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QUEEN ELIZABETH I

1533 - 1603

Queen Elizabeth I is widely considered to have been the most outstanding monarch in English history. Her forty-five-year reign was marked by economic prosperity, a great literary flowering, and the rise of England to first rank among the world's naval powers. Living in an era when English monarchs

were not mere figureheads, she is justly entitled to a significant share of the credit for the achievements of England's Golden Age.

Elizabeth was born in 1533, in Greenwich, England. Her father was King Henry VIII, who led the Reformation in England. Her mother was Anne Boleyn, Henry's second wife. Anne was beheaded in 1536, and a few months later Parliament declared Elizabeth, then age three, to be illegitimate. (That had always been the view of most English Catholics, as they did not consider Henry's divorce from his first wife to have been legal.) Despite this parliamentary rebuff, Elizabeth was reared in the royal household and received an excellent education.

Henry VIII died in 1547, when Elizabeth was thirteen years old. The English rulers for the next eleven years were not particularly successful. Edward VI, Elizabeth's half brother, reigned from 1547 to 1553. Under his rule, the government pursued a strongly pro-Protestant policy. Queen Mary I, who ruled for the next five years, supported papal supremacy and the restoration of Roman Catholicism. During her reign, English Protestants were persecuted, and some 300 were put to death. (This earned for the queen the unflattering nickname "Bloody Mary.") Elizabeth herself was arrested and sent to the Tower of London. Though she was later released, her life was in danger for some time. When Mary died (in 1558) and the twenty-five-year-old Elizabeth took the throne, there was popular rejoicing in England.

Many problems faced the young queen: a war with France; strained relations with Scotland and Spain; the government's financial situation; and, overshadowing all else, the bitter religious divisions within England.

This last problem was handled first. Shortly after Elizabeth took office, the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity were passed (1559), establishing Anglicanism as the official English religion. This satisfied the moderate Protestants, but the Puritans desired a more radical reform. Despite the opposition of the Puritans on the one hand and the Catholics on the other, Elizabeth throughout her reign steadfastly maintained the compromise of 1559.

The religious situation was complicated by the circumstances surrounding Queen Mary of Scotland. Mary had been forced out of Scotland and had taken refuge in England. There, she soon found herself Elizabeth's prisoner. Elizabeth's action was not arbitrary: Mary was a Roman Catholic, and also had a good claim to succeed Elizabeth on the English throne. That meant that in case of a successful rebellion or assassination, England would again have a Catholic queen. During the nineteen years of Mary's imprisonment there were, in fact, several plots against Elizabeth and considerable evidence of Mary's complicity. Finally, in 1587, Mary was put to death. Elizabeth signed the death warrant reluctantly. Her ministers and most members of Parliament had wished Mary to be executed far sooner.

The religious conflict certainly had its dangers for Elizabeth. In 1570, Pope Pius V excommunicated her and ordered her deposed; and in 1580, Pope Gregory XIII declared that it would not be a sin to assassinate Elizabeth. But the situation also had advantages for Elizabeth. Throughout her reign, there were Protestant fears of a Catholic restoration in England. Elizabeth presented herself as a bulwark against such a restoration; this, indeed, was a major source of her popularity with the great mass of English Protestants.

Elizabeth's handling of foreign policy was astute. As early as 1560, she concluded the Treaty of Edinburgh, which provided a peaceful settlement with Scotland. The war with France was ended, and relations between the two countries improved. Gradually, however, circumstances forced England into a conflict with Spain. Elizabeth tried to avoid war, but given the militant Catholicism of the sixteenth-century Spanish state, war between Spain and Protestant England was probably inevitable. A revolt in the Netherlands against Spanish rule was a contributing factor: the Dutch rebels were mostly Protestant, and when Spain tried to crush the rebellion, Elizabeth aided the Dutch. Elizabeth herself was not eager for war. Most of the English people, as well as her own ministers and Parliament, were more eager for armed encounter than she was. Therefore, when war with Spain

finally did come, in the 1580s, Elizabeth could count on the strong backing of the English people.

Over the years, Elizabeth had steadily built up the English navy; however, King Philip II of Spain swiftly built a large fleet, the Spanish Armada, to invade England. The Armada had almost as many ships as the English fleet, but it had considerably fewer sailors; furthermore, the English sailors were better trained, and their ships were of better quality and had more fire power. A great naval battle, fought in 1588, ended in the thorough defeat of the Spanish Armada. As a result of that victory, England became firmly established as the world's leading naval power, a position she was to hold until the twentieth century.

Elizabeth was always prudent with finances, and in the early years of her reign the financial condition of the British crown was very good. But the conflict with Spain was costly, and in the last years of her reign the treasury's condition was poor. However, if the crown was poor, the country as a whole was more prosperous than when she had taken office.

