Nathaniel's Nutmeg

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Extract

PROLOGUE

THE ISLAND CAN BE SMELLED before it can be seen. From more than ten miles out to sea a fragrance hangs in the air, and long before the bowler-hat mountain hoves into view you know you are nearing land.

So it was on 23 December 1616. The *Swan*'s captain, Nathaniel Courthope, needed neither compass nor astrolabe to know that they had arrived. Reaching for his journal he made a note of the date and alongside scribbled the position of his vessel. He had at last reached Run, one of the smallest and richest of all the islands in the East Indies.

Courthope summoned his crew on deck for a briefing. The stalwart English mariners had been kept in the dark about their destination for it was a mission of the utmost secrecy. They were unaware that King James I himself had ordered this operation, one of such extraordinary importance that failure would bring dire and irrevocable consequences. Nor did they know of the notorious dangers of landing at Run, a volcanic atoll whose harbour was ringed by a sunken reef. Many a vessel had been dashed to splinters on the razor-sharp coral and the shoreline was littered with rusting cannon and broken timbers.

Courthope cared little for such dangers. He was far more worried about the reception he would receive from the native islanders, head-hunters and cannibals, who were

feared and mistrusted throughout the East Indies. 'At your arrival at Run,' he had been told, 'show yourself courteous and affable, for they are a peevish, perverse, diffident and perfidious people and apt to take disgust upon small occasions.'

As his men rowed towards land, Courthope descended into his cabin and brushed down his finest doublet, little imagining the momentous events that were to follow. For his discussions with Run's native chieftains – conducted in sign language and broken English – would change the course of history on the other side of the globe.

The forgotten island of Run lies in the backwaters of the East Indies, a remote and fractured speck of rock that is separated from its nearest land mass, Australia, by more than six hundred miles of ocean. It is these days a place of such insignificance that it fails even to make it onto the map: *The Times Atlas of the World* neglects to record its existence and the cartographers of Macmillan's *Atlas of South East Asia* have reduced it to a mere footnote. For all they cared, Run could have slumped beneath the tropical waters of the Indies.

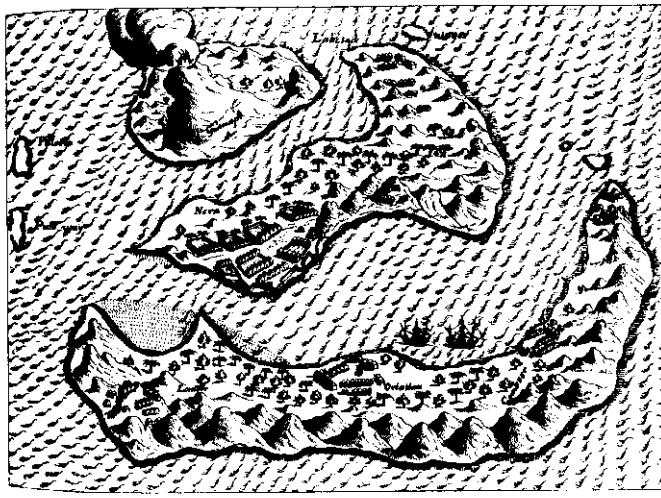
It was not always thus. Turn to the copper-plate maps of the seventeenth century and Run is writ large across the page, its size out of all proportion to its geography. In those days, Run was the most talked about island in the world, a place of such fabulous wealth that Eldorado's gilded riches seemed tawdry by comparison. But Run's bounty was not derived from gold – nature had bestowed a gift far more precious upon her cliffs. A forest of willowy trees fringed the island's mountainous backbone; trees of exquisite fragrance. Tall and foliaged like a laurel, they were adorned with bell-shaped flowers and bore a fleshy, lemon-yellow fruit. To the botanist, they were called *Myristica fragrans*. To

the plain-speaking merchants of England they were known simply as nutmeg.

Nutmeg, the seed of the tree, was the most coveted luxury in seventeenth-century Europe, a spice held to have such powerful medicinal properties that men would risk their lives to acquire it. Always costly, it rocketed in price when the physicians of Elizabethan London began claiming that their nutmeg pomanders were the only certain cure for the plague, that 'pestiferous pestilance' that started with a sneeze and ended in death. Overnight, this withered little nut – until now used to cure flatulence and the common cold – became as sought after as gold.

