

# John Dee's Role in Martin Frobisher's Northwest Enterprise<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction: John Dee and English Maritime History

*[Dee] was not the leading navigational adviser to the voyages; he made no contributions to science; and did not leave any worthwhile "books" unpublished; nor was he ever an effective propagandist of empire, as Hakluyt was.*

— A. L. Rowse<sup>2</sup>

*No intellectual did so much for English discovery as John Dee.*

— Samuel Eliot Morison<sup>3</sup>

Of all those who played a significant role in the planning, execution, and interpretation of Martin Frobisher's voyages to the Northwest Atlantic (1576-8), few have proven as puzzling as John Dee (1527-1609).<sup>4</sup> While some episodes in the voyages remain mysterious, recent scholarship — much of it carried out by associates of the Meta Incognita Project — has brought into focus the contributions made by key personnel, including Michael Lok, Christopher Hall, George Best, Jonas Schütz, and Frobisher himself. Dee's role in the Frobisher enterprise, however, has never been clear; and he remains an enigmatic figure in the Frobisher story. Those who have surveyed the primary sources know that Dee turns up in a range of capacities and contexts.<sup>5</sup> Yet, depending upon whose account one reads, it is possible to conclude that his contribution was anything from completely peripheral to absolutely essential.

As I suggested in my recent monograph on Dee, this is due, in part, to the fact that we have tended to lose sight of the scholarly advising into which Dee channeled his considerable resources, and through which he made his living among academic, courtly, and commercial circles. Likewise, the textual records which document the participation of such figures are fragmentary and often take forms (e.g. maps, position papers, and manuscript compilations) that no longer have the status of more "official" or "public" documents such as patents, charters, or published books. If we look back from the twentieth century to the sixteenth in search of imperial propaganda, for instance, it is clear that Dee's manuscript collection *Of Famous and Rich Discoveries* (1577) cannot compete with Richard Hakluyt's multi-volume compendium of *Principal Navigations* (1598-1600).<sup>6</sup> The most important factor, however, is that Dee's place in maritime history has been as variable as his overall character. Just as some historians have seen Dee as a deluded magician while others have considered him a pioneering scientist, some accounts deny him any part in Elizabethan maritime enterprise while others make him one of its prime movers.

In a review of what was then the latest word on Dee's life and works, Peter French's *John Dee: The World of an Elizabethan Magus* (London, 1972), A. L. Rowse wrote that "[Dee] was *not* the leading navigational adviser to the [Elizabethan] voyages; he made *no* contribution to science; and did not leave any worthwhile "books" unpublished; nor was he ever an effective propagandist of empire, as Hakluyt was." By representing Dee's writings on navigation and empire as "antiquarian" and by accommodating them to his (and his mentor Frances Yates's) vision of Dee as a Hermetic *magus*, French himself downplayed — or at least distorted — his role in the maritime sphere. John T. Juricek's work on Tudor and Stuart territorial claims, though more scholarly, also marginalised Dee's activities and achievements. He concluded that "no English claim is represented on any contemporary map," and made no mention of Dee.<sup>7</sup> Yet, in the years on either side of the Frobisher voyages, Dee prepared a series of treatises — and maps — which claimed for Queen Elizabeth an extensive imperial dominion covering most of the seas and much of the land in the Northern Hemisphere. In 1580, in fact, he summarised these claims on a manuscript map of the North Atlantic, and presented them to the government at conferences with the Queen, her treasurer Lord Burghley, and her secretary of state Sir Francis Walsingham.<sup>8</sup>

In some corners of maritime history and (especially) the history of geography, however, these and related efforts have earned Dee a more prominent position. As early as 1930, E. G. R. Taylor made Dee the central figure in her pioneering study, *Tudor Geography, 1485-1583*, where she called him "the man behind the scenes of overseas enterprise."<sup>9</sup> Dee's place in the advancement of English navigation has been favourably assessed by, among others, Lieutenant-Commander D. W. Waters; and his geographic expertise and cartographic output have been described by Antoine de Smet, Helen Wallis, and Robert Baldwin.<sup>10</sup> While Kenneth Andrews did not devote an entire chapter to Dee in his recent survey, *Trade, plunder and settlement: Maritime enterprise and the genesis of the British Empire, 1480-1630*, he called Dee "the most diligent and influential of the first generation of imperialists."<sup>11</sup> And G. J. Marcus, echoing the opinion of Samuel Eliot Morison, suggested that, in the Age of Expansion, "[Dee's] influence ... can scarcely be set too high."<sup>12</sup>

This paper will attempt to assemble, in one place, all of the relevant information for an assessment of Dee's role in the Frobisher voyages. It builds upon my previous account of Dee's maritime activities, and introduces a number of new sources (both primary and secondary) that have come to light since it was published.

## Dee's Role In Frobisher's Northwest Enterprise

### Before the Voyages

To understand how Dee came to participate in the Frobisher venture it is first necessary to take a brief look at the years leading up to the first expedition — to review the credentials and connections Dee brought to the venture, and the circumstances which gave rise to the voyages themselves. Indeed, even when he is not the direct instigator or chief actor in the

events leading up to the formation of the Cathay Company, Dee's early activities provide a helpful overview of England's campaign in search of a Northern Passage to Cathay.

