

# SHAKE-SPEARE'S VOYAGE TO AMERICA

*In which it is revealed  
that the real 'Shakespeare',  
Christopher Marlowe,  
was on board the ill-fated Flagship  
'Sea Venture',  
wrecked on a reef in Bermuda  
in July 1609*

*Together with the  
newly-deciphered Cryptogram  
and Rebus Cypher of May 1609  
and supporting evidence from  
'The Tempest'.*

Christopher W.H. Gamble



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## THE ADVENTURERS AND COMPANY OF VIRGINIA

It is now becoming evident that the extent of Marlowe's (i.e. Shakespeare's) interest and involvement in the planned colonisation of Virginia may have been hugely underestimated; the playwright's many connections with the 'Adventurers and Company of Virginia' can easily be traced.

We have already noted the established fact that Marlowe knew Sir Walter Raleigh, who for many years had been the prime inspirer, advocate, and financier of North American colonizing expeditions. In 1609, Raleigh was still incarcerated in the Tower of London, but he remained the leading influence behind the Virginia Company, an important adviser in all its undertakings—although his involvement had to be kept secret.

We have also seen that Marlowe was connected with the influential Walsingham family; the Walsinghams had long been committed to the exploration and colonisation of North America, advocating the many advantages of establishing a strong English presence in Virginia. Secretary of State Sir Francis Walsingham had been a patron and encourager of Raleigh, and had invested in the 1585-6 expedition to Virginia; Walsingham had also given much assistance and support to the geographer Richard Hakluyt, an enthusiastic promoter of colonizing ventures and a dedicated chronicler of voyages of discovery.

Ever since 1584, Hakluyt had been collaborating with Sir Walter Raleigh in seeking to obtain the Queen's support for Virginian colonisation; and in 1589, Hakluyt had published his famous *Principall Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries*, which was dedicated to Sir Francis Walsingham. He was also an investor in the Virginia Company.

Another prominent investor in the 'Adventurers and Company of Virginia' (and later Treasurer—which in this case means Governor) was Marlowe's friend and patron the Earl of Southampton (to whom both *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* had been dedicated;

the first seventeen Sonnets had almost certainly been written for him). Southampton had sponsored two earlier expeditions to the New World, namely the voyage of the *Concord* to Virginia in 1602, and a further expedition to Maine in 1605. The other principal investors in the Virginia Company included the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, who were also patrons of actors' companies, and later Dedictees of the First Folio.

In fact, on investigation, the Virginia Company turns out to have been a veritable nest of 'free-thinkers', including in its ranks a large number of progressive and literary-minded men; and, as we might expect, we find among its members Sir Francis Bacon, the great scholar, free-thinker and senior Freemason (the brother of Marlowe's friend and employer Anthony Bacon.). It was Sir Francis Bacon who, in May 1609, presented the Virginia Company's Second Charter to King James 1st for royal approval.

Many authors have suggested that the leaders of this colonizing enterprise had an underlying political ambition in the establishment of the Virginia Colony—namely, to found in the New World a more democratic and tolerant society (for example, Professor C.M. Gayley in his book *Shakespeare and the Founders of Liberty in America*, MacMillan, 1917<sup>4</sup>).

The Virginia Company's Second Charter had received royal assent from King James 1st in May 1609. The new Charter had been drafted by the reformer Sir Edwin Sandys, and was a huge improvement on the original Charter of 1607, for it granted significant freedoms to the Virginia colonists; according to Professor C.M. Gayley, the 1609 Charter contained 'the embryo of liberties apparently unassailable by Royal prerogative' (op. cit., p.41).

Today, of course, the United States is established as 'the Land of Liberty' . . . but there is much evidence to suggest that Marlowe ('Shake-speare') was a supporter of the principle of liberty in the Virginian Colony from its inception, bearing in mind, as we have seen, his association with such colonizing enthusiasts as Raleigh, South-

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4. See Appendix Five, 'Founders of Liberty'

ampton, Pembroke, Walsingham, and Hariot.

