

V.G. "Fortis Qui Potuit rerum cognoscere causas" I

Entry for the Royal Empire Society's Essay Competition, Class B

"Great Seamen of the Tudor Period"

Class B:

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Consider a penny, the commonest of our coins. What romance is there about it? At first sight there appears to be none at all. But if we indulge in a little reflection we see that on the penny is a symbol of Britannia ruling the waves; what more helped to put her in that proud position than the greatness of the Tudor seamen? How this greatness was brought about forms a romance in itself.

It is strange, almost beyond understanding, that Drake and Hawkins should ever have lived in the XVIth century. True, our Norse ancestors were great mariners, hardy souls who braved the stormy North Atlantic in their puny ships and anchored Cabot at Labrador by nearly 500 years. But after the Conquest we lost our interest in the sea: England became a continental power. It was the ambition of every Plantagenet to conquer France, not by sea but by land. Even after our defeat by Jean Darc ^{we} kept our eyes ever fixed on France.

1485.

Soon after the advent to the throne of the seventh Henry events began to move fast — outside England. The voyages of Prince Henry the Navigator round Africa were ably followed up by da Gama and other Portuguese. But when Columbus brought his plans for reaching India by sailing west to Henry VII he was laughed at by that practical and economical monarch, and the renown and reward of the discovery of America passed to Spain. By this time the latter was a powerful nation: in 1492 the last of the Moors had been ejected from Andalusia and the United Kingdoms were rising from strength to strength. For the next five decades Spain was mistress of the seas.

Meanwhile in England the glamour of Continental conquest had not faded from our eyes. As to the sea, we were indifferent. We had no navy and little merchant shipping, "the bark of the English water dogs had scarcely been heard beyond their own

* J.A. Froude: fishing-grounds, and the largest merchant vessel sailing from the port of London was scarce bigger than a modern coasting collier.* The Papal Bull of '94 was unacted for, and the Spaniards and Portuguese colonised the New World at leisure. The English people made no move independently of their king; as yet there were no fierce religious controversies to divide them from the Spaniards. There is no doubt that it was religion which made English seamen what they became: "the English sea-power was the legitimate child of the reformation."†

† Froude: *ibid.*

1492.

After Columbus' first voyage Henry began to pay more attention to the sea, and when a certain Genoese named John Cabot came to him in 1497 with plans for sailing to America the monarch did not turn him away, but fitted him out (though in a miserably meagre manner) and allowed him to sail with 18 gallant men from Bristol. Cabot reached Newfoundland, but little resulted from his expeditions: "England dared not yet arouse the wrath of Spain by laying hands on this heritage: her time was not yet... The voyages of the Cabots... merely staked out a claim which lay dormant for several generations as regards inland discovery or plantation, though before the middle of the new century the Newfoundland fisheries had become an important nursery of our seamen."‡

‡ G.M. Trevelyan: "History of England"

In 1509 Henry VIII came to the throne: Henry's break with the Pope ('27) and the dissolution of the monasteries (56-70) gained him many enemies amongst the Papist states of the Continent. He did not openly flout Spain by allowing buccaneering, but instead built a really efficient royal navy. It was the first time England had ever permanently possessed a fleet; Henry V's splendid ships had been allowed to rot; other kings had relied on a few converted merchant ships. Henry built a new fleet of ships of a bigger and better kind. The result was that when a mighty French fleet attacked our shores in '45 we were able successfully to resist it.

Two years later the great king died: We are inclined to form

various opinions of Henry VIII and look upon him as a cruel husband and a godless king. But the substantial fact remains that probably it was he more than any one else in the XVIth. century who established the English sea traditions: he set the seed and tended the young sapling: Drake and Hawkins merely pruned a tree almost come to maturity and then reaped the fruit.

1553.

Towards the end of the old king's reign Sebastian Cabot had revived the idea of finding a North passage to India. Various expeditions set out, chief among which was that of Sir Hugh Willoughby and Richard Chancellor, two brave men who sailed in three tiny ships to attempt a feat which has flouted so many explorers from that day to this. Willoughby and two of his ships were ice-bound and frozen to death in Russian lapland; Chancellor with the third reached Archangel on the White Sea, and successfully founded the Muscovy company. This voyage, together with those of Davis and Frobisher later to North America, did much to establish the fur trade.

During the short reign of Edward VI and the quarrels for the Protectorship and the brief but bloody reign of Mary, Henry VIII's sapling withered from want of care, so that when Elizabeth succeeded to the throne there were many vessels in our ports which could be made efficient if money were spent on them. At the same time the sea-mindedness of the people, especially in the coast-shires like Devon and Cornwall was growing steadily. One thing in particular served to stimulate it - Mary's persecutions of the Protestants earned out at the instigation of her Spanish husband. The cruelties and barbarities perpetrated made the name of Philip and Roman Catholicism hateful beyond measure to every true Englishman.