Dee's university years, in the 1540s, were divided between Cambridge and Louvain. Cambridge provided a humanist education in the languages, arts, and sciences, and the acquaintance of many of those who would become prominent at the court and in the church during Elizabeth's reign. Louvain, which was more directly influential for his work in the maritime sphere, brought him into contact with the leading Continental cosmographers and mathematicians: he numbered among his teachers and friends Gemma Frisius, Pedro Nuñez, Abraham Ortelius, and Gerard Mercator. Before returning from Louvain Dee gave lectures on Euclid in Paris, where (he later recalled) he met with the mathematicians Oronce Finé and Joannes Peña, the astronomer Antoine Mizauld, and the cosmographer Guillaume Postel. From these years in Louvain and Paris Dee acquired not only contacts but texts and instruments that went beyond anything then available in England — including mathematical, geographical, and historical books and manuscripts, various compasses, two Mercator globes with manuscript emendations, and a ring dial devised by Gemma Frisius. Even at this early stage in his career, his growing library and scientific collection must have represented a centre for up-to-date theory and practice, and can probably be credited with bringing to England some of the ideas and instruments that would be essential for long-range exploratory voyages like Frobisher's.<sup>13</sup> In the years before the Frobisher voyages, Dee wrote a number of works which — while they cannot necessarily be connected with any particular voyage — provided a general impetus to English maritime enterprise. Among the works which do not survive are titles such as “De vsu Globi Coelestis, ad Regem Edoardum sextum [On the use of celestial globes, to King Edward VI]” (1550), “The true cause ... of Fluds and Ebbs” (1553), and “De Triangulorum rectilineorum Areis, libri 3, demonstrati: ad excellentissimum Mathematicum Petrum Nonium conscripti [On the areas of rectilinear triangles, in 3 books, composed for that most excellent mathematician Pedro Nuñez]” (1560).<sup>14</sup> By all accounts, his so-called “Mathematicall Praeface” to the first English translation of Euclid's *Elements* (1570) — and especially its introduction to applied geometry in sciences such as “Geographie,” “Chorographie,” and “Hydrographie” — was a major influence on both theory and practice in Elizabethan England.<sup>15</sup>

Frobisher's were not the first voyages upon which Dee and his collections would have an impact. He was closely involved in the venture that in several ways initiated the Elizabethan Cathay Campaign — Hugh Willoughby's and Richard Chancellor's 1553 voyages to the northeast. Their chief patron was John Dudley, whom Dee was serving — and probably living with — at the time; and Dee provided navigational training to Chancellor at least. Chancellor's probings along the northern Eurasian coast were sufficiently successful to lead to the establishment of the Muscovy Company — which employed Dee as one of its principal advisers.<sup>16</sup>

It was in the mid-1560s, though, that the search for a Northwest Passage came into its own. Around that time Sir Humphrey Gilbert, dissatisfied with the Muscovy Company's lack of progress (or effort) in northern exploration, challenged the company's monopoly

and drafted a pamphlet entitled, *A Discourse for a Discovery for a new Passage to Cataia*, which proposed a new direction for northern exploration. At that time the tract remained unprinted and the venture was postponed — though it surfaced again in the next decade, when it served as one of the catalysts for Frobisher's new Cathay enterprise, bringing together Dee and Michael Lok, Treasurer of the Cathay Company and principal supporter of the voyages.<sup>17</sup>

Lok's exceptionally thorough documentation provides a detailed picture of the inception of the project — and of Dee's interest in it. Looking back on the entire venture in 1581 (from prison, where he was shouldering the burden of the Cathay Company's financial failure), he described how he and Frobisher had planned to dispatch an expedition in 1575.<sup>18</sup> A lack of funds (and investors to provide them) forced a postponement until the following year.<sup>19</sup> At this point, Lok had already secured the advice of Humphrey Gilbert and Stephen and William Borough, the support of several major investors, and the services of Christopher Hall and Owen Griffin. According to Lok, Dee did not enter the picture until late in May, 1576:

*The learned man, Mr. John Dee, hearing the common [report] of this new enterprise and understanding of the prepara[rations] for furniture of the ships being thereby perswa[ded] that it would now procede, and having not byn acquaint[ed] with our purpose in any parte before, [abo]ut the xxth day of May, Anno 1576, of his own good na[tu]re favoring this enterprise in respect of the service and commodity of his naturall cuntry came unto me, desy[r]ing to know of me the reasons of my foundation and purpose in this enterprise, and offering his furderance thereof with such instructions and advise, as by his learning he could geve therein. Whereupon I conceived a great good opinion of him; and therefore apointed a tyme of meeting in my house, wherat were present Martyn Frobysher, Steven Borough, Christofer Hall, with other. Where freely and playnly I layd open to him at large my whole purpose in the traffike of merchandise by those new partes of the world for the benefit of the realm by many meanes as well in the cuntries of East India, yf the sea this way be open as allso otherwise, thought that this new land should chance to bar us from the sea of India. And allso declared such coniectures and probabilities as I had conceived of a passage by sea into the same sea of East India by that way of the northwest from England. And for the proof of these two matters I layd before him my bokes and authors, my cardes and instruments, and my notes therof made in writing, as I had made them of many yeres study before. Which matters, when he had thus hard and sene, he answered that he was right glad to know of me thus much of this matter, and that he was greatly satisfied in his desyre about his expectation, and that I was so well grounded in this [pur]pose he sh[ew]ed me all[so] his own. [...] And afterw[ards] [the while] the ships remayned here, he toke pay[ns to learn the] rules of geometry and cosmography for [the informat]ion of the masters and mariners in the use of [the in]struments for navigation in their voyage and fo[r cas]ualties happening at sea which did them service whereby he deserveth iust commendation.*



Dee's version of the chain of events was slightly but significantly different. In his account, published in 1577 in the self-promotional preface to his *General and Rare Memorials pertaining to the perfect arte of Navigation*, Dee praised Lok's initiative, which (he says) came to his attention *at the beginning* of 1576. In this preface he gives Lok credit for the Frobisher venture, but downplays the length of his involvement: "whereas, about, 3. or 4. monthes last past [i.e. in February or March], a vertuous Ientleman and Marchant, with zealous Intent, for the Auauancement of God his Glory, and the great Commoditie, and honor of this kingdom, procured vnto him, Worshipfull, yea and Honorable Ayde also: to set furth Ships, for a Northwest Discouery." Dee goes on to explain that immediately afterward Edward Dyer presented him with a manuscript copy of Gilbert's Cathay discourse — which would be published, at last, in April 1576. Dee read Gilbert's treatise, "And perusing th[o]roughly all reasons and allegations ... in the sayd Pamphlet expressed: did by euery Article therof, in the Margent, Note their value, or imperfection." Gilbert, for his part, praised both Dee and the new Cathay enterprise.

