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**Bristol and the Northwest Passage;
Thomas James's 1630-2 Expedition
Re-Assessed**

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**Bristol and the Northwest Passage;
Thomas James's 1630-2 Expedition Re-Assessed**

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Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Bristol. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author, and all quotations and evidence drawn from other sources have been duly acknowledged.

Signed:

Date:

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Abbreviations

BRO - The Bristol Records Office

SMV - The Bristol Society of Merchant Venturers

EIC - The London East India Company

HBC - The London Hudson's Bay Company

Introduction

Sir Arthur Dobbs's 1731 *Memorial on the Northwest Passage* began:

You may be surpriz'd that I should at this time endeavour to revive an attempt to discover the Northwest Passage which has in a manner been exploded since the year 1631.¹

The year 1631 witnessed the last English attempt at the Northwest Passage for three generations. The *Henrietta Maria* departed from Bristol on the 3rd May captained by the local navigator Thomas James, and financed by Bristol merchants. It marked the end of a 100 year period of English obsession with locating the passage, in which Bristol merchants had been actively engaged. Between Drake's circumnavigation in 1577 and James's return to Bristol in 1632 alone, there were at least twenty separate English expeditions.² Understandably, the latter date has been dubbed 'the end of the Golden Age of arctic research'.³ Likewise, for P. T. Bradley, it quite simply 'represented the conclusion of a lengthy phase of exploration, fascination and stubborn for the Northwest Passage, and the hope it held out of opening a maritime route to the East Indies.'⁴ This work will address the overlooked finality of Captain James's expedition in relation to the power of the myth of a navigable passage in the years preceding 1630, and in relation to the rise of Bristol's American commerce from the mid seventeenth century. From the Bristol perspective it represents a pivot in the process by which America was commercially transformed from obstacle to opportunity; by which efforts to overcome it evolved into efforts to profit from it.

Although the search for the Passage in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries has rightly been described as the 'most spectacular failure'⁵ of the Age of Discovery, its navigation promised spectacular reward. Direct trade with Oriental markets cut out the middlemen of the Levantine and Spanish markets, promising a better rate of trade finance and higher margins on luxury imports demanded by a burgeoning consumer culture. A Northwest Passage assured a shorter route to Asia than the lengthy and dangerous voyage around the Cape of Good Hope, reducing costs and increasing margins. It also assured diminished competition with the Iberian and Dutch mercantile naval powers, who dominated the aforementioned route and the Strait of Magellan; the Northwest Passage seemed

¹ A. Dobbs, *A Memorial of the Northwest Passage*, in G. Williams; *Voyages of Delusion; The Quest for the Northwest Passage*, (London, 2003) p. 46

² B. Rensink, *If A Passage Could Be Found; The Power of Myth and Money in North American Exploration*, (UoN, 2010), p. 16

³ M. Christie, *The Voyages of Luke Fox of Hull and Captain Thomas James of Bristol in Search of a Northwest Passage*, (London, 1898), p. iii

⁴ P. T. Bradley, *British Maritime Enterprise in the New World from the late Fifteenth to the early Eighteenth Century*, (New York, 1999), p.300

⁵ W.K. Davies, *Writing Geographical Exploration; James and the Northwest Passage*, (Calgary, 2003) p. 3

preordained as England's own. Its discoverers would be assured a place in history. Richard Hakluyt (1582) wrote:

God doth yet still reserve this great enterprise for some great Prince of England to discover this voyage of Cathaio [China] by this way; which for the bringing of the spiceries from India to Europe were the most easie and shortest of all wayes hetherto founde out. And surely, this enterprise would bee the most glorious, and of most importance than all other, that can be imagined, to make his name great, and fame immortal, to all ages to come.⁶

The history of the English search for the passage is as lengthy as it is dramatic. Although Captain James's expedition is by no means the most illustrious or successful in this grand narrative of geographical progress, it has its place in numerous arctic exploration compendiums, and boasts a handful of specific historical works. The compendiums typically span centuries; their merit is judged by their exhaustiveness. Examples have ranged from John Harris's *Voyages and Travels* (1705) to James Delgado's *Across the Top of the World* (1999). Little space is allocated to each expedition, and the worth that the authors attribute to each is generally relative to cartographical progress made compared with former attempts. The same is true within the articles of Brendan Rensink (2010) on the power of the 'myth' of the Northwest Passage and in Helen Wallis's (1984) chronological study of English attempts at the passage, both of which focus on the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. As such, James's expedition is often considered insignificant when compared to that of Captain Luke Fox of Hull who embarked earlier in the same year; Fox made it considerably further North.⁷

A handful of work has focused specifically upon Captain James's expedition. Wayne K. Davies (2003) laboured over the literary value of James's narrative - *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage* (1633) - which was published by Royal command shortly after his return.⁸ As part of the *Hakluyt Society Series* of publications, Miller Christie (1894) produced study of Captain James's expedition from Bristol contrasted with Captain Luke Fox's of Hull earlier in the same year. This work is fundamentally 'a comparison between the two explorers' concerning their personal character, navigational ability and social background.⁹ Christie stands alone in venturing an explanation for the finality of Captain James's failure, suggesting that:

After the return of Captain James in October 1632 public opinion seems, for nearly forty years, to have remained satisfied that further search for a North Westerly passage to China through Hudson's Bay was useless. . . The King, the court, the Bristol merchants and the general public all seem to have been satisfied.¹⁰

⁶ J. Winter-Jones (ed.), *Divers Voyages touching the Discovery of America and the Lands Adjacent*, (London, 1850) p.25

⁷ W.K. Davies, *Writing Geographical Exploration*, pp.5-6

⁸ See Appendix 4

⁹ M. Christie, *The Voyages*, p. ccvii

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. cxciv, ccix

Unfortunately, Christie failed to elaborate further on this conclusion and in the overall scheme of his work it occurs as an afterthought. This two volume publication is essentially an edited volume of primary sources which he comprehensively located and committed to print. By his own admission, he leaves the fruits of his labour ‘very largely to tell their own tale.’¹¹ Finally, Malcolm MacInnes (1967) produced a pamphlet of Captain James’s expedition. It is principally concerned with the minutia preparations behind the adventure and conjecturing that it can be reduced to an exercise in ‘civic emulation’ through SMV corporate competition with London.¹²

Reference to the expedition has also been made by a number of economic and mercantile historians of early modern Bristol; interpretations vary. D. H. Sacks loftily claimed that it represented the ‘epitome’ of Bristol’s contemporary mode of commerce, and the intrepid and ambitious spirit of the SMV whose ‘heady dream’ was to transform Bristol into a major entrepôt. In doing so, he brandished James as one of the ‘heroes of commerce’ and the expedition as the flagship voyage in the SMV’s ‘pursuit of high margins of profit and quick gain, rather than economic concentration and expanding control over capital resources.’ In effect, this meant a thirst for new, far-flung markets that could offer different and exotic luxury wares.¹³ A similar sense of Bristol’s inexorable westerly march to commercial supremacy found in Sacks is central to MacInnes’s *Gateway of Empire* (1968). There can be no doubt that what Richard Stone has termed Bristol’s ‘American Revolution’ in overseas trade from (1642 - 1665) was essential to the development of Bristol towards its ‘Golden Age’ in the eighteenth century.¹⁴ However, the impression of predestination and corporate co-ordination proposed by MacInnes and Sacks will be challenged by conclusions of this work; the process by which America was commercially transformed from obstacle to opportunity for Bristol occurred on an ad hoc basis amongst a handful of elite merchants.

