Beyond the Line: Piracy, Sovereignty, and the Fate of Sir Walter Raleigh

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Abstract

On 29 October 1618, Sir Walter Raleigh, the last great standard-bearer of Elizabethan England's maritime tradition, met his death on the scaffold in the Old Palace Yard at the order of King James I. Although James officially executed Raleigh under a fifteen-year-old death sentence for treason, in actuality his recent “crimes” against Spain in America were what had “stirred his Majesty’s justice.” Raleigh had been convicted of the original offense shortly after James's ascension to the English throne in 1603, but the new king spared his life and instead confined him to the Tower of London. In 1616, after years of desperate pleading, Raleigh finally persuaded James to grant him not only release from captivity but also permission to travel to Guiana to search for a gold mine that he had allegedly discovered there two decades before. Spanish officials protested loudly against the expedition, claiming all of America by right of prior discovery and papal donation, and charging that Raleigh only intended to invade the West Indies to engage in piracy. Raleigh never managed to locate the mine, but did succeed in killing a number of Spaniards, including the local governor, before reducing the Spanish town of St. Thomé to ash. Incensed, Philip III, King of Spain, demanded that James punish Raleigh for his piratical enterprise and the English monarch shockingly obliged.

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Sir Walter Raleigh, or Ralegh, (?1554 – 29 October 1618) was an English poet, aristocrat, explorer, and historian. Raleigh, son of Walter Raleigh, of Fardel, Devonshire, was born at Hayes Barton in that county. In 1568 he was sent to University of Oxford Oxf., where he greatly distinguished himself. In the next year he began his career of adventure by going to France as a volunteer in aid of the Huguenots, serving thereafter in the Low Countries. The year 1579 saw him engaged in his 1st voyage of