



The Secret Voyage of Sir Francis Drake: 1577-1580

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On September 26, 1580, Francis Drake sailed his ship, the Golden Hinde, into Plymouth Harbor on the southwest coast of England. He had long been given up for lost, and rumors quickly circulated about where he had been on his three-year round-the-world voyage, and about the plunder he had brought home to fill Queen Elizabeth's treasury. However, a veil of secrecy was immediately imposed on the expedition: Drake's journals and charts were impounded, and his men were forbidden, on pain of death, to divulge where they had been—especially during the summer of 1579, when they had dropped from sight in the North Pacific.

In hindsight, Drake's journey was arguably the greatest sea voyage of all time. In a ship barely one hundred feet long, he sailed more than 40,000 miles, much of the voyage at extraordinary speed; disrupted the Spanish Empire in the New World; encountered often hostile native peoples on four continents; narrowly escaped disaster on numerous occasions; and became the first captain to circumnavigate the globe.

Samuel Bawlf masterfully recounts the drama of this extraordinary expedition within the context of England's struggle to withstand the aggression of Catholic Europe and Drake's ambition for English enterprise in the Pacific. He offers fascinating insight into life at sea in the sixteenth century—from the dangers of mutiny and the lack of knowledge about wind and current to the arduous physical challenges faced every day by Drake's men. But it is Bawlf's assertion of Drake's whereabouts in the summer of 1579 that gives his book even greater originality. From a seminal study of maps of the period, Bawlf shows with certainty that Drake sailed all the way to Alaska—much farther than anyone has heretofore imagined—thereby rewriting the history of exploration. Drake was, Bawlf claims, in search of the western entrance to the fabled Northwest Passage, at which he planned to found England's first colony, which could wrest control of the Pacific, and the wealth of the East Indies, from Spain. Drake's voyage was, in fact, far ahead of its time: another 200 years would pass before the eighteenth-century explorers of record reached the northwest coast of North America.

A cast of luminous characters runs through *The Secret Voyage of Sir Francis Drake*: Philip II of Spain, Europe's most powerful monarch; Elizabeth's spymaster and powerful advisor, Francis Walsingham; the encyclopedic cosmographer John Dee; and Abraham Ortelius, the great Dutch mapmaker to whom Drake leaked his Pacific discoveries. In the end, though, it is Francis Drake himself who comes most fully to life through the lens of his epic voyage. Remembered most as a privateer and for his victory over the Spanish Armada, the Drake that emerges from these pages is so much more: a dynamic leader of men, a brilliant navigator and sailor, and surely one of history's most daring explorers.

The Secret Voyage of Sir Francis Drake: 1577-1580 Details

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Barry Sierer says

A fairly concise description of the “secret” voyage and life of Sir Francis Drake. One of the most fascinating issues is the deception that surrounds this trip as well as other voyages by explorers in Drake’s time. Trade routes, and by extension, the maps that detailed them, were so critical that maps were intentionally altered by monarchs to protect the information that these explorers developed. In the case of King Phillip of Spain, he published maps that portrayed the Pacific Ocean as large lake that could be sailed in order to reach Asia from North America.

The reason for two star rating is the author’s handling of the “New Albion” controversy. “New Albeon” is the hotly debated location on the North American coast (some possible locations include the Oregon or California coasts) where Drake careened (cleaned the hull of) his ship before crossing the Pacific Ocean.

This author suggests that this site is on the Oregon coast, but then claims that New Albion was a colony located on Vancouver Island. He makes this assertion with sources that do not seem properly backed up. He then spends an entire chapter describing what Drake “might” have seen along the BC coast at the time. A narrative that sounds suspiciously like a cultural tourist brochure. (The author is professor of British Columbian history).

This author has confused the New Albion issue and done a disservice to history.

Jeffrey Sylvester says

Samuel Bawlf’s, “The Secret Voyage of Sir Francis Drake” is a good book but is a little dry in parts. I was initially put off by the text-book style of writing when compared with the fluid and detailed prose of explorer novelist Laurence Bergreen. But once I got into it I realized that Bawlf provides many useful summaries regarding the use of navigational instruments (the astrolabe, cross-staff) and the broader events that contextualized Drake’s travels (the Treaty of Tordesillas 1494, the Inquisition, the correlating rise in Protestantism & the loosening of Spanish claims on New World land and shipping lanes).

