

# WHAT TO DO ABOUT HEROES OR HOW TO DO WITHOUT THEM

## Lessons from Elizabethan History

An Essay by Charles Sullivan, PhD

Presented to the Chit Chat Club

San Francisco, California

January 10, 2023

Copyright © 2023 Charles Sullivan

Queen Elizabeth I inherited a small, vulnerable, poorly financed kingdom from her Tudor ancestors. Initially it consisted only of England and Wales; it was internally divided along religious and political lines; and it was severely threatened with competition or conquest by Spain and other European powers. But gradually, during Elizabeth's eventful reign (1558-1603) her beloved island monarchy was transformed into a more coherent, confident nation with increasing prosperity, imperial ambitions, and some regional control of the seas. Who brought about this transformation? The Queen herself deserves much of the credit. "Elizabeth played a centrally important role in political life, not as a passive object of aspiration and devotion in the hands of her courtiers and ministers, but as an active player in decision making." Active though she was, however, Elizabeth had to function within the established hierarchy of social classes, guided yet

restricted by a confusing and sometimes conflicting array of laws, customs, allegiances, political factions, family ties, and individual personalities. She could not search widely for talent, nor simply recruit the most capable people to serve her. Instead, to fill the higher, more prestigious positions in government, she was expected to (and usually did) make her selections from a very privileged male aristocracy consisting of approximately sixty peers of the realm and three hundred knights at the beginning of her reign.<sup>1</sup> Yet when it came to serving her more directly, in England or abroad, Elizabeth sometimes selected promising gentlemen of lesser ranks and promoted them later to knighthood or the nobility (or both) if she was pleased with their performance. In this short essay for the Chit Chat Club, ten examples will be briefly discussed:

(1) Stalwart Supporters: Cecil/Burghley; Walsingham.

(2) Early Favorites: Dudley/Leicester; Hatton.

(3) Knights Errant: Gilbert; Grenville; Drake.

(4) The Perfect Knight: Sidney.

(5) Late Favorites: Raleigh; Devereux/Essex.

Her chosen few did not all adhere to the same standards of knightly service or chivalrous conduct, nor did Elizabeth always wish them to; at different times she singled out different kinds of men for different uses, including her personal entertainment and comfort.<sup>2</sup> The results, for England, were somewhat mixed.

## **1. STALWART SUPPORTERS**

**Sir William Cecil** (1520-1598; ER created 1<sup>st</sup> Baron **Burghley** 1572) is a prime example of those wise, older, and sincerely devoted supporters that

every ruler needs, particularly when young, insecure, and inexperienced like Elizabeth Tudor at age 25. A sober-looking but happily married man, the father of several children, Cecil had been elected to parliament as a “knight of the shire” in 1553. Recruited by Dudley’s father to administer Princess Elizabeth’s lands, he did not become involved in glamorous activities such as jousting, dancing, poetry writing, or flirtation with the Queen and other ladies of the court, nor did he serve her as a warrior or an explorer. Instead, being habitually cautious and pragmatic in most respects,<sup>3</sup> he gradually acquired a firm grip on the business of government and held it for many years, as Secretary of State, Lord High Treasurer, and otherwise, skillfully reconciling Elizabeth’s ideas with what he conceived to be her best interests and thereby earning her unshakable trust.

On at least one occasion, however, Elizabeth made an important decision without consulting him: she approved Francis Drake’s bold expedition into the Pacific in 1578, which infuriated Spain (as Burghley would have feared) and yielded a much-needed shipload of treasure for her and other investors. Having accumulated a fortune of his own by more conventional methods, Burghley refused to accept any part of these riches for himself; however he did use the Queen’s share to pay England’s foreign debts (which were large).

Born a “commoner” with roots in ancient Welsh families, Lord Burghley was both down-to-earth and immensely proud; his portrait in the Bodleian Library at Oxford has him riding on a mule, in preference to a knightly charger, though we notice he is clutching what appears to be a Tudor rose, and his “Sitsylt” (Cecil) coat of arms is surrounded by the Order of the Garter, an exalted level of knighthood which the Queen had conferred upon

him in 1572.<sup>4</sup> Burghley was no hero. Elizabeth never made much of him at court, during all the years of his faithful service, but she visited him frequently as he lay dying in 1598, and it's said that when he was no longer able to lift a spoon, she fed him.

**Francis Walsingham** (c. 1532-1590; ER knighted 1577) also rose from obscurity to pursue a distinguished career in government, largely behind the scenes. Recruited and subsequently advanced by Burghley, he too became devoted to Elizabeth, but served her primarily in the darker regions of espionage, foreign intrigue, and what today might be called counter-terrorism. He and his numerous hired agents protected the Queen from mortal dangers, most notably the assassination conspiracy for which Mary Queen of Scots was eventually tried and convicted in 1587.

Walsingham often wore black clothing, with no ornaments other than a cherished cameo of Queen Elizabeth.<sup>5</sup> Although she may not have been especially fond of him as a man, she undoubtedly valued his dedication and accomplishments. After he succeeded in negotiating a defensive alliance with France against Spain in 1572, Elizabeth presented him with a unique oil painting, suitably inscribed, of herself and her Tudor ancestors.<sup>6</sup> The following year Walsingham was appointed her principal secretary, an influential post he held until his death in 1590.

Even as he focused on complicated affairs in Europe, Walsingham became a leading advocate of the growing English navy and its potential uses for exploration and aggression abroad, as well as for defense at home. Less cautious than Burghley, he wanted England to acquire a substantial share of

the “New World” in spite of Spain’s exclusive claims, so he supported the efforts of Drake, Raleigh and others in that direction. He was also a strong if unlikely believer in the knightly tradition and its code of honor, as epitomized by his heroic son in law, Sir Philip Sidney, the “perfect knight.” When it turned out that this young warrior (fatally wounded in 1586) had died almost penniless, Walsingham paid all of Sidney’s debts and funeral expenses, rather than allow any shame to be attached to his memory. Just three years later Walsingham himself died penniless or nearly so, having supported some of his many secret agents and spies out of his own pocket because the Queen could not or would not pay those expenses which he considered essential. “Intelligence,” he liked to say, “is never too dear.”

