

Sir Francis Drake- first admiral of Queen Elisabeth I

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Abstract:

Francis Drake did not come from a wealthy family, nor did he have any influence over those, who decided about England. Despite this, thanks to hard work from youth, charisma and courage, within several years he had achieved, what many Englishmen of that time, even the richest ones, could only dream of - eternal fame and splendor.

Napoleon Bonaparte used to say, that men of genius are meteors destined to burn themselves out in lighting up their age. During the reign of Elizabeth I, by dispensation, this task was to be completed by one of England's most prominent sons, sailor and politician, Francis Drake.

He was born on a farm in Crowndale near Tawistock in Devonshire, in the south west of England. The exact date of his birth is not known, but February or March 1540 is most often indicated. During birth and childhood of Francis in England, violent social

and political changes took place¹. The rejection of power of Rome by Henry VIII resulted in, bloody suppressed, opposition of English Catholics. In 1536, Catholic rebels from northern England demanded the restoration of monasteries. In spite of rumors of Henry's concessions to new faith, in 1539 an act of six articles, which contained orthodox Catholic principles, was published². In the reign of Edward VI (1547-1553), the document mentioned above was relinquished, the Protestant Communion was renounced, and in 1549 new prayer book, containing a simplified set of services, was launched, what resulted in social unrest³. After Edward's premature death, the Catholic Maria Stuart took over the throne in England, her ardor and rejection of the predecessor's regulations has caused anxiety in England on a religious background⁴.

Drake's father, Edmund, was a skilled craftsman, but his work was not

¹ J. Paige, *Sir Francis Drake: Circumnavigator of the Globe and Privateer for Queen Elisabeth, The Rosen Publishing Group*, New York, 2003, p.13.

² J. Cummins, *Francis Drake*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa, 2000, p. 18.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ *Sir Francis Drake (1542-1596)* [in:] Official website of the Royal Museums Greenwich: <http://www.rmg.co.uk/explore/sea-and->

enough to support his family, so he had to find himself an extra job and become a Protestant clergyman⁵.

Until now, there has been little information about Francis's mother or siblings. Edmund is believed to have married Anne Myllwaye and had twelve children with her, but even that is not entirely clear. Said twelve children may be a combination of siblings and cousins⁶.

Drake's family leased significant land and earned money from the plants grown on them. When Henry VIII took over the territories of Tawistock in 1539, Drake fought about survival. Although their lease was restored in 1546, religious unrest and the rebellion of 1548 turned the family of Francis to Devon in Kent, where Edmund began to work as a cleric⁷.

According to another version, Drake's father, employed in Tavistock at the shearing of sheep, was to be accused of assault and theft and escaped with his family before being punished⁸. After moving the family settled on an old, destroyed ship.⁹

When Francis was 13 years old, he was sent to sea and became a disciple on a merchant ship, so he learned, how to read the stars and use them with a compass¹⁰.

When the ship's owner died, he left his property in decline to Drake, who continued to transport the goods. After some time, however, he sold the ship and began working

with a distant relatives, well-known slave trader, John Hawkins, who had lived in Plymouth¹¹.

In 1559 the throne in England embraced Elizabeth I Tudor. In her reign England has recorded a significant development of population, wealth and influence. It became more open to the world. She sought to set up colonies and draw similar profits from the New World, like Spain and Portugal, with which she competed. An important role in the life of the Elizabethan English was played by religion, especially the question, whether

[ships/facts/explorers-and-leaders/drake](https://edupediapublications.org/journals/index.php/IJR/ships/facts/explorers-and-leaders/drake) (access: 17.09.2017)

⁵ J. Paige, op. cit., p. 13.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 13.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 14.

⁸ J. Cummins, op. cit, p. 19.

⁹ T. Larkin, *Sir Francis Drake*, The Rosen Publishing Group, New York, 2001, p.3.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p.6.

¹¹ K. Petrie, *Sir Francis Drake*, ABDO Publishing Group, Minnesota, 2004, p.7-8.

their homeland should be a catholic or Protestant country¹².

