

# The Canadian Landscape and its Inhabitants in John Davis's Account of his Second and Third Exploratory Journeys (1586–1587)

BOGLÁRKA BEREI

## Introduction

Early contact stories would often report bloody conflict between European explorers and North-American natives. Somehow, violence was always part of the confrontation between European explorers and Aborigines, especially the Inuit in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Naively, one might think that the intruders, in this case the European explorers, would always bear the blame of all these bloody encounters. However, this is not necessarily always the case, with several historical examples of indigenous people initiating bloodshed for no apparent reason – but the point I want to make in this essay is that even if the reason was not always apparent, it is not difficult to find out. Again, there were also exploratory journeys where everything went without a hitch in the beginning, but then after a while things began to go awry.<sup>1</sup>

John Davis's three voyages of exploration to Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) and Qikiqtaaluk (Baffin Island) with his crew fits within the characterisation given above. In the present paper, I would like to give an account of the navigator's voyages, laying the accent on the two later voyages, because not only do we find fascinating anthropological observations on the needs and habits of the indigenous peoples of the western coast of Greenland and Baffin Island, but also, for the first time in history, we can read in detail about Inuit religious customs as recorded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by John Davis. He was a person who not only contributed to the history of mankind through his voyages of exploration but also through his important and interesting works. One of these is *The worldes hydrographical discription*, a book of geography (1595), from which the reader could draw the conclusion that the world is inhabitable and inhabited in all its zones. This is nothing new today, but at that time it was a great discovery, because according to Ptolemaic geographical conceptions, the equatorial zone around the Earth was a hot and therefore inhabitable zone, while the northern and southern cold zones were also regarded as just as uninhabitable. So this work was important in disproving the ancient *oikoumenē* theory. Another important work of his is *The seaman's*

---

<sup>1</sup> The classic English survey of the early contact history between the Inuit and European explorers is Oswalt: Eskimos and Explorers... For a Hungarian summary, see Vassányi: Szellemhívók és áldozárok..., 13–30.

*secrets* (1595), which is a practical illustrated guide for safe coastal navigation, an ancient-and-modern technique of sailing.<sup>2</sup>

But my source text here is Davis's or other crew members' own diaries.<sup>3</sup> Regarding the text, we perceive that the authors strive for great accuracy throughout their texts. They give an hour-by-hour accurate description to mark certain particular events, but there are other times when they skip several days or even weeks in time. I would like to draw my readers' attention to the fact that early modern logbooks often do not tell us the exact location a sailor visited because calculating especially the longitudinal coordinates was much more difficult than it is today. What is certain is that Davis visited both Baffin Island and Greenland on all three of his voyages. I think it is also important to point out that the contact Davis had with the aboriginal inhabitants of Greenland (all of his journeys took place before the 1605 Danish reappropriation and later resettlement of the island) is equally significant to us today, since Davis's crew had visited Greenland before they landed on the North American coast, and so they arrived in what is modern day Canada with prior experience of the indigenous people of Greenland. We can also say that the two Inuit cultures (Kalaallit and Inuktitut) were probably very similar and had originated in ancient times from the same place – Western Siberia and what is today Central Arctic Canada.

### A short review of the first voyage

On their first voyage, in 1585, as soon as Davis and his crew set sail problems arose not far from the English coast, and they were obliged to anchor at the Scilly Islands.<sup>4</sup> John Jane (sometimes spelt John Janes), who was a merchant serving Davis's uncle, M. William Sanders, reported on their first voyage. The sources were first collected and published by the famed Elizabethan English geographer Richard Hakluyt (cca 1552–1616) in his grandiose *The Principall Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation*.<sup>5</sup> The surviving reports tell us that Davis took musicians with him on his first journey.<sup>6</sup> After the stop at the Scillies, they reached Greenland, which they refer to only as the “Land of Desolation.”<sup>7</sup> Later, they arrived in what is thought to be the area of present-day Nuuk, where they first encountered the indigenous people of Greenland. The description tells us that the first contact did not go badly. At first the natives made a lamentable noise to raise attention, so Davis would later send the four musicians ashore and at that point, the Kalaallit started to dance and make friendly signs. This also demonstrates that, in the beginning, a friendly expression of

---

<sup>2</sup> See detailed bibliographical data for these two works in the Bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> All the relevant original documents were published by Markham: *A Life of John Davis, the Navigator...* – I am utilizing his edition. See also Markham: *The Voyages and Works of John Davis...* for a historical background.

<sup>4</sup> Markham: *The Voyages and Works of John Davis*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> London: 1589, 776–792.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

affection could count for a lot. On that note, the first journey resulted in barter trade with the Kalaallit and, later, a safe return home without intercultural incidents or clashes.

