Arctic Gold

Archeology of the Frobisher Voyages. WILLIAM W. FITZHUGH and JACQUELINE S. OLIN, Eds. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1993. xvi, 271 pp., illus. $45 or £34.95.

The Meta Incognita Project. Contributions to Field Studies. STEPHEN ALSFORD, Ed. Published in collaboration with the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History Arctic Studies Center by the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec, 1993. viii, 219 pp., illus. Paper, C$19.95. Mercury Series Directorate Paper no. 6.

The works under review here are devoted to the interpretation of a set of events that, except for an episode in the early 1860s, lay largely unanalyzed for some 400 years. The story begins in 1576, with a voyage from England under the leadership of Martin Frobisher. The intended destination of the voyage was the envisioned Northwest Passage, a strait that would lead to China. Realizing that what had appeared to be such a strait was in fact a lengthy bay (in what is now known as Baffin Island), Frobisher explored further. In this enterprise he discovered a group of people—the Inuit—who possessed iron and copper implements, was ambushed by natives who hit him in the buttocks with an arrow, lost a boat with five men, later captured an Inuit, and finally returned to England. One might think he was disappointed, but he carried back a black stone that an assayer assured him was high-grade gold ore.

That promise enticed wealthy patrons, including Queen Elizabeth I, to raise capital and fund a second (1577) and a third (1578) expedition. The second had three ships with increased tonnage to carry more cargo and a crew of 145. The voyagers settled briefly on an island that the Inuit inhabitants gave the name Kodlunarn, or white man's, Island, and this time they recovered almost 245 tons of ore, mostly from a single mine, before returning to England. Other accomplishments of this voyage included the building of a small defensive fort on the island, increased knowledge of Inuit culture and behavior, the location of further sources of minable ore, and learning how to survive in the inclement environment.

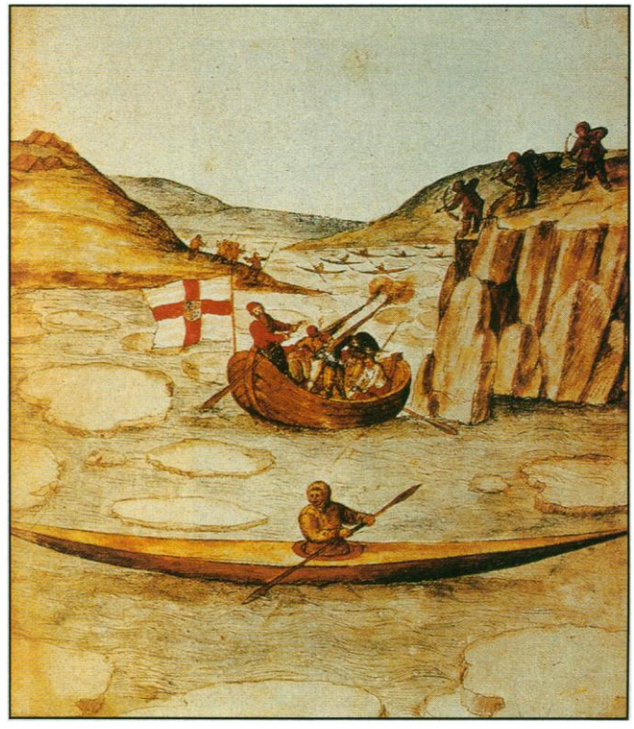
Foreseeing continued success, the expedition's sponsors again equipped a fleet, this time of 15 vessels with a crew of 397, of whom 100 were to stay ashore the next winter in a colony for which materials were brought to construct a stone and timber building. En route to Frobisher Bay the ships were lashed by storms, and ice conditions were bad off the Baffin coast. The ship carrying most of the timber intended for building the winter dwelling sank, and many provisions were lost. But Frobisher set up a base camp, including assaying facilities, on Kodlunarn Island (which he himself named after the Countess of Warwick) and repaired the vessels that had been damaged by the ice. Mining at seven sites produced 1136 tons of ore, which were loaded onto the ships for return to England. The ships left without much food and were again beset by storms, resulting in the loss of many men. Bad news met the fleet when it reached England; they learned that the 1577 ore was worthless. Assays of the 1578 ore revealed the same.

