

**DISCOURSE ON THE LIFE AND
CHARACTER OF SIR WALTER
RALEGH. BEING THE THIRD ANNUAL
ADDRESS TO MARYLAND
HISTORICAL SOCIETY, MAY 19, 1846**

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Discourse on the Life and Character of Sir Walter Raleigh. Being the third Annual Address to Maryland Historical Society, May 19, 1846 by J. Morrison Harris

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SIR WALTER RALEGH.

WE have opened the volume of History, this evening, at a page crowded with the record of great deeds, and glowing with the story of illustrious men.

The period immediately preceding, was one of the most momentous in the annals of the race, for the events which distinguished it, were of a weight and character, not merely to impress, powerfully, the age in which they occurred, but to extend their influence through all subsequent time,—tinging the opinions, moulding the institutions, and affecting the destinies of man.

It was a period of varied and startling action, mental, moral and physical. The invention of Printing had given impetus to Letters. The revival of Letters, opportunity to investigation, and impulse to thought. With increasing knowledge, came new and just perceptions of mental freedom; and the withes of superstition, in which the spirit of man had been bound for ages, were rent asunder in the first struggles of the awakening giant. From his gloomy

cell, the monk of Eisleben came forth with his latin Bible, and his indomitable heart; and, amid the war of creeds, the conflict of principles, and the convulsions of society, the Sampson of the Reformation held his appointed way. In the stern conflict which ensued, men of commanding genius, everywhere sprang up. On the one side fought Erasmus, Melancthon, Zuinglius, Calvin; on the other, Lainez, Xavier, Loyola. The collision of such minds could not fail to produce the most important results. The untiring effort and unshaken faith of the first, strengthened and carried on the Reformation; the splendid genius, and super-human zeal of the last, conceived and built up the order of the Jesuits.

The age was, further, illustrated by the success of Columbus. The mariner of Genoa, had given a new world to the sovereignty of Spain. A great problem had been solved, and the Geography as well the Religion of the world, was in a condition of agitation and reform. The immense field, thus suddenly opened to the daring and adventurous, soon became the theatre of some of the most interesting and momentous incidents in History. With unscrupulous hand, Pizarro had gathered the abundant wealth of Peru, and the sceptre of the fallen Incas passed into the iron grasp of the soldier of fortune. Through the lovely valley and the thronged City of Mexico, the fiery Cortéz had passed in his path of blood; and the expiring fires of the Teocallis threw their red glare, alike upon the *means* and the *end* of conquest:—the heaped spoils of the Indian Emperor, and the fearful scenes of the “night of woe.”

Events of such magnitude could not fail to produce the most serious effects upon the character and conduct of the succeeding age, and we, accordingly, find their influence distinctly marked in the history of the time. ~~It would lead us into too long a digression to trace out the results attributable to each; and it is sufficient for our purpose to state, generally, that they greatly enlarged the domain, and liberty of thought—directed the philosophic to new and wonderful themes—fired the imagination and gave scope to the daring of the adventurous;—changed entirely the tone of society—purged the church of errors—checked the throne in its license—gave place and reality to the People—devolved upon man, new responsibilities and rights, and invested his nature with sublimer dignity. The period to which our attention is particularly directed this evening, exhibits in all its occurrences the influence of the events to which we have referred, and premising that its general character cannot be rightly understood unless they are borne in mind, we shall pass at once to the consideration of our subject.~~

Sir WALTER RALEGH was fortunate in the moment of his birth. He came into public life in the dawn of the most brilliant era of English History; during the reign of a Queen, who, great herself, appreciated and cherished greatness in others; upon the eve of events in which his genius fitted him to play a conspicuous part; surrounded by contemporaries of various graces and most remarkable intellect; representatives of all the varieties of human greatness; statesmen, who, born without the trappings, were also free from the prejudices of noble birth; men

of strong minds, clear heads, and bold hearts; who dismayed by no difficulty, appalled by no danger, wrought out, with firm purpose and skilful hand, well digested schemes for the advancement and safety of the realm. There were Soldiers, too, who went into the battles of the time, endued with much of the spirit, if not clad in the panoply of knights. Sussex, generous, impulsive and honest; Essex, the brilliant and successful courtier—the finished gentleman—the accomplished scholar—the illustrious commander—whose reckless and impetuous valor, made war romantic, and whose career was like the course of a shooting star, sudden in its rise—dazzling in its zenith—gloomy in its fall. Sir Philip Sydney, the Crichton of the age; a rare union of the elegant, the sterling and the true; a fine writer and accomplished soldier; while yet in his thirtieth year, famous throughout Europe; commemorated by Grotius for his great designs and inestimable worth; esteemed by Elizabeth “the jewel of her times,” and, by the elegant Camden, pronounced “the darling of the learned world”. Over the copious pages of Littleton, the great commentator bent in learned contemplation. With earnest heart, and powerful pen, Hooker labored in the field of ethical lore; and the father of the new Philosophy revolved in studious seclusion, the startling principles of the *Novum Organum*.—Nor was this period illustrated alone by chivalry and dignified by science. Literature became the mirror of human action; and whilst Spenser sang the beauties of the ideal world, Jonson, Fletcher and Beaumont; Webster, Marlowe, Decker and Shakspear, produced those dramatic

