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Trumpeters from China in Bristol in 1577?

This note corrects the impression given in the Bristol Records of Early English Drama (REED) that five trumpeters from China performed for the mayor, aldermen, and common council of Bristol in November 1577. Rather, the note points out that the trumpeters were likely English and were associated with the return of Martin Frobisher's second northwest passage expedition that fall.

On 17 November 1577, the mayor and aldermen of Bristol approved payment of ten shillings to five trumpeters ‘which came in the Shippes that came from Cataya’.¹ The town paid the trumpeters ‘for sownding their Trumpettes’ while the mayor, aldermen, and common council processed to a bonfire at the high cross in honour of the queen’s visit to the town twenty years prior. This was not the only instance of entertainers from a ship docked at an English town bringing their talents on-shore for the local population: for example, in early May 1562, the mayor of Newcastle Upon Tyne ordered the payment of four shillings to ‘the fellyshyp of a shype’, evidently from Aldbrough, Yorkshire, ‘ffor dansyng in the fyrthe’.² Likewise, on 21 April 1614, trumpeters from the Royal Navy were paid three shillings, four pence for performing at King’s College, Cambridge, and the wardens’ account book for Coventry records a payment of ten shillings made on 8 December 1629 to ‘fower Trumpettes who had been at Sea for the Earle of Warwick’.³ What stands out in the Bristol record, however, is the designation of the ships’ origin as ‘Cataya’, a variant of ‘Cathay’, a term often used by the English in the period for the northern part of China but also Asia more generally.⁴ Thomas Cooper, for example, described Cathay as, ‘A great region in the East pacte of the worlde, extending to the Easte Occean sea: on the south to the over India, and is also called Sinarum regio. It is divided into nine realmes: all be under the great Cham’.⁵ The record of the trumpeters from the ‘Cataya’ ships apparently caused some confusion for the *Records of Early English Drama*

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(REED) editor for Bristol, who attaches a question mark to the word 'Cataya' in the volume's index.⁶ More problematic, however, is the use of the term 'strange' (in quotation marks) in the volume's introduction to describe the trumpeters.⁷ The word 'strange', which does not appear in the Bristol record itself, usually referred to foreign or non-English people and implies that the trumpeters, and perhaps by extension the 'Shipp's' on which they arrived in Bristol, came from China.

There is no record of a voyage from China, or any part of the 'Cathay' region, arriving in England in 1577. The first documented direct contact between England and China occurred on 27 June 1637, when Captain John Wendell attempted to establish trading relations at Macao.⁸ We do not know precisely when the first Chinese person came to England, though, as Robert Batchelor points out in his *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (DNB) entry on Shen Fuzong (ca 1658–91, the first documented and named person from China to come to England, in 1687), 'records of the East India Company voyages indicate Chinese diaspora merchants living in Bantam would replace English and other sailors lost on the arduous voyage.'⁹ Batchelor's finding would imply an earliest likely date upon the return of the first East India Company voyages to China in 1603 (it was during the first voyage that the English established their factory at Bantam). It seems improbable that the arrival in Bristol of multiple ships from China would go completely unrecorded in any other local or court documents.

The ships in the Bristol record were most likely those of the English voyager Martin Frobisher, who had returned to England early that October from his second expedition to discover a northwest passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific and at least one of whose ships was still in Bristol that November. In using the word 'Cataya', the writer of the Bristol record might simply have thought of Frobisher's ships in terms of his intended objective — Frobisher's lieutenant George Best, for example, used the term in his 1578 published account of Frobisher's journeys, *A true discourse of the late voyages of discoverie, for the finding of a passage to Cathaya, by the Northweast*, and it appeared also in the work that helped inspire Frobisher, Sir Humphrey Gilbert's *A discourse of a discoverie for a new passage to Cataia* (published in 1576 in an edition prepared by George Gascoigne, but written in the mid-1560s and, according to Michael Brennan, 'widely circulated in manuscript' prior to appearing in print).¹⁰ The phrase 'that came from Cataya' suggests either that the writer thought (wrongly) that Frobisher had succeeded in finding a northwest passage or that, to the writer, the entire Arctic region from the north Atlantic to northern China was effectively one homogeneous geographic region identifiable as 'Cataya'. This latter explanation seems most likely for two reasons. First, someone associated with local governance in Bristol would

