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0521481619 - Voyages in Print: English Travel to America, 1576-1624

Mary C. Fuller

Excerpt

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Introduction

We should note the force, effect, and consequences of inventions which are nowhere more conspicuous than in those three which were unknown to the ancients, namely printing, gunpowder, and the compass. For these three have changed the appearance and state of the whole world.

(Francis Bacon¹)

This famous statement by Francis Bacon points us in a particular direction: namely, towards what was to Renaissance Europe a new world. All three of these technologies were instrumental in the European conquest of America: the compass got you there, the gun protected you and functioned as a kind of cultural magic, and printing allowed you to reproduce and disseminate what you had learned, in the form of maps, vocabularies, histories, and so on. This book is mostly about the third term in the series: the printed texts which were both generated by and helped to generate England's entry into American discovery and colonization between 1576 and 1624, that is, between Sir Humphrey Gilbert's *Discourse of Discovery* and John Smith's *Generall Historie*.

The written record tells us much of what we know about how printing presses, gunpowder, and the compass allowed Englishmen to operate on the New World and those who inhabited it. They also tell another, more implicit story: how the printing press in particular, the engagement of writing with American discovery, operated on Englishmen. Peter Hulme recently attributed the "obsessive" documentation of the early English voyages and colonies to a "self-conscious effort to create a continuous epic myth of origin for the emerging imperial nation."² Hulme's comment instances a broad consensus on the importance of the Elizabethan and Jacobean voyage texts as central to forming the idea of an English nation. In his recent *Forms of Nationhood*, Richard Helgersen usefully sets Richard Hakluyt in the company of other writers engaged in a "generational project" of articulating the idea of an English nation.

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Hakluyt, of course, is principally known as the editor of *Principal Navigations of the English Nation* (1598–1600), a massive collection of printed documents which indeed has been most often characterized precisely as a national epic.

Another general consensus agrees that the referential claims of the voyage texts matter. It matters that these things really happened, and that they were recorded by men who had experienced and witnessed them. Philip Edwards writes that for the authors of the voyage narratives, “their writings are an extension or a continuation of their participation . . . There is a difference between writing for your life and writing for a living.”³ Helgeson concurs: “before being books, these voyages actually happened. Their having happened was essential to their meaning.”⁴ No one writing in English in Cambridge, Massachusetts could deny this. The converse, however, is also true. Edwards again: “It is worth noting how much the act of writing was considered to be an indispensable part of making voyages” (*Last Voyages*, 8). Being written was an important component of their happening, and this is true in a strong sense. The voyage narratives came into being not only as after-the-fact accounts for ideological purposes, but as an integral part of the activities they documented.

Richard Hakluyt nurtured and encouraged both English travel and English travel writing. As his reputation grew, his documentary collections acquired a gravity of their own which stimulated and attracted travel narratives; documents appear in *Principal Navigations* which were originally addressed to Hakluyt as letters, or transcribed by him from a solicited oral narrative. But Hakluyt’s notion of collecting and assembling narratives into a book was not itself responsible for the genesis of English voyage narratives. Hakluyt’s project was at least in part dependent on the existence of widespread writing practices already in place, particularly of *merchants’* writing. Primary documentation of the earlier enterprises in *Principal Navigations* was available to Hakluyt largely because both commerce and navigation were intimately involved with the production of written records. And not only commerce and navigation: political and diplomatic documents also occupy a significant space in *Principal Navigations*. (The latter, however, are qualitatively different, tending towards formulaic repetition of legal language.) Commercial and navigational writing also had their formulae, but they were more open-ended ones. The log, the itinerary, the inventory, and the record

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of transactions encouraged a degree of expansiveness and detail, incorporating new material in an ongoing manner, even permitting the appearance of at least skeletal narrative. (Figure 1 illustrates the physical space allotted to prose observations in John Davis' 1587 log-book, printed by Hakluyt; figure 2 shows the prose journal kept by Sir Thomas Roe in addition to a more technical log.)