There was one drawback to the sudden and urgent demand: no one could be sure from exactly where the elusive nutmeg originated. London's merchants had traditionally bought their spices in Venice, and Venice's merchants had in turn bought them in Constantinople. But nutmeg came from much further east, from the fabled Indies which lay far beyond Europe's myopic horizons. Ships had never before plied the tropical waters of the Indian Ocean and maps of the far side of the globe remained a blank. The East, as far as the spice dealers were concerned, could have been the moon.

Had they known in advance of the difficulties of reaching the source of nutmeg they might never have set sail. Even in the East Indies where spices grew like weeds, nutmeg was a rarity; a tree so fussy about climate and soil that it would grow only on a tiny cluster of islands, the Banda archipelago, which were of such impossible remoteness that no one in Europe could be sure if they existed at all. The spice merchants of Constantinople had scant information about these islands and what they did know was scarcely encouraging. There were rumours of a



The Banda Islands at the turn of the sixteenth century were the goal of every Elizabethan adventurer. 'There is not a tree but the nutmeg,' wrote one early English visitor, 'so that the whole countrey seemes a contrived orchard.' Run Island, marked Pulorin, is on the extreme left.

monster that preyed on passing ships, a creature of 'devillish possession' that lurked in hidden reefs. There were stories of cannibals and head-hunters – bloodthirsty savages who lived in palm-tree shacks decorated with rotting human heads. There were crocodiles that lay concealed in rivers, hidden shoals to catch captains unawares, and 'such mightie stormes and extreme gusts of winde' that even the sturdiest of ships were placed in grave risk.

None of these dangers deterred Europe's profit-hungry merchants who would chance everything in their desperation to be the first to find nutmeg's source. Soon the shipyards of Portugal, Spain and England were alive to the clatter of shipbuilding, a flurry of activity that sparked what

would later become known as the spice race, a desperate and protracted struggle for control of one of the smallest groups of islands in the world.

In 1511, the Portuguese became the first Europeans to set foot in the Banda Islands, a group of six lumps of rock boasting rich volcanic soil and a strange micro-climate. Distracted by hostilities elsewhere in the East Indies, they did not return until 1529 when a Portuguese trader named Captain Garcia landed troops on the Bandas. He was surprised to discover that the islands which had caused such commotion in Europe had a combined area that was not much larger than Lisbon. Five of the Bandas were within gunshot of each other, and it was immediately apparent to Garcia that by building a castle on the principal island, Neira, he would have virtual control over the entire archipelago.

But one island, Run, was different. It lay more than ten miles to the west of Neira and was surrounded by dangerous and hidden reefs. It was also buffeted by the twice-yearly monsoon, putting it beyond the reach of Garcia's carracks for much of the year. This was galling to the Portuguese, for Run was thickly forested in nutmeg and its annual yield was enough to fill a large flotilla of ships. But Captain Garcia soon found himself troubled less by the inaccessibility of this outlying island than by the hostility of the native Bandanese whose warlike antics proved both tiresome and costly. Scarcely had his sailors set to work on a massive castle than a flurry of arrows and the threat of head-hunting sent them scurrying back to their ship. Henceforth, the Portuguese rarely visited the islands, preferring instead to buy their nutmeg from the native traders who were frequent visitors at their fortress in Malacca.

The misfortunes suffered by the Portuguese did not

discourage England's merchants from launching themselves into the spice race and nor did it deter the captains chosen to lead these expeditions; bold and fearless men who steered their ships through such 'greevous stormes' that one in three was lost. The weather was not the only threat: scurvy, dysentery and the 'blody flux' killed hundreds of men, and countless vessels had to be scuppered when there was no longer a crew to sail them. When the ships finally limped back from the East the surviving crews found the wharves of London packed with people anxious to catch a glimpse of these heroic men. The crowds were fuelled by stories that the sailors on board were returning with untold wealth; that they wore doublets of silk, that their main sail was made of damask and their top sails trimmed with cloth of gold. Although the humble sailors had been strictly forbidden from indulging in 'private trade', the temptations proved too great for many. After all, nutmeg commanded fabulous prices in Courthope's day and brought spectacular profits to all who traded in it. In the Banda Islands, ten pounds of nutmeg cost less than one English penny. In London, that same spice sold for more than £2.10s. – a mark-up of a staggering 60,000 per cent. A small sackful was enough to set a man up for life, buying him a gabled dwelling in Holborn and a servant to attend to his needs. London's merchants were so concerned about the illegal trade in nutmeg when their first fleet arrived back in London that they ordered the dockyard workers to wear 'suits of canvas without pockets'. This did little to deter the sea-hardened mariners from filching their masters' spice and although punishments grew ever more severe over the decades, many still managed to amass private fortunes. As late as 1665, Samuel Pepys records a clandestine meeting with some sailors 'at a blind alehouse at the further end of

town' where he exchanged a sackful of gold for a small quantity of nutmeg and cloves.

