

Sir Walter Raleigh

Most Americans know of Sir Walter Raleigh, the powerful court favorite of Queen Elizabeth I of England, as a legendary, almost mythical figure. We recognize Raleigh as a significant historic figure, an important sixteenth century explorer and founder who organized and financed the earliest English expeditions to the mid-Atlantic coast of the newly discovered American continent. For years, America's childhood history books portrayed a suave Raleigh in the role of a courtly gallant, spreading his cloak over a wide puddle lying in the path of his beloved Queen as she strolls through an English woodland. His flamboyant gesture seeks to protect the royal ankle from even the tiniest spattering of mud.

Without a doubt, Raleigh's accomplishments as gentleman, soldier, colonizer, privateer, poet, dandy, and courtier made England ring with his name within his lifetime, while his place in U.S. history is assured.



Yet, notwithstanding Raleigh's achievements and the myths of his heroics, a startling truth must be brought to the attention of persons interested as much in the realities of history as in its legends. That startling truth is that Raleigh's exploits were launched as a result of leverage gained through his wanton acts of brutality and plundering in Ireland, for which he was rewarded with seized Irish lands. And it must be recognized that his life was informed in large measure by a burning contempt for Catholicism. As a matter of poetic justice, it was precisely this contempt that brought him to ignominious end.

It is sometimes pleaded in defense of Raleigh's violations of Ireland that his profound anti-Catholicism was imposed on him as a small boy in staunchly Protestant Hayes-Barton, his birthplace (1552) in the West Country of Devon. But history shows that as he matured, his hatred grew by leaps and seemed never mollified by reason.

In the cavernous, multi-gabled farmhouse of his birth he spent a comfortable early life reveling in his tendentious nurturing. It took root and grew as he sat under the high-pitched roof absorbing day and night his household's bitter reactions to the anti-Protestant edicts of the then reigning Catholic Queen Mary. Daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, and embittered wife of Catholic Spain's absentee King Phillip II, Mary tried to submit England to the Pope's influence during her short tenure. Seemingly

turning on her own people, she jailed and executed scores of prominent Protestants on the grounds of heresy. Some of these persons were indirect acquaintances of Raleigh's father. Young Walter developed a permanent loathing of Catholicism at a tender age while listening to his father's condemnations of these jailings and executions.

It comes as no surprise then that, in 1568, when the call went out in Protestant Devon for aid to the flagging Huguenot fortunes in the French religious wars, which had been raging across the Channel, the sixteen-year-old Walter Raleigh eagerly volunteered. He soon joined the body of West Country gentlemen who rallied to board "commission ships" to cross over and fight to the death in aid of their sacred cause.

So it was that the intrepid teenager Walter Raleigh spent four of his formative years fighting with Protestant leader Admiral Coligny, energetically battling Catholics in fierce support of the Huguenot interests. Among the youngest of the participants, Raleigh operated without the official authority and guarantee of the Crown. His reckless ardor in this respect particularly pleased Elizabeth. She recognized that Raleigh and his comrades in the invading volunteer brigade of patriotic English Protestants were risking summary execution as terrorist combatants, if captured.

The 20-year-old warrior returned unscathed from his French adventures well experienced in search and destroy warfare and full of confidence and glory. Thus was the stage set for Raleigh's natural ascendancy to heroic stature, versed and rehearsed as he was in the art of violent engagement of Roman Catholic adherents on their home soil.

In the summer of 1580, Ireland was simmering in discord and discontent. Elizabeth worried that the implanted Isle's increasing instability (which heretofore had been a mere distraction for her) might soon explode into a major drain on her resources. She discussed with her main advisors the possibility of sending some brigades across to regularize the situation. Raleigh was among those proposed to lead the effort. This idea immediately appealed to the soldier in Raleigh. Given his predilection for enjoying Catholic blood, he saw the island of Ireland beckoning.



Clearly in the eyes of Elizabeth and her coterie, the dauntless young hero was an ideal choice to be among the leaders in teaching some needed lessons to the unprotestant natives of Ireland, whom

they regarded as politically dangerous, impudent, restless and primitive. Adding to their concerns was their realization that the ancient Statutes of Kilkenny were being increasingly ignored. The statutes, which had been enacted hundreds of years earlier by English and Anglo-Norman occupiers, established a permanent system of legal and social apartheid to keep the natives down.

Moreover, the Crown was distressed because certain members of the implanted nobility had for some time been daring to protest the systemic colonialist degradations going on around them. For example, certain Anglo-Norman families, such as the de Burghs, the Fitzgeralds, the Butlers and the Ormonds whose ancestors had come over with the first waves of invaders, had become inculturated to the extent that their sympathies and instincts were unacceptably Irish. Certain branches of these families had become fierce defenders of the integrity of Ireland, the land of their birth. Consequently, it was becoming clear to Elizabeth that intervention and supervision were called for.

