

# Charting a different course

There's a hidden history of the Age of Discovery – and it can inform our environmental thinking today, says **Horatio Morpurgo**

It took the small flotilla in which Francis Drake set out to circle the globe nearly two months to cross from West Africa to Brazil as it sailed south in 1578. Francis Fletcher, chaplain aboard Drake's flagship, the *Pelican* – later, of course, renamed the *Golden Hind* – had never seen flying fish before. “Many times,” he wrote, “they would flye against the toppe masts and sales of our ship, and against the bodies of our men.” Their fins were “like to the wing of a swallow ... wherewith she flyeth as any fetherd fowle in the air”. Their fry, “of the bignes of gnatts ... scudd upon the superficies of the water and skipp from place to place like grasshoppers.”

Birds, tuna and dolphins are also minutely observed with the same delight. Ancient philosophers had claimed that the Equator was an uninhabitable *torrida zona*, yet here was an “earthly Paradise”. Fletcher's enjoyment shines through in the notes he made. After speculating about the life cycle of flying fish, he concludes: “In these and such pleasures did we pass away 54 days.” Note the first person plural. He is not only talking about himself.

*The World Encompassed*, the official version of Drake's voyage, appeared half a century later, in 1628, and was largely based on Fletcher's notes. The wildlife is still there and it is still good to eat, but none of the enchantment has made it past the editor, Drake's nephew (also called Francis). And we are surely justified in asking why not.

Before we do that, let's revisit some assumptions. Many still think of Drake's circumnavigation, and those earlier voyages by Vasco da Gama, Columbus, Magellan and others, more or less as the economist John Maynard Keynes did in his *Treatise on Money*, published in 1930. “The modern age opened with the accumulation of capital in the 16th century, and the power of compound interest is such as to stagger the imagination,” he wrote. “I trace the beginnings of British foreign investment to the treasure which Drake stole from Spain in 1580 ... every pound which Drake brought home has now become £100,000.” That's nearer £500,000 today.

Drake's treasure-laden return became a defining image of the Elizabethan age. Many would still agree with Keynes about its meaning, and there is clearly important truth in this economist's view. But we've seen already that it wasn't compound interest that staggered Fletcher's imagination. And there were other dissenting views. On his return, Drake's ‘gifts’ of gold and silver to senior courtiers were refused – possibly because they were (at least, publicly) opposed to acts of anti-Spanish aggression, possibly because they regarded Drake as an upstart. The compass-maker Robert Norman wrote an oblique satire of Drake's golden moment, published, pointedly, a year to the day after his return. The French botanist Carolus Clusius travelled to London in 1581 to interview Drake and his crew about the peoples and plants and animals they had seen. They showed him a kind of bark from Patagonia that had cured scurvy. They told him about the fireflies and the flying foxes and the cocoa beans. Probably Clusius knew the looted gold and silver was a sensitive issue and didn't even ask. Or maybe that just wasn't what the voyage meant to him.

The way we interpret this still matters, because the Age of Discovery remains active in the way we see the wider world and our place in it, particularly in Britain. By contrast to the authorities in Portugal or Spain, where accounts of the early explorers were quickly and widely disseminated, the Elizabethan state placed strict controls on how this story would be told. All logs and private diaries were to be handed over to a ship's commander as soon as returning vessels docked. These were then used to craft an official version that served the interests of the Elizabethan state and state-related business.

Historians of this period focus, with good reason, on the conflicts between competing peoples or groups – between England and Spain, say, or Europeans and Africans, or Europeans and Indigenous Americans. But this period also generated conflict *within* people and between people ostensibly on the same side. In January 1580, for example, the *Golden Hind* was stranded for 20 hours on an Indonesian reef. Fletcher