The men that survived the expeditions to the Spice Islands returned with such fabulous tales and scrapes, true Boy's Own adventures, that their audiences were left spellbound. David Middleton had a dramatic escape from the cannibals of Ceram; the dilettantish William Keeling performed Shakespeare in the mangrove swamps of West Africa, whilst William Hawkins paid a visit to the Indian Great Moghul and spent the next two years watching gladiator battles of a scale and brutality not seen since the days of imperial Rome. There was Sir Henry Middleton, David's brother, who dropped anchor off the coast of Arabia and distinguished himself by becoming the first Englishman to visit the interior of the country, albeit as a prisoner with 'a great paire of fetters clapt upon my legges'. And there was James Lancaster, commander of the pioneering first expedition to be organised by the East India Company, who spent a delightful evening listening to a scantily clad gamelan orchestra that belonged to the lusty Sultan of Achin.

After all the disasters and false starts it was appropriate that England's first contact with the nutmeg islands should be with Run, the smallest and least accessible of them all. It was also fitting that they should arrive in such an undignified fashion, washed up as shipwrecks after a ferocious tropical storm in 1603. But what was all the more remarkable was that these English mariners, unlike the Portuguese, struck up an instant and lasting friendship with the native chieftains. Long before the sea-salt had stiffened their hair they were toasting each other with the local palm toddy.

England had scarcely launched herself into the spice race when she learned there was a new power to contend with.

In 1595, the Dutch despatched their first fleet eastwards with a crew more menacing and warlike than had ever before been encountered in the tropics. Faced with competition from both the English and Portuguese, they changed their goal from trade to conquest – the conquest of the Banda Islands – and they pursued this with a brutality that shocked even their own countrymen. But on the island of Run they were to meet their match. What happened on that remote atoll, just two miles long and half a mile wide, was to have consequences that no one could ever have imagined.

The extraordinary story of Nathaniel's nutmeg has been largely forgotten for more than three centuries. It is not always a pleasant tale, for although the captains and leaders of expeditions liked to refer to themselves as 'men of qualitye', that did not stop them from indulging in torture, brutality and gratuitous warfare. Such were the grim realities of life in the East, a harsh and bloody existence that was lightened by the occasional flash of humanity and courage – true feats of heroism that were epitomised by the bravery of Nathaniel Courthope.

But more than a century of expeditions and misadventures were to pass before Courthope set sail in the *Swan*. His story begins not in the sultry climes of the nutmeg islands, but in a land of icebergs and snow.

CHAPTER ONE

ARCTIC WHIRLWINDS

IT WAS THE LOOK-OUT who saw them first. Two crippled vessels, rotting and abandoned, lay at anchor close to the shoreline. Their hulls were splintered and twisted, their sails in tatters and their crew apparently long since dead. But it was not a tropical reef that had wrecked the ships and nor was it malaria that had killed the crew. England's maiden expedition to the Spice Islands had come to grief in the ice-bound waters of the Arctic.

The historic 1553 voyage was the brainchild of a newly founded organisation known as the Mystery, Company and Fellowship of Merchant Adventurers for the Discovery of Unknown Lands. So impatient were these merchants to enter the spice race – yet so unprepared for the risks and dangers – that they allowed enthusiasm to overrule practicalities and long before the ships had left port a catalogue of errors threatened to jeopardise their mission. The choice of expedition leader, or 'pilot-general', was sensible enough. Richard Chancellor was 'a man of great estimation' who had gained some experience of seafaring in his formative years. His adoptive father, Henry Sidney, so eulogised his young charge when presented to the Company that the merchant adventurers thought they had a new Magellan in their midst. Sidney explained that it

was Chancellor's 'good parts of wit' that made him so invaluable and, never shy to blow his own trumpet, added, 'I rejoice in myself that I have nourished and maintained that wit.'

When a doubting merchant tackled Sidney on his enthusiasm for being separated from Chancellor the old man had a ready answer. 'I do now part with Chancellor not because I make little reckoning of the man, or because his maintenance is burdenous and chargeable unto me. You know the man by report, I by experience; you by words, I by deeds; you by speech and company, but I by the daily trial of his life.'