Each of these accounts acknowledges the other men, but also serves to enhance the role of the author. Ultimately, it may be impossible to disentangle this web of self-serving praise. There is no reason to believe that Dee was *directly* involved in the Frobisher venture until the early months of 1576. On the other hand, it does seem unlikely that Dee would have had to wait for "common report" to learn of Lok's project; that he would have "not byn acquaint[ed] with our purpose in any parte before"; and, above all, that it would take Lok's own navigational notes to persuade him of the existence of, and possible routes through, a Northwest Passage. By the 1570s these geographical ideas were common knowledge: they had been represented on maps produced by Dee's old friends Mercator and Ortelius, discussed in many of the books contained in his library,<sup>20</sup> and surveyed in Gilbert's treatise.<sup>21</sup>

Once Dee was on board, however, his and Lok's accounts converge: just before the first voyage Dee was summoned by Frobisher and Sir Lionell Ducket to Muscovy House, where he resided for a short time, instructing Frobisher and Hall in the science of mathematical navigation. Whether or not Dee's tutorials had any direct affect on Frobisher's or Hall's navigational practice (and there is evidence to suggest that they did not<sup>22</sup>), Lok commended Dee for this service, and Frobisher and Hall themselves sent him a letter from Shetland on their outward voyage, thanking him "for your frendly Instructions: which when we vse we do remember you, and hold our selues bound to you as your poore disciples, not able to be Scholers but in good will for want of lerning."<sup>23</sup> While (as we have seen) Lok had his own books and instruments, Robert Baldwin has suggested that at least some of those which accompanied Frobisher on his first voyage (including Robert Recorde's *Castle of Knowledge*, William Cunningham's *Cosmographycall Glasse*, Pedro de Medina's *Regimento de Navigacio*, and several works by Andre Thevet) were "obviously taken because of Dee's recommendation."<sup>24</sup>

As I have implied, it was Dee's learning and his textual resources (rather than first-hand navigational experience) that uniquely qualified him as a scholarly adviser to the Frobisher voyages. It is therefore significant that when he described his work with

Gilbert, which took place just as he was beginning to serve the Frobisher venture, he depicted himself as a reader — and annotator — of texts. In this he followed in the tradition of that other great Renaissance discoverer whose search for Cathay (like Frobisher's) took a significant, though much more consequential, detour — Christopher Columbus.<sup>25</sup> A recently rediscovered volume from Dee's library shows Dee at work, preparing himself as an expert on exploration; and it may provide a link (in the mind of one contemporary Englishman, at least) between Columbus and Frobisher. Sometime between 1571 and 1583 — and most likely during the years in which he advised the Cathay Company — Dee acquired and annotated Ferdinand Columbus's life of his father, the famous *History ... of the Life & Deeds of the Admiral Christopher Columbus*.<sup>26</sup>

Their failures notwithstanding, Frobisher's voyages mark a formative moment in England's belated entry into direct imperial competition with the Spanish, and (despite the collapse of the voyages' mining and colonizing enterprises) the beginning of its rise as an imperial power. Dee's marginalia, I would suggest, must be read in the context of this key moment in that transfer of power.

Aside from Dee's commentary on Columbus's character, the locations of his discoveries, and the behaviour of the Spanish explorers, the marginalia reveal Dee's interest in the practical matters of exploration and cross-cultural contact. First, he knew how important it was — when places and phenomena were being observed, potentially, for the first time — for explorers to keep detailed records. Reading that “the Admiral was very careful to keep a journal of all that happened on the voyage: wind directions and currents, the distance run by each ship, and all that they sighted on the way,” Dee wrote in the margin, “Note what things are to be noted in a voyage by Sea.”<sup>27</sup> This was a part of the briefing which he later gave Arthur Pet and Charles Jackman (before their Northeast voyage of 1580): was it also part of the instruction he gave Hall and Frobisher? And was it therefore one of the reasons for the unusually careful records kept during their voyages?

Dee's marginalia also display a constant concern with Columbus's itinerary; with the distances he travelled and the means he used to measure them, and with the location of various points in the New World. In several places, Dee commented on Columbus's mistaken landfall: he drew special attention to the passage, “[he] was mistaken in his belief that the first lands to which one would come [travelling westward] would be Cathay and the empire of the Great Khan.” Given his own interest in finding a way around the Americas to Cathay (which was, of course, the initial purpose of Frobisher's first voyage), Dee was extremely attentive to Ferdinand's summary of classical and medieval sources on this subject.

Dee's marginalia focus, above all, on the pragmatic “policies” of Columbus. Some of these concern the voyages themselves, such as the notes on the number of men on the ships or the amount of the reward for the first man who spotted land. Others concern the establishment of a colony on that land: he notes descriptions of forts and discussions of the practice of leaving men behind. Most, however, are strategies for successful interaction with and exploitation of the indigenous population. Dee identifies tricks for

securing the faith of the people, for extracting information from them, and for initiating favourable trades with them. A sickening number of these practices that Dee labels “policies” in the margin entail the seizure of Natives: on p.66 Dee noted that “12 indians [were] taken,” on p.76 that “a woman [was] gotten,” on p.77 that “An indian in a canoe [was] taken,” on p.185 that “6 indians [were] taken,” and so on. This takes us very close to Frobisher’s voyages,<sup>28</sup> as does the detailed discussion of how to procure the Natives’ permission to leave men behind, and of how many men were needed to keep that colony safe.<sup>29</sup>

Frobisher’s venture is also invoked by Dee’s careful attention to any mention of gold. Gold was, of course, at least the indirect object of most European exploration in the new world, so it is not surprising to find Dee noting “a show of gold” and, later, a “great quantity of gold.” But, more specifically, Dee noticed how gold was accidentally discovered on Columbus’s first voyage, and that in subsequent voyages hired labourers from Spain were taken to mine the ore — a sequence of events which was to be repeated (with disastrous consequences) in Frobisher’s three voyages.

