

THE QUEEN'S PIRATE

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The Secret Surfer

*Rush Hour: How 500 Million Commuters
Survive the Daily Journey to Work*

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*La Diva Nicotina: The Story of How Tobacco
Seduced the World*

THE QUEEN'S PIRATE

The Triumphant Life and Tragic End
of THOMAS CAVENDISH,
Elizabethan Privateer

IAIN GATELY



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To Ed, who taught me how to sail offshore and promised
that, if I wrote this book, he'd read it.

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←
Cavendish's circumnavigation
1586-1588

←
Cavendish's second voyage
1591-1592



Introduction

Berehaven, Ireland



*'The sea is a waving, wavering foundation, the wind's theatre
for both comedies and tragedies.'*

Samuel Purchas

ON THE MORNING TIDE OF 11 June 1593, the sailing ship *Desire* drifted into Berehaven on Ireland's southwest coast. She was the last to return of a fleet of five vessels that had left England to the sound of trumpets two years before. Now she was a floating wreck. Her sails had been blown to rags, and her decks were littered with fallen spars and tangled ropes. She had sixteen living crewmen, only five of whom had strength enough to stand up. They were the sole survivors of an initial company of seventy-four men who had sailed from Plymouth in the summer of 1591.

The *Desire's* anchors had been lost in a gale six thousand miles away, and her captain could only bring her to rest by running her aground. Irish labourers had been watching from the fields and, as soon as she was still, they climbed aboard to gather in the remnants of her sails and make her fast. They fled in horror the instant they'd secured the *Desire*. Her decks were littered with corpses whose intestines had burst out of their stomachs and scrotums. Beneath them, in her hold, was a coagulated mass of rotting penguins, whose flesh seethed with 'most loathsome and ugly' worms. The worms were eating their way through the *Desire*. According to a survivor,

there was nothing that they did not devour... our clothes, boots, shoes, hats, shirts, stockings: and for the ship they did so eat the timbers that we greatly feared they would undo us, by gnawing through its side... at the last we could not sleep for them, but they would eat our flesh.

The *Desire* was a famous ship. Just under five years previously, she had tied up in the River Thames beside the Royal Palace of Greenwich in a very different state. On this occasion, her sails had been cut from damask and a giant standard sewn from Chinese

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silk and cloth of gold flew from her main mast. Her mariners were dressed in blue silk suits with gold medallions on heavy gold chains hanging from their necks. According to a Spanish spy, 'It was as if Cleopatra had been resuscitated. The only thing wanting was that the rigging should have been of silken rope.' As the *Desire* came into her mooring, she had 'fired off a great quantity of artillery', which, in the opinion of another spy, was 'a most beautiful sight'.

Her owner, Thomas Cavendish Esquire, gentleman, privateer and circumnavigator, had brought the *Desire*, which he'd had 'built up from the keel', to Greenwich to pay homage to his queen, Elizabeth I of England. After saluting her with cannon-fire, he'd staged a banquet for her aboard his ship in a cabin hung with 'marvellously rich' banners. They dined off solid gold plates, serenaded by the *Desire's* musicians. Elizabeth (spies reported) was in 'great good humour'. England was at war with Spain, and she boasted that its king 'barks a good deal but does not bite. We care nothing for the Spaniards; their ships, loaded with silver and gold from the Indies, come hither after all.'



The change in the condition of the *Desire* between her triumphant display in 1588 and her crippled state in 1593 reflected the altered fortunes of her owner. Thomas Cavendish, the youngest, most audacious hero of the Age of Discovery, a contemporary of Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh, had staked his inheritance, his social status and his life on perilous ventures in search of plunder and fame. He'd participated in the first English colonising expedition to Virginia in 1585; and had led his own fleet around the world a year later, returning to England after capturing the richest Spanish galleon afloat, 'victorious over elements and enemies, illustrious in wealth and honour'. However, in 1591, at the age of thirty, he had launched a final, fatal expedition, intended not only to privateer, but also to establish trade with China, which had been frustrated by treachery and mutiny. He died at an unmarked

spot in the South Atlantic as his venture fell to pieces and his ships, including the *Desire*, returned without his body.

Cavendish's Spanish opponents called him a corsair – a pirate – and reacted to his depredations with a mixture of panic and fury. How could a youth 'of about twenty-two years, with a wretched little vessel of a hundred tons and forty or fifty companions' have disrupted their Pacific trade and beggared their colonies in Mexico and the Philippines, unless he was in league with the Antichrist? The Inquisition burned alive those of his crew that they captured, and news of his death was commemorated with *Te Deums* in three continents, to thank God for getting rid of him.

