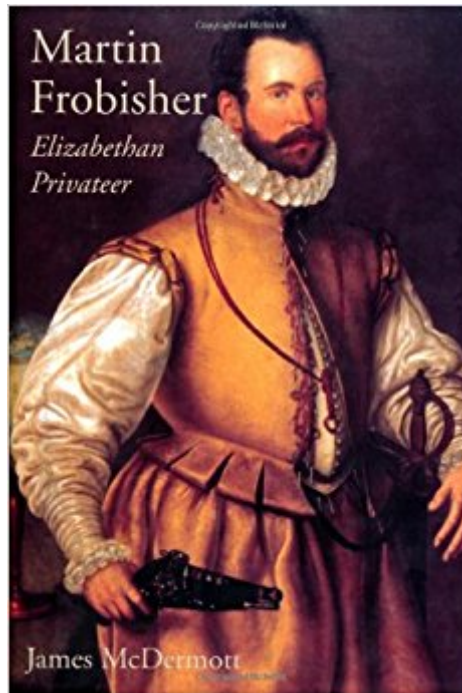




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# Martin Frobisher: Elizabethan Privateer



## Synopsis

Adventurous and wilful, the swashbuckling Martin Frobisher was both a brave sea-commander who served Elizabeth I with distinction and a privateer who single-mindedly pursued his own interests. This highly entertaining biography provides the first complete picture of the life and exploits of Frobisher, from his voyages in search of the fabled Northwest Passage to his courageous resistance to the Spanish Armada and his activities as privateer and sometime pirate. The book explores Frobisher's vigorous personality and its manifestation in the turbulence of his career and his impact on others. It also illuminates the robust world of maritime enterprise in the sixteenth century, when the shifting objectives of the Elizabethan age brought together felons, merchants, and great officers of state. James McDermott, a leading authority on Martin Frobisher and the Northwest Passage, offers a riveting account of the explorer, based on all extant manuscript and documentary sources. McDermott sets aside the distortions of Frobisher's popular reputation as a hero and offers instead a richly detailed portrait of a fascinating but flawed man whose ceaseless search for wealth and fame defined his ext

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## Customer Reviews

Frobisher Bay in the Canadian subarctic and a plaque at St. Giles Cripplegate in London are all that remain of the memory of Sir Martin Frobisher (1535-1594). McDermott's crowded biography, as thorough a life of the elusive adventurer as the relatively few available facts make possible, traces his checkered career from a stark Yorkshire boyhood to the coasts of Africa and North America, and his privateering on the Atlantic to his later undertakings for Queen Elizabeth. McDermott fills in the

gaps with supposition and parallel descriptions of such seafaring contemporaries as Drake and Hawkings, veering off into material that few readers, other than aficionados of privateering and particularly those knowledgeable about antique nautical terms, would care to know. Frobisher's three unrewarding voyages to barren "Meta Incognita" (now Baffin Island) in search of a northwest passage to the Orient and failed get-rich-quick scheme to mine for gold in Inuit country left him in need of money, and so he resumed his semi-official piracy of foreign ships. Elizabeth, who in 1588 was in need of a tough captain, made Frobisher a vice-admiral, and his role in thwarting the Spanish Armada earned him a knighthood. Despite the dry prose, independent historian McDermott, who has been researching his hero for 30 years, successfully evokes the life of an admittedly unlikable character, as he survived the downside of ambition and climbed upward no matter what the cost to others. Ultimately, the fame of his "brief asides" into legitimacy, even his heroic death during a mission "under the authority of the Broad Seal of England," McDermott concludes with apparent sadness, "should not disguise the truth of a career whose despoliations had defined Martin Frobisher." Color illus. not seen by PW. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

This is the first full-length biography of Frobisher since the publication of William McFee's *Life of Martin Frobisher* in 1928. Independent scholar McDermott worked his way through a labyrinth of archival documents to create this compelling portrait of a true Elizabethan sea dog and his world. McDermott is quick to point out that Frobisher was more than just an unscrupulous privateer but also the point man for England's nascent colonial ambitions. By examining his subject's life, McDermott exposes the intricate web of public and private ambitions that compelled Elizabethan England to take to the seas. It was Frobisher's courage and nautical skills that made him the natural choice to lead the search for the Northwest Passage that brought English exploration to the shores of North America. Frobisher never found fabulous wealth, but his prowess as a sea warrior helped crush the Spanish Armada and establish England's proud maritime tradition. McDermott tells his story with wit and style. Recommended for public and academic libraries. Jim Doyle, Sara Hightower Regional Lib., Rome, GA Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Martin Frobisher is remembered today for Frobisher Bay in Canada and as a sea captain in Elizabeth's fleet against the Armada. In death, as in life, his exploits are often overshadowed by more flamboyant seafarers such as Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Hawkins. *Martin Frobisher: Elizabethan Privateer* attempts to rescue the captain from semi-obscurity and place his life in the context of its times. The spotty documentation on much of Frobisher's life makes this no easy task

