

4 ✨ *Fabled Land*

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Figure 4.1. Walter Raleigh, map of Guiana (El Dorado), ca. 1596. Manuscript, vellum roll. © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved, Add. MS. 17940A.

An early map of Guiana (fig. 4.1) lives in a carefully guarded and climate-controlled case at the British Library in London, where it wears a little tag that reads “Add. MS. [additional manuscript] 17940A.” Such a clinical title belies the romantic and mysterious history of this strange chart, which most scholars now believe to be the work of the legendary Elizabethan privateer, courtier, and adventurer Sir Walter Raleigh. If this is indeed the case, then Add. MS. 17940A not only represents the earliest depiction of northern South America by an English hand; it also lies at the origin of one of the greatest geographic obsessions of all times—El Dorado, the lost “golden empire” of the Amazonian jungles. Moreover, in a peculiar and looping way, the idiosyncratic history of South America’s unique English-speaking nation, modern Guyana, can be traced back to this fragile cartofact.

Let’s begin by unrolling the chart in the hands of a modern explorer. In 1995, the quadricentenary of Raleigh’s first voyage to South America, the English travel writer and essayist Charles Nicholl published *The Creature in the Map*, a book-length account of his own retracing of Raleigh’s route, spiced with ruminations on the fate of the great man. Raleigh, recall, lived fast and gloriously in the era of Shakespeare and Donne, climbing from middling sort of impecunious gentry to sit (however briefly) at the right hand of Queen Elizabeth (r. 1558–1603), before his sexual antics and political miscalculations led him off to the Tower, and eventually to the executioner, who, in whacking off his head, elevated him to the ambivalent status of Oedipal father of the British Empire.¹ Nicholl, setting out for the tropical land that proved Raleigh’s undoing (he oversold Guiana to the English crown and could never deliver on the promises he made for its wealth and virtue), heads first to the cool quarters of the British Library, to commune for a moment with Raleigh’s spirit by breathing the dust of Add. MS. 17940A. Taking his chair in the manuscript reading room, and gently opening the scroll, “stiffened with preservative chemicals,” Nicholl lets his eyes rove around Raleigh’s dreamworld, seeing in the chart a magnificent “mingling of the psychological and the geographical.” How so? Well, take a look at that queer, squiggly thing that dominates the center of the cartographic field: there, nested between the upper reaches of the Orinoco and the Amazon, lies a mandala-like form—Manoa, the “Lago del Dorado,” the inland sea that secreted, Raleigh

thought, the last great South American Empire. The Spaniards might have gotten the silver of Mexico and Peru, but the gold of Manoa, Raleigh argued, would be England’s. Yet what a strange form Raleigh has reserved for this shimmering Mecca of rapacity: “It looks like a monster, a creepy-crawly, some nightmare *cucaracha*,” writes Nicholl. And it does indeed. Or does it? Looking again, we might wonder, with a little nudge from Freud, if this slippery, ciliated slit in the map is not another sort of thing altogether.

We will come back to this vexatious matter. First, a little context. In 1596, immediately upon returning from his not-entirely-successful Guiana venture, Raleigh published *Discoverie of the Large, Rich, and Bewtiful Empyre of Guiana*, a travel narrative and promotional pamphlet laying out the glories of the upriver bits of the South American Main. While this text did not include a map, Raleigh did offer his readers a tantalizing promise in his dedication: “How the country lieth and is bordered . . . mine own discoverie, and the way I entered, with all the rest of the nations and rivers, your Lordship shall receive in a large Chart or Map, which I have not yet finished.” Moreover, it was probably best not to publish it, Raleigh continued, since the contents of this chart were so valuable that it should be kept secret, the better to aid intrepid Englishmen and foil greedy Spaniards, Dutchmen, and the like. For more than 250 years it was assumed that this map (if it ever existed) had been lost or destroyed. But in 1849 the British Library acquired an anonymous, faded vellum roll that appeared to depict northern South America. It was not for another decade or so that anyone tried to associate this find with Raleigh (using meticulous analysis of toponyms, work confirmed by recent studies), and by the time late nineteenth-century scholars were pressing this claim, the stakes were hardly academic. On the contrary, a major war seemed to hang in the balance. The cause of the dispute was the discovery of some real gold in the Guianas in the 1860s, which had led to an acrimonious border showdown between Venezuela (then very much in the U.S. sphere of influence) and British Guiana, a colony of the United Kingdom. With the United States saber-rattling in the name of the Monroe Doctrine (the old saw about European nations having no right to meddle in the Americas), and Britain standing on its presumptive rights and venerable traditions of global hegemony, actual conflict seemed imminent.² International diplomacy ultimately

prevailed, however, in the form of a formal boundary arbitration process, in which the disputants were invited to submit dossiers of documentation in support of their legal claims to the territory. In the thick of this novel and exhaustive process of historical geography, Add. MS. 17940A started to look like a key source. Though each side, of course, spun it a different way. If for the English the chart recorded England's earliest claims upon the region in question, for the Venezuelans (and their U.S. backers) Raleigh's chart gave away the game altogether: after all, it was completely inaccurate (there is no Lago del Dorado and no Manoa), proving Raleigh never set foot in the area; and moreover, his own preoccupation with cartographic secrecy adverted to the illegitimate character of his whole project (proper territorial claims were supposed to be public and linked to structures of sovereignty, whereas Raleigh's clandestine cartography could be used to support the Venezuelan charge that he had always been an interloping pirate in Spanish lands, who had therefore kept his stolen geographic knowledge safely under his hat).

