

## The Age of Elizabeth

When Queen Mary died in November 1558, there was general relief; the cruelty of her persecution of protestants had alienated the sympathy of the English people. **Elizabeth** was still young, only 25, and the fact that her life had been in danger under Mary made her especially popular. She was known to have been well educated in the humanist tradition, and she was protestant. The citizens of London welcomed her joyfully as a peacemaker and hoped that she would protect the reformed religion, ruling wisely and well. As she entered London for her coronation, a child dressed as Truth presented her with a Bible in English while a figure representing True Religion trampled on Ignorance and Superstition. It was clear that the religious divisions of English society were a threat that had to be quickly dealt with. Elizabeth hated extremes and fanaticism of every kind. She knew that most of her subjects wanted a peaceful life.

### The Church

The result of the religious changes under Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary was a high degree of confusion and social insecurity. Extreme forms of Protestantism developed in reaction to Mary's brutal attempts to undo her father's reforms. In religious policy, Elizabeth steered a *via media*, a middle course in search of a broad consensus, and during her long reign she tried to make the English Church a united body, a servant of the State, a means of ideological and civic control through forced conformism (the **Elizabethan Settlement**). More radical forms of Protestantism continued to develop among the citizens of London and other cities, who came to be known later as Puritans, while many people lost all interest in a religion that did not appeal to them. The simple forms of popular piety--pilgrimages and visits to shrines, special prayers and rituals--that drew people into the churches during the middle ages ceased to exist; the process of secularization had begun.

The main expression of the English (Anglican) Church's special identity was the **Book of Common Prayer**, containing the official forms of all the church's services. Until the later years of Henry VIII, the church had continued to use the traditional Catholic forms for the Mass and for daily prayers, for baptisms and weddings and all the other ceremonies. After Henry's break with Rome, the Bible readings at the Mass began to be made in English, and sometimes sermons began to take the place of the Mass under Continental influence. In 1549, just after Henry's death, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, and others produced a first version of an English-language liturgy, which was approved by Parliament as part of an **Act of Uniformity**, in an effort to prevent the country being completely divided between Catholic and Protestant camps.

In 1552, after the now dominant Calvinists had objected that this first version was too Catholic, a revision was published and basically this 1552 Book of Common Prayer remained in daily use in every parish of England until the mid 20th century, with only small changes. Its English style, formal and elegant, was largely the work of Cranmer, and it had an enormous influence on almost every English writer, who grew up hearing and reciting its solemn rhythms and cadences day after day. A good example is the General Thanksgiving:

Almighty God, Father of all mercies,  
we thine unworthy servants  
do give thee most humble and hearty thanks

for all thy goodness and loving kindness  
to us and to all men;  
we bless thee for our creation, preservation,  
and all the blessings of this life;  
but above all for thine inestimable love  
in the redemption of the world  
by our Lord Jesus Christ:  
for the means of grace and for the hope of glory;  
and we beseech thee,  
give us that due sense of all thy mercies,  
that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful and  
that we show forth thy praise not only with our lips but in our lives,  
by giving up ourselves to thy service  
and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness  
all our days,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost  
be all honor and glory, world without end. Amen.

Soon after Elizabeth became queen, a new Act of Uniformity in 1559 imposed the Prayer Book forms of worship everywhere, but in many areas there was resistance because it was felt to be too Catholic. During her reign the churches continued to be stripped of their medieval furniture; statues, paintings and other works of art were destroyed as idolatrous and church buildings were left bare, sometimes almost in ruins. The monasteries closed by Henry VIII fell completely into ruin, or were demolished. Their lands were sold to raise money for the state treasury.

The official teaching of the Established Church of England was expressed in the **Thirty-nine Articles** (1563) that from 1571 all the clergy had to accept. They were anti-Catholic without being as Calvinist as the more radical protestants wished. Through all this, the country lost much beauty, and much faith.

The Church of England retained the old structure of bishops in charge of dioceses and priests at the head of parishes. This displeased the more extreme Presbyterians but has continued until today. One of the great works of Elizabethan prose was written to justify this traditional hierarchical structure which is not found in the Bible, it having evolved only after the New Testament was complete. **Richard Hooker** (1554 - 1600) was Master of the Temple (one of the London law colleges) and his *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (published in 1593) is a model of clear, logical argument, justifying the hierarchy of bishops priests and deacons by appealing to the natural order of the cosmos, and to the important role of reason in establishing the laws that govern the church.