## During the Voyages

### *VOYAGER?*

It was once thought that Dee actually travelled with Frobisher’s ships on their second voyage to Meta Incognita in 1577.<sup>30</sup> This is clearly a case of mistaken identity: Dee’s private diaries indicate that he remained in London throughout that year.<sup>31</sup> Besides, as Robert Baldwin has suggested, when it came to the New World Dee was very much the “armchair traveller”; and at the time of Frobisher’s voyages “Dee’s status was that of the well-read theorist.”<sup>32</sup>

### *INVESTOR*

It has often been noted that Dee pledged — but, like many investors, never paid — a £100 share in the venture.<sup>33</sup> But what has rarely been noticed is that this investment came directly out of Lok’s pocket: one of Lok’s retrospective accounts of “dyvers Charges for the Affayres of the Companye” included the entry, “And Michael Lok hathe in stok and venture for him selff and hys chylidren which he hathe paid [amount] And in the name of John Dee [amount].”<sup>34</sup> McDermott attributes this to either poverty or prudence on Dee’s part; but, without ruling either of these out, I would suggest that it represented some sort of payment in kind for Dee’s service to the voyages.

Significantly, of five separate documents in which Lok lists those venturers who had not paid their share, Dee appears in only one — which is specifically for costs relating to “ffraight and wages.”<sup>35</sup> Given that Dee’s debt in this tally amounted to only £28 (instead of the £100 share provided by Lok) it is possible that this represents an additional sum ventured by Dee himself.

A glance at the place-names Frobisher and his men assigned to the region they explored indicates that prominent investors were rewarded by having their names associated with particular bays, islands, hills, or mines. This points us to another indication of the venture's indebtedness to Dee: in Christopher Hall's manuscript narrative of the third voyage of *The Ayde*, there is a sketch of a rocky coastline with the caption, "Mr Dee his Pinnacles."<sup>36</sup>

#### COMMISSIONER/ADVISER

Since Dee's later instructions for Pet and Jackman's 1580 voyage have been preserved, we know that for a similar venture he supplied the navigators with a sailing chart and advised them on the use of instruments and the keeping of records at sea.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, aside from the general letters of thanks cited above, no such documentation survives for Dee's directions to Frobisher and his men. Direct evidence does survive, however, for Dee's participation in assaying and victualling commissions.

Early in 1578, Dartford became active as a centre for the processing of Frobisher's "Northwest Ewr [Ore]."<sup>38</sup> When Michael Lok wrote to the Privy Council to request a license for the building and assaying at Dartford, Dee was listed among the "Commyssyoners" (alongside Sir William Winter, Sir William Pelham, Thomas Randolph, Edward Dyer, and others).<sup>39</sup> In 1579, after the third voyage, Dee remained among the Cathay Company's commissioners. On the 28th of March Sir Thomas Gresham sent a letter to the Privy Council to report on the state of operations: in the list of signatures Dee's can be found just below Gresham's, and alongside those of Thomas Allen, Lionell Ducket, Michael Lok, Martin Frobisher, Edward Fenton, Christopher Hoddesdon, Gilbert York, and Matthew Field.<sup>40</sup>

One final glimpse at Dee's activity as a commissioner has recently turned up in an unexpected place. Pepys Library (Magdalene College, Cambridge) MS 2133 contains Edward Fenton's log for the 1578 voyage of *The Judith*. Before the log there are several miscellaneous documents, including one careful list of the dietary needs — and costs — of one man for the time to be spent on sea and on land in the third voyage, drafted on 18 March 1578 (fol.5r). The head-note explains that it was prepared "by Mr fforbisher, Mr Dee, Mr Younge, Mr Lok and Mr Edw: Fenton and others Commissioners appointed for thorderinge of such cawses as were to be delt in for the new discoveries made by Cap<sup>en</sup> fforbisher to the Northweste."

#### WRITER

Dee's first, and by far best-known, contribution to English maritime enterprise was his *General and Rare Memorials pertayning to the Perfect Arte of Navigation*, written in 1576 and printed in 1577. This work outlined a project for the establishment of a naval coast guard; but it was part of a much more ambitious scheme. As Dee explained in the work's preface, he intended it to serve as an introduction to a four-volume series which would go under the extraordinary title, "The British Monarchy."<sup>41</sup> The fourth part of this

work was to be called *Of Famous and Rich Discoveries*. The badly damaged manuscript which answers to this title is a rambling compilation of materials on geography — specifically of areas to be explored in voyages to Cathay via the Northeast and Northwest Passages. Given that this volume was put together between 24 March and 8 June 1577, it is tempting to see it as in some way connected to the Frobisher voyage of that year: the Frobisher expedition is mentioned several times, but it remains unclear how (or even whether) this work directly influenced the subsequent activities of the Cathay Company.

It did, however, add to Dee's reputation as a leading geographical adviser and imperial theorist. As he was writing his *General and Rare Memorials* Dee prepared his work, *Brytanici Imperij Limites* ["The Limits of the British Empire"], which spelled out his case for Queen Elizabeth's rights to foreign lands and sovereignty over what he called the "British Seas." He cited classical histories, medieval chronicles, travellers' accounts, ambassadors' letters, and family trees, all to support his conclusion that for "a great parte of the sea Coastes of *America* ... and Cheiflie all the *Ilands Septentrionall* [that is, the northern islands such as Greenland and Friseland], the Title Royall and supreme government is due ... vnto [her] most gracious Maiestie." This conclusion does not seem to have been presented to its intended audience at court until late in 1577: on 25 November he noted in his diary that he "declared to the Quene her title to Greenland, Estotiland and Friseland." The full text of Dee's plan was not conveyed to the Queen and her ministers until 1580 (by which time it was accompanied by a map — with a summary of his imperial claims inscribed on the reverse, now known as "The Brief Remembrance"). At that time, of course, the Cathay Company had been disbanded, and Dee's efforts were no doubt being directed at the voyages of Pet and Jackman (and, later, John Davis).

