

## Henry Hudson: A Short Biography

For the historian, Henry Hudson's life does not begin until 1607 when he first appears in official documents of the Muscovy Company. However, even then few official documents bear Hudson's name. Fewer still were the journals, logs, maps, and records of voyages made by Hudson. Therefore, to understand Henry Hudson today, one must first understand his historical context and the times in which he lived. Hudson was a complex person, obsessed with finding a route to China. Driven by the travel literature of the day, Hudson would have a great impact in his time as well as present day.

During the 1580s, Richard Hakluyt, employed by the Muscovy Company, began to collect logs, journals, and other records of voyages.<sup>1</sup> Hakluyt compiled the documents and published a book entitled *The Principle Navigations Voyages Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*. The book's timing was impeccable, coupled with the recent defeat of the Spanish Armada; Hakluyt's book fueled the people's enthusiasm for English exploration.<sup>2</sup> Russell Shorto describes that "The result was to make England aware of itself in an international context, to see the European nations casting outward in a new age, an age of discovery."<sup>3</sup>

It was in this new age of discovery that Henry Hudson lived. Determined and self-possessed, Henry Hudson, by the time he appears in historical documents, was

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Shorto, *Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan, the Forgotten Colony that Shaped America*, (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

approximately forty years old, a captain, and veteran of seafaring.<sup>4</sup> Shorto writes that Hudson was, “a seasoned mariner, a man with a strong and resourceful wife, and three sons.”<sup>5</sup> Hudson, like others in England, undoubtedly read, with much enthusiasm, about the great seafarers and explorers of the past. Hudson’s ambitions were to take his place within the great pantheon of European explorers: Columbus, Magellan, Cabot, Cortes, and Da Gama.<sup>6</sup>

Hudson’s first attempt to reach Asia was based on a theory “established” eighty years earlier by Robert Thorne. The theory read that due to the proximity of the sun at the North Pole the sun will melt the ice and the traveler will be blessed with “perpetual clearness of the day without any of the darkness of the light.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Hudson’s goal was to sail straight over top of the world, past the North Pole. On April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1607 Hudson left England for the Northeast Passage, and hopefully, Cathy (Northern China). Hudson’s ship, the *Hopewell*, was a seventy foot wooden boat with a crew of twelve. The *Hopewell* came within six-hundred miles of the North Pole.<sup>8</sup> Hudson and his crew charted the islands of Spitzenberg and Hudson’s Tutches and noted the potential profit to be gained from whaling and walrus hunting in these remote islands.<sup>9</sup> However, the abundance of ice prevented access to the Northeast Passage and Hudson wrote in his journal that, “This morning we saw that we were compassed with Ice in abundance...And this I can assure at present...by this way there is no passage.”<sup>10</sup> With the Northeast

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 19-20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Donald S. Johnson, *Charting the Sea of Darkness: The Four Voyages of Henry Hudson*, (New York: Kodansha International, 1995), 20.

<sup>8</sup> Shorto, 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, 46.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Hudson cited in Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques and Discoveres of the English Nation*, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1935), Vol. 3, 567.

Passage blocked by ice, Hudson resolved to try again and returned home to England.

Though he returned with little to show for his voyage, Hudson did manage to disprove Throne's theory and thus eliminate one possible route to Asia. Hudson was rehired by the Muscovy Company that same year and returned to his home to review his voyage and try again the following sailing season.

Henry Hudson's second voyage attempted to find a Northeast Passage through Nova Zembla (modern day Novaya Zemlya). Hudson again sailed on the *Hopewell*, this time with a crew of fourteen and a new first mate, Robert Juet.<sup>11</sup> On April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1608 Hudson left England for the Northeast Passage. When Hudson reached Nova Zembla he found his path to the Kara Sea blocked by ice. He wrote in his journal that the passage "is so full of ice that you will hardly think it."<sup>12</sup> Due to the ice on both his attempts to find the Northeast Passage, Hudson concluded that he was "out of hope to find passage by the North-east."<sup>13</sup> After this realization Hudson then decided to disregard the company orders and head for a Northwest Passage.<sup>14</sup> Writing in his journal that, "For when we were at Nova Zembla on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July, void of hope of a Northeast Passage, I therefore resolved to use all means I could to sail to the Northwest."<sup>15</sup> After weeks at sea in the frigid Arctic weather Hudson's crew mutinied and forced him to return to England. Upon his return, Hudson began to immediately prepare for his next voyage, this time via the Northwest Passage.

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<sup>11</sup> Shorto, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Hudson, cited in Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgrimes*, (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1605-1607), Vol. 13, 329.

<sup>13</sup> Hudson in *Ibid*, 328.

<sup>14</sup> Shorto, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Hudson cited in Johnson, 72.

