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GOD AND EXPANSION IN ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND:  
JOHN DEE, 1527–1583

BY WALTER I. TRATTNER

Despite the more than three hundred fifty years that have passed since his death, John Dee still largely remains an enigma. Misunderstood by many of his contemporaries, and called by his later interpreters everything from a “charlatan” and “conjurer of evil spirits,” to “the leading pioneer in the English Geographical Renaissance” and a man far “too advanced in speculative thought for his own age to understand,”<sup>1</sup> no two authorities paint the same picture of this strange Elizabethan.

Dr. John Dee,<sup>2</sup> a tall, thin man with a long pointed beard and a mysterious manner, presents an interesting problem for the historian. A prolific writer (and almost all of the writings are extant), as well as a man of varied activities, the events of Dee’s life are well known. Yet, no satisfactory account of his important life has ever been written. Indeed, even his most sympathetic commentators do not seem to have understood fully this enthusiastic sixteenth-century seeker of wisdom and lover of the secrets of God and nature.

The fascination of his psychic projections has led Dee’s biographers to ignore his solid achievements in the science, history, and geography (among other things) of his day. In addition, assuming that there were two John Dees, (1) the utilitarian scientist interested in the practical application of speculative thought, and (2) the evil practitioner of occultism, there has been an inability to see the one true Dee. John Dee was a lover of divine wisdom, a dreamer, and a thinker, living in an age which was becoming increasingly dominated by the middle-class utilitarian ideal. Dee was an intellectually honest, sin-

<sup>1</sup> Many writers have called Dee both a “charlatan” and a “conjurer of evil spirits.” Two notable examples are: Louis B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Ithaca, 1958) and William Alexander Ayton, *The Life of John Dee*, translated from the Latin by Dr. Thomas Smith (London, Theosophical Publishing Society, 1908). The term “English Geographical Renaissance” (which is used throughout the paper) belongs to E. G. R. Taylor, *Tudor Geography, 1485–1583* (London, 1930). Dee was called a man too advanced for his own age to understand by his most sympathetic biographer: Charlotte Fell-Smith, *John Dee, 1527–1608* (London, 1909).

<sup>2</sup> Although called “Dr.” John Dee by many of his contemporaries, as well as using the title himself, Dee was not a “Dr.” He had not earned any degree beyond the M.A. The chances are that the title “Doctor,” so inseparable from his name, was merely bestowed in its original complimentary sense when it had become self-evident that he indeed was *doctus*, or learned.

cere, and pious Christian torn between the passing old and rising new order. He was, in other words, an Elizabethan.

A discussion of two related phases of his many activities not only helps one to better understand John Dee, but it also sheds further light on sixteenth-century England. Dee's rôle in the Elizabethan Geographical Renaissance has not been appreciated fully by his biographers and deserves elucidation.

Secondly, and related, an understanding of why, at the height of Dee's, and England's, overseas operations in 1583 Dee seemingly gave up his interest in those affairs that occupied so much of his time during the previous thirty years helps explain some of the motivations behind the many geographical explorations which played so important a rôle in that turbulent era. In that year John Dee suddenly migrated to the Continent and although he returned six years later, he was never again involved in exploration or colonizing expeditions. Unlike his biographers, I believe that this was a perfectly understandable development. To ask the misleading question about Dee, "How come a man endowed with his gifts and moral attributes could have lapsed into such madness [i.e., his spiritual concerns] as that which he raged?"<sup>3</sup> is to completely misunderstand John Dee and his age.

It was into the tempestuous and transitional world of the early 16th century<sup>4</sup> that John Dee was born in London on July 13, 1527.<sup>5</sup> Born into a family of moderate means, young Dee received the "usual" religious upbringing. He was educated at Cambridge and later became a Fellow of the newly established St. John's College. Inflamed by a love of learning even as a youth, Dee ardently studied mathematics and astronomy above all other subjects, taking countless observations of the heavens.

In May 1547, his twentieth year, Dee's thirst for knowledge carried him to the Low countries where, studying at the University of Louvain, called by Rashdall "one of the earliest and, for a time, by far the most famous homes of the New Learning in Europe,"<sup>6</sup> he formed close friendships with scientists and philosophers of world

<sup>3</sup> Ayton, *Life of John Dee*, 95.

<sup>4</sup> For a good account of the "Intellectual Conditions and Characteristics of the Sixteenth Century" see L. Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (8 vols., New York, 1931), V, Ch. 1. Also, P. H. Kocher, *Science and Religion in Elizabethan England* (San Marino, California, 1953); E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London, 1948); and Wright, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Almost all of the biographical material on Dee's life has been taken from the following three biographies: Ayton, *op. cit.*; Fell-Smith, *op. cit.*; and G. M. Hort, *Dr. John Dee, Elizabethan Mystic and Astrologer* (London, 1922).

<sup>6</sup> Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, ed. by F. M. Powicke and A. B. Emden (3 vols. Glasgow: Oxford University Press, 1958), II, 226-27.

fame. Among them, his relations with the famous Girardus Mercator seem to have been the most fruitful and significant.<sup>7</sup> Dee also became acquainted with the great Flemish mathematician, cartographer and cosmographer Gemma Phrysius, whose first globe, accompanied by a published text on the principles of astronomy and geography, had been brought out in 1530.

