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## Sir Humphrey Gilbert Plans Colonies and Claims Newfoundland

SIR Humphrey Gilbert, elder half-brother of Sir Walter Raleigh, belonged to the group of expansionists headed by Sir Francis Walsingham who believed that England's destiny demanded that she occupy a portion of the New World before Spain seized all of it. He had served as a soldier in Ireland and in 1567 had been involved in an attempt to settle a colony of Englishmen in Ulster. This effort may have crystalized his ideas about colonies overseas. At any rate, on November 6, 1577, he addressed to Queen Elizabeth a secret memorandum with the title *A Discourse How Her Majesty May Annoy the King of Spain*. In this he proposed that the queen might send out a fleet of warships under the pretext of a voyage of discovery, but its actual purpose would be to seize Spanish vessels in the West Indies and Newfoundland and establish English bases in both places. If the queen took any notice of this suggestion, no record exists, but it may be significant that a few days after Gilbert's memorandum Drake sailed on his voyage around the world.

Gilbert's next step was to obtain a charter, valid for six years, granting him the right to colonize any heathen lands not already possessed by any Christian prince. The charter was dated June 11, 1578, and Gilbert immediately set to work to organize an expedition of 11 ships and 500 men: it sailed on September 23, 1578, but had to put back because of a storm. In the meantime, captains in the fleet fell to quarreling, and when Gilbert finally

cleared Plymouth on November 19, he had only seven ships. Precisely where he went remains a mystery. He appears to have run into storms and hostile Spanish ships, but he managed to get back to Dartmouth near the end of April 1579 with nothing to show for his pains except debts. Hearing that he proposed to set out again, the Privy Council forbade another voyage unless he gave bond for good behavior, a suggestion that Gilbert and his associates were accused of piracy.

Gilbert's first effort to discover and colonize lands overseas, if, indeed, that is what the expedition of 1578-79 set out to do, was a fiasco. But Gilbert retained his dream of colonization and he continued to make plans for a venture overseas. In 1582 he encouraged a proposal by Sir George Peckham and Sir Thomas Gerrard, two loyal Roman Catholics, to establish a colony where English Catholics who found life difficult at home could settle and live in peace. Although Peckham and Gerrard were unable to launch a strictly Catholic colony under Gilbert's charter, they gave support to his next colonizing voyage, which sailed on June 11, 1583. The fleet consisted of five ships, the *Delight*, the *Bark Raleigh* (owned by Sir Walter Raleigh), the *Golden Hind* (not Drake's ship of this name), the *Swallow*, and the *Squirrel* (a small craft of some ten tons). The fleet had been at sea only two days when the captain of the *Bark Raleigh*, the largest vessel, turned tail and sailed for home, claiming that sickness in the ship forced him to leave the expedition.

Although the four remaining vessels parted on the westward voyage, all managed to rendezvous off Saint John's Harbor, Newfoundland, at the beginning of August, and on August 3 Gilbert entered the harbor and showed his commission to colonize. Thirty-six fishing vessels, English, Spanish, Portuguese and French, were at anchor, for Newfoundland at this time was regarded as an international resort of fishermen, who had their own regulations and appointed from among the ship captains an admiral who adjudicated disputes. On August 5 Gilbert landed, set up a tent and called the fishermen and sailors of the various ships before him. He read the provisions of his charter, claimed the land in the name of the Queen of England and promulgated the first laws under his charter: the religion would be according to the rites of the Church of England; anyone attempting to dispute the queen's rights to



the territory would be tried according to the laws of England; and anyone speaking in dishonor of the queen would forfeit his ship and lose his ears. As governor of the new land, Gilbert allotted land to various applicants and leased drying stages to the fishermen on their somewhat vague promises to pay. He then requisitioned fish for his hungry seamen, put up a post with a leaden coat of arms attached and spent the next two weeks exploring his new possession, which pleased him immensely. Some rocks that he discovered gave hope of valuable minerals.

But Gilbert was not content to remain in Newfoundland. His aim was to claim and colonize territory on the mainland. The sailors in his little fleet were grumbling over their short rations and poor equipment, for Gilbert's expedition had been ill-organized from the start. Since some of the men balked at sailing farther westward, Gilbert placed the *Swallow* in charge of the malcontents and let them sail for home. With the other three ships, on August 20 he set a course for what we now call Nova Scotia. Eight days later the *Delight*, with the bulk of supplies for the expedition, ran aground on rocks and was lost with 80 men. Sixteen survivors got away in a pinnace and made a landing in Newfoundland. Disheartened and short of victuals, the crews of the two remaining vessels demanded that Gilbert sail for England, and on August 31 he reluctantly turned eastward. Gilbert chose to remain in the little *Squirrel*, his own vessel, in which he had sailed from Newfoundland. The weather was rough, and Edward Hayes, captain of the *Golden Hind*, urged Gilbert in vain to come aboard the larger ship. On the afternoon of September 9 the *Squirrel* came within hailing distance of the *Golden Hind* and Hayes once more begged Gilbert to leave the *Squirrel*. Sitting on deck, reading a book, Gilbert called back that "we are as near to heaven by sea as by land." That night the crew of the *Golden Hind* saw the lights of the *Squirrel* disappear, and no trace of Gilbert or his vessel was ever found. Thus perished one of the most eager exponents of exploration and colonization—but one who showed little capacity for organization and direction. He nevertheless left a legacy of hope with the expansionists, and his ideas were to be developed by Sir Walter Raleigh and others.

# Voyages of Champlain, Cartier, and Gilbert

