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GILBERT, SIR HUMPHREY, soldier, navigator, explorer, is generally thought to have been born in 1539, but it is possible that his birth was earlier. He died at sea in 1583. He was the second son of Otho Gilbert of Greenway on the river Dart and of Katherine, daughter of Sir Philip Champernoun of Modbury in Kent. Otho died in 1547 and his widow married Walter Raleigh of Fardell and Hayes in Devonshire, by whom she had three children, one of them a boy named Walter; thus Humphrey Gilbert was the half-brother of Sir Walter Raleigh. The difference in age between them was probably thirteen years.

Humphrey was educated at Eton and Oxford: at the university he is said to have studied navigation and the art of war. His earlier education must have been thorough and along classical lines, for his writings display an intimate knowledge of Greek and Latin philosophers and poets, and it is probable that he could speak both French and Spanish. After Oxford, he was attached to the household of the Princess Elizabeth, and later, for a short time, he resided in one of the Inns of Chancery.

He first saw military service under Ambrose Dudley, Earl of Warwick, at the siege of Newhaven (i.e. Havre in Normandy) in 1562-3, during the religious civil wars in France: he was wounded on June 5th, 1563—not on September 26th, as the *D.A.B.* states, by which date peace had been made.

In July 1566 he served in Ireland under Sir Henry Sidney in his campaign against Shane O'Neil. After four months on October 12th he was sent back to England with despatches for the Queen.

Gilbert was in Ireland again in July 1569, for he wrote to Cecil for leave to return to England 'for the recovery of my eyes'. Before that leave was granted Gilbert had made a name for himself by his so-called 'pacification' of Munster. To our modern way of thinking his treatment of Munster, of which province he was put in complete control, was revolting and uncivilized. Gilbert himself describes his ruthless methods of

wholesale slaughter in a letter to Cecil without any apology for them. Sir Henry Sidney wrote highly praising Gilbert's services, for which he had knighted him on January 1st, 1570. The difference in standards between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries may be judged by the following quotation: 'His manner was that the heads of all those (of what sort soever they were) which were killed in the day should be cut off from their bodies and brought to the place where they escamped at night, and should be laid on the ground by each side of the way leading into his own tent, so that none could come into his tent for any cause but commonly he must pass through a line of heads, which he used *ad terrum*, the dead feeling nothing the more pains thereby; and yet did it bring greater terror to the people, when they saw the heads of their dead fathers, brothers, children, kinsfolk and friends, lie on the ground before their faces when they came to speak with the said Colonel.' (Thomas Churchyard, *General Rehearsal of Wars*, 1579.) Gilbert left behind him with the Irish a reputation second only to that of Oliver Cromwell.

If Gilbert had all the acquisitiveness of his times—that he had is proved by his petition in 1572 for the grant of all the south-east coast of Ireland—in his defence it may be said that out of his expenses in Ireland for nine months of £3,315 7s. he only received repayment of £600.

In 1570 Sir Humphrey married Anne Ager of Ottenden in Kent, a wealthy heiress, by whom he had five sons and one daughter. The next year (1571) he was returned as M.P. for Plymouth alongside Sir John Hawkins. It may be a proof of his loyalty to his queen or of his independent and combative mind that he at once fell foul of the House of Commons in general and of Peter Wentworth in particular, who called him 'a flatterer, a lyer and a naughtie man', for having defended the queen's prerogative in the unpopular question of royal licenses.

The year 1572 was an unfortunate one for Gilbert. He was sent to the Netherlands in command of 1,500 English volunteers to help the Zeelanders in their rebellion against Spain—probably Elizabeth's real purpose was to get possession of Flushing. The campaign was a failure and Gilbert came back



to England disgusted with the quality of the troops which he had been given and with the Zealanders' commander, t'Zaarets.

From 1573 to 1578 Gilbert lived at Lincolne, retired from public employment and devoted his time to writing. He polished up his old 'Discourse' on the North-West Passage, which his friend Gascoigne, the poet, published in 1576. He also had an idea of going to help John Oxenham, who had been cut off in the Panama isthmus with captured treasure, for he was now developing a plan for breaking up the Spanish empire. He sent to the government schemes for wrecking Spanish maritime power by seizing her Newfoundland fishing fleet, attacking the treasure fleet on its way to Europe and occupying the islands of Hispaniola and Cuba as permanent bases for this purpose. He embodied these ideas in another 'discourse' entitled *How her Majesty might annoy the King of Spain*, but the government was anxious at all costs to avoid war with Spain and Gilbert's approach was ignored (1577).

