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PATRIOT OR TRAITOR: The Life and Death of Sir Walter Raleigh

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In a crowded field, was there a more swashbuckling Elizabethan than Sir Walter Raleigh?

Anna Beer, his latest biographer, thinks that the legend of Raleigh spreading his cloak over a puddle for Elizabeth I to walk on may have some truth, so consistent is it with his flamboyant, image-conscious self-conduct. His portraits glint with dark allure, making it easy to see why he became one of Elizabeth's favourites; but there was much more to him than good looks and skilful courtiership. As soldier, mariner, explorer, and coloniser, he was a man of action; but he was also a thinker, who studied mathematics and science with his protégé Thomas Harriot, voiced sceptical views, and seemed to many contemporaries to flirt with atheism. His literary output included innovative poetry and – never one to be unambitious – a *History of the World*. Yet his multiple enterprises and hyperactivity were punctuated by periods of depression and despair, and he provoked a widespread hostility which led him to lengthy confinement in the Tower of London and a traitor's death.

This prismatic personality is vividly evoked by Beer's narrative. Born in 1554 into a Devon gentry family, Raleigh spent his early adulthood in military and naval ventures, including overseeing the brutal massacre of surrendered enemies at the siege of Smerwick in Ireland in 1580. Over the next decade he rose to high favour at court, becoming Captain of the Guard and occupant of the magnificent Durham House on the Strand, with extensive estates elsewhere including Sherborne Castle in Devon and a large slice of the English plantation in Munster.

The Irish plantations were England's first attempt at colonialism, but Raleigh's aspirations ranged further afield. Following his knighthood in 1585, he organised a series of expeditions to establish the colony of Virginia in the New World. From the first of these Harriot wrote a fascinating account of the Algonquin peoples of Ossomocomuck, illustrated by striking watercolours by John White. Although their primary goal was of course conquest and exploitation, Raleigh and his associates also took an intellectual interest in the language and culture of the indigenous Americans.

However, attempts to found a settlement at Roanoke ended catastrophically with the mysterious disappearance of the colonists, and this was not the only endeavour by Raleigh that began to go off course. His success at court relied heavily on his eloquent poetic veneration of the Queen as an infinitely desirable, serenely unattainable mistress: 'In heaven queen she is among the spheres, / She mistress-like makes all things to be pure; / Eternity in her oft change she bears; / She beauty is, by her the fair endure.' But love of a less ethereal kind interrupted his seemingly unstoppable ascent: in 1591 Bess Throckmorton, one of the Gentlewomen of the Privy Chamber, became pregnant by Raleigh, and they married secretly. When news of the marriage and their son's birth broke the next spring, Raleigh and Bess were committed to the Tower of London, since, at the Elizabethan court, personal betrayal of the Queen was equivalent to political treachery. This is probably when Raleigh composed one of his most notable poems, 'The Ocean's Love to Cynthia', lamenting his loss of the Queen's favour.

Fortunately for Raleigh, ships sponsored by him returned from Panama having captured a treasure-laden Spanish galleon, and the offer of cash to the Crown secured his release in September 1592. Bess and her baby son Damerei – named after an ancestor with royal connections – were less fortunate, remaining in the Tower, where Damerei seems to have died of plague. In December Bess was finally released and allowed to return to

Sherborne, where the following autumn she gave birth to a second son, Walter, known as Wat.

Seeing the effectiveness of New-World riches in advancing his cause, Raleigh set sail in 1595 for Guiana (part of present-day Venezuela) in quest for El Dorado, the fabled city of gold. He returned without the promised bounty, but with a sensational account of the trials and thrills of his journey. As he and his men toiled up the Orinoco by canoe, it grew 'dark as pitch, and the river began so to narrow itself, and the trees to hang over from side to side, as we were driven with arming swords to cut a passage through those branches that covered the water'. What they found, however, was less a heart of darkness than a land of wonders, where the 'strange thunder' of vast waterfalls led them from one breathtaking vista to the next, and there were 'birds of all colours, some carnation, some crimson, orange tawny, purple, green'.

Raleigh's hope in publishing his gripping travel narrative, entitled *The Discovery of the Large, Rich, and Beautiful Empire of Guiana*, was to inspire his Queen and compatriots to further expeditions and imperial conquest. They would find in Guiana a realisation of the mythical golden age, with 'rich and beautiful cities, ... temples adorned with golden images, ... sepulchres filled with treasure ...; it hath so many plains, clear rivers, and abundance of pheasants, partridges, quails, rails, cranes, herons, and all other fowl'. However, his rapturous prose failed to recruit others to share his vision, and for the rest of the reign he clung on insecurely at court, competing strenuously with his rivals the Earl of Essex and Sir Robert Cecil. On Elizabeth's death in 1603 his fall was swift. The new king, James I, had formed an unfavourable opinion of Raleigh even before arriving in London, and quickly stripped him of the captaincy of the guard, his trade monopolies, and Durham House. By July, Raleigh was back in the Tower, charged with treasonous conspiracy.

Raleigh and other suspects were transferred to Winchester for trial and execution, and Beer opens her book with his preparations for death in his prison cell there, teasing the reader

with the implication that this will be the end of his story. However, nearly two hundred pages later, after her account of Raleigh's Elizabethan years, we learn that Winchester in 1603 was not the end: just before the execution, James spared Raleigh's life. Even so, Raleigh was to remain confined to the Tower and attainted, that is, legally dead.