Contemporary rules for commerce and navigation stress the importance of the written record. Records of bearings and distance traveled were required by navigators both in order to get a fix on where they were, and to create a more permanent record allowing others to replicate their journey. Sebastian Cabot's ordinances of 1553 specify that "the marchants, and other skilful persons in writing, shal daily write, describe, and put in memorie the Navigation of each day and night"; once a week, the writings of different ships are to be collated and "upon good ... conclusion determined, to put the same into a common leger to remain of record to the company."⁵ Luca Pacioli's important 1494 treatise on commercial bookkeeping similarly instructs the merchant to keep "a book in which [he] records all his transactions, large and small, in chronological order regardless of their size. He will record in detail in this book everything bought or sold, omitting nothing, clearly mentioning the who, what, when, and where of the transaction."⁶ As commerce and navigation developed, neither could be practiced *without* writing, frequent, detailed, ongoing, and systematic. Hakluyt's material on the Muscovy and Guinea trades shows how the requirements of commercial and navigational writing intersected, along with a third imperative, the trading company's demand for a reliable, permanent record from its agents: "a common leger to remain of record." The resultant documents became much of Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations*.

Instructions for the Northeast Passage voyages sponsored by the Muscovy Company in the 1580s, printed in Hakluyt's collection, provide a specific example of the writing required of the travelers. Arthur Pet and Charles Jackman's commission, given by Sir Rowland Hayward and George Barne in 1580, instructs them "of all your assemblies and consultations together, and the substance of matter you shall at every time agree upon, we would have you to note them in the paper bookes that we give you for that purpose, unto each barke one."⁷ William Borough insists on the importance of another kind of record:

M. Iohn Davis.3.		Traffiques and Discoueries.					117
Month.	Days.	Hour.	Comf.	Latitud.	Declination of the pole.	Ther. hids.	THE DISCOVERSE.
June.							
Noone the 24	24	12	by E. Rasterly	41	67	40	S. S. E.
	25						The true course, &c. Here the weather was very hot. This 24 of June at 6 of the clocke we met two saunges at sea in their small canoes, into whom we gave bracelets, and nails, for skins & birds. At 9 of the clocke they departed from vs. The next day at 7 of the clocke in the morning, there came unto vs 30 saunges so to leaguers off the shore, intending to goe to the shippe. The land off them fish, birch, thimber, birds, and their canoes from their backs, for bracelets, nails, knives &c. They remained with vs foure houres, and departed.
Noone the 26	26	12	R.				S.
	27	12	R. E.	2			S. W.
	28	12	R.	10			S.
	29	12	R. E.	8			S. W.
	30	12	R. E.	5			S. E.
Noone the 27	27	12	Westerly	52	70	4	
Noone the 28	28	12	R.	42	72	12	
	29						
	30						
July.							
1	1	12	by S. Westerly	44	71	36	R. W. by R.
2	2	12	S. E.	12	71	9	
Noone the 3	3	12	R. R. W.	11	71	40	R.
Noone the 4	4	12	S. S. E.	26	70		R.
	5	12	S. S. W.	22	69		Variable.
	6						
	7						
	8						
Noone the 9	9	12	S. S. E.	7	68	50	Calm.
Noone the 10	10	12	S. E. by S.	8	68	30	S. by R.
Noone the 11	11	12	S. R. E.	11	68	45	Variable.
Noone the 12	12	12	S. S. E.	16	68		R. R. W.
	13	12	S. by S.	20			S.
	14						
Noone the 14	14	12	by R.	11	67	50	S.
Noone the 15	15	12	S. S. W.	5	67	45	E.
	16						
Noone the 16	16	12	by S. Westerly	27	67	10	S.
Noone the 17	17	12	S. by W.	30	65	22	R. fog.
Noone the 18	18	12	W. southerly	32	65	20	S. fog.
	19						
	20						
	21						
	22						
	23						This 22 day at 2 of the clocke in the afternoon, hauling fallen 60 fathoms Northwell, we ankered among an huge number of ice being in the bottom of the sayd supposen passage, at which place the water rises a fademe height. Here as we rode at anker, a great towale passed by vs, and towed West in among the ice. In this place a S. W. by W. moone maketh a full sea. Here the compasse varied 30 degrees.
	24						The 24 day at 1 of the clocke in the morning we set sail, departing from this place, and haying our course S. E. to recouer the maine Ocean againe.
	25						This 25 we were becalmed almost in the bottome of the Streights, & had the weather marvellous extreme hot.
	26						This day being in the Streights, we had a very quicke Noone.
	27						Being still in the Streights, we had this day faire weather.
Noone the 29	29				64		At this port we got cleere of the Streights, having coasted the South shore, the land trending from hence S. W. by S.
Noone the 30	30	12	S. S. W.	22	63		This day we coasted the shore, a banke of ice being thereupon. At this 30 of July in the afternoon we crossed ouer the entrance of mouth of a great river of passage, being 30 leagues broad, and situate betwene 65 & 67 degrees, in which place we had 3 or 4 great rades, currents of ourleis, halfcompeing like the rage of the waters betwix London bying, and bending their course into the fawd mill.