Seen in its historical context, the alliance of the 'colonisers' and the 'freethinkers' is not altogether surprising. The opponents of the 'freethinkers' were the traditionalists, particularly the churchmen, who stubbornly held to the long-established Scriptural version of the history and geography of the world. These traditionalists felt threatened by the whole concept of a 'New World'; the extent of their fears is demonstrated in the fact that, at the Universities, it was forbidden to teach about even the flora and fauna of North America. Reports from the New World tended to raise difficult and highly contentious questions, such as the antiquity of American Indian legends, or the origin of the Indians' divergent Creation myths. One of the accusations levelled against Marlowe, back in 1593, had concerned his opinion that:

'the Indians and many authors of antiquity have assuredly written above 16 thousand yeares agoe, whereas Adam is proved to have lived within six thousand years.' (from the 'Baines Note', dated 27th May 1593; quoted in *In Search of Christopher Marlowe*, p. 308)

This is comparable to the allegation made by Thomas Nashe that atheists 'impudently persist in it that the late discovered Indians are able to show antiquities thousands [of years] before Adam' (quoted in Robert Lacey's *Sir Walter Raleigh*, p.217).

For those whose minds were not closed, however, the New World held endless fascination. Bearing in mind Christopher Marlowe's connections with Raleigh and the Virginia Company, it is likely that he had long wanted to visit North America; he must have talked at length with his friend Thomas Hariot, about the latter's experiences on his two expeditions to Virginia. Hariot was an accomplished scholar, mathematician and cartographer, and had been employed as navigation instructor to Raleigh's sea captains; back in 1588, he had published his *Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, which had rapidly become a best-seller. Theodore De Bry's 1590 Folio edition of Hariot's book had featured engravings of John White's impressive watercolours of American Indians, and there is evidence that these paintings were for some time in the possession of

Sir Thomas Walsingham at Scadbury Manor, where Marlowe would certainly have seen them (see A.D. Wraight's *In Search of Christopher Marlowe*, pp.143 ff). (Another scientific talent associated with Virginian exploration was the astrologer Dr. John Dee, whose map of the Eastern Coastline of North America, drawn up in 1580, can still be seen in the British Museum. Dr. Dee had long been a mentor of Sir Walter Raleigh.)

To the public at large, the New World was an intriguing mystery, a source of much curiosity and speculation; it was an unknown realm which, in the popular imagination, was associated with stories of gold mines, strange beasts, and tattooed 'men of Ind', some of whom had already been brought back to London. Some of these 'travellers' tales' are reflected in *The Tempest* (examples may be found in Act II :ii: 31, 'there would this monster *make* a man' . . . ; Act III: iii: 22 ('unicorns'); Act III: iii: 47, 'men Whose heads stood in their breasts', etcetera).

No doubt many of the prospective colonists had dreams of discovering gold in limitless quantity; but Marlowe himself was a realist, and as well-informed about Virginia as it was possible to be, in those times of slow communications. He could have learned a great deal from Thomas Hariot, including information about the dependability, or otherwise, of the Indians—the natives Manteo and Wanchese, brought back to England in 1584, had been surprisingly frank on this subject, speaking of the cunning and treachery practised by their fellow tribesmen.

The ever-industrious Hariot had devoted a considerable amount of time to compiling a vocabulary and phonetic alphabet of the Algonkian language. Bearing in mind Marlowe's known linguistic abilities, it would have been quite in character for him to have prepared for his visit to Virginia by familiarising himself with the language of the Indians.



## THE SPANISH CONSPIRACY

There is now a good deal of evidence to indicate that there was at this time a Spanish (Catholic) conspiracy against England's newly-established Virginian colony.

In addition to their vastly profitable empire in Central and South America, the Spanish laid claim to the whole of North America, which they called Florida; they had therefore not been pleased to hear of English (and Protestant) plans to colonise Virginia. New evidence is emerging concerning a number of plots which were aimed at the destruction of the Jamestown settlement, in the hope of extinguishing the newly-born colony at its inception.

As Ivor Noel Hume relates in his book *The Virginia Adventure*, the only known map showing the exact location of the Jamestown fort was discovered among papers in a Spanish archive! Evidently this information had been procured by a Spanish spy, under the direction of the Spanish ambassador to England, Don Pedro de Zunega. Zunega's surreptitious activities, and his hostile reports to Madrid, are now being re-examined in the light of a new theory concerning the many unexplained deaths at Jamestown in 1607. This thesis provides a full explanation for the sudden high mortality, the symptoms of the colonists' illnesses being consistent with arsenic poisoning, almost certainly attributable to agents of Catholic Spain.<sup>5</sup> The suggestion was originally made by pathologist Dr. Frank Hancock, Medical Director of Labcorp, in Virginia, and featured in a Channel 4 Television Documentary, *The Jamestown Massacre*.

