

**DONALD S. JOHNSON**



# CHARTING THE SEA OF DARKNESS

*The Four Voyages of Henry Hudson*



**“Johnson...recounts Hudson’s growing obsession with locating  
a northwest passage...fascinating.”**

**—Douglas A. Sylva, *The New York Times Book Review***



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Darkness*

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*The Four Voyages of  
Henry Hudson*

DONALD S. JOHNSON



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*Also by Donald S. Johnson*

Cruising Guide to the Coast of Maine, Volume 1

Cruising Guide to the Coast of Maine, Volume 2

Phantom Islands of the Atlantic



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## Preface

How did I come to write about Henry Hudson? Most people know little more about Hudson than that a bay and a river bear his name. That was all I knew, too—until I received a call from Nick Benton, a master rigger and longtime friend.

Nick did the rigging on *Nakomis*, my small schooner, many years ago. Since then he has worked on much larger vessels, including the *Western Union* and *Pride of Baltimore*. In 1989 he was in charge of creating an exact replica of Henry Hudson's ship, the *Halve Maen* (*Half Moon*), and he wanted me to come to Albany, New York, to act as construction director. I couldn't accept, but did agree to spend several weeks as part of a "visiting master craftsmen" program.

During my stay with Nick and his family we had long discussions about the ship and about Henry Hudson. Nick asked, "What was Hudson doing exploring the Chesapeake Bay and the Hudson River when his contract with the Dutch East India Company expressly stated that he was to search for the Northeast Passage to the East Indies, and take *no other route*?" No one came up with a satisfactory answer. I had my own belief, but no solid grounds to support it.

Out of these conversations grew an article on the *Half Moon* and the four voyages of Henry Hudson, which was published in *Maine Coastal News*. Subsequently I came across the evidence needed to back up my conjecture that Henry Hudson was obsessed with finding the Northwest Passage. It was part of his plan to sail in this direction even before he embarked on the 1609 voyage. Bolstered by this new information, the original article grew into the present book.

Just as every explorer is indebted to predecessors whose discoveries pointed the way, so too do I have thanks to pay. I wish to acknowledge John L. Allen for

his insights on cartography and the search for the Northwest Passage, which he shared in a symposium on "The Land of Norumbega," sponsored by the Maine Humanities Council. Thanks also to Toby Mostel, who took the time and patience to read the manuscript and make countless suggestions, corrections, and criticisms. And finally, my gratitude to James Babb and Tom McCarthy, my editors. Undaunted by the size of the task, and with unfailing good humor, they took my rambling discourse and turned it into a book worthy of pride.

At this point it is customary for the author to absolve those who have worked with him from any responsibility for the errors and problems that may be found in the book, and to claim them solely as his own. I don't know when this practice started, but in 1627 Captain John Smith did it in the preface to his *Sea Grammar*. Since I have not seen it expressed better elsewhere, I will let Captain Smith speak for me:

*Honest Readers,*

*If my desire to doe good hath transported mee beyond my selfe, I intreat you excuse me, and take for requitall this rude bundle of many ages observations; although they be not so punctually compiled as I could wish, and it may bee you expect. At this present I cannot much amend them; if any will bestow that paines, I shall thinke him my friend, and honour his endeuors. In the interim accept them as they are, and ponder errors in the balance of good will.*

*Your friend,  
John Smith*

Donald S. Johnson  
Perry, Maine  
August 1992



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## Introduction

Historians have not been kind to Henry Hudson, not through any enmity toward the man or his accomplishments, but evidently through indifference. In the period immediately following Hudson's expeditions (approximately 1611–1615), a flurry of publications on his voyages appeared in Holland. At about the same time, in England, historian Richard Hakluyt collected the manuscript journals of that country's maritime explorers, including Hudson. Hakluyt's *The Principal Navigations* covered a period of 1,500 years of "great traffiques and discoveries," and did much to awaken England's interest in her maritime heritage.

But the Reverend Samuel Purchas, a later compiler, gave us the most information about the life and ventures of Henry Hudson. Purchas took the Hakluyt records and added other relevant documents in his own book, *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas His Pilgrimes*, printed in 1625. Unfortunately, in the few years between the voyages and the publication of the documents, some of Hudson's original writings were lost or destroyed. One of the most important of these was the logbook from his 1609 voyage, when he first visited America, discovered Delaware Bay, and explored the river that now bears his name.

We know less about Henry Hudson's background than we do about that of his great contemporary, William Shakespeare. There are no parish registers, diaries, town deeds, or local accounts to document his life. He was an Englishman who resided in London; he had a wife named Katherine and three sons named Oliver, John, and Richard. Other than that, we can only conjecture that he was the descendent of Henry Hudson the elder, alderman in the city of London in 1555, and that he may have had relatives among the officers of the Mus-



covy Company, an English merchant venture organized for the purpose of finding a northern sea route to China.

Everything we know about Hudson's career took place within a four-year period. On April 19, 1607, before departing on his first voyage in search of a northern passage to China, he took Holy Communion in the church of St. Ethelburge the Virgin, within Bishopsgate, along with ten men of his crew and a boy (presumably his young son, John). On or near June 21, 1611, he died, a victim of treachery and mutiny. During this short time he made four momentous voyages in search of a passage to Asia, journeys that greatly enlarged the geographical knowledge of the world.

It is not only biographical material that is lacking. Though some portraits appeared later, there are no contemporary portraits, paintings, or written descriptions of Hudson's appearance extant to give us an idea of his likeness. Not even in the decorative borders of the many maps that poured forth from the Netherlands during the seventeenth century can an image of Hudson be found.