A portrait of this English hero and Spanish villain, painted when he was in his late twenties, shows an Elizabethan gallant, sumptuously dressed, rather than the brutal corsair his enemies feared and detested. Cavendish stands tall in his picture with his hands on his hips, holding the brim of a velvet hat with a jewelled cockade in the fingers of his right hand, while his left hand is draped over the pommel of a sword. A white lace collar around his throat is decorated with snowflake patterns, backlit by the crimson silk beneath. The collar tops a peascod doublet in candy-stripes of cream silk alternating with bands of embroidered cloth of gold. Above the finery, Cavendish's eyebrows are shaved pencil thin and his hair raised into a quiff. It's hard to imagine such an elegant individual burning ships and towns or cutting people's throats, until you look into his pale blue eyes, still luminous beneath the crackled varnish of his portrait, and see that Cavendish appears to be watching you from his young, lean face. His gaze is direct and, by some trick of the light, it seems that the eyes of a dead man live on in his picture and are scrutinising the stranger in front of them. The effect is both mesmerising, and chilling.

Thomas Cavendish was the most existential of Elizabethan heroes, aloof, calculating and motivated by opportunity and expediency rather than introspection, piety or prejudice. His principles – such as they were – derived from a medieval concept of honour that sanctioned both violence and theft, and glorified

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revenge. Nonetheless, he was feted in his own age. His triumphs were celebrated in ballads, and his fall was mourned by poets. His contemporaries considered his death to have been a model of fortitude in the face of adversity and named their sons after him. The Dutch followed in his footsteps, using his charts and pilots to establish themselves in Asia, and Cavendish's dream of sea-borne commerce between England and China proved to be prophetic.

Here, for the first time, is his story.

1



The Courtier

Suffolk, England





IN SEPTEMBER 1581, THE TWENTY-ONE-YEAR-OLD Thomas Cavendish was burning through his inheritance. He had just come of age and gained control over the estates that had been bequeathed to him. He'd had a melancholy childhood and a gloomy adolescence, and aimed to compensate himself now that he was rich and independent. Born into a family of wealthy and well-connected Suffolk gentry, Thomas was one of nine children. His infancy was punctuated by the deaths of his three elder brothers and one of his younger sisters, and his father had died when he was only twelve years old. He'd become the ward of his maternal uncle Sir Thomas, 2nd Baron Wentworth, after his father's premature death. Although Cavendish's guardian fulfilled his duties, steering him along the usual course for a young man of his social class by sending him to Cambridge University for a year in 1576, and thence to Gray's Inn to learn a little law,¹ Wentworth was a man of tainted honour, and Cavendish felt contaminated by association. The baron's long and mostly illustrious career had been stained by a single instance of gross incompetence. In 1553, Mary I had appointed him governor of Calais, England's last toehold in France, which it had held for over two centuries, and which Wentworth lost to a French army in 1558 in a siege lasting only seven days.*² The French captured Wentworth as well as Calais and kept him prisoner until he was ransomed by Elizabeth I. He retreated from court after this disgrace and became a staunch Puritan. A portrait from 1568 shows him as Thomas Cavendish would have known him. His clothing is austere – his doublet and hose are

* The defeat had shocked Mary so deeply that she'd claimed that, if her body were to be opened after her death, the word *Calais* would be found cut into her heart.

black, his ruff is minimal – and his expression is watchful, perhaps to give lie to the rumours that he'd been surprised by the French.

Once he'd received his inheritance, Cavendish rejected the puritanism that had cast a shadow over his adolescence, poured some of his wealth into his wardrobe and joined the exuberant band of courtiers who attended Queen Elizabeth at her palaces. No official ceremonies were required to be admitted to this enchanted circle. Cavendish was one of a number of young gentlemen with relatives among the privy councillors or with blood-ties to the queen who joined the royal entourage once they'd been presented. Cavendish and his fellow courtiers revelled in conspicuous consumption, spending fortunes on their clothing, their hats, their shoes, their jewels and their suits of armour. They aimed to lead as well as follow fashions, sporting both styles imported from Europe and those of their own devising. Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, for instance, affected an Italian way of dress when he returned from a self-imposed exile in Tuscany after farting while 'making of his low obeisance to Queen Elizabeth',* and stunned the court with 'a little apish hat, couched fast to the pate, like an oyster'.³ Sir Philip Sydney, meanwhile, (who was reckoned to be the finest English courtier alive, admired in Europe as well as at home) dazzled with a white silk peascod jacket, slashed and tufted, worn over black velvet trunk-hose embroidered with gold and a matching codpiece.