## **2. EARLY FAVORITES**

**Sir Robert Dudley** (1532-1588; ER elevated as 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of **Leicester** 1564) was one of several men widely recognized as Elizabeth’s “favorites,” not necessarily her lovers or potential husbands, but sophisticated and attractive courtiers with whom she could enjoy dancing, flirtation, companionship, even brief periods of intimacy or near-intimacy within the many constraints and obligations of her very public life as Queen. Dudley was the earliest of them, already a close friend before her coronation in 1558. He stepped easily into the role of leading courtier, having been brought up as the son of a Duke, familiar with the ways of royalty and well schooled in knightly activities including horsemanship and jousting. Elizabeth doted on him at first, using pet names such as “Eyes” and “bonny sweet Robin,” and showering him with gifts of real estate and money, plus many special tokens of affection, as well as appointments to her Privy Council and other

positions. He had already been elected to parliament as a knight of the shire as early as 1551; she made him a Knight of the Garter in 1559.

But Leicester's privileged status as the Queen's favorite did not last many years. When he became jealous of a possible rival (Sir Thomas Heneage) in 1565, Elizabeth quickly put him in his place: "*God's death, my Lord, I have wished you well, but my favour is not so locked up for you that others shall not participate thereof. And if you think to rule here, I will take a course to see you forthcoming [i.e., departing]. I will have but one mistress and no master.*"<sup>7</sup> At some point, Elizabeth must have realized that she could afford to play a very one-sided game of courtly romance, favoring whichever man she preferred at any given moment, and letting other favorites like it or lump it. Thus Leicester had to put up with Heneage for a while, with Hatton for a longer while, and so on. Motivated initially by political ambition (even the possibility of marriage to her) as well as genuine affection for the Queen, and reassured later by her intermittent expressions of the strongest feelings towards him, Leicester remained loyal to her until his death in 1588, just after the Armada victory.

In what way did Leicester help the Queen to gain and use her royal power successfully? He was no hero—not a daring explorer nor an outstanding soldier, hardly a resourceful diplomat, but in his role as her earliest and perhaps dearest favorite, he enabled Elizabeth to endure and even to enjoy for several decades her controversial unmarried status of "Virgin Queen." Thanks to Leicester and other special favorites, she was never compelled to accept any man as master.

**Christopher Hatton** (1540-1591; ER knighted 1577) was evidently recruited in 1561 by the sprightly Queen herself, who observed him at court dancing an intricate, athletic step known as the *galliard* that she particularly enjoyed. Soon enough, Hatton was one of her regular dance partners, and a frequently outspoken admirer of her grace, beauty, and other attributes. Elizabeth appointed him a “gentleman pensioner” (one of 50 body guards), then a gentleman of the privy chamber, and later captain of the yeomen of the guard. Thus he was seldom very far away from her, day or night, and there were rumors of sexual activity (as there were regarding several other favorites of the Queen). But Hatton cultivated the reputation of a model courtier, unmarried and childless, presumably chaste, one who adored Elizabeth to the exclusion of all other women and would rather die than be separated from her for more than a day or two. This was his chivalric pose, at any rate, and he seemingly never wore out his welcome to the Queen’s innermost circles of advisers and confidantes. He was appointed Lord Chancellor in 1587 and Knight of the Garter in 1588.

For modern historians, an interesting measure of favoritism on Elizabeth’s part might be how often (if ever) and for how long she permitted certain nobles, knights, and lesser gentlemen to make dangerous journeys abroad for purposes of exploration, privateering, or warfare. That was generally the easiest way for Elizabethan males to gain the reputation of “heroes,” but also the surest way to deprive the Queen of their companionship (temporarily if not permanently). So Leicester and Raleigh, for instance, were often kept at home; neither ventured to North America during her lifetime, Raleigh only after her death. Essex and Sidney tried to go abroad, had to be brought back unwillingly from unauthorized travels. More expendable “knights errant”

such as Gilbert, Grenville, and Drake were usually permitted (sometimes ordered) to go in harm's way, and suffered accordingly. Hatton, who apparently never traveled overseas, was either denied the Queen's permission to do so, or was perhaps not so inclined. Nevertheless he remained enthusiastic about the potentialities for English trade and colonization, and he became a kind of patron saint of exploration by others, with two important books about navigation dedicated to him.<sup>8</sup>

In 1577 Hatton was one of the financial backers of Drake's expedition into the Pacific Ocean (other backers included Walsingham, Leicester, and the Queen). Drake acknowledged this by changing the name of his ship in mid-voyage from the *Pelican* (seabird, an emblem of Elizabeth as self-sacrificing nurturer of her people) to the *Golden Hinde* (female deer, a rare and undefined heraldic symbol appearing in the Hatton family's coat of arms). More than just financing, Hatton may have provided a large measure of moral support or protective cover for Drake upon his return to England in 1580. Drake was not charged with murder for the formal execution of Thomas Doughty during the voyage (Doughty having served as Hatton's personal secretary some time earlier, and then allegedly as a "spy" for Lord Burghley, who opposed this venture). Hatton's acquiescence, together with the Queen's eager acceptance of the treasure that Drake brought home for her, evidently influenced public attitudes and perceptions. So public opinion and the press (such as it was) tilted in his favor. Knighted aboard his ship as the Queen looked on, Sir Francis was not a villain (murderer, pirate, etc.) but a national hero! The Pacific Ocean was suddenly perceived as a vast new arena in which England could legitimately and effectively challenge



Spain! There were seemingly no limits to what Englishmen and English ships could do!

With his share of profits from Drake's voyage, Hatton proceeded to build what was then the largest, most elegant house in England (Holdenby, Northamptonshire, 1583), but he quixotically refused to sleep there until Elizabeth had done so, which she never did. He died insolvent in 1591, owing £56,000 to the Queen, who nevertheless afforded him an elaborate state funeral at Old St. Paul's Cathedral, London.

