John Davis Encyclopedia Article

John Davis

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1550?-1605

English navigator and explorer who went in search of the Northwest Passage from Europe to the Pacific. Davis was born near Dartmouth, in Devon. He fell in love with the sea as a child, and as an adult became convinced that he could navigate around North America to reach the Far East from Europe. He persuaded the British monarchy, under Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603), to sponsor his journey. They agreed, and in 1585 Davis began his first expedition. He made three unsuccessful attempts to locate the Northwest Passage, in 1585, 1586, and 1587. On his third voyage, Davis attempted to navigate the Strait of Magellan, but was prevented from doing so by bad weather. On his way back to England in 1592 he discovered the Falkland Islands. In addition to his noteworthy seamanship, Davis authored several books on navigation, including *The Seaman's Secrets* (1594) and *The World's Hydrographical Description* (1595). He also invented the back-staff and double quadrant, or Davis's quadrant, which was used for navigation until the eighteenth century. Davis was killed in 1605 by Japanese pirates near Sumatra.