Sidney's rhetoric won the day and Chancellor was promptly given command of the *Edward Bonaventure*, the largest of the expedition's three ships. The governors then turned to choosing a captain for the expedition's other large ship, the *Bona Esperanza*. For reasons that remain obscure they plumped for Sir Hugh Willoughby, a 'goodly personage' according to the records, but one who had absolutely no knowledge of navigation. Such a man would have been a risk for the short hop across the English Channel; to despatch him to the uttermost ends of the earth was to court disaster.

When it came to deciding the passage to the Spice Islands the merchant adventurers were most insistent. Although they had watched the Spanish and Portuguese successfully sail both east and west to the East Indies, they plumped for an altogether more eccentric option. Their ships, it was decided, would head due north; a route that would shave more than two thousand miles off the long voyage to the Spice Islands. It would have the added benefit of avoiding conflict with the Portuguese who had been sailing the eastern route for almost a century and had

established fortified bastions in every port. There was also the question of illness and climate to consider. English mariners had seen the Portuguese ships return home with their crews decimated by dysentery and typhoid, often contracted in the tropical climes of the Indian Ocean. At least one man in five could expect death on the long voyage to the East but that number was frequently much higher and often entire ships had to be abandoned due to a shortage of crew. Since the Portuguese were acclimatised by birth to a hot climate men questioned how English sailors, brought up on the frosty fringes of northern Europe, could hope to return in rude health.

The expedition ran into trouble before it even set sail. During delays at Harwich, it was discovered that a large part of the provisions was already rotten, while the wine casks had been so badly assembled that the wine was leaking freely though the joints in the wood. But with the wind in their favour the captains decided there was no time to restock the ships and the expedition set sail on 23 June 1553.

So long as the vessels stuck together under the capable direction of Richard Chancellor they were unlikely to run into trouble. But as they rounded the rocky shores of northern Norway, 'there came such flows of winde and terrible whirlewinds' that Willoughby's ship was blown off course. Chancellor had planned for such an eventuality, suggesting that the ships regroup at Vardohuus, a small island in the Barents Sea. He waited for seven days but, hearing nothing of either the *Bona Esperanza* or the *Confidentia*, the third ship of the fleet, he pushed on eastwards towards the White Sea.

The other two vessels had also survived the storm. After riding out the gale, Sir Hugh re-established contact with

Disaster strikes Dutch explorer William Barents, who believed there was a quick route to the 'spiceries' via the North Pole. The engravings (shown here and on pp. 17, 167 and 169) illustrate how his ship was wrecked on 'a great store of ice' and how his men survived the winter.

the *Confidentia* and both headed towards the coastline. Here Willoughby's inexperience began to tell. He sounded the sea floor, pored over charts and scratched his head before concluding that 'the land lay not as the globe made mention.' Failing to locate Vardohuus's or Chancellor's vessel, he decided to press on with the expedition without the flagship.

On 14 August 1553, he 'descried land', apparently uninhabited, at 72 degrees latitude but failed to reach it due to the quantity of ice in the water. If this reading is correct, his ship must have reached the barren islands of Novaya Zemlya which lie, remote and isolated, in the Barents Sea. From here he appears to have sailed south-east, then north-

west, then south-west, then north-east. The ignorance of Willoughby and his men is staggering, for their course, more than three hundred miles inside the Arctic Circle, must have taken them in a giant arc through a dangerous sea littered with melting pack-ice. On 14 September, they again sighted land and shortly afterwards 'sailed into a faire bay' somewhere close to the present border between Finland and Russia. Willoughby's men were cheered by the sight of 'very many seal fishes, and other great fishes; and upon the main we saw beares, great deere, foxes with divers strange beasts'. They planned at first to spend a week here but 'seeing the yeare far spent, and also very evill weather, as frost, snow, and haile', they decided to winter in the bay.

The expedition's directors in London must by now have hoped that their ships had found the North-East Passage, broken through it, and be well on their way to the Spice Islands. But instead of balmy evenings and gently swaying palm trees, Willoughby and his men had met with freezing fog, impenetrable ice, and the realisation that London's merchants had made a terrible mistake when they chose the route over the North Pole. Those merchants had vociferously defended their decision, presenting logical and compelling arguments to support their theories. As far back as the year 1527, Robert Thorne, an English trader living in Seville, had written to King Henry VIII with the exciting (and highly secret) news that the Spice Islands could be reached by way of the North Pole: 'I know it is my bounden duty to manifest this secret unto your Grace,' he wrote, 'which hitherto, as I suppose, hath beene hid.' The King was left in no doubt that 'by sailing northward and passing the Pole, descending to the Equinoctial line, we shall hit these islands [the Spice Islands], and it should be a much shorter way than either the Spaniards or Portingals have.'