

England on the Eve of Colonization

by Paul E. J. Hammer

When James VI of Scotland and his entourage began his journey south to take up the crown of England in April of 1603, it looked as if the ancient enmity between the two realms had finally been swept away. With England's aristocratic elite greeting their new sovereign in their most extravagant finery and masses of the common people crowding the sides of the road to watch the great procession pass by, the transition from rule by an old Tudor Queen to a Stuart monarch who was also King of Scots was initially greeted by what seemed like unbridled enthusiasm. For the first time in half a century, England was again ruled by a king; for the first time in even longer, the realm also had a royal family—two princes, a princess, and the prospect of even more royal children to come. Although disappointment with the new James VI & I would soon set in, the opening weeks of his English reign were marked by an excitement that reflected profound relief that the royal succession had been settled without resort to war and a common hope that better days were ahead now that decades of rule by childless queens were finally at an end.

When Elizabeth I died on March 24, 1603, she had been queen for almost forty-five years—longer than a majority of her subjects had been alive. Within a few years, Elizabeth's reputation would be burnished with nostalgia and her reign would be seen as a golden age. Nevertheless, the last two decades of her rule had been difficult and fraught with anxiety.

For some eighteen years, Elizabeth's England had been locked in open war with the Spanish empire of Philip II (succeeded by his son, Philip III, in 1598). In many ways, the conflict was about religion. Protestant England had long feared Spain was marshalling the forces of international Catholicism against it. By 1585, Elizabeth felt compelled to send troops to aid the (largely Protestant) Dutch to prevent the Spanish army completing its conquest of the Low Countries—the obvious base for an assault on England. English anxieties were further heightened by the sizeable Catholic minority among the queen's own subjects and continuing fears they might prove a fifth column for Spain. Philip II was not only determined to crush the English challenge, but was also infuriated by English piracy, not least against Spanish ships and settlements in the New World. The result was Spain's attempt to invade England by sea in 1588—what is today popularly called “the Spanish Armada.” Famously, English cannon and fireships won the day, damaging the huge Spanish fleet so badly that many vessels were lost to storms in its desperate bid to escape home around the British Isles and back into the North Atlantic.

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The great clash of 1588 was merely the end of the beginning of the war, not the beginning of its end. In 1589, England launched its own counter-Armada against Spain and Portugal—with almost equally disastrous results. Thereafter, the conflict increasingly became a land war on the Continent. Repeated drafts of raw English conscripts were sent to fight in France and the Low Countries, dying in droves. Maimed or unemployed veterans became an increasingly common sight in English towns. At sea, the bold claims that Sir Francis Drake and others had made for naval attacks against Spain and its possessions before the war were repeatedly disappointed. Despite a few striking successes such as the capture and sack of Cadiz, Spain's chief port serving the Americas, the more common outcome was that of the disastrous attempt to occupy Panama that left Drake among the dead. Spain fared even worse. Two new Armadas in 1596 and 1597 were severely battered by storms and proved total failures. Instead of large fleet actions, the most effective maritime operations involved the legalized piracy of English privateers. This became a huge industry along England's coastline, embracing vessels ranging from small owner-operated boats to private warships owned by noblemen, courtiers, and many of the same London merchants who were also launching long-range trading expeditions to the Mediterranean, Africa, and Asia.

During the mid-1590s, the burden of sustaining the war effort became even more difficult. After outbreaks of plague in 1593, the country was wracked by a succession of disastrous harvests during the middle years of the decade. London saw riots in 1595 and some of the queen's subjects may even have starved to death in more distant regions in the following years. Elizabeth's government was forced into a delicate balancing act, demanding heavy taxes to fund the war each year but also seeking to minimize the burden on her poorest subjects. Underlying this policy was a fear that excessive financial demands might provoke the sort of popular rebellions that had nearly torn the realm apart in 1549. While commanders bemoaned the military consequences of penny-pinching, Elizabeth sought to eke out her over-stretched finances by selling crown lands and pawning old jewels. Instead of rewarding courtiers with grants of land or titles, she also increasingly issued patents and monopolies. These royal grants cost her nothing and sometimes generated annual fees. They allowed the lucky recipients to reap their rewards by entering into partnerships with merchants to ensure control over some specific product, such as the collection of import duty on sweet wines, the printing of Latin primers, or the manufacture of salt or starch. The queen's subjects had to pay inflated prices to guarantee a suitably large profit to the monopolist and his partners. The proliferation of this crown-endorsed exploitation provoked widespread anger and prompted furious complaints when new parliaments met in 1597 and 1601.