### READER

Above I described Dee's annotations in an early biography of Christopher Columbus, and suggested that Dee's primary role in the voyages of Frobisher and others was that of an extremely well-informed *reader*. Back in 1930, E.G.R. Taylor prepared a fairly comprehensive listing of the cosmographical books found in Dee's collection by 1583 (see Appendix IA of *Tudor Geography*). More recently, Julian Roberts and Andrew Watson have described the entire library, noting that the section Dee devoted specifically to "Historici libri ad navigationem pertinentes" (which formed the basis of Taylor's listing) "did not comprehend all Dee's books on the New World."<sup>42</sup> What is sufficiently clear from either listing is that Dee's library contained an unrivalled collection of sources on practical navigation, on the geography of the northern regions, and on the history of imperial ventures in both the new and old worlds.

While the annotations in the Columbus volume certainly relate to Elizabethan maritime enterprise, they can only be tentatively associated with Frobisher's voyages. Another of Dee's annotated volumes on the history of exploration has recently surfaced, however, and it bears a much closer relationship to the voyages of 1576-78. It is a copy of Strabo's *De situ orbis libri xvii*, in Greek and Latin, edited by Conrad Heresbach and published in



Basle in August, 1549. It currently resides in the Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels.<sup>43</sup> Dee acquired this hefty folio in Louvain only a few months after it was printed: he signed the title-page, “Joannes Deeus 1549. Decembre. Lovanij. 10s.” While many of the underlinings and notes appear to be from this period, Dee returned to this volume and — as we shall see — added marginal notes throughout his life.

In the Renaissance Strabo’s *Geography* was one of the key texts for both the study of geography and its application in voyages of exploration. Its emphasis on the interrelation of the different disciplines involved in knowledge of the world (mathematics, climatology, rhetoric, politics, and so on) fit neatly with the scientific humanism of Dee and his contemporaries. On a more practical level, Strabo sat alongside Ptolemy as the primary Classical statement on the limits of the known world: this world-picture would inform the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century voyages that would make it obsolete.<sup>44</sup> In the opening pages the book’s special relevance to Dee, and to the Frobisher ventures, is immediately apparent. In Book I, Chapter I, Section 6, Strabo discusses Homer’s use of the term “arctic circle.” Dee underlines this text and adds a gloss of his own, paying particular attention to the mention of the people of the north. Where Strabo writes, “Furthermore, Homer knows of the men who live farthest north; and while he does not mention them by name ... he characterises them by their mode of life, describing them as ‘nomads,’ and as ‘proud mare-milkers, curd-eaters, and a resourceless folk’,” Dee notes, “Gentes septentrionales, Homero haud ignote [Of the northern people, Homer was not ignorant].”<sup>45</sup> Dee was especially interested in Strabo’s conclusions about the habitable world, and his assertion that “It is unlikely that the Atlantic Ocean is divided into two seas.”<sup>46</sup>

The volume contains much general commentary on the geography of the ancient world, and the opposition between barbaric and civilised cultures that it established<sup>47</sup> must have been especially useful for those who were backing early colonial ventures. On sig.k4r, for instance, Dee draws attention to “The Converting of Barbarousnes into Ciuilitie by good Pollicie.” And, as with the annotations in the life of Columbus, Dee’s marginalia are always attentive to mentions of metals (especially gold).

Dee’s annotations are, finally, especially dense in the sections relating to the early history of “Britania” and “Thule,” the two regions in which — for obvious reasons — he was most interested. In Book 2, Chapter 4, Section 1, Strabo describes the controversial testimony of Pytheas about Thule, specifically citing “his story about Thule and about those regions in which there was no longer either land properly so-called, or sea, or air, but a kind of substance concreted from all these elements, resembling a sea-lungs — a thing in which, he says, the earth, the sea, and all the elements are held in suspension; and this is a sort of bond to hold all together, which you can neither walk nor sail upon. Now, as for this thing that resembles the sea-lungs, he says that he saw it himself, but that all the rest he tells from hearsay.”<sup>48</sup> In one of the volume’s most remarkable annotations, Dee speculates that Pytheas was, in fact, describing icebergs such as those observed by Frobisher’s men. He underlines this entire passage and writes in the margin, “I think it was the Mowntaynes of Ise; somme of a myle long; some longer; and 40 or 50 faddom

high such as Owen Griffith saw a<sup>o</sup> 1576 and M<sup>r</sup> Christopher Hall.”<sup>49</sup> Clearly, Dee’s contact with the pilots of Frobisher’s ships did not stop after his preliminary briefing. As we will see in the next section, he had unusual access to their documentation, and it is possible that he interviewed them personally after their return — as we know he did Hugh Smith, concerning Pet and Jackman’s encounter with the ice in the Kara Sea four years later. On that occasion Smith sketched the scene for Dee, who noted on the map the place where they were stopped by “Infinite yse.”<sup>50</sup>

### After the Voyages

As in the map drawn by Smith, the principal evidence for Dee’s contact with the aftermath of the Frobisher’s voyages is the appearance of his hand in the texts which documented the venture. As Helen Wallis and others have noted, in the early years of maritime expansion, all evidence of geographical discoveries was closely guarded by the companies (and courts) involved.<sup>51</sup> It is significant, therefore, that Dee possessed his own manuscript copies of several central documents pertaining to Frobisher’s voyages. The most important volumes are British Library MSS Cotton Otho E.VIII and Harley 167. The former not only contains Lok’s retrospective account (cited above), but Smith’s map and materials relating to Willoughby’s 1553 voyage to the northeast. The latter contains a version of Edward Sellman’s journal from the 1578 voyage, quite different from the fuller account he published that year. More valuable, perhaps, were the compressed description of Edward Fenton’s 1578 voyage in the *Judith*, and Christopher Hall’s account of his third voyage, which were never published in any form: these Dee signed and dated (1580) on fol.184r, and annotated throughout.