Throughout sixteenth-century England, the Irish were assumed to be universally disloyal to the Crown. They were seen to consort with Spaniards and Italians. Indeed, many English believed that the Irish supported the Papacy primarily because it was politically anti-English. And aside from politics, an immense cultural scorn of the Irish people ran through English public opinion. Irish people were quite simply regarded as savages. Upon his arrival, Raleigh's attitude toward them clearly reflected that mind set.

For example, according to Robert Lacey, a leading British Raleigh scholar,

"When he went to the jungles of South America, Walter Raleigh was to treat the naked and hostile indigenous people of the Guiana swamps with more respect and kindness than he ever showed the Irish ."

When Raleigh landed in Cork, he almost immediately made his presence felt by hanging, drawing and quartering James Fitzgerald, a descendant of a settler family who had "gone native," or so Raleigh had been informed. Later that summer, responding in vengeance, the Fitzgerald family murdered Sir Peter Carew, who was a member of Raleigh's brigade and Raleigh's first cousin— ambushing him far out in the Irish countryside away from the protection of the English garrison.

This eye-for-an-eye retribution by an implanted noble family hostile to the governance from London and sympathetic to Irish autonomy seems to have set off the short-tempered Raleigh in a most horrifying manner. His depredations continued and intensified. That autumn, a party of Spanish

and Italian mercenaries landed at Smerwick (St. Mary's Town) off the coast of Munster near Dingle Bay. They had been commissioned by the Pope to strengthen the Irish revolt against the cruel anti-Catholic administration of the island by its masters at Westminster. What ensued is best conveyed by another quote from Robert Lacey:

"It was the good fortune of the English that these foreigners provided the sort of help that the Irish rebels did not need. The Irish strength in their guerilla war was the ability of raiding parties to lay their ambushes and then to disburse into the woods and marshes. There was no single focus that their pursuers could follow, no fortress that they could siege or destroy. But this elaborately armed phalanx of foreign soldiers was anything but a quick-moving guerilla band and, if possible, was still worse suited to Irish conditions than the English, for they knew even less about the terrain and they could not even speak a language that Irish sympathizers might understand. Isolated out on the Smerwick peninsula, the unfortunate foreigners quickly prepared a temporary fort for themselves and "dug in" preparing for a face-to face confrontation."

After four days of bombardment by Raleigh's cannons and muskets, the makeshift fort, hopelessly isolated, capitulated on November 9, 1580. There were more than four hundred Spaniards and Italians inside, plus over a hundred Irish men and women. Although white surrender flags and cries of "misericordia" had issued forth late in that day from the collapsing makeshift fort, Raleigh and his men decided to slaughter all of its occupants—allegedly without discussion or hesitation. It fell to Raleigh to orchestrate the mass killings. He accomplished it with such dispatch that in a matter of hours he and his company could stand back and contemplate with satisfaction six hundred stripped corpses which the "chief of party," Lord Gray of Wilton, later described with a sigh of satisfaction as "gallant and good personages to behold."

Soon after the wholesale massacre at Smerwick, tales of Raleigh's savagery spread over Ireland like wildfire. The Smerwick abomination was followed by other cruelties by Raleigh throughout his stint in the country.

For his efficiency at bloody work, Raleigh was rewarded by the Crown with the gift of Barry Court, a ruin of a villa that formed a part of a large spread of land near Rostellan Castle. It included the whole northern side of Cork Harbor, land on which Queenstown was later built. Eventually his rights in this reward were technically extinguished when he was unable to continue funding its ongoing needs for repairs.

Walter Raleigh returned to London by autumn of 1581, with Ireland considerably more quiescent. And, as Lacey puts it, he was "reinforced by his reputation as a useful if self proclaimed pundit on Irish affairs." The Queen began to become deeply impressed by his tactical and strategic thinking. Sir Robert Naunton tells us that, "He had gotten the Queen's ear in a trice and she began to be taken with his elocution and loved to hear his reasons to her demands on every kind of question."

It seems then that his whole, ruthless Irish adventure had prepared him for the most critical battlefield of his life– the court of Queen Elizabeth. Raleigh was destined to win greatly on that field– for which, in the eyes of many historians, he was politically launched primarily by his outrages against the people of Ireland

After the death of his patron Elizabeth, Raleigh's anti-Catholicism became a burden for Elizabeth's successors, the House of Stuart. Cultivating the Catholic Spanish regime for tactical reasons, James I acceded to the request of the Spanish ambassador to charge Raleigh with treason. Raleigh was convicted and beheaded in the Palace Yard on October 29, 1618 on the orders of James I. Like all those executed for treason, his head was displayed on a pike in the Yard. It is said that Raleigh's final request before ascending the scaffolding to the block was for permission to smoke a last pipe of Virginia tobacco. It was granted.

Margaret Irwin has observed in *The Great Lucifer- A Portrait of Sir Walter Raleigh*, that,

"Raleigh's cruelty, swift and relentless, has left no such shuddering horror round his name in Ireland as that of Cromwell in the next century. "

Maybe the time has come to consider whether a closer parallel needs to be made.

(Written by Martin W. McCormack, 2006)

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