At the other end of the interpretive spectrum, Captain James’s expedition is dismissed as insignificant, akin to Bristol’s colonising ventures of the first two decades of the seventeenth century. The conclusions of MacInnes and others have tended to ‘exaggerate’ the SMV’s involvement in exploration and colonisation.¹⁵ Whilst it is certainly true that Captain James’s expedition was financially marginal for the SMV, in the same way that the ultimately unprofitable colonising ventures at Cupid’s Cove (1610) and Bristol’s Hope (1617) were, there is a significance to these schemes that has been overlooked by macro-structural economic histories of contemporary Bristol and its merchant body. A closer examination of the relevant sources demonstrates that James’s expedition was not a corporate venture; rather it was the work of a select few. A number of this select few can be identified in the aforementioned colonising ventures. A few can also be traced to the

¹¹ Ibid, p. cxxxiv

¹² M. MacInnes, *The Voyage of Captain Thomas James and the Northwest Passage*, (Bristol, 1967), p.4

¹³ D. H. Sacks, *The Widening Gate; Bristol and the Atlantic Economy 1450-1700*, (California, 1991), pp. 52-53

¹⁴ R. Stone, *The Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Seventeenth Century*, (Unpublished Thesis, 2012)

¹⁵ Ibid, p.24

earliest records of trans-Atlantic trade in the 1637/8 Port Book, the transcription of is thanks to Richard Stone.

Whilst the objective is not to attribute excessive value to Captain James's expedition, nor the colonising ventures of the early seventeenth century, the thesis remains that the former represents the final stage of America as obstacle for Bristol, whilst the latter represents the seeds of America as opportunity. This transition can be tracked through the involvement of a specific set of Bristol merchant members of the SMV in both, as well as in records of the earliest trans-Atlantic trade. Ultimately, America as opportunity nullified Bristol's search for the Northwest Passage. The fundamental aims of reaching the Asian markets directly through the passage were satiated by the 'revolutionary' rise of Bristol's American commerce in the second half of the seventeenth century. The Bristol merchant's loss of interest was reinforced by the specific impact of Captain James's failure, the rise of the East India Company's stranglehold on Oriental imports and cemented by the 1670 chartering of the Hudson's Bay Company which monopolised access to the Hudson's Bay area and any future attempts at locating a passage.

This thesis is presented over four parts within two chapters. The first part of the initial chapter will address the basis of the 'myth'¹⁶ and provide a narrative account of Bristol merchant involvement in the search for the Passage in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century which will draw on a number of secondary resources to produce a composite picture. The most influential of the numerous theoretical treatise on the discovery of the Passage will also be identified. Whilst these sources had distinct promotional agendas, they illustrate the all-pervasiveness and the power of the idea of an open polar sea which lead directly to the North Pacific. A number of private and official letters detailing the preparations of James's expedition between himself and his merchant benefactors will attest to the conviction in the existence of the passage which persisted in 1630.¹⁷ The second part of the initial chapter is dedicated to the role Captain James, in his failure, played in exploding the potency of this myth and the end this brought to merchant investment in Bristol and further afield. Using Captain James's narrative of his expedition, evidence for its popularity and the warmth of his reception which boosted his personal and private reputation, it will be demonstrated that his failure had a tangible impact upon what Christie loosely termed as 'public opinion'. Four letters relating to James's reception in 1632 have been transcribed for this purpose.¹⁸

The second chapter departs from the cultural interpretation of the first and places James's expedition within Bristol's contemporary mode of commerce. The first part of the latter chapter is dedicated to a closer identification of James's benefactors from within the SMV and challenges the tendency for the

¹⁶ Adopted from: B. Rensink, *If a Passage Could be Found; The Power of Myth and Money in North American Exploration* (2010)

¹⁷ These letters have been committed to print by M. Christie in *The Voyages*, pp. cxxxiv - clviii

¹⁸ See Appendices 1 - 4

expedition being understood as a collective, corporate venture. This identification is achieved through a closer examination of the aforementioned letters which are cross referenced with records from the SMV in the seventeenth century.¹⁹ In doing so, connections are made between early colonising ventures of Bristol merchants in the first two decades of the seventeenth century²⁰, and with the earliest records of trans-Atlantic trade in the 1637/8 Port Book. An elite core of Bristol merchants defied characterisations of the SMV as demonstrating ‘a certain lack of enterprise’²¹. These few set the pace by which America was commercially transformed from obstacle to opportunity. The second part of the latter chapter proposes that the meteoric rise of Bristol’s trans-Atlantic trade was the concluding factor in the aforementioned transition, in conjunction with a loss of interest in Asian trade - where once it had created conflict with the EIC - and the eventual monopolisation of the Northwest Passage by the HBC in 1670. Richard Stone’s exhaustive quantitative thesis on Bristol’s overseas trade (1558 – 1609) will be the economic bedrock of this section. In particular, the commercial implications of Bristol’s ‘American Revolution’ in overseas trade (1642-1665) satiated the overarching aims of discovering a Northwest Passage for Bristol’s merchants. Ultimately, this work aims to challenge one-dimensional interpretations of Captain James’s expedition and the earlier abortive colonising ventures as simply ‘unprofitable’²² and corroborate McGrath’s tentative conclusion that:

This does not, of course, mean that Bristolians do not deserve an important place in history of exploration and colonization. It may be that this small band of pioneers and investors helped in the long run to win for their city dividends which they failed to obtain for themselves.²³

¹⁹ These documents are sourced from P. McGrath, *Records Relating to the Society of Merchant Venturers in the Seventeenth Century* (Bristol 1952)

²⁰ Extant records are sourced from: D.B. Quinn, *New American World; A Documentary History of North America* (London, 1979) Vol. III & IV

²¹ P. McGrath, *Records Relating*, p.xli

²² As argued by P. McGrath, *Bristol and America 1480-1631* (Bristol, 1997), p.1 & R. Stone, *Overseas Trade*, p. 129 & J. A. Williamson, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Voyages under Henry VII*, p.144

²³ P. McGrath “Bristol and America” in K.R. Andrews (ed.) *The Westward Enterprise; English Activities in Ireland, The Atlantic and America 1480 – 1650* (Bristol, 1978), p.102

Chapter 1: Dispelling the ‘Myth’

A Lengthy Tradition

In the sixteenth and early seventeenth, the idea of a navigable passage was as influential as it was enduring. The failure of Thomas James’s expedition marked the end of regular series of English expeditions for Hudson’s Bay and beyond. Testimony to this is self-evident; modern maps of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago are littered with the geographical eponyms of those English navigators, and their benefactors, that attempted to reach the orient via a Northwest Passage – the majority of which date from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It has been variously demonstrated that in the sixteenth century there was a lengthy tradition of Bristol merchant involvement. However, details are limited – the Book of Trade - which proves such a valuable resource in the seventeenth century - commences in 1598. Co-ordinated record keeping was inhibited due to the fact that the SMV lay effectively dormant for the majority of the sixteenth century until 1607. ‘Undoubtedly, many earlier records have been lost’ lamented Christie.²⁴

What is surmised should be understood as indicative , rather than a chronological survey, of Bristol merchant involvement and investment prior to 1630. Attempts to reach the East by sailing West from Bristol can be traced back to the motivations behind the John Cabot voyages of the 1490’s. It would appear that this venture was financed by co-operative Bristol merchants, Henry VII and Italian financiers.²⁵ Cabot’s son – Sebastian – was engaged in a similar venture in 1508.²⁶ He captained a second attempt on behalf of the King of Spain, in which the Bristol merchants Robert Thorne, Roger Barlowe, Thomas Howell, William Ostriche and Henry Patmer were ‘deeply connected’.²⁷ Robert Thorne the elder’s was also linked with *Company Adventurers in to the New Fownde Ilondes*. This company sent voyages to NW passage in 1503, 1504, 1505, whilst in 1527 his son, Nicholas Thorne, contributed the earliest known treatise advocating the existence and discovery of the Northwest Passage written in English.²⁸ Furthermore, Bristol merchant investors in Martin Frobisher’s voyages between 1576 and 1578 included Thomas Chester, Thomas Kelke, Thomas Aldworth and Robert Halton. The ships were fitted out and departed from Bristol.²⁹ A letter written to Walsingham by