No doubt it was also at Louvain that Dee's interests in alchemy and occult matters were fed and strengthened, for that great university was still under the spell of the famous spiritualist and alchemist Henricus Agrippa, whose great work, *De Occulta Philosophia* was published in 1531.<sup>8</sup> Before returning to his native land in 1551, Dee travelled to Paris where he remained for many months and successfully delivered the first series of public lectures ever given on Euclid there. Assuredly, Dee's sojourn to and stay in that French city was of utmost importance for his later life, for one must remember that at this time Paris was not only a leading center of astronomy and astrology, but also of the mysterious and the occult.<sup>9</sup> Young Dee already had acquired international fame as a mathematician, and after his Euclidian lectures he was offered an appointment as a Royal Mathematician with an annual salary of 200 (French) crowns; he decided, instead, to return home. But the seeds implanted during these years at Louvain and Paris bore much fruit. As a result of the acquaintances made there, Dee maintained a lively correspondence with professors and doctors at almost every university of note upon the Continent.<sup>10</sup>

Dee's return to England was of great significance for he brought with him two large globes, as well as a number of astronomical instruments of Mercator's making. And, writes a leading student of

<sup>7</sup> Mercator was the originator of a method of cosmographical projection in which latitude and longitude are indicated by straight lines to serve the purposes of navigation and steering by compass. Cf. Hort, *Dr. John Dee*, 17. The great Portuguese mathematician and cosmographer Pedro Nuñez, as well as the famous mathematician from Louvain, Anthony Gogava, befriended and apparently influenced Dee.

<sup>8</sup> Agrippa's defense of the practice of magic as one of the lawful ways by which a man can attain a knowledge of God and Nature made a lasting impression on Dee. Cf. Hort, *Dr. John Dee*, 17. For an excellent discussion of Agrippa's thought, see Thorndike, *op. cit.*, V, Ch. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Thorndike, *op. cit.*, V, Ch. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Dee named especially his correspondents at the Universities of "Orleans, Collen, Haedelberg, Strasburg, Verona, Padoa, Ferrara, Bononia, Urbine, Roma," and "in many other . . . cities, and townes of Christendome." John Dee, "The Compensious Rehearsall of John Dee," 8. Reprinted in *Autobiographical Tracts of Dr. John Dee*, ed. by James Crossley, *Chetham Miscellanies* (Vol. 1. London: Chetham Society, 1851). Hereafter cited as *Autobiographical Tracts*.

geography, "the importance of these instruments, leading as they did to improvements in astronomico-geographical observations cannot be overestimated."<sup>11</sup> Shortly after arriving back in England, Dee presented two astronomical treatises to King Edward VI, one explaining the use of the celestial globe and the other, the movements of the heavenly bodies. In 1553 the already famous scholar produced, among other things, two works on *The Cause of Floods and Ebbs* and *The Philosophical and Political Occasions and Names of the Heavenly Asterisms*. Both of these were written at the request of the Duchess of Northumberland, whose patronage had already been bestowed on Dee.

While most thoughtful Elizabethans accepted the study of science, they continued to have gnawing fears about its possible consequences. The student of nature might always go above the stars and find no Christian God. Consequently, scientists, including Dee, made every effort to show that natural philosophy served religion well and humbly; the dedications, prefaces, and even the texts of their scientific publications carried explicit reassurance on this cardinal point.

In addition to his mathematical and astronomical interests, John Dee's studies also followed the pursuit of occult knowledge. Many people were already beginning to see in Dee no mere scientist, but a conjurer and magician of doubtful reputation. The occult tradition, going back to Neo-Platonism, unlike traditional Christianity, held that some of the most important forces in the world of nature come not from the elements, but from the hidden virtues transmitted to all physical objects by the stars from the intellectual world, which in turn emanated from God. It, therefore, tended to blur the difference between matter and spirit. Moreover, the Christian denial that there existed any ambiguous or neutral spirits between the two popular unbodied spiritual agents of God—angels and devils—was anathema to those of the Neo-Platonic persuasion. It was this belief in multitudinous orders of creatures in the ethereal regions and a desire to explore nature with the supernatural yet not demonic spirits that later was to cause tragedy to John Dee.

The growing popular concern over Dee's occult activities is understandable. In 1552 Jerome Cardan, the famous physician of Padua, visited England and lodged at the home of Sir John Cheke, where Dee frequently saw and talked with him.<sup>12</sup> Cardan was then in his prime; an occultist, surrounded by all the mysterious glamor of Padua, the supposed school of necromantic art, with an intense belief in his own powers, and a keen commanding intellect. Dee was considerably younger than Cardan, and may well have looked up to him as his master. The range of their discussions may be guessed at when we remember the super-normal powers that Cardan claimed to possess

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *Tudor Geography*, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Hort, *Dr. John Dee*, 22-23.

and exercise at will. He could, he declared, project his soul out of his body. He had a peculiar kind of clairvoyant vision, practiced divination, and dreamed prophetic dreams. Also of importance is the fact that Cardan believed himself to be accompanied by a guardian angel, which gave him counsel and assisted him in his undertakings.<sup>13</sup> His companionship must have given Dee stimulus and inspiration, for from this time on Dee continually pursued occult knowledge.

Meanwhile, with the death of Edward VI, Queen Mary took favorably to Dee, and upon invitation Dee drew up the new monarch's horoscope. Soon, however, he consolingly turned to Mary's younger sister and connivingly entered into correspondence with the Princess Elizabeth in her semi-captivity at Woodstock. Recalling this at a later date Dee reminded the Queen that "Before her Majesties coming to the crowne, I did shew my dutifull good will in some travailes for her Majesties behalfe, to the comfort of her Majesties fauourers then, and some of her principall servantes, at Woodstock. . . ." <sup>14</sup> Dee allayed Elizabeth's fears by predicting her fortune from the stars. When discovered and reported, however, Dee was easily charged with both treason—using magic against the Queen's life—and heresy. Although near the flames and imprisoned for a while, he was eventually acquitted of both charges and released.<sup>15</sup> The implications of the charge, however, were never to wear off.

