Whether going east or west, a northern maritime route skirting the Arctic was long a European fever dream. Northern passages have recently become more realistic due to declining levels of sea ice, and nations are bringing to bear their territorial claims along with the latest exploratory technologies for mineral and resource exploitation. Drilling and shipping are already on the rise, even before biologists have had an opportunity to learn more about the undiscovered life present in newly revealed Arctic areas.

It is this background of inherent conflict with a respect and awe for the natural world that is at the heart of author and conservationist Horatio Morpurgo’s historical and environmental essay, The Paradoxal Compass: Drake’s Dilemma, an intriguing work in three distinct parts. It’s a welcome oddity of a book, an old-fashioned discussion on a number of topics, from maps to maritime intrigue; from the birth of a new worldview under Elizabeth I to Cold War environmentalism; from passionate bird-watching to the creation of marine reserves in English waters.

The Paradoxal Compass begins at the author’s seaside childhood home in southwest Devonshire. The first part, ‘Beginnings’, investigates the motivation for and fascination with exploration, whether that of a young boy scouting rural forests and history books for inspiration, or that of a great seafaring nation intent on wealth and expansion. Not coincidentally, Devonshire was a point of departure for Sir Francis Drake, notorious 16th-
century pirate, slave-trader and explorer. It was also home to less renowned navigators like Stephen Burough, who led a small ship named the *Searchthrift* on a journey tracing the northern Russian coastline for the North East Passage to Asia before being distracted by Ivan the Terrible. There was also John Dee, one of Burough’s instructors, who created the Paradoxal Compass, a circular map with the North Pole at its centre. It offered a new vision of the world with a circumpolar perspective of then-imaginary trade routes. In attempting to put the earth’s curved surface on to a flat plane, Dee ‘found a way to represent the world about which people suddenly knew both more and less than ever before.’ Knowing both more and less about the world is something we in the 21st century might understand.

The 16th century’s new understanding of mapping, as well as the demystification of magnetic fields, measurement, and navigational technology, led to a transition from wonderment at nature to a more detached, mechanised worldview. The growing conflict between the two perspectives is examined more closely in the book’s second part, ‘Questions Emerge’. In the pursuit of a moment that illustrates the era’s tug-of-war between rationalism and intuitiveness, Morpurgo employs an emotional chronology that takes place during a ship stranding on an Indonesian reef and the ensuing struggle for power between the ship’s captain, Francis Drake, and its chaplain, Francis Fletcher. This long, dramatised passage portrays Fletcher’s conviction that the stranding wasn’t just divine retribution for Drake’s earlier beheading of a mutinous crew member, but for the entire commercial goal of the voyage itself. The confrontation ends many hours later, with Fletcher in chains and Drake once again at the helm of the freed ship. In this telling, the detached, commodified view of the world has carried the day, the century, and the future.

A great deal is made of the difference between the original, nature-heavy writings of Francis Fletcher – his observations during the Great Voyage of Drake’s *Golden Hinde* – and what was finally published of this work together with Drake’s notes a century later in *The World Encompassed*. What’s missing in the latter is a sense of wonder at the world beyond England’s shores; what remains is merely a tallying of that which can be measured, seized, hauled away, sold.

**According to Morpurgo, Circumnavigational journeys were always about ‘statecraft and commerce,’ with resulting maps and information treated as state secrets. What he sees as absent, however, is the lost potential for conveying the enchantment, the splendour of the rest of the world, to a nascent capitalist culture bent on conquering.** It matters now because ‘consciously or otherwise the Age of Discovery in general, and the circumnavigation in particular, is still active in the way humans see the wider world and our place in it.’ This intersection of commerce and exploration, of statecraft and nature, is underscored by discussions that link Berthold Brecht’s *Life of Galileo* to a newfound power of reason. Other connections are drawn between environmental activism during the Cold War (especially regarding pollution caused by the mining and use of coal) and the eventual downfall of the Soviet Union’s Communist satellite states.