The defeat of the Spanish Armada, 1588. (Library of Congress, Kraus Collection, Rare Book and Spec. Collections Div.)

Despite the appearance fostered by some elaborate portraits of the queen, Elizabeth's court was actually something of a cut-price royal court by the 1590s, especially in comparison with that of her father, Henry VIII. Although Elizabeth and her courtiers dressed in magnificent and expensive clothes, the running costs of the court itself were repeatedly pared back and many offices were left unfilled. At the same time, the small group of men who dominated the queen's government seemed to be making extraordinary amounts of money for themselves, giving the court a distinct odor of corruption.

Perhaps the greatest cause of anxiety in Elizabeth's later years was her adamant refusal to name an heir. As an unmarried sovereign, she had no child to succeed her and the English crown—the source of authority for government in the realm—therefore seemed open for the taking. Although James VI of Scotland seemed the strongest candidate, some had doubts about his legal eligibility. Philip II of Spain also staked a claim, based upon his descent from John of Gaunt in the fourteenth century. Some English aristocrats were also quietly assessed as potential domestic candidates to succeed Elizabeth and open war over the English succession seemed all too probable. It is no coincidence that William Shakespeare and other writers devoted such attention in the 1590s to analyzing and dramatizing the Wars of the Roses, England's bitter civil wars of the fifteenth century which seemed likely to revive again on Elizabeth's death.

The final years of the reign saw England's war efforts reach a new peak of intensity, although the prime focus was now on defeating a massive insurrection in Ireland. A substantial portion of Elizabeth's entire spending on war between 1585 and 1603 was consumed by the war in Ireland after 1598, reflecting the unprecedented numbers of troops which she now had to commit there. Even so, the insurgency was not broken until the very end of 1601, when Spain finally landed an army in the British Isles. The besieging of the Spanish force at Kinsale and the defeat of the large Irish army that sought to relieve it shattered the Irish. The surrender and forced repatriation of the Spanish troops also left Spain humiliated.

Although the victory was not finally sealed until early 1603, the bloody and costly struggle in Ireland helped to ensure that James VI, and not a Spaniard, would become Elizabeth's successor. It also enabled the new king to begin his reign by negotiating a peace with Spain on surprisingly good terms. The Treaty of London of August 1604 enabled England to continue offering unofficial support to the Dutch and opened the way for the renewal of trade with Spain. Although the peace failed to permit English access to the New World, many former veterans of Elizabeth's wars began to resurrect and revise old schemes to plant a foothold in the Americas in direct defiance of Spain. For some of them, the desire for continued adventure or the lack of alternative options for employment meant they would actually sail to Jamestown, despite the appalling conditions there. In England, however, the rapturous reception accorded to James had already begun to turn sour. The king's attempt to create a Union of Crowns between England and Scotland excited furious opposition in both realms. Puritans and Catholics alike were also dismayed that James was unable to deliver the changes in official religious policy that they believed he had promised them before his accession. Corruption and the abuse of monopolies also seemed to be getting worse. By the 1620s, when James and his successor Charles I struggled with European-wide religious war and a revival of tensions with Spain, Elizabeth was being celebrated by some critics of the Stuart kings as a Protestant royal paragon and her reign as a golden age of heroic English achievement in the face of Spanish Catholic aggression. The apotheosis of "Good Queen Bess" was well underway.

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METADATA

Era: Colonization and Settlement, 1585-1763, The Americas to 1620

Sub Era: Early Settlements, Imperial Rivalries, Exploration

Theme: Global History and US Foreign Policy, Military History, Religion

Curriculum Subject: World History

Grade Level: 9, 10, 11, 12, 13+

Keywords: anti-Catholicism, Protestantism

Coverage People: Francis Drake, King James I, King James VI, King Philip II, Queen Elizabeth I

Coverage Events: Spanish Armada

Coverage Organizations: Stuarts, Tudors

Coverage Geographical: England, Europe, Great Britain, Ireland, Scotland, Spain