Figure 1 John Davis' log, in Richard Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1598)

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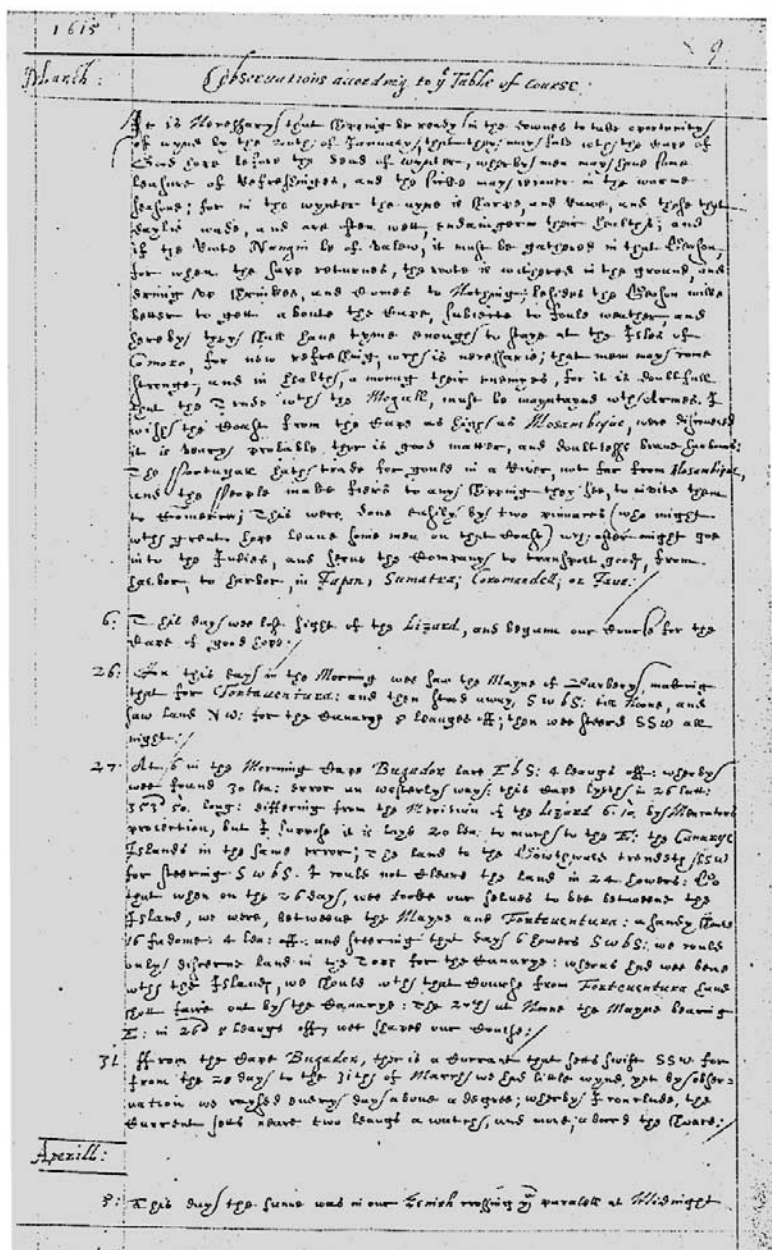