### **3. KNIGHTS ERRANT**

Queen Elizabeth, who never left England, occasionally authorized or even directed some of her bolder male subjects to venture overseas, seeking territorial advantage such as a "northwest passage" through the frozen Arctic region to establish trade with China, or possible sites for future colonies, while incidentally preying on Spanish shipping and ports in the Caribbean and elsewhere. In certain instances, the Queen invested her own money or included her ships in their projects; in every instance it was she who issued the licenses or other official documents, such as those giving mariners legitimacy as "privateers" (authorized agents of her government) rather than pirates.<sup>9</sup> I won't go further into the controversial subject of international piracy at this point, except to note that treasure removed from Spanish ships had usually been seized earlier from indigenous people who were unwilling subjects of the new "Spanish Empire." In the form of gold, silver, jewels, etc., specific pieces of this loot must have been difficult to identify or trace.

**Humphrey Gilbert** (c. 1537-1583; knighted 1570) entered the service of Princess Elizabeth as a young man-at-arms in 1554 or 1555, and climbed quickly through England's military ranks in the 1560s to help suppress her "uncywill" Catholic subjects in Ireland. Here is a contemporary description of Gilbert's conduct as a military officer in the service of the Queen:

"His method of waging war was to devastate the country, killing every living creature encountered by his troops. If a castle did not yield at the first demand he would accept no later submission, but would take it by assault and kill every person in it. He made the Irish lords, who came to surrender, walk to his tent between two lines of heads cut from his dead enemies, and forced them, after abject submission, to enter into bonds and put in pledges of good behaviour."<sup>10</sup>

Such brutal actions were evidently not "beyond the pale" in those days, for Gilbert was knighted in the field by his mentor and commanding officer, Sir Henry Sidney (father of Philip, the "perfect knight," below), and elected to Parliament in 1571. Although he remained the Queen's soldier at heart, hot-tempered and violent on occasion, Gilbert also proved to be an over-ambitious, greedy visionary of sorts; he devoted his later years to the idea of establishing English colonies overseas. In the 1580s he conjured up (and raised some of the financial backing for) proposals that would have given him enormous power and extensive property in North America, if they had succeeded; but somehow the conditions of wind and weather were seldom quite right for him to sail from England. After several false starts, Walsingham informed Gilbert that the Queen wished him not to accompany a proposed expedition, although she had previously approved it, because he was "a man noted of not good happ [aptitude or good fortune] by sea."<sup>11</sup>

Gilbert persevered nevertheless, living up to his knightly motto, *Mutare Vel Timero Sperno* (“I Scorn to Change or to Fear”).

Ironically, his final transatlantic voyage in 1583 would have planted a colony of loyal English Catholics at what is now Newport, Rhode Island (selected by the Queen’s advisor John Dee as the best place to start a “British Empire” in North America); but this promising effort was cut short by severe storms and disastrous errors of navigation, with Gilbert insisting on leading the way in his own tiny ship, the *Squirrel*.<sup>12</sup> He was last seen sitting on deck, reading a book, possibly the Bible or Thomas More’s *Utopia*, as the churning waters of the North Atlantic engulfed him and his hapless crew of eight.

After Gilbert’s death, his half-brother Walter Raleigh (the Queen’s favorite at the time) was permitted to take over the English attempts at settlement in North America. He soon shifted their primary focus southward from Newfoundland and “New England” to “Virginia,” seeking a more temperate climate for agriculture and a more convenient base for future “privateering” in the Caribbean. Raleigh, brighter and more stable than Gilbert, might well have succeeded where Gilbert repeatedly failed; but he was not allowed to lead these efforts himself, because of Elizabeth’s need to keep him close to her, and he lacked the resources to support them adequately from England. None of his intended colonies in America survived more than a few years.

**Richard Grenville** (c. 1542-1591; ER knighted 1577 or earlier) was Gilbert’s cousin, and had a similar background. Born in the “West Country”

(Devon), brought up in a tradition of service to the monarch, he fought in Ireland, was knighted, and elected twice to parliament. Also he manifested irrational or literally bloodthirsty tendencies from time to time, both in his public life and in private. For instance, it was said of Grenville that “while at dinner or supper, he would carouse three or four glasses of wine, and in a bravery take the glasses between his teeth and crush them in pieces and swallow them down, so that often times the blood ran out of his mouth without any harm at all unto him.”<sup>13</sup>

Grenville was eager to make his fortune abroad, like Gilbert, but he had more of an aptitude for the sea.<sup>14</sup> In 1574 he proposed (and organized some backers for) an unprecedented voyage into the Pacific Ocean, hoping to find bountiful territories unclaimed by Spain and perhaps to locate the opening of a navigable “northwest passage” through North America. This far-reaching project was rejected by Queen Elizabeth because of temporarily smoother relations with Spain’s ruler, Philip II, only to be revived in 1576-77 and given instead to Drake (a socially inferior upstart, from Grenville’s viewpoint). Deeply disappointed, Grenville tried to content himself with homely duties, serving as sheriff of Cornwall and converting Buckland Abbey (near Plymouth) into a residence fit for a knight. Drake’s triumphant return to Plymouth in 1580, with a ship’s cargo of Spanish treasure for the Queen and other investors, must have been a severe blow to Grenville’s ego. He put Buckland Abbey on the market and moved to a more obscure estate, only to learn how Drake, recently knighted, had purchased the Abbey through intermediaries with a third of the £10,000 that Elizabeth allotted to him.

In April 1585 Grenville was given a second chance for success in North America, leading an expedition to “Virginia” (present-day North Carolina) on behalf of another cousin, Walter Raleigh, who had become such a great favorite of Queen Elizabeth that he was no longer permitted to go overseas himself. Leaving 107 men “settled” at Roanoke, Grenville returned to England for additional supplies but failed to deliver them in time. Drake (homeward bound from a Caribbean raid) had stopped at Roanoke before him, in June 1586, and rescued the starving survivors.