The loss of lives (both Inuit and English) and of equipment went for naught. Knowledge was obtained that would prove useful in the future: about Inuit culture and behavior, about strategies for traveling through and living in snow and bad weather conditions, and about how to evaluate possible gold ore. But for almost three centuries no white man visited Kodlunarn Island. Then in 1861 an American explorer, Charles Francis Hall, went north to ascertain the fate of Sir John Franklin, who had been lost while exploring the Arctic in the 1840s. Unable to reach the Central Arctic search area, Hall turned his efforts to eastern Baffin Island, just north of Frobisher Bay. Here he befriended local Inuit, learning their language and other customs well enough to live and travel with them for extended periods.

Hall found out nothing about Franklin, but the Inuit told him about much earlier European visitors. He traveled with the Inuit to Kodlunarn Island, where he examined physical evidence of the Europeans' sojourn—pottery fragments, flint-tempered slag, brick, tile, and iron/slag masses made by direct reduction of iron ore in a bloomery furnace. Hall made a detailed inspection of the island, mapping the locations of foundations and stone structures and noting the presence of European artifacts in nearby Inuit tent sites. On the basis of his finds and Inuit oral-history accounts, Hall believed the island to be the site of Frobisher's 16th-century mines and base camp. Returning south, Hall published an account of his discovery, and his conclusions gained acceptance.

Though like Frobisher he had not found what he was looking for, Hall also obtained knowledge of some value from his expedition. Once word of the location of Frobisher's site spread, many people (archeologists, historians, and others) continued a process the Inuit had begun 283 years before—removing vital and undocumented relics from the island.

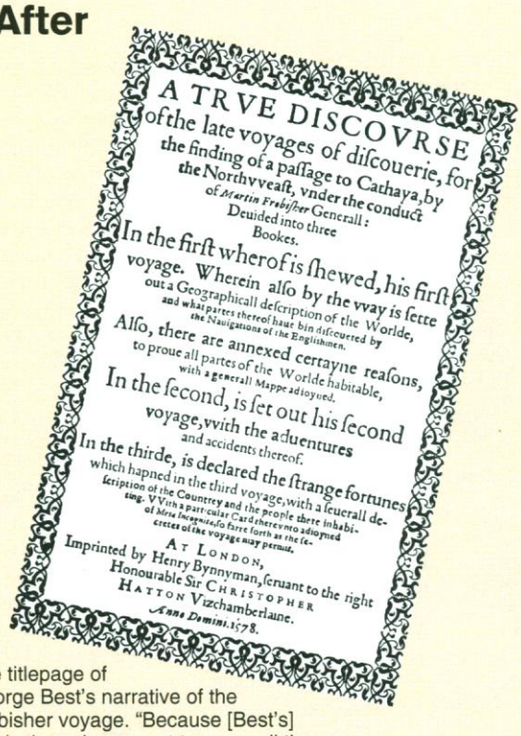
Archeology of the Frobisher Voyages represents the beginning of a "new wave" of more professional effort to reconstruct the Frobisher story. It reports the results of



"Encounter with Eskimos" as painted by John White, probably on the basis of sketches by an unknown artist with the Frobisher party. "This painting more than any other image or record has inspired popular opinion about the Frobisher voyages. Its battle scene mixes a fanciful reconstruction of the loss of Frobisher's five sailors with accurate rendering of Inuit kayaks, dress, and weapons, icepans, and treeless landscape. White has even captured the vertical faulting characteristic of the islands in Countess of Warwick Sound. . . . Only the European-style tents are in error." [From *Archeology of the Frobisher Voyages* and *The Meta Incognita Project*]

Frobisher and After

Charles Francis Hall's "discovery of Frobisher relics nearly three hundred years old, Sunday, August 11, 1861" at Niountelik Island. [From Hall's *Life with the Esquimaux*, 1864]



A TRVE DISCOVRSE
of the late voyages of diſcouerie, for
the finding of a paſſage to Cathaya, by
the Northvveaſt, vnder the conduct
of *Martin Frobiſher* Generall:
Deuided into three
Bookes.

