

The Real People in

Roberto Devereux

Though all the characters in Donizetti's *Roberto Devereux* really lived, many of the relationships in the opera, as well as key plot points, are fiction.

Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex, was quite a different man from the one in the opera. Donizetti's Roberto is an admirable man who goes to his death rather than reveal the name of the woman he loves, thereby compromising her. Historically, the man was an often charming and lovable, but ultimately self-serving rogue who never understood he could not tame the Queen. "This last of the Tudor's over-mighty subjects" is S.T. Bindoff's description in *Tudor England*. "There was that unique complex of charms—the beautiful face and body, the brilliant personality and style—which first captured royal favor and then time and again recovered it after follies which would have doomed a less ornamental offender. ... Essex died as he had lived, a man of one idea, the idea of his own aggrandizement."

There is absolutely no doubt of Elizabeth's affection for him, despite the fact she was a generation older, or that she repeatedly forgave him for his misdeeds. "I know but one friend and one enemy my Lord [Essex] hath; and that one friend is the Queen and that one enemy is himself" was the way one courtier of the time put it. She was dazzled by his looks, his quick wit, his often-brilliant mind, his daring and prowess on the battlefield, and by the way he seemed to know exactly how to charm and flatter her. In the opera, Essex's greatest mistake was against Elizabeth the woman, which is the opposite of history. The real Queen Elizabeth signed his death warrant because of his treason against the Crown, though Elizabeth the woman never got over it. In *All the Queen's Men*, Neville Williams writes, "As a result of his own crass self-destruction Elizabeth had lost the only man she had really cared for since [Sir Christopher] Hatton's death. At court the most troublesome faction of the whole reign had been annihilated and Robert Cecil remained at last in undisputed command."

Cecil is a minor character in the opera but, true to life, one that is implacably opposed to Robert Devereux. Sir Walter Raleigh is also a minor character but one who gives Elizabeth the blue scarf taken from Devereux, a scarf that proves to Elizabeth that her Robert does indeed love another woman. Historically, there was no blue scarf and while Raleigh often quarreled with Dev-



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ereux, he does not seem to have been the lifelong bitter enemy Robert Cecil was.

Factually speaking, there was no relationship, certainly no love affair, between the wife of the Earl of Nottingham and Robert Devereux. In the opera, her name is Sarah; in real life, it was Catherine. She was a generation older than he was, and one of Elizabeth's closest confidants. The two women were cousins, and when Catherine died, just weeks before the Queen, Elizabeth sank into a deep depression.

Historically, the Earl of Nottingham (he becomes a duke in the opera) was not the close friend to Essex that he is in the opera, but neither was he an enemy. That changed when Essex led an armed rebellion and tried to force a change in the government. It was Nottingham who led the force that quashed the uprising and he was one of the commissioners at Essex's trial. He was present at Elizabeth's deathbed in 1603, and according to some accounts pressed her on the matter of succession, to which Elizabeth indicated James should succeed her. Certainly Elizabeth did not name James as her successor when Essex was beheaded as happens in the final scene of the opera.

The timing of the historic events is different in the opera than they actually occurred. In the opera, Devereux returns from Ireland and is beheaded 24 hours later. In fact, when he returned to London in 1599 (against the Queen's orders), there were several months of inquiries, various versions of house arrest, and it was clear Elizabeth was angry with him. But it was only when he attempted to seize power through an armed revolt that he was arrested for treason and beheaded in 1601. He was 34 years old.

And then there is the matter of "the Essex Ring" as it has come to be known. On July 31, 1927, the *New York Times* carried the headline "Elizabeth's Ring Comes Back." The article said: "Queen Elizabeth's ring, which she vainly awaited as a sign that the Earl of Essex implored her mercy, is coming back to her at last where she lies in Westminster Abbey. ... The golden circlet that was to protect the impetuous noble if he was ever in trouble arrived lately in Christie's auction rooms in London. The successful bidder, moved by the romance of the love and quarrels of the aged Queen and young Robert Devereux, has obtained authority to place it, in a casket, upon the tomb of the Virgin Queen."

Most historians consider the story of the ring to be fiction, primarily because there is no reference to it in any of the contemporary accounts of the trial and beheading of Essex. In fact, the first reference to it in print seems to occur almost a century after the events, in 1695, in a novel entitled *The Secret History of the most renowned Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Essex, by a Person of Quality*. It might not have been historically accurate, but the ring—and the relationship it represented—makes one hell of an operatic plot. 🌸

Left, top: A portrait of Robert Devereux (1566–1601), Earl of Essex, from London's National Portrait Gallery.

Left, bottom: A Portrait of a Young Man and Woman, recorded on the frame as Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603) and Robert Cecil, First Earl of Salisbury (c. 1563–1612), Secretary of State.

Top: Queen Elizabeth I's 1599 rebuking of the Earl of Essex by artist Paul Rainer.



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Major Events During the Life of Elizabeth I

- 1533** Elizabeth is born at Greenwich Palace.
- 1536** Elizabeth's mother, Queen Anne Boleyn, is executed at the Tower of London.
- 1558** Queen Mary I dies and Elizabeth becomes Queen Elizabeth I.
- 1564** William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe are born.
- 1585** Virginia colony of Roanoke established by Sir Walter Raleigh. Elizabeth takes the Netherlands under her protection, beginning the war with Spain.
- 1588** Defeat of the Spanish Armada.
- 1597** Elizabeth makes Robert Devereux Second Earl of Essex.
- 1599** Opening of the Globe Theatre.
- 1600** Elizabeth grants charter to East India Company.
- 1601** Execution of Robert Devereux (1566–1601).
- 1603** Queen Elizabeth I dies from blood poisoning; James I ascends the throne.