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THE DISCOVERY OF DRAKE'S "PLATE OF BRASSE" OF 1579

By J. B. BREBNER

In spite of very successful efforts by Queen Elizabeth and her advisers to suppress the detailed records of Francis Drake's piratical circumnavigation of the earth, during the years 1577 to 1580, contemporary public demand for particulars had to be satisfied in some fashion. Hakluyt therefore inserted six unnumbered leaves of narrative in the 1589 edition of *The Principall Navigations* to provide a picturesque account, and this had to serve until 1628, when the much more circumstantial *The World Encompassed* appeared in print under the patronage of Drake's nephew, compiled from the notes of Chaplain Francis Fletcher. Since that time some additional source-materials have been discovered and a great deal of intelligent effort has been exerted in order to fill out the story. In 1926 Henry R. Wagner published a most satisfactory general account,¹ and since that time Professor E. G. R. Taylor has demonstrated conclusively that Drake planned to investigate the South Pacific and then break into the Portuguese monopoly of the spice trade at the Moluccas.²

In spite of all this interest, no one has known for certain where it was on the Pacific shore of North America that Drake spent five weeks repairing his ship and recuperating after his carnival of piracy. It was clearly in the vicinity of San Francisco, but it seemed incredible that if he had entered the Golden Gate no mention would have survived of the tempting waterway of San Francisco and San Pablo Bays and the Sacramento River, so like a corridor into the North-west Passage. Trinidad Bay, Bodega Bay, Tomales Bay, and Bolinas Bay had their claimants, but on the strength of Davidson's researches,³ most scholars believed that Drake's Bay, inside Point Reyes about thirty-five miles north of the Golden Gate, was the site. The next most likely location seemed to be Bolinas Bay under Mount Tamalpais and nearer the entrance to San Francisco Bay.

For many years Professor H. E. Bolton of the University of California has been discussing Drake's visit with his students at Berkeley and reminding them that, before he left, Drake put up a brass plate naming and claiming New Albion for Elizabeth and that he fastened in the plate a silver sixpence bearing the queen's likeness. Half in earnest and half in jest, he urged them to cross the bay to beautiful Marin County and find the plate or sixpence.

Early in February, 1937, Mr. Beryle Shinn, a young store clerk from Oakland, approached Bolton about an inscribed brass plate, about 5 x 8 inches and an eighth of an inch thick, which he had picked up in Marin County in late June or early July of 1936, thinking that he might use it to repair a sprung door on his car. He took it home, where he and friends rubbed away enough of the encrustment on the plate to decipher the name

¹*Sir Francis Drake's Voyage around the World* (San Francisco, 1926).

²For a summary see W. J. Harte in *History*, new series, XX, March, 1936, 348-53.

³G. C. Davidson, *Identification of Sir Francis Drake's Anchorage on the Coast of California in the Year 1579* (California Historical Society Papers, part 3, San Francisco, 1890).

"Francis Drake", whereupon someone suggested that Professor Bolton might be interested in seeing it. Shinn was not a student and his delay of over seven months demonstrated his ignorance of the possible value of his discovery.

Bolton's immediate concern was to secure the plate for the University and State of California rather than have it fall to some wealthy individual or serve as advertising for some hotel or railway company. He appealed to Allen L. Chickering, president of the California Historical Society, who recruited a group of friends in San Francisco to buy the plate. Shinn never asked or set a price for his discovery and the San Francisco group satisfied themselves that he was not a party to a hoax. Bolton argued that the plate itself, with its notches for spikes and its jagged hole with flanges to hold a sixpence, and the inscription, which exactly fitted the general description of Drake's visit and of the setting-up of a plate given by Fletcher, made it extremely likely that the discovery was an authentic one. Chickering's group paid Shinn \$3,500 for the plate and the whole story was made public at a luncheon on April 6, 1937. The California Historical Society on that day issued an elaborate and beautifully printed booklet containing Bolton's address, some supporting materials, good maps, and fine illustrations.⁴

It is hardly necessary to add that this publication has been, and will continue to be, closely studied by interested scholars and that controversy concerning it will be vigorous for some time. But announcement of the discovery had another kind of effect as well. Letters and telephone messages began pouring in about all kinds of discoveries which the tellers thought might be related to the plate. An ancient vessel had been excavated here, an English brass ship's bell was said to be there, there were remnants of a stone fort at such and such a place, and extensive relics of an Indian village at another. Much of all this was irrelevant, but two discoveries bore very directly on the situation in hand.