The Mass became known as “the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion” and was soon only celebrated a few times each year. The Bible and sermons were at the centre of the new religion; in order to control the message of the Church, a set of official **Homilies** (sermons) was published to be read at the services. Priests did not have the right to speak their own ideas, which might be subversive.

John Foxe: *The Book of Martyrs*

One of the most influential books of the period was *Actes and Monuments of these latter perillous dayes, touching matters of the Church*, usually known as *Foxe’s Book of*

*Martyrs*. Composed by John Foxe (1516 - 1587), this huge record of protestant heroics (6000 folio pages, four million words) was first published in Latin in Strasbourg in 1559, and in English in 1563, going through many editions in the following century. It offers a reading of the history of the Christian church based on the new vision of Christianity developed by the continental Reformation, according to which the visible church is not the true Church of Christ, and is often deeply corrupted (the Catholic church is the main target). True Christians ("the saints") are persecuted by the enemies of the faith both inside and outside the church, as was shown by the sufferings of the protestants who were killed during the reign of Mary Tudor.

One of Mary's first and most pathetic victims had been Lady Jane Grey, a protestant noblewoman who was put forward by a group of courtiers in an attempt to prevent Mary from becoming queen. The coup failed and she was executed after making a simple speech (according to Foxe, who is often not an accurate reporter):

Then the hangman kneeled down and asked her forgiveness, whom she forgave most willingly. Then he willed her to stand upon the straw, which doing, she saw the block. Then she said, "I pray you, despatch me quickly." Then she kneeled down, saying, "Will you take it off before I lay me down?" And the hangman said, "No, madam." Then tied she the kerchief about her eyes, and feeling for the block she said, "What shall I do? Where is it? Where is it?" One of the standers-by guiding her thereunto she laid her head down upon the block, and then stretched forth her body and said, "Lord, into thy hands I commend my spirit;" and so finished her life, in the year of our Lord God 1553, the twelfth day of February.

The most significant part of Foxe's work is his mythical version of the history of the English Church: according to this, true apostolic Christianity came directly to England in AD 63, when Joseph of Arimathea came bringing the Holy Grail and built the first church at Glastonbury. Later this "true" church was veiled by being taken over by the popes of Rome, but now the time has come for the English Church to be reformed, liberated from Roman corruptions, and to appear as the Light of the Nations. The way this nationalistic vision links religious belief and elements drawn from the old romances is striking and characteristic.

To this can be added the widespread idea that the rulers of England inherited Constantine's imperial title: on the first title page of Foxe's book, Queen Elizabeth is shown standing in imperial triumph on the fallen pope, whose keys are broken. This image became standard: Elizabeth is seen as empress of the whole world, defender of true Christian religion and of justice, guardian of virtue and bringer of peace; the mythical title **Astraea** is often used, the last goddess of the golden age to leave the earth, represented in the sky by the constellation called the Virgin.

### The Queen's Power

In everything, the Tudors moved towards an organic state in which individual freedom was strictly controlled by censors, commissions, and punitive laws. Their goal was the affirmation of their own royal supremacy. They failed, however, in the long run, and instead they gave birth to the modern state in which no one person, but the abstract State is supreme.

Elizabeth did all she could to fashion herself into an emblem of England. The **Virgin Queen** made herself into a new icon or image, taking advantage of her female sex to provoke male fantasies of service and reward, by which she controlled her closest ministers. The

Renaissance fondness for emblems, images that can be read at many levels including political and even metaphysical, was fully exploited during her reign.

Elizabeth was at least as despotic and autocratic as her father, she could not accept criticism or contrary advice. She was, though, a very talented woman, speaking and reading French, Italian, Latin and Spanish, good at dancing, playing music, and hunting. She could be charming, but when she was angry she was dangerous.

One of her strategies when confronted with a need to make a decision was to delay so long that the need disappeared. In the early years, the main question was whom she should marry; this question of the queen's marriage dominated most of the reign, for by it she manipulated factions in court and also kept foreign countries in suspense. The main problem lay in the question as to who would follow her on the throne, in view of the turmoil that could arise if there was no clear heir. Yet in the end Elizabeth never married, and never clearly indicated who should succeed her.

