

Mary Fuller

Professor of Literature

MIT School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences

Book project

Geographic Information in the Age of Drake

No one who works on early modern travel writing can avoid an encounter with Richard Hakluyt's early collection of English travel writing, *Principal Navigations* (1600). *Principal Navigations* is a key text across multiple disciplines: colonial history, English literature, anthropology, history of science, and a multitude of regional histories. A vastly heterogeneous and only lightly edited collection of documents covering all the regions of the world known to Englishmen at the end of the 16th century, it is most often — perhaps necessarily, given its length — either used very selectively or described in terms of broad-strokes generalizations. Its two thousand pages of materials have been quarried for centuries, but the book itself has not yet been the subject of a systematic study; a scholarly edition is only now in preparation.

Hakluyt's collection has been both celebrated and obscured by a reception history that has taken as representative a relatively small selection of its contents, rousing narratives of patriotism enacted on the high seas. Hakluyt actually printed a vast array of materials, heterogeneous in their forms, sources, and contents. He included stories of success, of failure, and of numbing repetition; sources originally written in French, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese; logs, letters, price lists, letters patent, instructions, and reports. Dramatic, fully-finished narratives of English voyages like those of Frobisher, Raleigh, and Drake are only one part of a complicated and heterogeneous whole.

The heterogeneity of *Principal Navigations* presents a challenge and an invitation for textual analysis. Some of these challenges include the book's length, the many varieties of documents it includes, and the sparseness of many of these documents as texts. The invitation is to find modes of analysis adapted to this and other travel collections from the period, which can complement attention to narrative, rhetoric, and style. One kind of analysis is made possible by working with the more referential fields of history, archaeology, geography, and so on. A document may offer more or less factual information about a given place, a given event, a given economic or cultural reality; evaluating its relationship to and transformation of facts outside the text has to be part of any critical account, and doing so provides another angle of vision on a text that may be, in and of itself, rhetorically thin.

Another set of analytic tools comes from bibliography, or more broadly, the field that has come to be known as "history of the book." Hakluyt himself wrote only a fraction of *Principal Navigations*' 2000 odd pages, and the book's identity as a collection complicates the attribution of authorship; at the same time, the choice, organization, and para-textual framing of documents (titles, marginalia, and local context) associate new meanings with documents authored by other hands. It becomes possible then to read a document's contents both against its real-world contexts, to the extent these are knowable, and against its physical context in Hakluyt's book.

Hakluyt's book has its own systems of organizing information, and these are both para-textual and part of larger intellectual and social systems. For instance, the organization of the collection's three volumes by geographical regions invites us to think about Hakluyt's work in relation to other ways of representing geographical information in print (for instance, Abraham Ortelius's ground-breaking world atlas of 1570) and also to a developing cosmography still thinking about the nature and meaning of terrestrial climates. The collection's contents speak to

the social networks along which Hakluyt both gathered and disseminated information -- and remind us that, despite the title's insistence on "the *English* nation," these networks and the collection itself had a very important international component that complicates assessments of Hakluyt's nationalism.

The immediate, practical aim of the book is to serve as a basic reference for future readers: providing rich contexts for materials many readers use only selectively, and identifying some of the critical issues animating materials that are less often read. More expansively, thinking about Hakluyt's book opens an exploration of what it meant to represent the world textually in 1600, at a moment when geographic information was beginning to be actively and systematically collected within the frame of an emergent scientific perspective on the world.