

Richard Hakluyt, promoter of the New World: the navigational origins of the English nation

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ABSTRACT

The defeat of the Spanish Armada and the launch of the first exploratory voyages towards the New World, forced England to seriously consider her immense possibilities of replacing Spain in the international arena. Taking as a point of departure the final version of Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1598-1600), this piece explores the management of the texts he compiled to promote English expeditions to North America. If we consider the fundamentally private financing of these dangerous and expensive voyages, convincing Englishmen to risk their purses and their lives was not an easy task. But Hakluyt managed to do it successfully by resorting to some skillful narrative and editorial strategies. One aspect that stood above the rest in this unique attempt at channeling the expansionist desires of Englishmen towards the New World was the creation of a national identity. Many of the issues Hakluyt brought up in his work were aimed at defining a truly English national character, one radically different from that of other identifiable nations, one based on the 'new worldness' of the lands encountered across the Ocean Sea. The 'newness' of America became an emblem for a new and regenerated nation whose idiosyncrasy would help her become the divinely-appointed master of the known world.

In the early 1580s, almost a century after Christopher Columbus first set foot on the New World, England could boast no substantial or legitimate claim to the territories that we now call 'America'. Less than a century later, England had not only managed to become an empire but she had also replaced her most powerful rivals in the international arena. In the time elapsed, the labor of those who believed in the expansionist potential of 'little England' contributed to lay the ideological foundations necessary to advance uncertain and for a long time unsuccessful colonial ventures across the Atlantic.

Well before England found any legal right to the vast territories of the Americas, some English managed to create and develop an empire-oriented

consciousness. Predating material success, and as a primordial component of this success, a contingent of ideological forces joined in the attempt to *promote* risky enterprises towards the New World. This was the era of adventurers such as Francis Drake, Walter Raleigh, Thomas Cavendish, Humphrey Gilbert, and John Smith; of artists such as John White and Theodor de Bry; of theoreticians such as John Dee, Richard Hakluyt, and Thomas Hariot; of writers such as William Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser; and, finally, of rulers such as Elizabeth and James. All together, in a composite effort, made the creation and the expansion of an English imperial nation possible, and many of them did so by means of words rather than martial deeds. It is true that words in this particular case served the interests of direct involvement in the New World, but what makes these words special is that during this period they did not reflect fulfilled achievements of the English nation but, rather, repeated hardship and failure. In this manner, promoting English expeditions to the American territories became a matter of presenting these territories as a new Paradise, a new land of opportunity that God in His providence had destined for the enjoyment of Englishmen, even though no Englishman who had attempted it had ever succeeded in turning such opportunity into real profit. The propaganda that preceded the establishment of English colonies in North America was based on a fantasy of transcended insularity and failure, on a guarantee that the providential destiny of an imperial English nation would be fulfilled if only Englishmen applied themselves to the task hard enough and piously enough.

The reverend Richard Hakluyt (b.1552-d.1616) stands out as the most singular name among those mentioned previously. Born into an upper-class family of Herefordshire, Hakluyt studied Theology at Oxford and, while there, he became interested in geographical literature through the influence of his own cousin and namesake, a lawyer, a collector of voyage narratives, and a consultant of the Muscovy or Russian Company. In the “Epistle Dedicatorie” to Sir Francis Walsingham of the 1589 edition of his major work, *Principal Navigations*, Hakluyt (1903-1905:I,xvii) alludes to his beginnings as a student of navigation and geography:

From the Mapped he [the elder Hakluyt] brought me to the Bible, and turning to the 107 Psalme, directed mee to the 23 & 24 verses, where I read, that they which go downe to the sea in ships, and occupy the great waters, they see the works of the Lord, and his woonders in the deepe.

In the late 1570s and early 1580s Hakluyt joined his cousin in the active promotion of a shared interest: establishing an English colony in America. From the very beginning, though, Hakluyt differed from his cousin’s approach. If the lawyer always displayed a predominantly economic

outlook aimed at making the enterprise profitable, the priest had a more genuine 'colonial' attitude characterized by the obsession with stopping Spanish progress and by his fear of national exclusion and shame. The younger Hakluyt was more than anything preoccupied with the idea that England could be left behind in the colonial race, and, even more so, with the idea that this potential exclusion would be a direct consequence of England's own character flaws. From the start Hakluyt realised that he had to contribute to the change of his countrymen's mentality before the material success his cousin advertised could become a reality.

