



Who was Sir Walter Raleigh? The prominence given to Walter Raleigh in the *Elizabeth: The Golden Years* film has led many to ask: how much of that film was historical fact and how much Hollywood fiction?

Soldier and Sailor

Walter Raleigh was an extraordinary combination of soldier and sailor, adventurer and pirate, scholar and poet, navigator and explorer, historian and parliamentarian, entrepreneur and courtier. His charisma, courage and chivalry made him a favourite of Queen Elizabeth and he did, in fact, establish the first English colonies in the New World, in what he named Virginia. By all accounts, Raleigh was a brilliant scholar. He studied law. He also fought in The Netherlands with the Dutch Protestants against the Spanish.

Disinformation

However, there is no evidence that he was romantically involved with the Queen. That disinformation was in fact a goal of the Spanish government with which England was at war, to portray the Virgin Queen as “*an illegitimate bastard*” and “*a whore*”, and so they regularly insinuated that the dashing young men who served the Queen as soldiers and sailors were also “*her lovers*”. However, it is clear that was nothing but malicious slander. It would seem that Hollywood has chosen to give new life to this more than four centuries old wartime propaganda.

Protestant Freedom Fighter

Walter Raleigh fought on the side of the Huguenot Protestants in the French wars, with the Dutch

freedom fighters in Holland and in 1580 he helped put down an Irish rebellion. However, he played no role in the defeat of the Spanish Armada. In *Elizabeth: The Golden Years*, Raleigh is depicted as playing a central role in the battle. However, he was responsible for organizing land defences and was not on board any of the English ships during the battles against the Spanish Armada.

The Royal Navy was ably led by the English Admirals Lord Howard and Sir Francis Drake. Incredibly, the *Elizabeth: The Golden Years* film does not even mention the pivotal role of Sir Francis Drake. (Who also led the devastating pre-emptive raid against the Spanish Armada at the Port of Cadiz, in 1587, destroying many ships and supplies, buying valuable time for England and delaying the Armada by many months. Sir Francis Drake was also the first Englishman to circumnavigate the globe in his ship *The Golden Hind*.)

Chivalrous

Raleigh was brought up in Devon and studied at Oxford. After fighting in France and Holland and putting down a rebellion in Ireland, he was brought to the attention of the Royal court. There are many accounts of his laying his expensive cloak across a muddy puddle to allow the Queen to walk across without her shoes being sullied.

Raleigh was granted vast estates in Ireland, valuable trade monopolies to the New World, control over Cornish tin mines, political positions in Devon and Cornwall and membership of the House of Commons.

Behind the Lines in Ireland

During the campaign in Ireland, Raleigh had to deal with a savage, treacherous and skilled enemy who did not operate within the codes of any civilized conduct. He not only had to fight Irish Catholic guerillas, but professional Spanish soldiers. On one occasion Raleigh captured Lord Roche out of his own strongly garrisoned castle. Raleigh force marched Roche across 20 miles of hostile territory, in pouring rain, at the dead of night.

It was his assignment to report to the Queen concerning the putting down of the rebellion in Ireland that brought him to the attention of Elizabeth in 1581.

Honoured Favorite of the Queen

Raleigh was made Captain of the Guard, created a Knight, granted Durham House and granted 40,000 acres in Ireland and an estate in Dorset. These favours from the Queen earned Raleigh the envy and jealousy of many of his contemporaries. Queen Elizabeth granted Raleigh a charter to discover *“remote, heathen and barbarous lands, not actually possessed of any Christian prince or people”*, and to *“take possession of them”* in the name of the Queen.

Virginia

Raleigh reported back that Virginia was *“the paradise of the world.”* He brought back novelties in the way of plants, food and tobacco . Cotton he called *“grass silk”* and potatoes *“pater nostri”*

He reported that the soil in Virginia was so rich that it yielded three harvests a year. He also brought back two natives, Wanchese and Manteo, who were well received at court.

Harassing the Spaniards

Raleigh was then unofficially commissioned to organise English raids on Spanish commerce. As the gold and silver from the New World was being used to finance Spanish wars of aggression against the Protestant allies in the Netherlands, and the build up of an invasion force to conquer England, these privateers were able to serve both to deny resources to the enemy, and to help finance the build up of British ships and arms to counter the Spanish threat.

The First English Colonies in America

In 1583-1584 he organized expeditions to Newfoundland and what he named Virginia. In 1585 he established the first English colonies in America, on Roanoke Island, in what is today North Carolina. In 1587 Raleigh dispatched another expedition to Roanoke Island. However, none of the colonists of these two expeditions survived. Those that did not die of disease, or return to England, were massacred by the local Indians.