When set at liberty again, Dee occupied himself for a while with projects for founding a State National Library of books and manuscripts which were being rapidly destroyed with the pillaging and destruction of monasteries. In January 1556, he presented to the Queen *A Supplication For The Recovery And Preservation Of Ancient Writers And Monuments* both in England and throughout the Continent. Dee concluded this remarkable document with a generous offer of his services to the realm:

. . . by furder device of your said suppliant, John Dee (God granting him his life and health), all the famous and worthy monuments that are in the notablest Librarys beyond the see (as in Vaticana at Rome, S. Marci at Venice, and the like at Bononia, Florence, Vienna, &c.) shall be procured unto the said Library of our sovereign Lady and Queen, the charges thereof (beside the journeying) to stand in the copying them out, and the carriage into this realm only. And as according all other excellent authors printed, that they likewise shall be gotten in wonderfull abundance, their carriage only into this realme to be chargeable.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For a thorough discussion of Cardan's thought see Thorndike, *op. cit.*, V, 563–83.

<sup>14</sup> I. D'Israeli, *Amenities of Literature* (2 vols., New York, 1841), I, 300.

<sup>15</sup> John Dee, *Autobiographical Tracts*, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Hort, *Dr. John Dee*, 27; Fell-Smith, *John Dee*, 15. A copy of this document can be found in Dee's *Autobiographical Tracts*, 46–49.

The death of Queen Mary in 1558 brought her younger sister to the throne. And Elizabeth, remembering the sage whose prophecies had illuminated her dark hours, at once summoned Dee to the court to calculate a favorable day for her coronation. Dee named January 14, 1559, and from that time on the scholar, settling at Mortlake on the Thames, remained in favor. Over the next few decades Dee was continually busied one way or another at the fancy of the Queen who not only made frequent demands upon him for personal services, but also often visited his home and famous library—the largest in all of England.<sup>17</sup>

It was at this time that John Dee turned much of his ceaseless energy to geographical concerns. In this connection two things must be pointed out. First, in the sixteenth century the world location of England had been completely altered. From her slumbers on a remote margin of the Old World, Englishmen now awakened to find themselves on the very threshold of a new one. Secondly, scientific geography has its roots in astronomy—in a knowledge of the shape and size of the earth, of its apparent motion relative to the heavenly bodies—knowledge which allows accurate fixing of position by astronomical means; hence, the debt of geography to astrology, based on just such astronomical knowledge was great. The cosmographer was, in fact, in the first instance a mathematician and an astronomer, so that geographical literature was sought within many astronomical and mathematical works.<sup>18</sup>

Geography owes a large debt to Roger Bacon for his general teaching (as well as specific works) concerning the importance of applied mathematics and the experimental approach to science. Bacon profoundly influenced many of the pioneers of the English Geographical Renaissance, including John Dee.<sup>19</sup> In the words of the leading historian of English geography of the Elizabethan era, after the publication of a new edition of Cabot's world map in 1549, "a new chapter in English geographical thought and practice opened." And that new chapter was, on the practical side, the beginning of the English search for Cathay; on the theoretical side, a story in which John Dee is one of the leading figures.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Dee's library was internationally known, and his more than 4,000 volumes and manuscripts was without a doubt the largest collection in all of England. For a list of the Manuscripts he possessed see "The Lists of Manuscripts Formerly Owned by Dr. John Dee," with a preface and identified by M. R. James. *Supplements to the Transactions of the Bibliographical Society, 1921-1926* (Supplement 1, London, 1926).

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, *Tudor Geography*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> The largest number of books and manuscripts written by any one author among Dee's 4,000 works were those by Bacon. It should perhaps also be noted that Dee possessed many of Robert Grosseteste's works. <sup>20</sup> Taylor, *op. cit.*, 19.

Keeping in mind the opportunities and stimuli which Dee's personal connections afforded him in his approach to geography, it is no wonder that his interest turned to the seas. His training and Continental travels gave him further opportunities, which he did not neglect, both to confer with the learned and to acquire a fine library of foreign books. No man in all of England was better qualified for the office of technical adviser for various overseas voyages than was the skilled mathematician, astronomer, and astrologer John Dee, with his friendships throughout the Continent and within the Elizabethan Court.

It is known that Dee's advice was sought in 1553 by Sebastian Cabot when he undertook to organize the first Northeast expedition, thus beginning in earnest an era of English expansion.<sup>21</sup> And when the Duke of Northumberland also turned to the promotion of the discovery of Cathay by way of the Northeast (a venture which from the promise it held of new markets for English woolens had gained the support of the great London merchants), it was again Dee who was asked to put his skills at the new company's disposal. In 1559 Dee made his services available to the Muscovy Company. He instructed those heading the voyage (Stephen and William Burroughs) in various mathematical and technical skills. And although the Muscovy Company's discovery of a route to Persia and new trade led in the early 1560's to its practical abandonment of the search for Cathay, others like Jenkinson, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, and John Dee kept Cathay before the public mind.

Dee, however, did not abandon his "other" studies. Remember that sometime in the early 1550's Dee wrote two astronomico-geographical treatises for the Duchess of Northumberland. He also published a number of treatises on subjects apparently remote from geography. The most important of these was his *Hieroglyphic Monad Explained Mathematically, Cabalistically, and Anagogically*, written in the Neo-Platonic tradition with additional cabalistic embroideries. In this work, published in 1564 and dedicated to Maximilian, King of Hungary, Dee expressed his belief in the hidden sympathies and antipathies of things, the transmission of the force of the super celestial intellectual world to earth through the stars and planets, and the existence of spiritual beings of a high order not quite synonymous with the angels of Christianity. In addition, it is not surprising that in the text he expressed the belief that the letters of the alphabet embody great mysteries, that medicine is contained in the monad, and that people should raise cabalistic eyes to the sky. Dee indulged in

<sup>21</sup> George Bruner Parks, *Richard Hakluyt and the English Voyages*, edited with an introduction by James A. Williamson. *American Geographical Society Publication* No. 10 (New York, 1930), 10.



much number mysticism and depiction of characters in the usual Neo-Platonic manner, holding that through the knowledge of superior numbers, one penetrates into the inner mysteries.<sup>22</sup> After proclaiming that such mysteries were not for the vulgar, Dee closed the treatise with a request to the printer to print only a limited amount of copies of the work to be judiciously distributed to the initiated.