After his death, nearly two centuries elapsed before further interest in Henry Hudson is documented. In 1809, the New York Historical Society commemorated the 200th anniversary of his 1609 voyage and the discovery of New York. Forty-five years later, the Historical Society of Delaware printed a rejoinder to New York's special claim to Henry Hudson. Its interest in Hudson is explained in the following quote from an address to its members:

*People have been so long accustomed to regard Henry Hudson as the peculiar property of New York, that scarcely anyone dreams of associating his name with the history of Delaware, and very few are aware that in point of time the latter state has prior claim to him as her discoverer. On the 28th of August, 1609, he entered and explored this bay and river, revealing to the world this beautiful region to which your Commonwealth owes its name; whereas the Half Moon (Hudson's ship) did not enter Sandy Hook until the*

*evening of the 3rd of September. New York is accordingly Delaware's younger sister.*

Thereafter, with the exception of two books—one by G.M. Asher, published in 1860, and the other by Llewelyn Powys, published in 1927—interest in Hudson and his voyages appears to die out. Searching the history books on the European discovery of North America, we find the explorations of Henry Hudson largely ignored—a far cry from the admiration Hudson's accomplishments aroused during his time. Captain John Smith wrote, “the bounds of *America* doth stretch many thousand miles: into the frozen partes whereof one Master *Hutson* an English Mariner did make the greatest discoverie of any Christian I knowe of, where he unfortunately died.”

If my only motive for writing this book had been to prevent the achievements of a remarkable man from falling into the brackish backwaters of obscurity, it would have been well worth the effort. But there is another compelling reason for further study of Henry Hudson: His 1609 voyage initiated the Dutch colonization of America and spawned many of our religious, philosophical, and governmental ideals.

Although we are accustomed to hearing about our English heritage and the part English and French colonists played in the struggle for control of New England, Dutch involvement generally is overlooked. However, it was the Union of Utrecht—a proclamation of independence from Spain made in 1579 by seven provinces in the Netherlands—that sparked both the French Revolution and the movement for American independence from England.

The English Bill of Rights, which circumscribed royal power and guaranteed limited freedom of religion, was signed under the reign of the Dutch Prince William III, who became king of England through marriage to Queen Mary II. The precepts of freedom of religion and separation of church and state were incorporated in the Massachusetts Constitution in 1780 and in the American Constitution seven years later. Other legacies of the

Dutch are our free public school system, legal equality of men and women, and a strong mercantile, entrepreneurial spirit.

Henry Hudson's exploits and great geographic discoveries were marked by sheer excitement, adventure, and intrigue. It is difficult to imagine the courage it took for those first voyagers to leave behind familiar lands and set out across the unknown seas in search of a distant, elusive goal. The ships that made these journeys were incredibly small. Hudson's *Half Moon*, only 65 feet long and 17 feet wide, had to contain all the stores, food, and drink to maintain the vessel and its twenty-man crew for a voyage of two months or longer. Conditions aboard were nearly intolerable. The cramped accommodations offered no privacy. The sailor rarely had time to change his clothes—even if he had a second set. The men quickly became infested with lice and infected with typhus, scurvy, and dysentery. Sir Walter Raleigh described the seaman's destiny as: "to endure and suffer . . . from a hard cabin, cold and salt meat (often crawling with maggots), mouldy biscuit, dead beer, wet clothes and want of fire for cooking or warmth." Cabins of privileged guests, or even the master, were "but sluttish dens that breed sickness."

If storms at sea or disease and poisoned food didn't claim the seaman's life, there was another enemy to confront—pirates. Piracy and privateering were rampant during Elizabethan and early Stuart times, and violence at sea, common in Western European waters, carried to North American waters as well. The second half of the sixteenth century and beginning of the seventeenth century were chaotic times in Europe, with most nations engaged in open hostilities. Any ship, be it French, English, Dutch, Spanish, or Portuguese, regardless of allegiances or treaties, was fair game for any other—every vessel was a predator, and every vessel was prey. Privateering was simply considered a form of commercial enterprise. Add to this the anxiety of potential confrontations with "savages" on the distant shore, and one might wonder why anyone would have considered cross-

ing the uncharted sea. That they did is an eloquent testimony to their courage.

Fortunately, most of the source material about Henry Hudson is written in English, eliminating the need for translations. Journals of the voyages are reproduced here as they were written, except that I have taken the liberty of changing archaic phraseology and spelling to enhance readability. Unless there was a specific reason for retaining the original place names, they too have been changed to the present familiar ones. I have also converted distances, originally given in leagues, to their equivalent value in miles.

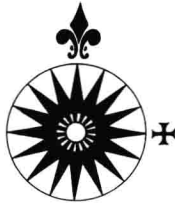
The use of side margin notes, a common practice in seventeenth century books, served as a form of running index. They appear in Samuel Purchas's books, *Purchas His Pilgrimes*. Many of these notes have been retained as Purchas wrote them—but not all. Some seemed redundant and have been deleted; others have been added where further explanation was necessary. All maps and charts, with the exception of the one drawn by Henry Hudson, have been redrawn from reproductions in various atlases of cartography. While this has the great advantage of stripping away all unnecessary detail, thus enabling one to focus attention on the relevant information, it prevents one from seeing the great beauty and full account of history contained in them. For further enjoyment and enlightenment, I urge the reader to seek out the original copies of these maps and charts.

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*Venient annis saecula seris  
Quibus Oceanus vincula rerum  
Laxet, et ingens pateat tellus,  
Tethysque novos detegat orbes:  
Nec sit terris ultima Thule.*

In later years the age shall  
come  
When the Ocean will unloose  
the bonds of nature  
And the vast earth will stretch  
out,  
And the sea will disclose new  
worlds:  
Nor will the globe be utmost  
bound by Thule.  
Seneca: *Medea*, Act II, v. 371.

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*Charting  
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Darkness*

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