Figure 2 A page from Sir Thomas Roe's "Journal during his Embassy at the Court of the Mogul" (1615)

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in keeping your dead reckoning, it is very necessary that you doe note at the ende of every foure glasses, what way the shippe hath made ... and howe her way hath bene through the water ... and also to note the depth, and what things worth the noting happened in that time, with also the winde upon what point you finde it them, and of what force or strength it is, and what sailes you beare. (*PN* 1904 III, 259)

In addition, Borough requires travelers to keep records of latitude observations, with time and place; when they see land, to take a bearing, estimate the distance, and draw what they see; to note high and low tides, currents, and variations of the compass.⁸

On this particular voyage, writing functioned not only practically but also as a cultural token. John Dee suggested that the Pet/Jackman voyage should exchange books with the Chinese. Maps printed in China, and Chinese-language books, were to be obtained for their information. Richard Hakluyt the lawyer desired them to seek out *old* printed books, “to see whether they have had print there before it was devised in Europe as some write” (*PN* 1904 III, 268). In turn, the travelers were to bring and display a map of England, and to give as gifts Abraham Ortelius’ book of maps, a book of the attire of all nations, herbals, and bestiaries (*PN* 1904 III, 272). Finally, they were provided with a book of rates, in which they could check off the commodities to be found in the east, and a list of commodities “of which we have plentie and want vent” (coincidentally, no doubt, parchment is at the top of the list).

In many ways, then, the act of writing was crucial to the navigational, commercial, and informational purposes of the voyage, principally (although not exclusively) as a record. Borough concludes: “these orders if you diligently observe, you may thereby perfectly set downe in the plats ... [fill in] your whole travell, and description of your discovery, which is a thing that will be chiefly expected at your hands” (*PN* 1904 III, 261). The requests to *practice* different kinds of writing – minutes of meetings, accounts, navigational records – culminated in the expectation of a finished product which would “perfectly set downe ... your whole travell.” The piece of writing returned to the Muscovy Company was to reproduce the voyage, and thus to make the material of experience durable, accessible, useful. This demand for the reproduction of experience transcended purely technical information, the raw material of coordinates, price lists, or maps, though it also included such information (as did Hakluyt’s collections). The instructions for another expedition, undertaken in 1588, simply make the general request that their recipients

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take “paper and ynke, and keepe a continuall journall or remembrance day by day” (*PN* 1904 III, 123).

The imperative for travelers to write promised both to stimulate observation and to organize it. If sailors had always had to be observant, the requirements of the new overseas trading companies enforced attention in new directions and at a new level of intensity. While David Waters describes rutters as “written . . . on vellum or scraps of paper by the pilot himself from notes he made over a pot of ale . . . in a sea-port tavern” (*The Art of Navigation*, 12), Borough envisioned a copious and detailed writing to the minute, a writing already organized into categories of inquiry. In a similar manner, Thomas Harriot’s account of North Carolina in the *Briefe and True Report* (1587) was organized into kinds of commodities and conditions of their availability or possibility; Hakluyt’s initiation into geography was an account of the world by his older cousin articulated in terms of trade, the goods which came from and went to the places on his map (I discuss this scene in chapter 4). By the demand for copious and systematic use of paper and ink, an information flow was created, both generating data – markets, trade routes, personalities, and cultures – and making it meaningful to those who requested it.⁹

This copious writing was notably surrounded by practices of privacy. Travelers are instructed that they should write in cipher; that they should dispatch their writing back to England, frequently, or keep it locked up in a chest; that they should keep accounts secret from their colleagues, or learn things covertly about them. Stephanie Jed sees in the secret books of Florentine merchants the production of a sense of privacy.¹⁰ Although Hakluyt’s authors differ from Jed’s merchants in important ways, we see in their texts the record of a widespread writing practice with the same distinctive features of synchronicity, denotative reference, and privacy. Jed argues that these features are “not incidental to the functions mercantile writing performs, but rather . . . constitutive of the particular modalities of thought and composition by means of which the merchant-writers represent themselves” (95).¹¹ Do the documents Hakluyt collects also constitute self-representations? Do they, in fact, participate in the production of selves, in the awakening of self-consciousness through the requirement to write regularly and in the first-person voice? What kind of self-consciousness?