Additionally, upon his return to England, Hudson had received several letters from his friend, and famous New World explorer and soldier, John Smith, leader of the Jamestown settlement.<sup>16</sup> With the help of Smith's letters and maps, Hudson felt that he was correct in believing that there was a Northwest Passage to the Pacific somewhere north of the Jamestown colony.<sup>17</sup> A setback occurred when Hudson was fired by the Muscovy Company. The Dutch eagerly courted the experienced Hudson in order to increase their wealth and to gain fame by finding a shorter route to China.<sup>18</sup> The French too, however, were interested in Hudson sensing that he would be the "fulcrum" of the next great discovery.<sup>19</sup>

Hired by the Amsterdam Chapter of the East India Company (Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie or V.O.C) and wealthy Dutch merchants represented by Emanuel van Meteren, Hudson's directive was to find a Northeast Passage despite his and other's previous failures.<sup>20</sup> However, Hudson disregarded his company orders and sailed for the Northwest Passage. Hudson's vessel for the voyage was the eighty-five foot, vividly painted *Halve Maen* (Half Moon).<sup>21</sup> With a crew of sixteen, half English, half Dutch, Hudson sailed near the Jamestown settlement and from there moved north entering Delaware Bay, the first European to do so. Hudson and crew soon realized that this was not the Northwest Passage as the treacherous shoals and sandbars barred Hudson from navigating further upriver.<sup>22</sup> Hudson then sailed North and reached what are today, the outer reaches of New York harbor along the coast of Staten Island. His crew recorded

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 22-23.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, 82-84.

<sup>19</sup> Shorto, 30.

<sup>20</sup> Shorto, 31.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 31-32.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

that the land was “very pleasant and high, and bold to fall withal.”<sup>23</sup> Hudson was sure this was indeed the Northwest Passage. As Hudson sailed upriver, Juet noted that “The River is a mile broad: there is very high Land on both sides.”<sup>24</sup> However, the river had become too narrow and shallow for the *Half Moon* to navigate. This was not the fabled Northwest Passage Hudson sought.

Hudson recorded in his journal that the land had great trading potential and an excellent harbor; the area could provide a foothold for further colonization, but that no Northwest Passage existed by this route, as Hudson recorded in his journal, “They found our ship could go no farther, for they had been up 24 to 27 miles in which there was only seven feet of water and inconstant soundings.”<sup>25</sup> On his way back to Amsterdam, Hudson stopped in Dartmouth, England to allow some of his English crew to disembark, most likely because they were unhappy with Hudson’s leadership. While anchored, the English authorities detained Hudson and confiscated all of his charts, logs, and maps of his voyage. The Dutch learned of this through their spies and managed to obtain copies of Hudson’s report to the V.O.C. and van Meteren. Van Meteren, in turn, published Hudson’s report with additional comments noting that the river was “as fine a river as can be found, wide and deep, with good anchoring ground on both sides.”<sup>26</sup> The Dutch published this work to, in a sense, beat the British to the punch and claim discovery of this new land and waterway.

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<sup>23</sup> Hudson cited in Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgrimes*, Vol. 13, 356.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Juet cited in I.N.P. Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1489-1909*, (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1915-1928), Vol. 2, 44.

<sup>25</sup> Hudson in Johnson, 122.

<sup>26</sup> Emanuel van Meteren in G.M. Asher ed., *Henry Hudson the Navigator the Original Documents in Which His Career is Recorded*, (New York: The Hakluyt Society, 1860), 150.

Hudson's detainment in Britain was not enough to crush his spirit and desire to reach the Northwest Passage to Cathay. With the backing of three young and wealthy English aristocrats Hudson set sail again in April of 1610.<sup>27</sup> Hudson concluded that the only possible route for the Northwest Passage must be north of where he had sailed the previous year. The *Discovery*, the same ship as Captain George Weymouth had used to chart the "Furious Overfall" (Hudson Strait) Henry Hudson sailed into the "Great Bay of Ice" (Hudson Bay).<sup>28</sup> After passing much pack ice and icebergs Hudson emerged into the vast expanse of Hudson Bay and was again sure that this was the Northwest Passage.

With supplies low and winter approaching Hudson decided to overwinter on land and dragged the *Discovery* onto land as well to prevent it from being crushed by ice.<sup>29</sup> The winter was a nightmare for both Hudson and his crew, as Donald Johnson described the scene, "The sailors contracted scurvy, and their blackened gums rotted around their teeth. Their limbs swelled: legs lame with disease, made worse by frostbite and foot rot, no longer supported their undernourished bodies."<sup>30</sup> When the ice melted, the growing dissatisfaction of the crew throughout the winter escalated into a mutiny. Some members of the crew pointed out Robert Juet as the leader of the mutiny.<sup>31</sup> One August day in 1611, during their return to England, as Hudson emerged from his quarters he was bound and led into a scallop with eight other crew members, including Hudson's son, and was set adrift in Hudson Bay.

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<sup>27</sup> Shorto, 34 and Johnson, 149.

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, 149.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 150.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 152.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 194.

Upon the crew's return to England, charges of mutiny were brought against them, four were imprisoned, but eventually all were acquitted of the charges against them.<sup>32</sup>

Several theories exist as to what happened to Hudson after he was set adrift. Native American legends of the area claim that Hudson reached land and quietly lived out the rest of his days among the Indians. Historians, however, agree that Hudson most likely perished in the icy waters of Hudson's Bay. Though no remains have been found to verify either theory. In the end, Hudson's legacy lives not only in the river and bay that bear his name but the affect his explorations had upon the world, past and present.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 152.

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