

How Sir Francis Drake and Queen Elizabeth I Made England a Global Power

By Nigel Cliff [The New York Times](#) March 10, 2021

Review of [IN SEARCH OF A KINGDOM: Francis Drake, Elizabeth I, and the Perilous Birth of the British Empire](#) By Laurence Bergreen

England is a nation divided. In one camp, nationalists decry the diabolical threat to their freedom posed by dastardly Continentals, instead throwing their hopes on a shadow empire of boundless trading opportunities. In the other, pro-Europeans bitterly protest that their country is making a cataclysmic mistake and bide their time. Sound familiar? Just kidding. It's not Boris Johnson's Brexit Britain but the England of the late 16th century, the subject of "In Search of a Kingdom."

In [Laurence Bergreen's](#) colorful assessment, an unlikely alliance between Queen Elizabeth I and Sir Francis Drake empowered English Protestants to see off Continental Catholics and stake out the beginnings of the British Empire. Drake, a flame-bearded firebrand who resembled a cross between Errol Flynn and Yosemite Sam, has a peculiar status in English history. On the plus side, he was a superlative navigator who helped defeat the Spanish Armada. In the debit column, he had an incurable habit of piratical thieving that leaves a bad taste in the mouth.

Among other attractions, this makes him an excellent candidate in whom to consider the warring passions of the English character: the stiff upper lip and the devil-may-care. A tenant farmer's son — the oldest of 12 brothers — with the accent and manners to match, Drake was despised by courtly patricians for his passing acquaintance with protocol. Yet to a scrappy island nation that was spoiling to stick it to the overweening Spanish Empire, a dose of "yah-boo-sucks" went a long way. Wrap it in a flag, and it ran and ran — and still does. Bergreen does not make the link to modern-day Britain, but can it be coincidental that "Brexiteer" echoes "privateer," the old term for a state-licensed sea raider?

In Drake's own time there was no British Empire, and no Britain (something to watch again). In England there was a shaky national church, which Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, had made himself head of, splitting the country in two. The papist powers in Europe considered England a wicked backwater ruled by a heretical witch — justification enough for the governing Protestant clique to knock off Spanish ships on the high seas. As Bergreen notes, the young Drake started his career under his Plymouth cousin, the state-backed [buccaneer John Hawkins](#), by seizing slave ships and illicitly selling the captured cargo in the Spanish Caribbean. Plymouth recently voted to [remove Hawkins's name](#) from a city square after protests against monuments to philanthropic slavers. As the future overseer of the Royal Navy, Hawkins had at least as much to do with the defeat of the Spanish Armada as his younger cousin. Yet a seafront statue of Drake still stands in Plymouth, defying a petition demanding its removal.

It might yet survive, along with [the Drake naval base](#), roundabout and mall. After two voyages, Drake quit and formed an alliance with escaped slaves to knock off a Spanish mule train carrying gold and silver across Panama. By then he had conceived a violent and self-justifying hatred of the Spanish Empire with its atrocities and rapine and Inquisition; abuses that confirmed him in the reasonable belief that those most convinced of their own certainties do most damage to others. This animus, together with his navigational prowess, lust for lucre and staunch Protestantism, made him a godsend for Elizabeth, whose only safe path to ocean trade was to outsource empire-building and claim to have absolutely nothing to do with it.

Next page: Queen Elizabeth I knighting Francis Drake, 1581. Credit...Alamy



Drake was to voyage to the west coast of the Americas to break ground for future trade missions. If he plundered Spain's plundered wealth in the process, so much the better. In the event, as Bergreen engagingly recounts, he did far more. Setting sail in 1577, he pushed across the Atlantic to Brazil, bellowing psalms into the wind and dining to airs played on viols. He swung down the coast, briefly stopping to behead a minor nobleman for alleged mutiny and witchcraft, before dashing through the treacherous [Strait of Magellan](#) at twice the clip of Magellan himself. There he emerged into a ferocious storm that swallowed up all but his own plucky little galleon, which he proudly renamed the Golden Hind.

Coasting along Chile and Peru, he picked off groaning Spanish treasure ships and unsuspecting Spanish encampments; at one landing, he made off with a stack of silver bars without disturbing the sleeping sentry. He claimed California for Elizabeth, tried and failed to find a Northwest Passage back home through Canada, and headed across the Pacific. Bagging spices in the Moluccas, encountering killer crabs, courteous kings and deadly shoals, he crossed the Indian Ocean, rounded the Cape of Good Hope and sailed into Plymouth Harbor after a voyage of nearly three years, the first captain to circumnavigate the globe and return alive.

Whether that feat was intentional or extemporized — Bergreen appears to lean toward the first — it was no fluke. Captaincy in the Age of Discovery was about managing men and disasters. Hunger, thirst, disease, exhaustion and dissent were greater hazards than defective charts. Drake had the iron resolve and high spirits for the job. He got on famously with Indigenous people and sent off his Spanish captives with a full belly and a parting gift, all in the interest of extracting the greatest possible wealth at the least possible cost. And what wealth. Golden indeed, Drake's galleon disgorged the century's biggest haul of precious metal; Elizabeth's own share exceeded the crown's annual income. Rewards followed: the knighthood, coat of arms, country mansion, estates, marriage to an heiress and, most important, favorite status at court. Full acceptance never came, and neither in his lifetime did recognition of his spectacular but illegal circumnavigation. Elizabeth still hoped to avoid outright conflict with Spain and put about the barefaced lie that he had limped home empty-handed.

Bergreen, who has written well-regarded biographies of Columbus and Magellan, proposes the haul as the golden counterweight that tipped the balance of power in Europe. This is leaning heavily on the scales; the financial upside for England was greater than the downside for Spain. Yet psychologically, the voyage unquestionably electrified both. It emboldened England to project power at sea and conceive a global trading empire. Conversely, it humiliated the Spanish, to whom the man they called *El Draque* — the dragon — became the stuff of legend, credited with diabolical powers and, like a Protestant Saladin, admired for gallantry to his foes.

The Elizabeth-Drake combination is fascinating, but perhaps unavoidably it results in a patchy telling. Events at sea and court unfold separately, with few actual interactions between queen and captain. Both make sporadic appearances in the second half, an account of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, to which Drake's key contribution was a wildly successful pre-emptive strike on the enemy's preparations at Cádiz. There are oddities, too. The Golden Hind was named after the whole of a female red deer, not its rear legs. Galicia is not due south of London. Flurries of repetitions and recapitulations trip up the narrative. After being sent back once more into the thick of an apparently concluded story line, for this reader it felt like *déjà vu* all over again.

This is a shame, as Drake's story is both dramatic and timely. His global joy ride may not have been intended as a geopolitical statement, and his later adventures ended in disaster. But he helped chart a course for the future British Empire, which learned to be more freewheeling and commercial, less draconian and statist than its Spanish forebear. Along the way Drake came to embody a streak of Englishness — bumptious, tenacious, patriotic, crafty, vainglorious and defiantly exceptionalist — that is back with a vengeance. Welcome to the new Elizabethan Age.