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Voyagers and Translators in Elizabethan England: Richard Hakluyt, John Florio and Renaissance Travel Collections

Recently scholars have devoted new attention to the role played by Italian Protestant reformers in the intellectual and religious history of the early modern British Isles. Among the most famous of these is the Italian lexicographer and translator John Florio, known for his Anglo-Italian dictionaries and for his translation of Michel de Montaigne’s *Essais*. Far less attention has been given to Florio’s early career, marked by his collaboration with the English geographer Richard Hakluyt in order to translate Jacques Cartier’s *Brief récit*. This paper focuses on Florio’s first translation in the light of Elizabethan travel literature, while examining also how the Italian reformers participated in the Elizabethan discussions about Atlantic colonial expansion, arguing for the necessity of opposing the Spanish Empire in both the Old world and the New.

In recent years scholars have devoted new attention to the role played by Italian Protestant reformers in the intellectual and religious history of the early modern British Isles. One of the key figures in the reception of the continental Renaissance in Elizabethan and early Stuart England was the Italian lexicographer and translator John Florio, known especially for his Anglo-Italian dictionaries and for his translation of Michel de Montaigne’s *Essais*. Far less attention has been dedicated to Florio’s early career, marked by his collaboration with the English geographer Richard Hakluyt. The aim of this paper is to examine Florio’s first translation and to contextualize it within Elizabethan travel literature. The encounter between Florio and Hakluyt deserves further attention also because it sheds light on the Italian Protestant reformers’ involvement in disseminating the geographical literature of the Italian Renaissance outside of Italy. Looking closely at the Elizabethan discussions over Atlantic colonial expansion, the Italian reformers participated actively in the controversies that erupted in late sixteenth-century Protestant Europe regarding the necessity of opposing the Spanish Empire in both the Old World and the New.

Translating Voyages

In his dedication to Philip Sidney in the *Divers voyages*, his first collection of travel writings published in London in 1582, the English geographer Richard Hakluyt vigorously complained that his countrymen did not take an interest in the new geographical horizons as readily as the inhabitants of Spain and
Portugal did. One century after its discovery, England did not yet have a single colony in the New World: ‘I marvaille not a little […] that since the first discoverie of America […] after so great conquests and plantings of the Spaniardes and Portingales there, that wee of Englane could never have the grace to set fast footing in such fertill and temperate places, as are left as yet unpossessed of them’.\(^1\) By the 1580s, with the exception of Richard Eden’s works and Thomas Nicholas’ translation of Francisco López de Gómara’s *Historia general de las Indias*, very little was available in English on North America. Hakluyt’s collection was intended therefore to satisfy the growing demand for geographical information by the English audience, starting with the dedicatee of the *Divers voyages*. It was not a coincidence that Michael Lok’s map of the Northwest Passage was also dedicated to Sidney.\(^2\) Obsessed by ‘that heroical design of invading and possessing America’, the author of the *Arcadia* had every intention to join Francis Drake’s expedition, and it was only Queen Elizabeth’s enjoinment that stopped him.\(^3\) In the *Defence of poetry*, not published until 1595 but drafted in the early 1580s, Sidney had indeed already referred to the New World, ‘where no writing is’, and to the American Indians’ capacity for keeping record of the past orally, through ‘songs, which they call areytos’.\(^4\)