In 1570, however, Dee wrote one of his most significant works. In the form of a Preface to Henry Billingsly's *English Translation of Euclid*,<sup>23</sup> he composed a magnificent exposition of the relationship and application of mathematics (especially arithmetic and geometry) to the practice of skilled arts and crafts. It was, in fact, a plea for the scientific method, and it obviously owed much to the great schoolman, Roger Bacon, of whom Dee was so devout a disciple.

Apart from its autobiographical details, the most important sections of the Preface were those dealing with mathematics as the essential foundation for the practice of surveying, navigation, cosmography, and hydrography. The twofold aspect of mathematics, as a pure and an applied science, was constantly on Dee's mind. And the discussion of navigation, and its obvious grounding in mathematics gave Dee an opportunity to remind his countrymen of their duties and privileges in the matters of discovery. In a passage which foreshadowed his later masterpiece, Dee asserted to his fellow Englishmen in a good Christian manner that

In navigation none ought to have greater care to be skilful than our English pilots. And perchance some would more attempt, and other some willingly would be aiding, if they wist certainly what privilege God had endued this island with, by reason of situation most commodious for navigation to places most famous and rich. . . . I say . . . some one or other should listen to the matter: and by good advice and by discreet circumspection, by little and little win to the knowledge of that trade and voyage; which now I should be sorry (through carelessness, want of skill and courage) should remain unknown and unheard of. Thereof verily might we grow commodity to this land chiefly, and to the rest of the Christian Commonwealth, far passing all riches and earthly treasure.<sup>24</sup>

The final phrase on "riches" and "treasure" is a reference to that secret hope which really lay behind all Dee's efforts, the hope of a revelation of occult mysteries in the East.

In 1573, Dee's friend, the expansionist Edward Dyer, was restored to the Queen's favor, while another favorite, Christopher Hatton,

<sup>22</sup> Edward W. Strong, *Procedures and Metaphysics* (Berkeley, 1936), 197.

<sup>23</sup> According to Samuel Eliot Morison this book, along with Dee's Preface, was required reading for all upperclassmen at Harvard College in the seventeenth century. S. E. Morison, *Harvard College in the 17th Century* (2 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1936), I, 147.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Taylor, *Tudor Geography*, 105.

was also rising to a position of importance. By now Dee obviously already had begun to dream of England as mistress of a Northern empire based on a command of the seas. And it was through the influence of these two men, both of whom had their hearts set on the discovery of Cathay, that Dee urged his expansionist schemes. In 1577 it was "To The Right Worshipfull, [*sic*] discrete, and singular fauorer, of all good Artes, and sciences, M. Christopher Hatton, Esquier: Captain of her Maiesties Garde, and Ientleman of her privy Chamber,"<sup>25</sup> that Dee dedicated the first volume (*A Pety Navy Royall*) of his *magnum opus*, *General and Rare Memorials Pertayning to the Perfect Arte of Navigation*.<sup>26</sup> This work, *A Pety Navy Royall*, addressed to all those who "carefully desire the prosperous state of the Common Wealth, of this Brytish Kingdom, and the Politicall SECVRITIES therof," does not bear directly on discovery. But it has as its object the setting forth of the advantages of having a navy of vessels in permanent commission and the means whereby such a scheme could be financed. Such a fleet was, of course, a pre-requisite of the policy of expansion which Dee was advocating, namely that of establishing a British maritime Empire. And while many have dismissed Dee as a fanatic and a megalomaniac, his picture (on the front piece of the work in 1577) of Queen Elizabeth at the helm of the Christian ship of Europe, had in it an element of the prophetic.

Mingling what has become the traditional elements of expansion with God and patriotism, Dee urged the importance of establishing a *Pety Navy Royall* of "three score tall ships or more, but in no case fewer," of 80 to 200 tons burden<sup>27</sup> to be thoroughly equipped and manned "as a comfort and safeguard to the Realme."<sup>28</sup> He shows the security this navy would give to English merchants: "I report me to all English Marchants . . . of how great value to them, and Consequently, to the Publik-Weale, of this Kingdom, such a securitie were? Whereby, both outward, and homeward (continually) their Marchantlike Ships (Many or few, great or small) may, in our Seas, and somewhat farder, pas quietly vnpylled, vnspoyled and vntaken, by Pyrates, or others. . . ." <sup>29</sup> This navy would also "decipher our coasts," sound channels and harbors, and observe tides. Thousands of soldiers, he says, "will thus be hardened and well broke to the rage and dis-

<sup>25</sup> Dee, *A Pety Navy Royall* (London, 1577), 4. A microfilm copy of this work can be found in the University of Wisconsin Library Rare Book Room. University Microfilm No. 12113 (Case 63, Carton 378).

<sup>26</sup> *The General and Rare Memorials Pertayning to the Perfect Arte of Navigation* was a four volume work. Hatton was to bring the work to the notice of the Privy Council, while Dyer, who appears to have borne the charges for its printing, was to bring the work to the attention of the Queen.

