

Frankie Myers
fbmyers@ncsu.edu
HI3095
University College Cork

Raleigh's Colonial Legacy

Although his North American colonial experiments ended in tragic failure, Sir Walter Raleigh is nevertheless regarded as the father of English American colonialism. What he achieved was not the founding of a lasting colony, but the founding of a lasting idea. Before Raleigh, English interest in America consisted of searching for new routes to Asia and harvesting (or plundering) gold and other precious commodities. Colonization—transplanting a cross-section of English society and building an overseas empire had never been taken seriously until Raleigh came along, and it wasn't for many years and a great deal of promotion that his ideas were fully appreciated.

Before 1584, save Newfoundland, England had not one foothold outside the British Isles. When Sir Humphrey Gilbert, Raleigh's half-brother, secured Newfoundland for the Crown, his goal was to cash in on the existing multi-national fishing industry there, not to build an overseas English society. Gilbert and his contemporaries were also engaged in numerous expeditions into the Arctic to find a passage to Asia. Expeditions to America in search of gold were common, and piracy became the nation's favourite pastime. In short, the nation's overseas interests focused on finding fast, easy wealth. After having witnessed the riches that had poured into the laps of Spain and Portugal from America in the last 50 years, England was, understandably, determined to find her own. But overseas wealth did not come as easily for England as it did for Spain and Portugal. Although Raleigh, too, invested himself in all of these pursuits of wealth, he was also deeply committed to building a sustainable English colony in America, which would later provide the source of wealth and power that England desired.¹²

Raleigh's 1584 patent from the Queen enabled him to settle lands "not actually possessed of any Christian prince or people." He chose the coast of "Virginia"

(present-day states of North Carolina and Virginia), and made two attempts to colonize there. He also advocated strongly for a colony in Guiana, though he himself was never able to establish one. After Raleigh was imprisoned and later beheaded, both Virginia and Guiana remained sites of English colonization attempts. Virginia, of course, became the heart of the English American colonies, and later, the United States. His colonies failed for a variety of reasons. The lessons learned from these failures and the colonial model that emerged from them were vital to the success of later colonies.

The first colony under Ralph Lane was organized as a military expedition, with the settlers working as paid servants. Lane, being a military man, saw only to the end of the first stage of the colony—building a fortified settlement on a suitable harbour, and did not know how to build a sustainable colony with a diversified community, agriculture, and commerce. The 107 colonists, too, lacked the necessary skills to plant crops and build a sustaining community. Most of them were aristocrats who paid their own way in search of personal fortune. They were not given land grants, so they had little personal stake in the colony, and many, after realizing that there was no gold to be found, thought only of how much longer it would be before they could return to England.³ Thomas Hariot, the scientist who was among that first group, notes of the settlers, “Because there were not to be found any English cities, nor such fair houses, nor at their own wish any of their old accustomed dainty food, nor any soft beds of down or feathers, the country was to them miserable.”⁴

Furthermore, Lane saw relations with the natives from a militaristic, rather than a diplomatic, standpoint, and demanding food and other goods at gunpoint or with the taking of hostages was commonplace. Naturally the relations with the natives grew hostile and ended in bloodshed.

Besides all this, the island was not a suitable location for a colony as it lie amongst numerous shoals and had no deep-water harbour. Many of the ships’ initial provisions were damaged when the flagship, *the Tyger*, ran aground and flooded.¹

Fortunately, the first colonists were able to return to England, and Raleigh was able to learn much from these problems. Together with Richard Hakluyt and others,

Raleigh thought out and put forth a model for colonialism that included what kinds of people were needed, how the settlers should be rewarded, how the community should be governed and organized, how the natives should be treated, what kind of economic resources would be required, and what were realistic short-term expectations for the economic returns on the colony. These ideas formed the basis of his second attempt as well as subsequent successful colonies such as Jamestown and Plymouth.