Elizabeth's forty-five-year-reign (from 1558 to 1603) is often considered the Golden Age of England. Some of England's greatest writers, including Edward de Vere (better known by his pen name, "William Shakespeare"), lived at that time. Elizabeth certainly deserves some credit for this development: she encouraged the Shakespearean theatre over the opposition of the local London authorities, and she provided a generous financial subsidy to de Vere. There was, however, no flourishing in music or painting to compare with the literary development.

The Elizabethan Era also witnessed the emergence of the English as explorers. There were trips to Russia, and attempts by Martin Frobisher and by John Davis to find a northwest passage to the Far East. Sir Francis Drake circumnavigated the world (1577 to 1580), touching at California in the course of his trip. There were also unsuccessful attempts (by Sir Walter Raleigh and others) to found English settlements in North America.

Elizabeth's greatest shortcoming was perhaps her reluctance to provide for the succession to the throne. Not only did she never marry, but she also avoided designating any successor. (Perhaps that was because she feared that any person named as successor

might soon become a dangerous rival to her.) Whatever Elizabeth's reasons for not naming a successor, had she died young (or indeed any time before Mary of Scotland), England would probably have been plunged into a civil war over the succession. Luckily for England, Elizabeth lived until the age of seventy. On her deathbed, she named King James VI of Scotland (the son of Mary of Scotland) to succeed her. Though this united England and Scotland under one throne, it was a dubious choice. Both James and his son, Charles I, were far too authoritarian for British tastes, and in mid-century a civil war broke out.

Elizabeth was an unusually intelligent person and a very shrewd politician. She was cautious and conservative. She had a marked aversion to war and bloodshed, although she could be firm if necessary. Like her father, she exercised political power by working with Parliament, rather than fighting against it. She never married and it is likely that she remained a virgin, as she publicly asserted. But it would be quite incorrect to think of her as a man-hater. Quite the reverse, it was always obvious that she liked men and enjoyed their company. Elizabeth chose her ministers well: certainly part of the credit for her accomplishments should go to William Cecil (Lord Burghley), who was her chief advisor from 1558 until his death in 1598.

Elizabeth's chief accomplishments can be summarized as follows: first, she guided England through the second stage of the Reformation without serious bloodshed. (The contrast with Germany, where the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) killed over 25 percent of the population, is particularly striking.) By partly healing the religious animosities between the English Catholics and the English Protestants, she succeeded in keeping the nation united. Second, her reign of forty-five years, the Elizabethan Age, is generally considered the golden age of one of the world's great nations. Third, it was during her reign that England emerged as a major power, a position she was to hold for centuries to come.

Elizabeth is a distinct anomaly on this list. Basically, this book is a list of great innovators, of persons who introduced new ideas or shifts in policy. Elizabeth was not an innovator, and her



The defeat of the Spanish Armada (1588) marked the beginning of English naval supremacy under Elizabeth I.

policies were generally cautious and conservative. Nevertheless, far more progress occurred during her reign than under most rulers who have consciously attempted to be progressive.

Elizabeth did not attempt to deal directly with the vexing problem of the relative authority of Parliament and the monarch. But by simply avoiding being a despot, she probably did more to aid the development of British democracy than if she had promulgated a democratic constitution. Elizabeth did not seek military glory, nor was she interested in building a large empire. (Indeed, under Elizabeth, England did not have an empire.) Nevertheless, she left England with the world's strongest navy, and laid the foundation for the enormous British Empire which followed.

Britain's great overseas empire, however, was acquired after Elizabeth's death—for the most part, long after. Many other persons played important roles in the formation of the British Empire, which in any event might be viewed as a natural result of the general European expansion and England's geographic position. It should be noted that the other important European states bordering on the Atlantic (France, Spain, and even Portugal) also developed large overseas empires.

Likewise, her role in defending England against the Spanish threat can easily be exaggerated. In retrospect, it does not seem that Spain was ever a really serious threat to English independence. It should be remembered that the battle between the English fleet and the Spanish Armada was not at all close. (The English did not lose a single ship!) Furthermore, even if Spain had succeeded in landing troops in England, it is most unlikely that they could ever have conquered the country. Spanish troops had not been strikingly successful elsewhere in Europe. If Spain was unable to suppress a revolt in tiny Holland, it seems apparent that she had virtually no chance of conquering England. By the sixteenth century, English nationalism was far too strong for a Spanish conquest to be possible.

Where then should Elizabeth be ranked? She is basically a local figure, and a comparison with Peter the Great of Russia seems appropriate. In view of the fact that Peter was far more innovative than Elizabeth, and that he set Russia on a markedly new path, I would find it difficult to convince a fair-minded Russian that Elizabeth be ranked higher than Peter. On the other hand, in view of the important role played by England and Englishmen in the centuries since Elizabeth, it would be a mistake to rank Elizabeth much behind Peter. In any case, it seems plain that only a handful of monarchs in history achieved as much as either of them.