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Article:

“Thou concludest like the sanctimonious pirate, that went to sea with the Ten Commandments, but scraped one out of the table,” says Lucio in the first act of *Measure for Measure* — words that could describe the greatest naval hero of Shakespeare's era, Sir Francis Drake. Drake was celebrated in Tudor-Stuart England as a godly, chivalrous circumnavigator and Armada admiral, but was also portrayed as a daring and sometimes ruthless raider of almost incalculable Spanish treasure. His life was, even during his lifetime, subject to varied rival constructions and multiple erasures, fabrications ironically worthy of a Protestant self-fashioner who found a loophole in the Decalogue for theft.

In *Sir Francis Drake: The Construction of a Hero*, Bruce Wathen attempts the ambitious work of surveying Drake's many constructions and reconstructions, not only in the days of Elizabeth and the early Stuarts, but through four centuries and into the present — with a particular focus on Drake's apogee in the British popular imagination during the long nineteenth century. Wathen is not without his theoretical tics: he mouths the language of radical skepticism about historical “authenticity” (7) while nevertheless distinguishing between obvious fiction and likely fact. Yet he is conversant with contemporary Drake scholarship, and his work is informed by centuries of archival material and visual culture, with many handsome black-and-white illustrations. Overall, Wathen presents an indispensable compendium of Drakeana, and a congenial guide through many generations of evolving British nationhood.

In examining the periodic reinventions of the circumnavigator, Wathen rightly observes that this process of cultural construction began as soon as Drake returned from the far side of the world and docked the gold-laden Golden Hinde at Plymouth in 1580, bringing the geopolitically laggard Elizabethans some rare good news. Despite Drake's significant role in the defeat of the Armada eight years later, Wathen argues, the Famous Voyage “remained the determining element” in Drake's reputation throughout the Renaissance (16); and Drake's evident anti-hispanicism made him a potent ideological counter to James I's hispanophile policy (35). Indeed, “until the mid-Victorian period Drake's fame was derived principally from the circumnavigation of the globe” (4). During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and especially from the

Restoration to the Regency, Drake served as an exemplum for writers including Fuller, Burton, Sadler, Defoe, Johnson, and Southey. Johnson particularly admired Drake's industry, determination, and resilience — though Wathen might have noted the irony of an ardent anti-imperialist like Johnson praising a man destined to become the Victorian personification of empire (60–61).

After the accession of Victoria, Drake's life and legend underwent a sea change: in popular lore and painting — as well as in Froude's *History of England* and in Kingley's novel *Westward Ho!* — the Armada replaces the circumnavigation at the center of Drake's fame, with Sir Francis recreated as the chief, or even sole, victor of 1588. These mid-Victorians saw the naval defense of the Protestant empire as Drake's legacy to Britain, and as the century waned and anxieties about German naval rivalry grew, Corbett's Drake biography linked him to Nelson in representing the strategic boldness and patriotic spirit that would preserve Britain and the empire (146). In a more popular vein, Newbolt enshrined the pseudo-Arthurian legend of Drake's Drum, beating to call the admiral to the rescue in the hour of England's most need (147–49).

This heroic-magical view of Drake prevailed in the popular imagination via fiction and film through the very needy hours of two world wars, receding with the empire through the 1950s and '60s, when Drake was most likely to be denounced as an imperialist (and sanctimonious) pirate. Yet since the 1970s, quadricentennials of the circumnavigation and the Armada have revived academic and popular interest in Drake, with new biographies, scholarly reappraisals, and even a seaworthy replica of the Golden Hinde docked near Shakespeare's Globe in Southwark. Wathen concludes by noting that a new construction of Drake as the prototypical crosscultural explorer and early multiculturalist is emerging in Britain (180–81). Selective? Silly? Of course — as are all reductions of complex historical reality to the moment's fashions. But a life as richly lived and traveled as Drake's presents such marvelously varied materials for reconstruction.