<sup>27</sup> Dee, *Pety Navy Royall*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

turbance of the sea, so that in time of need we shall not be forced to use all fresh water soldyers" ready at hand.<sup>30</sup>

Dee then touched on the question of unemployment: "hundreds of lustrous handsome men will this way be very well occupied and have needful maintenance, which are now idle or want sustenance, or both."<sup>31</sup> Quoting the ancient advocate of sea strength, Pericles, Dee reminded his audience that "These skilful sea-soldyers will be more traynable to martiall exploits, more quick-eyed and nimble than the landsmen."<sup>32</sup> Not only will the *Pety Navy Royall* look after pirates, but it also would protect England's valuable fisheries with the result that "many a hundred thousand pounds yerely Revenue, might grow to the Crown of England, more than (now) doth."<sup>33</sup>

Coming to the financial side, he asserts that every natural born subject of the "Brytish Impire" will willingly contribute towards this "perpetuale benevolence for sea security" the hundredth penny of his rents and revenues, and the five-hundredth penny of his valuation.<sup>34</sup> Dee would end the carrying off of English gunpowder and saltpeter from the realm. "Good God," he cried, "who Knoweth not what provise is made and kept in other Common Weales against armour carrying out of their limits?"<sup>35</sup> He deplores the wholesale destruction of English forests and timber (which is needed for ships) to keep the iron works going.<sup>36</sup>

The question of the limits of sea jurisdiction was also carefully discussed by John Dee. At that time it was commonly held that the diversity of natural products between one country and another was divinely appointed to promote intercourse between nations, and hence that God intended the seas to be free to all.<sup>37</sup> Dee, however, declared for a "closed sea."<sup>38</sup> He held that closed waters extend for 100 miles from a nation's shore, or in the case of narrow seas (less than 200 miles across) to a point mid-way between the home and foreign coasts. By laying claim for England to the shores and islands conquered by the former British Kings, Arthur and Madoc, and hence to a stretch

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Dee said the "Flemish" herring fisheries were worth £490,000 a year, but were conducted almost entirely off the English coast, and Englishmen then have to buy their own commodity from strangers. It might be mentioned that an Act similar to the one advocated by Dee at this time was passed by James I in 1609, a year after Dee's death. It required foreign fishing vessels to obtain a license (at a fee) to fish in English waters.

<sup>34</sup> Dee, *Pety Navy Royall*, 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 16ff.

<sup>37</sup> R. and R. Hakluyt, *The Original Writings of the Two Richard Hakluyts*, 2 vols., introduction and notes by E. G. R. Taylor (London: Hakluyt Society, 1935), I, 11, footnote.

<sup>38</sup> Dee, *Pety Navy Royall*, 27ff.

of sea for a hundred miles around each of these, Dee was able to establish fairly well a rightful jurisdiction across the North Atlantic and Arctic Oceans (the recent discoveries of Stephen Burroughs having extended British rights toward the Northeast).

Dee devoted a final chapter to the history of "that Peaceable and Proudest Saxon, King Edgar," whose "yerely chief sommer pastymes [were] . . . sayling round about his whole Isle" guarded with "hys grand nauy of 4,000 sayls, at the least."<sup>39</sup> Then he asks, "Shall we . . . not Iudge it, some parte of wisdome, to Imitate carefully, in some little Proportion . . . the prosperous Pastymes of Peaceable King Edgar, that Saxonically Alexander" who "so Highly, and Faithfully [served] . . . the glory of God . . . ?"<sup>40</sup>

Dee then concludes by asserting that England must attain this "incredible political mystery"—the supremacy of the seas.<sup>41</sup> England must be "Lords of the Seas" in order that its "wits and travayles" may be employed at home for the enriching of the Kingdom, that "our commodities (with due store reserve) may be carried abroad," and that peace and justice may reign,<sup>42</sup> for, as he earlier stated, "It is an olde Proverb, A Sword Keepeth Peace."<sup>43</sup>

Enough has been said of this book to show that, among other things, it was a remarkable contribution towards the history of the naval and fishing industries of Great Britain. Dee's treatise voiced the ideals of many sixteenth-century Englishmen, and twelve years later with the defeat of the Armada they were to be realized.<sup>44</sup> A. L. Rowse, in his *Elizabethans and America* recently wrote: "Strange to say—and everything about Dee is strange—the megalomaniac proved prophetically right: perhaps he was not a clairvoyant for nothing after all."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>41</sup> It is no mere coincidence that throughout the entire work Dee repeatedly uses the term "political." Coming mainly from Machiavelli, although from other sources as well, "Politik" in the sixteenth century implied the mystical and the mysterious; the dark and reserved domain for only the initiated few.

<sup>42</sup> Dee, *Pety Navy Royall*, 59.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>44</sup> The second volume to *The General and Rare Memorials Pertayning to the Perfect Arte of Navigation*, called *The Perfect Arte of Navigation*, was too long to be rescued from manuscript, where it still lies. Apparently the third volume was kept a mystery by Dee, while the last volume, on *Famous and Rich Discoveries*, likewise remained in manuscript form. The purpose of the fourth volume was to show how the English might bring back the riches of the East, not merely spices and material wealth, but the secrets of true wisdom. See, Parks, *Richard Hakluyt*, 48. In his *Autobiographical Tracts* Dee wrote: "And so great is the volume thereof, [*General and Rare Memorials*] that, to have it fairely and distinctly printed, with all the appertenances it would be in bulk greater than the English Bible, of the greatest volume. . . ," 61.

<sup>45</sup> A. L. Rowse, *The Elizabethans and America* (London, 1959), 18.