²⁴ M. Christie, *Attempts Towards Colonisation*, p. 681

²⁵ E. T. Jones, *Henry VII and the Bristol expeditions to North America: the Condon Documents* (2010); E. T. Jones, *The Matthew of Bristol and the financiers of John Cabot's 1497 voyage to North America* (2006); F.G. Bruscoli, *John Cabot and his Italian Financiers*, (2012)

²⁶ J. Winter-Jones (ed.), *Divers Voyages Touching the Discovery of America and the Ilands Adjacent* (London, 1850), p.25

²⁷ P. McGrath, *Bristol and America*, p.11-3

²⁸ J. A. Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p.136; J. Winter – Jones, *Divers Voyages*, pp. 27-32

²⁹ P. McGrath, *Bristol and America*, p.13

Thomas Aldworth, mayor and Master of the SMV, indicates the Society's unanimous support for, and considerable investment in, Sir Humphrey Gilbert's expedition of 1582:

The motion grew generally so well to be liked that there were eftsoones set downe by mens owne hands then present, and apparently knowen by their owen speech, and very willing to offer the sum of 1000 markes and upward . . . [and] a ship of threescore and barke of 40 tonne.³⁰

By 1630 the idea of a navigable Northwest Passage appears to have persisted. Indeed, the correspondence between the interested party within SMV, Captain James and the Crown relating to the preparations for the voyage reveals a certainty; its discovery was regarded as inevitable. In a private letter to James, the principal investors in the voyage stressed, with an emphasis on *when* the discovery is made:

The speedie procuringe of the King's signature, wee consent wth you to be necessary if it bee his Ma^{ties} pleasure to confine the trade when the passage is discovered.³¹

There was urgency in the need to procure the King's signature, which was made acute by the fear for the success of an identical venture launched from London in a similar timeframe. There can be little doubt corporate rivalry played a role in Captain James's expedition.³² The Bristol merchants confessed to James that they were convinced of the cause: despite the difficulties in obtaining a signature "wee all continue very constant and well p'swaded therein."³³ Indeed, a hefty investment was procured which included acquiring, fitting and furnishing the ship with munitions, ordinances, artillery and victual. Furthermore, they were responsible for recruiting an able master, two mates, and any other mariners required to complete a contingent – all of whose wages were to be paid for by the merchants who will be closer identified in the following chapter.³⁴ Before the *Henrietta Maria* was even procured, a couple of payments appear in the *Treasurer's Book*. On 23rd November 1630 there was also payment made to Thomas Turner the Baker for bread as victual for the *Henrietta Maria* amounting to 50 and 17s. The payment for crewmembers also appears as precisely £181 18s and 1d.³⁵

The conviction outlined above was founded upon two factors: a rich literature by 'propogandists',³⁶ of geographical and commercial treatise advocating the existence and the profitability of a passage and

³⁰ R. Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation Volume III* (London, 1903) p. 134

³¹ 'The Bristol Companies letter to Captain James Feb 10th 1630' in M.Christie, *The Voyages*, p.cxlvi

³² M. Christie, *The Voyages*, pp. cxxxii - iii

³³ 'The Companies letter to Captayne James concerninge their desire of his care in prosecutinge the designe' from In M.Christie, *The Voyages*, p. cxliii

³⁴ 'A copy of the Warrant for the Henrietta Maria April 30th' in M.Christie, *The Voyages*, p. clviii

³⁵ The Treasurer's Book I 16 & 17, in P.McGrath, *Records Relating*, pp.205-6

³⁶ P.T. Bradley; *British Maritime Enterprise*, p. 283

secondly the tendency of former, unsuccessful captains and navigators to ‘perpetuate myths’ of a navigable passage.³⁷ Robert Thorne the Younger’s *Declaration of the Indies* was written as early as 1527 to encourage the patronage of Henry VIII for exploration of the Northwest Passage. However, the most significant and influential of the sixteenth century was no doubt Sir Humphrey Gilbert’s 1576 *Discourse on the Northwest Passage*. Polymathically drawing on both classical philosophical arguments and contemporary geographical science³⁸, Gilbert argued for the undeniable existence of the Passage.³⁹

The early seventeenth century witnessed a spate of similar treatise. In 1610 John Davis produced *The World’s Hydrographical Description* which contained a folio sheet entitled *Motives* for the discovery of the Northwest Passage.⁴⁰ Interestingly Davis was also a neighbour to Adrian Gilbert, Humphrey’s brother, who himself received from Elizabeth monopoly rights over all Northern discoveries under the banner of the *Colleagues of the Fellowship for the discovery of the Northwest Passage*.⁴¹ The following year, Sir Dudley Digges produced *Of the Circumference of the Earth* which was addressed to the Prince of Wales who at that time was ‘supreme protector’ of the newly incorporated *Company of London Merchants Discoverers of the Northwest Passage*.⁴² Furthermore, Edward Waterhouse’s 1622 *Declaration of the State of the Colony and affairs in Virginia* contained an appendix entitled *Treatise on the Northwest Passage to the South Sea through the Continent of Virginia and by Fretum Hudson* written by the contemporary mathematician Henry Briggs. This was included by Samuel Purchas in his 1625 work *His Pilgrims* which, due to its popularity, no doubt served to further disseminate the theory.⁴³

Evidence of the persuasiveness of these tracts is demonstrated by the 1612 a charter issued by James I for the establishment of the *Company of Merchants Discoverers of The Northwest Passage*.⁴⁴ Digges was a founding member and ‘prime mover’ whilst also being a major shareholder in the East India Company.⁴⁵ Gilbert’s discourse on the potential of the Northwest Passage as a route to secure the benefits of Oriental trade was also received favourably by Queen Elizabeth. Indeed, it appears that it

³⁷ B. Rensink, *If A Passage Could be Found*, p. 10

³⁸ Gilbert made reference to contemporary geographers including *Gemma Frisius, Muristerus, Appianus, Hunterus, Costaldus, Guyardinus, Michael Tramesinus, Franciscus Demonge/nitus, Barnardus Puteanus, Andreas Vanasor, Tramontanus, Petrus Martyr*, and *Hortelius*. He also drew on the philosophical arguments of *Plato in Timeo, Marsilius Ficinus, Crantor, Proclus and Philo and the nautical geographical reckonings of Strabo*.

³⁹ H. Gilbert, *Discourse for the Discoverie*, pp. 19-20

⁴⁰ J. Davis, *Motives inducing a project for the discovery of the North Pole Terrestrial; The Straights of Anian into the South Sea and the coasts thereof*

⁴¹ J. W. Jones (ed.) *Divers Voyages Touching the Discovery of America*, p. Lxxxvii

⁴² D. Digges, *Of the Circumference of the Earth; Or a Treatise of the North West Passage*

⁴³ B. Rensink, *If A Passage Could be Found*, p. 10

⁴⁴ ‘A Charter Granted to the Company of the Merchants Discoverers of the North-West Passage’ in M. Christie, *The Voyages*, pp. 642-664

⁴⁵ M. Christie, *The Voyages*, p. 36

had a role to play in the formation of the Cathay Company and more specifically the said company's investment into a number of Northwest Passage ventures with the aim of reaching China.⁴⁶

It was also common practice for failed explorers to promote the myth – perhaps to soften the blow of their failure in order to salvage the hopes of their investors. The surviving mutineers responsible for casting Hudson and those remaining loyal to him adrift in 1610 were interrogated and prosecuted upon their return. The official conclusion on their depositions suggested an easterly tide as evidence for a clear Northwest Passage to the Pacific:

