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NEH Summer Seminar for College Professors | Summer 2011
Reading the English encounter with the Americas: interdisciplinary sources and methods.

Introduction

Every early modern voyage was an event, or a series of events, experienced, witnessed, remembered, and sometimes recorded from a variety of perspectives. It was affected by weather, navigational skill, judgment, personalities, logistics, and what were frequently the unknowns of where it would end up, and in whose neighborhood. It also existed in the form of intentions, theories, plans and instructions. It returned survivors, samples, records, knowledge, sometimes plunder and captives. It might result in maps, letters, journals, sketches, and rumors as well as in books small, large, domestic, or foreign. It almost certainly affected the plans and expectations of later voyagers. It often left a trail of consequences in the places it touched.

Narrative is an important angle of approach to these complex phenomena, because it begins to tell us how participants shaped and made sense of their experience. But participant narratives can only exist as shaped by and responding to the pressures and contingencies of experience. For this reason, travel writing demands — perhaps more than any other kind of writing — to be read in the company of its contexts. We will explore the possibilities for such reading during the four weeks of this summer seminar for fifteen college professors, held on the campus of MIT.

In recent decades, scholars in literature have paid increasing attention to a set of texts that used to be viewed as largely the province of historians: the records of England's encounter with the Americas from 1497 on. Influential work by scholars like Stephen Greenblatt and others has reshaped the boundaries of the field, introducing new materials for study and new questions and topics to the study of more traditional literary materials. This proposed summer seminar for college and university teachers aims to put literary and textual approaches to the records of the encounter in dialogue with the methods and materials of other disciplines. What can we learn about foundational events and narratives, during the century or so after 1492, by fostering collaboration between literature, history, archaeology, anthropology, and bibliography, and how can such collaboration be practically undertaken?

Since the Columbian quincentenary, these early modern texts and events have engaged a broader audience through the forms of popular books, films, and public history, and have continued to be the subject of political and legal negotiations. They have also become the site of a multisided dialogue between academic disciplines. A generation of new work on the encounter by literary scholars, from the early 90s on, came to be widely read in other, concerned disciplines, and to stimulate work that responded both to its strengths and its perceived weaknesses. As the field and its multiple audiences have evolved, scholars working on travel writing are increasingly expected to be more deeply familiar with a range of regional histories and cultures, to draw on multiple bodies of knowledge, and to address an audience outside their own discipline — if not outside the academy as such.

As travel writing has become a more common object of study *within* the discipline, scholars have also begun to look more closely at the conditions in which such writing was produced, and the particular forms in which it was produced: through what processes did notes or logs written in the field or on shipboard eventually become printed books of various kinds and with various audiences? One of the results of this attention to the history of the travel book has been editions that make available (newly or for the first time) many archival documents associated with well-known print narratives: drafts, memoranda, unpublished logs or journals, accounts, instructions.

At the same time, digital archives such as Early English Books Online have made even obscure print sources widely available. In short, scholars working on early modern travel writing today have access to and are potentially responsible for a greatly expanded volume of materials, are asking new kinds of questions, and are addressing a wider and more diverse audience than was the case several decades ago. The broader topic of this seminar — which bears on the origins of New World societies and social formations — will always be of concern to our own, particular region of the New World. Developments in the study of travel writing make a seminar on interdisciplinary sources and methods particularly timely now.

Contents and implementation

This seminar will take up methods and materials relevant to the study of English travel to the Americas within the chronological framework of the period from (roughly) 1550 to 1610. Beginning with a focus on early voyages and their practical and intellectual contexts, we will spend the middle two weeks of the seminar on two voyages that have been both very well-documented and the focus of an extensive secondary literature in several areas. The final week of the seminar will focus on records of associated with a particular settlement, records that will be far less familiar to most participants and are indeed still in the process of coming to light.

Week 1

We'll begin with an introductory session aimed at giving an overview of the period, and a survey of relevant perspectives: from maritime history, bibliography, geography, and literature. We will also look at the prefaces to Richard Hakluyt's two late 16th century collections of English travel narratives, *Principal Navigations* 1589 and 1598-1600, to get a participant's view of the context in which these voyages were undertaken, narrated, and printed. Early in the week, participants will have an orientation to the MIT libraries and I will also begin meeting with them individually to discuss research projects related to the topic of the seminar — projects that they will present for feedback in later sessions. As the week continues, we'll pursue the question of precursors and contexts for Elizabethan voyages in two ways: first, in terms of a general intellectual/scientific history; second, in terms of a local and near-term history of making, describing, and printing accounts of voyages.