Hakluyt's first work as a promoter of New World enterprises appeared in 1582 under the title *Divers voyages touching the discovery of America*. This was a short compilation of foreign and national travel narratives in support of the voyage that Sir Humphrey Gilbert was planning for the planting of the first English colony in North America. This little quarto, despite its obvious and excusable shortcomings as an inaugural piece of this kind, already displays the clear goals that Hakluyt would pursue with even greater commitment in his later publications: establishing English legitimacy in the New World (that is, her right to be present there and to take her share in the profits that other European nations had been enjoying for almost a century), and demonstrating that colonizing ventures like the one intended by Gilbert were not only profitable in theory but also feasible for the English at that time. This work also illustrates the diverse nature of the genre chosen by Hakluyt, the motifs that would turn up again and again in English colonial discourse, as well as the international scope of the enterprise at hand. This embryo of Hakluyt's later promotional work, the emphasis on including absolutely everything that could be of value to encourage the English to action, already shows the propagandistic character of Hakluyt's task. As W.E.D. Allen (1974:170-171) pointedly argues, "there is in Hakluyt's work an undertone of propaganda justified indeed by his intention to inspire Englishmen to take a strenuous part in the contemporary expansionist drive of the western European maritime nations."

Considering the importance that Hakluyt indeed had for the promotion of New World ventures in England, one might get the impression that he actually took part in some of these ventures. The fact that most scholars usually refer to his compilations as 'Hakluyt's voyages' also contributes to the illusion that he was not only an intellectual but also a traveler. But this is far from the truth. Hakluyt's only recorded voyage beyond English borders was his five-year stay in France as chaplain and secretary to Sir Edward Stafford, the English ambassador in Paris. However, not having set foot on the lands he promoted was not his own fault. We know that Hakluyt intended to accompany Gilbert in the 1583 voyage that he helped promote with his *Divers voyages* but, in the end, his friend, the Hungarian scholar

known as Stephanus Parmenius, took his place. Also in 1584, when Walter Raleigh was about to take up Gilbert's patent and a new voyage to America was in the works, Hakluyt wrote to Walsingham asking for permission to take part in the venture (Taylor 1935:206):

And calling to mind that your honor made a motion heretofore unto me, whether I could be contented to goe myselfe in the action, these are to put your honour out of doubt that for myne parte I am most willinge to goe now in the same this present setting forth and in the service of God and my country to employ al my simple observations readings and conference whatsoever.

On this occasion, another good friend of his, Thomas Hariot, took his place. It seems that Hakluyt was more appreciated as a student and planner of voyages than as a possible specialized observer in them. As Parks (1928:107) argues in the best biography of the English compiler written to date, "Hakluyt stayed at home to become the best-traveled man in England." But in 1583 Hakluyt did go to France and, during his stay, he worked not only as Stafford's chaplain but, more importantly, as Walsingham's agent. There is no written record proving Walsingham's official employment of Hakluyt in his service, but we do have extant letters written by both men wherein they exchange confidential information about happenings at the French court. In France Hakluyt also maintained repeated interviews with Frenchmen involved in colonial enterprises (André Thevet, the Royal Cosmographer, was the most prominent among his French contacts) and also with foreigners who happened to be in France at the time and who could provide him with useful information to be employed by future English voyagers. In 1584, during one of his frequent escapades to England, Hakluyt was received by Queen Elizabeth and he presented her with the *Discourse of Western Planting*, a long document in support of Walter Raleigh's plans to establish an English colony on American soil. The *Discourse* is the largest and best example we have of Hakluyt's own writing and of his theory about how colonization should proceed. Unpublished at the time but widely circulated within private circles, this document is of the utmost importance in our understanding of the approach Elizabethan adventurers and entrepreneurs took towards the New World. The *Discourse* is also a flagrant attack on Spain and a systematic summary of the reasons why Raleigh's plans should be approved by the Queen, supported by wealthy investors, and generally applauded by the entire English population. More importantly, in this text Hakluyt emphasized how the American colonies should be pursued and secured as an extension of England and the English people across the ocean. This is not a redundant or unimportant feature. For the first time in

England the New World was not presented as a separate entity to be exploited and then, once exhausted, abandoned, but as a prolongation of the English borders across the Atlantic. With the aid of men like Hakluyt, England's colonial mentality was now changing and the goals of the enterprises directed to the new lands also had to change. It is now that we find a much greater concern with the legitimizing of English colonial ventures, as well as with the attacks on the lack of legitimacy of other foreign powers that had been sending their men to America for almost an entire century. Even though the outlook Hakluyt displayed in the *Discourse* remained strongly economic (with the inclusion of long catalogues of commodities to be found and also with the addition of sets of instructions to follow in order to achieve a successful and permanent colonization), it is not less true that most of the document was concerned with ideological arguments aimed at establishing English rights in the New World.