Dee also played a prominent (if ill-defined) role in the voyages which would directly follow Frobisher’s probings for a Northwest Passage — the three voyages led by John Davis in 1585-1587.<sup>52</sup> Davis spent some part of his upbringing in Dee’s household.<sup>53</sup> If his own account is to be believed, Dee was actually responsible for initiating the venture: as he noted in his diary on 23 January 1583, “the Ryght Honorable Secretary Walsingham cam to my howse, where by good lok he found Mr. Awdrian Gilbert, and so talk was begonne of North-west Straights discovery.” It was agreed that Davis would serve as “master-pilot” for the voyages, and the next day the same group was joined by Davis for a private conference at the house of Robert Beale, clerk of the Privy Council, where “all charts and rutters were agreed uppon in generall.” Dee’s involvement continued until at least 6 March when an even larger group met “abowt the N.W. voyage.” In the following months, Dee mysteriously withdrew from the project and from England, making his way to Prague, where he would spend the years covering the Davis venture.<sup>54</sup>

Davis would not only have received training from Dee in the sciences which would be useful to his navigational ventures; but he would have had access to Dee’s comprehensive collection of books and instruments. One of the most useful discoveries made by Julian Roberts and Andrew Watson in their research on Dee’s library is the fact that it was “spoiled” not by the legendary angry Mortlake mob, but by some of Dee’s associates whom he had entrusted with the care of the collection during his 6-year stay in Eastern

Europe. Significantly, the words “John Davis spoyle” (or some variant) appear next to about 70 printed books and 1 manuscript.<sup>55</sup>

One of the items stolen from Dee’s library between 1583 and 1589 was “one great bladder with about four pound weight.” This item had been a complete mystery to me until I noticed an interesting passage in Best’s account of Frobisher’s 2nd voyage: “our menne iustly suspecting them [i.e. the Natives], kepte aloofe without their daunger, and yet sette one of our companie a shore, whyche tooke vp a greate blather [bladder], which one of them offered vs, and leauyng a looking glasse in the place, came into the Boate agayne. Concerning this Blather which we receyued, our Captiue made signes that it was giuen him to keep water and drinke in, but we suspected, rather, it was given him to swimme and shift away withall.” There is almost no way of knowing how, in fact, this bladder was intended to be used, or what Frobisher and his men did with it. Is it possible that it found its way into Dee’s library, where it would have been placed alongside other artefacts from the New World (such as his obsidian mirror of Spanish-American origin)? And was it among the objects stolen by John Davis, Frobisher’s successor in the exploration of the Canadian Arctic? If so, it provides one of the strangest links in the strange story of the search for the Northwest Passage.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

Even after all of the relevant information is assembled and weighed, it is difficult to assess Dee’s impact on the Frobisher enterprise. His contributions were largely indirect and his plans were often unrealised. But in the end, one has to take issue with most of A.L. Rowse’s conclusions about his contribution to England’s nascent maritime empire. He was a leading navigational adviser to most of the voyages to the Northeast and the Northwest between 1550 and 1583. He made substantial contributions to the mathematical, geographical, and navigational sciences. He left several “worthwhile” texts unpublished (though whether they were “books” and whether he ever intended to publish them is open to debate). And, ultimately, even if he did not provide the British Empire with effective propaganda, he must be credited with a good deal of its theoretical framework and internal momentum.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the members of ARTAF for their conversation and input through the years, and to acknowledge that some of the research presented in this paper was funded by a Junior Caird Fellowship at the National Maritime Museum (1992-93) and a Bibliographical Society Grant (1995-96).

<sup>2</sup> “Elizabethan Magus: John Dee,” in *Discoveries and Reviews: From Renaissance to Restoration* (London: MacMillan, 1975), p.191.

<sup>3</sup> *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages, A.D. 500-1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.483.

<sup>4</sup> For general introductions to Dee's life and works see the article in the *Dictionary of National Biography* and Ch.1 of William Sherman, *John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> A crude but effective way of gauging his presence in the Frobisher voyages is to consult Vilhjalmur Stefansson's edition of *The Three Voyages of Martin Frobisher* (London: The Argonaut Press, 1938), where (according to the index) he appears 22 times — the same number, incidentally, as Richard Hakluyt.

<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, during the 1570s and '80s Elizabethan politicians and explorers would have seen Dee's texts as state of the art.

<sup>7</sup> John T. Juricek, "English Territorial Claims in North America Under Elizabeth and the Early Stuarts," *Terrae Incognitae* 7 (1975), 7-22; 11. This article is based on Juricek's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, "English Claims to North America to 1660: A Study in Legal and Constitutional History" (University of Chicago, 1970).

<sup>8</sup> The map is British Library, MS Cotton Augustus I.i.1, and the accompanying treatise is his *Brytanici Imperii Limites*, British Library MS Additional 59681. For a description of both of these, and the conferences at court, see Ch.7, section c, in my *John Dee*.

<sup>9</sup> *Tudor Geography, 1485-1583* (London: Methuen, 1930; reprinted New York: Octagon Books, 1968), v. Cf. Taylor's "John Dee and the map of northeast Asia," *Imago Mundi* 12 (1955), 103-6, "A letter dated 1577 from Mercator to John Dee," *Imago Mundi* 13 (1956), 56-68, and "John Dee and the Nautical Triangle, 1575," *Journal of the Institute of Navigation* 8 (1955), 318-25. Taylor's rehabilitation of Dee (and her knowledge of some of his manuscript sources) seems to have owed something to the earlier work of J. A. Williamson: see his *Maritime Enterprise, 1485-1558* (Oxford, 1913).

<sup>10</sup> D. W. Waters, *The Art of Navigation in England in Elizabethan and Early Stuart Times* (London, 1958); A. de Smet, "John Dee et sa place dans l'histoire de la cartographie," in Helen Wallis and Sarah Tyacke (eds.), *My Head is a Map: Essays & Memoirs in Honour of R. V. Tooley* (London: Francis Adwards and Carta Press, 1973); Helen Wallis, "Across the Narrow Seas," in *Studies in the History and Bibliography of Britain and the Low Countries presented to Anna E. Simoni* (London: British Library, 1991); Robert Baldwin, "John Dee's Interest in the Application of Nautical Science, Mathematics and Law to English Naval Affairs" (unpublished manuscript, distributed to ARTAF at the 32nd Meeting on Thursday, 8 August 1996). Cf. Ch.7 in my book on Dee, and my forthcoming essay, "Putting the British Seas on the Map: John Dee's Imperial Cartography," in J. Akerman (ed.), *Cartography, Statecraft, and Political Culture* (Chicago: Speculum Orbis Press, in press).