There is evidence that the Spanish had even succeeded in subverting members of the Privy Council, for it was discovered after the death of Secretary of State Robert Cecil, in 1612, that he had been receiving a pension from Spain; Cecil appears to have been working for the Spanish from as early as 1607.

It is therefore possible that, hearing of Marlowe's plan to visit Virginia, a senior member of the Virginia Company, perhaps the Earl of Southampton, secretly commissioned Marlowe, as an experienced

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5. See Appendix Four, The Spanish Conspiracy

intelligence agent, to investigate the true circumstances and condition of the Colony. This would be a commission which the playwright would have felt obliged to accept, given his debt of gratitude to his patrons and protectors, many of whom, as we have seen, were senior members of the Virginia Company. If Marlowe was indeed entrusted with such a mission, it would clearly be prudent, for security reasons, to ask him to report back in person, since the despatch of a written report would incur the risk of sensitive information falling into the wrong hands.

These are matters for future research, but what is certain is that Marlowe's experiences on the *Sea Venture* would have a profound impact on his life and work, culminating in the writing of *The Tempest*. We will be returning presently to the eventful voyage of the *Sea Venture*; but first we should see whether that play has any more evidence to offer concerning Marlowe's presence on board the Flagship.



## ARRIVAL IN VIRGINIA

The survivors of *Sea Venture* reached Jamestown in their two pinnaces, the 'Patience' and the 'Deliverance', on the 24th of May 1610—almost a year late. But any celebration of their safe arrival must have been muted with sadness at what they now encountered; the settlement was in a chaotic condition, with many dead from starvation and disease, or killed by the Indians. This state of affairs was no doubt a major shock to the weary survivors of the shipwreck; as prospective colonists, they must have been appalled at the extent of the problems now facing them.

What were the underlying causes of the crisis in Jamestown? And why did such terrible adversity fall upon its inhabitants in the winter of 1609? We should briefly consider the background to the disaster.

First and foremost is the fact that, for many years, distrust had been steadily increasing between colonists and natives; certainly, by 1609, the indigenous tribes were no longer in such awe of Europeans. Since their first arrival in Virginia, the English adventurers had committed a sequence of needless blunders—an early example was Sir Richard Grenville's reckless and impulsive destruction of the Indian village of Aquascagoz, in June 1585. Such ill-considered acts always left a bitter legacy of hostility and suspicion.

So far as the Jamestown settlement is concerned, from the beginning there were many serious difficulties facing its inhabitants, and some of the underlying causes are only now coming to light. We have already considered the strong evidence regarding a Spanish conspiracy, which led to the arsenic poisonings of 1607. This cruel assault had nevertheless failed to uproot the Colony.

Unfortunately for the beleaguered English settlers at Jamestown, the years 1607-1610 were years of drought in Virginia (as has been recently established by means of dendrochronology). From the earliest days, obtaining sufficient food had been the most intractable problem. The colonists were astonishingly badly equipped, and

lacked even basic agricultural skills; as a result, they relied much too heavily on the Indians for their food supplies, often stealing what could not be bought, so that their constant demands became a serious threat and an unwanted burden to the native inhabitants.

Further antagonism arose from the fact that the Europeans brought with them lethal diseases such as measles and smallpox, to which the indigenous peoples had no resistance.

Relations with the Indians had worsened, and, in the end, had broken down completely; cruel atrocities had been inflicted by both sides. This breakdown in relations between colonist and Indian forms part of the background to *The Tempest*, for the 'salvage' Caliban is clearly based upon an American Indian (one of the 'men of Ind', *The Tempest* II: ii: 61), and Caliban's behaviour resembles that of the tribesmen—initially friendly and co-operative, and in awe of the newcomers; later embittered, disillusioned and treacherous (with the encouragement of Stephano and Trinculo, Caliban plots an insurrection, the murder of the 'Lord' of the isle, Prospero).