Our opinion is that the same ground bay in w^{ch} they sailed must be fedd from y^e ocean . . . because the currant did drive perpetually from the East . . . We thinke that the passage is to be found betwene the West and the N. West and not more northerly.⁴⁷

The impact of this official conclusion is evident in the haste in which a new expedition was organised and dispatched – Sir Thomas Button commanded the *Discovery* and the *Resolution*, setting off from London in April 1612. The optimism surrounding Button's expedition is evident in the Letter of Credence afforded to the navigator and his backers by King James I, which also contained direct instructions from the Prince of Wales. These instructions allude to an assuredness in Button's success and contain reference to the 'currant' formerly mentioned.⁴⁸ Furthermore, as Christie highlighted, the sheer scale of the expedition highlights the 'extreme confidence' felt in it – there were no less than 160 mariners involved. 1612 also witnessed the chartering of the *Merchants of London Discoverers of the Northwest Passage* which included Button and his companions. The said Company directly financed five attempts at the passage between 1610 and 1616. Indeed, this "great tyde of floode" first evident in the depositions of the returning survivors of Hudson's expedition in 1611 was also observed and reported by Button and Baffin.⁴⁹

The reliance on the experience and opinion of former navigators who promoted the myth is demonstrated within the correspondence surrounding the preparations for James's expedition. Sir Thomas Roe – the SMV's contact in London - wrote to the Society that:

Wee must houlde some correspondence in o^f seuall instruccons for the manner of the search of the passage, and to communicate ou^r Cards, and the workes and errors of other men, that

⁴⁶ D.F. Lach; *Asia in the Making of Europe*, Vol. II, pp.372-3

⁴⁷ 'Copy of the Depositions Relating to Hudson's Expedition in 1610-11' in M. Christie; *The Voyages*, p. 634

⁴⁸ 'Letter of Credence of King James I and Prince Henry's Instructions given to Sir Thomas Button' in M. Christie; *The Voyages*, p. 635

⁴⁹ M. Christie; *Captains Luke Fox and Thomas James*, pp. xix-xx, xxxviii, xlix

wee may helpe oneanother, and make the more expedicon, and the more exquisite
discouerie.⁵⁰

Likewise, the Society of Merchant Venturers implored James to:

Forgett not to confer wth S^r Thomas Button and any other juditious men w^{ch} you can learne
haue byn formerly ymployed in this discouerie, comparinge their mapps and cardes wth yo^{rs}
and collectinge all their observacons for yo^r better informacon and satisfaccon.⁵¹

⁵⁰ 'Sir Thomas Roe his letter to Mr. Mayor to incite the merchants of Bristoll to go forward in the enterprize' in M.Christie, *The Voyages*, pp. cxxxiv-cxli

⁵¹ 'The Bristol Companies letter to Captain James February 10th 1630' in M.Christie, *The Voyages*, p. cxlviii

Exploding the Myth

In his failure, Captain James stood alone in his categorical denial of the existence of a passage and the commercial viability of one should it exist. This was reinforced by three factors; firstly his personal and professional reputation, secondly the warmth of his reception upon returning amongst both the Bristol merchants and at the Royal Court, and finally the popularity of his narrative account. These factors combined to effectively dismantle the myth of a navigable Northwest Passage for a considerable period thereafter. Within the epilogue of the first edition of James's narrative there was printed an 'Advice concerning the Philosophy of these late Discoveryes' by the philosopher, theologian and scholar William Watts. This discourse neatly surmised the loss of faith in the idea of a navigable passage:

I here present you a voyage to *Cholcos*, though not the *Golden Fleece* with it: the *Searche*, I mean but not the *finding*, of that so much talkt of, so often sought for, *North-West Passage*, and a nearer way to the *South Sea*; that, wherein so much *Time and Treasure* haue been expended, so many braue spirits employed, and yet none discovered. There is no such passage to be found, and that the *Spaniards*, by the gully of their false *sea-cards*, and the fable of an old *Greeke Pilote*, but diuerted our *English and Dutch* Sea-men from their golden *Indyes*: It appears to bee but a plot, for that themselues neuer make vse of this Passage. For mine owne part I suppose that the *Philosophers stone* is the *North-West Passage*. My argument for it is: For that theres so much *Philosophy* in the way to it.⁵²

James's narrative – written and published by personal request of Charles I in early 1633⁵³ - outlined a clear ten point argument against future investment in exploration of the passage. Primarily, the reported 'great flood tide' flowing easterly out of Hudson's Bay - which had been the theoretical driving force behind numerous prior attempts - did not exist. Rather, it was made up of a number of different currents becoming 'distracted and reverse with halfe tydes.' There was no marine life to be seen – dead or alive – within Hudson's Bay, nor any drift wood, which further suggested that the Bay was isolated from any other large bodies of water. Furthermore, the sheer quantity and unpredictable mobility of the ice rendered North-west navigational patters impossible – no ship could ever follow the same course in a predetermined direction. Furthermore, this ice drove into Hudson's Bay from the West – the desired direction for further navigation – blocking Hudson's Straight and accumulating on Resolution Island. If there were a way through this ice, it would be unpredictably narrow for one hundred and forty leagues – maybe even five hundred to *Califurnia* - and 'infinitely pestered with ice.' A straight, should it exist, would be lengthier than imagined and could only possibly be navigated in August and early September. At other times of year 'when the nights are so long and the

⁵² W. Watts, 'Advice concerning the Philosophy of these late Discoveryes', in M.Christie, *The Voyages*, pp.620-621

⁵³ See Appendix 4

weather so cold that it will not be indurable' there would be little hope of success. James stressed that no substantial ships that were capable of carrying the quantities of merchandise required to make the voyages economically viable could endure the conditions he outlined above and would be placed in extraordinary danger if attempted and would be commercial insanity and suicide for the sailors. The EIC's imports from Asia required enormous bulk purchases of pepper in the first half of the seventeenth century to make the eighteen month voyage profitable, which of course required some of the largest burthen contemporary shipping. The same commercial principle was not, therefore, implementable.⁵⁴ Accordingly, the route around the Cape of Good Hope should be preferable for 'the farthest way about is well knowne in fewer dayes to be performed; yea, with lesser paines and more safety of ship and goods.' Investors, asserted James, would be wise to stick to the East Indies and Southern Asia – for whilst trade with Northern Asia – Japan in particular - remained an interesting prospect, the risks via the Northwest Passage were insurmountable.⁵⁵ His exceptionally dramatic narrative no doubt served to corroborate his argument. It has been described variously as 'apocalyptic' and 'calamitous'; the long winter endured on Charlton Island particularly so.⁵⁶ Christie is correct in claiming that 'to quote passages [of danger] would be to quote a very large portion of the narrative.'⁵⁷

The arguments outlined above were disseminated by the unprecedented popularity of this exploration narrative. Having first been published in 1633 within months of James's return, it was republished in no less than four editions over the following two centuries, which is testimony to its quality as an early piece of literature. Portions of the narrative have appeared in print at least 20 times in the 150 years following James's return to Bristol. To suggest that it gained 'a recognized position in English literature' is no exaggeration.⁵⁸ A prime example of its significance and entrance into popular culture would be its adoption as the primary source for Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.⁵⁹

The warmth of James's reception is demonstrated within the correspondence between himself, the Royal court and his benefactors following his return to Bristol. His reputation was secured before his return; by deciding to endure the winter of 1631 in the bay now named after him in order to attempt the search again the following spring, James won many admirers. This was, at the time, an unmatched feat. Sir Thomas Roe, the Merchant Venturers contact at the Royal Court, wrote to the society expressing that by risking his life in doing so, he would return with 'more honour' and 'shall hath

