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Extra

Sir Walter Raleigh: deliberate self-harm in the Tower of London, 1603

Greg Wilkinson

Sir Walter Raleigh (circa 1554–1618) – a landed gentleman, writer, poet, soldier, politician, courtier, spy and explorer – is one of the most notable and controversial figures of the first Elizabethan era. A favourite of Elizabeth I, shortly after her death on 24 March 1603 he was accused of plots against her successor James I. Raleigh was arrested on 19 July 1603 and imprisoned in the Tower of London.

Sir John Peyton, Lieutenant of the Tower, wrote to Lord Robert Cecil, one of Raleigh’s judges, on 21 July 1603:

‘... Raleigh still maintained his innocence “but with a mind the most dejected that ever I saw.” Two days later, he again spoke of Raleigh’s “so strange a dejected mind” and said that “his fortitude is [not] competent to support his grief.”’

Cecil described Raleigh’s behaviour on 27 July 1603 to his confidant, Sir Thomas Parry, Ambassador in France, in a letter dated 4 August 1603:

‘... yet one afternoon, whilst divers of us were in the Tower, examining some of these prisoners, he attempted to have murdered himself: whereof when we were advertised, we came to him and found him in some agony, seeming to be unable to endure his misfortunes, and protesting innocency, with carelessness of life; and, in that humour, he had wounded himself under his right pappe, but no way mortally, being, in truth, rather a cut than a stab, and now very well cured both in body and mind.’

Raleigh wrote an impassioned letter to his wife ‘immediately after he had given himself the wound in the Tower’:

‘... I cannot live to think how I am derided, to think of the expectation of my enemies, the scorns I shall receive, the cruel words of lawyers, the infamous taunts and despites, to be made a wonder and a spectacle! Oh, death! hasten thee unto me, that thou mayest destroy the memory of these, and lay me up in dark forgetfulness! Oh, death! destroy my memory, which is my tormentor; my thoughts and my life cannot dwell in one body.’

The Lieutenant wrote again to Cecil on 30 July 1603:

‘... Sr Walter Rawley his hurte wyl be whn [within] these two days pfectly hoole; he doth styll contyneue pplexed as you leftte hym. ... his spirites ar exceeding muche declined, hisgrowne passionate in lamentatyon and sorrowe ...’

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