The arrival of the remaining seven ships of the *Sea Venture* fleet, and a further 350 emigrants, in August 1609, had only made the situation worse; most of the fleet's food stocks had been spoiled on the journey, with the result that there was now even less food to go around. In the absence of their appointed commanders (all of whom had been on the *Sea Venture*), the colony had descended into anarchy. To quote the words of William Strachey:

'the broken remainder . . . made a greater shipwracke in the Continent of Virginia, by the tempest of Dissention: every man over-valuing his own worth, would be a Commander: every man under-prizing another's value, denied to be commanded.'

The famine had returned in the winter of 1609-10, and many had died; the days had been spent in a desperate search for food, foraging for acorns and berries; but the hostility of the Indians meant that no-one could forage in safety or leave the immediate vicinity of Jamestown. This was a period of misery which the colonists called 'the starving time'; a passage in *The Tempest* recalls their meagre subsistence diet, for Prospero threatens Ferdinand:

'Thy food shall be  
The fresh-brook mussels, wither'd roots and husks  
Wherein the acorn cradled' (I: ii:458).

By this time, the Indians' attacks had become much more frequent; not long before Marlowe's arrival, the local Chieftain had massacred thirty of the colonists, and Marlowe may himself have witnessed the cruel 'sacrifice' of another unfortunate individual, later related by William Strachey (these facts may help to explain the unfavourable portrayal of Caliban in *The Tempest*). By the Spring of 1610, the Jamestown colonists had been forced into virtual imprisonment within the bounds of their fort. The isolated settlement was now in a most desperate predicament, their only consolation the faint hope that help might one day arrive from England.

The arrival of the two hand-built pinnaces from Bermuda, at the end of May, brought only temporary respite; the ships were carrying much-needed food supplies, but these provisions were soon exhausted. It did not take long for the newly-arrived Lieutenant-General, Sir Thomas Gates, to realise that the Colony could not be saved. Within just a few days, he reluctantly reached the conclusion that Jamestown would have to be abandoned.

The only practical course would be for all the colonists to re-embark and set out on the voyage back to England, first making their way North to the fishing fleets at Newfoundland. There were four pinnaces available (including the two hand-built in Bermuda, which were of doubtful seaworthiness); in these vessels they would begin their long journey home. This being resolved upon, the colonists packed up their belongings and embarked, then sailed downstream towards the Atlantic shore.

Twenty-four hours later, the little flotilla was assembled in Chesapeake Bay, preparing to brave the ocean again; and they were almost ready to set off, when, at this critical moment, a new supply fleet arrived, bringing more colonists and the new Governor-General, Lord De La Warr (after whom the State and River of Delaware are now named). The Governor-General was enraged to discover that Jamestown had been abandoned; he promptly reversed Gates' decision, and

forced the settlers to return immediately to their huts in Jamestown, and to reinstate the settlement.

Inevitably, this meant that Marlowe's plans also had to change; he would be obliged to remain in Virginia for a while longer. Over the next few weeks, De La Warr introduced a strict new penal code, and gradually he succeeded in setting the Colony back on its feet.



During the months of June and July of 1610, the Jamestown colonists were mainly occupied in unloading the supply ships; once this task was completed, the fleet would be preparing to return to England, and it transpired that Captain Newport and Sir Thomas Gates would be leaving also. This would have presented Marlowe with his first opportunity to return to England, an opportunity which he would surely have wished to take, for there might not be another vessel making the Atlantic crossing for many weeks.

What in fact would the playwright's plans have been at this time? And is it conceivable that he actually stayed on in Virginia? While this does remain a theoretical possibility, there are a number of considerations in favour of an early return to England.

Firstly, we considered earlier the possibility that Marlowe may have been secretly commissioned, by a senior member of the Virginia Company, to check on conditions in the Colony. Such a commission would be consistent with Marlowe's contacts with the leading figures in the Virginia Company, particularly his friendship with the Earl of Southampton. As we have seen, the new Colony was not without its enemies, and there is strong evidence of a Spanish-Catholic conspiracy against this unwelcome English (and Protestant) expansion into the New World. If this hypothesis is correct, then for reasons of security Marlowe would have been required to report back in person, and presumably he would have wished to avoid further delay.

