

## Thomas James (ca. 1593-ca. 1635)

Although his name is emblazoned on the map of Canada and in the annals of his native Bristol, Thomas James remains a shadowy figure. Even the fact that he was born in Bristol has been questioned, as has the date of his birth. But scholars agree — for the present, at least — that he was probably born about 1593, in Bristol, England. It is likely, too, that he came from an eminent family, and was a wealthy barrister. But the records are too scanty to provide any real insight into the man himself, or into the experiences that might have shaped him.

James emerged from the shadows for only one brief period. In 1631, he was selected by some Bristol merchants to see if there was a passage leading from Hudson's newly discovered bay into the fabled Pacific. After an unsuccessful search (for there was no passage), James wintered near the northeast corner of Charlton Island, and returned to Bristol the following summer. In 1633, James published an account of his expedition: *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage of Captain Thomas James*.

This was received with such enthusiasm that James became a popular figure in London's political and social circles. He did not spend much time in the limelight, however, for he was back at sea within a couple of months. On this occasion, he was commander of the *9th Whelp of the Lion*, one of the royal vessels that were patrolling the Bristol Channel and the Irish Sea in an attempt to suppress the pirates infesting the area. In October of that same year, the Earl of Stafford, Lord Deputy of Ireland, recommended that James be promoted because he was diligent, civil in his conversation, and capable in his profession. But it was not to be. For he died, probably in 1635, while still in his early 40s. He was apparently unmarried, because he left all his worldly goods to his sister. And it is probable, though not certain, that he was buried in the Lord Mayor's Chapel in Bristol.

Although James was a popular and respected figure at the time, he is generally held in rather low esteem today. His initial popularity was undoubtedly related to the fact that he wrote a very lucid book on an interesting and fashionable topic. His journal, after all, was the first book in English to describe a wintering in the Arctic, an experience he described in vivid detail.

In addition to this popular acclaim, based largely on the elegance of his prose and the dramatic qualities of his narrative, James was received with signal respect by the merchants of London, as well as Bristol. For example, they accepted without question his conclusion that a Northwest Passage did not exist, except possibly at such a high northern latitude that it would have no commercial value. And this ended the initial phase of arctic exploration in Canada, a phase that started in 1576 when Martin Frobisher sailed the *Gabriel* into Frobisher Bay.

Although both the merchants and the Admiralty were completely satisfied with his performance, the feeling persists that James was not an experienced mariner. This feeling can be traced back to a comment made by Luke Foxe. Foxe, who was exploring Hudson Bay for a group of London merchants, sighted James' ship, the *Henrietta Maria*, on 29 July 1631. After dining with James the following day, Foxe noted in his journal that "he was no seaman." Foxe also criticized James' vessel as being unsuited to the task at hand. As Foxe offers no evidence in support of his opinion of James, we can probably attribute it to personal or political rivalry. But we cannot be sure.