In spite of John Cabot's early failure, in 1497, to reach Cathay by sailing west and north from England, the belief in a Northwest Passage around America persisted for many years. Englishmen sent voyage after voyage in this profitless and discouraging quest. The most recent examples of the search for the Northwest Passage were the three voyages of Martin Frobisher in 1576, 1577, and 1578. Dee was intimately involved in these attempts, dealing with the expedition both as a promoter and an official geographer. As a promoter he had subscribed some money to Frobisher but although a shareholder in the venture, George Parks is quite correct in maintaining that Dee's "economic interest was in all likelihood a result and not a cause of his intellectual interest; he was probably adviser first and investor second."<sup>46</sup> As early as 1576, even before the writing of his *General and Rare Memorials* Dee had been called upon to give lectures in the art of navigation to Frobisher's company.<sup>47</sup>

At about this same time (1577-1580) Francis Drake was making his successful voyage around the world. There is strong evidence that Dee was also in the counsels of those responsible for that venture. The promoters of Drake's voyage included the Earl of Leicester, Walsingham, a Court Secretary and leader of the colonial party, Hatton, and Dyer, all of whom were close acquaintances of Dee. And the earliest entries in Dee's *Private Diary* refer to visits from Drake's friends and backers at precisely this time.<sup>48</sup>

By the year 1577 the active, restless brain of Humphrey Gilbert was at work on the problem of the exploration and colonization of America, and it is perhaps more than a coincidence that Gilbert called on Dee the day before he affixed his signature to the document entitled: "How her Majesty May Annoy the King of Spain." On November 6th, 1577, Dee recorded, "Sir Umfrey Gilbert cam to me at Mortlak."<sup>49</sup> Shortly thereafter Gilbert was awarded a patent for his colonizing scheme in the New World. Only about three weeks later Dee was summoned to the Court to explain to both the Queen and Secretary Walsingham (who was behind both Drake's and Gilbert's voyages) her title to the land to be colonized.

While most Englishmen justified England's right to land in the

<sup>46</sup> Parks, *Richard Hakluyt*, 47.

<sup>47</sup> Frobisher sailed up Hudson Bay, which he believed to be the route to the East. When it was believed that he found gold in some black and glistening rocks, his voyage tended for some time to divert attention away from a search for the East. See J. E. Gillespie, *A History of Geographical Discovery, 1400-1800* (New York, 1933), 80.

<sup>48</sup> Dee, John, *The Private Diary of Doctor John Dee*, edited by James Orchard Halliwell (London: The Camden Society, 1842), 4.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

New World on John Cabot's 1497 voyage, Dee declared the Queen's title rested on discoveries first made under King Arthur, then Madoc and later by the British merchant-explorer Thorne (1494) as well as Cabot three years after. And it was on this priority that Gilbert's patent rested. To accompany his views on the matter Dee also drew up a map of Atlantis (the New World)<sup>50</sup> as well as several tracts on the "hydrographic description of the Atlantis." Dee thought that the term generally used at that time for America, "West Indies," was misleading; he preferred the term "Atlantis," even over "America."<sup>51</sup> In all probability Dee took the term "Atlantis" from Plato's *Timaeus* which opens with the tale of the old Athenian State that fought for its own and others' freedom against the people of Atlantis until the earthquake ended the old Athenian race, and the Atlantean continent was swallowed in the sea. John Dee owned copies of many of Plato's works, including the *Timaeus*.<sup>52</sup>

In 1579, as his *Diary* mentions, Dee was already in touch with Adrian Gilbert and John Davis,<sup>53</sup> the two men later associated with the Northwest Passage attempts of 1585–1587. In June 1580, he was in touch with the two men again, while in August of the same year Dee obtained from Humphrey Gilbert a grant to what essentially amounted to the royalties of discovery of all the land north of the fiftieth latitude (the abandoned Frobisher region).<sup>54</sup> Queen Elizabeth graciously commanded Dee to attend her Court more often<sup>55</sup> and he was not slow to avail himself of the invitation. On October 3, 1580, he brought her further proof of her *Titles to Foreign Lands*, written by his hand on two parchment rolls. A week later the Queen called at his Mortlake estate and "withall told me," he inscribed in his *Diary*, "that the Lord Threasorer [Burghley] had greatly commended my doings for her title, which he had to examyn, which title in two rolls he had brought home two howrs before; . . ."<sup>56</sup>

In 1581 Dee's thought centered upon America and apparently he wrote a great volume in Latin on the propagation of the Christian Faith among the Infidels of Atlantis.<sup>57</sup> A year later Dee involved himself with Richard Hakluyt in an entirely new plan for reaching Cathay.

<sup>50</sup> According to Parks, serious English cartography began with the map of America drawn by Dee for the Queen in 1580. See Parks, *Richard Hakluyt*, 184.

<sup>51</sup> Hence, "Atlantical" meant pertaining not to the Atlantic Ocean, but to Atlantis (i.e., America). See Taylor, *Tudor Geography*, 99; Rowse, *Elizabethans*, 18.

<sup>52</sup> See James, *op. cit.*; Fell-Smith, *John Dee*, 244. <sup>53</sup> Dee, *Private Diary*, 7.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Dee, *Autobiographical Tracts*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 22; Dee, *Private Diary*, 9.

<sup>57</sup> I could find no references to this work in any of Dee's own writings, nor in any of the secondary works consulted except Parks, *Richard Hakluyt*, 48–49, and Taylor, *Tudor Geography*, 135.

At the same time another of Gilbert's chief backers, Sir George Peckham, came to see Dee and inquire into the English title to North American lands. In addition the "young [sea captain] Mr. Hawkins, who had byn with Sir Francis Drake, cam to . . . Mortlak."<sup>58</sup> The following year, 1583, however, saw Dee far more actively involved in overseas exploits than previously.