## The second voyage

John Davis's second voyage of exploration took place in 1586. His two ships departed from the port of Dartmouth on May 7<sup>th</sup>. The explicit aim of the voyage was to find the Northwest Passage.<sup>8</sup>

Firstly, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June they hit a land which most likely was Cape Farewell at the southern tip of Greenland. According to the report, the beach was so icy that there was no chance of landing, so they continued their journey. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of the same month, among heavy storms they hit land again, which Davis remembered, because they had been there the previous year. "And so much the rather, because the yeere before I had bene in the same place, and founde it very convenient for such a purpose, well stored with flote woode, and possessed by a people of tractable conversation."<sup>9</sup> Concerning the habit of the native people, the writer, this time Davis himself, says men here are easy to approach or to influence in behaviour. In geographical terms, the area is described as a place with high altitude mountains, there are beautiful straits and bays. Later on, the indigenous people were approaching them in their canoes, shouting and crying loudly. They were sending signals to the English ship, because they recognised some people who had been there the previous year. There were eighteen of them, and Davis gave each of them a knife as a gift but expected nothing in return.<sup>10</sup> This is, I think, one of the reasons why Davis was initially successful because he always tried to take a friendly and people-oriented approach. His tactics for getting to know the aboriginal inhabitants are not strictly adapted to a mercantile point of view; he did not expect anything in return. As far as the Kalaallit are concerned, they brought the English seal skins as well as deer skins, Arctic hares, and salmon skins. Further on, Davis decides that he would like to take a closer look inside the land, but this must be done in such a manner that no one is harmed in any way and under no circumstances should any of the natives be killed.

My selfe, still desirous to have a farther search of this place, sent one of the shipboates to one part of the land, and my selfe went to another parte, to searche for the habitation of this people, with straight commaundement that there should be no injurie offered to any of the people, neither any gunne shot.<sup>11</sup>

This, again, shows that Davis was keen to avoid confrontation. They found tents covered with sealskins and lots of dried fish. I find it interesting to mention that they also found bags

---

<sup>8</sup> Markham: *The Voyages and Works of John Davis*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

with tiny images cut into wood – probably a reference to objects of religious character. Davis also mentions that the Kalaallit were very good at wrestling and very nimble.

Later, in July, forty natives volunteered to assist them to get wood for the captain of the *Mermaid*, one of the English ships, and the explorers found a grave covered only by a seal skin. Interestingly, it had a cross on it, so it was likely a Christian grave. “This fourth of July the Master of the *Mermaid* went to certaine Islands to store himselfe with wood, where he found a grave with divers buried in it, onely covered with seale skinnes, having a crosse laid over them.”<sup>12</sup>

Afterwards, Davis describes a ritual act, so to speak, when the natives were about to trade with Davis and his crew again: They held their hands towards the sun, shouted *Ylyaoute* in a low voice, and struck their breast, evidently promising, and asking for, safety.<sup>13</sup> Davis concludes from this “Oath of the Sun” that the natives are very easy to deal with, free from deceitfulness. He continues to discuss their religious beliefs by claiming that “they are idolaters,” moreover, says he, they are “witches,” and they have huge collections of “idols,” which they take with themselves everywhere, even into their canoes, and worship them. In addition to these, they operate with many varieties of “enchantments,” for less important purposes.<sup>14</sup> It can be said that this is the very first factual comment on Inuit religion in world history – the very first empirical statements, although not the very first question raised concerning Inuit religion (because that was put by English explorer Martin Frobisher [†1594] in the report of his first journey to Baffin Island in 1576).<sup>15</sup>

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1586, Davis and his crew happened upon an abandoned Kalaallit encampment, where they found many small wooden figures, which they concluded could easily be idols of some kind. They also saw carved “spirit statues,” which could be further religious objects. Then we find a description of witchcraft and sacrificial offerings. A native shaman first gave a long speech to the English, then he lit a fire (by rubbing) and threw some kind of grass on it, saying several words and making strange gestures. He threw some other things on it, which were probably supposed to be sacrificial items. Davis and the crew observed this, while the shaman wanted Davis, the captain, to go into the smoke of the sacrificial ritual. So the native people wanted to perform a ritual on him or with him or for him. The captain absolutely refused it and wanted no part of it, so he grabbed one of the natives and pushed him into the fume and ordered one of his companions to stomp the fire out and throw it into the sea. So they did in order “to show them that we did contemne their sorcery.”<sup>16</sup>

Afterwards, we receive from Davis a general introduction to the everyday life of the indigenous people, their diet, their items and their language. Their dietary habits are generally ‘to eat raw fish, drink salt water and enjoy eating grass and ice’ – we must handle

---

<sup>12</sup> Markham: *The Voyages and Works of John Davis*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> See Anonymous: *A Trve Discovrse of the late voyages of discoverie...*

<sup>16</sup> Markham: *The Voyages and Works of John Davis*, 19.

this information with reserve.<sup>17</sup> As far as weapons are concerned the native people only had darts, bows and arrows and slings, made of bone or stone. Fishing was carried out by making a net from the whale's fin and using it to catch the fish.<sup>18</sup> The aboriginal language, remarks Davis, is spoken very softly and contains a lot of throat sounds. On page 21 in Markham's above-mentioned edition, we find the first Inuit words listed in universal history. For the sake of demonstration, here are a few examples from the original collection.