master-pieces which hold despotic sway over the taste and judgment of the world.

The three-score years of Sir Walter Raleigh's life, were so crowded with action, and he was so intimately connected with every event of moment which marked the annals of his time, that it is a task of no small difficulty, within the limits of an occasion like the present, to avoid being either prolix or incomplete in presenting a view of his character. In our narrative, therefore, we shall confine ourselves to the more prominent and important events in which he was an actor; and, in our deductions of his motives and conduct, present arguments as condensed as possible. It may be well to premise, that in reference to certain points, widely variant opinions are entertained, and while some exalt him into a demigod, others give him a far lower position in the scale of moral greatness. The authorities are in many respects scant and contradictory; and Sir Walter, himself, furnishes so much of the evidence, that, unless his veracity and honor are seriously questioned, it is scarcely possible to substantiate the charges which are preferred against him. To whatever conclusion we may arrive, however, in reference to these mooted points, it will be conceded that Raleigh was an extraordinary man, endowed with rare faculties, capable of any achievement, and standing forth in the completeness of his genius and variety of his labors, in the conspicuous foreground of History. To a society, therefore, such as I have the distinguished honor to address, the subject is both pertinent and interesting; and the more so from the fact, that the comprehensive mind of Raleigh planned

the colonization of the fertile realm of which our state formed part, while the ships of his adventurous fleet were the first that swept in pride over the waters of our own broad bay.

X Sir Walter Raleigh appears, for the first time, an actor in the affairs of his age, as a volunteer in the gallant band of gentlemen who fought upon the side of the Huguenots, under the banner of Henry Champernon. The five years of his service in France, brought him into contact with some of the most renowned leaders of the time, and made him a participant in the most important events which marked that fierce and protracted struggle. Under Lodowick of Nassau, Coligny, and Condé, he appears to have fought in the memorable battles of Jarnac and Moncontour, and he escaped the comprehensive massacre of St. Bartholomew by taking refuge in the house of the Ambassador, Walsingham. Although he had not passed his seventeenth year, he behaved with great bravery, and his allusions in his *History of the World, to the conduct of these distinguished leaders*, in some of the battles referred to, clearly evince, that young as he was, he already exercised that habit of close observation and reflection, which is one of his characteristics. His return from France after the death of Charles IX. was succeeded by a short period of inaction passed in Chambers in the Temple. From his own account, Raleigh did not, at that time, read law, nor does it seem that he entertained the idea of pursuing the profession at any subsequent period. His ardent spirit, however, soon led him into more active life, and we find him increasing his military knowledge and rapidly earn-

ing the reputation of an accomplished soldier in the Low Countries which were then struggling against the encroachments of Spain. Amid the engrossing duties of the camp, and the alluring dissipations of military life, he was a regular and laborious student; and the germ of that vast fund of learning which has contributed to immortalize his name, is to be traced to the five hours which he devoted every day, under circumstances so unfavorable, to the cultivation of his mind. This assiduous application on the part of a young man, in such a position, evinces an elevated ambition, great self-command, and a persevering energy, which are interesting as the first development of those mental powers which subsequently led to greatness. After having passed nearly ten years in the career of arms, and having acquired a reputation as rare as it was honorable, he joined the enterprise of Sir Humphrey Gilbert, who had obtained letters patent from Elizabeth, authorizing him to undertake north-western Discoveries, and to possess such lands as were unsettled by christian princes or their subjects.

The expedition encountered, at the outset, a severe storm, or, as some authors insist, a superior Spanish force; and, after the loss of a ship, was driven back to port. Before preparation could be completed for a renewal of the attempt, the outbreak of war in Ireland, again called Raleigh into the field, and he served with Lord Grey in the successful resistance which was made against the Spanish forces sent over to strengthen the Munster Rebellion. In this service he confirmed the military reputation acquired in France and the Low Countries, and came to be