

How Raleigh Became a Courtier

Steven W. May

Walter Raleigh's ascent from infantry captain in Ireland to premier royal favorite is one of the most dramatic yet mysterious success stories of the Elizabethan age. How did he do it, or, more accurately, how did that transition occur? Scores of talented, well-bred, educated men did everything in their power to attract the queen's favorable attention. Yet only Hatton and Raleigh emerged as significant favorites in the absence of noble birth, membership in the queen's extended family, or service in her household as princess before 1559. To understand the rarity of Raleigh's good fortune we need only consider the failures: other Inns of Court gentlemen—George Gascoigne, Thomas Lodge, John Donne—never managed to penetrate the Privy Chamber. University wits and court entertainers—George Peele, Gabriel Harvey, John Lyly—failed to attract Elizabeth's attention. Lyly, for example, managed to be sworn one of the queen's esquires for the body extraordinary (that is, without regular duties or pay). He wrote court drama for her majesty's entertainment, yet received no further reward. In a widely-circulated letter he rebuked his sovereign by complaining, "Thirteen yeares your Highnes Servant; But; yett nothinge."¹ In contrast, Raleigh's ascent to the height of royal favor occurred in a matter of months, although it followed more than a half-dozen years of failure.

After service in the French wars of religion, followed by residence at Oriel College, Oxford (1572–1574), Raleigh came up to London. By mid-1580 he had probed the fringes of the court for at least six years, socializing with other well-bred gentlemen from his base at the Middle

¹*The Complete Works of John Lyly*, ed. R. Warwick Bond, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1:70.

Temple and no doubt plying his courtier relatives for whatever favor they might obtain for him. The kinship he claimed was rather distant, however, and royal recognition was not forthcoming.² A privateering voyage in 1578–1579 ended in loss rather than profit. His dalliance in near-court circles finally yielded him a place in the retinue of the Earl of Oxford, who employed him to deliver the earl's challenge to Philip Sidney in the wake of the "tennis court" quarrel. Within months, however, Oxford was said to be planning Raleigh's assassination because he had defected to the Earl of Leicester's service.³ Early in 1580 Raleigh was twice brought before the Privy Council for brawling within the verge of the court. Their lordships sent him to prison for a few days on both occasions. Such behavior was ill-calculated to ingratiate him with the queen or her principal ministers. Yet courtiership hinged upon access to the sovereign, a connection that Raleigh failed utterly to achieve during these years. His name does not appear in court-related documents nor in courtier correspondence before the 1580s. It is quite unlikely that he managed a personal interview with Elizabeth during these years. If he did, the contact was too brief for her to take serious notice of his good looks and ready wit.

In the summer of 1580 Raleigh abandoned his pursuit of a career at court or in the central government. That July he took command of a company of infantry and horse bound for the wars in Ireland. Leicester probably arranged this appointment in the service of the new Lord Deputy, his friend and ally, Arthur, Lord Grey of Wilton (Leicester no doubt procured as well Edmund Spenser's post as his lordship's secretary). Raleigh's break with courtly aspirations must have seemed to him final, because the two career paths were mutually exclusive: true, courtiers often served in the military abroad—Leicester, Sidney, and Essex for example—but Raleigh is the only Elizabethan favorite of any magnitude who came to court directly from the field. A second new captain dispatched to Ireland that summer was Raleigh's first cousin, Edward Denny, the son of Catherine Raleigh's sister Joan, née Champenon.

²Steven W. May, *Sir Walter Raleigh* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), p. 2.

³D. C. Peck, "Raleigh, Sidney, Oxford, and the Catholics, 1579," *Notes and Queries* n. s. 25 (1978): 428–429.

