevor W. Hearl

Was Sir Francis Drake the first English sea captain to step ashore at St Helena? Hitherto that honour has gone unchallenged to Thomas Cavendish who sailed aboard the *Desire* in June, 1588, and whose twelve-day visit is fully recorded in the ship's journal. But, in his latest book, "Drake and Saint Helena", Robin Castell ardently argues the case for believing that the *Golden Hind* had revictualled there eight years earlier, in June 1580, thus reviving Drake's chances of reaching home after three years circumnavigating the world.

There is certainly plenty of scope for speculation. Though countless books have been inspired by Drake's epic voyage over the last four hundred years, accounts of its long last lap from Java homeward are still curt and vague. Indeed, writers virtually end their story with Drake's departure from the East Indies, dismissing the fraught passage across the Indian and South Atlantic Oceans in little more than a sentence. Most recently Canadian geographer Samuel Bawlf has explained why in "The Secret Voyage of Sir Francis Drake" (London, 2003), noting that, "after Java, the (contemporary) accounts provide very few details of the rest of Drake's passage home". All that is known is that Drake sighted the east coast of Africa after 57 days, taking another 25 days to round the Cape of Good Hope where, "seven tons of rainwater" were collected and, "a month later, after sailing another 3,000 miles, they sighted the coast of Sierra Leone". (p. 179). So much for the South Atlantic!

The current British authority on Drake, Harry Kelsey, is no more informative, either in the new edition of the Dictionary of National Biography or in his book, "Sir Francis Drake, the Queen's Pirate" (Yale, 2000), where we are merely told,

"on the west side of the Cape (they) were unable to land. Then some heavy rains renewed their water supplies, and they sailed on for another month or more. Finally, they stopped for water and provisions at Sierra Leone [...]. It was 22nd July 1580". (p.204).

The problem facing chroniclers of the voyage has always been the loss of Drake's journals and charts, after their presentation to Queen Elizabeth, so that other sources have had to be relied on, including the papers of his nephew, John Drake, though this does not explain why so much is known about the rest of the expedition, and so little of its final months.

Castell's case in favour of Drake's landing at St Helena is based on reason and report, abundantly supported by texts and charts. Reason tells him that Drake must have found supplies somewhere between Java and Sierra Leone to keep his crew of 59 fit enough to sail the ship, and as he did not land at the Cape, he must have got them, like the Portuguese, at St Helena. Documentary support, he believes, can be found in a number of contemporary accounts, but mainly in that of a Portuguese

Angolan merchant, Odorato Duarte Lopez, in the well-known Italian report on the Congo and neighbouring islands by Antonio de Pigafetta, who wondered why the Portuguese did not garrison St Helena before it was seized by rivals, such as the two English “pirates”, Drake and Cavendish, “who had now twice entered into those seas”. Whether this means that both revictualled there, is a matter of interpretation, but Castell points out that Drake and his men would have been well aware of the island’s existence from mariners’ gossip, if from nothing else. Moreover, two years later when Drake’s men sailed again on a follow-up expedition under Edward Fenton, his plan to capture St Helena and seize Portuguese treasure ships there, provides proof enough for Castell that they must have been there before. There is, however, no hint of this in all their accounts of this “troublesome voyage”.

Doubts that Drake sailed even within sight of St Helena must be raised by the sailing route traced on Nicola van Sype’s chart, said to have been copied from Drake’s lost map showing that his course from the Cape took the *Golden Hind* well to the East of St Helena.

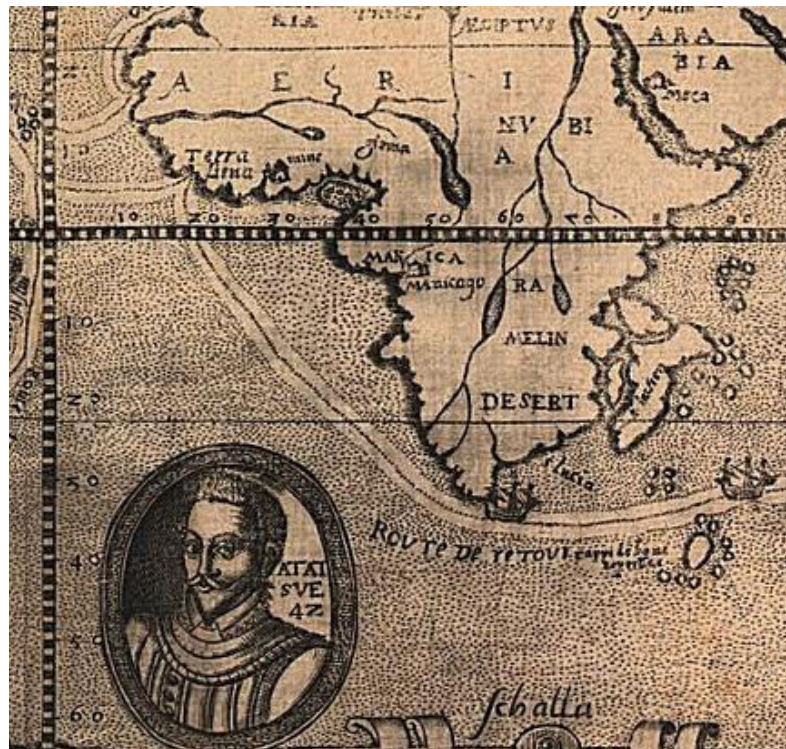


Figure 1: Van Sype’s map of Drake’s route in the South Atlantic

Nevertheless, scholars would do well, as Robin Castell has done, to take a St Helena perspective of maritime matters in the South Atlantic. To ignore this is to court error, as I discovered many years ago when checking on the exciting claim, in the Dictionary of National Biography, that the leading Elizabethan mathematician and astrologer, Dr John Dee - incidentally who taught Drake’s navigators - had “at some time visited St Helena and wrote an account of his voyage”. When I examined the relevant documents in the Old British Museum library, I found that an

account of Fenton's abortive voyage had misled the biographer, on whom St Helena's maritime significance was probably quite lost.

Robin Castell's challenge to the accepted authorities by publishing a review of evidence from the South Atlantic viewpoint is therefore to be welcomed. He had already nailed his colours to the mast in "St Helena Illustrated" (Cape Town, 1998) by claiming under a portrait of Drake that, "Documentary evidence reveals that he must have arrived at St Helena in 1580", quoting as his source, "Ship's Master, Thomas Cotes" (p. 4). Having surveyed his veritable arsenal of literary and pictorial material in "Drake and Saint Helena", I fancy that readers may well conclude rather that if Sir Francis did not land at St Helena, then he surely should have done! But St Helena is unlikely to order a Drake commemorative issue for philatelic fanciers on that score.

Reference

Castell, Robin, "*Drake and St Helena*", (St Helena 2004); pp. (xviii), 133; 11 portraits, 20 maps & endpapers, etc., bibliogr.

South Atlantic Chronicle, October 2006, Vol. XXX, No. 3, pp. 13-14.

© A.H. Schulenburg. Reproduced with permission.