The book is centered on Sir Francis Drake’s secretly commissioned voyage to the New World. Prior to this commission, Elizabeth I’s government was in financial trouble relative to Spain, her primary rival. Spain was also Catholic and supported Mary Stuart for the English throne. When considering the on-going nature of this dual threat, Elizabeth eventually concluded that a Spanish end to England was inevitable if she didn’t heal England’s finances by catching up in the race to exploit New World resources. One problem was that Phillip felt he had a Pope sanctioned monopoly on all New World land West of Brazil, a treaty that would hold little weight in a Protestant England. Elizabeth knew that meddling in Spanish commerce would be viewed as an act of war but she had to try because Phillip’s power was growing and an invasion was just a matter of time.

In Elizabeth’s day monarchs facing financial strain would often regulate the use of joint-stock companies to finance New World voyages. That way, monarchs wouldn’t have to shoulder the entire risk of the venture and they could provide an incentive for private ship owners to augment the strength of their navy. Elizabeth

tested these waters with Sir Francis Drake but kept the expedition secret to avoid rocking the boat. Drake was to plunder the Spanish, to find a suitable spot for English colonization, and to find the elusive Northwest Passage.

A stellar navigator, Drake appeared and disappeared with loads of plunder. When overtaking a ship, Drake's men would go straight to the cabin to capture the pilot and their maps, but instead of doling out harsh treatment, he would dine the Captain and decide which of his crew to keep to operate the captured ships and to help steer toward established harbours and destinations. Once that was decided, anyone who wasn't accepted was dropped off at land or in a discarded ship with the necessary provisions to live or make landfall.

Drake's success was based largely on surprise. As such, he had to keep ahead of Spanish messengers on land as he sailed through Magellan's Strait and up the West coast of what is now south and Central America. He also made sure to careen his ships at regular intervals to get rid of any dead weight whether it was barnacles or a slow ship, and tried to gain as much knowledge as possible about where to catch trade winds.

But the voyage was as much about exploration. Numerous detailed observations of the coasts were made especially north of the 40th parallel, which was one reason why the time of the voyage stretched beyond expectation. By the time Drake's fleet reached southern Alaska it was decided that a contingent of men would be left behind in a smaller boat to attempt navigation of the fabled Northwest Passage whereas Drake's team would haul it back in the bigger ships, the 20,000 miles West, over the Pacific, and around the capes, to get back to England.

When Drake arrived in England he wasn't sure whether country's political circumstances had changed or whether he had fallen out with Elizabeth for whatever arbitrary reason. Thus, he anchored off the coast of France until he received word.

Hearing of Drake's plunder, Elizabeth immediately reeled him in and bathed in his riches. Drake enjoyed Elizabeth's favour but eventually wanted back out to sea to in order to time the navigation of the Northwest Passage and become known for its discovery. Elizabeth had different plans. Instead, she made Drake second in command of an English fleet designed to take on the accruing Spanish Armada. Drake's job was to randomly attack assembling Spanish fleets in home harbours to break their battle formations and morale, but ultimately to distract the focus and resources of Phillip. Drake successfully took to the task but was upset with the Queen's commissioning of others to carry out his New World hopes, all of which failed miserably. Drake was the King of the Seas and everyone knew it. When Drake died, all the men in the New World, regardless of nation, mourned his passing whereas the Old World celebrated.

Beyond the New World adventure, a few other themes emerged. One was that retrospect has helped redeem Drake's accomplishments and reputation. It took more than 200 years for other explorers to successfully replicate his feats. The one drawback of this book is the length of text devoted to the politically shifting nature of maps and the part devoted to whether or not the Northwest Passage was found.

3 out of 5 stars for Bawlf!

