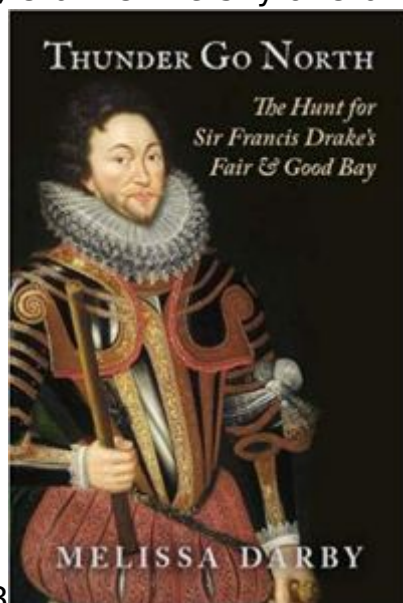




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Citation: Darby, Melissa. *Thunder Go North: The Hunt for Sir Francis Drake's Fair & Good Bay*. Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 2019. 315 pages, \$24.95.



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Just where did Francis Drake, who circumnavigated the globe in 1577 – 1580, land on North America's west coast to repair his ship, the *Golden Hind*? This has been one of the great geographical mysteries of California history. Melissa Darby's new book questions the premise that this was a California mystery at all.

But it is definitely a geographical mystery, and geographic facts and documents, especially maps, are key to Darby's argument. She cites numerous documents from the 15th and 16th centuries that shed light on the Drake voyage, including how it was an official mission on behalf of Queen Elizabeth to search for the fabled Northwest Passage and make preparations for England's colonization of lands not claimed by other Christian nations. These sources make particular reference to Drake's sailing to latitudes far north of those published in the authorized account of the voyage, placing the landing point somewhere from 44 to 48 degrees north. The published version gives Drake's northernmost latitude as 42 degrees and the landing in the vicinity of the 38th parallel, and this could be explained by political purposes: to claim more territory along the coast, and to obscure the actual mission of the voyage from Spain. The maps that resulted from the voyage reflect both stories, the official and the edited versions. This falsification is not surprising; Spain



was falsifying its maps as well to deceive its enemies.

From the geographic perspective, chapters 3 and 6 are the most interesting. Chapter 3 focuses on the discrepancy between the reported latitude of the landing (38 to 38.5 degrees north Latitude) and the one appearing in numerous early manuscripts, including the draft for Richard Hakluyt's report of the voyage (44° N). Chapter 6 details the history of early cartography resulting from Drake's voyage, beginning with Drake's own hand-drawn map of the world, presented to Queen Elizabeth upon his return. Darby notes that "this map has not survived, though there are several derivatives, including those brought to light by [Zelia] Nuttall." These are well-covered by the works of British cartographic historian Helen Wallis.

Darby takes some time to discuss the inset of the Jodocus Hondius map, which dates from as early as 1589. The inset portrays "Portus Nova Albionis," and has been a major piece of evidence for all contenders for the landing site. It is particularly cited by those who believe that Drake entered the Golden Gate and landed somewhere within San Francisco Bay. The map is a poor fit for Drakes Bay at Point Reyes, but does have a striking similarity to San Quentin Cove, due to a peninsula and island that could be Tiburon Point and Belvedere—if one rotates the inset 90 degrees to align with a topographic map. But other maps, such as Robert Dudley's manuscript chart from about 1636 clearly indicate that the bay faces out to sea, so that the Hondius inset is oriented in the traditional manner with north at the top.

Then Darby discusses a prime candidate for the landing site along the Oregon coast: Whale Cove in Lincoln County. This pocket bay was first proposed as the solution to the mystery by British engineer Bob Ward in 1979. Samuel Bawlf publicized this theory in his 2003 work, *The Secret Voyage of Sir Francis Drake, 1577-1580*. Bawlf also used cartographic evidence for a more northerly extent for the voyage, reaching as far as southern Alaska. His book makes for an interesting read, and a comparison of the two books shows that there are different ways to interpret the evidence. Bawlf concentrated on reconstructing Drake's route along the coasts of Alaska, British Columbia, and Washington, and did not go extensively into evidence for the landing site in Oregon. This is where Darby makes significant contributions to the alternative proposal, using her training as an anthropologist and archaeologist.

Darby describes the local geography in support of the Oregon landing, including a reef near the peninsula that could have been the island depicted on the Hondius



inset; the white cliffs to the north; and even “desert land” noted by Drake that could be the Oregon Dunes National Seashore. The voyage account also refers to a coast lined with “canoe-making trees,” a good fit for the cedars of the Oregon coast, which the Native people indeed used for this purpose. Besides the geographic evidence, Darby presents a thorough analysis of how the voyage reports align with anthropological knowledge of the Oregon coast Indians. These chapters get rather technical, more akin to articles in a specialized anthropology journal. The general reader may wish to skim over these sections and leave it to the anthropologists to evaluate how well Darby’s argument stands up against similar work related to the Bay Area’s Native people. But it seems well-reasoned to me, and the reader may still benefit from noting the major points. Here you will find the inspiration for the enigmatic main title of the book.