Secondly, the playwright had now been absent from England, and from his friends, for more than a year—presumed drowned—and he would surely have been very concerned about the safety and well-

being of his friend and Patron, Sir Thomas Walsingham—and, in particular, the question of how the latter had come to terms with the news of the loss of the *Sea Venture*.

Finally, as a dramatist and a man of the theatre, albeit 'behind the scenes', Marlowe would presumably have wished to continue with the creative work which had always been at the heart of his being, writing new plays and completing unfinished projects which he had left behind, including perhaps his notes for *King Henry VIII* (completed around 1613). A decision to remain in Virginia would have forced the playwright to risk the loss of his manuscripts on the dangerous Atlantic crossing.

In the remote Virginia Colony, moreover, there would have been many practical difficulties hindering his work, not least the shortage of books and writing materials; and it is likely that, during the three-day sea-storm and shipwreck, the playwright had lost the few books he had with him (Strachey's account informs us that much of the passengers' luggage—'many a Trunke and Chest'—had been thrown overboard to lighten the ship, and he adds the rueful comment that he himself had 'suffered no meane losse'.) Furthermore, the troubled atmosphere in the Jamestown Colony—at this time engaged in a struggle for its very survival—would have been a further disincentive.

In my view, this combination of circumstances would have drawn Marlowe back to England at his earliest opportunity. This was presented by the departure of Captain Gabriel Archer's ship *The Blessing*, which sailed from Jamestown on the 20th of July 1610, with Sir Thomas Gates and Christopher Newport on board (the ship was also carrying William Strachey's *True Reportory*).

If this analysis is correct, the duration of Marlowe's stay in Virginia was approximately seven weeks. Doubtless he had originally intended to stay for much longer—but the shipwreck, and the enforced ten-months stay in Bermuda, obliged him to change his plans.

Could *The Tempest* have been written in Virginia, or during an ocean voyage? This does remain a theoretical possibility. Unlike

many of the 'Shake-speare' plays, *The Tempest* does not depend on extensive use of classical sources or historical works, such as Holinshed's *Chronicles*. As for the other late plays, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*, these are all notoriously difficult to date with any certainty, especially as earlier versions of these plays may have existed. *Pericles* and *Cymbeline* were probably written before the poet's departure; and *The Winter's Tale* on the other hand has only one primary source, Robert Greene's *Pandosto*, which Marlowe could have had in his possession in Virginia. We do know that *The Winter's Tale* was performed in May 1611, when Simon Forman saw the play at the Globe; this would be consistent with our proposed date for Marlowe's return, for his arrival in September 1610 would have given him a period of about seven months in which to write the play.

#### MARLOWE'S RETURN TO ENGLAND

The news of the tragic loss of the *Sea Venture* had reached England before the end of 1609; there, naturally, everyone believed that the wrecked flagship had sunk, with the loss of all on board . . . and the most devastating news, to those who knew the secret, was that the 'Ever-Living Poet' must have drowned also . . . and this is precisely what Thomas Walsingham must have concluded. The poet's loyal friend of so many years must have been overwhelmed with grief at this cruel turn of events.

When Captain Newport, Sir Thomas Gates and his passengers (Marlowe among them) reached Plymouth in September 1610, their totally unexpected return was greeted with astonishment and great rejoicing; the news spread rapidly, generating intense interest in the extraordinary story of the shipwreck and the castaways' strange experiences in the 'Devil's Isles'.

Rumours of the safe return of some survivors of the *Sea Venture* would soon have filtered through to the still-grieving Thomas Walsingham, giving rise to sudden hopes and renewed fears about the survival of his dear friend and protégé. Did the disguised playwright now contrive to get a message through to Walsingham? Or did he just turn up one day near Scadbury Manor, his Patron's home?

Whatever the setting, there must have been a very emotional reunion; we can imagine the great joy of Walsingham and his friends at having their almost-drowned friend, the 'ever-living poet', returned to them—delivered, for the second time, from premature death.

'There might you have beheld one joy crown another . . . it seemed, sorrow wept to take leave of them, for their joy waded in tears.' (*The Winter's Tale* V: ii: 47)