For the next two years, as impending war with Spain made further voyages to America increasingly problematic, Grenville was assigned to work on coastal defenses against the Great Armada, whose celebrated defeat in 1588 was widely attributed to the superior seamanship of Drake and other English mariners. Grenville had been denied the chance to take part in this historic naval battle, perhaps because of his animosity towards Drake, yet he had been ordered to put his own best ships under Drake’s command.<sup>15</sup> “A man of intolerable pride and unsatiated ambition,”<sup>16</sup> Grenville must have been seething with frustration and jealousy after that. But Drake’s own career ran aground in 1590, when he and Sir John Norreys (with 130 ships and 23,000 men) mismanaged a complicated project to seize control of Portugal, plus some of the Azores Islands, from Spain. As a result of this failure, and regardless of his earlier successes, Queen Elizabeth did not give Drake another command at sea until 1595. “In the curious way in which his fortune was connected with Grenville’s, indirectly, almost as if by mutual exclusion, Drake’s reversal opened the way to Grenville’s opportunity.”<sup>17</sup>

Grenville's opportunity for heroic achievement came in 1591, when 16 English ships were sent to intercept a large convoy of Spanish treasure galleons in the Azores. Outnumbered more than 3:1, the Englishmen withdrew to fight another day—all but Grenville, in command of the *Revenge*, a vessel which had been used earlier by Drake against the Armada and was still considered the best warship in the Queen's navy. Grenville, unwilling or unable to get away, ordered his lone ship to charge into the midst of the Spanish fleet, doing much damage and drawing fire from all sides, until he had no more ammunition and only 25 men left standing on the shattered, dismasted hull. Grenville, with multiple wounds, died a few days later. His cousin Walter Raleigh, who did not personally witness this incident (because of a last-minute order from the Queen, keeping him ashore), wrote an extremely flattering account of it. Grenville's intentional sacrifice of himself and most of his crew came to be regarded as an outstanding demonstration of English heroism.<sup>18</sup> Future generations of British sailors and soldiers would be called upon to do their duty likewise, at sea or on land, in conflicts all over the world.

**Francis Drake** (c. 1540-1596; ER knighted 1581) had the humblest family origins of any of the ten Elizabethan knights discussed in this paper—his heraldic motto *Sic Parvis Magna* means “Greatness from Small Beginnings.” Yet having been recruited by Walsingham because of his aptitude for the sea and his fierce hostility towards Spain, Drake was evidently inspired by the knightly ideal of lifelong service to the sovereign. Indeed, during his famous voyage of circumnavigation (1577-80) Drake seems to have thought he was acting *in loco reginae* (to coin a phrase), and in accordance with a plan she had approved.

Some historians say that Drake was just a pirate. How should we regard him? Whether or not it was literally the Queen's commission that he displayed on occasion, Drake probably carried some form of documentary authorization from her, as all English mariners venturing into the Americas were required to do. For example, in 1584, Queen Elizabeth issued a document to Adrian Gilbert, brother of the recently deceased Sir Humphrey, which authorized him to utilize "punishment, correction or execution" to deal with mutiny and other forms of unruly behavior that might occur during a voyage.<sup>19</sup> On the strength of his "commission," which presumably had wording similar to this, Drake formally tried and executed an unruly companion (Thomas Doughty) who refused to obey his orders. Thereafter Drake had no difficulty exercising the authority he claimed as *de facto* leader of the expedition.

In the Pacific, his force now reduced to one well-armed ship and less than a hundred men, Drake was frequently able to take what he wanted (gold, silver, jewels, supplies, maps, etc.) from various Spanish vessels and port facilities. Thanks to an American scholar who later found and translated official Spanish records in Mexico City and Seville: "We now know that Drake succeeded in doing so without shedding the blood of a single Spaniard."<sup>20</sup> We also know that Drake was not tried for any crimes upon his return to England; but lately his reputation has suffered from the criticism of certain modern scholars, who claim to understand "Drake's real character and his place in history. He was a pirate, and a good one, largely because he was untroubled by a conscience that in most men would murmur against

theft or murder.”<sup>21</sup> Such views of Francis Drake as a conscienceless (or psychopathic) deviant are debatable as we learn more about the societal norms and values of England in the Elizabethan era,<sup>22</sup> when horrible torture and agonizing executions were standard procedures, often performed before a public audience. Against that 16<sup>th</sup> century background, Drake comes across as a man of purposeful action, bold but not reckless or out of control like some others discussed in this essay, who used his natural abilities, his acquired skills, and the resources available to him in serving Queen and country, sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

What about Drake’s ego? Was he self-consciously “heroic” like Grenville (taking on an entire convoy of Spanish ships) or Essex (challenging enemy commanders to single combat, instead of leading his troops into battle as expected)? Apparently not. The “greatness” in Drake’s motto refers to the significance of the results he achieved for England, especially in his voyage of 1577-80, rather than to his opinion of his own importance. His circumnavigation of the globe, though probably not planned in advance, succeeded because of a remarkable combination of good luck, good judgment at many times of decision, and determination to get the job done for the Queen. He couldn’t find the “northwest passage” through North America (because it doesn’t exist), but he did claim the territory of “Nova Albion” (probably today’s British Columbia) for Elizabeth and her successors; then he sailed the rest of the way around the world to deliver his shipload of gold, silver, and jewels to her agents in England. For his services Drake was knighted in 1581, granted an impressive coat of arms<sup>23</sup> that Elizabeth may have personally chosen for him, and given £10,000 (less than



2% of estimated total value) of the treasure he had brought home to her, more or less intact.<sup>24</sup>

These were relatively large rewards to a man of modest beginnings like Drake, but for reasons of her own the Queen refused to give him what he wanted most: permission to publish the detailed maps and notes of his geographical discoveries in the Americas, and permission to make a return voyage to the Pacific coast. He pleaded with her repeatedly but in vain. Elizabeth or her advisors may have thought it wise to keep Spain (and most of England) uncertain as to precisely where Drake had gone and what he had found (or had not found, most particularly the “northwest passage”). After the Queen’s death this uncertainty persisted until Captain Cook and others rediscovered “Nova Albion” in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and Drake’s claim was renewed, so that much of North America could eventually be added to the British Empire.<sup>25</sup>

#### **4. THE PERFECT KNIGHT**

**Philip Sidney** (1554-1586; ER knighted 1586 or earlier) was exceptionally well connected: the godson and namesake of King Philip II of Spain, the nephew of the Earl of Leicester, in whose military campaign he would be fatally wounded, the cousin of his friend the Earl of Essex, to whom he bequeathed a favorite sword, and last but not least the unrequited lover of Essex’s sister, Penelope Devereux. Prior to his early death as a gallant soldier (having given part of his body armor to a comrade in urgent need), Sidney had travelled to Paris, Vienna, Florence, and other centers of European culture, and had gained expertise in jousting, poetry, and the

rituals of romantic love; thus he was remembered (and virtually worshiped by some of his followers) as the perfect Renaissance courtier.