But the story of Drake’s voyage and landing is only one of two that Darby has to share. The other concerns the longstanding debate over the landing site, especially as it played out in California. It is a tale of academic intrigue—how professional historians with an emotional investment in a particular solution to a historical question will sometimes violate professional ethics to oppose anyone who defies the “orthodox” solution.

Both Darby and Bawlf make their respective cases based on the practice of falsifying the latitudes (and in Bawlf’s reconstruction, even the dates) of the voyage so as to deceive the Spanish. The added consequence of this deception was that it would confuse future historians, who assumed from the published accounts that Drake landed in the vicinity of San Francisco. Then the search for the actual landing point became confined to various candidates in that area. This has been the focus since the 1850s, with the “official” consensus deciding on the Point Reyes cove now called Drake’s Bay. Many books discuss the debate, including Warren Hanna’s *Lost Harbor: the controversy over Drake’s California anchorage* (University of California Press, 1979). Darby reminds us of a larger debate that was carried on over the years, widening the geographic scope to the Pacific Northwest.

Some of the sources from Mexican, Spanish, and British archives that Darby quotes have been known for over a century and written about by earlier researchers. Darby recounts their work and the pushback they received from California historians who were convinced of the California solution. In particular, Darby highlights the career of Zelia Nuttall, a San Francisco native trained in anthropology and ethnology as well as history, whose book, *New Light on Drake*, renewed the debate in the early 20th century. Her theory of Drake’s landing further north was well-reasoned and



evidence-based, but she received a cold reception from California's historical authorities, especially UC-Berkeley history professor Herbert Bolton. Darby documents their active efforts against Nuttall, conspiring to prevent her publication of further evidence for the Northwestern theory. Her research notes and manuscript were eventually lost. Darby rescues Nuttall from obscurity and allows her contributions to Drake scholarship to resume a place in the historical debate.

The Californians' grip on the "official" theory of a Bay Area landing continued in America, but couldn't prevent British scholars from continuing to raise questions and proposing alternatives. In the 1930s, the debate was once again threatening to dislodge the California theory. Then the appearance of a brass plate apparently inscribed by Drake himself, just as the official account speaks of, seemed to bolster the Bay Area locale, at least in the general population's mind. Darby goes into the story of the plate in detail. In the process, she takes Bolton to task, exposing major ethical issues in his career, providing evidence that he was the instigator of the hoax that the plate proved to be.

Reexamination in the 1970s, with proper metallurgical tests, proved that the plate was a fake, and Darby reviews the lengthy search by James Hart, Director at the Bancroft Library, to identify the perpetrators. She lays out the evidence pointing to Bolton, with the assistance of his fellows in the E Clampus Vitus organization, challenging the integrity of one of California's preeminent historians.

But Hart himself did not expose Bolton, due to the timing; California was about to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the landing. There was once more a lively debate over the landing point, but again, it was confined to California. Exposure of the hoax did not immediately reset the debate to the mid-1930s when alternatives were being proposed. That is the role Darby is fated to play.

Has Melissa Darby's book settled the geographical mystery of Drake's "fair and good bay" once and for all? Probably not, given the long history of the debate and the emotional investment that historians and the public in general have had in the matter. This reviewer knows all about such emotions, being a native of the Bay Area who grew up believing in Drake's visit to this region. But we must not let emotions and bias short-circuit the debate but rather let the facts lead to reasoned analysis of all possible alternatives. These days we see all too vividly how clinging to one's own opinion and dismissing any alternatives as "fake news" is only destructive to the advancement of knowledge. So I can accept that Oregon may well have a better claim as the site of Nova Albion, based on the strong case that Darby makes.



I will be quite interested to observe the responses to the new theory, both by the historical community and the general public. We may hope that Darby is more successful than Samuel Bawlf was in rebooting the great debate. And if she proves convincing to the professionals, and a new consensus emerges, those who were attached to the California solution may at least indulge in another flavor of emotional reaction: the satisfaction that Zelia Nuttall was vindicated and her adversary, Herbert Bolton, put in his place. That this was at the hands of another competent female researcher is an added treat, since Bolton and his colleagues were clearly disdainful of Nuttall on account of her sex, and probably also her half-Mexican heritage.

The book may provide more details than the general reader will care for about the intricacies of historical debate and the sometimes shady behavior of scholars too attached to their theories and their reputations, but for the same reason, it will be a good resource for those being trained in the profession of historical research: a morality tale of sorts.

Revisionists often come in for criticism. They upset people's familiar ideas about a topic by proposing radically different solutions to questions, whether in science or history. But let's keep in mind that revisionists can be correct, especially when they present compelling data and arguments for the new paradigm. Thunder Go North may prove to be a good example of this, as the debate over Drake's landing unfolds. So let the conversation continue!

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