

Exhibition Reviews

Inuit and Englishmen: The Nunavut Voyages of Martin Frobisher. CANADIAN MUSEUM OF CIVILIZATION, Ottawa, Ontario. 1 April 1999 to 30 January 2000.

The creation of Nunavut on 1 April last year was formally recognized by the Canadian Museum of Civilization with the opening of *Inuit and Englishmen: The Nunavut Voyages of Martin Frobisher*. On first analysis, an exhibition on the Frobisher voyages to the eastern Canadian arctic in 1576, 1577, and 1578 might seem a curious way to commemorate the first change to Canada's political landscape in half a century, but in fact, it could not have been more appropriate. It was the Frobisher voyages which first introduced English exploration of the eastern Canadian arctic (now Nunavut). Iqaluit, the capital of the new territory, is situated at the head of Frobisher Bay, the very area where Frobisher sought the Northwest Passage and laid claim to the region for Queen Elizabeth I of England. Frobisher's claim in effect took the Inuits' sovereignty away; the creation of Nunavut returned it.

On a more practical side, *Inuit and Englishmen* has enabled the Museum to present, in a public forum, the culmination of a decade of research on the archaeological sites associated with the Frobisher voyages. This research project was developed in response to the obvious need for a management plan that recognizes the historical significance of the sites and guarantees their protection from souvenir hunters, tourist traffic, and natural erosion. A research advisory committee, called the Meta Incognita Project Committee, was put together to coordinate and guide the efforts of the various individuals involved in the Frobisher project. Taking its name from the title given to the eastern Arctic by Queen Elizabeth ("Meta Incognita," meaning "Unknown Shore"), the research committee included representatives from the northern community and from federal and territorial agencies having a vested interest in the commemoration, preservation, and interpretation of archaeological sites.

Over the course of the last decade, the Meta Incognita Project Committee

enlisted the support of a multi-disciplinary team of some sixty international scholars. The largest contribution to this team was by far the archival component set up in the United Kingdom under the leadership of Sir Ian Gourlay. The archival task force is credited with having broken much new ground, not just on the Frobisher voyages, but on Elizabethan exploration in general. The devotion of the international participants to the project and their combined skill in rooting through the libraries and archives of Europe has provided the necessary historical context for the archaeological research conducted in Canada. The archival component alone probably makes the Frobisher voyages the single, most intensely studied European expedition to the Canadian arctic. No doubt the same will also be said of the archaeological component, once the research is completed.

Inuit and Englishmen highlights the three Frobisher voyages to Nunavut and puts these within the wider context of early European exploration of the New World. The presentation is chronological, and uses a variety of media from the collections of the Canadian Museum of Civilization and from other museum and archival institutions in North America and Europe.

Assembled under the curatorship of Dr. Robert McGhee, the Museum's Arctic archaeologist, the records and artifacts selected for *Inuit and Englishmen* work well together. Each complements the other to provide a sense of Frobisher's extraordinary accomplishments. The photographs from the Frobisher Bay area dispersed throughout the display area, for example, remind us of the bleak and inhospitable nature of the region in which Frobisher and his crews found themselves and tried (in his third voyage) to colonize. Other panels, which contain facsimiles of the maps used by Frobisher as he sailed across the north Atlantic to Meta Incognita, underline how little was known of these lands in Elizabethan England. The land forms bear little resemblance to the Nunavut that we know today, and clearly demonstrate how easy it was for these early adventurers to assume that the Northwest Passage was almost within grasp. Replicas of navigational instruments from the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich help to explain why Elizabethan navigation was such an imprecise science and why their maps were so imaginative. It is a wonder how anyone could navigate a route across 4,000 kilometres of arctic waters with such crude instruments, let alone accurately explore and map new coastlines.

In other words, *Inuit and Englishmen* stands as a testament to the courage of Frobisher and his crews as they tested the limits of their endurance, their knowledge, and their beliefs. When approached from this perspective, the Frobisher voyages take on far more importance than what they have been traditionally accorded by historians. Frobisher was not the naive adventurer who mistakenly mined arctic "fool's" gold. He was a legitimate explorer, who set forth for unknown waters, armed with the latest scientific and geographic knowledge his culture had to offer, which we now know was very limited. His third and final voyage to Nunavut, for example, had the full backing of the

British monarchy. Archival research has discovered that it comprised some 400 hundred men and fifteen ships, which at the time represented nearly ten per cent of England's merchant navy. To this day, it remains the largest arctic expedition assembled by the British.

