

## INTRODUCTION

All I thinke presente shedding abundante teares and casting out lowd sobs and wofull cries. In uttering the peticon of the forgiuenes of sinnes he spake with great feruency forgiue us our trespases in Christ Jesus ... layinge his neck on the blocke and his armes abroad he patiently received the stroke of the Executioner.<sup>1</sup>

In 2001, a recently rediscovered account of the execution of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex was published by *BBC History Magazine*, with the front-page headline: 'He Loved a Queen. He Lost His Head'. The headline and the article testify to the enduring interest in the life of a Tudor traitor who enjoyed a decade-long career of dazzling success at the court of Elizabeth I during the post-Armada years before a sudden fall from favour with the Queen, a dramatic rebellion on the streets of London and finally his execution in the Tower of London on 25 February 1601.

Born on 10 November 1565, Essex was the son of Walter Devereux, 1st Earl of Essex and Lettice Knollys, great-niece of Anne Boleyn. Walter's determination to advance the family fortunes led him to commit himself to the colonization of Ulster in 1573, financing his efforts through a loan from the Queen, based on the forfeiture of about a third of his property. The complexities of Irish politics, poor relations with the Lord Deputy, William Fitzwilliam, and outbreaks of disease among Walter's troops left him in desperate financial straits, alleviated by further loans from the Queen; the entire project ended in dismal and costly failure in September 1575. Walter was not without hope of retrieving the situation, securing appointment as Earl Marshal of Ireland in March 1576, but he fell ill with dysentery and died in Dublin Castle on 22 September 1576, aged thirty-seven, leaving his ten-year-old son Robert, now 2nd Earl of Essex, to inherit a much-reduced estate, heavily encumbered with debt, mostly owed to the Crown.<sup>2</sup>

On his father's death, Essex became one of the Queen's wards, placed under the care of William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and spending time at Burghley's house in London and his country estate of Theobalds in Hertfordshire, alongside other royal wards and Burghley's own children, including his second son, Robert

Cecil, who was to become a key figure in Essex's life.<sup>3</sup> Essex's mother's remarriage to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester in September 1578 brought him more fully into the orbit of the court, though he made no immediate impact. It was not until he returned from military service in the Netherlands in late October 1586 that the young, handsome Essex caught the Queen's eye and his political career began. In June 1587 his status as royal favourite was confirmed when he was appointed Master of the Horse, an office that brought him into close, frequent contact with the Queen – crucially, it was the office that Leicester had occupied before him.

From this point onwards Essex's career developed rapidly and he swiftly moved from being the Queen's favourite to being one of her leading counsellors as well as the predominant military leader of the period. He was appointed to the Privy Council in February 1593 and headed military expeditions to Cadiz in 1596 and the Azores in 1597 before being appointed as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and put in command of the royal army sent there in 1599 to put down the very serious rebellion led by Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone. By this point his relationship with the Queen was in trouble, and Essex's failure to put down the rebellion resulted in his fall from favour and a rapid financial and psychological decline culminating in a panicked attempt to force access to the Queen on 8 February 1601: an event known to history as Essex's rebellion. This was swiftly and inevitably followed by Essex's arrest, trial and execution.

Essex was once viewed as a tragicomic figure, romantic and dramatic but psychologically unstable: an 'Elizabethan Icarus' who flew too close to the sun and suffered the consequences.<sup>4</sup> Most recently, however, this picture has changed. Wallace MacCaffrey's account of the latter part of Elizabeth's reign was largely focused on Essex's career and his argument that the earl was at the centre of an intense factional dispute for power and patronage in the period.<sup>5</sup> Essex's journey towards political credibility was completed in Paul Hammer's political biography of the earl's career up to 1598. Hammer fundamentally challenged the image of Essex of a 'political lightweight', redefining the earl as a military strategist and commander who persuaded the Queen to recognize his ambition and skills; to recognize him not just as her 'young favourite' but as 'a soldier, a councillor and a politician.'<sup>6</sup>

