

Paul R. Sellin. *Treasure, Treason and the Tower: El Dorado and the Murder of Sir Walter Raleigh*.

Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011. xxiv + 306 pp. \$64.95. ISBN: 978-1-4094-2025-5.

The initial motivation for this work was the author's discovery of a couple of documents indicating a connection between the English royal favorite and the Swedish king in 1628, concerning a future attempt at recovering Raleigh's fabled gold mine in Guayana. He then looks backward from here to establish the legitimacy of the documents, the existence of the mine, and to use this all to

comment on the events that brought the famous Elizabethan to an untimely end. The majority of space is given over to a close analysis of the 1595 Guayana voyage. Sellin actually went to South America and retraced Raleigh's steps, and he makes a strong case that everything was pretty much where the old seadog said it was. This in itself is a useful contribution, and it is the result of some impressive work. The problems lie not with this, but with the context the author sets this in, and his continual discussion as to the implications.

The writing style is an unusual mix. Much of it reads like a travelogue or suspense novel with the author as main character, filled with breathless language describing the search through books and foreign archives, and frequently running to hyperbole about the implications of the smallest of discoveries. And yet, it is clearly intended for a very specialized audience: with countless phrases unnecessarily rendered in various foreign languages, pages given over to analysis of usage of the definite article or particular Latin declensions, and main conclusions cast as significant blows against the work of a handful of literary scholars that Sellin, bafflingly, puts forward as representatives of the entire historiographical view. At one point, he even slides into a multipage block quotation, a conversational retelling of a debate between multiple personalities representing "conflicting ideas" in his own "eager psyche" (110).

Sellin's central argument is cast against a surprising straw man, claiming that Raleigh has always been seen as some sort of despicable character, and that this book will finally correct this centuries-long injustice. But Raleigh, in fact, has usually been portrayed as one of the great heroes of British history; nor has this changed much in recent years, with celebratory work easy to find, and occasional critics — the part Sellin mistakes for the whole — offering a much more complex reading than this author lets on. Moreover, most of this book's conclusions about the injustice done to Raleigh — indeed the real meat of the last couple of chapters, and the central selling point of the book — are based in strongly stated, Whiggish personal opinions about the good, martial Protestants and the evil, effeminate, scheming Catholics, Spaniards, and their allies, and Sellin's view of James I is firmly mired somewhere in the nineteenth century. He speaks with discomfiting certainty about so many things, while often getting crucial facts wrong, such as whether and when countries were at war with one another, and then bases key assumptions on these mistaken beliefs. He accuses "most previous scholars" of wrongly believing that Raleigh had exaggerated the nature of his claim and its value (9), despite later admitting that Raleigh constantly did just that (217, 222). He is selective with his use of justifications for imperial possession, and he even freely admits that Raleigh was motivated in his second voyage by the very sort of anti-Spanish "geo-strategic plan" that James and his officers accused him of (176). Sellin makes no distinction between proper policy in 1596 and 1618, and repeatedly asserts that the very attempt to remain at peace with Spain was essentially a treasonous strategy. And yet, despite all of his claims about the trial and resultant execution, he surprisingly leaves out a description of what actually happened on the 1617–18 voyage. In the end, beyond his close analysis of (and detailed description of the process of locating)

those first few documents — and despite his claims to revelatory, field-shaking conclusions — there is no real archival work at all: citations when they are there are to secondary, printed work, and most of the significant points of supposed novelty rest merely on repeated assertion and explicit personal outrage. While this book offers some useful insight on El Dorado, the same simply cannot be said for “the murder of Sir Walter Raleigh.”

ROBERT S. D. CROSS  
Vanderbilt University