But Richard Hakluyt's main claim to fame, and his definitive establishment as the leading figure in the promotion of New World ventures in England, came in 1589 with the publication of *The Principal Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation*. In what has been termed as, quoting Froude (1852), "the prose epic of the modern English nation," Hakluyt produced a monument to English optimism and unlimited imperial aspirations. Based on the model first used by the Italian compiler Gian Battista Ramusio in his *Navigazioni et Viaggi*, Hakluyt compiled a collection of documents of about 700,000 words, in three books, with the two-fold goal of establishing England's international reputation as a nation engaged in overseas enterprises and of promoting new and more adventurous voyages that would eventually turn England into the most powerful nation in the entire globe. This compilation would see a second edition between the years 1598 and 1600, this time in a much enlarged form (up to 1,700,000 words) and with the inclusion of many more voyages carried out by non-English adventurers. When comparing both editions of this work, we observe the extent to which Hakluyt's concerns progressively became more global and his approach more all-inclusive. In the Dedicatory to Robert Cecil we find in the third volume of the second edition (1600), Hakluyt (1903-1905:lxxvii) boasted of this all-inclusive nature of his work: "there is no chiefe river, no port, no towne, no citie, no province of any reckoning in the West Indies, that hath not here some good description thereof, aswell for the inland as the sea-coast." This all-inclusiveness could also be seen as proof of how English attempts to settle and to trade overseas had intensified in the decade following the defeat of the Spanish Armada, a direct outcome of the optimism and self-confidence that this victory represented for the English. Together with the travel narratives proper, in both editions Hakluyt included all kinds of documents that he considered important for his audience's

understanding of the magnitude of his goal. The preparations and antecedents of a particular voyage (letters patent, promotional literature, instructions to be carried out before and during the enterprise) were accompanied by the relation of the voyage itself (sometimes with different versions) and by panegyrics commending the results and encouraging similar enterprises. He also included clearly fictional narratives, something for which later scholars have sourly criticized him, but we must not forget that this was a man who took his labor as an editor and as a historian very seriously and thus followed the maxim that no story could be rejected as impossible until it could be checked by further evidence (Parks 1928:178). More than anything, with this work Hakluyt wanted to provide a pedigree of glory to English navigational skills, to show the antiquity of English commercial and navigational origins, to shut the mouths of those who had ridiculed England for not venturing in overseas enterprises. Reading the *Principal Navigations* from cover to cover one gets the impression that the English had been in the picture of overseas enterprising for at least as long as any other European nation of the period. And this is why this work became such a point of reference not only for contemporary entrepreneurs, but also for later generations of English adventurers. Hakluyt was already aware of this in his preface to the second edition (1903-1905:xlvi):

But that no man should imagine that our forren trades of merchandise have bene comprised within some few yeeres, or at least wise have not bene of any long continuance; let us now withdraw our selves from our affaires in Russia, and ascending somewhat higher, let us take a sleight survey of our traffiques and negotiations in former ages.

Hakluyt was not a historian in the modern sense of the term. Another criticism levied against his *Principal Navigations* was that he failed to provide editorial notes or that he did not assemble overall theories based on the narratives he so carefully collected, commissioned, and ultimately published. But this is not a fair criticism of Hakluyt's work as from the outset he was absolutely clear about his 'mission' when bringing out this collection. In the preface to the 1598 edition he outlined his antiquarian method of work for his readers (1903-1905:xxix):

I am not ignorant of Ptolemies assertion, that Peregrinationis historia, and not those wearie volumes bearing the titles of universall Cosmographie which some men that I could name have published as their owne, beyng in deed most untruly and unprofitable ramassed and hurled together, is that which must bring us to the certayne and full discoverie of the world.

As Pagden (1993:94) argues, the great value of Hakluyt's achievement is that he provided the new empirical sciences with the kind of data which all previous studies of the behavior of man had lacked, that is, "truly *objective* information based upon first-hand, eye-witness accounts." Objectivity may be questioned in many of the narratives included in Hakluyt's collection, and many will undoubtedly question Hakluyt's own objectivity when deciding which narratives to include and which to omit. However, Hakluyt claimed not to interfere with the subjects whose voice he enabled to be heard. The authors of Hakluyt's 'travels' were apparently allowed to speak through him unimpeded, and he took pains to make the reader believe that what he read had not been distorted by the experienced or biased hand of the editor. Hakluyt let his authors establish their own authorial voice, and he only interfered in his prefaces with pointed allusions to how man should use his reasoning capacity, his ability to learn and understand by inference and not only by direct empirical observation. Nevertheless, Hakluyt also wanted to emphasize his active participation in the enterprises he collected. He never hesitated to compensate for his lack of first-hand experience in overseas voyaging, equating his own 'travail' as an editor with the 'travel' undertaken by the authors of his narratives, as if his own 'travail' as an editor supplemented or even perfected the 'travel' of the adventurer. The hardship that always accompanied English travelers' actions was thus shared by the editor who traveled to English libraries in search of documentation, the editor who traveled long distances to interview informants, the editor who tirelessly translated or commissioned the translation of a vast amount of foreign relations (Hakluyt 1903-1905:xxxix-xl):