This study will largely accept the rehabilitated version of Essex, though its consideration of the instabilities that undermined the earl's career from the outset will indirectly question whether this rethinking of the earl has gone too far. There remains a thread of recklessness, of excess, perhaps even of psychological instability that runs through Essex's life and career and culminated in the disaster of Ireland in 1599 and the farce of 1601. Robert Lacey, in his 1971 biography of the earl, attempted to identify a psychological or physiological problem, diagnosing, variously, 'an hysterical persecution complex', loss of the will to live and 'manic

religious depression.<sup>7</sup> Finally, he attributed Essex's behaviour to syphilis.<sup>8</sup> But Essex's behaviour does not fit the patterns of the disease and psychological diagnoses at such an historical distance can only ever be speculative and unsafe. What is more certain is that Essex's behaviour demonstrated signs of instability from the start, but that these did not hinder his rapid rise to favour with the Queen.

Central to this process was the relationship between Essex and Elizabeth. It was as a result of her favour that he rose to a position of high importance in government, and it was after the loss of her favour that he fell from that position and ended up on the scaffold. Unsurprisingly, historians have paid a great deal of attention to the nature of the relationship between the young earl and the ageing Queen, yet a fully satisfactory account has yet to be provided of precisely what sustained what was from the outset a highly volatile relationship. The first part of this study will focus on trying to understand Essex's identity in the way that he himself saw it, and on exploring the ways in which that informed and shaped his relationship with the Queen. The aim is not to write a new biography of the earl but to work towards an understanding of his life and career in the terms that he himself saw it. The emphasis will be on understanding Essex's identity as a nobleman and a knight – his chivalric identity, a much-overlooked aspect of his mental world.<sup>9</sup> It is not the intention here to claim that this was all there was to Essex's personal identity and worldview, rather that this is an important aspect of his life that has been neglected, partly because of the reluctance of historians to take the languages of chivalry and courtly love seriously.

Essex's rebellion needs to be reconsidered in this context, not as an act of subversion against Elizabeth but as an effort to regain access to the Queen and to present to her the earl's grievances. The Essexians' conviction that they had been excluded from the royal favour by the machinations of her evil counselors reflects a wider historical understanding of late-Elizabethan politics as being essentially shaped by factional strife. But there are problems with this narrative, not least that much of the evidence comes only from the Essexians themselves. We need to reconsider the causes célèbres of factional intrigue and to look more carefully at the key relationships within the court, between Essex and Cecil and between Essex and his own friends and followers. Most importantly, Elizabeth herself must be re-placed at the centre of the court, contrary to many recent historians' tendency to marginalize the Queen in the latter years of her life.

More broadly, the notion that the 1590s had a distinct character, separate from the remainder of Elizabeth's reign, needs to be challenged. Since the mid-1990s, John Guy's thesis of the 'two reigns' of Elizabeth – two periods distinct in political culture and issues, pivoting on the years 1585/7 – has become an increasingly dominant paradigm for understanding the nature of Elizabethan politics and Elizabeth's queenship.<sup>10</sup> Though it succeeded in focusing attention on the previously neglected 1590s, it has perpetuated historians' failure to

explore and understand her reign as a whole. This study challenges the divide between the 'two reigns', paying closer attention to the continuities between the conduct of politics in the 1590s and before. In so doing, it will challenge the dominant narrative of the 1590s, in part by reopening the debate on faction, where it will take forward the insights offered by Simon Adams on the earlier Elizabethan court into the later period, as well as opening up our understanding of the 1590s by taking a fresh look at the nature of the evidence for factional intrigue. It is hoped that this will result in a reappraisal of the 1590s not as a gloomy decade of political vice and seething conflict but as a phase of remarkably effective government in the face of serious problems. The Essex who emerges from this book is flawed but comprehensible, a loyal servant of Elizabeth who sought to achieve a great deal and in so doing fatally overstepped the boundaries of his relationship with the Queen, the centrally important figure of the age, without whose support Essex could not survive.

# Copyright