<sup>11</sup> Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p.35. In the chapter, "Northwest with Frobisher and Davis," Andrews describes the "active part" taken by Dee "in the geographical and technical planning" of the voyages (171).

<sup>12</sup> *A Naval History of England* (London: Longmans, 1961); Vol. 1, p.52.

<sup>13</sup> Julian Roberts & Andrew G. Watson, eds., *John Dee's Library Catalogue* (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1990), Introduction; Sherman, *John Dee*, ch.2.

<sup>14</sup> Dee lists these and many other titles in *A Letter, Containing a most briefe Discourse Apologeticall...* (London: Peter Short, 1599), sigs.A3v-B1v.

<sup>15</sup> "Iohn Dee his Mathematicall Praeface," in Henry Billingsley, trans., *The Elements of Geometrie of the most auncient Philosopher EVCLIDE of Megara* (London: John Daye, 1570).

<sup>16</sup> T. S. Willan tells the story in *The Early History of the Russia Company, 1553-1603* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956), though his only mention of Dee concerns his role in the 1580 voyage of Pet and Jackman.

<sup>17</sup> James McDermott, "Michael Lok, Mercer and Merchant Adventurer" in this volume.

<sup>18</sup> Lok's account survives as British Library MS Cotton Otho E.VIII. Except for fol.45, it is in Dee's hand. The document is printed in Taylor, *Tudor Geography*, 269-70; but her transcription is not entirely accurate, and she fails to distinguish between the two sections of the account, dating the whole to 1577. Below I cite the superior transcription produced by Collinson for the Hakluyt Society edition of *The Three Voyages of Martin Frobisher* and reproduced in Stefansson's edition, Vol.II, pp.79-83 [emphasis mine].

<sup>19</sup> For a careful account of the events leading to the formation of a "Company of Cathay" see James McDermott, "The Company of Cathay: the Financing and Organization of the Frobisher Voyages" in this volume.

<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Dee's *Of Famous and Rich Discoveries* (BL MS Cotton Vitellius C.VII, fols.26-269) — which was prepared in the spring and summer of 1577 and which I will describe later in this paper — contains an exhaustive compilation of old and new sources on the geography of the Northwest and Northeast regions. Perhaps none was more influential than the notoriously misleading account of the brothers Antonio and Nicolo Zeno, from whom Dee borrowed many of his geographical ideas about the Northwest Atlantic (especially those concerning the fictional island of “Estotiland”).

<sup>21</sup> They were also the subject of a letter sent by the merchant Robert Thorne to King Henry VIII in 1527. Sometime in the 1570s, Cyrpian Lucar — the son of one of Thorne's associates — presented Dee with a copy of this letter (Sherman, *John Dee*, pp.172-3).

<sup>22</sup> McDermott, “The Company of Cathay,” suggests that Hall (at least) was already an experienced navigator, and that the value of Dee's expertise was probably indirect: it probably helped publicize the expedition, and his earlier tuition of William Borough enabled him to make his own effective contribution.

<sup>23</sup> The letter, dated 26 June 1576, was published by Dee himself in the preface to his *General and Rare Memorials* (sig. A2r).

<sup>24</sup> “John Dee's Interest,” p.3.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Valerie Flint, *The Imaginative Landscape of Christopher Columbus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Margarite Zamora, *Reading Columbus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> *Historie Del S.D. Fernando Colombo; Nelle quali s'ha particolare, & vera relatione della vita, & de' fatti dell' Ammiraglio D. CHRISTOFORO COLOMBO, suo padre*, trans. Alfonso Ulloa (Venetia: Appresso Francesco de' Franceschi Sanese, 1571). I cite from the translation of Benjamin Keen, *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus, by his Son, Ferdinand* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958; 2nd ed., 1992). Dee's copy is British Library shelf-mark 615.d.7. I want to thank David Quinn for the tip which led me to this volume, and Julian Roberts for examining the volume and confirming my attributions. I have described this volume and its annotations in more detail in a forthcoming essay, “John Dee's Columbian Encounter.”

<sup>27</sup> Dee was particularly struck by Columbus's techniques for ensuring that reports of his discoveries would make it back home even if he didn't. In Chapter 37 Fernando cites the following passage from his father's log: “Then...I thought upon Your Highnesses, and considered some means whereby, even were I dead and the ship lost, you might get some news of the success of my voyage.... Therefore I wrote on a parchment, as briefly as the state of things required, how I had discovered those lands as I had promised to do; the length of the voyage and the route thither.... This writing, folded and sealed, I addressed to your Highnesses.... I straightaway had a great wooden barrel brought to me, and having wrapped the writing in a waxed cloth and put it in a...loaf of wax, I dropped it into the barrel, which I made secure with hoops and cast into the sea....” Along the top of that page Dee wrote, “Note these Practices to saue his Letters and Aduertisements to the King of Castile.”

<sup>28</sup> For extensive discussions of the eskimos seized by Frobisher — and taken back to England — see Neil Cheshire, Tony Waldron, Alison Quinn, and David Quinn, “Frobisher's Eskimos in England,” *Archivaria* 10 (Summer 1980), 23-50, and William C. Sturtevant and David Beers Quinn, “This New Prey: Eskimos in Europe in 1567, 1576, and 1577,” in Christian F. Feest (ed.), *Indians and Europe* (Aachen: Rader Verlag, 1987), 61-140.

