Chapter 1

Sea-Dogs: Frobisher, Grenville, and the Definition of National Selves

In [the sixteenth] century, and especially in the last years of the century during England’s naval war against Spain, the sea and seamen entered the national consciousness in a way they had not done in England for over 500 years.

N.A.M. Rodger, Safeguard of the Sea

Add Gilbert, Grenville, Frobisher, of knights to make up five, all in their better parts with God, with men their fame’s alive . . .

William Warner, Albions England

Introduction

Richard Hakluyt—in his massive documentary anthology, The Principal Navigations . . . of the English Nation (1598–1600)—sought to prove something about the English: first and most explicitly, to assert that the English both in his own time and earlier had projected their presence far beyond their own shores, both by sea and by land, and in all directions; second, that the scope of England’s achievements in this regard rivaled those of other European nations, those “strangers” whose navigations and discoveries Hakluyt himself “had long since published in Print . . . in diuers languages, as well here at London, as in the citie of Paris.”¹ These broader arguments marshal a collection of documents whose contents are quite varied,
more so than Hakluyt’s patriotic prefaces might lead us to expect. Among them, however, some make a stronger case: not simply that English encounters with other nations can be documented, but that the details of these encounters manifest the national superiority of the English to those they encounter. This chapter compares two such groups of documents, and two kinds of encounter: one with “strangers” far away, in the New World; the other, with strangers close to home. The first group of materials concerns Sir Martin Frobisher’s three voyages in search of the Northwest Passage, in 1576, 1577, and 1578: a synthetic narrative of all three by George Best is printed by Hakluyt as “A true discourse of the three Voyages of discoverie, for the finding of a passage to Cathaya, by the Northwest, under the conduct of Martin Frobisher Generall.” The central narrative of the second group is by Sir Walter Ralegh, and gives the story of a naval battle just off the Azores between his cousin Sir Richard Grenville, aboard the ship Revenge, and a much superior Spanish force: it is printed by Hakluyt as “A report of the truth of the fight about the Isles of Açores, the last of August 1591 betwixt the Revenge, one of her Majesties shippes, and an Armada of the king of Spaine.”

The texts by Best (on Frobisher) and Ralegh (on Grenville) had appeared individually, as we noted in the Introduction, before becoming part of Hakluyt’s “mighty fleet” of documents; within Hakluyt’s collection, both have contributed to a dominant sense of what the collection is “about,” forming part of categories of documents they might also be taken to represent. Their location within the anthology reflects certain obvious logics of classification on the editor’s part. Ralegh’s text appears near the end of Hakluyt’s original second volume, on voyages to the East and Southeast, where accounts of travel to Africa are interleaved with (Hakluyt’s title) “certain sea-fights, and other memorable acts performed by the English nation”; these are generally episodes from the Anglo-Spanish sea war of the late sixteenth century. Best’s account of the Frobisher voyages appears near the beginning of the original third volume, following legendary voyages to the Americas, documents on the Cabots and Columbus, and a theoretical discourse by Sir Humphrey Gilbert. The contemporary narratives of travel to America that follow are ordered geographically, from north to south along the Atlantic coast of North and South America—an organizational scheme that lends prominence to the Frobisher documents and to the early voyages of Cabot and Gilbert, fortifying Hakluyt’s assertion of English priority in the northernmost parts of the New World.

These expeditions were at the opposite ends of a larger common project: England’s political, economic, and military competition with