

Sir Walter Raleigh (1552 - 1618)

Walter Raleigh was an English navigator and adventurer. His manners, good looks and charm won him the favour of Queen Elizabeth I, who gave him gifts of land and licenses to trade.

Raleigh was born in Devon, England. Raleigh's family was strongly Protestant and experienced a number of near-escapes during the reign of Queen Mary I of England. Once Raleigh's father had to hide in a tower to avoid being killed. Thus, during his childhood, Raleigh developed a hatred of Catholicism. Between 1579 and 1583, Raleigh took part in the suppression of the Desmond Rebellions. He was present at the siege of Smerwick, where he oversaw the slaughter of some 700 Italian soldiers after they had surrendered unconditionally.



In 1584 he organized expedition to explore and colonize Florida. Raleigh's plan for colonization in North Carolina and Virginia ended in failure at Roanoke Island, but paved the way for subsequent colonies. This led to the founding of Virginia, but none of colonists maintain the area. In 1596, Raleigh wounded during the capture of Cadiz.

Raleigh fell briefly into disgrace when he was discovered to be having an affair with one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, Elizabeth Throckmorton, who he later married. When, during the following year, the unauthorized marriage was discovered, the Queen ordered Raleigh imprisoned and Bess dismissed from court. Once at a dinner party at Horsey's, there was a heated discussion about religion which later gave rise to charges of atheism against Raleigh.

In 1595 he sailed to the West Indies looking for gold, but found none. After Elizabeth's death, Raleigh was treated with suspicion by the new king James I, and imprisoned on a false charge of treason. He was released in 1616 to lead another expedition to the West Indies, but on his return he was executed on the same charge of treason. In 1616, during the initial attack on San Thome, Raleigh's son Walter was struck by a bullet and killed.

Raleigh was beheaded with an axe at Whitehall on 29 October 1618. "Let us dispatch," he asked his executioner. After he was allowed to see the axe that would behead him, he mused: "This is a sharp Medicine, but it is a Physician for all diseases and miseries". Sir Walter's final words were: "Strike man, strike!" His execution was seen by many, both at the time and since, as unnecessary and unjust.