Essex, eager to inherit this glorious mantle, not only wore Sidney's sword but also married his widow, Walsingham's daughter, Frances. After being assured that Sidney's debts and funeral expenses, amounting to more than £6,000, would be paid (by Walsingham), Queen Elizabeth ordered the most elaborate public ceremony on record in London, with black-robed clusters of court officials, nobles, and knights in solemn procession, followed by many Englishmen of lesser status; near the end came "120 members of the Company of Grocers in their liveries, walking two and two."<sup>26</sup> Hundreds of other Londoners, many in mourning and bearing arms, brought up the rear.

Given the magnitude and splendor of his state funeral, it is surprising to learn that Elizabeth had shown somewhat less regard for Sidney during his brief lifetime; he was not one of the favorites on whom she liked to bestow personal nicknames or special tokens of affection and esteem. Why not? Perhaps this perfect courtier was simply too perfect for her taste. As a young man, Sidney had set the strictest standards of conduct for himself and others; even the Queen was not exempt from his outspoken criticism if she did something of which he disapproved, such as considering marriage to a foreigner, albeit a Frenchman of noble birth. Also, like the Queen and various other courtiers, Sidney took part (only once, and briefly) in a get-rich-quick scheme to colonize North America; but he was evidently the only one to be granted many thousands of acres of property in "New England" and then relinquish it, having concluded that greed on this scale was dishonorable. Even worse perhaps, from Elizabeth's standpoint, was a

noticeable lack of the romantic attention that she required: Sidney wrote poetry about other topics, but did not rhapsodize blindly about the Queen's (fading) beauty and (withered) charms, preferring to direct his youthful ardor and his love poems towards ladies other than her, some of them imaginary, some real.

But these were especially difficult times for the Queen. The controversial execution of her rival Mary Queen of Scots had finally taken place, only a week earlier, and a massive invasion of England was being prepared by the King of Spain, Philip II (coincidentally, Sidney's godfather, in combat with whose forces in the Netherlands he had lost his life, as mentioned earlier). Elizabeth needed to make a very convincing demonstration of national unity and strength, and in 1587, with the magnificent ceremony to mark this young warrior's death, she made it. An idealized Sidney would now serve as her emblematic warrior, the Tudor equivalent of Sir Galahad, the purest and most gallant knight at King Arthur's mythical Round Table. Thus she conveyed an impressive message to the world: Such are my heroic knights—such is my power—such is England!

## **5. LATE FAVORITES**

**Walter Raleigh** (c. 1554-1618; ER knighted 1585) might have become one of Queen Elizabeth's most effective knights errant if she had not made him one of her greatest favorites instead. The more she was attracted to Raleigh, it seems, the less she would leave him free to accomplish. But later, after she was finished with him, he accomplished very little.

Born in Devon, Raleigh was related to several of the seagoing “West Country” families (half-brother of Gilbert, cousin of Grenville and possibly Drake, etc.). He tried to reach the Americas in 1578 with one of Gilbert’s abortive efforts (stubbornly sailing as far as the Azores before having to turn back in a leaky ship) and then added to his military experience in Ireland, acquiring a mixed reputation for tactical brutality and strategic acuity.<sup>27</sup> Sent home to England in 1581 with dispatches from the front, Raleigh instantly made a favorable impression on the Queen because of his attractive (call it sexy) appearance and his astute comments about the Irish situation. Elizabeth preferred him to Leicester, Hatton, or any other “favorite” for the next several years, and spoiled him accordingly, with frequent gifts of money, real estate, and expensive clothing and accessories such as a suit of solid silver armor. Raleigh greedily took everything she gave him, and often asked for more.

1581 was a year of intense excitement about the New World and its wealth. Drake (who incidentally circumnavigated the globe) returned from the Pacific with a shipload of treasure, and Walter Raleigh briefly cultivated him, hoping to play a significant part in the next attempt to exploit Drake’s discoveries—if such a voyage were authorized. But Drake was denied this opportunity by the Queen, for reasons practical rather than personal: she correctly grasped that the Atlantic coast of America was much closer to England than the Pacific coast, and therefore more immediately profitable, because of Spain’s concentration of ill-gotten wealth in the Caribbean and vicinity. So Raleigh took advantage of his own meteoric rise as Elizabeth’s favorite of favorites. Gilbert having failed (and died) on another expedition to “New England” in 1583, Raleigh managed to promote himself as

England's leading explorer, found the resources he needed, and redirected this effort southward to a place he called "Virginia" in honor of the Queen.

But now Raleigh was held back by Elizabeth, like a precious pet on a leash. Not permitted to sail to America himself, he had to enlist his cousin Grenville and other English mariners to make the voyages for him, with men, ships, and supplies that he provided mostly from his own rather limited resources. On paper he assumed the title "Lord and Governor of Virginia" although he never actually got there in person to develop whatever he might have envisioned. Each of Raleigh's small coastal settlements died out, from lack of sufficient reinforcements and supplies, so that nothing of his imaginary "Virginia" was left in English hands when the Virgin Queen died in 1603.

Meanwhile there were other developments affecting Raleigh's status as favorite. Essex (knighted for heroic action against the Spanish forces in the Netherlands) came triumphantly home to England in 1586, and attracted much attention at court, most particularly the Queen's. Leicester her aging favorite witnessed the Queen's rousing speech to her troops at Tilbury on the eve of the "Armada" sea battle in 1588, then sickened and died. With Leicester gone, Essex easily took his place as Elizabeth's chief favorite. And in 1589 Walter Raleigh was dispatched with Drake, other leaders, and a very large force (150 ships and 20,000 men) to destroy what was left of Spain's Armada.

