

The Lost Years, 1585–1592

Tensions between Protestants and Catholics came to a head in 1586 when Mary, Queen of Scots, was implicated in a plot to overthrow the Queen and Elizabeth agreed. She was executed in February 1587. Killing a fellow monarch, however threatening, was a grave act, and it provoked a response. In the spring of the following year, Spain dispatched a mighty navy to capture the English throne and replace Elizabeth.

The greatest fleet that 'ever swam upon the sea', the Spanish Armada looked invincible. In battle formation it spread over seven miles of sea and carried ferocious firepower: 123,000 cannonballs and nearly three thousand cannons, plus every manner of musket and small arms, divided between thirty thousand men. The Spanish confidently expected the swiftest of triumphs – one literally for the glory of God. Once England fell, and with the English fleet in Spanish hands, the very real prospect arose of the whole of Protestant Europe being toppled.

Things didn't go to plan, to put it mildly. England's ships were nimbler and sat lower in the water, making them awkward targets. They could dart about doing damage here and there while the Spanish guns, standing on high decks, mostly fired above them. The English ships were better commanded, too (or so all English history books tell us). It is only fair to note that most of the Spanish fleet were not battleships but overloaded troop carriers, making plump and lumbering targets. The English also enjoyed a crucial territorial edge: they could exploit their intimate knowledge of local tides and currents, and could dart back to the warm comfort of home ports for refreshment and repairs. Above all they had a decisive technological advantage: cast-iron cannons, an English invention that other nations had not yet perfected, which fired straighter and were vastly sturdier than the Spanish bronze guns, which were poorly bored and inaccurate and had to be allowed to cool after every two or three rounds. Crews that failed to heed this – and in the heat of battle it was easy to lose track – often blew themselves up. In any case the Spanish barely trained their gun crews. Their strategy

was to come alongside and board enemy ships, capturing them in hand-to-hand combat.

The rout was spectacular. It took the English just three weeks to pick the opponent's navy to pieces. In a single day the Spanish suffered eight thousand casualties. Dismayed and confused, the tattered fleet fled up the east coast of England and around Scotland into the Irish Sea⁸², where fate dealt it further cruel blows in the form of lashing gales, which wrecked at least two dozen ships. A thousand Spanish bodies, it was recorded, washed up on Irish beaches. Those who struggled ashore were often slaughtered for their baubles. By the time the remnants of the Armada limped home, it had lost seventeen thousand men out of the thirty thousand who had set off. England lost no ships at all.

The defeat of the Spanish Armada changed the course of history. It induced a rush of patriotism in England that Shakespeare exploited in his history plays (nearly all written in the following decade), and it gave England the confidence and power to command the seas and build a global empire, beginning almost immediately with North America. Above all it secured Protestantism for England. Had the Armada prevailed it would have brought with it the Spanish Inquisition, with goodness knows what consequences for Elizabethan England – and the young man from Warwickshire who was just about to transform its theatre.