The Catholic Threat

It would have helped viewers of *Elizabeth: The Golden Years* to have been given more of the volatile background of Europe in the 16

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Century. The Saint Bartholomew Day Massacre, of 24 August 1572, unleashed savage slaughter against the French Protestants. Over 30,000 men, women and children were butchered in the most brutal way. In England, the news of the massacre from some of the terrified survivors brought shock and dismay. There was an intense hardening of feeling against Catholicism. The Queen expressed her cold anger to the French ambassador who was summoned to pass through a court in utter silence, where everyone was dressed in black. The Queen berated the ambassador over this

“most horrible crime”

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“a deed of unexampled infamy.”

The assassination of Prince William of Orange in The Netherlands, in 1584, by a Jesuit assassin, further hardened English resolve to resist Catholicism in general and Spain in particular.

Unfortunately, however, the *Elizabeth* film makes no reference to the tremendous fight for freedom raging in nearby Holland, nor the key role of Elizabeth in seeking to assist with weapons, finance and even a military expeditionary force of thousands of English troops. Nor were the Catholic campaigns against the Protestant Huguenots in France referred to, although Sir Walter Raleigh had been involved in both those conflicts.

The “Secret Marriage”

Much is made in the *Elizabeth* film of Sir Walter Raleigh’s *“secret marriage”* with Elizabeth’s maid of honour Bessie Throgmorton. In fact, Raleigh did have an affair with the Queen’s maid. And he was imprisoned in the Tower of London as a result. When he was released, (which was not in any way connected with the threat of the Spanish Armada) he was required to marry Bessie and retire in semi-exile to his house at Sherborne.

Scholar and Explorer

Sir Walter Raleigh was not only a soldier, but also a scholar and scientist. He wrote best selling books such as *The Discovery of the Large, Rich and Beautiful Empire of Guiana*. And the *History of the World*

. In 1595 Raleigh was commissioned by Elizabeth to carry the English flag into South America. This charter contained the usual warning against violating the territory of any Christian monarch. The area he explored is now called Venezuela, although despite his strenuous efforts, he was not able to find the fabled gold mines of Eldorado.

Pre-emptive Strike

In 1596 Raleigh joined with Admiral Lord Howard and the Earl of Essex in a massive raid against the Spanish port of Cadiz. This was to prevent a new Armada being launched against England. The English fleet of 150 vessels were manned by 6,400 sailors, and carried about the same number of soldiers. They stormed Cadiz, destroying, by burning or sinking, most of the Spanish fleet. During this action Raleigh received a severe gunshot wound in his leg.

Arrest and Imprisonment in the Tower

Upon the death of Queen Elizabeth and accession of James I in 1603, Raleigh was arrested and cast into the Tower of London. James I accused Raleigh of having had a role in the execution of his mother, Mary Queen of Scots. The trial was a disgraceful parody of judicial proceedings. The accusations were false, the evidence perjured and at least two of the judges were bitter enemies of Raleigh. Raleigh was sentenced to die the death of a traitor.

Treachery

However, the sentence was not carried out and the unjustly condemned man was incarcerated in the Tower of London for thirteen years. He occupied his time in writing his gigantic *History of the World*

. Finally, in 1617, James I was induced to release his illustrious captive on condition that he sailed for Eldorado to enrich his monarch with a fortune in gold. In May 1617 a fleet of ten vessels sailed out of Plymouth under Sir Walter Raleigh. However, Raleigh could not have known that his doom had already been sealed. James, with incredible duplicity, had informed the Spanish ambassador of the details of Raleigh's expedition. In the fight with the Spaniards, Raleigh's son was killed, his weary and disheartened men mutinied, his second in command shot himself and Raleigh returned home in defeat. He was at once arrested and sentenced to death.

Facing Death With Courage and Humour

Raleigh went to his death with courage and chivalry. He advised an acquaintance to come early so as to get a good seat. *"As for myself, I am sure of one."* When he saw an old man in the crowd with a bald head, exposed to the bitter cold, he took off his own cap and threw it to him saying
"Thou hast more

need of this than I."

Arriving at the scaffold he picked up the axe and running his finger across the edge commented:

"This is a sharp medicine to cure all my diseases."

His courage and Christian faith expressed at the scaffold impressed all who were there. One of the spectators cried out:

"Where shall we find another such head to cut off?"

Sir Walter Raleigh was heroic and adventurous, intelligent and humorous. Bold and brilliant. He was described as: *"A hero of the heroic age of England."*

Unfortunately the *Elizabeth* film does not do justice to either Walter Raleigh or Queen Elizabeth. It would have been better had they remained faithful to the facts of history. As so often is the case, the truth is more incredible than the fiction.

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