

Westward Ho!* (1855).** *Westward Ho!* was written by Charles Kingsley. The Reverend Charles Kingsley (1819-1875) is not well-known today. His only book which remains regularly read is his children's fable ***The Water Babies. But during his lifetime he was one of the giants of mid-century Victorian literature. Kingsley wrote children's literature, poetry, historical romances, sermons, scientific treatises, religious tracts, and literary criticism. He was also a parish priest, a prominent social reformer and political activist, a professor of history at Cambridge, tutor to the future Edward VII, and chaplain to Queen Victoria herself.

Westward Ho! is the story of Amyas Leigh, a Devonshire lad from the town of Bideford. He has always wanted to go to sea, and when he meets two men who are gathering a crew to go to the New World, Amyas begs his parents to let him go with them. They persuade him to wait, but the following year, after Amyas' father dies, Amyas' godfather, Sir Richard Grenville, lets Amyas accompany Sir Francis Drake on his first trip around the world. When Drake returns Amyas is now a strapping young man. Rose Salterne is a girl from Amyas' village who all the boys, Amyas included, are in love with. Amyas' cousin Eustace, who is Catholic, is one of those, but when she rejects his overtures he vows revenge. Amyas, his brother Frank, and the other boys of the neighborhood form the Brotherhood of the Rose and vow to always protect her.

Soon after Amyas returns one of his friends, Salvation Yeo, tells Amyas and Grenville a frightening story about how Yeo and his friend John Oxenham had been captured by the Spanish Inquisition. Oxenham had loved a Spanish woman who had given birth to a daughter, and Yeo had vowed to protect the child, but she was now lost, and Yeo begged Amyas to allow him to go with Amyas on his travels, in the hopes that one day he might find the girl. Amyas and Yeo go with Sir Walter Raleigh to fight the Spanish in Ireland. During the battle Amyas takes hostage a Spanish nobleman, Don Guzman de Soto. Amyas takes de Soto back to Bideford, but de Soto is charming and soon catches Rose's eye, and she his. When his ransom is paid he leaves England, but Rose disappears at the same time, apparently with him, and Rose's father and all the members of the Brotherhood of the Rose are infuriated and aggrieved and vow to sail to Caracas, where Don Guzman has gone to be governor, and rescue Rose. On the way they have to fight the Spanish several times, but when they reach Caracas they discover that Eustace beat them there and warned Don Guzman that they were coming. They also overhear Eustace speaking with Rose and trying to get her to run away with him, but Rose insists on being faithful to her husband. Rose insists this to both Eustace, who threatens to turn her over to the Inquisition (Rose insists on remaining a Protestant), and to Amyas. When Amyas and the others return to their ship they are attacked by Don Guzman's men and Frank is captured. Amyas' ship is eventually severely damaged in a fight with the Spanish, and the crew beaches her and march overland across Mexico, trying to find Manoa, the fabled city of gold. They brave hostile natives and starvation, but do not find Manoa. They do discover a native priestess, Ayacanora, who seems more white than native. She falls in love with Amyas and accompanies him on the trip.

After three years the group reach New Granada. They capture a Spanish galleon and release the prisoners from its hold. One of these prisoners, Lucy, is an English witch from Devon who had accompanied Rose and Don Guzman on their trip to the New World. Lucy tells Amyas about Frank and Rose. Eustace had told the Inquisition about Rose's Protestantism, and Rose, Lucy, and Frank were tortured by the Inquisition. Lucy converted to Catholicism, but Rose and Frank kept their faith and were burned at the stake as a consequence. This enrages Amyas, who swears

“henceforth till I die no quarter to a Spaniard.”¹ Amyas takes the ship back to England. On the way home Salvation Yeo discovers that Ayacanora was the daughter of John Oxenham who Yeo had sworn to protect, and Yeo becomes a father to her. When the ship reaches England Amyas brings Ayacanora to his house, and Amyas’ mother treats her like a daughter. Amyas continues to treat her like a sister, something Ayacanora is not particularly happy with. (She has fallen in love with Amyas).

Amyas prepares to go to Virginia with Sir Francis Drake, but then the Spanish Armada arrives, and Amyas takes part in its defeat. After the long battle Amyas goes after the ship on which Don Guzman sails. Amyas pursues Guzman but is deprived of his vengeance when Guzman’s ship wrecks during a storm. After Guzman’s ship sinks a bolt of lightning strikes Amyas’ ship, blinding him and killing Yeo. Amyas returns home and is cared for by his friends and family. He has a vision in which he sees that Rose and Don Guzman were really in love, and Amyas is reconciled to Don Guzman. Amyas ends his days with Ayacanora as his wife.

Westward Ho! has never been a part of the Victorian literary canon, but it was influential on later British juvenile literature and the entire *Boy’s Own* school of authors and adventure stories. It is an interesting book on a number of levels. The first one hundred and fifty pages or so are filled with venomous Catholic- and Spanish-bashing, as well as no small amount of bigotry toward those of African and Native American descent. Kingsley, a Protestant parson, was a proponent of what is now called “muscular Christianity,” equating effeminacy with moral weakness and physical vigor with moral strength. Kingsley wrote fiction with a didactic purpose. He wanted to stir up patriotic feelings on the part of the reading public, in the case of *Westward Ho!* specifically so that the British public would support the Crimean War. Kingsley also wanted to instill in his readers what he saw as the more courageous spirit of the Elizabethans. This manifests itself in the first quarter of *Westward Ho!* being filled with anti-Catholic, anti-Jesuit, and anti-Spanish bigotry as well as rabid pro-British propaganda. During these pages the modern reader will be forgiven for wanting to throw *Westward Ho!* against a wall. Unfortunately, when Kingsley wrote *Westward Ho!* his knowledge of history was faulty, and the book’s historical recreations are flawed when they are not entirely inaccurate. (In fairness to Kingsley, he wrote *Westward Ho!* at a time when reliable, semi-objective histories were hard to come by). Kingsley’s ideology also leads him to sacrifice historical accuracy in favor of jingo: Spanish cruelties are highlighted while English cruelties are downplayed; the English are portrayed in almost entirely positive terms as pure conquering holy Aryan warriors while the Spanish and the Catholics are portrayed in almost entirely negative terms; and, most damningly, the Elizabethans are shown to have the political attitudes of the Victorians, especially with regard to the slave trade—Kingsley’s Elizabethans abhor it, while the real Elizabethans saw it as just another honorable trade.