Late medieval science correlated physical geography, climate, natural and cultural phenomena to make predictions about the dispositions of particular peoples, the locations of precious metals ,or the existence and location of monstrous races. Nicholas Wey-Gomez, our first guest speaker, will visit the class to help us think about the scientific and unscientific ideas of physical and human geography that these accounts reveal, and their consequences for European thinking about the New World in the first century after Columbus's discovery. English voyages to the north in the 1550s, like the Spanish voyages to the West that preceded them, aimed at discovering a shorter sea route to China and to the East. For this reason, English audiences in the 16th century still sought information as well about the interior regions of Asia that — for most Western Europeans — lay beyond the boundaries of direct contact and certain knowledge. Accordingly, we will look at some texts by medieval travellers to central Asia that helps to form ideas of the regions travelers hoped to reach by sea, as well as shaping a more general

conception of world regions and world systems: in particular, excerpts of Marco Polo's travels as printed by G.B. Ramusio in the 1550s (translated by Purchas), and selections from the account of William of Rubruck's mission to the Mongol Khan [1].

What kinds of documents existed as immediate precursors for the Elizabethan travel writers? The editor Richard Eden's two collections of miscellaneous geographical information, appearing in 1553 and 1555, were the first manifestation of a burgeoning interest in publishing and reading travel books that, by 1626, would result in the [number] thousand pages of Samuel Purchas's collection of travel writing, *Purchas His Pilgrimes*. Eden's collections will interest us for two reasons. First, they are closely linked to In 1555, Eden praised his countrymen for their voyages of discovery to the Northeast, and rather offhandedly added to the collection the first two participant accounts of English travel to see print in the period : two narratives of travel to West Africa, one of them involving the young Martin Frobisher. The second of these narratives, in particular, strikes us by its heterogeneity — indiscriminately mixing a pilot's log book and evidence of first-hand observation with Eden's own cosmographies of a continent he had never seen outside the pages of Pliny and other older writers.

[1] Rubruck's account did not circulate widely before its translation and publication by Richard Hakluyt in 1598, but the appearance of an excellent recent edition from the Hakluyt Society leads me to prefer it over the comparable account by John de Plano Carpini.

Week 2

From beginnings in the 1550s, and the failed Northeast Passage search that led to the creation of the Muscovy Company, we will move to the 1570s, with a series of voyages captained by Martin Frobisher and aimed at discovering at passage to China by the Northwest. These voyages to what is now the Canadian Arctic appeared at the time to be a failure. Frobisher and his men neither found the passage, discovered gold, nor left an intended colony, and the voyages bankrupted investors in the "Cathay Company."

Yet these voyages did leave a very significant documentary and material trace. Multiple participants published accounts of the three voyages (Best 1578, Settle 1577, et. al.), while other narratives survive in manuscript; the financial woes following on the third voyage motivated contentious and detailed accounts of its administration and logistics by other interested parties. A second, unwritten dimension of the Frobisher record was unknown beyond Baffin Island until the 19th century, when the Arctic explorer Charles Francis Hall came upon both oral traditions about the Frobisher expeditions and (consequently) material traces left by the 16th-century voyages.

We will begin the second week by discussing printed accounts of the Frobisher voyages by contemporaries, and a few important critical responses to them in recent years. The primary sources on Frobisher, generally speaking, invite a discussion about evolving ideas of race in early modern England — as a function (or not) of latitude, as a biological inheritance, or as a set of practices around diet, marriage, and other cultural concerns. George Best's discussion of climate will allow us to think back to some of the readings from the previous session, and the survival of medieval ideas about the influence of climate on culture, temperament, and geology. We will also begin to observe some of the protocols of writing associated with these and other jointly funded voyages.

Among the extensive bibliography of criticism on the Frobisher sources, participants are most likely to be familiar with Stephen Greenblatt's chapter on Frobisher from *Marvelous Possessions*. We'll talk about the argument and methods of this chapter, with some reference to later work on wonder and the marvellous by Daston and Campbell. A book like *Marvelous Possessions* galvanized the field and continues to be very widely cited: what about it is still useful, and in what respects should we challenge ourselves to move beyond it?

Once we've looked closely at the printed sources, we'll begin to engage with other kinds of evidence about the voyages. The material record of Frobisher's voyages and the Inuit-English encounters to which they gave rise has been the focus of extensive research and discussion over the last several decades, by both American and Canadian researchers
(see www.civilization.ca/cmc/exhibitions/hist/frobisher/frsub16e.shtml).

We will be very fortunate to have a guest speaker, Reginald Auger, who directed archaeological research at the Frobisher sites in the 1990s. Professor Auger's participation will allow us to combine attention to the textual evidence with published and unpublished findings on the material record. We will be particularly interested in what such an approach can tell us about the captives taken by each side during the seasons of English presence in the Arctic. This topic is of particular interest to both Professor Auger and myself. Captivity more generally, as a mode of intercultural movement and experience, has been a central topic in and, increasingly, beyond American history, so we see the possibility both for

deeper understanding of a particular encounter as well as for a comparative perspective on this larger phenomenon.