By November both men saw action in the taking of the fort at Smerwick and the subsequent massacre of its Spanish and Italian garrison. Raleigh's earliest extant letters are dated a few months later; in context, they are almost as mysterious as his emergence as a royal favorite. In February 1581 Walter wrote three letters to privy counselors, and they are by no means the age's typical "form letters" pledging devotion and unspecified service to social superiors. Among other substantive issues, Raleigh advises his betters regarding needed changes in Irish policy, he promises to send them reliable intelligence about Irish affairs, and even criticizes, harshly, the Earl of Ormond, Lord General of Ireland.⁴ These explicit communications are wholly inappropriate from a rookie captain to the queen's closest advisors even if he hadn't disgraced himself in his only known contacts with them. Nevertheless, in December 1581, as his biographers have long noted, he returned to London and somehow gained access to the queen. He advised her on Irish affairs before the New Year and by June 1582, she had cancelled his return to duty in Ireland: he had arrived—but how?

Certainly, he did not attract Elizabeth's attention by spreading his cloak over a puddle as she hesitated to walk through it. Thomas Fuller published this myth nearly a century after the alleged gallant gesture took place. The problem with his story is that it presupposes what it purports to explain. If Raleigh was physically close enough to Elizabeth to spread his cloak before her, he was already someone known to her, someone in the court circle. Perhaps he did something of the kind after he became a courtier, but not before. Fuller's story tells us nothing of Raleigh's evolution from captain to courtier.

A more plausible explanation is Sir Robert Naunton's testimony that, though "a bare gentleman, . . . that variance between him and my Lord General Grey in his second voyage into Ireland . . . drew them both over to the Council table, there to plead their own cause. Where what advantage he had in the case in controversy I know not, but he had much the better in the manner of telling his tale, insomuch that the Queen and the lords took no slight notice of him and his parts, for from thence he

⁴*The Letters of Sir Walter Raleigh*, ed. Agnes Lathan and Joyce Youngs (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), pp. 1–7.

came to be known and to have access to the Queen. . . .”⁵ The main difficulty with Naunton’s account is that Grey did not return to England until September 1582, by which time Raleigh was already an established favorite. And Naunton introduces another discrepant detail, for it is unclear what “his second voyage into Ireland” can refer to, since both Grey and Raleigh first went to Ireland in 1580.

The mystery deepens when we examine Raleigh’s Chancery deposition on the third of February 1581. There, he is described as one of the queen’s esquires for the body extraordinary.⁶ Esquires for the body were sworn servants of the queen, but when did Raleigh gain this office and how did his testimony end up in Town depositions (depositions taken in London) while he was serving in Ireland? Raleigh’s letters to Privy Counselors at this time compound the confusion. The first, dated from Cork on 22 February 1581, is addressed to Lord Burghley. Raleigh sends his lordship a detailed account of the money he spent conveying his men to Ireland, money his paymaster there refused to reimburse. Raleigh counters by going straight to the top, requesting his back pay from the Lord Treasurer. He even dispatched his request via a gentleman “whom I have desired to attend your lordship for that purpose.”⁷ In context, this letter is quite remarkable, for even someone as brash as Wat Raleigh would have hesitated to dun the Lord Treasurer directly for his expenses. And how could a mere captain in Ireland assign a gentleman to pursue the matter with Burghley in London? Raleigh’s second letter, written to Sir Francis Walsingham on the following day, is even more inexplicable. It begins, “I receved of late a letter from your honor wherin I finde your honors disposition and oppinion more favorable then I can any way deserve.”⁸ Walsingham had more pressing demands on his time than to write laudatory letters to men of Raleigh’s station even if he had forgotten all about twice sending the addressee to prison in the recent past. What could Raleigh have done after only six months in Ireland to merit a personal letter of praise from the queen’s principal secretary? Where

⁵Naunton, *Fragmenta Regalia*, ed. John S. Cerovski (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1985), pp. 71, 73.

⁶Agnes M. C. Latham, “A Birth-Date for Sir Walter Raleigh,” *Etudes Anglaises* 9 (1956): 245.

⁷*The Letters of Sir Walter Raleigh*, p. 2.

⁸*The Letters of Sir Walter Raleigh*, p. 3.