probably know about the failed outcome of Frobisher's voyage. Second, at least one other English person in the period affiliated the indigenous people of the Arctic with those of northern Asia: according to Christopher Hall, one of Frobisher's lieutenants, the indigenous people that the expedition encountered in the Arctic 'be like *Tartars*' in their appearance, another word used to describe people from the northern region of Asia controlled by the Mongols.¹¹ The writer of the Bristol record likely saw indigenous people of the Arctic because Frobisher had brought back an Inuit man, woman, and baby boy, whom he put on display. The English named the man 'Calichough', the woman, 'Ighorth' (an Inuit word for 'woman') and the baby 'Nutiok' (an Inuit word for 'child'), but the three were not related to one another.¹² According to Bristol chronicler William Adams, 'They were savage people, clothed in Stag's skins, having no linen nor woolleen at all — and fed only upon raw flesh: she suckled her child, casting her breasts over her shoulders'.¹³ While their display did include an element of entertainment for the local population — on 9 October 1577, Calichough 'rode in a little bote made of skinn in the water' and 'killed 2 duckes with a dart' (evidently the first demonstration in England of the kayak) — nothing indicates that the two adult Inuit played trumpets, nor did they survive to 17 November, the date of the trumpeting. The parish register of St Stephen's, Bristol, records that on 8 November, 'Collichang a heathen man' was buried, followed on 13 November by 'Egnoch a heathen woman'.¹⁴ If Hall thought he saw physiognomic similarities between the Inuit and Mongols, the individual who made the Bristol record and likely saw the three people Frobisher had brought back possibly also conflated the Inuit with people of 'Catay' in the kind of thinking typical of early modern English descriptions of non-English ethnic groups (such as, for example, the use of the word 'moor' to describe peoples from regions as distinct as India, the Middle East, and Africa).

If the trumpeters were not otherwise unrecorded Chinese visitors to England but came from Frobisher's ships, as seems most likely, the next question is whether they were English. Besides the three Inuit, there is no record of other indigenous people of the Arctic, or any part of 'Cathay' for that matter, on board Frobisher's ships when he returned to England; however, he certainly sailed from England with both trumpets and men capable of playing them. During his first voyage on 19 July 1576 one of the crew 'solemnly sounded a Trumpet', according to Best, as part of a ceremony naming a small island 'Mount Warwick', after Lord Ambrose Dudley, earl of Warwick; later in the day, when the English saw the Inuit on top of the mountain, they hailed them and 'with the noise of our trumpets, they [that is, the indigenous people] seemed greatly to rejoyce'.¹⁵ During that same voyage, when Frobisher mustered his men on the mainland at 'Southerlande', according to

Best, he commanded 'a Trumpet to sounde a call' before giving a speech requiring 'every man to be conformable to order'.¹⁶ On 1 August, they 'shot off a Falken-gun, and sounded a trumpet' in an effort to help some lost crewmen find their way back to camp.¹⁷ Not long after, the prospect of securing the return of several Englishmen who had been captured by the indigenous people prompted Frobisher to order 'the Trumpet to sounde a call' on 7 August.¹⁸ On his second voyage, on 21 June 1577, while searching for gold in 'Meta Incognita' (Greenland), a landing party from one of his ships became separated in a heavy fog, 'wherevpon', according to Frobisher, 'we stroke our drummes, and sounded our trumpets, to the ende we might keepe together'.¹⁹ At the Countess of Warwick's Island during Frobisher's third expedition, on 2 August 1578, the 'sound of Trumpet' accompanied the captain's proclamation of his orders.²⁰ Indeed, Frobisher's fleet must have had multiple trumpeters, for one of the articles governing his third expedition required that, 'in the time of Fogs', 'every ship in the fleete' was to make 'a reasonable noise with Drum and Trumpet' in order to avoid collisions.²¹ The ships resorted to this noise one day when, as the sailor Thomas Ellis recounted, 'we stroke our drummes, and sounded our trumpets' because 'there fell such a fogge and hidious mist, that we coulde not see one another'.²²