So much for the political machinations that have entangled Add. MS. 17940A (the boundary dispute was ultimately resolved in favor of Great Britain, but under a cloud of suspicious backroom dealing; and the region remains unpleasantly contested to the present day). Let's return then, for a moment, to that "nightmare *cucaracha*," and the welter of interpretive speculation it has engendered. Nicholl, casting around for an explanation of the strange form of the Lago del Dorado, ultimately settles on an elaborate thesis, arguing (on the basis of Raleigh's ties to the "Wizard Earl" John Dee, together with some shadowy invocations of occultism in Raleigh's writings) that Sir Walter likely thought of his El Dorado quest in alchemical terms, and perhaps even as a kind of proto-Rosicrucian pilgrimage toward spiritual renewal (and a convenient cash reward).³ If this is right (and it is tempting, if not particularly well attested), then it is a short step from alchemical voyage to allegorical cartography, in which the "swamp-worm" at the center of Add. MS. 17940A just might stand for the heraldic "black-beast" which every magus must confront en route to power over matter and men.

Perhaps. There are certainly precedents for allegorically sophisticated cartographies in the Renaissance (for instance, the heart-shaped projections of Ortelius and

Fine, which have been linked to the secretive religious sect known as the Family of Love), and buried secrets in maps have a long history. But this is hardly the only possible reading of this striking map. Perusing Add. MS. 17940A in Nicholl's wake, the distinguished scholar of the English Renaissance Stephen Greenblatt also thought he caught a secret glimpse, not behind the curtain of Elizabethan gold diggers, but rather up the skirt of court politics. After all, what did Raleigh famously announce upon returning from South America? "Guiana" he wrote, "is a countrey that hath yet her Maydenhead," by which he meant she (and he did mean *she*) had never yet been "sack, turned, wrought, the face of the earth hath not been torne . . . the graves have not been opened for gold, the mines not broken with sledges." In short, it was a country that "hath never been entered," a project he proposed, most enthusiastically, to undertake.

As scholars, we have an obligation to take the gendered language of these pronouncements seriously, since they belong to a well-established European tradition linking women's bodies and the earth, sexual relations and geographic exploration. These ties were commonplaces among Raleigh's contemporaries, whose verses regularly wove together the imagery of erotic and terrestrial conquest. Take Donne's notorious "To His Mistress, Going to Bed," where the poet addresses his lover as follows:

*Oh my America! my new-found-land,
My kingdome, safeliest when with one man man'd,
My Myne of precious stones: My Emperie,
How blest am I in this discovering thee!*

Here "discover" puns thumpingly on "dis-cover" (as in "take off those coverings"), a play on words that gives way to a frank command: "As liberally, as to a Midwife shew / Thy self," which is roughly as liberally as I am suggesting Raleigh shows America in Add. MS. 17940A.⁴

Is it possible? It is. Nor need we reach into the nebulous zones of psychogeography to make the case. Period preoccupations and Raleigh's own writings offer supporting evidence. The "mine" or "purse" of gold was a standard Renaissance trope for the female genitals, and the very term "country" (as in "Guiana is a *country* that hath yet her Maydenhead") rang clearly in Shakespeare's day with a crude slang still in use in English. For these reasons and others, it is not unreasonable to see in

Raleigh's map a kind of literalization of his invocation of the "body" of Guiana and its "prize."⁵

To be fair, other scholars (like Neil Whitehead) have chosen to emphasize the basic fidelity of this map to the riparian hydrography of northern South America and have pointed to hints that Raleigh inscribed in his chart geographic knowledge learned from Amerindian communities. For all this, too, there is much to be said. Dirty joke? Or ethnographic palimpsest? Alchemical quest? Or con man's calling card? Add. MS. 17940A has kept scholars guessing for several generations.



Notes

1. Raleigh's paternity claim on England's overseas empire derives from his (ultimately unsuccessful) efforts to establish "Colony and Dominion" in Virginia in the 1580s. For more on all this, consider John W. Shirley, *Sir Walter Raleigh and the New World* (Raleigh, NC: Department of Cultural Resources, 1985). On Raleigh more generally, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Sir Walter Raleigh: The Renaissance Man and His Roles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

2. For more on British imperialism in mid-nineteenth-century Latin America, see chaps. 23–26.

3. Dee was an important astronomer, astrologer, and practitioner of practical mathematics who worked at the edges of the English court in this period. For more on him (and his

context), consult Frances Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge, 1979).

4. For more on the entanglements of gender and allegorical cartography, see chap. 14.

5. Considering that Raleigh was purportedly offering "Guiana" to Elizabeth, endlessly feted as the *virgin* queen (remember Virginia?), it must be acknowledged that the sexual politics of all this gendered language—and possibly imagery—would have been extremely complicated.

Additional Readings:

Cormack, Lesley. *Charting an Empire: Geography at the English Universities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Greenblatt, Stephen, ed. *New World Encounters*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Mangani, Giorgio. "Abraham Ortelius and the Hermetic Meaning of the Cordiform Projection." *Imago Mundi* 50 (1998): 59–82.

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