<sup>29</sup> Among the manuscripts at the British Library are two nearly identical sets of instructions to Frobisher and his men for the second voyage: MS Sloane 2442 (fol.23r-v) and MS Additional 35831 (Item 121). Not only do they contain a chilling commission for the seizure of Natives (“yo<sup>u</sup> should bringe hether...3 or 4 at the most of the people of that Countrey whereof some be olde and the other younge whome we mynde shall not retorne agayne thether. And therefore yo<sup>u</sup> shall haue greate care how yo<sup>u</sup> doe take them for avoyding of offence towards them and the Countrey” [Sloane 2442, 23v; the copy in Additional 35831 gives the number “eight or tenne”]), but they suggest that “in yo<sup>r</sup> waye outwards yo<sup>u</sup> shall...sett on lande vppon the Coast of ffreislande vj of the condemned persons w<sup>ch</sup> yo<sup>u</sup> carry w<sup>th</sup> yo<sup>u</sup>, w<sup>th</sup> weapons and victualls.... To w<sup>ch</sup> persons yo<sup>u</sup> shall gyve instructions how they maye by their good behavioure wynn the good will of the people of that lande and Countrey and allso to learne the state of the same” [Sloane 2442, 23r].

<sup>30</sup> B. M. Ward, “Martin Frobisher and Dr John Dee,” *Mariner's Mirror* (October, 1926), pp.453-5.



<sup>31</sup> While a *Simon Dee* had been engaged for service on the third voyage as a “howsecarpenter” (and “Ranne away” before its departure--see Stefansson, Vol.2, p.222), Ward evidently misread “John Dee” for “John Lee,” a gentleman on the *Ayde* (D. D. Hogarth, P. W. Boreham, and J. G. Mitchell, *Mines, Minerals & Metallurgy: Martin Frobisher's Northwest Venture, 1576-1581*, Canadian Museum of Civilization Mercury Series, Directorate Paper No.7, 1994, p.24, n.19). Dee’s activities in 1577 are recorded in J. O. Halliwell, ed., *The Private Diary of Dr. John Dee* (London: The Camden Society, 1842).

<sup>32</sup> “John Dee’s Interest,” pp.6, 7.

<sup>33</sup> See, most recently, Hogarth, Boreham, and Mitchell, *Mines, Minerals & Metallurgy*, p.16.

<sup>34</sup> Transcribed in Collinson’s Hakluyt Society volume, and reprinted in Stefansson, Vol.2, p.200. Cf. James McDermott, “The Company of Cathay,” where he cites Huntington Library MS HM 715, fol.27. For other accounts detailing Dee’s investments in the voyage, see Stefansson, Vol.2, pp.112, 113, and 217, where the amount of Dee’s stake varies from £25 to £33.

<sup>35</sup> For the lists without Dee’s name, see Stefansson, Volume 2, pages 167, 171, 194, and 197; for the one in which he appears see p.201.

<sup>36</sup> BL MS Harley 167.

<sup>37</sup> A badly damaged copy of these instructions in Dee’s own hand is BL MS Cotton Otho E.VIII, fols.77-79. A complete contemporary transcript (apparently Lord Burghley’s copy) is BL MS Lansdowne 122, art.5.

<sup>38</sup> Hogarth, Boreham, and Mitchell, p.83.

<sup>39</sup> BL MS Lansdowne 30, no.4, as printed in Stefansson, Vol.2, p.205.

<sup>40</sup> As printed in Stefansson, Vol.2, p.194.

<sup>41</sup> For more on this scheme, see Sherman, *John Dee*, ch.7, and Baldwin, “John Dee’s Interest.”

<sup>42</sup> Roberts & Watson, *John Dee's Library Catalogue*, p.41.

<sup>43</sup> The volume is now LP (livre précieux) 3414 C. It is briefly described in Roberts and Watson’s edition of Dee’s library catalogue and, more fully, in *Bibliothèque Royale: Quinze Années d'Acquisitions* (Bruxelles: Bibliothèque Royale Albert Ier, 1969), pp.377-8. The Royal Library acquired the volume in 1967 from H. P. Kraus (New York), who in turn seems to have acquired it from Dawsons of Pall Mall: inside the book there is a detailed description from the Dawsons sale catalogue, which calls it “a document of fundamental importance for the development of Elizabethan navigation and science.”

<sup>44</sup> See especially Anthony Grafton, *New World, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992).

<sup>45</sup> Sig.a2r. The English text I cite is that of the Loeb Classical Library Edition, trans. Horace Leonard Jones, 8 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), I:9, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Loeb ed., I: 17. At the bottom of sig.a2v Dee jotted, “Mare vnum.”

<sup>47</sup> A good guide is Patrick Thollard, *Barbarie et Civilisation chez Strabon, Annales Littéraires de l'Université de Besançon 365* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1987).

<sup>48</sup> Loeb, I: 399.

<sup>49</sup> Sig. i1r. The Latin text, which Dee underlines, reads, “In super & de Thule asseruit, & locis illis in quibus nec adhuc terra per sese aderat, nec mare, nec aer, sed coneretus quidam ex his acerus maritimo pulmoni similis....”

<sup>50</sup> Dee’s diary indicates that, on March 23, 1581, he was visited by “Hugh Smyth, who had returned from Magellan straights and Vaygatz” (11). The sketch that Smith drew for Dee survives in BL MS Cotton Otho E.VIII, fol.73: it is reproduced as Fig. 2 in Andrews, *Trade, plunder and settlement* (though Andrews fails to indicate that the notes in the map are Dee’s).

<sup>51</sup> Helen Wallis, “The Cartography of Drake’s Voyage,” in Norman J.W. Thrower (ed.), *Sir Francis Drake and the Famous Voyage, 1577-1580* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp.121-163; 136-7.

<sup>52</sup> Albert Hastings Markham, ed., *The Voyages and Works of John Davis* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1880).

<sup>53</sup> Roberts and Watson, p.43.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Baldwin’s “John Dee’s Interest” contains a useful discussion of Dee’s possible motives for abandoning the Davis project when he did.

<sup>55</sup> Roberts and Watson, p.50.

<sup>56</sup> It seems likely that if Davis was in possession of the bladder during the period of his voyages to the Arctic, he would have taken this point of contact with him. I have not yet discovered any reference to the bladder in the accounts of Davis's voyages.