PARMENIUS

Woodrooffe,Thomas: Vantage at sea. New Yorkm, 1958,St.Martin's Press, Pp.130-135.

NORTHWARDS TO CATHAY

A fiasco like this might well have ended all thought of voyages to the north-west had it not been for a strong body of opinion in England which refused to accept that the destiny of the New World had been unalterably fixed by the Papal Grant of the previous century. There was a party in the country which thought that North America should be settled by Englishmen. Richard Hakluyt and Dr. Dee had been using their pens to get their countrymen interested in colonizing America. Hakluyt argued that England was overflowing with poor who could with advantage be transplanted into 'the temperate and fertile parts of America'; that the prisons were crowded with men detained on trifling charges who could better serve their country as colonists than by being strung up as criminals. Dr. Dee, enthusiastic as always, wrote a paper in which he tried to prove by using the most far-fetched arguments that Elizabeth had a valid title to the New World. His arguments are forgotten, but two words in that paper are not. In it the term 'British Empire' was used for the first time. A Sir Humphrey Gilbert, Devonshire squire and half-brother to Sir Walter Ralegh, had long been interested in the north-west. Ten years earlier he had written a *Discourse of a discoverie for a new Passage to Cataia*, which he had circulated in manuscript, and had also obtained the Queen's permission to explore in those parts. But now he forgot exploration, being captivated by the idea of colonization. He had the large, strategic idea of colonizing Newfoundland to serve as an advanced base when the passage was discovered. The venture was a private one backed by Ralegh, Sir Philip Sidney and Walsingham; the Queen giving it her blessing but no public money. On June 11th, 1583, Sir Humphrey Gilbert sailed from Cawsand Bay with five ships and 260 men who included shipwrights, masons, carpenters and artisans likely to be needed in a new settlement, as well as 'mineral men and refiners' to search for the precious metals which everyone was convinced abounded in any new lands. So much for the practical side, but there was more. The chronicler of the voyages goes on, 'Besides for the solace of our people and the allurement of the savages we were provided with music in good variety, not omitting morris dancers, hobby horse

and Maylike conceits to delight the savage people whom we intended to win by all fair means possible'. In such a spirit did the first colonizing expedition ever to leave Britain sail down Channel with a fair wind.

This exalted mood was not enjoyed by the whole expedition; Edward Hayes, a deeply religious man, was only describing what he felt that bright June morning, and his feelings were shared no doubt by his leader but by precious few of the others who sailed with them. Nearly every undertaking of those days was an incongruous mixture of the heroic, the tragic and the farcical; and this expedition was running true to form by the time they were out of soundings. In the middle of the second night at sea, the largest ship, one fitted out at the expense of Sir Walter Ralegh, suddenly deserted the fleet without so much as a by your leave or a plausible excuse. Hayes, master and owner of the *Golden Hind*, could see no reason for behaviour which was odd even for those days, but Gilbert was not discouraged. With the Queen's parting present, an anchor of gold inset with a pearl, pinned to his doublet, he sailed on with four ships into a belt of variable winds and poor visibility which slowed up the fleet. Then in thick fog on the Newfoundland Banks he lost another ship. This was the *Swallow* which sneaked off when the fog came down instead of heaving to astern of the flagship according to Gilbert's standing orders. Her crew were not the sort to pay much attention to orders, for every man except her captain was by profession a Channel pirate and they had been impressed for this voyage instead of being sent to prison. Once clear of the fleet the sight of a stray Newfoundland fishing vessel proved too much for their professional instincts. Forcing their own captain below they took and looted the stranger, then turned her adrift after torturing her crew who had no hidden riches to disclose, after which they shaped a course for Newfoundland. When Gilbert reached that coast after a passage from Plymouth of seven weeks he was delighted to fall in with his missing ship; though he was a little puzzled by the extravagant behaviour of her crew who on turning out to cheer him, 'spared not to cast up into the air and overboard their caps and hats in plenty'—and they were all wearing new clothes.