Raleigh's biographers have noticed the discrepancy at all, they have assumed that Sir Francis praised Raleigh for his military exploits. Yet Walsingham would have needed an industrial-strength crystal ball to do that, for by February of 1581 Raleigh had accomplished nothing more noteworthy than serving with some half-dozen other captains at the siege of Smerwick. It is worth noting, too, that naval captain Richard Bingham, a participant in the siege, particularly commended four of Grey's officers for their valor at Smerwick without mentioning Raleigh.⁹ Nothing in his military career to date could have elicited Walsingham's letter.

Over the next calendar year, however, Raleigh compounded his enigmatic behavior by returning to London where he so enthralled Elizabeth that she cancelled his military career in order to keep him at her side. He did not manage this transition with a cloak over a mud puddle or a showdown with Lord Grey before the Privy Council. The key to these mysteries came to light as I prepared the volume on Raleigh for the Twayne English Authors series. I there cited Thomas Bawdewyn's newsletter to the Earl of Shrewsbury dated 22 December 1580. After a brief account of the capture of the fort at Smerwick, Bawdewyn writes that "in ryffeling vp of the baggage <wa> Capitaine Rawlye hath founde a greate numbere of Letters *which* have discovered some matters of secrecye: the same cam vnto the Coort on saterday Last as I am informed."¹⁰ Thus Raleigh had returned to London by 17 December 1580, barely five months after arriving in Ireland. The journey

⁹Public Record Office, London, State Papers, Ireland, PRO SP 63/78, f. 72v.

¹⁰Lambeth Palace Library, Talbot Papers MS 3198, f. 53. Thomas Lodge reprinted the letter in full in the second volume of his 1838 *Illustrations of British History* (p. 186), an invaluable three-volume edition of original papers that is, unfortunately, unindexed. If any previous Raleigh biographers happened upon this letter, they apparently conflated it with his return to London a calendar year later in December 1581. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* article on Raleigh picked up the 1580 trip from my book on Raleigh, adding to its account the astonishing conclusion that "This episode is frequently portrayed as the genesis of his career at court, even though he was ordered back to Ireland early in 1581" (online ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004]). I offer this analysis of the event as a hopeful step toward such frequent portrayals of its meaning.

is otherwise unrecorded and the letter, unnoticed in Raleigh studies before 1989, nor was I able to pursue its implications in that book. In context, I believe it supplies the missing link toward explaining Raleigh's ascent to courtiership.

What secret matters of intelligence did Raleigh bring to London late in 1580, and how did he obtain them? It is not clear just when Raleigh's men were deployed at Smerwick after the fort surrendered on 9 November. Grey's account to the queen says only that he sent in "certeyn bandes, who streight fell to execution."¹¹ Captain Bingham wrote that "a number of the marryners" entered the fort in advance of "the bande, that had the warde of the day." A marginal note mentions Captain Denny.¹² John Hooker's account in his "Description of Ireland" states that captains Raleigh and Macworth "who had the ward of that daie" entered the fort and massacred the foreign troops.¹³ Grey's forces dispatched more than 500 prisoners, making it likely that at least these three companies—Denny's, Raleigh's, and Macworth's—would have been required to carry out such an atrocity. Hooker, however, a west country man quite partial to Raleigh, makes no mention of the discovery of any secret documents or of Raleigh's return to London with them. The most likely clue as to the nature of these documents occurs in Grey's letter to Walsingham on 12 November. He mentions that his forces have recovered various writings and commissions from the Pope, papers indicating that a much larger Catholic force would soon arrive in Ireland.¹⁴ Quite possibly these were the documents Raleigh's men had seized when they entered the fort and that he soon conveyed to London.

In fact, Grey dispatched Denny to deliver his official account of the siege to the queen and her Privy Council. Raleigh apparently accompanied his cousin back to England with the secret documents that he alone deployed before the Council. He arrived in London by mid-December 1580 and left for Ireland shortly after his Chancery deposition on 3 February 1581. The mission, as described in Bawdewyn's letter to

¹¹Public Record Office, London, State Papers, Ireland, PRO SP 63/78, f. 63.