⁵⁴ K. N. Chaudhuri, *The English East India Company; The Study of an Early Joint Stock Company 1600-1640* (London 1999) P.145

⁵⁵ James, T. *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage*, in M.Christie, *The Voyages*, pp. 590-2

⁵⁶ G. Williams; *Voyages of Delusion; The Quest for the Northwest Passage* (London, 2003), p. 5

⁵⁷ M. Christie, *The Voyages*, p. clxx

⁵⁸ M. Christie, *The Voyages*, p.clxxvii. For a chronology of reprints see pp. clxxxiii-vi

⁵⁹ For arguments see: C.R. La Bossiere (ed.); *Worlds of Wonder*, pp.51-4; W.K. Davies, *Writing Geographical exploration*, pp. 258-68

gained infinite reputacon' regardless of the outcome.⁶⁰ The Bristol merchants' hopes that 'his resolucon and industrie as alsoe our endeavour and charge may bee crowned by his Ma^{tie} benigne acceptance thereof' were fulfilled. James's account and his conclusions regarding the non-existence of a passage were met with unanimous approval.⁶¹ Attested through private letters with his benefactors, James found himself 'honourable entertained' by his London hosts – most notably Lord Danby who was but one of 'manie Lorde at whose tables I have Beene entertained' and 'his Ma^{tie} welcomed mee Home and was pleased to say it satisfied his expectacons.' He reported that 'they respect the worst of yo^{ur} servant the more amplie.' Charles I was evidently highly interested in James's findings, for upon their first meeting the interview lasted a full two hours. James was instructed to return for further questioning and his captain's log was to be written into a narrative and discourse for publication by Royal order.⁶²

By breaking with a tradition of myth perpetuation, and by his boldness in wintering on Charlton Island, James served to dismantle the popular myth of a navigable Northwest Passage. The popularity of his narrative no doubt served to widely disseminate his disproof. However, the arguments above provide a relatively narrow, cultural interpretation of the finality of Captain James's 1631 expedition. The following chapter will adopt an economic perspective to address the same issue. The voyage shall be examined relative to Bristol's contemporary mode of commerce. It will also be placed into a broader interpretive framework that witnessed America's transformation from obstacle to opportunity in the eyes of a select few pioneering Bristol merchants in the first half of the seventeenth century. These select few, on an ad hoc basis, began to develop commercial links with Newfoundland and New England within the same period as financing Captain James's voyage and investing in Newfoundland colonisation. This trans-Atlantic pattern of trade would come to dominate Bristol's overseas trade by the second half on the seventeenth century, rendering overcoming the continent an obsolete investment.

⁶⁰ See Appendix 1

⁶¹ See Appendix 3

⁶² See Appendix 4

Chapter 2: From Obstacle to Opportunity

The Foresight of the Few

The process outlined above was overseen by a select few Bristol merchant who can be identified amongst James's benefactors. They shall be closely identified and their connections to investment in Newfoundland colonisation and the earliest records of Bristol merchant trans-Atlantic trade will be demonstrated. Typically, historians have referred to the expedition of Captain James as a corporate enterprise. D.H. Sacks suggested the expedition was the 'epitome' of the SMV's new mode of commerce which sought to breach new markets and trade luxury imports first hand.⁶³ Similarly, W.K. Jones wrote of 'the society's enthusiasm' and 'the Bristol merchants' as a collective force.⁶⁴ The same is true Patrick McGrath who stated that 'the Society of Merchant Venturers was very interested in the venture' and that 'the Society guaranteed the wages of all who went on the expedition'.⁶⁵ Likewise, despite transcribing the correspondence indicating the merchants involved, Christie also referred to 'the merchants of the ancient city of Bristol' as a corporate entity.⁶⁶ These assertions tend to be supported by the opening lines of Captain James's narrative:

Hauving bin for many yeeres importuned by my honourable and worshipfull friends to undertake the discouery of that part of the world which is commonly called the NorthWest Passage into the South Sea and so to proceed to Iapan, and so round the world westward . . . I acquainted my much honoured friends; the Merchants of Bristol, therewith, who (as euer they have bin benefactors and aduancers of them that pursue the ways of Honour, together with the enlargement and benefit of his Maiesties Kingdomes) did freely offer to bee at the charge of furnishing for the shipping for this purpose.⁶⁷

The letters relating to the expedition within the *Book of Trade* can be similarly misleading. They are unanimously recorded as '*The Companies Letter*', and those received are addressed to the company as a whole.⁶⁸ The majority of them are signed on behalf of the Society, and often indicate a unanimous involvement, even with Mayor John Tomlinson sometimes incorporated. Tomlinson's signature is also allocated to an undated letter addressed from the SMV to Richard Weston, Lord Treasurer, alongside that of Humphrey Hooke, Master of the Society.⁶⁹ The earliest extant letter from the Society relevant to the affair – dated 2nd February 1630 – tells of: 'the dessigne of the merchants here, w^{ch}

⁶³ D.H. Sacks, *The Widening Gate*, p.51

⁶⁴ W.K. Davies, *Writing Geographical Exploration*, p. 168

⁶⁵ McGrath, Patrick. "Bristol and America" in K.R. Andrews (ed.), *The Westward Enterprise*, p. 101

⁶⁶ M. Christie (ed.), *The Voyages*, p. cxxxiii

⁶⁷ T. James; *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage of Captain Thomas James*, p.1 printed in M.Christie, *The Voyages* p.

⁶⁸ See Appendeces 1-4 & M. Christie, *The Voyages*, pp. cxxxiv - clviii

⁶⁹ 'Sir Thomas Roe his letter to Mr. Mayor to incite the merchants of Bristoll to go forward in the enterprize' in M. Christie, *The Voyages*, pp. cxxxiv-cxli

intend to employ the said Captaine for discoverie of the North-West passage and for that purpose they have intreated him.’⁷⁰ In requisitioning trading privileges proportional to success, the letter emphasises the generality of Bristolian vested interest. Furthermore, it is stressed that the whole of civic Bristol would be indebted to Weston for his assistance in promoting the expedition, not only the SMV.⁷¹

Arguably, this political strategy paid dividends. Conditional monopoly trading rights were soon to be confirmed. Also, there was secured for Captain James – via Lord Danby of the Privy Council – a personal meeting with Charles I. This was an opportunity to promote the expedition and the interests of the SMV, in order to receive encouragement and assurance ‘from His owne mouth’. The letter suggests that the role that the SMV played - through the merchant shipping that it contributed towards naval efforts in the Anglo-Spanish War (1625-30) - was the main factor for the willingness of the King to meet with Captain James the following Sunday.⁷² During this meeting, Captain James produced a petition to the King from ‘yo^r Marchants Adventurers and Citizens of the Citty of Bristoll’. It formalised the request for privilege of trade through the passage should it be discovered, suggesting that the venture would not be undertaken until this prerequisite is assured. The royal signature was thus provided, confirming the necessary legal conditions for the expedition to go ahead.⁷³

However, a closer examination of the private letters between merchants and Captain James demonstrates the particular set of merchants financially involved in the affair. Whilst these merchants were intimately affiliated with and firmly established within the SMV, it becomes clear that they acted independently of the society and took sole responsibility for the financing and organisation of the expedition. This explains why there are ‘only two’ SMV financial records relating to the venture which deal with its victualing and crew.⁷⁴ The prime movers who assumed financial responsibility are demonstrated in a later copy of the warrant for the procuring of the *Henrietta Maria*. ‘At a general assemblie of the said societie, in ample nomber’ on an unknown date prior to the securing of the royal signature on 8th February 1630, it was confirmed that that:

⁷⁰ ‘The Companies Letter to Sir Thomas Roe for y^e obteyninge of Condicons to encouradge them in the enterprize with Capt. James for discoverie of the N.W. passage’ in M.Christie, p. cxlii

⁷¹ ‘The Companys letter to the Lord Treasurer in the bahalfe of Capt. James and to Crave his Lo^{pp}s favour for equall priviledge with others that shall attempt the enterprize’ in M. Christie, *The Voyages*, p. cxlv

⁷² ‘The Earl of Danby his letter to Sir John Worstenham, knighte, concerning his Ma^{ty}s pleasure to speake with the Capteyne, whereby hee shall receive grace and encouradgement for the undertakinge of the voyadge’ in M. Christie, *The Voyages*, p. cxlvi

⁷³ A petition to the King delivered by Captain James on behalf ‘yo^r Marchants Adventurers, Citizens of the Citty of Bristoll’ in M. Christie, *The Voyages*, p.cxlvii

⁷⁴ P. McGrath, *Records Relating*, pp. 205-6

Humfrie Hooke, nowe maister of the said societie, Andrew Charlton, Miles Jackson, and Thomas Cole . . . [are the] husbands and stewardes of the mannaging and furnishing of the saide ship wth all provisions and necessaries.