The journal of Edward Sellman, also a sailor on the third voyage, records the name of one man who probably sounded a trumpet warning on that foggy day: on 29 June 1578, when Frobisher spotted a peninsula that he thought was Penbroke Hand, 'Christopher Jackson, the trumpeter, being in the top, did make yt playnly Gabriels Hand ... to the which the Generall yelded'.²³ Not only does Sellman name the trumpeter, he implies that Jackson was employed on the voyage specifically as a trumpeter (even though in this case he was — like most members of the crew on such long and dangerous voyages — undertaking another job as well). Thus, no positive evidence exists that the five trumpeters from 'the Shippes that came from Cataya' were Chinese; the most likely scenario is that they were Englishmen, like Christopher Jackson, who had been specifically employed as trumpeters in Frobisher's crew.

Notes

- 1 Mark C. Pilkinton (ed.), *REED: Bristol* (Toronto, 1997), 115.
- 2 J.J. Anderson (ed.), *REED: Newcastle Upon Tyne* (Toronto, 1982), 31. According to John Baillie, the Firth, or Firth-Banks, later called the Forth, was an area on a hilltop located outside of the Newcastle walls long used as a place 'for the recreation of the

- town's-people'. John Baillie, *An Impartial History of the Town and County of Newcastle upon Tyne and Its Vicinity* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1801), 160; on the Firth, see 159–62.
- 3 Alan H. Nelson (ed.), *REED: Cambridge*, 2 vols (Toronto, 1989), 1:524. R.W. Ingram (ed.), *REED: Coventry* (Toronto, 1981), 428.
 - 4 'Cathay, n.', *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* online.
 - 5 Thomas Cooper, *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae* (London, 1584) in Ian Lancashire (ed.), *Lexicons of Early Modern English* online (Toronto, 2006).
 - 6 Pilkinton, *Bristol*, 349.
 - 7 *Ibid.*, xlii.
 - 8 Ernest Stanley Dodge, *Island and Empires: Western Impact on the Pacific and East Asia* (Minneapolis, 1976), 261–2.
 - 9 Robert K. Batchelor, 'Shen Fuzong (c.1658–1691)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (DNB)* online.
 - 10 Michael G. Brennan, 'The Literature of Travel', John Barnard and D.F. McKenzie (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, 7 vols (Cambridge, 2002), 4.246–74, 262–3, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521661829.013>.
 - 11 Luke Fox, *North-West Fox, or, Fox from the North-West Passage* (1635), D2v.
 - 12 See Neil Cheshire, Tony Waldron, Alison Quinn, and David Quinn, 'Frobisher's Eskimos in England', *Archivaria* 10 (1980), 23–50.
 - 13 Transcribed in Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *The Three Voyages of Martin Frobisher*, 2 vols (London, 1938), 2.238–9.
 - 14 Transcribed in Cheshire et al., 'Frobisher's Eskimos', 37. The baby was taken to London and the Cathay Company paid to keep him at an inn with a nurse, but he died before the Company could present him at court.
 - 15 George Best, *A True Discourse of the Late Voyages of Discoverie, for the finding of a passage to Cathaya, by the Northweast, under the conduct of Martin Frobisher* (1578), B1r-v.
 - 16 Best, *A True Discourse*, B4r
 - 17 Fox, *North-West Fox*, D2v.
 - 18 Best, *A True Discourse*, D2r.
 - 19 Stefansson, *The Three Voyages*, 1:36.
 - 20 Best, *A True Discourse*, K1r.
 - 21 Fox, *North-West Fox*, E2v.
 - 22 Thomas Ellis, *A True Report of the Third and Last Voyage into Meta Incognita: achieved by the worthie Capteine, M. Martine Frobisher Esquire* (1578), A6r.
 - 23 Transcribed in Stefansson, *The Three Voyages*, 62.