In the firſt wherof is ſhewed, his firſt
voyage. Wherein alſo by the vvay is ſette
out a Geographicall deſcription of the Worlde,
and what partes thereof haue bin diſcouered by
the Nauigations of the Engliſhmen.

Alſo, there are annexed certayne reaſons,
to proue all partes of the Worlde habitable,
with a generall Mappe adioyned.

In the ſecond, is ſet out his ſecond
voyage, vvith the aduentures
and accidents thereof.

In the thirde, is declared the ſtrange fortunes
which happned in the third voyage, with a ſeuerall de-
ſcription of the Countrey and the people there inhabi-
ting. VVith a particular Card thereunto adioyned
of Meta Incognita, ſo farre forth as the ſe-
cretes of the voyage may permit.

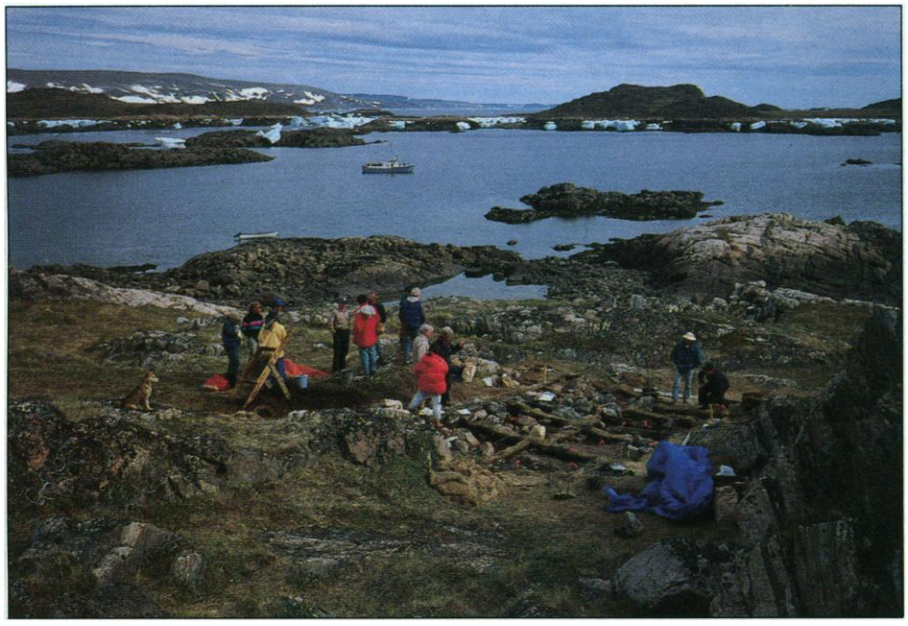
AT LONDON,
Imprinted by Henry Bynneyman, ſeruant to the right
Honourable Sir CHRISTOPHER
HATTON Vizchamberlaine.
Anno Domini. 1578.

The titlepage of George Best's narrative of the Frobisher voyage. "Because [Best's] text is the only account to cover all three voyages and because Frobisher himself never learned to write, it has often been relied upon as the 'official' account."