Early in 1583 the definite formulation of Adrian Gilbert's plans to search for a Northwest Passage, based on Dee's technical advice, came to a head. A clear picture of numerous meetings held both at Dee's home and elsewhere is preserved in his *Diary*. On January 23, 1583 "the Ryght Honorable Mr. Secretary Walsingham cam to my howse, where by good lok he found Mr. Awdrian Gilbert, and so talk was begonne of Northwest Straights discovery."<sup>59</sup> And on January 24th, 1583, Dee, "Mr. Awdrian Gilbert, and John Davis went by appointment to Mr. Secretary to Mr. Beale his howse, where only we four were secret, and we made Mr. Secretarie privie of the N. W. passage, and all charts and rutters agreed uppon in generall."<sup>60</sup> Once again, on March 6th, 1583, Dee recorded that "I, and Mr. Adrian Gilbert and John Davis, did mete with Mr. Alderman Barnes [one of the most influential Directors of the Muscovy Company]. Mr. Townson [a London merchant who was often associated with discoveries] and Mr. Yong [?] and Mr. Hudson [Thomas Hudson, father of Henry, and one of the founders of the Muscovy Company], about the N. W. voyage."<sup>61</sup> One of the results of this project was the license granted to Adrian Gilbert and John Davis to explore and plant colonies in the Northern part of Atlantis (observe Dee's influence in the name).

Dee lived for 25 years after 1583, the date of the last extract from his *Diary*, and he continued to make notes of important events as they occurred. Yet we find no further allusion in his journal to any of the other expeditions that ensued, nor do we find any further reference made to those who were engaged in them.

Besides immersing himself in geographical pursuits, Dee, over the years, had continued to nourish his interests in astrology and alchemy. In addition, for some time he had engaged in séances with a series of mediums to call up spirits from whom he hoped to learn the secrets of God and nature; those very secrets he sought from his geographical exploits. During the previous year Dee made the acquaintance of a young man, Edward Kelley, who, in Dee's mind, had marked mediumistic powers. Daily crystal-gazing séances again were resumed and Dee believed himself to be conversing with Neo-Platonic angelic spirits. In May 1583, Dee was introduced to the Polish Prince, Laski, then on a visit to England.<sup>62</sup> Laski, too, was a disciple of the occult and

<sup>58</sup> Dee, *Private Diary*, 11.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

when he visited Dee at Mortlake, Laski, Dee, and Kelley spent the entire night prying into hidden mysteries. Shortly thereafter, on September 21, 1583, Dee and Kelley, along with their families, left England in favor of the Continent. It was now that Dee abandoned his geographical activities for others that, perhaps he believed, would bring him more quickly to his ultimate goal.

If the actual attainment of the goal is a measure of success, then John Dee, notable mathematician, philosopher, astronomer, and keen student of geography and discovery was a failure. Nevertheless, it was such failures, both on the practical and theoretical side, that paved the way for the successes and clearer knowledge of the following decades. In claiming for Dee an important place in the history of sixteenth-century English geography it is sufficient to state that he was the teacher, technical instructor, friend, and adviser to most of the English mathematicians, astronomers, and geographers of his day. His pupils include such illustrious men as Richard Chancellor, Stephen and William Burroughs, Anthony Jenkinson, Martin Frobisher, Christopher Hall, Humphrey Gilbert, Adrian Gilbert, John Davis, Walter Raleigh, and Francis Drake, as well as Thomas Digges, Sir Edward Dyer, and Sir Philip Sidney. For his unceasing efforts in instructing mariners and scientists in their attempts to unveil hidden corners of the earth, John Dee is entitled to an honored place in the history of geography.<sup>63</sup>

Prior to 1583 John Dee appeared as a man of learning and a Court favorite—astronomer, mathematician, a brilliant lecturer and a diligent prober in chemical and alchemical secrets. He had written on navigation, history, logic, travel, geometry, astrology, and a host of other subjects. He had essayed to found a national library and he was contemplating a great work upon the reformation of the calendar. Had he remained in England, Dee doubtless would have taken a conspicuous part in later geographical ventures. It was in the critical year of 1583, however, that this man engaged in respectable popular efforts turned aside earthly wisdom in favor of the spiritual, and thereby came into disrepute in the eyes of so many of his contemporaries. Increasingly, reports were spread that Dee was initiated into the magical arts, helped by demons, and the label of “sorcerer” and “conjurer” of evil spirits became permanent. He was to die in poverty in 1608.

Dee did not abandon his geographical interests, as Rowse suggests, because having “no terrestrial preferment, nothing to live by . . . [he] at last . . . accepted better prospects from the Continent and went off to raise the spirits. . . .”<sup>64</sup> John Dee was an Elizabethan, and like

<sup>63</sup> This honored position was universally conceded to Dee by his British contemporaries. See Francis R. Johnson, *Astronomical Thought in Renaissance England* (Baltimore, 1937), 139–140 (footnote).

<sup>64</sup> Rowse, *Elizabethans*, 21.



many of his contemporaries he was part Medieval and part Renaissance. In true Renaissance style, Dee was a devotee of the new learning, but the sole object of that learning for Dee was the attainment of the older ideal of divine wisdom. Geographical exploration for Dee had not been a matter of material rewards. Beyond a concern for enough money to support himself and his family Dee was not primarily interested in financial matters, for if he had been, he would not have refused the yearly stipend of 200 French crowns offered him in Paris. A revealing paragraph from Dee's *Autobiographical Tracts* further bears this point out and is worth quoting.