The practices of secrecy around mercantile texts suggest a way of reflecting on these texts which would juxtapose them with other kinds of occulted Elizabethan writing: for instance, with love sonnets “kept in the

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private room within ornamental cabinets or boxes” and declaring private emotions.¹² (Patricia Fumerton argues that the “artifice of secrecy” enacted by Philip Sidney’s sonnets, for instance, “constitutes the first step or threshold ushering in the ‘modern’ idea of a self at a distance from public expression.”¹³) The composition of lyric poetry, and the kind of self-formation it instances are empirically distinct from mercantile writing in evident ways, both formally and topically. Indeed, Shakespeare’s Sonnet 102 positions the privacy of love lyric in opposition to commerce: “that love is merchandised, whose rich esteeming / The owner’s tongue doth publish everywhere” (lines 3–4).¹⁴ Yet Renaissance scholars have increasingly come to read such anti-commercial or anti-public assertions as tactics rather than fact, tactics precisely in a kind of self-merchandising. Sonnets functioned as forms of professional advertisement or claims to a status not otherwise enjoyed; such poems *were* published “everywhere” even as they declared their essentially private nature.¹⁵ If sonnets come to look more like commercial writing than one might have expected, however, commercial writing is also not without its odd resemblances to the sonnet.

If sonnets asserted unique, untranslatable selves while in fact creating marketable *public* identities, the case of the voyage narratives appeared to be virtually opposite; they appear wholly directed towards the external world, incapable of speaking about the self.¹⁶ They are, especially, denotative, intended to record certain facts (often numerically expressible) about objects and phenomena in the world: winds, tides, ships, bolts of cloth, pieces of gold. In a sense, they are intended to be as transparent as possible, and the task of the writer is almost more to transcribe or to copy *from* the world of objects and events rather than to author a text as such.¹⁷ Michel de Montaigne writes in “Des Caniballes” that we can receive truth about a distant place only through the account of “a man so simple, that he may have no invention to build upon, and to give a true likelihood unto false devices,” a man who, unconcerned with personal gain, would only speak accurately of what he had seen, matching words to things and motions.¹⁸

The merchant-writers of Hakluyt’s voyages though, however denotative their texts may have been, did not see themselves as such simple men. John Alday criticized another Muscovy trader by writing to the Company, “I think him ... the most simple person that was there (as touching the understanding of a merchant)” (*PN* 1904 III, 197). By trade, the merchant was *not* simple, and his complexity consisted partly

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in the maintenance of a space of privacy, of hidden knowledge.¹⁹ Or *spaces*, since the lines of allegiance and potential rivalry which defined what was concealed, and from whom, were multiple. If on the one hand an English merchant held himself apart from Russians, Turks, and Persians, similar distances might exist not only with other Englishmen but with other members of the same company. Alday worried, for instance, that his colleagues of the Muscovy Company “hold me so untrusty to them that they dare not open their minds, for feare or doubt, I should beare more affection to others than them, and so discover their secrets” (*PN* 1904 III, 197). Secrets were not only kept, but also shared in a distribution which marked affection, created association.

Both first-person discourses and practices of physical privacy have been credited with a role in the production of individual selves, selves defined by the possession of a hidden interior and by their presumed difference from, rather than community with, others.²⁰ One wants to be careful in positioning Hakluyt’s Muscovy traders in relation to such claims. The hidden book of mercantile writing suggests not only an authorial self for which the book is a surrogate, a self conscious of its own interiority and so on, but also the notion of that book as property separable from its producer, an artifact to be withheld from general circulation not because of its intimacy but because of its informational value. Seeing the book as property dismantles the “natural” relationship of the private book to a private, authorial self affiliated with the book. The owners of the book are finally not the same as its authors, who own it only provisionally; the real owners of the written book are those who commissioned the voyage. (The practice of writing might be thought of as payment of a debt or service; the finished document is a legacy whose passage describes the writer’s ties of affiliation to those who sent him.) The journal left by Hugh Willoughby of his fatal Northeast Passage search registers unmistakably the responsibility of writing for one’s successors, even if that writing literally was a legacy left in death; indeed, the journal continues past a marginal note describing their anchorage as “the Haven of Death” (see figure 3).²¹ Hakluyt the lawyer writes to a traveler, “set downe in writing whatsoever you shall learne from day to day, lest you should forget, or lest God should call you to his mercy, and by ech returne I wish you to send in writing whatsoever you have learned, or at the least to keepe the same safe in your coffer, that come life or death your countrey may enjoy the thing you goe for” (*PN* 1904 III, 250). While the secret books of Stephanie Jed’s Florentine merchants