what restlesse nights, what painefull dayes, what heat, what cold I have indured; how many long & chargeable journeys I have traveled; how many famous libraries I have searched into; what variety of ancient and moderne writers I have perused; what a number of old records, patents, privileges, letters, &c. I have redeemed from obscurity and perishing.

As it could not be otherwise, self-promotion went hand in hand with the promotion of the enterprises with which Hakluyt occupied his time and energy.

A major implication in the discussion of Hakluyt's narratives is the process whereby the imaginative construction of the New World in England played a fundamental role in the creation of a 'new' (or at least 'renewed') English nation. Like other European peoples who took part in the initial discovery and exploration of America, the English could not fail to achieve a better and definitive understanding of themselves as a nation, even at the cost of failing to obtain a clear understanding of the peoples and landscapes this 'new' world encompassed. The travelers we find in Hakluyt's work

underwent a traumatic experience of self-estrangement, an experience that eventually led to the discursive formulation of a national model on which the new English self, the one destined to succeed Spain in the domination of the world, would be set. America was not discovered by the English, as it was not really discovered by Spain; rather, English travelers discovered themselves and their new identity was based on hardship and failure, on endurance and the surmounting of difficulties. This was a new identity constructed in reference to the 'new' and the 'old', the recently encountered and the already known, the Amerindian and the Spanish. But even the absolutely familiar, the 'old' English self, was credited with a participation in the reconstitution of a totally new identity: the discordant elements of the newly-envisioned nation, the idle and the rowdy, the malicious and the dangerous, could be regenerated, rehabilitated, purged, so as to be reincorporated in the new nation. The ideal of an English imperial nation had to be construed on the unstable foundations of repeated self-deception. As Knapp (1992) convincingly argued, England managed to sublimate the notion of being an empire 'nowhere'. Not only in the promotional texts comprised in Hakluyt's collection, but also in a whole series of literary works from this period (Shakespeare's *History Plays*, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*), notions of England's 'otherworldness' worked as powerful motifs aimed at transcending her otherwise suffocating insularity. The fact that at this time England had not yet managed to expand her boundaries overseas and even that she was an island ruled by a childless female monarch, were not taken as limiting factors for the feasibility of creating a mighty English nation but, on the contrary, as proof of England's moral superiority with respect to her European competitors.

The nationalist discourse created in this tradition was one in which spiritual achievement was presented as capable of overcoming material lack, and this spirituality was made into a trope to show England's unmistakable destiny as an imperial nation. What is more, the failure characterizing English attempts at establishing overseas colonies was precisely redeemed, compensated for, through the creation of narratives such as the ones compiled by men like Richard Hakluyt. If the purses of Englishmen were empty, the same was not true of the nation's literature, which could still produce some of the most compelling portraits of English endurance, determination, and potentiality. The nation envisioned in the promotional narratives of the New World was always deferred, always promised and anticipated. Failure and hardship were converted into exemplary traits that any Englishman aspiring to the greatness of the emerging nation should imitate and reproduce. Due to the impossibility of recording material gain, Hakluyt's writers constantly brought their narratives back to the English self that deserved praise just for trying. The 'heroes' of England's New World

enterprise, unlike the Cortéses and Pizarros of Spain, and the Magellans and Vasco da Gamas of Portugal, were not superhuman beings or demigods who could serve to create a foundational myth of national stability or perpetuation. On the contrary, these heroes were flawed human beings who should learn to overcome their flaws in order to transcend their current state of imperfection and provide the foundations for a more stable English nation. These heroes were common men, normally illiterate, habitually unsuccessful, but their determined engagement in adventures that until then had provided England with little more than loss and heartache was what qualified them as worthy members of a worthy nation. And this qualification was discursively constructed through the work of promoters like Hakluyt who managed to stretch their imaginative capacities to the maximum. This was definitely, as we now know, a worthy enterprise.

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