Richard Chancellor Biography

Richard Chancellor

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Contents

Richard Chancellor Biography.....1

Contents.....2

Biography.....3

Biography

Richard Chancellor (died 1556) was the first Englishman to penetrate the White Sea and to establish relations with Russia.

Richard Chancellor, evidently a native of Bristol, acquired geographical and maritime proficiency from the explorer Sebastian Cabot and the geographer John Dee. Cabot had always been interested in making a voyage to Asia through the Arctic, and for this purpose King Edward VI chartered an association of English merchants in 1552-1553, with the Duke of Northumberland as principal patron. They hoped not only to discover a Northeast Passage but also to find a market for English woolen cloth.

Sir Hugh Willoughby was given three ships for the search, and Chancellor went as second in command. A Norwegian coastal storm separated them; Willoughby, with two ships, sailed east and discovered Novaya Zemlya but died with all his men on the Lapland coast. Chancellor, with the ship *Edward Bonaventure,* found the entrance to the White Sea and anchored at the port of Archangel. Englishmen had visited Russia earlier, but all recent contact had been through the German merchants of the Hanseatic League. Leaving the *Edward* at Archangel, Chancellor traveled overland to Moscow, where he was favorably received by Ivan the Terrible. The Czar seemed glad to help in breaking the Hanseatic trading monopoly.

When Chancellor returned to England in the summer of 1554, King Edward was dead, and his successor, Mary, had executed Northumberland for attempting to place Lady Jane Grey on the throne. No stigma attached to Chancellor, and the Muscovy Company, as the association now was called, sent him again to the White Sea in 1555. On this voyage he learned what had happened to Willoughby, recovered his papers, and found out about the discovery of Novaya Zemlya. Chancellor spent the summer of 1555 dealing with the Czar, organizing trade, and trying to learn how China might be reached by the northern route.

In 1556 Chancellor departed for England, taking with him the first Russian ambassador to his country. They left Archangel in autumn; the *Edward* reached the Scottish coast but was wrecked at Pitlago, where Chancellor lost his life. The Russian envoy survived to reach London. Chancellor had found a way to Russia, and though in time it was superseded by a better one it remained for years the only feasible route for the English.