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FROBISHER'S FALSE EL DORADO

By JOEL MARTIN HALPERN

There have been many bogus gold rushes in the history of mining, but one of the most bizarre occurred in the middle of the 16th century. It all started with a few pieces of amphibole, and before it was over this fantastic fiasco had involved the Queen of England, \$3,000,000 and some of the most prominent businessmen in England. In order to understand the various events which led up to the "discovery," it is necessary to know something about the history of this period.

Columbus' discovery was followed by several other voyages of exploration in the latter part of the 15th century. These voyages led, in turn, to numerous others, most of them being made by individuals in search of riches in the Americas or in pursuit of a shorter route to Asia. As the 16th century progressed and the Spanish Empire began to expand rapidly, the British intensified their search for a Northwest Passage. They hoped the discovery of this shorter route to the Orient would increase their power and enable them to compete with Spain on a more equal basis.

One of the most daring Elizabethan navigators who sought to realize this aim was Martin Frobisher. He was born in 1539 and early in his life chose the career of the sea. In 1576, being deprived of his usual occupation of piracy by Queen Elizabeth's friendly gestures to the Spaniards, he decided to undertake a voyage in search of the Northwest Passage.

After receiving the necessary backing of some London Merchants, he set sail on June 7, 1576, with two large ships and a smaller one, his own being manned by a crew of thirty-five. The small ship sank, and one large ship deserted, but Frobisher refused to be discouraged and went on alone. Finally, after an arduous voyage, he sailed into the bay, in the southeast part of Baffin Island (in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago), that now bears his name; he believed it to be part of a strait leading to Asia.

On his return to London the investors,

eager to make a profit out of the voyage, "discovered" that one of the stones collected by a member of the crew was gold ore. They were so convinced that even after three different London goldsmiths found it to be worthless, they found a fourth who declared, after "due tests" that this was indeed gold ore. A new stock company called the Cathay Company was hastily organized, with the Queen subscribing to one-fourth of the stock. Another better-equipped expedition was sent out to seek more of this "gold ore." The remains of these frantic diggings of the fortune-seekers are still visible today in the hillsides of the islands around Frobisher Bay.

Upon their return to England a chosen group of "experts" was designated by the Court to ascertain the exact composition of the ore. They found the ore to be very rich and well worth \$200 a ton, in terms of our present currency. This precious ore was then taken to the dungeons of Bristol Castle where it was secured from theft by four great locks! The reputation of the Cathay Company rose greatly. More money was raised, and the following season a large fleet departed and brought back 1300 tons of the worthless stuff. By this time the true nature of the ore had been discovered, and it was jettisoned along the quay. Recently specimens both of the "ore" dumped in England and from the piles of rocks left by Frobisher and his men in the vicinity of Baffin Bay have been obtained. The results of an analysis of these rocks has proven rather interesting.

One of the rocks turned out to be amphibolite (consisting mainly of amphibole and pyroxene). Upon microscopic examination calcite, sodic plagioclase, biotite, magnetite, ilmentite, titanite, quartz, apatite, garnet and zircon were found in small quantities. Another specimen has been identified as pyroxenite, containing a large amount of augite and some hornblende as well as other minerals. The specimen is sprinkled with

biotite, which gives it a sparkling surface. No pyrite has been found although it may be present in small quantities. The bronzy lustered mica and not the pyrite was probably the basis for the "discovery of gold."

Thus ended one of the most colossal farces in the history of Great Britain. This little tale should surely provide some comfort for anyone who has ever identified a piece of worthless pyrite as

gold or who has sought in vain for hidden riches.

Acknowledgment

I am indebted to Sharat K. Roy's "History and Petrography of Frobisher's 'Gold Ore'", Vol. 7, No. 2 (May 26, 1937), in the GEOLOGICAL SERIES OF THE FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, of which this article is chiefly a summary. The interested reader is referred to it for more detailed information.

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