

## **The Legacy of Henry Hudson**

The legacy of Henry Hudson goes beyond simply the name he gave to a bay in Canada and a river New York. Hudson was one of the first Europeans to encounter the Native American tribes in New Jersey and New York. He created the basis for trade and political relations with Indians along the Hudson River Valley. These initial relations between the two groups would set the background for Dutch and English colonists during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There are, therefore, many layers to Hudson's legacy. Some layers –such as his relations with the Indians- were created by Hudson himself; while other layers were created by historians, promoters of New World exploration, and other third parties. To find the true legacy of Henry Hudson, the scholar must shift through the fiction created by these third parties and discover the true implications of Hudson's voyage up the river.

The first layer of Henry Hudson's was created by Hudson's deeds and his crew's experiences that were brought back to Europe. Promoters of the New World added yet another stratum to Hudson. Merchants too, while not directly benefiting from Hudson himself, achieved great wealth through the nascent fur trade in the New World. Finally, the colonists of the New World experienced a wholly separate portion of Hudson' legacy. Therefore, while he is a great explorer who risked life and limb in the name of discovery; he also left a basis for dealing with Native Americans that would be followed by colonists in the New World.

The colonists of the Hudson River Valley were those who experienced the most negative effects of Henry Hudson's legacy. Hudson and his crew were the first Europeans to encounter the Native Americans who lived along the Hudson River's shores. The initial meetings between the two societies were based on mutual trade and commerce. However, there were some instances of violence and misunderstanding.<sup>1</sup> For example, Hudson's crew one night plied several Native Americans with alcohol in order to part the Indians with their furs. When the Indians would not yield their goods and several crew members ambushed the Natives early the next morning wounding one Indian and taking the furs located outside of their dwelling.<sup>2</sup> The pursuit of riches in the New World, in the form of animal furs, was a driving force behind Hudson's voyages. Hudson's crew had several altercations with Indians over furs.<sup>3</sup> This pattern would be followed by Dutch, English, and French colonists in New York during the seventeenth century.

The next layer of Hudson's legacy was manufactured by historians and promoters of the New World during the seventeenth century. The seventeenth century historian and biographer, Richard Hakluyt created a mystique of Henry Hudson, and other English explorers, that endeared them to the population of England.<sup>4</sup> Hakluyt used popular sentiment of Hudson to promote him not only as an explorer but as an Englishman as well. The Englishmen of Henry Hudson's time, Hakluyt writes, lived in "an age wherein God hath raised so general a desire in the youth of this realm to discover all parts of the face of the earth."<sup>5</sup> Later historians, Samuel Purchas for example, would use Hakluyt's

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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), 31-33.

<sup>2</sup> Donald S. Johnson, *Charting the Sea of Darkness: The Four Voyages of Henry Hudson*, (New York: Kodansha International, 1995), 98-100.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>4</sup> Shorto, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Hakluyt cited in Shorto, 20.

works and develop and update them during the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Purchas followed Hakluyt's example and expanded upon the voyages of Hudson creating a larger interest in Hudson at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Promoters of business ventures to the New World exploited the deeds and discoveries of Hudson in his own time. When Emanuel van Meteren, representing the Dutch East India Company, contacted Hudson in 1609 offering him a chance to sail, it was an investment in the potential of Hudson. By this time Hudson's voyages had become so well known that England, the Netherlands, and France believed him to be the man who would make the world's next important discovery.<sup>7</sup> Thus Hudson's legacy was beginning to become distorted in his own time. When Hudson returned from his third voyage, he was detained in England, unable to leave his home due to the importance of his discoveries.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Hudson's popularity made him a great prize for the English government to hold onto. The nation who could claim Hudson's charts and logs could claim commercial ownership of the land he had discovered.

It is difficult to separate some of the romanticized legacy of Henry Hudson from his actual legacy. Hudson was indeed a great explorer who did much to advance the knowledge of the Arctic region. The Hudson River and Hudson Bay are respectfully named for his greatest discovery and final resting place. However, Hudson leaves a mixed legacy with in regards to treatment of the native people. In the pursuit of profitable furs, Hudson and his crew persuaded the Indians to part with their furs through any

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgrimes*, (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1605-1607), Vol. 13, 329.

<sup>7</sup> Shorto, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, 96.

means. Often times this meant trickery or the use of alcohol as a lubricant in taking advantage of the Native Americans.<sup>9</sup>

Therein lies Hudson's darker legacy. The pattern of plying Indians with alcohol in order to gain concessions would be followed by Dutch, French, and English colonists. Ultimately, Hudson's legacy is a mix of myth, fact, and profit-seeking.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

## Works Cited

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