The English had expected to encounter a native population in Virginia like the Spanish had found in South and Central America who would support the colony as it was beginning to take root. This first expedition sobered them to the reality that the natives were too primitive and too sparsely populated in tiny villages to provide adequate surplus food and labour. It was therefore necessary to convince working-class Europeans to emigrate, and a diverse skill set was needed including farmers, gardeners, carpenters, and blacksmiths. Whole families would be sent. These people would not be able to afford paying their own way; the cost of emigration, tools, equipment, and initial supplies had to be provided by the financiers. The full financial scale of the undertaking and the extent of promotion that would be needed were beginning to be realized.

The first colony also shaped England's initial impressions about Native Americans. From the initial reconnaissance expedition that Raleigh sent out, Arthur Barlow noted of the natives, "A more kind and loving people there can not be found in the world."⁵ This kind of glowing praise no doubt made it easier for settlers to justify bringing their families to the New World. Natives—most famously Manteo and Wanchese--were brought back to England and taught English and Christianized so they could serve as interpreters and diplomats, and they formed a lasting, positive impression on the English population. Raleigh himself advocated a policy of peaceful cooperation. By treating the natives with respect and providing them fair compensation, England, he believed, could win the allegiance of the natives—particularly those who had come under the tyranny of the Spanish conquistadors. During his voyages to Guiana, he apparently gained such respect among the natives that his name became "in the mouths of subsequent explorers a passport to their confidence."⁹

The first voyage also provided a great deal of insight into the realities of the region which Raleigh named Virginia. Thanks to the detailed drawings, maps, and journals of John White and Thomas Hariot from the first settlement, a great deal was now known about this region, its people, and its flora and fauna. Hariot studied how the natives grew corn and crafted fish nets so that he could pass on these skills to future settlers. Among other things, White mapped the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay, which would be a suitable deep-water harbour for settlement and was Raleigh's target for the second colony.¹

For the second voyage, Raleigh and Hakluyt drew together more financiers and petitioned for financial support from the Queen (although it doesn't seem she gave more than a modest amount). Instead of going to pay settler's wages, the money went towards tools and supplies. The settlers would be paid in Virginian land—500 acres for agreeing to go and more in proportion to the amount that they themselves contributed. Settlers therefore had a personal stake in the survival of the colony. Also, Raleigh organized the second colony as a self-governing city, and formally appointed government officials of the "City of Raleigh in Virginia." He advocated autonomy, liberty, and religious freedom in the colony.⁶

In terms of the colonial model, very little changed from this colony and the subsequent successful colony at Jamestown—he had largely gotten it right. But due to a number of factors beyond Raleigh's control, the second colony failed. Because of the impending threat of invasion by the Spanish armada, resupply ships were not allowed to make the voyage as planned. Those that did were often lured into piracy on the way and never made it to the colony as they were supposed to. It was difficult at best to control the actions of sea captains—particularly without firm support from the Crown and a strong financial institution behind the venture. When a ship finally did reach the colony in 1591, the settlers had vanished, and the mystery of the "lost colony" has never been fully resolved.⁷

Besides teaching England valuable lessons about how a colony should be run, Raleigh's colonies were instrumental in igniting public interest that remained after his influence waned. We owe this largely to the work of Richard Hakluyt, who wrote exhaustive discourses and engaged in publicity campaigns for settlement. His

Discourse of Western Planting, aimed primarily at the Crown, presented his and Raleigh's multi-threaded argument for colonization, and his massively detailed *Principle Travels* chronicled the first Roanoke colonies and stressed the opportunities that lie in America. By the turn of the century, English clergy were preaching of Christianizing the natives, the unemployed and lower class members of society saw an opportunity to bring themselves out of poverty through hard work, and Catholics and other religious groups saw a way to religious freedom.²

Raleigh's and Hakluyt's argument for colonization focused on putting Spanish power in check. They claimed that overseas colonies would serve as strategic military bases from which raids and pirating expeditions could be launched. Seizing Spanish outposts would mean securing a portion of the vast wealth that Spain enjoyed. Furthermore, the colonies would free England's dependence on the Spanish trade monopoly with the Americas, provide new markets for English industry (in both the colonists and the to-be-civilized natives), and relieve the high unemployment which England faced. Raleigh evangelized colonization as a means of ensuring the security of England's future greatness. As Benians writes, "By setting the struggle with Spain in the forefront of his plans, Raleigh taught the Elizabethans to look at colonization with a political eye. In his proposals he showed not only private profit to be involved, but also the national future." The colonies would remain at the forefront of English politics for centuries to come.¹²

