

typography of a book and by whom it was printed and bound. Some of the footnotes and information in brackets seem unnecessary. Wouldn't any reader of this book know that MS means manuscript and that William Wordsworth was an English poet?

These quibbles aside, all Antarcticans and Shackletonians will be informed by reading this book and pleased to have it on their shelves alongside *The life of Sir Ernest Shackleton*, happily again in print. (Robert B. Stephenson, The Antarctic Circle, PO Box 435, Jaffrey, New Hampshire 03452, USA.)

FROBISHER'S GOLD. Fraser Grace. 2006. London: Oberon Books. 101p, soft cover. ISBN 1-84002-709-6. £8.99.
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The Elizabethan adventurer Martin Frobisher was something between a pirate and an explorer, a not unusual combination at the time. In 1576, he set out from England in search of the Northwest Passage. Rather than return empty-handed, he came back from northern Canada with samples of a mysterious 'black earth' that supposedly concealed gold. Queen Elizabeth I was among the investors lured into funding two expeditions to exploit the discoveries. Nothing at all came out of these voyages, and there's a suspicion that the assay tests on the early samples of 'black earth' were either wildly optimistic or deliberately rigged.

This is the promising basis for Fraser Grace's play *Frobisher's gold*, first performed at the Junction in Cambridge in 2006. The action is framed by opening and closing scenes at Windsor, with a lengthy central section set on 'Friesland,' the featureless white waste where Frobisher's party are quarrying for gold. Grace isn't aiming at realism: the Friesland interlude becomes increasingly surreal as the characters are transformed into polar animals — a walrus, a penguin, a bear — before the whole scene dissolves in a dream of the Eskimos singing ethereally and off stage. And a dream it is, the product of Elizabeth's literally fevered imagination back in her Windsor palace.

As well as Frobisher and Elizabeth — whose relationship is essentially a matter of business — the writer brings other genuine historical figures to the table. Francis Walsingham, normally seen as England's first

and most ruthless spymaster, is here presented as a bumbling Polonius-style figure, known as 'Wally' to the Queen. Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex, is the courtier who earns her displeasure by marrying in secret and whose execution she imagines in her dream of Friesland. Following a long tradition that demands that famous single women have to be saddled with a love (or sex) life, Essex is presented as her lover, although he would have been scarcely in his teens by the time of the Frobisher expeditions.

But accuracy and strict historical verisimilitude aren't the aims of Grace, whether in terms of chronology or language. The second line of the play is 'Do you know what bugs me, Devereux?' after which Elizabeth goes on to talk about ruling 'a nation of underachievers.' And the conclusion of the play, which has Walsingham and Devereux both appearing in drag as the Queen (to cover for her absence from the public eye while she's laid up with the fever), is not so much transvestite high jinks as deliberate travesty.

But *Frobisher's gold* isn't some latter-day version of *Carry on, Lizzie*. It has plenty of jokes — there's a particularly good running gag about the Eskimo word for 'fish' — but touches of poignancy too. There is subtlety in the contrast between Martin Frobisher and the most sympathetic character, William Crowe, a surgeon who accompanies him. Crowe's naive respect for his master ('the greatest leader of men, ever known') is balanced by his openness towards the 'Esquimaux,' whose language he wants to learn, whose singing he wishes to hear. And there's a general psychological and historical truth underlying the shenanigans. The exploring and colonising spirit of the sixteenth century was an amalgam of adventurism, greed, and recklessness, as displayed here. The search for gold is destined to fail, but the energy and grit needed to discover that there's nothing out there are the motors that will make England great, or at least greater than Spain, a project that Elizabeth has set her firm heart on. The Queen is shown attending to her image, both literally and metaphorically, and if her decision to be the 'virgin queen' wasn't the slightly flip choice shown in *Frobisher's gold*, there's no doubt that Elizabeth and her advisors were as image-conscious as any masters of spin today. So the sometimes-farcical surface of this play does conceal plenty of historical gold. (Philip Gooden, 2 Sion Hill Place, Lansdowne, Bath BA1 5SJ.)