Thus the way was prepared for the first of the really great Tudor seamen: "the history of the English in America practically begins with the three slave-trading voyages of John Hawkins" * Hawkins was the son of a slave-owner and himself traded in slaves until he had made

* E.J. Payne

a fortune at it. After that he was the first of the Buccaneers and later became Treasurer of the Navy. Despite his interest in the slave-trade Hawkins was really a great man. His chief merit was that he was the first to reveal the weakness of the scattered Spanish colonies. After his retirement from buccaneering his work was taken up by Francis Drake, "the greatest of the English naval adventurers and the first Englishman to plough a furrow round the globe."* Besides his great feats of bravery and war in plundering the Spanish treasure-ships, besides his wonderful voyage round the world, besides even his victory over the Armada, two of Drake's innovations have been of permanent value. First he insisted on equality between his mariners and his soldiers; in the Spanish service sailors were despised: in Drake's ships they were just as much gentlemen as their brothers. Secondly he used a warship as a ship, not as a piece of artificial land. "To Sir Francis Drake the warship was a mobile battery; to the Duke of Medina Sidonia it was a platform to carry swordsmen and musketeers into action... it was not the boarder but the broadside which made

* E.J. Payne:

History of England. England mistress at sea."

The buccaneering actions of Drake and Hawkins are well-known, but we seldom realise their bravery. Here these men were, upholding the honour of their country in hostile waters thousands of miles from home, in daily terror of their lives, yet going about their work calmly, winning if they could and if defeated—"Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori." After all their labour their hard-won spoil did not benefit themselves but their queen. No wonder we hear so much of the Brave men of Devon!

There is no space here to recount individual feats of bravery and skill, but we cannot leave the defeat of the Armada without a passing reference. When King Philip's great fleet, "large enough to bear the burden of 60 thousand tonnes,"[†] eventually reached the Channel to attack England—

"... this great fleet invincible against her bore in vain

The richest spoils of Mexico, the stoutest hearts of Spain."[‡]

It was the bravery and calmness of Howard, Drake and the English captains which made this feat possible. The blasts came in at the end and scattered

† Hakluyt.

‡ Macaulay:

The Spanish Armada.

the routed ships, but it was Wellington's army that won Waterloo; Blücher merely chased the defeated. Elizabeth, deeply religious, took as the motto for the medal struck to celebrate the victory: "He blew, and they were scattered." Yet it was more the broadside than the breeze which quelled the might of Spain.

The battle of 1588 was the last great feat of the fighting Tudor seamen. After it they met with mixed success. But of late years another school had been leading the way on a new road - exploration and colonization. Three names in particular outshine all others - Frobisher, Gilbert and Raleigh.

Martin Frobisher was the first of that long series of explorers who set out on a forlorn attempt to find the North-West passage. How brave he must have been we see when we realize that this man with his tiny ships attempted a feat which has since baffled so many hundreds of better-equipped explorers. Frobisher failed, but he got his reward in the form of naval preferment and a command in the Armada.

Gilbert and Raleigh represent the colonizing school: there were two colonizing sections, one wishing to settle in Florida and the other in ^{the North} ~~Virginia~~; Gilbert and Raleigh belonged to the latter, and tried Newfoundland and Virginia. Though they were a generation before their time, the importance of their work cannot be over-estimated. Following their example Englishmen settled in the four ^{quarters} ~~corners~~ of the globe and formed the vast British empire. Because they chose the North they led the Pilgrim Fathers to settle in a land with a climate suitable for the development of true British character, and made our cousins in America of much the same outlook as ours. The work of Gilbert, Raleigh and Frobisher has proved invaluable.

Other great seamen, such as Cavendish, Davis, Grenville and Howard, whose prestige and achievements were only slightly inferior to those of their better-known contemporaries cannot be dealt with here. So, to sum up, what judgment can we pass on the Tudor seamen? Their buccannery has been condemned as immoral, but in the circumstances it was justifiable immorality; it has been said that their work has been overvalued, but that it is because its value is only to be found below the surface. Although they made no permanent conquests like the navy in Chatham's wars or the Napoleonic struggles, they made England into a seafaring nation. A

peculiar train of events converted these "descendants of the archers and retainers" into the finest seamen in the world. They were brave men who risked their all to uphold the name of England; some ~~few~~ of them became rich for their labours, but many others lost all their wealth and position; many died fighting or suffered the horrors of the Inquisition; a few, like Raleigh, lost their heads in their country's service. They were the pioneers; they prepared the way for the glorious traditions of our navy; they ~~prepared the way~~ ^{blazed the trail} for the Mayflower and other Stuart colonizing exploits; they lifted our country from a comparatively unimportant power to the first rank amongst nations. Their work was not continued in the next era - Henry VIII's navy was allowed to rot - but nothing could prevent its having lasting results. The work of Drake and Raleigh is far greater than that of Nelson. They ploughed the prairie: Nelson reaped the crop.

FINIS.

[Books Consulted:

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G.M. Trevelyan: History of England.

E.J. Payne : Elizabethan Seamen

R. Hakluyt : Voyages (for the Armada).

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