Cavendish and his fellow gallants also paid attention to the bodies beneath the finery, remedying natural defects with subterfuge. His friend Sir John Harrington, the queen's 'saucy godson', summarised the artifices necessary, including shoulder pads, deodorants and the tricks of small talk, to perfect themselves:

We use much bumbastings and quiltings to seem fitter formed,
better shouldered, smaller waisted, fuller-thighed than we are, we

* Elizabeth reminded him of his indiscretion when he returned from Tuscany. 'My Lord,' she said, unprompted, 'I had forgot the fart.'

use perfumes both inward and outward to seem sweeter than we be; we use courteous salutations to seem kinder than we be; and sometimes graver and godly communications, to seem wiser than we be.⁴

Gambling was the favourite vice of these paragons of masculinity, and it was rampant at court. The queen and her privy councillors played at cards for money (Elizabeth cheated), the pot-boys shook dice for pennies and her courtiers bet on anything that moved, including random events – such as which one of two falling leaves would hit the ground first?

Thomas Cavendish was a natural-born gambler. He'd run up debts against his inheritance before he'd received it and increased his stakes once it was in his hands. In 1581, for instance, he wagered £1,000 on whether or not George Gifford, a gentleman pensioner of the queen, could walk to Constantinople.⁵ However, while such large, bold bets marked Cavendish as a thrill-seeker, within a year of becoming independently wealthy the excitement of laying wagers had paled. The kick faded once the bets had been settled, and Cavendish wanted more than transient excitement. He cast around for other channels for his money and energy, and found a role model and mentor in Walter Raleigh, a young captain of a good family who had borrowed £100 to make a splash at court. Raleigh's 'handsome and well compacted person', neatly trimmed beard, bright blue eyes and 'bold and plausible tongue'⁶ had recommended him to Queen Elizabeth, who valued wit in her courtiers as much as the cut of their bumbasts, and she had made him her new favourite.

* Bets on feats of endurance were all the rage and were later satirised by the playwright Ben Johnson, whose character Puntarvolo, in *Every Man out of His Humour*, lays down stakes (at odds of five to one) not only for himself, but also for his dog and his cat, that they will walk to Constantinople and return to England.

Better educated than most of her councillors, fluent in Latin and Italian, Elizabeth was vivacious, quick-witted and erudite.⁷ She danced every day, she loved hunting and both reading and composing poetry. Despite her responsibilities and the constant threat of assassination, she retained a sense of fun. She was a discriminate judge of company, who'd been flattered by the best wits in England, and she raised and rewarded those who caught her ear as well as her eye. She was bored by her previous favourites, who'd been elegant youths when she came to the throne in 1558 but had since grown long in the tooth, dull in their minds, and repetitive or evasive in their speech. She showered Raleigh with presents, gifting him Durham House (once the palace of the Catholic Bishops of Durham) as a residence and appointing him Master of the Stanneries, which provided him with a substantial income in tithes.

Raleigh put his new wealth into circulation. His shoes alone (which were valued at £600) cost more than ten skilled shoemakers earned between them in a year. His prodigality enchanted Thomas Cavendish and his peers. They envied Raleigh for his clothing, respected him for his experiences – he was a battle-hardened warmonger, who'd killed men with his sword and lance in campaigns in both France and Ireland – and admired his powers of self-expression. Raleigh was also known for his integrity, in that he never betrayed his roots. He was related to the great privateering families of the west of England and he participated or invested in the family business throughout his life.⁸

It was this aspect of his character that appealed most to Thomas Cavendish. Much of his own wealth was tied up in land and, like many of his class who had bets to make or clothes to buy, he was looking for opportunities to raise cash other than by collecting rents. Privateering, as espoused by Walter Raleigh, seemed ideal. It was a legal form of piracy. If a merchant lost a ship or cargo to hostile action, they could apply to England's Admiralty Court for 'letters of reprisal', which granted them the right to take shipping and goods to the value of their losses from their aggressors, and/or

their countries of origin. The letters could be sold at a discount to professional privateers who would carry out retribution for a percentage of the takings. Privateering was also open to gentlemen, to whom it resembled jousting with ships as steeds instead of horses, and who believed that fighting at sea was as valid a path to wealth and fame as warfare on land.*⁹

Thomas Cavendish's ancestors had won their estates and privileges through warfare and oppression† and he decided to follow their examples, albeit by sea. He was motivated by glory as well as gain. Not just the gold, but the getting of the gold, inspired him. He wanted to exorcise the demons of his wardship under Wentworth and emerge from the shadow of shame. In 1584, Cavendish elected to throw his hand in with Raleigh, who was promoting a plan at court to establish a privateering base in America. Raleigh contended that war with Catholic Spain was inevitable, and that the best way to forestall conflict was to interrupt the flow of gold and silver her king, Philip II, received from his American territories by raiding his treasure fleets from a safe haven on the west coast of the Atlantic. Privateers could also be patriots.