Bolton's telephone rang late on the night after the announcement and his caller announced that he had picked up the missing sixpence some years before near Bolinas Bay. He was a painter who found many of his subjects in Marin County. Bolton hurried down to his home only to be presented with an almost unworn Elizabethan silver coin of 1573, but a threepence instead of a sixpence! This discovery pretty well disposed of the possibility that Shinn had found the plate *in situ*. He had picked it up on a rocky little hillock about four or five hundred yards west of the road which cuts across the base of the San Quentin Peninsula, well inside the northern section of San Francisco Bay. This situation was close to a bay and a creek mouth which would have been a suitable refuge for Drake, but Bolton had been careful to point out that the Indians might easily and naturally have carried the plate there from its original position on the outer coast.

Almost immediately a still more surprising revelation came from a San Francisco banker named Leon Bocqueraz, who sent word to Chickering that his chauffeur had found the plate in 1933 over near Drake's Bay. Bocqueraz had been hunting at Laguna Ranch in that vicinity and

⁴*Drake's Plate of Brass* (California Historical Society Special Publication no. 13, San Francisco, 1937).

his waiting chauffeur, William Caldeira, had picked up the plate at a spot about four miles from where Davidson had argued that Drake had landed. Caldeira showed the plate to the weary Bocqueraz, they even deciphered a little of the lettering on the plate, and it was tossed into the back of the car. Bocqueraz forgot the matter, however, and Caldeira, deciding that it was unimportant, threw the plate away one day along the road near San Quentin. Both men distinctly remembered the jagged hole for the sixpence. Yet Caldeira could not have thrown the plate to the place where Shinn found it. At least one other person, therefore, must have handled the plate between 1933 and 1936. There ought to be a moral or two for historians and antiquarians in this fantastic tale.

Those who read Bolton's address will find that he does not subscribe absolutely to the authenticity of the plate. His position might fairly be described as leaving the task of disproof to others. Shinn, who alone profited by the discovery, had clearly not planned a hoax. The modest size and rough, irregular character of the plate, just the sort of fragment which an anxious armourer sergeant, with a long journey ahead of him, might have grudgingly given to his commander; the lettering, crudely and hastily inscribed with a cold chisel; the extensive weathering of the plate; and the quite subtle correspondence of its inscription with Fletcher's narrative made for a strong presumption of authenticity.

The doubts which have arisen are connected with the orthography, the phrasing, and the spelling of the inscription. All of these matters were in a transitional state in 1579, but somehow or other the inscription gives the impression of a relatively modern statement rather curiously "antiqued". No doubt palaeographers are going to raise all the moot points—the use of "i" instead of "y", the absence of the "y" substitute for "th", the spelling of "her" with two r's, the scattering of extra e's, the phrasing of the salutation and the date, *etc.*, *etc.* There seem to be two ways to settle these doubts pretty conclusively, however, and at the beginning of May arrangements were being made to adopt them.

In the first place, modern metallurgists can carry out extremely close analysis, both of metals and of their oxidation. They could apparently in this case demonstrate whether the brass of the plate has the same principal constituents and impurities as sixteenth-century English or Iberian brass. Even more important in the problem of a possible hoax, they could approximately measure the age of the heavy oxidation on the plate. In the second place, a great deal can be learned from microscopical examination of inscriptions, both as to the graving tool and as to the age of the weathering on the edges of the cuts. If and when such examinations are made by the accepted experts in these methods, and if their decisions assign plate *and* inscription to the sixteenth century, the vagaries of phraseology and spelling can be put down to some eccentric in Drake's company.

Meanwhile no one, perhaps least of all Bolton, is going to take a decided stand. California, like the rest of the world, has had its share of historical fakes. There have always been mischievous persons who love to create mysteries even at no profit to themselves and even when the items causing the mystery might not be discovered within their life-times.

Perhaps, therefore, the best way to conclude this brief communication is to reprint the inscription so that members of this Association may puzzle over it while the experts do their work.

BEE IT KNOWNE VNTO ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS
IVNE 17: 1579

BY THE GRACE OF GOD AND IN THE NAME OF HERR
MAIESTY QVEEN ELIZABETH OF ENGLAND AND HERR
SVCESSORS FOREVER I TAKE POSSESSION OF THIS
KINGDOME WHOSE KING AND PEOPLE FREELY RE-
SIGNE THEIR RIGHT AND TITLE IN THE WHOLE LAND
VNTO HERR MAIESTIES KEEPEING NOW NAMED BY
ME AN TO BEE KNOWNE VNTO ALL MEN AS NOVA
ALBION.

FRANCIS DRAKE

Hole for
Silver
Sixpence