In 1565, Francis married Mary Newman¹³. A year later he made his first trip to the New World on a Hawkins-designated slave ship. On the way he learned to navigate in the open seas¹⁴. As the ships of his relative were often attacked for the carried goods, Drake also experienced the first battles at sea¹⁵. The following year, Hawkins made another commercial trip. Francis commanded his ship "Judith.". During the expedition Hawkins directed his ships to the Mexican port of San Juan de Ulua¹⁶. He was going to sell the slave captives there, acting against Spanish law. Having arrived, Hawkins and Drake were caught by the Spaniards in a trap. They managed to escape, but many members of their crews died. This incident instilled in Francis a deep hatred to the Spanish crown¹⁷.

In the seventies and eighties of the 16th century the struggle between England and Spain intensified. Queen Elisabeth

supported the Huguenots in France and was involved on the Dutch issue, striving to maintain an outbreak of anti-Spanish revolt in the Netherlands by sending volunteers and cash subsidies¹⁸. In turn Philip II delegated his agents and Jesuit priests to Ireland to help the Catholics, who had lived there, in the fight against English Protestants¹⁹.

In 1570, at the banks of Panama's city- Nombre de Dios, a port of the Spanish fleet of treasures, on the Chagres River, Drake plundered the sailing ships carrying goods, which were worth 40,000 ducats, and he took from their decks velvet, kerosene, gold and silver, which he shared with his crew²⁰.

At the end of February 1571, in a small port of Pontoon, Francis surrendered two Spanish ships from Cartagena to Nombre de Dios. For the next three months, Drake followed the Panamanian coastline between Nombre de Dios and Puerto Bello, taking over 12 vessels of Philip II with goods valued at 150,000 peso (now £ 9.5 million), and covering two ships, slaves and

¹² *Sir Francis Drake (1542-1596)*, [in:] Official website of the Royal Museums Greenwich: <http://www.rmg.co.uk/explore/sea-and-ships/facts/explorers-and-leaders/drake> (access: 17.09.2017)

¹³ E. F. Benson, *Sir Francis Drake*, Books on Demand, Hamburg, 2015, p.45.

¹⁴ K. Petrie, op. cit., p.8.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ G. Thompson, *Commander Francis Drake & the West Coast Mysteries*, Lulu.com, 2010, p.16

¹⁸ H. Zins, *Historia Anglii*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich- Wydawnictwo, Wrocław, 2001, p. 162.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ S. Ronald, *Elżbieta I. Królowa piratów*, Bellona, Warszawa, 2007, p.170-171.

clothing, worth another 80,000 peso (£ 5 million)²¹.

On May 8, 1571, the English corsair took over the royal freighter ferry of Spain, transporting the ruler's correspondence to the colonies in Peru and Panama. He put the crew of ship on an uninhabited island, passed the ship to the mercy of fate, and threw the letters of Philip II into the sea, Then he returned to England²².

On March 24, 1572, Francis sailed, with two ships, from Plymouth and on June 22 launched an attack on Nombre de Dios. In a few hours he won the city, taking on serious injuries. But the plunder was less than expected, and thus, to compensate for the loss, Drake plundered Spanish ships filled with silver, flowing from Mexican Vera Cruz to Nombre de Dios²³. He also conquered Vera Cruz, on the way back, encountering 50 ships filled with silvered goods, which were mostly found on the board of the English corsair. After 23 days of travel, on August 9, 1573, Drake arrived to Plymouth²⁴, „[...] and everyone hurried to see the proof of God's

*love and blessings to the Queen and England by the fruit of the work and the success of Captain Drake [...]*²⁵.

Successful completion of the expedition provided Francis with recognition and wealth. After purchasing 3 equipped frigates, he sailed to Ireland, where he served under the command of Earl Essex²⁶. When his patron died, he returned to England, where he was presented to the adviser of Queen- Sir Francis Walsingham and stood before Elisabeth I²⁷. These acquaintances led to the creation of Drake's Pacific expeditionary plan, devoted to the destruction of the Spanish colonies around this reservoir²⁸. The command of five ships was given to him²⁹:

- Pelican, commanded by Drake, with a loading capacity of 100 thousand tone,
- Elizabeth, headed by captain John Winter, capable of holding 80 tons,
- Marigold, under the command of captain John Thomas, with a capacity of 30 tons,

²¹ Ibidem, p.173-174.

²² Ibidem, p. 174.

²³ J. Cambell, *The life of the celebrated Sir Francis Drake, the first circumnavigator*, London 1828, p. 7

²⁴ Ibidem, p.8.