To be most briefe . . . as concerning my forraine credit, . . . I might have served five Christian Emperors; namely, Charles the Fifth, Ferdinand, Maximilian, this Rudolph, and this present Moschovite: of every one their stipends directly or indirectly offered, amounting greater each, then other: as from 500 dollars yearely stipend to a 1000, 2000, 3000; and lastly, by a Messenger from this Russian or Moschovite Emperer, purposely sent, unto me at Trebona castle . . . of my coming to his court at Moskow . . . there to enjoy at his Imperial handes £2000 sterling yearely stipende; . . .<sup>65</sup>

Once again, if Dee was interested in financial betterment would he not have accepted any one of these positions rather than die in poverty, as he did?

For Dee, rather, overseas exploration was part of the search for something deeper; it was a probing for the heart of all knowledge, for the Infinite, for the Unknowable. Signs of this already were clearly visible in his *Pety Navy Royall* when Dee declared the reasons that he "doth wish and advise part of the publik threasory to be bestowed upon some two or three honest men who should be skilful in Forreyne languages." For "within the next few years," Dee continued, "in farder Cuntries great Affayres are by some of our Country-Men to be handled: If God continue his Gracious Direction and Ayde thereto, as he hath very comfortably begun: and that, *by means not yet published*."<sup>66</sup> For more than thirty years Dee had sought true wisdom in spirits, books, men, and distant new lands—always, however, unsuccessfully. If concentrated geographical activities failed, perhaps the shew-stone and angels would bring him to his goal.

To Dee the spirits he called upon were angels; he could not believe that he had broken the ideas of Christianity. But by the popular verdict of Elizabethan Christianity they must be devils; angels would have no such commerce with men. The case, therefore, for Dee's contemporaries was one in which the scientist abandoned his profession to resort to the supernatural. For Dee, however, that distinction was

<sup>65</sup> Dee, *Autobiographical Tracts*, 8-9.

<sup>66</sup> Dee, *Pety Navy Royall*, 62.

meaningless, for as he repeatedly said throughout all his life, *all* knowledge served God. In order to pursue that knowledge as he now saw fit, Dee was forced to turn once again to the Continent.

Beginning with Prince Laski's visit in May 1583, the accounts of his doings with spirits were minutely written down by Dee. They later were printed and published under the title of "*A True and Faithfull Relation of What Passed for many Years Between Dr. John Dee and Some Spirits.*"<sup>67</sup> This illuminating work which throws a great deal of light on the reason behind Dee's psychical activities suggests that Dee's ultimate aims in both his geographical and spiritual exploits were one and the same. Especially revealing is Dee's confession<sup>68</sup> that he

began and declared by long course of study for forty years, alwayes, by degrees going forward, and desirous of the best, and pure truths in all manner of studies, wherein I had passed, and that I passed as many as were commonly known and more than are commonly heard of. But that at length I perceived onely God (and by his good Angels) could satisfie my desire; which was to understand the natures of all creatures, and the best manner how to use them to his divine honor and glory. . . . And herein I had dealed sundry wayes: And at length had found the mercies of God such as to send me the instruction of Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel, and divers other his good and faithful Messagers. . . .

Dee, the astrologer, had always been in close touch with psychic phenomena. The old idea of access to certain stores of wisdom which God had withheld from man, but presumably gave to spiritual creatures of a higher order, had long attracted him. In addition, this profoundly pious man was convinced that God desired to hide nothing from the faithful seeker. This was confirmed for Dee by the sacred words of the angel Gabriel who uttered to him: "If thou remain my servant, and do the works that are righteous, I will put Solomon behind thee, and his riches under they feet."<sup>69</sup> Therefore, man with God's aid, may establish a real communication with the spiritual world through the calling of good spirits.<sup>70</sup> Once convinced of his medium-

<sup>67</sup> Dee, John, *A True and Faithfull Relation of What Passed for many Years Between Dr. John Dee and Some Spirits*, with a Preface by Meric Casaubon (London: D. Maxwell, 1659). Hereafter cited as *Some Spirits*. <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 167. <sup>70</sup> Dee wrote that the angel Uriel related the following to him: "For the spirit of God is twofold: working by information, and influence Celestial through the grant of God his good will, in the ministry of his Angels to the information of such as are his faithful and chosen. And another thing is to be inspired from God himself, in his holy spirit, immediately comforting and knitting Wisdom together with you, beyond the power that is given unto his Angels. I have spoken unto you a sound and true doctrine, and have given you not fleshly but Celestial counsel: Apply your self unto it, as the Spirit of God leadeth you." *Ibid.*, 361.

istic powers, God's wish to enlighten him through His angels became a reality for Dee. In fact, the voice of another of the divine messengers even had told him to "pluck up . . . thy heart and be merry" and "pine not thy Soul away with inward groanings," for "I will open unto thee the Secrets of Nature and the riches of the world" and "I will disclose unto you such things, as shall be wonderfull, and of exceeding profit."<sup>71</sup> It is, then, no wonder that Dee unhesitatingly left the island empire in favor of the Continent to seek and receive the true wisdom needed to fashion him according to his Maker. In John Dee's own words, all his endeavors, material and spiritual alike, only sought to "highly please, the eternall and almighty God, in executing for him the verity of his mercifull promises, generally made to all his sincere worshippers."<sup>72</sup>

English science in the sixteenth century was, on the whole, practical and experimental. Most leading scholars were not interested in abstract theory, except in so far as it was necessary for determining fundamental principles. They had a clear vision of the practical utility of science for the relief of man's estate. A few, on the other hand, were infused with the older medieval attitude and sought knowledge for its revelation of the truths of God. For Dee, however, the two traditions, did not conflict; rather, they were in harmony and indeed complemented each other. John Dee should be recognized as a particular variant of the proto-typical Elizabethan marriage of science, pseudo-science, and religion in the search for that divine unity which lay like a pattern behind the façade of nature.

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>72</sup> Dee, *Autobiographical Tracts*, 42.