Gilbert sailed along the coast and at the beginning of August entered St. John's to the great interest of the three dozen fishing vessels of four different flags which were lying peacefully in the harbour. On August 5th, 1583, Sir Humphrey Gilbert landed in state, and having read his Commission to a polyglot crowd of fishermen most of whom did not understand a word of these strange proceedings, took formal possession of the land in the name of the Queen. Then he announced that the religion of the place would be that practised by the Church of England, that it would be governed according to the law of England, and for good measure he added the warning that 'if any person should utter words sounding to the dishonour of Her Majesty he should lose his ears'. He then proceeded to loose an undisciplined rabble of his own men, upon this peaceful and law-abiding community where the English, French, Spanish and Portuguese worked amicably alongside one another. As soon as the colonists were allowed ashore many deserted and took to the woods where they lived as outlaws; one gang stole a fishing vessel after setting her crew ashore, some demanded to be sent home at once and many reported sick.

With no discipline to hold it together, Gilbert's colonizing expedition all but disintegrated on its first contact with a new land, and this was largely the leader's fault. Although the men he had chosen or had been given would have been a handful for anybody, Gilbert had little or no power of command over men, and he lacked that rare quality of leadership which can induce men far from the restraints of civilization or the power of constituted authority to follow and accept discipline against their natural inclination. Gilbert was no Drake. Like his cousin, Sir Richard Grenville, he was headstrong, wayward and obstinate as a mule, yet across the centuries he appears as a likeable and unusual man. A soldier rather than a seaman, and a scholar and country gentleman before either, he had served as a soldier in France, the Low Countries and Ireland where he had been knighted. He had not had a distinguished career, being unemployed for long periods, but he was well connected, and the Queen liked him. He was the first to suggest a University for

light drove ashore in a gale and broke up almost at once. The unfortunate Stephen Parmenius was lost and all the pirates, a clear example, Hayes was convinced, of God's judgement upon them for their wickedness. All the stores were gone and only two small ships were left. The season was far advanced, the spirit had gone from the remainder—so on August 31st Gilbert left the coast of America and sailed for England.

In fine weather two days later Gilbert went on board the *Golden Hind* to spend a day in more comfortable surroundings. He was in good spirits though he felt the loss of so many of his men, and especially his library of books which had gone down in the *Delight*. When the time came for Gilbert to go the sight of the *Squirrel* lying off was too much for the seaman's eye of Edward Hayes. She was grossly overloaded with tophamper and guns and obviously unsafe at this time of year. Hayes tried his best to persuade Gilbert to make the Atlantic crossing in the *Golden Hind* but 'nothing cou d avail to divert him of a wilful resolution of going through in the frigate' and the answer Hayes got was what one would expect from Humphrey Gilbert: 'I will not forsake my little company going home with whom I have passed so many storms and perils'. It was a fine gesture of which the sensible Hayes disapproved.

About a month later when they were a little to the northward of the Azores they struck a full gale and a roaring, angry sea. On the afternoon of September 9th those in the *Golden Hind* were anxiously watching the *Squirrel* as she disappeared into a trough, apparently engulfed, only to reappear on the crest a few moments later. Hayes took his ship as close as he dared and as he came surging past the *Squirrel*, there was Gilbert perched up in the stern reading a book (it was More's *Utopia*) and as they went by they caught his cheerful shout above the tumult of the wind and sea: 'we are as near to Heaven by sea as by land'.

But a top-heavy little vessel like the *Squirrel* could not live for long in that sea, and 'the same Monday night', writes Hayes, 'about twelve of the clock or not long after, the frigate being ahead of us in the *Golden Hind*, suddenly her lights went out, whereof

as it were in a moment we lost the sight, and withal our watch cried "The general is cast away" which was too true. For in a moment the frigate was devoured and swallowed up in the sea.'

Yet Sir Humphrey Gilbert did not live in vain, even if he got no farther than Newfoundland. His *Discourse* had fired the imagination of the least romanticized, but one of the greatest of English sea captains. Nor was all connection between the Gilbert family and the search for a north-west passage ended when the *Squirrel's* lights went out: his younger brother Adrian at once set about organizing a voyage of northern discovery. The Devonshire home of the Gilberts was near Dartmouth which had been a nursery of seamen since Chaucer's time and Adrian had made a voyage or two with a young neighbour from Sandridge whose qualities had greatly impressed him. Through the influence of his half-brother, Sir Walter Ralegh, and of that great patron of all sea affairs, Sir Francis Walsingham, Adrian Gilbert and his associates were granted letters patent by the Queen authorizing the search for a passage to China and the Moluccas by sailing to the northward. A rich member of the Fishmongers' Company, William Sanderson, together with a number of west country merchants provided the financial backing and Adrian's neighbour John Davis was given command of the expedition.