Raleigh may have been considered expendable at this point, but Essex was definitely not. When he defied the Queen's orders and galloped off to

Falmouth, eager to join Drake and Raleigh with the English fleet, Elizabeth tried hard but too late to bring him back. Though the mission was a costly failure overall, both Essex and Raleigh won acclaim for bravery in attacking the Spanish port of Cadiz, so it was Drake who bore the brunt of the Queen's anger and frustration. Drake, in spite of his past services, was kept ashore, idle, without a ship or a naval command, for the next five years. Raleigh later fared even worse, for he had angered the Queen more deeply, by entering into a secret marriage that landed him and his wife in the Tower of London (in separate apartments). After his release, Raleigh was barred from court for the next five years, but able to survive on one of the country estates which Elizabeth had previously granted him

Desperate to find new sources of income, and free now of any restraints from the fickle Queen, Raleigh searched for a legendary "City of Gold" in a remote area of South America in 1594, making his way to present day Guyana, which does produce some gold and other minerals. During this difficult transitional period, incidentally, the poet John Donne wrote a short message of encouragement entitled "Cales and Guyana,"<sup>28</sup> presumably addressed to Raleigh:

*If you from spoyle of th' old worlds farthest end  
To the new world your kindled valors bend,  
What brave examples then do prove it trew  
That one things end doth still beginne a new.*

Raleigh had definitely made a new beginning of sorts; but after Elizabeth's death in 1603, he was *persona non grata* to her successor, King James I, and spent most of the next 15 years confined to the Tower of London, caught in

the shifting currents of England's ongoing relationship with Spain. He was executed in 1618.

**Robert Devereux** (1566-1601) became 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of **Essex** upon the death of his father in 1576.

Essex was Elizabeth's last and arguably her most spectacular favorite. He arrived at court in a blaze of glory, having been knighted for valor on the field of battle (Zutphen, the Netherlands, 1586) by Leicester, his stepfather and commanding officer. To be one among many courtiers was of little importance to this exuberant young man, however; already an Earl and hugely egotistical, he tolerated the compliments and invitations he received from the Queen and others, but he clearly preferred the military life, with its emphasis on chivalric honor and selfless bravery—which could easily lead to heroic episodes and further advancement. And so in 1587, Essex impulsively ran away from court to rejoin the war in the Netherlands. He was stopped by order of Elizabeth before he made it across the Channel, but ran away again in 1589 to join Drake and Norreys in attempting to seize control of Portugal from Spain. The failure of this ill-conceived campaign did nothing to diminish Essex's eagerness for new adventures, the more grandiose the better.

Much taken with him despite the difference in ages, Elizabeth tried to keep Essex close by offering him various positions and honors (starting with Master of the Horse, succeeding Leicester, in 1587, and Knight of the Garter in 1588, degraded 1601), but she could never quite satisfy his bounding

ambitions. “. . . he consciously fashioned himself as Sidney’s heir, as the ideal courtier knight.”<sup>29</sup> Having inherited Sidney’s favorite sword, Essex took over the leadership of Sidney’s friends and numerous followers, and in 1590 he married Sidney’s widow (Walsingham’s daughter, Frances), presumably with the permission of the Queen. But Essex’s idea of knightly behavior was badly skewed; it often involved taking reckless, pointless risks, which suggest a serious lack of judgment. Hatton, the Lord Chancellor in 1591, tried to emphasize the difference between genuine heroism and pointless self-sacrifice: “Your Lordship best knows that true valor consists rather in constant performing of that which has been advisedly forethought than in an aptness or readiness of thrusting your person indifferently into every danger.”<sup>30</sup> But Essex failed to heed this advice.

Lack of judgment was also revealed in Essex’s tendency to create lots of new knighthoods on the battlefield: 24 at Rouen (1591), 68 at Cadiz (1596), about 80 in Ireland (1599). These spur-of-the moment gestures probably delighted the men so honored, and made Essex increasingly popular, but (adding so many names to the roster so quickly) they significantly cheapened the value of English knighthood and distorted its meaning. “After Ireland, where Essex had continued to dub knights in defiance of Elizabeth’s direct orders, the Queen was so enraged that she determined to degrade the new knights and was only dissuaded after the intervention of [Burghley’s son, the Secretary of State] Robert Cecil.”<sup>31</sup>

The wholesale dubbing of knights was part of a larger story of increasingly poor judgment and irrational behavior on the part of Essex. Elizabeth had already made him Master of the Ordinance as well as Earl Marshal, in



response to his pleas for recognition of his sometimes-effective performance as a military leader. In 1599 he demanded and got the position of Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, taking a well-equipped army of 16,000 men from England to put down a rebellion led by the Irish Earl of Tyrone. Instead of using this numerical superiority to crush the enemy immediately, as the Queen surely expected him to do, Essex frittered away his force on minor attacks and maneuvers, until it was no longer sufficient for accomplishing his major objective. He then tried to save face in his own pseudo-chivalrous way by offering to engage in single combat (winner take all) with the elderly Tyrone, who sensibly and predictably declined. Essex rushed to England in a frantic attempt to justify his actions to the Queen—but now he was far out of Elizabeth’s favor, and could not talk his way back. So Essex impulsively decided to make a show of force instead (to seize Elizabeth and hold her in the Tower perhaps, until she came to see things as he did). Long story short, the Earl of Essex ended up being tried and executed for treason in 1601.

What was going on here? The events leading up to Essex’s death could be viewed politically, as faltering steps in a poorly planned and poorly managed *coup d’etat*. But earlier episodes of inappropriate behavior (Essex drawing his sword on the Queen when she slapped him in 1598, Essex forcing his way into her dressing room in 1599, etc.) suggest that Essex’s problem was essentially psychological: he had an extremely unrealistic view of himself, Elizabeth, and his relationship with her. It seems that Essex simply could not tolerate taking second place anywhere to anyone, woman or man, Queen or parent, etc. As Essex saw himself and his destiny, he had to be number one. In relation to Elizabeth, therefore, Essex the youthful and dependent courtier simply had to become master of his all-powerful Queen. She had to

be persuaded (or compelled) to allow Essex to serve her, in the specific ways and through the various high offices that he demanded for himself, whether she really wished to do this or not. And she had to validate, openly for all to hear, Essex's fantastic self-image as the most devoted, the most worthy, the most capable, and yet the most completely self-effacing man who had ever served her: the perfect knightly instrument of royal power.