A handful of others are directly implicated through their private correspondence with Captain James. A letter to Captain James on the 8th of February thanking him for his ‘speedie procuringe’ of the King’s signature to the petition, and the effectiveness of his promotional work in the capital, was signed by Giles Elbridge, Richard Longe, John Barker and John Tailor as well as those mentioned in the warrant.⁷⁵ Confirmation of these merchants appears in another private letter to Captain James on 3rd February 1630 offering advice ‘concerninge their desire of his care in prosecutinge the designe.’⁷⁶

From the earliest database of SMV members in 1618 and in other records relating to the society in the period, it becomes clear that James’s benefactors comprised some of the most economically and politically powerful elect of the SMV in the first half of the seventeenth century. As has already been indicated, Humphrey Hooke was the Master of the SMV between 1630-1 – and twice more before this date - whilst no doubt the leading merchant in contemporary Bristol. He also served as treasurer of the society and as Bristol’s Sheriff in 1614. John Barker has served as master of the company in 1617, 1618 and 1626 and also held offices as mayor, warden and sheriff of Bristol in 1625, 1611 and 1612 respectively. Richard Long is also recorded as having served as City Warden by 1618 and again in 1621, and finally Mayor later in 1636. Andrew Charlton served as Mayor in 1634 and Sherriff in 1621. Miles Jackson was Sheriff of Bristol in the year of the expedition, whilst John Tailor acted as Sheriff in 1625 and was later Mayor in 1640.⁷⁷ Furthermore, these individuals can all be identified within the ranks of what Patrick McGrath has termed the ‘little ship owning aristocracy in the early seventeenth century.’⁷⁸ What has been demonstrated is that Captain James’s expedition was not the work of the SMV as a corporate body. Those responsible represented a selection of the most established, powerful and wealthy members of the SMV and of Bristol’s civic sphere. However, where it suited, Captain James’s expedition was characterised as a corporate affair. This is apparent in official correspondence with the Crown through Lord Danby, the Treasury through Richard Weston and with Sir Thomas Roe. This served to lend political weight to the pre-requisite petitioning of the Crown and Exchequer.

Evidence of sporadic investment in Newfoundland colonisation in the first two decades of the seventeenth century - despite a lack of detail - implicates a number of the aforementioned merchants.

⁷⁵ ‘The Company Letter to Sir Thomas Roe February 26th 1630’ in M. Christie, *The Voyages*, p. clii

⁷⁶ ‘The Companies letter to Captayne James concerninge their desire of his care in prosecutinge the designe’ in M. Christie, *The Voyages*, p.cxlili

⁷⁷ ‘Register of Members 1618-1700’ in P. McGrath, *Records Relating*, p. 27 & ‘Mayors and Sheriffs of Bristol 1600-1699 Transcribed from *Annals of Bristol Vo.1* by John Latimer’

<<http://www.davenapier.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/mayors/mayors.htm>> (Last Accessed 18/4/2013)

⁷⁸ P. McGrath, *The Merchant Venturers and Bristol Shipping*, p. 75

Interestingly, despite different potential outcomes, the search for the Northwest Passage and American colonisation were often promoted in tandem within contemporary English mercantile treatise. Examples from the early seventeenth century include John Davis's *The World's Hydrographical Description* (1610) which argued for the benefits of colonies and plantations along America's north-eastern seaboard. It also contained a folio concerned with arguing the existence and commercial viability of the Northwest Passage.⁷⁹ Likewise, Edward Waterhouse's 1622 *Declaration of the State of the Colony and affairs in Virginia* contained an appendix entitled *Treatise on the Northwest Passage to the South Sea through the Continent of Virginia and by Fretum Hudson*.⁸⁰

The first of these ventures was a prototype colony and plantation at Cupid's Cove dating from 1610 on the Avalon Peninsular. Its location was decided due to the explorative voyages of Martin Pring, a Bristolian, who reconnoitred the coastline from Newfoundland down to modern day Massachusetts via Nova Scotia and Maine in both 1603 and 1609. Although no names were recorded, Pring's account of the latter voyage tells us that he 'set out from the cittie of Bristoll at the charge of the chiefest merchants and inhabitants of the said citie.' He praised the climate, fauna and the flora of the region which he acclaimed 'an excellent haven'.⁸¹ McGrath has estimated that at least £1,000 was invested by unknown Bristol merchants in this venture alone.⁸² Pring's favourable account of the coastline he traversed and the landings he made probably promoted the Cupid's Cove enterprise in the minds of his Bristol merchant financiers.

This is best expressed in a petition to the Privy Council from the Bristol merchants and their London associates in the same year, requesting a charter for the settling of Newfoundland:

Certaine marchantes of London and Bristoll having used the fishing trade of Newfoundland, being confident that the same is habitable in winter . . . and being full of woodes, faire rivers, storde with good fishe, with fowle and birdes also, and many staggess, or beasts of that nature . . . beinge but 3 weeks sayle from England and Ireland. Theis Marchants desire to have leave with a fewe men fitting for plantation.

It was argued that there was already a considerable fishing industry around the Newfoundland shores, that there was no established foreign or savage presence, and that a colony could produce new commodities for domestic import. The ground was known to be fertile and a colony would provide a

⁷⁹ 'Motives inducing a project for the discovery of the North Pole Terrestrial; The Straights of Anian into the South Sea and the Coasts Thereof.'

⁸⁰ B. Rensink, *If A Passage Could be Found*, p. 10

⁸¹ S. Purchas, *His Pilgrims* XIX pp.322-329 printed in D.B Quinn, *New American World III*, p.359

⁸² P. McGrath, *Bristol and America*, p. 16

market for English export as well as goods for import.⁸³ A Bristol chronicle entry entitled 'Settlement in Newfoundland' reinforces the Bristol merchant initiative in the Cupid's Cove settlement.⁸⁴

The Company of the City of London and Bristol for the colony of plantations in Newfoundland was promptly incorporated by James I to carry out the Cupid's cove venture. One of the primary tenets of justification for the appointing of the Charter was that 'we may . . . grant thereof without doing wrong to any other prince or state, considering they cannot justly pretend any sovereignty or right thereunto'⁸⁵ which mirrors the geopolitical considerations behind avoiding the Cape of Good Hope route to the East Indies. Significantly, of the eleven Bristol merchants implicated, three were to be involved in Thomas James's expedition two decades later: Humphrey Hooke and John Barker were two of twelve who held 'high office'.⁸⁶ Giles Elbridge is also recorded as having invested in the equipping of the three ships alongside Humphrey Hooke, although the sums involved are unknown.⁸⁷ Furthermore, it is understood Barker sent out his apprentice John Crowder out to the colony on 21st June 1609 as of the original 40 in May 1610. At least eight apprentices were sent out on behalf of prominent Bristol merchants.⁸⁸