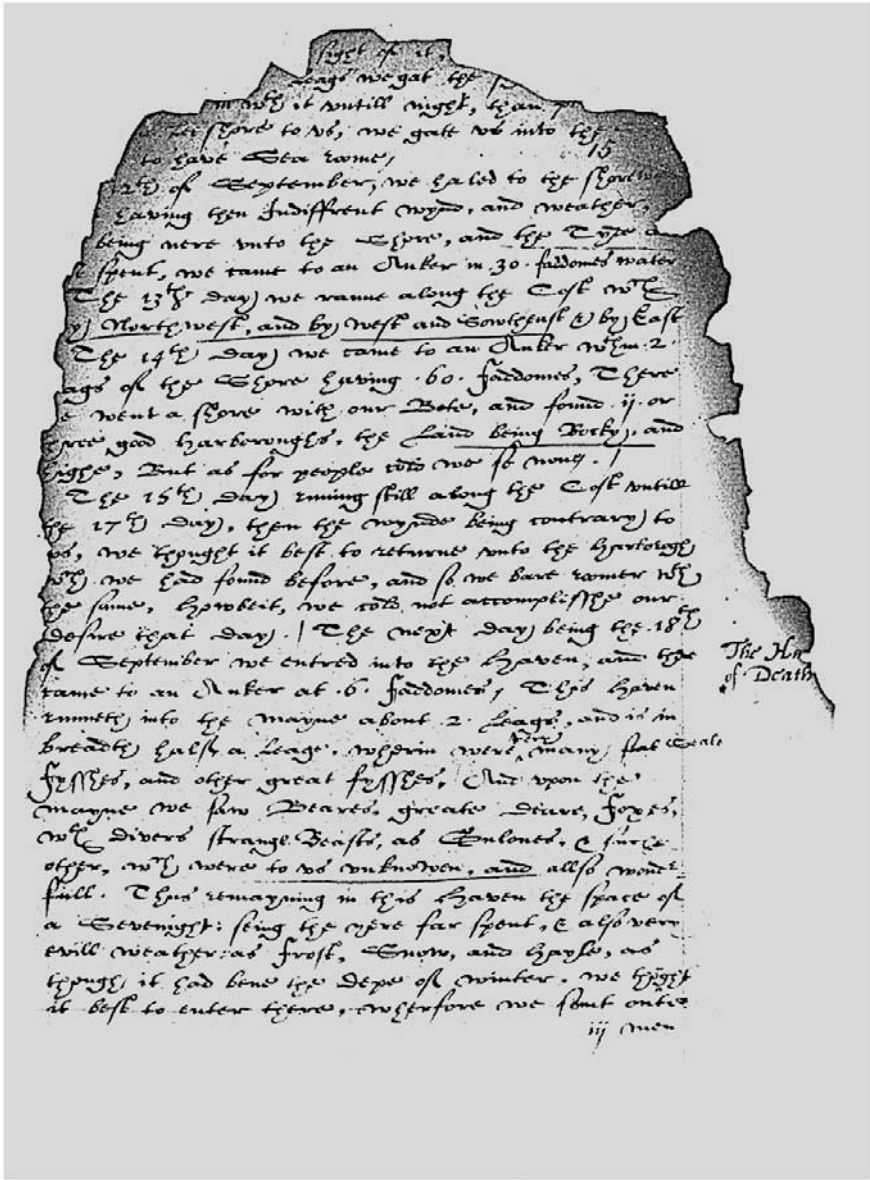


Figure 3 Penultimate page of Sir Hugh Willoughby's journal (1553)