If this was the scenario that Essex imagined for Elizabeth and himself, he picked the wrong woman to try it on. She was more than a match for him, seeing through his poses and disguises, recognizing him finally as an insubordinate, unstable, power-obsessed rival on whom the axe must fall.

## **CONCLUSION**

The ten knights discussed in this essay are examples of men who were important and useful to their ruler, Elizabeth Tudor, during or even before her 45-year reign as Queen of England. Additional examples and a fuller discussion are needed. But we have seen enough to appreciate how Elizabeth used some of the men most readily available to her as instruments of royal power. They were all imperfect in one way or another; she too had some imperfections and shortcomings, such as an understandable though unfortunate tendency to play favorites, to intermingle her personal needs with the broader concerns of her kingdom and her people. On balance, it appears that favoritism made life as the "Virgin Queen" more tolerable for Elizabeth, but that in the case of Raleigh and others perhaps, the talents of her favorites were curtailed or wasted.

It should also be noted that Queen Elizabeth outlived many of the men and women who served her, including nine of the knights discussed here (all but Raleigh). Others replaced them in some instances, of course, but certain ones were probably irreplaceable from Elizabeth's point of view: Burghley, for instance, and Leicester. She must have felt lonely, unsupported, terribly vulnerable at times, especially in later life, despite the multiple circles of courtiers and attendants around her. And no doubt there were other times when she was severely frustrated by having to depend on the instrumentality of men to do what needed to be done. Consider her "Armada" speech at Tilbury (19 August 1588): "*I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and a king of England too. . . . rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms. . . .*" If Spanish troops had actually come ashore at that point, Elizabeth would have given them cause to regret it.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Alford, Stephen. *Burghley: William Cecil at the Court of Elizabeth I*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

Bate, Jonathan & Dora Thornton. *Shakespeare: Staging the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Bawlf, Samuel. *The Secret Voyage of Sir Francis Drake, 1577-1580*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004.

Collinson, Patrick. *Elizabeth I*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Cooper, John. *The Queen's Agent: Francis Walsingham at the Court of Elizabeth I*. London: Faber and Faber, 2012.

Dickinson, Janet. *Court Politics and the Earl of Essex, 1589-1601*. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012.

Donne, John. *The Complete English Poems*. London: Everyman's Library, 1991.

Gilbert, Sir Humphrey. *A discourse of a discoverie for a new passage to Cataia*. (Presented to Queen Elizabeth as a manuscript in 1566, published in revised form, London, 1576). Reprinted as Document 15 in Quinn, *The Voyages and Colonising Enterprises of Sir Humphrey Gilbert*, pp. 129-164.

Gough, Barry M. *Britain, Canada and the North Pacific: Maritime Enterprise and Dominion, 1778-1914*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004.

Hutchinson, Robert. *Elizabeth's Spy Master: Francis Walsingham and the Secret War that Saved England*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2007.

Jenkins, Elizabeth. *Elizabeth the Great*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1959.

MacGregor, Neil. *Shakespeare's Restless World: An Unexpected History in Twenty Objects*. London: Allen Lane, 2012.

McKee, Alexander. *The Queen's Corsair: Drake's Journey of Circumnavigation 1577-1580*. New York: Stein and Day, 1979.

Nuttall, Zelia (Translator & Editor). *New Light on Drake: A Collection of Documents Relating to His Voyage of Circumnavigation 1577-1580*. London: Hakluyt Society, 1914.

Penzer, N. M. (Editor). *The World Encompassed and Analogous Contemporary Documents Concerning Sir Francis Drake's Circumnavigation of the World*. London: Hakluyt Society, 1926.

Quinn, David Beers. *England and the Discovery of America, 1481-1620*. New York, Knopf, 1967.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Voyages and Colonising Enterprises of Sir Humphrey Gilbert*. London: Hakluyt Society, 1940.

Rowse, A. L. *Sir Richard Grenville of the Revenge: An Elizabethan Hero*. London: Cape, 1937.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Sir Walter Raleigh: His Family and Private Life*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962.

Sullivan, Charles. Sir Francis's Drake's "Nova Albion": The Lasting Value of a British Colony That Never Actually Existed. An essay presented to the Chit-Chat Club, San Francisco, California, January 14, 2013.

van Dorsten, Jan Adrianus, Dominic Baker-Smith, and Arthur F. Kinney (Editors). *Sir Philip Sidney: 1586 and the Creation of a Legend*. Leiden: Leiden University Press, 1986.

Wallace, Malcolm William. *The Life of Sir Philip Sidney*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915. Reprinted in 2011.

Wathen, Bruce. *Sir Francis Drake: The Construction of a Hero*. Cambridge, England: D.S. Brewster, 2009.

Weir, Alison. *The Life of Elizabeth I*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2008.

Williams, Neville. *All the Queen's Men: Elizabeth I and Her Courtiers*. New York: Macmillan, 1972.

## **WEBSITES**

For general information and specific facts, various websites have been consulted, including the following:

<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/research/members>

<http://tudorhistory.org/primary/tilbury.html>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Knights\\_and\\_Ladies\\_of\\_the\\_Garter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Knights_and_Ladies_of_the_Garter)

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Family\\_of\\_Henry\\_VIII,\\_an\\_Allegory\\_of\\_the\\_Tudor\\_Succession.png](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Family_of_Henry_VIII,_an_Allegory_of_the_Tudor_Succession.png)

<http://www.hallofnames.org.uk/heraldry-symbols-what-they-mean>

<https://www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/~ben/grenv3.htm>

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> McKee, p. 300.

<sup>2</sup> Below the rank of gentleman she would not go to select a favorite. “It is a certain note of the times that the Queen in her choice never took into her favour a meer new man, or a Mechanick.” (Sir Robert Naunton, *Fragmenta Regalia*, 1641, quoted in Winton, p. 12.)