A second, similar venture at Bristol's Hope is shrouded in more documentary obscurity. The Bristol *Book of Charters* tells us of 1617 that:

This yeere Divers particular marchants of the society didd sett forwardes the plantacon of a porcion of land of Newfoundland called Bristolls Hope . . . for the Colonie or Plantacon in Newfoundland.'⁸⁹

Apparently, this was a divorce from the joint-stock venture with London merchants at Cupid's Cove in which the prime mover, John Guy, carried with him the Bristol investors and colonisers across to the new site at Carbonear along Grace Harbour.⁹⁰ Therefore it can tentatively be assumed that Barker, Hooke and Elbridge were again involved - and possibly more of those later linked with Captain James's expedition. Although these ventures were abandoned before long, both 'withering to extinction'⁹¹ by the beginning of the 1630's, those within the New England region developed both quickly and organically following the end of effective London company control early in the same

⁸³ 'A Petition of merchants of London and Bristol to the Privy Council for a Newfoundland Charter' in D.B. Quinn, *New American World IV*, p.131

⁸⁴ 'Settlement in Newfoundland' in P.McGrath, *Records Relating*, p.200

⁸⁵ 'Charter by King James I to the Newfoundland Company' in D.B. Quinn, *New American World IV*, p.133

⁸⁶ P. McGrath, *Records Relating*, p.199

⁸⁷ A.F.Williams, *John Guy*, p.288

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 289 -306 (Appendices 4-7)

⁸⁹ 'Bristol's Hope 1617-8' from *Book of Charters I*, 57 published in P.McGrath, *Records Relating*, p. 200

⁹⁰ J. A. Williams, *John Guy*, pp. 148-151

⁹¹ P. T. Bradley, *British Maritime Enterprise*, p. 321

decade.⁹² The prime examples of this include the Pilgrim Father's settlements at Plymouth Harbour, Jamestown and Salem. The former, by 1642, had a population of 3,000 in ten separate locations which were yielding surplus crops of tobacco for export in quantities that facilitated the payment of their debts to the London Virginia Company.⁹³ Likewise, Salem boasted a population of 1,000 within two years of its foundation in 1628 by the Massachusetts Company. By 1642 this it developed exponentially, boasting a population of 16,000. By this time, P.T. Bradley has suggested that trade between Salem and England resembled a shipping 'highway' and that ocean-faring vessels of 'several hundred tons' were under constructed on site.⁹⁴

A handful of the same merchants also appear in the *Port Book* for 1638/9. The first customs record of Bristol's American trade illustrates Stone's assertion that 'there can be no doubt that in the late 1630s and early 1640s Bristol merchants were showing some interest in the new opportunities which the American colonies presented to them.'⁹⁵ Three of the six recorded were amongst the select few 'husbands and stewards' of Bristol's last involvement with the Northwest Passage. Giles Elbridge appears in the 1637/8 import account for the book of trade as importing from New England in the *Thomas and John* on 30th August 1638 with 526 units of beaver and otter skins in two shipments in seven casks. Likewise John Charlton is recorded as having imported five tons of train oil from Newfoundland on the 17th October at a customs duty of £1 1s 1d. Richard Longe is also recorded as having two imported shipments from Newfoundland on 24th September of the same year of a quantity of fish (wet and dry) and 20.75 tons of train oil at a customs duty £5 19s. The total imports from this year amounted to £60.⁹⁶ Whilst Stone is absolutely correct in his assertion that this was proportionally negligible to Bristol's total imports for the year, it nonetheless is an early indication of recognition of the opportunity that was presented by the output of the fledgling American colonies.⁹⁷ This suggests that, although the SMV 'showed a certain lack of enterprise in its attitude towards opening new markets,'⁹⁸ its leading members showed signs of extraordinary ambition which was no doubt facilitated by their extra political power and surplus capital which included not only the search for the Northwest Passage in 1630, but also American colonisation and the earliest indications of trans-Atlantic trade. Accordingly, the period 1610 – 1638 was one of ad hoc ambition which saw – amongst a select few merchants – the emphasis on America change from obstacle to opportunity. These sporadic investments are understood as precursors to 'one of the most dramatic, even revolutionary,

⁹² R. Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, pp. 92, 111

⁹³ P. T. Bradley, *British Maritime Enterprise*, p.319

⁹⁴ P. T. Bradley, *British Maritime Enterprise*, p.323-4

⁹⁵ R. Stone, *The Overseas Trade of Bristol*, p.132

⁹⁶ 1637/8 Bristol Port Book, TNA PRO E190/1136/10

⁹⁷ R. Stone, *The Overseas Trade of Bristol*, p.124

⁹⁸ P. McGrath, *Records Relating*, p.xli

developments in Bristol's commercial history'⁹⁹ which rendered investment in the Northwest Passage, in colonisation and in direct Asian trade redundant.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p.137

Trans-Atlantic Trade: A Conclusion

Bristol's potential involvement in the search for the Northwest Passage was legally ended in 1670. May 2nd of this year marked the chartering of the Hudson's Bay Company, within which no Bristol merchants were incorporated. Only those incorporated:

At their owne great cost and charge undertake an Expedition for Hudsons Bay in the North west part of America for the discovery of a new Passage into the South Sea and for the finding some Trade for Furrs Mineralls and other considerable Commodities and by such their undertaking have already made such discoveries as doe encourage them to proceed further in pursuance of their said designe by meanes whereof there may probably arise very great advantage to us and our Kingdome.¹⁰⁰

This concluding section proposes that by 1670 this formal exclusion would have been inconsequential for Bristol's merchants. Interest in the Northwest Passage was long extinct alongside that of direct Asian trade. The latter point is testified by the SMV's refusal of an offer to invest in a joint-stock operation in 1650 from the EIC. 'The said proffer', replied the Society, 'may prove no way beneficiall to this company.'¹⁰¹ This represents a polarisation of interests; in 1631 there had been a conflict over Captain James's expedition, and what its success would theoretically entail for both sets of merchants. The minutes of the Court of Committees of the East India Company on 30th March 1630 indicates a commercial apprehension regarding the 'good hope' surrounding the Bristol venture:

The Company cannot admitt of the lading of the said shipp wth pepp^r otherwise than for their own accompt; for, if they should, it would be a kind of allowing of private trade w^{ch} they may not permitt.¹⁰²

Indeed, perhaps as early as 1650, the focus of the SMV – as spearheaded by the enterprising few identified in the last chapter – was now firmly upon profiting from the commercial opportunity presented by America. This was facilitated by the exponential growth of its colonies and their productive output in the second half of the seventeenth century, which 'revolutionised' Bristol's overseas trade and ushered in a period of unprecedented prosperity. Specifically, for Bristol's merchant community, the implications of what Stone coined Bristol's 'American Revolution' satiated many of the desires that lay behind the quest for a Northwest Passage to Asia. The principal and overarching themes within a selection of the more influential contemporary treatise on the Passage align with the benefits of Bristol's American trade outlined by Stone.

