



## EDWARD DE VERE NEWSLETTER NO. 2

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### **What part did Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, play in the voyages of exploration and trade in the great Elizabethan Age of Exploration?**

Historical records from the Elizabethan period show that Oxford was involved in voyages connected with the search for the North West Passage and the opening of trade routes to the East Indies. Oxford's ventures in connection with these voyages of trade and exploration can be traced through references to his investments and to a ship, the *Edward Bonaventure*, a 250-ton vessel which fought against the Armada in 1588 and is mentioned in various records dating from 1581 to 1602.

Oxford's first recorded connection with voyages of exploration is his backing of the third Frobisher expedition in search of the North West Passage in 1578. Oxford, who was twenty-eight at the time, adventured the enormous sum of £3000. The voyage was a failure, perhaps due to the fraud of Michael Lok, and Oxford lost his entire investment (Ogburn 602-3).

In the fall of 1581, Oxford invested £500 pounds in the ill-fated Fenton voyage to the East Indies, for which he may also have purchased a ship, the *Edward Bonaventure* (Taylor 14, 19). Along with the *Leicester* and the *Talbot*, the *Edward Bonaventure* set out for the Moluccas under the command of Captain Edward Fenton in May of 1582. Having started out too late in the year to round the Cape, Fenton, upon arriving at Sierra Leone, decided to cross the Atlantic to Brazil and sail through the Straits of Magellan to the Pacific. An attack by three

Spanish warships off the coast of Brazil put an end to these plans, and Fenton set sail for home, reaching England in May of 1583 (Routh, 425-6).

In 1585, Oxford was again involved in the search for the North West Passage, subscribing as a shareholder in Captain John Davis' voyage to Baffin Island (Ogburn, 671).

Meanwhile, the ship Oxford may have purchased, the *Edward Bonaventure*, was engaged in trading voyages into the Mediterranean with the Company of Merchants of the Levant (the Turkey Company), granted letters patent by Elizabeth in 1581 (Bent viii). By letter of October 16th, 1586, William Shales and John Sanderson at Cairo informed the Turkey Company that they had had news of a sea battle near Sicily in which a number of the Company's ships, including the *Edward Bonaventure*, fought with galleys of Spain and Malta (Foster, *Sanderson*, 136). This event is recorded in greater detail by Hakluyt in his *Voyages*. In Hakluyt's account, five of the Company's ships left London in November of 1585. The *Merchant Royal* and the *William and John* were bound for Tripoli, the *Toby* for Constantinople, and the *Susan* and the *Edward Bonaventure* for Venice. After completing their trading ventures, the ships met at Zante (now Zakinthos) and set out together for home. On July 13th, 1586, they were attacked by galleys of Spain and Malta near the island of Pantelleria, between Tunis and Sicily. After fending off the Spanish attack, the English ships put into Algiers for supplies, and then successfully ran the gauntlet of a second group of Spanish galleys which was waiting for them at Gibraltar (Hakluyt 285-9).

In 1588, the *Edward Bonaventure* took part in the great sea battle against the Armada, under the command of James Lancaster (Foster, *Lancaster*, xiv). Oxford may have been on board the ship during the first part of this engagement (Ogburn 705).

During the years 1591-1594, the *Edward Bonaventure*, along with the *Penelope* and the *Merchant Royal*, was engaged in the first English trading voyage to the East Indies. In April of 1591, the three vessels set out from London under the command of Captain James Lancaster. After the ships had rounded the Cape, sickness on all three vessels forced the return of the *Merchant Royal* to England. Shortly thereafter, the *Penelope* was lost in a storm. In spite of various misfortunes, the *Edward Bonaventure* continued on to the East Indies. On the return voyage, after rounding the Cape in March, 1593, the ship was delayed by contrary winds until Lancaster, his supplies exhausted, set sail for Trinidad and, from thence, to Newfoundland. A gale hit the ship near the Bermudas (Shakespeare's "still-vexed Bermoothes"), forcing it back to the West Indies, where the exhausted and mutinous crew abandoned Lancaster and eventually surrendered the *Edward Bonaventure* to the Spaniards at San Domingo. From this point on, accounts conflict, one stating that the *Edward Bonaventure* eventually returned to England with a rich cargo, another holding that the voyage was a financial failure (Foster, *Lancaster*, xii-xvii).

Another brief mention of the *Edward Bonaventure* occurs in 1599, when Thomas Dallam, who travelled to the Levant in that year to present an organ to Sultan Mahomed III as a gift from Queen Elizabeth, mentions in his diary that he left Zante in the *Heckter* on February 26th in the company of the *Edward Bonaventure* and the *Swallow* (Bent 90).

We last hear of the *Edward Bonaventure* in 1602, when John Sanderson records that, in February of that year, he took passage in that ship from Scanderoon (Tripoli) to Zante. The manner of Sanderson's reference to his voyage in the *Edward Bonaventure* indicates that the vessel was still sailing as a merchant ship for the Turkey Company.

Sanderson then notes in his diary that the *Edward Bonaventure* was "wrecked the yeare after uppon the coast of Fraunce, before Bullin [Boulogne]" (Foster, *Sanderson*, 128).

What, then, was Edward de Vere's part in the great Elizabethan voyages of trade and exploration?

Although much research remains to be done in the historical records of the period, it is clear that the 17th Earl of Oxford's part in the great Elizabethan Age of Exploration was by no means a minor one. His interest and involvement in these daring and costly voyages brought him into close contact with the group of adventurous explorers, rich London merchants and royal courtiers who made them possible. His contribution in this area deserves greater recognition.

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