*Kesinyoh* – Eat some.

*Maslycouyte* – Musike.

*Aob* – The sea.

*Yliaoute* – I meane no harm.

*Ponameg* – A boat

*Sawygmeg* – A knife

*Aoh* – Iron

*Lethicksaneg* – A seale skinne

*Maatuke* – Fish.

*Tucktodo* – A fogge.

*Sasobneg* – A bracelet.

*Sugnacoon* – A coat.

*Ugnake* – A tongue.

*Macuah* – A beard.

*Pignagogah* – A threed.

*Quoy sah* – Give it to me.<sup>19</sup>

Afterwards, Davis and his crew realize that the natives want to get iron at any price, even by stealing from the European intruders. In fact, these are the events that created the conflicts. The description reveals that not only was the iron stolen but also some cables (hawsers) that belonged to the boat. The crew started complaining about the inhabitants of the country, saying that the captain's friendly intercourse with them gave them an inclination to misbehave.<sup>20</sup>

The natives stole their anchors, cut their mooring lines, cut off their boats. Further complaints from the sailors include that they grumble captain Davis that while he left the ship for some business, the crew had been pelted with slings and stones weighing a quarter of a pound. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of July, the sun had hardly set but the natives had already begun to throw stones into the *Moonlight* with slingshots, which hit the deck master, causing him to topple over. This irritated the sailors, and also changed Davis's attitude, because it made him resentful. They then started to follow the natives with their gunboats and shot at them. This was not very successful, as the native people were very fast in their canoes. Davis and his crew wanted their anchor back, but they could not get it, so in exchange they took a hostage (that is, kidnapped an aboriginal man), who later died.<sup>21</sup> In August, they arrived at the Canadian continent, still keeping the significance of the Northwest Passage in mind.<sup>22</sup>

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of September, they landed but their boat was damaged, so they had to go ashore anyway, but first Davis sent five sailors ahead to fish, and they put out the fishing net and left it there all night. The report goes on to explain that one of the natives suddenly emerged from behind the woods and attacked Davis's crew, who were slaughtered, were brutally killed with arrows. After this horrendous occurrence, Davis gives an account of a massive

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 20.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Markham: The Voyages and Works of John Davis, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 23–24.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 28.

storm, which could be expected at this time of the year. As luck would have it, they arrived back in England at the beginning of October, after a stormy and difficult journey.<sup>23</sup>

### The third voyage

Davis' third journey to the Northwest Atlantic took place in May 1587, departing from Dartmouth on the 19<sup>th</sup> of that month, as on his two previous trips. This voyage got off to a rather inauspicious start. One of the boats which was called the Elizabeth, sprang a leak and a great effort was needed to keep it from sinking. A near mutiny aboard one of the ships before they had even reached land added to the disastrous start.<sup>24</sup>

Having arrived at the desired coast on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June, Davis and the crew became aware that at around two o'clock in the morning, the native people approached their pinnace (a smaller sailing ship carried in pieces and put together by the crew on the desirable spot) and broke off the upper two strakes of it, all in an attempt to get iron: "The 20, about two of the clocke in the morning, the Savages came to the Island where our pinnace was built readie to bee launched, and tore the two upper strakes, and caried them away onely for the love of the iron in the boords."<sup>25</sup>

The third journey increasingly uncovered the Inuit fascination with European goods, especially those containing iron. The captain then decided artillery fire was to be the "solution"...

Later, two of the indigenous people at sea began to follow them in rowing vessels (kayaks), and then the logbook records peaceful trade again.<sup>26</sup> The locals, trading various goods of their own, seemed to covet the knives and other metallic objects of the Europeans. The local people clearly valued these opportunities for trade, as this interaction ends with a continued "pursuit" of the English by the natives, lasting three hours.

Trade continued soon after: this time with many more indigenous visitors. Up to 30 locals now traded with the vessels, once again displaying an unwavering desire for metal. For nails, bracelets, and knives, the locals seemed to have been willing to trade apparently essential items of theirs and even their boats.<sup>27</sup> At this time, the English were around the Cumberland Isles and Frobisher Strait.<sup>28</sup>

In August, reserves of water and wood were running low, and the voyage set course for home. Concern also struck that sickness would spread through the ship. During the final weeks of the expedition, they encountered several kinds of animals. Dogs, deer, hares, bears and whales punctuated their travels before finally on the 15<sup>th</sup>, they headed home for England.