The rest of Gilbert's life was devoted to his plans for planting an English colony in North America. Other people were thinking along the same lines, men such as Richard Hakluyt the elder, who was to help Gilbert with advice and had been collecting information for some years. On June 11th, 1578, Gilbert obtained from the Queen a patent which authorized him to search for and to occupy with English settlers lands 'not actually possessed of any Christian prince or people'. The patent was valid for six years and he was to hold all the land he discovered from the Crown. He was already beginning to collect ships: he had as his chief partner Henry Knollys, son of Sir Francis Knollys, the treasurer of the household, but he turned for his main support to his own family. He sold some of his wife's property and he raised subscriptions from his brothers Sir John and Adrian Gilbert. He also brought in Walter Raleigh and his elder brother Carew. Five of Katherine Champernoun's sons were involved in the expedition besides some Champernoun and Carew cousins.

The fleet was to consist of ten ships, gathered together at Plymouth. Unhappily, during the delays in fitting them out quarrels broke out between Knollys and Gilbert: eventually

Knollys deserted with three of the ships and sailed off into the Channel and Bay of Biscay where he took to piracy. On November 19th, 1578, Gilbert at last set sail with seven ships. He himself commanded the *Anne Ager* (named after Gilbert's wife), 250 tons, with the title of Admiral of the Fleet: the *Hope of Greenway*, 160 tons, was commanded by Carew Raleigh, the Vice-Admiral: Miles Morgan commanded the *Red Lion*, 140 tons: the *Falcon* of 100 tons was under the command of Walter Raleigh, she being the Queen's ship: the *Galleon* of 40 tons under Richard Veal, the *Swallow* of 40 tons under John Verney and the *Squirrel* of 10 tons carrying eight men, these completed the squadron.

The destination of the fleet is unknown, for the secret was well-kept, so that not even Mendoza, the Spanish ambassador, knew. When we remember to what dimensions the expansions of England overseas was to attain, the sailing of Humphrey Gilbert on the first attempt to plant Englishmen overseas is a notable event. In fact, the voyage was a failure from the very start. What evidence we have suggests that the plan was to cross the Atlantic by way of the Canaries to the West Indies and then to work up the coast of North America. The ships were heavily armed in order to repel attacks by Spanish ships. The voyage was to be one of reconnaissance to prepare for a later expedition for colonizing.

The fleet scattered after leaving Plymouth, probably owing to bad weather, and it never reassembled. Gilbert put into an Irish port where he took in more supplies, but he failed to find the rest of his fleet when he again put to sea, therefore he returned to port where he fell in with the *Hope of Greenway*, which had sprung a leak; Miles Morgan had slipped away to join Knollys in his piracy: later his ship, *Red Lion*, was lost at sea. Walter Raleigh with one or two other ships besides the *Falcon* set out on the course which had been planned, and made for the West Indies, but when he found he was short of food and had lost his right bearings, he turned for home near the Cape Verde Islands. Here he met and fought some Spanish ships which handled Raleigh's vessels very roughly. He reached Dartmouth in May 1579 in a battered condition, almost at the



same moment as Gilbert returned to Plymouth. Both Gilbert and Raleigh wanted to try again in the summer of 1579, but they encountered difficulties with the government, which disapproved of piracy too near home and therefore forbade the expedition, although there is no evidence that either Gilbert or Raleigh indulged in piracy, whatever knoxys and some of Gilbert's men had done.

The last four years of Gilbert's life were given to almost feverish activity to accomplish his American schemes. In 1580 he sent out that Simon Fernandez who had accompanied Raleigh in the *Falcon* in 1578 to reconnoitre the American coast. In three months Fernandez returned with a great deal of first hand information. There was need for hurry, since Gilbert's patent expired at the end of 1584. Unfortunately, of all his old ships only the tiny *Sybil* survived, and unfortunately also Gilbert was short of ready money. He therefore set about raising money by every device he could think of. One of the chief methods he employed was to sell in advance tracts of the lands he had not yet discovered. For example, Dr. John Dee purchased all the land north of parallel 50°. By dint of skilful advertising many other purchasers were found. Gilbert represented that a small investment might turn a simple English gentleman into a feudal lord of huge estates. The prospect of finding gold and jewels was held out, the possibility of finding new markets for raw materials and for manufactured goods was exploited. Especially did Gilbert seek to persuade the loyal Catholic gentry that they might create overseas a new state in which they could still serve their Queen and could at the same time preserve their Catholic religion. Between June 1582 and February 1583 Gilbert got rid of nearly nine million acres of land, all on paper, of which most went to the Catholic investors, led by Sir George Peckham and Sir Thomas Gerrard. These latter intended to send out an expedition on their own in 1582 to explore the territories and then to follow that up with a large colonizing expedition in 1583. Thanks, however, to the warnings of Catholic priests and the intriguing of the Spanish ambassador, Mendoza, most of the Catholics backed out, so that these two expeditions never took place.

Gilbert made an agreement with the Southampton merchants that they should have a monopoly of trade with the new colonies in return for financial help here and now. Even so, money was scarce and the expedition was delayed month after month.