Jeff says

"The Secret Voyage of Sir Francis Drake" S. Bawlf. 2003. Successful slaver, intrepid buccaneer, and famous explorer, Sir Francis Drake is without question one of the most colorful and exciting characters in maritime history. The book's main focus is on Drake's secret exploration of the Pacific Northwest in search of the famed Northwest Passage. Artifacts from archeological digs and the oral history of Native Americans, along with scant surviving cartographic knowledge are used to piece together his journey. The author even studies the climatic history of the area comparing it to the descriptions of surviving documents. Because Queen Elizabeth insisted on keeping his explorations clandestine, the breadth of his discoveries have remained a mystery. Although primarily conjectural, this book does an amazing job of sleuthing the many possibilities of his exploration in a very intelligent and methodical fashion. If only all historical works could be this exciting of a read!

Ian Robertson says

Geographer and former politician Samuel Bawlf burst onto the literary scene with a captivating theory that Sir Francis Drake explored the Pacific Northwest of North America almost 200 years before other European explorers, claiming the territory for England as Nova Albion but failing in his primary mission to find a northwest passage between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. There is no definitive proof, of course, and without that school-children's textbooks will remain unchanged, but what a rollicking yarn Bawlf tells - educational, exciting, well researched and thought provoking. A must read for Canadians, maritime historians, and indeed all who enjoy historical fiction.

After some early and notable success under Captain William Hawkins in the Caribbean, Drake captained his own ship, sailing for Queen Elizabeth in 1577 from Plymouth. He led his fleet south and across the Atlantic, through the Strait of Magellan on the southern tip of South America, up the west coast of South and Central America, across the Pacific to the Moluccas and ultimately continuing west around the southern tip of Africa and home to England, bearing riches and becoming the second captain and first Englishman to circumnavigate the globe. Bawlf tells of Drake's accomplishments well, along the way highlighting developments in navigation, health (combating scurvy), daily life and seafaring life, geography and cartography, and geopolitics.

With this rich tapestry of detail, Bawlf concentrates on a large gap between the time Drake was known to have landed in New Spain (Mexico) and when he was known to have arrived across the Pacific in the Moluccas, and he painstakingly lays out his evidence that Drake spent the time exploring northwards to the Alaska panhandle. Gaps in information or historical record are addressed through circumstantial evidence, though no definitive proof is or can be offered regarding the secret voyage.

Not being an historian by training or vocation, the only inaccuracy I could spot was with reference to William Hawkins as John Hawkins' brother early in the book and as his nephew later - a very minor oversight. The primary criticism of the book is with regard to the final sections, which detail Drake's hypothetical voyage in the Golden Hinde north to Alaska. Bawlf is clear regarding his suppositions, but the chapters have the same historical tone as those detailing Drake's earlier, well documented voyages, and thus a casual reader might be left with the impression that this northern voyage is more fact than conjecture. The tone does give the book a consistency and makes Bawlf's hypothesis extremely readable, but it also leaves the impression that he's trying a bit too hard to turn his theory into fact. Again, a very minor quibble.

The Secret Voyage has all of the detail of a history text, the action of an historical novel, and the potential to

unleash further research to confirm or repudiate this most interesting of hypotheses. Extremely well structured and researched, and a very enjoyable read.

Joe says

I came to this book with scant knowledge of Sir Francis Drake, basically that he was post-Christopher Columbus British naval explorer – and that he had a beard. Obviously there is much more to this amazing man’s story and ample reason as to why he’s remembered – and books are still being written about him – 400+ years after his sea voyages. (To put Drake in historical perspective, William Shakespeare was a contemporary.) This volume provides an excellent and very readable chronicle of Drake’s life, times and adventures.

Queen Elizabeth – the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn – was on the British throne during Drake’s lifetime. She and England were in the midst of “religious turmoil” stirred up by first her father, and then her half-sister, Mary. On the “global” front, Elizabeth was performing a delicate balancing act as a world power, seeking a national identity without unduly provoking her European neighbors – France, Portugal and particularly King Philip’s Spain.

This “contest” included trade from Asia and the colonization of the New World; the goal to exploit their treasures. Since the only mode of long-distance transportation available at the time were sailing ships, he – or she – who ruled the high seas, controlled trade which also meant the associated riches; so a sailor and commander of Drake’s caliber was a valuable resource indeed. And Drake was one hell of a sailor.