The cross-cultural aspects of this first meeting of Inuit and Europeans since the Norse voyages more than half a millennium earlier are also given a level of treatment in the exhibition. Video presentations recount traditional Inuit oral history of the meetings and the Inuit understanding of the sites used by Frobisher's crews. In another video, modern-day Inuit youth tell us what the Frobisher voyages mean to them as they embark on their own voyage to create a new Inuit-administered region within Canada's borders. The Inuit testimony is nicely juxtaposed with archival records describing the English perception of the relationship, a relationship which was marked by superstition, fear, and misunderstanding. In this regard the exhibition "pulls no punches." English behavior is shown with all its failings, as clearly abominable.

Although I was very impressed by the time and energy that went into *Inuit and Englishmen*, I must admit to being somewhat disappointed in the number of facsimiles and reproductions used in place of original archival records. When the exhibition closes at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, portions of it will probably travel to northern communities where it will be shown in facilities with less than ideal environmental conditions. In such situations the reproductions will certainly be necessary, but while the exhibition is shown in the museum's own modern facility, I think it would have been more appropriate to have used original records as much as possible.

The story line for *Inuit and Englishmen* is informative and well presented, but the captions that accompany the records and artifacts on display unfortunately have little to say about the items themselves. The exhibition does little to draw the visitor's attention to them. For example, *Inuit and Englishmen* opens with the life-size portrait of Martin Frobisher painted by the Dutch artist Cornelis Ketel. The painting was completed prior to Frobisher's second voyage in 1577, and is now housed in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. The portrait is accompanied by a small caption which gives a very brief biographical history on Frobisher, but which says nothing about the portrait. There is nothing to draw the visitor's attention to the bosun's whistle around Frobisher's neck, a symbol of his naval command; or to his pistol and sword, symbols of his earlier days as a pirate and pillager of Spanish galleons; or to the Dutch globe on his right, a symbol of his worldly adventures. I realize that, in the "minimalist" tradition demanded by modern-day exhibition designers, it is almost impossible for curators to provide much beyond a few simple lines of text, but as this example clearly shows, when a caption is directed towards the item itself, the story line can often be enhanced.

There is no exhibition catalogue for *Inuit and Englishmen*, but there is the magnificent two-volume monograph, entitled *Meta Incognita: A Discourse of*

Discovery. The two volumes are edited by T.H.B. Symons, Chairman of the Meta Incognita Project Committee, and are published as Mercury Series Directorate Paper 10 by the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The monograph presents the research findings of the scholars working on the archival portion of the project. A third volume (which is still in preparation) will summarize the results of the archaeological investigations.

The Frobisher voyages were an extraordinary act of human endeavor, which until now, have been largely relegated to little more than a footnote in history. *Inuit and Englishmen* does much to address this past imbalance. It is a first-rate tribute to all the researchers who worked on the Frobisher project.

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National Archives of Canada

Victoria 1889. BRITISH COLUMBIA ARCHIVES.

www.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca/exhibitions/birdseye/victoria.htm, n.d.

Highlighting Human Rights in Ontario. ARCHIVES OF ONTARIO.

www.gov.on.ca/MCZCR/archives/english/exhibits/humnrits/index.html, n.d.

As archives, museums, and galleries become more and more dependent on electronic databases for collections management and research purposes it is becoming more common – if not mandatory – for these institutions to look to the Internet as a means to make their collections accessible. Yet, as with any medium, there is a transitional period during which old processes and procedures are forced to fit the new tool before it moves on to being used more effectively as a unique medium. This has certainly been the case for the Internet and especially for the use of web sites as exhibition sites by cultural institutions.

Resorting to the Internet as an exhibition site becomes doubly problematic when the institution involved is unable to distinguish between its use as a research tool and use as an exhibition site. Often what results is an attempt to mimic the architecture of traditional exhibition spaces or cataloguing systems rather than develop programming that utilizes the full non-linear format or hypertext-based capabilities of this medium. Often institutions ignore possibilities of linking to other related sites, of collaborating with other institutions to expand the aims of the exhibition, or providing special opportunities for the visitor to go deeper into the collection. These confusions are evident in the two applications of this tool by the Ontario and British Columbia Archives, currently available on their web sites.

The Archives of British Columbia exploits the research value of a web-site in their exhibition, *Victoria 1889*, by providing a series of images from their collection in a card-catalogue-type format. This web site more closely follows