¹⁰⁰ 'The Royal Charter for Incorporating The Hudson's Bay Company A.D. 1670' http://www.solon.org/Constitutions/Canada/English/PreConfederation/hbc_charter_1670.html (Accessed 18/4/13)

¹⁰¹ 'The East India Company' 21st February 1650 in P. McGrath, *Records Relating*, p. 228

¹⁰² 'Minutes of the court of committees of the EIC March 30th 1631' in M.Christie, *The Voyages*, p.lxxxiii

Whilst it was repeatedly argued that England was the ‘nearest and aptest of all other realms’ to exploit the benefits of a commercial Northwest Passage to Asia, it soon became clear that Bristol was in fact the nearest and aptest city to exploit the opportunity of Trans-Atlantic trade.¹⁰³ As the last chapter indicated, it took some Bristol merchants little time to realise this following their last unsuccessful investment in a Northwest Passage expedition. By 1670 this opportunistic enterprise had developed into a new mode of commerce which heralded an era of ‘newfound prosperity’ and ‘remarkable growth’ for the city and its merchant community.¹⁰⁴ The enticing promises of ‘infinite profite’¹⁰⁵ and ‘wonderfull welth’¹⁰⁶ within treatise on the Passage were realised closer to home and were founded upon different commodities. Between 1637/8 and 1654/5 alone, the city’s accountable overseas trade grew by up to 80% despite the commercial and political disturbances of the Civil War. Instances of exponential growth in overseas trade are perhaps best illustrated in the 30% increase in total imports into the city within the space of a year, reaching £567,000 in 1671/2.¹⁰⁷ Significantly, by the mid-1660’s, 80% of Bristol’s booming overseas trade was with America.

The foundation of this new commercial prosperity was not the ‘great abundance of gold, siluer, precious stones, Cloth of golde, silkes, all maner of Spices, Grocery wares, and other kindes of Merchandize’ which was promised in Asian trade through the Northwest Passage.¹⁰⁸ Whilst it may have been true that in the sixteenth century these commodities represented ‘thinges that wee here esteeme most,’ from the second decade of the seventeenth century tobacco rose to prominence within the burgeoning domestic consumer market.¹⁰⁹ Bristol was officially barred from this trade for the first half of the seventeenth century due to a number of factors. Primarily, the Virginia Company held a monopoly on all imported tobacco from the New England region between 1619 and 1625. Royal proclamations in 1631, 1634 and 1638 reinforced that the product was not to be imported into anywhere but London which according to Latimer ‘was one of the most profitable branches of their commerce.’ Latimer has demonstrated evidence that Bristol merchants were circumventing these measures. In February 1630 the Government temporarily ‘was compelled to withdraw the arbitrary orders by which the foreign tobacco trade was made a monopoly for the benefit of London Merchants’ on behalf of the customs farmers who claimed the ‘great injury they sustained from it, many ships being laden with tobacco, being, they alleged, carried into Western outports under pretence of damage, when the cargoes were smuggled ashore, and the duties lost.’¹¹⁰ Whilst this demonstrates local demand and a willingness to circumvent prohibition to commercial ends, the other

¹⁰³ R. Thorne, *Declaration of the Indies*, p. 3

¹⁰⁴ R. Stone, *The Overseas Trade of Bristol*, p.159

¹⁰⁵ R. Thorne, *Declaration of the Indies*, p. 5

¹⁰⁶ H. Gilbert, *Discourse for the Discouerie*, p.13

¹⁰⁷ R. Stone, *The Overseas Trade of Bristol*, pp.121, 163

¹⁰⁸ H. Gilbert, *Discourse for the Discouerie*, p.42

¹⁰⁹ R. Thorne, *Declaration of the Indies*, p. 5

¹¹⁰ J. Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Seventeenth Century*, pp. 119, 144

inference, as made by Stone, is that Bristol's trans-Atlantic commerce may not be as insignificant as the records imply.¹¹¹

Evidence of the South West's early demand for tobacco, for instance, comes in the form of a 1631 Royal proclamation which both reinforced the capital's import monopoly and banned its growth domestically. Latimer suggests that 'the culture of tobacco in Gloucester became so prevalent that the Privy Council sent down a peremptory order to the sheriff to cut down the plantations.' That this continued to be a problem is demonstrated by the reissuing of the proclamation three years later and again in 1638.¹¹² Before long inflated economies of scale helped to reduce unit price of it and thereby the product was gradually transformed 'from minority goods affordable only to the elite to items of mass consumption.' By 1654/5, Bristol was importing just under 1.9 million lb. of tobacco and a decade later this had risen to 4.2 million lb. Indeed, tobacco absolutely dominated Bristol's American imports – in 1671/2 accounted for over 80%.¹¹³ Incidentally, Bristol's sugar import trade also experienced a rise to prominence. This first became apparent by 1654 when 21,500 cwt. is recorded in the Port Book. A decade later the quantity has risen to 33,000 cwt. Remarkably, in the first two years of the 1670s, the two commodities equated to 99% of total American imports.¹¹⁴

The other main arguments for the discovery of a Northwest Passage to Asia was that it would create a new and insatiable export market and that this in turn would foster domestic industry and thereby generate employment. As such, the reliance on traditional European export markets, that seemed so regularly hampered by political and military conflict, would be alleviated. This was deemed a necessity, for 'depending, either vpon *Fraunce, Spaine, Flaunders, Portingal, Hamborovve, Emdem,* or any other part of *Europe*¹¹⁵ suffered due to:

trade and traffique with ou^r neighbour^r countreys [being] in small request, the profitt nowe seldome answering the Marchants aduerture whereby the poore English marchants, artificers, and Laborers can scarce gayne meate to their bellyes and clothes to their backs, so cunningly do ou^r neighbour^r countreys reiect ou^r home commodities to th^e end to sett their owne people to awork and to impoverish ou^r. Wee shalbee of necessitie enforced to seeke out remote partes of y^e world to vent ou^r commodities.¹¹⁶

Stone has argued that Bristol's 'American Revolution' in the seventeenth century came to represent a 'significant new market' for regional manufactures and hinterland produce, thereby creating a considerable 'impetus to industry and agriculture in Bristol and its hinterland' which produced the

¹¹¹ R. Stone, *The Overseas Trade of Bristol*, p.132

¹¹² J. Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Seventeenth Century*, p.116

¹¹³ R. Stone, *The Overseas Trade of Bristol*, pp. 232, 124, 142, 170

¹¹⁴ R. Stone, *The Overseas Trade of Bristol*, pp. 142, 170

¹¹⁵ H. Gilbert, *Discourse for the Discoverie*, p.42

¹¹⁶ D. Digges, *Motives for a project*, p.1

provisions and the curious diversity of manufactured ‘wares’ sold to the colonies. Remarkably, the value of Bristol’s exports to America, it appears, grew at a faster rate than that of imports. This was due to the relatively slow development of the colonial industrial sector. They were, understandably due to the massive demand from overseas, absorbed by the production of surplus tobacco which formed the basis of their economies.¹¹⁷

During the second half of the seventeenth century Bristol’s American trades grew at a remarkable pace, leading into the ‘Golden Age’ that was to commercially bloom in the following century. Accordingly, from the mid seventeenth century onwards, Bristol’s merchants were faced with inexhaustible commercial opportunity across the Atlantic would no doubt have held their full attention. There are no records of substantial Bristol merchant involvement or investment in the opening up of new markets or of new colonising ventures following Captain James’s expedition to the Northwest Passage in 1631, and little wonder; the disruption of the Civil War was immediately followed – and perhaps somewhat preceded - by the boom of trans-Atlantic trade. The shift in Bristol’s commercial engagement with the American continent – from obstacle to opportunity – was spearheaded on an ad hoc basis by an affluent and politically influential core of the SMV. Other factors that led to the end of Bristol’s long engagement with the Northwest Passage have also been considered. Captain James’s failure no doubt had a substantial impact. His refutations of the existence and commercial plausibility of a Northwest Passage carried a considerable amount of political weight and broke with a long tradition of myth ‘perpetuation’. This effectively exploded the myth of a navigable Northwest Passage and surely discouraged potential investors from within the SMV or further afield for some time; the search was not resumed until 1719 by Captain James Knight under the auspices of the HBC – a disastrous affair.

¹¹⁷ R. Stone, *The Overseas Trade of Bristol*, p. 174