Cavendish stayed close to his mentor as his plan evolved. First Raleigh applied to the queen for a patent to explore, exploit, settle and ultimately rule the entire east coast of America between Florida and Newfoundland. Elizabeth signed and sealed it on 16 March 1584, bestowing immense powers over unknown territories on her favourite:

* The precedent had been set by Edward III at the battle of Winchelsea in 1350, when he had ordered the pilot of his ship to 'set me against yonder Spaniard that is coming, for I wish to joust with him'. Quoted in Sir Julian Stafford Corbett, *Drake and the Tudor Navy, With a History of the Rise of England as a Maritime Power* (2 vols.) (New York: Burt Franklin, 1899) p. 20.

† A Cavendish had been Lord Chief Justice in the reign of Richard II, another slew Wat Tyler, leader of the peasants' revolt, in 1381; a third had played a conspicuous and gallant role at the Battle of Agincourt.

We do give and grant to our trusty and well-beloved servant Walter Raleigh Esquire and his heirs and assignees ever after free liberty and license from time to time and for all times forever hereafter to discover search find out and view such remote heathen and barbarous lands Countries and territories not actually possessed by any Christian prince and to have hold occupy and enjoy... forever'.¹⁰



Once he had his patent, Raleigh launched a reconnaissance mission. Two ships captained by Philip Amadis and Arthur Barlowe crossed the Atlantic and spent six weeks exploring America, before returning to England in mid-September. Barlowe wrote a report of their findings, which Raleigh circulated among both courtiers and the City of London's merchants. The report was shameless propaganda, picturing Raleigh's new territory as an earthly paradise. When his ships had closed in on its shores, Barlowe reported, the air had been perfumed with sweet scents 'as if we had been in the middle of some delicate garden, abounding with all kinds of odoriferous flowers'.¹¹ Wafted by fragrant breezes, they had cruised the coast until they found an inlet where they anchored and rowed ashore.

Their landfall was covered with a tangle of grapevines, bursting with ripe fruit, so many, in Barlowe's opinion, that 'in all the world the like abundance is not to be found'. The land beyond consisted of a series of verdant islets, sheltered from the Atlantic by a barrier chain. The islets were graced with 'goodly woods, full of deer, rabbits, hares and fowl', and the woods themselves were composed of giant aromatic trees, including, 'the highest and reddest Cedars of the world'.¹²

This new Eden had people in it. When Raleigh's men established contact with the local Algonquin tribe, they found them 'very handsome... and in their behaviour as mannerly and civil as any of Europe'.¹³ The Algonquin had proved eager to make friends and (for any merchants reading) were honest traders. They were

'most gentle, loving and faithful, void of all guile, and treason, and such as lived after the manner of the golden age'.¹⁴ Barlowe imputed their fine characters to the fecund landscape, whose soil was 'the most plentiful, sweet, fruitful, and wholesome of all the world, which brought forth all things in abundance, as in the first creation, without toil or labour'.¹⁵

Fortunately, from the point of view of Raleigh's patent, the Algonquin were heathens, whose lands hadn't yet been claimed by any other Christian princes. None that Barlowe met had seen a white man or a European sailing ship before, and 'they wondered marvellously at the whiteness of our skins, ever coveting to touch our breasts'. If they had any faults beyond idolatry, it was an addiction to cruel and bloody wars that had 'marvellously wasted' the population so that the country had been 'left desolate' in some places, creating plenty of room for Raleigh to establish a settlement.¹⁶

Amadis and Barlowe brought back two Algonquin men, Wanchese and Manteo, to be taught English and to serve as ambassadors and interpreters on future expeditions. Raleigh used them as walking advertisements for his new venture and enlisted the scholar Thomas Harriot to transcribe their language and to teach them English. Raleigh was delighted with the results of his reconnaissance expedition. His scouts had found a site for a fort in America, had established peaceful relations with its inhabitants and had whipped up interest in the venture among both investors and influencers. His next aims were to get his patent ratified by Parliament, and to send a follow-up fleet of ships to build a privateering stronghold in his new possessions. He chose Thomas Cavendish to help him with both aims.