These two sessions on the Frobisher voyages have an implicit focus on indigenous history and non-documentary sources. It isn't possible to take participants to Baffin Island, much less on a trip that would combine a visit to the original site with another to the archives and museums that now display and contextualize its artifacts. Instead, I plan to spend one session at the end of the week on a field trip to a comparable site in Massachusetts. Plimoth Plantation is a site of early contact that now incorporates a multi-faceted public presentation of its history.

Over recent decades, what visitors see at Plymouth has been transformed as the site has evolved to present the lives and perspectives of native people alongside those of settlers. Without a doubt, the status of Plymouth as a tourist destination brings this presentation to a larger audience than will ever read any document about early modern travel to North America. The story told by this site, through reconstructions, dramatization, and other means, ultimately relies on the same combination of material, oral, and documentary sources that we will have worked with earlier in the week. What kind of story does this site tells the visitors now, and by what means? What relationship does the public presentation of history at this site bear to the work of archaeologists and other scholars? Participants with special interest in such questions may also want to visit ongoing excavations of the 17th century "Indian School" in Harvard Yard, and I can provide them with information both about this project and other relevant sites and collections in the area.

Week 3

From the Frobisher voyages of the 1570s, we will next turn to Walter Raleigh's voyage to Guiana in 1596. Raleigh's expedition followed on a series of exploring and colonizing voyages to North Carolina that he planned and funded, but in which he did not participate personally either as a traveler or as a writer. In 1596, for reasons political and personal, Raleigh both traveled and wrote. His *Discoverie of the Large, Rich, and Beautiful Empire of Guiana* became the subject of focused attention in a series of highly visible and widely read studies by literary critics in the early 90s. (At one time, it scarcely seemed possible to attend a conference session bearing on the New World without hearing quoted Raleigh's telling phrase,"Guiana is a country that hath yet her Maidenhead").

Some of this work, including my own early article on Raleigh's *Discoverie*, became a focus for critical reactions from the domains of anthropology and history (in a variety of flavors). One result was the appearance of an edition prepared by the anthropologist Neil Whitehead. Whitehead's edition included an important introductory monograph laying out information about indigenous culture and indigenous sources that had largely been missing from that earlier work. We will read some of the important points in this exchange, including Whitehead's essay, along with Raleigh's text.

Raleigh's accounts of headless men and Amazons, this time drawn from indigenous testimony, will return us again to the subject of "monstrous races," first broached in week 1, and of marvels.. While Raleigh himself never claimed to have seen an Amazon or a headless man, the economics of the print marketplace ensured that both would be represented in illustrations accompanying contemporary editions of his work on the continent. Like the accounts of Frobisher's voyages, the narrative Raleigh produced did not persuade Queen Elisabeth to invest in the conquest or further exploration of Guiana, as he had proposed. Nor did his expeditions succeed in locating the gold mines of which Spanish and indigenous informants seemed to give evidence. (Both Raleigh's monsters and his claims of abounding gold have ensured a place for his narrative in debates about ideas of evidence and practices of truth production in the early modern period: e.g., Campbell 1988; see also Shapiro 2000).

However, Raleigh's book did persuade some of his countrymen to follow him to the Orinoco. Joyce Lorimer has done more than any other single scholar to uncover and publish accounts of early English contact with Guiana, both before and after Raleigh's 1596 voyage (Lorimer 1990). Her recent edition of the *Discoverie Of Guiana* adds to these an intriguing new narrative from manuscript, as well as more well-sourced testimony about Amazons and men without heads; it also makes available for the first time Raleigh's own draft, with pre-publication annotation by multiple hands. Lorimer's edition makes it possible for us to think about this text in a new way, as emerging from a collaborative writing practice pressured by the interests of multiple participants. We are, again, very fortunate to have her as a guest speaker for the second session on Raleigh, to lead a discussion on what this text looks like in this new context and in the surroundings of other, roughly contemporaneous and geographically adjacent undertakings.

Week 4

The last set of materials we will examine, on early colonies in Newfoundland, will be far less well known to most participants, and certainly less studied by American academics in any discipline. In this way, I hope it will provide us with some practice in navigating materials that do not, accompanied by the considerable bibliographies of secondary literature attached to the voyages of Frobisher and Raleigh. We'll begin by looking at a few archival and printed documents about English contacts with Newfoundland from 1497 through the beginning of the 17th century, with some attention to the historical background.

Then we will look more closely at a set of print, manuscript, and archaeological materials from the English colony at Cupids Cove (1610), which will have recently celebrated its 400th anniversary. These materials are particularly interesting for several reasons. The archaeologist at the site, William Gilbert, has kindly agreed to help me identify appropriate materials and information for the seminar and I hope we will also have some access to promotional materials associated with the anniversary.

As we look at these less familiar materials, we will think about the kinds of issues we can identify either in the materials themselves, or in the project of shaping a historical narrative about them. How else might we shape the story, and why? •