Without spoiling too much of Drake’s story here, he was tasked by Elizabeth to find a northwest passage to Asia around North America, much like the Straits of Magellan around the southern tip of South America. He never found it because there isn’t one. Along the way though, and particularly during the almost three year voyage chronicled here, Sir Francis explored and mapped the new world, survived harrowing meteorological circumstances, fought numerous naval battles and secured 30 tons of plunder - 30 tons! And also, by the way, he and his crew circumnavigated, i.e. sailed around, the globe.

As to the particulars of Drake’s nautical adventures and as to why and how they were kept “secret” – well – read the book - You won’t be disappointed. The Secret Voyage of Sir Francis Drake is a fascinating and compelling read.

Rowland says

Bawlf first tells the entrancing story of Francis Drake, a man with virtually no background who leaped into immense wealth and influence via his voyages into the Spanish maritime empire. According to Bawlf, the various fragments of information left by Drake after he English spy-masters had stolen and hidden almost everything reveal that he discovered British Columbia and the "north-west passage" route back to England. This discovery held enormous import for the British elite, who ached to dismantle the haughty Spanish empire and replace it with their own. We know now that they succeeded, although the north-west passage played no part: it did not exist. Nevertheless, Bawlf tells a fascinating story of 16th-century detective work, rifling around in the ancient maps and extracting from them Drake's hidden episode that only makes a greater

man of him. I thoroughly enjoyed this book, which leaves the detective work until the end for real adherents.

Tom says

This is a great swashbuckling book. We all learned of how Francis Drake circumnavigated the world looting spanish ships on the way and arriving back in Elizabethan England with a ship full of treasure. What is new is the discovery that part of his mission was suppressed and the full story only recently pieced together. Part of his mission was to sail around the southern tip of S. America, navigate the Strait of Magellan and then sail up the western coast as far north as to find the western outlet of the presumed northwest passage. of course other English sailors (e.g. Frobisher) had attempted to find a NW passage from the east side. The clever part of Drake's mission was the idea that perhaps if they found the western outlet, they could navigate their back. Very bold, but, of course, fatally flawed. Nevertheless, it makes for a great story. The book is rich with the story told by maps and the subterfuge in which the Elizabethan's engaged to hide from their spanish enemies their actual intent.

I bought this book when on a trip to Vancouver and, not surprisingly, it reveals that Drake at one time landed on what is present day Vancouver. I enjoyed the book and it will be placed on the history section of my shelves, next to J.E.Neale's biography of Eliz I.

Tony D. says

When I saw this book in my local library I thought, "Hmm. Pirate story. Nice." I had no idea I was about to read the tale of the second man to ever circumvent the globe; which he did in a little wooden Galleon named "The Golden Skiff."

He fought the Spanish, partied and warred with natives, braved storms, heatwaves, freezing, and mutiny, to return to England with a boatload of treasures that catapulted him to International fame.

The book itself is non-fiction and reads as a history book would, but the tale of this man was so engrossing I found myself looking forward to coming back and reading it rather than running another round on my Playstation. Great story.

Jim Labelle says

Wow! My son lent me this book and said he thought I'd like it. Boy was he right. Drake is another one of those characters from history I've always been fascinated about. His voyage around the world and his defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 were events that reshaped the history of the world over 400 years ago. (Incidentally, I've always been fascinated with round-the-world voyages for some reason and once read a book written by Francis Chichester which I think was called the Gypsy Moth about his solo circumnavigation of the globe in the 1960's). To top things off the author puts forth a convincing argument that Drake secretly explored the coast of British Columbia and Alaska in 1577, nearly 200 years before Captain Cook. Read it! It's terrific.

Cat says

Growing up in the SF Bay Area, I was told (taught?) that Sir Francis Drake "discovered" the bay and left a plaque. So I was surprised to read in this book that um, he didn't ever go to SF. Go figure!

I mean, I was genuinely surprised when I got to the end of the book and figured that he wasn't heading towards SF. I guess that story was proven false about twenty years ago, but I never heard different.

So that was cool.

Otherwise, the book is capable, but hardly imparts the um, flavor of what a 16th century sea voyage must have been like. His prose is decent enough, but it doesn't sparkle.