²⁵ P. Nichols, *Sir Francis Drake Review*,1592, [in:] Official website of the Library of the University

of Pennsylvania: <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/gutbook/lookup?num=2854> (access: 17.09.2017)

²⁶ J. Cambell, op. cit., p.8.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ F. Drake, *The world encompassed*, London 1652, p. 2.

- Swan, managed by captain John Chester, with a loading capacity of 50 tons.
- Christopher, commanded by captain Thomas Moon, able to hold 15 tons.

So equipped Francis set off on 15 November 1577 to Plymouth, however, the strong storm, with which he faced on the sea, forced him to stop at Falmouth. On December 13, 1577 he again traveled on a journey. On December 29 passed Cape Verde Islands, On March 13, 1578 crossed the equator, on March 5 reached the coast of Brazil and crossed the river La Plata, where he briefly lost contact with two ships³⁰. Having joined them, he took crews and stocks from their decks and left them to the fate. On 29 May he entered the port of Saint Julian where he sentenced to death captain John Doug, who was accused of treason³¹. On August 20, he reached the Straits of Magellan, crossing it with the Pelican, which was renamed Gold Leaf. On November 25, he arrived in Macau for an appointment with two other English ships, however, captain of Elizabeth, after

crossing the Strait of Magellan, decided to return to England. Drake continued his journey along the coasts of Chile and Peru, not passing any occasion, to spoil Spaniards and destroy their settlements in South America³². Sailing near Mexican shores of Drake took several Spanish ships and ports. As the Golden Lace was damaged and needed immediate repair, on June 17, 1579, Francis stopped at a bay on the California coast (later named Drake Bay), where he said the following words: „[...] *By Your Will, God, we reached this peaceful bay. Let us all praise our most merciful God for his infinite and unspoken goodness for us. By faith in God great storms and difficulties, with whom we have struggled on unknown seas, thank to God's grace, we come here safe, we can protest that we are not worthy of such mercy [...]*”³³.

Navigating in the direction of North America, he reached the northern part of New Spain, which he called New Albion, taking over it in the name of Elizabeth I. Having completed his supplies, on September 29, 1579 he set a course for the Moloch. It seemed to him

³⁰ J. Cambell, op. cit., p. 11.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Ibidem, p.11-14.

³³ F. Fletcher, *The world encompassed by sir Francis Drake*, London 1854, [in:] Official website of the

to be a more sensible solution than going back through the Strait of Magellan, where could be armed ships, brought from Spain, or, dangerous for the current season, storms³⁴. Having reached his goal, on November 4, he entered the island of Ternate, where he was honored by its ruler. On December 10 arrived at Celebes, where his ship fell on the rocks. Despite the damage Drake did not give up on further travel. On June 15, 1580, he crossed the Cape of Good Hope, on July 12, passed through the equator, on September 11 appeared on Terceira³⁵. On September 26, 1580, the first Englishman, who sailed the globe, enjoyed a return to his native Plymouth with these words³⁶: „[...] *On September 26 with joyful thoughts and full of heartfelt gratitude to God, we arrived at Plymouth after 2 years, 10 months and several days of journey, experiencing many miracles of the Lord and unusual things, going through many adventures, fleeing the dangers and defeating the difficulties,*

lurking on us in the world [...]”.

On April 4, 1581, Queen Elizabeth entered the Golden Hind, which stationed near Deptford, and she had dinner with Drake. After eating the meal, she gave her host a noble dignity, saying, that his actions gave him more honor, than the title he admits³⁷. She also ordered to keep the ship as a monument to the glory of the nation and the outstanding captain³⁸.

The noble's position was not entirely satisfactory to Drake, so he bought 40 land properties in Plymouth, including 29 homes, 4 gardens, 2 horse studs and 5 department stores, which made him, alongside the family of Hawkins and the city council, the largest landowner in the city³⁹. Such a prominent person could not remain unnoticed; hence, in September 1581, Drake became the mayor of Plymouth, and later a member of the British Parliament⁴⁰. In 1583, Francis's wife died, and in 1585 he remarried with Elizabeth Sydenham from an influential and affluent family⁴¹. In the same year he also

³⁴ J. Cambell, op.cit., p. 14- 17.

³⁵ Ibidem, p.17-20.

³⁶ F. Drake, op.cit., p. 108.