Martin Frobisher. Portrait by Cornelius Ketel. [Bodleian Library, Oxford]

Charles Francis Hall and his Inuit associates gathering Frobisher relics on Kodlunarn Island, July 1862. [From Hall's *Life with the Esquimaux*, 1864]

{From *Archeology of the Frobisher Voyages*}



Excavations being conducted at Kuyait site, Frobisher Bay, in July 1991 at one of the houses occupied by Inuit shortly after their contact with the Frobisher party. Frobisher-period ceramics, coal, and European woods were recovered from Kuyait houses, indicating that Inuit people continued to "mine" the Kodlunarn Island sites for years—even centuries—after the English voyagers departed. [William Fitzhugh]

historical and archeological studies of Frobisher documents and artifacts, making use both of materials deposited in the Smithsonian Institution by Hall and of studies conducted on Kodlunarn Island in 1981, 1990, and 1991. In it 13 authors from institutions in the United States and Canada, in a generally accessible style, recount the history of the Frobisher voyages (first told by George Best in 1578) as seen both by Europeans and by Inuit and describe the Kodlunarn Island sites as they currently stand. Generally of a more technical nature, there are five chapters devoted to the ores and iron blooms from Kodlunarn Island, a principal question being whether they represent activities of the Frobisher expedition or of Inuit, Norse, or others. There are also a chapter each on pottery and on wood and charcoal remains. There have been many questions about the Frobisher material; many have been answered, but sometimes the new data simply raise new ones. The identity and the fate of lost men and ships are still uncertain.

An extension of the efforts that produced the Smithsonian volume is the Meta Incognita (unknown shores or boundaries) Project, a collaborative venture of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the Smithsonian Institution, and others. Its first publication is a set of 10 "Contributions to Field Studies" based on investigations conducted on Kodlunarn Island in 1991. The authorship of the work overlaps that of the Smithsonian Press volume, and it adds more basic data to those presented there, similarly covering a range of topics from Inuit oral history to metallurgical activities. Among the contributions is a preliminary report of excavations of Kuyait, a winter village of sod structures discovered in 1990 and containing Frobisher artifacts apparently utilized by later occupants. A second work from the project, *Martin Frobisher's Northwest Venture, 1576–1581: Mines, Minerals, and Metallurgy* by D. D. Hogarth, P. W. Boreham, and J. G. Mitchell, which considers the fate of Frobisher's booty from the British side, has recently appeared as number 7 in the Canadian Museum's Mercury Series (C$21.95), and a third is in press.

An iron bloom deposited in the Smithsonian Institution by Charles Francis Hall. "Attempts to date the bloom . . . led to the current interest in the Frobisher voyages and the Meta Incognita Program." Diameter, about 18 centimeters at base. [From *Archeology of the Frobisher Voyages*]

Frobisher failed in his effort to find gold ore in the bay that became known by his name; though he learned a lot about living in the Arctic, his knowledge was not passed on to others for many years. From Frobisher and his men the Inuit received new materials to utilize and new knowledge about an alien culture that had different goals and different ways to accomplish them. They passed on both acquisitions to their kin for many years and the knowledge to other members of that alien culture centuries later. The Smithsonian Press and Canadian Museum volumes represent the gold that Frobisher never found and that Hall only glimpsed.

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Ventures Southward

Before the Heroes Came. Antarctica in the 1890s. T. H. BAUGHMAN. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1993. xii, 160 pp., illus. $22.

After the big expeditions by the United States, French, and British navies in the 1840s there was a lull in Antarctic exploration before the "heroic age" at the beginning of the 20th century. The exploits of Scott, Shackleton, Amundsen, and Mawson in this later phase of revived interest overshadowed the achievements not only of other important contemporary expeditions but of their forerunners in the preceding decade. This book gives a long overdue appreciation of these pioneering ventures in the far south.

It begins with a general account of the early history—the unrewarded efforts of Matthew F. Maury and Georg von Neumayer in the second half of the 19th century to extend observations in meteorology and physical science into southern latitudes and the fruitful but short incursion of the *Challenger* inside the Antarctic Circle. Interest then began to rekindle, particularly in Australia, Britain, and Germany. While establishment scientists set up committees, passed resolutions, and lobbied for funds, those with commercial interest, the whalers who were finding their prey getting scarcer in the north, and dedicated individualists content to do things on a shoestring were quicker to take operative action. A private venture unconnected with whaling was that of Adrien de Gerlache, sailing in 1897 in the *Belgica* and getting trapped in the ice