But after those first one hundred and fifty pages something interesting happens. Kingsley settles down and does not let his agenda get in the way of his telling a cracking good tale. The Catholic- and Spanish-bashing occasionally reappears, but most of the time Kingsley is more concerned with describing Amyas Leigh’s exploits. *Westward Ho!* reads as if the storyteller in Kingsley, who had been cowed by Kingsley’s religious side at the start of the book, slowly won the struggle for control over the writing of the story. After that one hundred and fifty pages

¹ Charles Kingsley, *Westward Ho!* (London: J. Long, 1904), 483.

Westward Ho! has enough shipboard combats and sword fights to satisfy any young, adventure-seeking boy or girl. Kingsley himself admitted that the novel was “bloodthirsty,” but modern readers, whose sensibilities are considerably more coarsened than Kingsley’s, should merely find the novel fun.

On the whole the book is anti-intellectual, but nearly every character, even the roughest of Jolly Jack Tars, seems to have a thorough grounding in the Classics and can reel off long passages of poetry at the drop of a cap. Lucy the witch is memorable, and might well have been an early model for Terry Pratchett's bawdy witch Nanny Ogg. A number of historical figures make appearances, from Sir Philip Sydney to Edmund Spenser, and John Dee (see: *Guy Fawkes*) is name-dropped on several occasions. God sends messages to many of the characters in dreams, and the dreams always come true. Many of the characters are depicted as being too good to be true, but even they are given depth and shown to be flawed. (Except for Amyas’ mother, who is too saintly to be believed). Kingsley's hatred for the Spanish is obvious, but a few Spanish characters are shown as being honorable and even good people. And Kingsley throws some genuinely unexpected plot twists at the reader: main characters are killed unexpectedly; Rose’s disappearance is surprising, but far more so is the revelation that she really does love Don Guzman; Amyas’ fat friend Jack Brimblecombe, though occasionally a figure to be mocked by Amyas and his friends, displays no small amount of nobility and courage and positively shames Amyas and the others; and Kingsley goes against reader expectations by depriving Amyas of his final revenge.

In some respects Amyas is a stereotypical action/adventure hero: physically powerful, energetic, athletic, not too bright and distrustful of intellectuals, brave, loyal, a positive demon in a fight, devoid of imagination and gallant and respectful toward women. But Kingsley wasn't content to leave him there, and instead used him to teach a moral lesson, and in a surprising fashion. Amyas believes that Don Guzman is responsible for the deaths of both Rose and Frank, and Amyas places his own personal vengeance against this man above his responsibilities to his crew or his duty to Queen Elizabeth. As the years pass and Amyas' vengeance is increasingly delayed, Amyas' hate for Don Guzman grows until he becomes filled with it, and all other emotions are driven out. Even Amyas acknowledges that he is so filled with hate that he can feel no joy or love any other man. For this sin God punishes Amyas by taking his vengeance away, by having Don Guzman die in a shipwreck rather than be killed in combat with Amyas, and by blinding Amyas. And then, even more unexpectedly, God sends Amyas a dream in which Amyas sees Don Guzman and Rose together. Amyas at last accepts that Don Guzman and Rose truly loved each other, and Amyas then speaks with Don Guzman’s ghost:

And I saw him sitting in his cabin, like a valiant gentleman of Spain; and his officers were sitting round him, with their swords upon the table at the wine. And the prawns and the crayfish and the rockling, they swam in and out above their heads: but Don Guzman he never heeded, but sat still, and drank his wine. Then he took a locket from his bosom; and I heard him speak, Will, and he said: 'Here's the picture of my fair and true lady; drink to her, señors all.' Then he spoke to me, Will, and called me, right up through the oar-weed and the sea: 'We have had a fair quarrel, señor; it is time to be friends once more. My wife and your brother have forgiven me; so your honor takes no stain.' And I answered, 'We are friends, Don Guzman; God has judged our quarrel and not we.' Then

he said, 'I sinned, and I am punished.' And I said, 'And, señor, so am I.' Then he held out his hand to me, Cary; and I stooped to take it, and awoke."²

The ending of the novel is a qualified happily-ever-after. Amyas is blinded for his sins, but he repents of not loving Ayacanora because of her Spanish blood and decides to stay with her. England triumphs, and Amyas has accomplished many feats, but he remains blind and cared for by others—hardly the conquering hero of so many other **historical romances**.

Westward Ho! turns out to be a real page-turner, something the reader will not expect for the book's first quarter. To avoid the ugly section, readers should begin the novel with Chapter VII, "The True and Tragical History of Mr. John Oxenham of Plymouth." They will be rewarded for having done so.

Recommended Edition

Print: Charles Kingsley, *Westward Ho!*. London: British Library, 2011.

Online: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008669055>

² Kingsley, *Westward Ho!*, 584.