In February 1583 the Queen created a difficulty. She had observed that Gilbert was 'a man noted of not good hap at sea' and she suggested that he should not accompany the venture in person. Elizabeth seems always to have liked Gilbert and she did not now forbid him to go, nor was she angry when he went ahead with his plans. Indeed, she sent Gilbert a message through Raleigh that 'she wished great good hap and safety to your ships as if she herself were there in person' together with a jewel of 'an anchor guided by a lady'.

Gilbert set sail on June 11th for Newfoundland. The fleet consisted of *Delight*, 120 tons, in which Gilbert sailed as Admiral: the *Bark Raleigh*, 200 tons; the *Golden Hind*, 40 tons; the *Swallow*, 40 tons; the *Squirrel*, about 10 tons. On the 13th the *Bark Raleigh* turned for home and went into Plymouth, probably owing to a shortage of victuals brought about by the numerous delays before sailing when the victuals were consumed in harbour. In a fog on July 20th *Swallow* and *Squirrel* lost touch with the rest of the fleet and did not recover it until they arrived at Newfoundland, when Gilbert found the *Swallow* in Conception Bay and on August 3rd he met with the *Squirrel* in the harbour of St. John's. Gilbert went ashore on the 4th (Sunday) and on the 5th he formally annexed the harbour and two hundred leagues every way in the name of the Queen and took possession of the land for himself and his heirs. He spent a fortnight prospecting and made up his mind that he would plant a colony here. One ship he sent home with all the sick, nor did he leave any garrison at St. John's when he sailed on August 10th for America. His stay at St. John's had discovered two things: that a great mistake had been made in recruiting the crews from pirates and prisoners, and that Gilbert was quite incapable of dealing with the lawlessness and discontent which immediately broke out. The discontent grew in the ships, especially after the *Delight* had run aground and was wrecked



either on Sable Island or near Cape Breton. On August 31st, therefore, Gilbert turned back, having accomplished none of his main objectives. He himself was sailing in the *Squirrel* and he insisted on remaining in her in spite of heavy seas, although his friends tried to persuade him to go aboard the *Golden Hind*. On September 9th the *Squirrel* disappeared and was never seen again. The last sight that men had of Gilbert was sitting in the stern of the *Squirrel* with a book in his hand; whenever he came within hearing distance of the *Golden Hind* he was heard to say, 'we are as near to Heaven by sea as by land'.

It is not easy to assess the character of Sir Humphrey Gilbert. Probably the eulogies which have been showered upon him are as far from the truth as is most indiscriminating praise. That he was genuinely pious, patriotic and brave is not to be denied. He was said in his own day to be afraid of the sea, but the manner of his death gives that the lie. There are too many examples of his ungovernable temper for us not to feel he was an obstinate, jealous and self-opinionated man. He was a bad leader, unable to win the respect or the affection of his followers, incapable of dealing with mutiny and insubordination. According to Clark, the master of the *Delight*, the loss of that ship and most of its men was entirely due to Gilbert's refusal to take the advice of a better navigator than himself. When Gilbert asked him which course to take, Clark advised west-south-west, whereupon Gilbert at once commanded him to sail west-north-west. Clark explained that *Delight* would be on the sands before daylight; Gilbert accused Clark of being out of his reckoning and ordered him in the Queen's name to sail as Gilbert had said. Clark obeyed and *Delight* was on the sands by seven o'clock in the morning. (Clark's narrative is printed in W. G. Gosling's *Life*.) As a man of action, Gilbert was a failure, except perhaps in Ireland, and one may doubt what value his temporary success there ever had.

But as a man of intellect and imagination Gilbert must rank high. His was an original and creative mind, bold, far-seeing and extremely modern. His whole conception of overseas expansion was new, far ahead of the ideas of his time. And as a writer his reputation should be higher than it is. Among his

works there is a 'discourse' entitled *The Erection of [Queen Elizabeth's] Academy in London for Education of her Majesty's Wards and others the youths of nobility and gentlemen*. Broadly it was a plea for a kind of university in London. How modern was Gilbert's mind may be seen in the rules which he suggested for the library of this academy: he laid down almost all the rules which are now generally accepted as necessary for a librarian to observe: he suggested that a copy of every book published should be placed in the library, as is now done, for example, in the British Museum: he anticipated the future law of copyright. Gilbert was a typical product of a brilliant but undisciplined age. (Plate 28)

D. B. Quinn, *Sir Humphrey Gilbert*, 1940.

W. G. Gosling, *The Life of Sir Humphrey Gilbert*, (ch. 6 in particular must be used with care).

Edward Hayes, (captain and owner of the *Golden Hind*), *A Report of the Voyage . . . by Sir Humphrey Gilbert*, printed in Hakluyt's *Voyages*, 1599, more easily accessible in E. J. Payne's, *Voyages of Elizabethan Seamen*.



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