³⁷ C.I. Johnstone, *Lives and voyages of Drake, Cavendish and Dampier; including an introductory view of the earlier discoveries in the South Sea and the history of the bucaniers*, [in:] Official website of the Library of the University of Michigan:

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=moa;idno=BAA9233.0001.001>

(access: 17.09.2017)

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ W.W. Lacey, *Sir Francis Drake*, Infobase Learning, New York 2009, p.65.

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

conducted, commanding 25 ships, a new expedition to America, where he destroyed several Spanish towns and deprived Cuba and Florida of great wealth. These successes motivated him to attack the coasts of Spain and Portugal and to organize trips to the Mediterranean Sea⁴².

The official cause of the Anglo-Spanish war was the discovery of a Spanish MP's participation in the unsuccessful attempt on Elizabeth's life. The Queen of England expedited to the Netherlands an auxiliary army, led by Count Robert Dudley Leicester, to protect them against the Spanish attack, and Francis Drake robbed the Spanish colonies in the West Indies⁴³. In the spring of 1587, Drake attacked the port of Cádiz, a center of supply for the Spanish army, destroying 37 warships and smaller ships- „[...] *On April 18, 1587, the British fleet stood at the gates of Cadiz and Sir Francis gave a signal, The captains of the individual ships gathered on the flagship where he presented them a plan to enter the port and destroy the Spanish fleet there.*

Cadiz was one of the strongest Spanish cities, and Drake's undertaking for most people seemed to be desperate. However, for those who had fought with Spaniards in Central America and the northern outskirts of South America, this was a trivial matter [...]''⁴⁴. Francis also took over a thousand tons of stock and impressive load of silk spices and precious stones, which earned him the admiration of his Queen⁴⁵. The acquisition of Cadiz was for him "the singe of the King's beard".⁴⁶.

Against the execution of Maria Stuart (8.02.1587) and associated lack of change on the English throne as well as increasingly bolder El Draque (as Francis was described by Spaniards), in 1588, Philip II made a long- prepared offensive to the territories, that were subjected to Elisabeth I⁴⁷.

In May 1588, the Grand Armada of Spain, consisting of 130 ships and managed by the Duke of Medina-Sidonia, crossed the Tag's estuary, heading for the shores of England. The subordinates of Elizabeth I

⁴² H. Zins, op. cit., p. 161.

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ G.A. Henty, *Under Drake's Flag: A Tale of the Spanish Main*, 1596, [in:] Official website of the Library of the University of Pennsylvania: <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/gutbook/lookup?num=19206>

⁴⁵ C. Erickson, *Elzbieta I*, Świat Książki, Warszawa 2001, p.381.

⁴⁶ J. Cooper, *The Queen's Agent: Francis Walsingham at the Court of Elizabeth I*, Farber and Farber, Farber and Farber, London, 2011, p.227.

⁴⁷ C. Erickson, op. cit., p. 381.

sent to the invaders 197 ships, commanded by Lord Charles Howard⁴⁸. The first 'Battle of Britain' began on 31 July on the south-west coast of England. English soldiers did not allow to the Spanish boarding, threatening their rivals with a strong fire and leading them to a road war. On August 6, Armada, tired of fighting, stopped at the port of Calais, where was attacked by the British and lost many ships⁴⁹. In the evening, after the battle, Drake, who was raised to the rank of vice admiral, wrote to the advisor of Queen- Sir Francis Walsingham- the following letter: „[...] *God has given us such a good day to drive the enemy so deep in leeward and I have in God the hope that Prince Parma And Duke Medonya will not give up their hand for a few days, and once they meet, I believe, that none of them will enjoy the achievements of the day [...] We need to ensure, that we send ammunition and food wherever the enemy flees [...]*”⁵⁰.

On August 8th, British and Spaniards fought a battle in the vicinity of

Gravelines, ending Spanish defeat - none of its ships left the battlefield without a scratch⁵¹. When Spanish flagship, Rosario, collided with another ship, it lost its mast and separated itself from its fleet. This situation was used by Francis Drake. Although during the battle he had the task of tracking the Armada and using the lantern to relay its position to English ships, he decided to attack Rosario. The ship was taken without a gun by British, and Drake's insecurity brought the soldiers of Elisabeth I the crate of Spanish gold⁵². The survivors of Philip II's ships landed on the coasts of Scotland and Ireland, where their overwhelming part crashed at rocky banks of the Hebrides⁵³. In Francis's letter to Walsingham we read⁵⁴: „[...] *Let us conclude with a conciliatory chorus: praise to God ..., because only by his will, this proud foe of his truth has tasted his might here. On the ship of Her Majesty the "Revenge" [...] Servant of Your Majesty Although now half sleepy, Francis Drake.*

⁴⁸ Z. Wójcik, *Historia powszechna XVI-XVII wieku*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe, PWN, Warszawa 2002, p. 279.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ J. Cummins, op. cit., p. 210.