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 29–31.

<sup>24</sup> Markham: *The Voyages and Works of John Davis*, 39–40.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 41.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 43.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 44.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 46.

Exactly a month later, on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1587 “giving thanks to God for our safe arrival,” they reached the port of Dartmouth.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

We do not know specifically which parts of the logbook concern Greenland and which Baffin Island but it is a historical fact that Davis visited Baffin Island too. The Inuit cultures of the two islands were certainly very similar, although their languages are now considered to be two separate Inuit languages (Kalaallit and Inuktitut). As for the two journeys, we can say that the second journey contains more descriptions of indigenous customs and observation of the natives, including religious rites, while the third journey involves, unfortunately, more armed confrontations.

The point of this essay has been to explain the causes of such bloody conflicts, and to uncover their apparently unavoidable nature. Now it is certain that it was a matter of life and death for the Inuit to get the iron; while for the European invaders, it was just as important to find the Northwest Passage, because whoever would find it first would likely own half the world. This pressure, on both sides, led to the clashes, despite the fact that most of the time, the Inuit were interested in peaceful trade, and although Davis worked with a largely peaceful approach. In spite of the loss of life involved in the second and third journeys, this chapter – Davis’s explorations – in the contact and conflict history of Greenland and the high Canadian Arctic still was a relatively amicable one, as compared to other episodes.<sup>30</sup>

## Bibliography

Anonymous: *A True Discoverse of the late voyages of discoverie, for the finding of a Passage to Cathaya, by the Northveast, vnder the conduct of Martin Frobisher Generall: Deuided into three Bookes.* At London, Imprinted by Henry Bynnyman..., Anno Domini 1578.

Davis, John: *The seamans secrets deuided into 2. partes, wherein is taught the three kindes of sayling, horizontall, peradoxall [sic!], and sayling vpon a great circle: also an horizontall tyde table for the easie finding of the ebbing and flowing of the tydes, with a regiment newly calculated for the finding of the declination of the sunne, and many other most necessary rules and instruments, not heeretofore set foorth by any. Newly published by Iohn Dausis of Sandrudge... Imprinted at London: By Thomas Dawson, dwelling at the Three Cranes in the Vinetree, 1595.*

Davis, John: *The vvorldes hydrographical discription Wherein is proued not onely by authoritie of writers, but also by late experience of traouellers and reasons of substantiall probabilitie, that the worlde in all his zones clymats and places, is habitable and inhabited, and the seas likewise vniuersally nauigable... whereby appeares that from England there is a short and speedie passage into the South Seas, to China, Molucca, Phillipina, and India, by northely nauigation... Published by*

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 48.

<sup>30</sup> See two case studies of more violent early episodes in Vassányi: *Second Contact: Patterns of “Second Encounters” with the Inuit...*

- I. Daus of Sandrudg by Dartmouth in the countie of Deuon. Anno 1595. Imprinted at London: By Thomas Dawson dwelling at the three cranes in the vinetree, 1595.
- Hakluyt, Richard: The Principall Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English nation, made by Sea or ouer Land, to the most remote and farthest distant Quarters of the earth at any time within the compasse of these 1500 yeeres: Deuided into three seuerall parts, according to the positions of the Regions whereunto they were directed. Imprinted at London by George Bishop and Ralph Newberie, 1589.
- Markham, Albert Hastings: The Voyages and Works of John Davis the Navigator. London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1880.
- Markham, Clements R.: A Life of John Davis, the Navigator, 1550–1605, Discoverer of Davis Straits. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company Publishers, 1889.
- Oswalt, Wendell H.: Eskimos and Explorers. Lincoln, NE: The University of Nebraska Press, 1999.
- Vassányi Miklós: Szellemhívók és áldozárok. Sámánság, istenképzetek, emberáldozat az inuit (eszkimó), azték és inka vallások írásos forrásaiban. ('Conjurers of Spirits and Sacrificial Priests. Shamanism, Pantheon and Human Sacrifice in the Written Sources of the Inuit, Aztec and Inca Religions.') Budapest: L'Harmattan Hungary – Karoli Reformed University, 2017.
- Vassányi, Miklós: "Second Contact: Patterns of 'Second Encounters' with the Inuit in Early Modernity. An Anthropological Analysis of the Cases of Henry Hudson and William Baffin." = J. Nagy – M. Vassányi, eds.: Minorities in Canada. L'Harmattan, Paris–Budapest, 2021, 209–228.