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Foreword Review HISTORY

Patriot or Traitor: The Life and Death of Sir Walter Ralegh

Anna Beer
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Patriot or Traitor reveals fascinating Elizabethan Walter Ralegh's accomplishments as a teen soldier, inner-circle courtier, ethnographer/colonizer/pirate, and author. Anna Beer explains why Ralegh's influence and fortune arced and waned over his tumultuous life, ultimately leaving him a longtime, legally dead prisoner of the Tower of London.

Beer's assured tone and nuanced knowledge of her subject make for a lively history. She lauds Ralegh for his intellectualism in an age of "absolutism and fundamentalism" and as "one of the great prose stylists of his era" but is also keenly aware of his numerous faults. She tartly notes that he could be "economical with the truth" and was "always good at complaining," and she seems outright exasperated at his lack of tact in dangerous situations. The book is further enlivened by extensive quotes from Ralegh's and his contemporaries' letters, poems, and other writings.

Beer's evocative historical analysis effectively translates the social life of a distant era for modern readers. She describes how differently Elizabethans viewed things, including their highly stratified class system that called for gruesome hanging, drawing, and quartering of lower-class political prisoners, while "gentlemen" earned a less tortuous beheading. Parallels to contemporary affairs, like the glorification of Anglo-Saxon culture championed then and now by the far right, underscore Beer's contention that history should not be simply a "review of the past, but a source of correct action and human wisdom, here and now."

Ralegh's richly recounted life story evokes the turbulence of the Elizabethan and Stuart eras. It's a balanced biography of an English Renaissance man, deconstructing the myths surrounding his apotheosis by nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians and politicians as the poster boy for "a more decent form of imperialism"—a refreshing blend of commanding scholarship and opinionated reflections that is a delight to read.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (November/December 2018)

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