<sup>3</sup> Except for a continuing interest in finding new sources of gold, whether through mining or alchemy, according to John Dee’s diary, available online.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Williams, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Cooper, plate 5, following p. 181.

<sup>6</sup> This painting, now in the National Museum of Wales, is entitled “The Family of Henry VIII: an Allegory of the Tudor Succession.” Queen Mary and Philip of Spain are shown with Mars, symbolizing War; Elizabeth joins hands with Peace and Plenty (Williams, p. 102). To it has been added an inscription: “THE QUENE TO WALSHINGHAM THIS TABLET SENTE. MARKE OF HER PEOPLES AND HER OWNE CONTENTE” (Bate & Thornton, p. 24).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Weir, p. 166.

---

<sup>8</sup> John Dee, *General and Rare Memorials Pertayning to the Perfect Arte of Navigation* (London, 1577); Sir Anthony Ashley, English translation (London, 1588) of a Dutch book of sea charts entitled *The Mariner's Mirror* by Lucas Janszoon Waghenaeer.

<sup>9</sup> “To a Spaniard, all the English seamen were pirates; they made no distinction between piracy and privateering, especially when the latter was directed against Spain.” (Rowse, *Sir Richard Grenville of the Revenge*, p. 256) “It will be noticed however that in the official charges against Drake, drawn up in Spain . . . the epithet [pirate] does not occur.” (Nuttall, p. xiv)

<sup>10</sup> Quinn, *The Voyages and Colonising Enterprises of Sir Humphrey Gilbert*, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> Quinn, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> Compare the estimated tonnage or carrying capacity of Gilbert's *Squirrel* (8-10 tons) with that of Drake's *Pelican/Golden Hinde* (100-150 tons) and Henry VIII's flagship *Mary Rose* (500 tons).

<sup>13</sup> Rowse, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

<sup>14</sup> His father had served as captain of Henry VIII's flagship, the *Mary Rose*.

<sup>15</sup> Rowse, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph Lane, Governor of Roanoke colony, to Walsingham, 8 Sept 1585; Cal. State Papers, Col., quoted in Wikipedia article “Richard Grenville (sea captain).”

<sup>17</sup> Rowse, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

<sup>18</sup> Rowse *op. cit.*, p. 23, says: “There was never any fight more famous in a nation's history; never any that was more purely heroic in quality—that mixture of dare-devilry, defiance of fate, supreme indifference to consequences, which men admire more than anything, because their own ordinary lives are at every point so circumscribed by circumstance, from which there is, save in such moments, no emancipation.”

<sup>19</sup> . . . if it shall happen any one or more in any ship or ships sailing on their said voyages to become mutinous, seditious, disorderly or any way unruly to the prejudice or hindrance of the hope for success in the attempt or prosecuting of this discovery or trade intended, to use or execute upon him or them so offending such *punishment, correction or execution* as the cause shall be found in justice to require by the verdict of twelve in the company. . . .” [http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Chancery/C\\_66-124\\_mm32-4.pdf](http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Chancery/C_66-124_mm32-4.pdf). Spelling modernized, italics added.

<sup>20</sup> Nuttall p. xxxiii. A noteworthy conclusion, based on her translations of numerous contemporary Spanish records found in Mexico and Spain.

<sup>21</sup> Kelsey, p. 136.

<sup>22</sup> It is beyond the scope of this short essay to offer a detailed refutation of appraisals such as Kelsey's, except to suggest that human behavior should be assessed in relation to recognizable norms or standards in a particular historical context. If Drake was a thief or a pirate, so were many other Englishmen (and women) that profited from licensed “privateering,” not least Elizabeth their Queen, who issued the licenses and usually received a share of any loot. If Drake was guilty of bloodshed, then so were many other adventurers, including Gilbert, Grenville, Raleigh, and Essex, whose victims sometimes included unarmed prisoners and civilians as well as enemy combatants; and we know Queen Elizabeth occasionally ordered bloody executions, torture, and punishments of various kinds, or condoned them. So did her Stuart successor, James I. According to MacGregor (p. 260): “In Shakespeare's world, human butchery was a part of life.

---

Strolling across London Bridge to see a play at the Globe or the Rose, you would sometimes pass rows of traitors' heads impaled on spikes. The execution of criminals was, if not exactly public entertainment, certainly popular public spectacle.”

<sup>23</sup> To see Drake's coat of arms and motto, go to

[http://www.wyvernigules.com/Documents/ArmsofSFD/arms\\_of\\_sir\\_francis\\_drake.htm](http://www.wyvernigules.com/Documents/ArmsofSFD/arms_of_sir_francis_drake.htm)

<sup>24</sup> Drake's supposedly “greedy” behavior could be contrasted with that of other Elizabethan knights, Gilbert or Raleigh for example, who claimed enormous tracts of land in the Americas for themselves (rather than the Queen) and hoped to create enormous streams of revenue. Even Sidney the “perfect knight” was briefly tempted when Gilbert offered him an estate of 30,000 acres in what is now Rhode Island; but later, being Sidney, he refused it.

<sup>25</sup> Gough, Paper I, p. 52.

<sup>26</sup> Wallace, p. 396. We might wonder if some of Sidney's many debtors were marching in the ranks of the grocers?

<sup>27</sup> “That autumn [1580] there was foreign intervention in Ireland: the Pope sent a small expedition of some seven or eight hundred Italians, who fortified themselves upon the peninsula at Smerwick in the extreme south-west. ‘When the [Italian] captain had yielded himself and the fort appointed to be surrendered, captain Raleigh together with captain Macworth entered into the castle and made a great slaughter, many or the most of them being put to the sword.’” (Rowse, *op. cit.*, p. 135)

<sup>28</sup> Donne, *Complete Poems*, p. 132. “Cales” may have been another name for Cadiz, or possibly Calais? John Donne is believed to have served as a soldier in one or two of Drake's overseas adventures.

<sup>29</sup> Dickinson, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Dickinson, p. 19, source note 98.

<sup>31</sup> Dickinson, p. 21.

\* \* \*