¹²Public Record Office, London, State Papers, Ireland, PRO SP 63/78, f. 72v.

¹³Hooker, "Description of Ireland," in *Chronicles* by Raphael Holinshed (London, 1586), p. 439.

¹⁴Public Record Office, London, State Papers, Ireland, PRO SP 63/78, f. 66.

Shrewsbury, explains a number of mysteries in Raleigh's career at this time. First, it makes sense of Naunton's assertion that either Grey or Raleigh made a second journey to Ireland, for on returning to his post that February, Raleigh indeed traveled to Ireland for a second time, something Grey never did. Second, the return to London explains how Raleigh could have deposed on Gilbert's behalf in London on 3 February. Third, it explains his elevation to esquire extraordinary. The queen bestowed these honorary offices on persons she wished to reward without actually spending any money. Raleigh's report on the secret letters undoubtedly made a stunning impression on the Privy Council, as Walsingham's subsequent, very favorable letter to Raleigh suggests. He or another counselor probably moved Elizabeth to reward Captain Raleigh in this fashion for his enterprising service. Did Raleigh meet Elizabeth at the time? It is possible, yet the queen did not usually attend council meetings, but would have readily granted the post of esquire extraordinary on the mere say-so of someone like Walsingham or Burghley. What Raleigh's own letters, written in the same month to these men imply, is the high degree of respect he generated through his testimony before them. Walter was now in a position to thank Sir Francis for his kind words, and not only that, but in a follow-up letter of February 25, to criticize the Earl of Ormond's failures as Elizabeth's Lord General of Munster, and to assure Walsingham that he would keep him well informed about the state of affairs in Ireland. Raleigh was so confident of his status with the Council that he sent a gentleman to press the Lord Treasurer for reimbursement of his charges in the queen's service. This would have been mere impudence unless Burghley was favorably disposed toward him following his grand slam performance before the Privy Council. In August he wrote Leicester, complaining of his "poore place and charge" under Lord Grey.¹⁵ Captain Raleigh had become someone to reckon with at court by early 1581, months before his return to London that December. It all grew out of his journey to London with captured enemy documents in December of 1580.

This step toward royal preferment in turn explains what happened at the end of the year when Raleigh returned to London for the second time. Two such furloughs so close together are in themselves problematic. His standing with the Privy Council must have influenced,

¹⁵*The Letters of Sir Walter Raleigh*, p. 11.

at least, permission for this second absence from his command during his first year and a half in service. However, the initiative for this journey may have come from Grey himself, who recognized that Raleigh had become an apt and influential spokesman for his policies as Lord Deputy. During 1581 the English position in Ireland had worsened, and Grey's reputation gradually crumbled. The victorious massacre at Smerwick was long forgotten as queen and Council questioned why Lord Grey could make no significant headway against the rebels. More damaging still, he was forced to defend himself from charges that he bestowed Irish lands on his favorites there without requisite fines or rents to the Crown. The Lord Deputy referred to Raleigh as an ally in a letter to Walsingham on 14 May, noting with regard to the policy he defended that, "you maye alyttle geather by Captain Rawley's letter, that oothers heere thynck no impossibilitie in it."¹⁶ Grey's allusion to Raleigh confirms, moreover, that his subordinate had indeed undertaken a regular correspondence with Walsingham.