After England emerged from the war with Spain, she had learned a great deal about colonizing America from Raleigh's first two experiments and could work on applying these lessons to the first successful colonies. Raleigh's colonies made it clear that for a colony to survive, it needed a concerted, steady effort behind it, and private investments were not sufficient. Raleigh spent a total of £40,000 on his American voyages and this put an enormous strain on his finances. Meanwhile, the East India Company spent more than £60,000 on its first voyage to the East alone. To be able to distribute the high risk of the ventures and generate large amounts of capital—even when returns might take years, Raleigh's followers employed the new mechanism of the joint-stock company, forming the Virginia Company to generate the needed revenues.¹³ As a result, the first resupply ship at Jamestown arrived within a month of the colonists' arrival, and the second was not far behind that. Also, James I

put the Crown firmly behind the effort in terms of governance and oversight of the institutions involved—something Raleigh had pushed for all along. Twenty-four years after Raleigh's first settlement at Roanoke Island, England finally had established a lasting colony in America.⁸

Although Raleigh himself was imprisoned while the successful colony at Jamestown was taking root, there's no doubt that were he able to, he would have been the one leading it to successes. Instead, however, it was those people who were involved in his early colonial experiments who finally accomplished what he set out to do. As Edwards writes, "men who began their training under Raleigh were amongst the foremost promoters of the American plantations."¹⁰ Many of the financiers in London who backed the Virginia Company had been behind Raleigh's first colonies. They were led by Sir Thomas Smyth, who Raleigh had deeded the lost colony to and charged with sending out exploratory missions to find, and Richard Hakluyt, Raleigh's friend and principle promoter of the colonies. Sir Humphrey Gilbert's sons, Raleigh's nephews, headed up the group which planted the first successful colony in New England. John Smith, president of the Jamestown colony, followed Raleigh's advice on relations with the natives and succeeded in winning the friendship of the Powhatan Indians, which greatly aided the success of the colony. [2, 269-71]

So, although Raleigh's Virginia enterprise failed, as Edwards writes, "his perseverance in it had sown broadcast the seeds of eventual success. He had set an example which lived, with a more than common vitality, in the minds of men."¹¹ His contribution was made to English colonial theory. The lessons learned and the colonial model that he contributed laid the foundation for future successful English colonies and a later Republic.

Bibliography

- [1] Parry, J.H. *The Age of Reconnaissance: Discovery, Exploration, and Settlement*. Phoenix Press. 2000. London. p.p 212-213
- [2] *Ibid.* p. 214
- [3] Quinn, D. B. *Raleigh and the British Empire*. James MacLehose and Sons. 1910. Glasgow. p.p 75-76
- [4] *Ibid.* p. 78
- [5] *Ibid.* p. 56
- [6] *Ibid.* p. 106-108
- [7] *Ibid.* p. 108-125
- [8] *Ibid.* p. 227-237
- [9] Edwards, Edward. *The Life of Sir Walter Raleigh*, Vol. 1. Macmillan and Co. 1868. London. p. 184
- [10] *Ibid.* p. 722
- [11] *Ibid.* p. 93
- [12] Benians, E. A. "Raleigh: Died 29 October 1618." *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 52, No. 5. (Nov., 1918), pp. 277-287. Stable URL: <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0016-7398%28191811%2952%3A5%3C277%3ARD2O1%3E2.0.CO%3B2-C>
- [13] Cheyney, Edward P. "Some English Conditions Surrounding the Settlement of Virginia." *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 12, No. 3. (Apr., 1907), pp. 507-528. Stable URL: <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-8762%28190704%2912%3A3%3C507%3ASECSTS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-J>