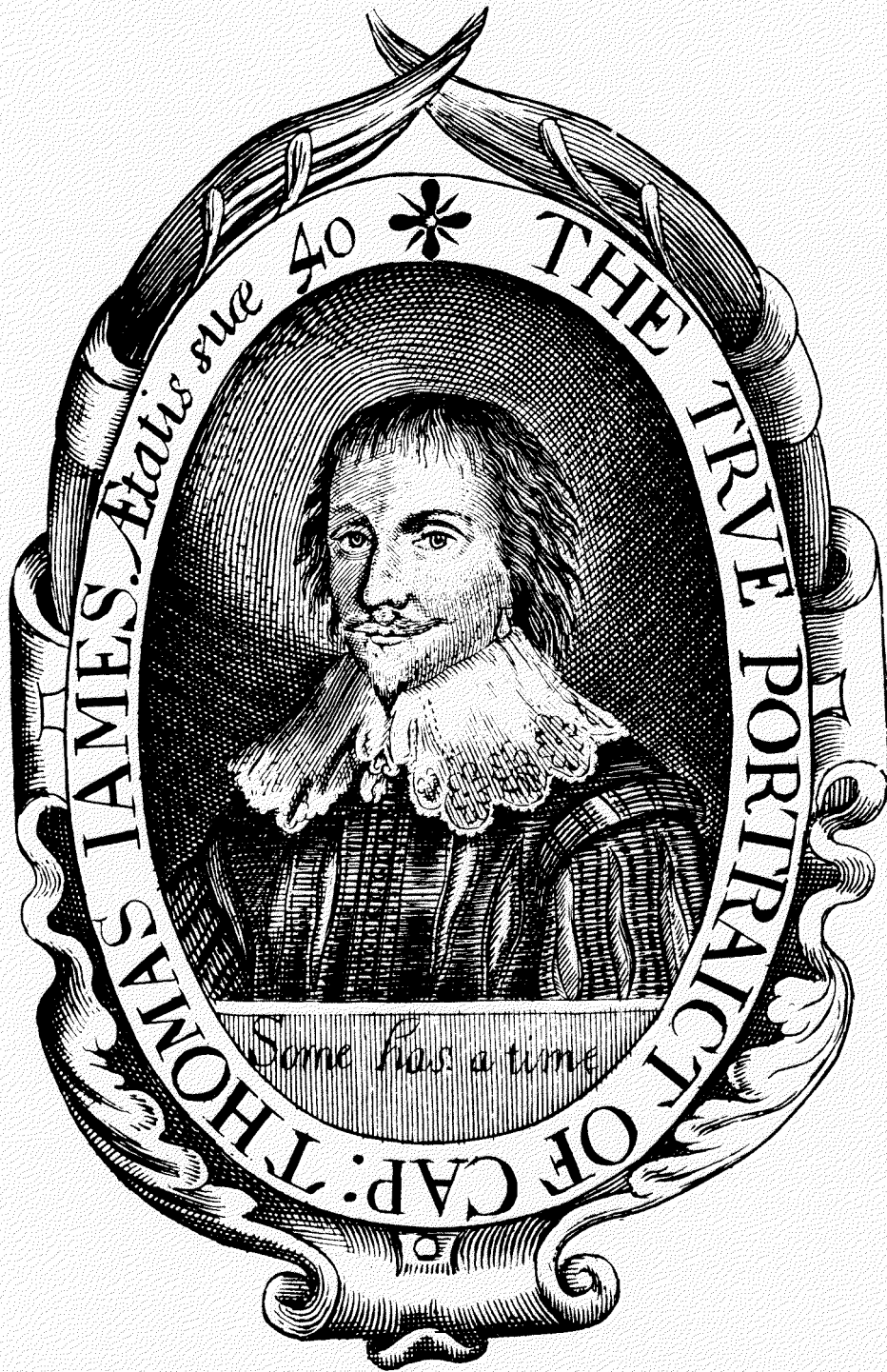
Our uncertainty derives from the fact that James was — and remains — a shadowy figure. We simply do not have enough information on which to base a balanced opinion of the man. I see no reason, however, to doubt his statement that he did have previous experience in arctic navigation, even though he mentioned it only once, and that in a brief, parenthetic comment. We do know, moreover, that he carried a comprehensive list of navigational instruments, all fashioned to his own exacting specifications. This would suggest most strongly that he was acquainted with the latest developments in the theory and practice of navigation, as would his association with Henry Briggs, the Oxford Mathematician.

Thomas James was the fourth explorer to winter in that vast, inland sea; he was preceded by Henry Hudson (1610-11), Thomas Button (1612-13), and Jens Munk (1619-20). If we compare James with his predecessors, he stands up very well. He explored more miles of coastline than any of the others. And being a thoughtful and experienced leader of men, he did not suffer the dissension that wracked Hudson's crew. Nor did he suffer the frightful mortality that almost wiped out the Button and Munk expeditions. Munk lost 61 of the total complement of 64 men who sailed with him. James, in contrast, lost only six out of a crew of 22 men — two to accident, and four to scurvy.

### FURTHER READINGS

- CHRISTY, MILLER. (ed.). 1894. *The Voyages of Captain Luke Foxe and Captain Thomas James*. London: The Hakluyt Society.  
KENYON, WALTER. (ed.). 1975. *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage of Captain Thomas James*. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum.

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