By year's end, however, Grey's situation had become even more untenable. He needed Raleigh's help with his superiors at court, yet his difficulties also left him vulnerable to someone as skilled in rhetoric, strategy, and vision as Captain Raleigh. Grey's governor of the province of Munster, John Zouche, wrote enthusiastically to Walsingham on 4 December to herald Raleigh's return to court: "In what estate the country is, I refer to my cousin Raleigh his report, who can very sufficiently deliver the same to you, praying your honor to give credit to all that which he shall say unto you."¹⁷ In London that December, Raleigh scuttled any instructions he may have received from Grey and presented the queen and Council with his own plan for bringing Ireland to heel while reducing the number of English soldiers there. His ideas were readily seized upon by the government, and Grey was taken completely off guard. The Lord Deputy complained to Burghley 12 January 1582: "My very good Lord, having barely received advertizement of a plott [that is, plan] delivered by Captain Rawley unto her Majesty for the lessening of her charges here . . . [it] might easily occasion her Majesty to thinck, that I have not so carefully as behooved looked into the state of

¹⁶Public Record Office, London, State Papers, Ireland, PRO SP 63/83, f. 47.

¹⁷Public Record Office, London, State Papers, Ireland, PRO SP 63/87, f. 8.

that cause and the search of her Majesty's profit."¹⁸ Grey went on to explain why Raleigh's plan simply could not be implemented. More highly defensive letters from Grey followed this one in rapid succession.

Still, Raleigh had not yet fully managed the transition from captain to courtier. The process of enchanting Elizabeth took several months. She extended his furlough that winter, but as late as April, her Majesty supposed that he would shortly return to the field. A draft of the Queen's commission to increase Raleigh's command in Ireland, drawn up in that month, states that Elizabeth wants "our Servaunt Walter Rawley treyned some longer tyme in that our realme," but an interlined passage adds that "for somme considerations . . . he is . . . lycensed to staye neere Oowre person."¹⁹ Raleigh had attracted the queen's attention, and from this vantage point of access to the sovereign he hammered away at the stalemate in Ireland. A month later, Grey protested to the queen that "I fynde my selfe grievously enformed against . . . It is . . . all in vaine to laboure my cleering by absent replies . . . I beseeche your Highnes . . . to afforde mee retourne hoame, and thatt face too face I maye aunswer my Chardgers."²⁰ Thus Grey sought the kind of mano-a-mano confrontation that Naunton attributed to him and Raleigh. With regard to increasing Raleigh's command in Ireland, Grey informed Walsingham in the same month, ". . . As for Capt. Rawleyes assignment to ye Charge of Apsleies band, wch . . . you write to bee signified vnto me by a lre from her Matj: I haue no lre wch specifieth any such thing to me; and for myne owne part I must bee playne I nether lyke his carriage nor Company."²¹ Raleigh had now burned his Irish bridges behind him in terms of his rapport with Lord Grey, but in terms of his ascent to courtier status, it no longer mattered. In June Elizabeth rescinded his service in Ireland. For the next decade he would rank among her most favored courtiers.

In retrospect, Naunton's account of how Raleigh became a favorite is correct in its broad contours although flawed in its details. Raleigh's ascent did not grow out of a dramatic confrontation with Grey before the

¹⁸Public Record Office, London, State Papers, Ireland, PRO SP 63/88, f. 26.

¹⁹Public Record Office, London, State Papers, Ireland, PRO SP 63/91, f. 7.

²⁰Public Record Office, London, State Papers, Ireland, PRO SP 63/92, ff. 14–14v.

²¹Public Record Office, London, State Papers, Ireland, PRO SP 63/92, f. 18v, 7 May 1582.

Queen and her Privy Council. It was instead a gradual process that took roughly a year and a half to complete. It began with winning over the privy counselors through his testimony before them in December 1580. Back in Ireland, he consolidated and expanded the reputation he had gained through personal correspondence with Walsingham, Burghley, Leicester, and perhaps others. Meanwhile, his sudden appreciation back home was not lost on the Lord Deputy. It facilitated, at least, Raleigh's subsequent journey to London late in 1581. Thereafter, he did engage in conflict with Lord Grey by setting forth a rival strategy for managing affairs in Ireland, a strategy that Grey countered at long distance without success. Above all, on his second return to London, Raleigh's standing with Elizabeth's principal counselors led to an audience with the queen herself. From that point, as Naunton remarked, "we are not to doubt how such a man could comply and learn the way to progression."²²

Emory University

²²Naunton, p. 73.