The writing shifts between memoir and history, documented fact and speculation on intentions, and an assumption of a shared national identity. There are oxbows, meanders, double-backs and eddies in the narrative, but then, Morpurgo isn’t necessarily intent on charting the fastest course to his destination. It’s a relief not to be in a hurry, to stop by the
wayside and visit the more obscure outcroppings of the Age of Discovery, to sit back and wander the by-roads of Morpurgo’s pastoral South West England. The book is as much about the story-telling as the story itself.

Non-British-born readers might feel lost with some of the historical specifics and assumption of shared identity. The rural area where I grew up, for example, has one main road. It is called Sir Francis Drake Boulevard, and it weaves for 50 miles through golden countryside, all the way out to Drake’s Beach, one of the possible sites where the Golden Hinde put in for repairs in 1579. This isn’t old England, this is Nova Albion – California. Restaurants abound with names that refer to Drake and the Golden Hinde. But beyond that, the name Drake carries little weight. He’s known as an English explorer and pirate – but with none of the legendary status that might lead to statues or plaques. After all, it was the Spanish who would use California as a stopping point for trade with China, not the English. A name that looms large in English history is a footnote in the ever-reinvented Gold Rush state of Nova Albion. This doesn’t diminish Morpurgo’s call for the Western world to re-evaluate the historical narrative under discussion, just because it happens to be of British origin. On the contrary, the stories that have made us who we are should be regularly tested for their ongoing validity, no matter where we happen to be or who wrote the stories.

In the third part of the book, ‘Fetching the Future Home’, Morpurgo circles back to the northern Russian coastline where, in part one, the crew of Stephen Burough’s first expedition retreated. This time, however, the ships being repelled are Greenpeace vessels; the sailors being branded pirates are environmental activists protesting Gazprom’s Prirazlomnoye oil platforms. It’s not a coincidence for Morpurgo, who identifies a through-line from the earlier explorers’ use of new technology to hunting whales and oil extraction to modern fossil fuel extraction technology. It’s all part of the ongoing approach to the natural world as a mere supply room for human greed. In doing so, he traces an arc from a time when the stores of nature were perceived as inexhaustible to the present day, when we are painfully aware of just how limited those resources really are. This circling back towards a beginning is echoed in Morpurgo’s own involvement in a successful campaign to ban scallop-dredging in Lyme Bay, where he returned to live after a long absence. The boy searching nature for sustenance has come home, and is beginning to return the favour.

The third part of The Paradoxal Compass also looks at whaling, and is rich with descriptions of historical minutiae such as ‘watching the (whale) oil while boiling’, or ‘weighing the whale bone.’ Furthermore, it investigates the establishment of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) that would have – in the past – prevented the hunting of whales in the first place. And which today might just allow fish stocks and sea-bed biodiversity to recover from over-exploitation. It could be argued that commodification of one sort or another has been going on since civilization became increasingly modernised and sedentary. The windswept heath landscape of northern Germany remains a testament to medieval coastal fisheries that sent out 10,000 boats to decimate abundant herring shoals, then razed entire forests to make salt to preserve the catch for export throughout central Europe. The first animal known to fall under official protection was the migratory northern bald ibis in 1504, but it was still hunted to extinction in Europe.

Selling and depleting our fellow creatures or exploiting land and sea to the point of
exhaustion is what we do and have always done. But then it’s the prerogative of great empires in decline to position themselves at the center of any story. And Morpurgo’s roundabout tale is one that asks its reader to discard old assumptions and create a new historical narrative. As he argues for better stories that will make apparent the need for a longer view when it comes to our use of nature, Morpurgo places us all on the deck of the Golden Hinde next to Francis Drake – not, as we might have hoped, during the glamorous heyday of epic plunder and fame, but rather, stuck on that reef with a mutinous chaplain and crew. Stuck, and waiting for a miracle to rescue us from otherwise certain destruction. Or just waiting for the right story to set the ship sailing again.

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