There is over ample coverage of the high politics of the period (understandable, since Drake figured prominently in many inter governmental shenanigans).

John says

A well researched and interesting account of Sir Francis Drake, his voyage around the world and his possible exploration of our NW coast. I learned lots about the conflicts between Spain and England and Drake's plundering of various Spanish treasures. It is so amazing to see what these explorers did in the 1500's not knowing where they were going and having to live off their own resourcefulness. The end of the book is a bit speculative of Drake's voyage around Vancouver Island, partly because that part of his voyage was kept secret so others wouldn't learn of his search for a NW passage, and partly because most of the secret records were lost in a fire.

Still it makes for interesting reading especially because a coin from 1551-1553 was discovered in some mud flats here in Victoria back in early January 2014.

Christopher Fox says

This is a good, interesting book. For my taste it could have been better were Bawlf a better story-teller. However, all the facts are here and there is a myriad of them, often laid out with extracts from original writings and logs of people involved. Drake was perhaps the penultimate English explorer (restless beyond imagining) and his skills as navigator, sailor, leader and even politician all come to the fore in this wide-ranging tale. I found the workings of governments and nations, especially those of the seafaring and colonizing countries (England, Spain and Portugal) even more intriguing (and that's the correct word for them) than even the far-flung exploits of Sir Francis.

Boy the people in that day and age were tough and self-reliant. Well worth a read.

Ardi says

Kaasahaarav kirjeldus ühest oma aja kuulsaimast maadeavastajast, seiklejast, piraadist. Raamat põhineb tõsielusündmustel, nii hästi-halvasti kui neid on tänapäeval võimalik rekonstrueerida, aga omab ka ilukirjanduslikku väärust. Hea katkend ajastust, mil meie planeedil oli veel midagi tõepoolest avastada ning seikused ei olnud kaugeltki mitte turvalised; kui seadused kehtisid ainult nii kaugele kui neid oli võimalik viia ning sellest edasi oli oportunistlike, tihti tugevama õigust kehtestavate, aga samas ka põhimõtteliklade meeste pärusmaa.

Ian says

This is a fascinating and, to me, compelling argument about the extent of Drake's northward exploration during the less documented portions of his voyage around the world. Bawlf combines a personal knowledge of the waters of the Northwest with what has been some obviously extensive scholarship. It's handled very lightly in this popular version of the argument, but there are plenty of long quotations from sixteenth century sources, and Bawlf's vision of sixteenth-century politics is in line with dominant historical accounts. Sadly, so much information from the original voyage was suppressed as a state secret and then apparently lost, that much remains in doubt. Bawlf's crucial section is therefore conjectural (as are everyone else's arguments about this section of the voyage). But it's a brilliant example of arguing using a variety of sources filled with hints, half-truths, and deliberate falsification. Bawlf also combines the original sources with accounts of later explorers, shreds of archaeological evidence, anthropology, and modern cartography and climatology. Because his arguments are based on so many sources, they are convincing in general outline. It seems clear that Drake visited several locations on the coast of the Pacific Northwest. The level of specificity claimed for his course is a little suspicious, and the claim that "Nova Albion" can only represent Vancouver island is muddy. But the book also functions as an engaging narrative of Drake's entire journey. Drake himself comes off as perhaps the most patient and kind early modern explorer you'll ever encounter (certainly extraordinarily kind by the standards of his day). If you like to sail, you'll also be enthralled by the amazing examples of seamanship (both authenticated and conjectural).

ReIstuart says

This is a history of the voyages of Drake. After giving you the commonly known history of the man and explaining his times and the world situation to some degree his suppressed voyage details are discussed. His voyage around the world was not a secret. But the official story didn't match up the amount of time it took for the voyage. Here, the author discusses the logical explanation, Drake's time exploring the Puget Sound/Vancouver area and why his exploration of this area was suppressed. Details on maps from his time in England confirm his knowledge of the area and there is no other reasonable explanation for this. We have plenty of evidence that the Queen directed information about his voyage suppressed. Sadly, additional records have been lost or destroyed either during the civil war or when the palace at Whitehall burned.

It's very interesting thinking about what a different world it was in this time and what outsized characters (like Drake) accomplished.