⁵¹ Z. Wójcik, op. cit., p.279.

⁵² *Sir Francis Drake (1542-1596)* [in:] Official website of the Royal Museums Greenwich:

<http://www.rmg.co.uk/explore/sea-and-ships/facts/explorers-and-leaders/drake> (access: 17.09.2017)

⁵³ Z. Wójcik, op. cit., p. 282.

⁵⁴ J. Cummins, op. cit., p. 211.

In 1589, Queen Elizabeth ordered English corsair to find and destroy the remaining Armada's ships and help the Portuguese rebels in Lisbon to fight against the Spanish occupiers⁵⁵. This expedition ended in catastrophe. Drake lost 20 ships and more than 12 000 seaman. He returned home and for the next years served as mayor of Plymouth⁵⁶.

In November 1590, the Secret Council of Great Britain recruited Drake as Admiralty Judge to assist it in analyzing the continual cases of ship looting by English adventurers, most of whom came from West Country, questioning suspects, inspecting cargos in dispute, and the execution of reports from the proceedings⁵⁷. It was also the duty of English noble to secure the loot until the High Court of Admiralty considered the case. These tasks were carried out by him until 1596⁵⁸.

At the beginning of 1596, the English Queen once again called Drake and his cousin, John Hawkins, entrusting them the capture of the Spanish treasure in Panama in hope

of cutting off Spain from its income and ending the war with that country⁵⁹. After several skirmishes in the Caribbean, Drake's fleet moved west and anchored off the coast of Portobello, where English corsair became ill with dysentery and died on 28 January 1596. Buried in a lead coffin, he rested on the bottom of the Caribbean Sea⁶⁰. In honor of Drake, his two most valuable ships were sunk with him - Elizabeth and Delight⁶¹. Drake's exact place of rest remains unknown today⁶².

Career, talent or cunning? What made Drake's success? It is difficult to answer this question unequivocally. His marvelous accomplishments at sea have earned him fame and recognition, and have also had a significant impact on rapid, social, advancement- from a poor Protestant clergyman to a nobleman, landowner, member of the British Parliament and vice-admiral. From baby connected with the sea, Francis learned the basics of shipping on the fly. He used a compass, read through stars with current position of the ship, skilfully commanded his fleet in various conditions. These skills allowed

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

⁵⁷ S. Ronald, op.cit., Warszawa 2007, p.344.

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁰ Ibidem.

⁶¹ *Sir Francis Drake (1542-1596)* [in:] Official website of the Royal Museums Greenwich:

<http://www.rmg.co.uk/explore/sea-and-ships/facts/explorers-and-leaders/drake> (access: 17.09.2017)

⁶² *Sir Francis Drake's body 'close to being found off Panama*, [in:] Official website of BBC NEWS: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-15447632> (access: 17.09.2017)

him to take an expedition around the world, and thus to record on the pages of human history. During his escapade, Drake captured tons of silver, pearls, rubies and emeralds, and golden boxes that were stored in the Tower⁶³. The total value of his loot has never been estimated, but it is estimated, that he acquired about 600 000 pesos, the equivalent of the current 165 million of US dollars⁶⁴. Drake's part of the trophy brought him considerable wealth, and English corsair's shareholders, including Lord Chancellor Christopher Hatton, Leicester, Queen's advisor sir Francis Walsingham and Queen Elizabeth, also earned⁶⁵. Besides, Francis had unusual ability to recognize the weaknesses of his opponents, so he could achieve his goals without using for this more people and artillery⁶⁶. Drake's most important role in prosperity, however, was his charismatic personality, which fully realized the Latin maxim: *Sic Parvis Magna- Size from modest beginnings*.

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⁶³ C. Erickson, op. cit., p. 334.

⁶⁴ W.W. Lace, op. cit., p.61

⁶⁵ C. Erickson, op. cit., p. 334.

⁶⁶ S. Ronald, s. 171.



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