Between these two framing accounts of the scaffold at Winchester, Beer organises the Elizabethan portion of Raleigh's career thematically rather than chronologically, under the headings Soldier, Courtier, Coloniser, Sailor, and so on. While this is effective in giving a sense of his many spheres of activity, it can be confusing, forcing leaps forwards and backwards in time. It also means that the pivotal disgrace of 1592 is addressed in a fractured way: the 'Courtier' chapter is oddly silent about it; then it is narrated in the 'Lover' chapter; but the great poem produced by the crisis, 'The Ocean's Love to Cynthia', is not discussed until the chapter on Raleigh as 'Writer'. Nevertheless Bess, Lady Raleigh, the catalyst for her husband's first downfall and the subject of an earlier biography by Beer, is a recurring and vigorous presence throughout the book. Beer generally modernises her quotations from original documents, but she makes an exception for Bess's appealingly idiosyncratic spelling, as when she writes to Robert Cecil in 1603 to plead for her husband as 'onn that is more worti of fafo than mani eles; having worthe, and onnesti, and wisdom to be a frind'.

Raleigh lived for a further fifteen years after the 1603 cliff-hanger at Winchester, and the final third of the book covers this Jacobean period, which *is* organised chronologically. The one-time roamer of the high seas is confined to the Tower for thirteen years, but still tries to participate in politics, writing letters and topical opinion-pieces; he also writes his extraordinary *History of the World*, a work of about a million words beginning with the creation of the world and covering ancient history (more volumes were intended to follow). He outlives his rivals: Essex, notoriously, was executed for treason in 1601; Cecil died of illness in 1612. However, another death was disastrous for Raleigh: many of his political

tracts aimed to attract the favour of Prince Henry, James's eldest son and the great hope of those disaffected with his father's regime, but the young Prince himself died in November 1612.

Raleigh, so successful (at least at first) as an Elizabethan, struggles to navigate the Jacobean regime and culture, and his life becomes a somewhat weary trudge through failure and despair. Even when he persuades the King to release him in 1616 for a final quest for the elusive El Dorado, there are delays, mass illnesses and deaths among the ships' crews, and foul weather: 'I was myself so wet as the water ran in at my neck, and out at my knees, as if it had been poured on me with pails'. When he finally reaches Guiana, Raleigh learns that he is not forgotten: he writes to Bess, 'To tell you that I might be here King of the Indians were a vanity: but my name hath still lived among them'. This moment of gratification, however, is followed by catastrophe and grief: their son Wat, aged twenty-four, is killed in military action against a Spanish settlement. As Raleigh comes to realise that all along James has been negotiating behind his back with the Spanish, his men desert and the expedition collapses. Raleigh tells Bess that his 'brains are broken', and returns home once more empty-handed, to face controversy and charges of misconduct. This time his incarceration in the Tower does end in execution, on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1618.

This is an engaging biography aimed at non-academic readers, with no notes and a relatively short list of works consulted (all either secondary works or modern editions of Raleigh's writings). There are a few local errors: traitors are repeatedly 'hung', not 'hanged'; the neo-Platonic philosopher Marsilio Ficino is identified as a love-poet; and a chronology at the end of the book ends abruptly in 1603, as if that really were the year of Raleigh's death. Readers hoping for tales of potatoes and tobacco will be disappointed: almost at the book's end, Beer mentions briefly that these were in fact introduced to England by others. What we do get in abundance is a sense of Raleigh's restless energy, especially in his early career. One

September, notes Beer, he travels from Cornwall to the court in London and thence to Ireland, no easy feat in the conditions of the time.

There is also welcome emphasis on Raleigh as a writer, with frequent quotation from his writings giving a forceful sense of his command of language and resonant style. Writing to King James in 1603 to plead for his life, Raleigh knows how to seize his reader's attention: 'This being the first letter which ever your Majesty received from a dead man ...'. Beer is right to give much of the 'Writer' chapter to 'The Ocean's Love to Cynthia', a compelling, anguished, enigmatic work. Raleigh, as acknowledged by his friend Edmund Spenser, had pioneered the idealisation of Elizabeth as Cynthia or Diana the moon-goddess in celebratory poems such as 'Praised be Diana's fair and harmless light'. The role of virgin-huntress, ruler of the waves, and endlessly self-renewing heavenly sphere had obvious aptness to Elizabeth. Now, however, banished from her affection, Raleigh explored the dark side of the moon. Elizabeth's nickname for him was her 'Water', so he represented himself as the Ocean, in thrall to her fickle powers. He writes of his 'forsaken heart' and 'withered mind'; he feels as if, at twilight, 'We should begin by such a parting light / To write the story of all ages past, / And end the same before the approaching night. / Such is again the labour of my mind', lines which uncannily anticipate his later effort to write a history of the world while under sentence of death. In an age when many authors, in sonnets, religious meditations, and dramatic soliloquies, were articulating complex mental states, 'The Ocean's Love to Cynthia' is among the most intense and embittered expressions of psychological turmoil. Raleigh was an explorer not only of far-flung territories across the globe, but also of inner space.

Beer does justice to Raleigh's multifaceted character and eventful life in this vivacious and highly readable account. She presents Raleigh's actions and personality as subjects for debate that evade firm conclusions, and we may feel that we never quite get an answer to the question in the book's title. Was Raleigh a patriot or a traitor? However, an answer is implicit

throughout: he was neither patriot nor traitor, but pretty much always out for himself; a pursuit which produced not only acts of ruthlessness, but also some of the most remarkable exploits and powerful literature of his age.

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