but the author is able to fill in the gaps with dexterity. Frobisher was born in Yorkshire England in the mid 1530s. After the death of his father in 1542, Frobisher was set to live with various relatives ending up at his maternal uncle's in London. Sir John Yorke was a well-connected merchant who set Frobisher to sea most likely because he was a drain on Yorke's finances. Frobisher fell out with his uncle after the latter failed to help him escape from captivity in Portuguese hands and soon struck out on his own. By the 1560s Frobisher was well established as a privateer. In this profession he often showed little regard for the legality of which ships were "good prizes" and which were not. He was called often in front of the admiralty court to answer charges of piracy. In 1576 Frobisher became the captain of an expedition to find the northwest passage from Europe to China. This expedition failed in its goal but did spark a gold rush when a souvenir rock brought back was thought to contain gold. Two more expeditions found no gold and nearly bankrupted many of the investors in the scheme. Frobisher's abilities as a captain earned him a place among Elizabeth's admirals during the Spanish Armada of 1588. His command decisions during that time remain controversial to this day. While some see Frobisher as an unskilled ship handler who needlessly put his ship in danger, the author is convinced that Frobisher was courageously placing his ship in harm's way to interpose himself between the coast and the Spanish fleet. Unlike other of Elizabeth's captains, Frobisher was never able to become a member of the Queen's inner circle. He rose on merit alone and his star continued to wax even as other of the 'sea dogs' watched their reputation falter. Most of the famed sailors modern readers would view as his peers were disliked by Frobisher as much as he was disliked by them. After the Armada, Frobisher continued in her majesties services as a privateer. He quickly returned to his former way of intercepting and plundering ships from both friend and foe. Despite his greed, he was clever enough to understand that England's main interest was in destroying Spanish treasure even when it could not be captured. In this view he was more willing to place public good above personal self-interest more than the Queen and members of the privy council. Frobisher's courage never deserted him; he was killed in 1594 leading a landing party on a Spanish fort. James McDermott has deftly accomplished a difficult task. He has written a comprehensive portrait of an unlikable character without overly condemning him or attempting to redeem him. Well researched and documented, *Martin Frobisher: Elizabethan Privateer*, is an informative and entertaining book well suited for academic and general reading.

Sir Martin Frobisher (1535-1594) was both a pirate and a Vice Admiral in the Royal Navy. The dichotomy of those two positions works as a good introduction to a man who spent much of his career searching for the fabled Northwest Passage, but also, in 1588, had a significant role in

thwarting the Spanish Armada (which earned him a knighthood). Yet, Frobisher never achieved the historical status of his contemporaries Sir Francis Drake or Sir Walter Raleigh. In fact, the only reminders of Frobisher's existence are Frobisher Bay in Canada and a plaque at St. Giles Cripplegate in London. The author, James McDermott, traces Frobisher's life from his boyhood in Yorkshire to expeditions in Africa, North America, and the Caribbean. It was Frobisher's three unsuccessful voyages in search of a northwest passage to Asia, which caused him to turn to piracy against the Spanish Empire in the Caribbean. The respectability of his later undertakings for Queen Elizabeth do not overwhelm his unsavory early activities or his personal ruthlessness. McDermott, an independent scholar and a leading authority on both Martin Frobisher and the Northwest Passage, spent almost 30 years researching his topic. The end result is the life story of an unlikable individual, who climbed the social ladder despite the cost to others around him. The author based his story on all of the available archival and printed primary sources, as well as numerous secondary sources. The only other full-length biography of Frobisher was William McFee's *Life of Sir Martin Frobisher*, which was published in 1928. This work is primarily recommended for those interested in naval history or the Elizabethan period.

A wonderful book written about one of England's first Maritime explorers. Frobisher usually is written with such notables of the time as Drake, Hawkins and Raleigh even if his famous voyage to the Northwest was a failure. He still managed to retain his dignity and eventually became one of England's greatest sailors. Mr. McDermott's book is a wonderful and complete picture of a quite-not-so-honest Yorkshire man who rose up to become a great explorer despite his past dealings with privateering and the law. Frobisher's last biography (AFAIK) was published in 1923 (William McFee) yet Mr. McDermott's excellent research and writing clearly rates above Mr. McFee's outline of a man whose history was written by happenstance and luck. I found this book to be invaluable research of a not-so-well-known man whom I portray at the Renaissance Pleasure Faire in California. Well researched and well written. A must for any 16th century maritime history fan or historian. Cheers!

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