### Mary Queen of Scots

The life of **Mary Queen of Scots** must have shown Elizabeth what marriage could lead to: Mary's French husband became the French king Francis II in 1559, but died the next year. In 1565 Mary married her cousin Henry Darnley, and hoped to inherit the English throne, although she was Catholic. In 1566 she had a son, James, who in fact united the two thrones in 1603. Mary's husband was assassinated, and she married the man who was thought to have been the murderer; he divorced his wife to marry Mary. As a result there was rebellion and in 1568 Mary fled into England to ask Elizabeth for help. She became a virtual prisoner, the focus of intrigues among factions who wished to see her on the combined throne of England and Scotland, after the death of Elizabeth.

There were continental Catholics, eager to depose Elizabeth in favor of Mary. Besides, in the northern parts of England, people were still strongly attached to the old Catholic religion. In 1569 they rose up in open revolt, but this was quickly suppressed. Others shared their ideas, though, and they were soon supported in this by Rome, when in 1570 **Pope Pius V** issued a document, the "bull" entitled *Regnans in excelsis*, declaring that Elizabeth was deposed from the English throne.

Next, an international plot was discovered, designed to land 6000 Spanish troops in England, to support Mary Stuart's claim to the English throne. As a result of all this, the feeling grew strong that true Englishmen were Protestants, and that Catholics could never be trusted to be loyal subjects. Behind these religious questions, there lay the intense political and military struggle for European domination that was going on between Spain, France, and the German Empire.

### The Netherlands and France

In 1567, the main Spanish army, 8000 Spaniards with over thirty thousand soldiers from Germany, Italy etc, marched into the Netherlands (The Low Countries) in order to put down a revolt that had begun in 1566. As a result of dynastic marriages, Spain had gained control of the Netherlands in 1506, but had not tried to make itself loved by the people there. In the northern areas Protestantism had spread, but even the Catholics in the southern Netherlands hated the Spanish. In 1566, with famine and economic collapse widespread, the population had risen up in spontaneous iconoclasm, but the huge army Spain sent in 1567

was clearly not only intended to control the situation in the Netherlands; it was also designed for a possible invasion of England. London was less than 200 miles away!

In the last week of August 1572, the previous uneasy balance between Catholics and Protestants (*Huguenots*) in France broke in the **Massacre of St Bartholomew**. 3000 protestants were killed in Paris, another 10,000 in the rest of France; this polarized the religious conflict throughout Europe, and in England the fear of continental plots and invasion became intense throughout society. There was pressure on Elizabeth to send an army to the Netherlands to support the protestant rebels against the Spanish. She resisted the idea, because there was no money to pay for foreign wars, but also because the non-Spanish soldiers (mercenaries) in the Spanish army kept going on strike for more pay, with the result that the rebels held their own without outside assistance.

### Elizabeth and International Politics

In the earlier part of her reign, Elizabeth's main minister and adviser was **Sir William Cecil**, Lord Burghley. He was a skilled politician, who gradually withdrew, leaving Lord Robert Dudley, the **Earl of Leicester**, as the main champion of active involvement in the religious struggles of Europe. In many ways, though, the most powerful man in the state was **Sir Francis Walsingham**, from 1572 until his death in 1590. He and Cecil developed a widespread system of spies and double-agents, both inside England and on the Continent, and played subtle games of covert diplomacy, using secret agents in ways that show a high mastery of the arts often termed Machiavellian.

In order to keep France from becoming too much an enemy, Elizabeth long pretended to be interested in a marriage with the French king's brother, the **duke of Alencon**. He came to England in 1579 and 1581, intending to wed Elizabeth, but finally left unmarried. The plan caused strong opposition among the fervent protestants, since Alencon was catholic, but Elizabeth always preferred *realpolitik* to religious issues. Cecil and Walsingham, however, were committed protestants who longed for a clearer policy.

They were helped by new developments; the Dutch revolt became a clear struggle of protestants in the area now known as Holland against catholics (Spanish and local) in what is now Belgium. In 1580 **Spain** annexed Portugal and took control of its territories (which included Brazil). In 1582 the Spanish prince of Parma became governor-general of the Netherlands and began new campaigns against the protestants. In 1582 a plot was uncovered in Scotland to impose Mary Stuart and a return to Catholicism. In 1583 a very complex game of secret agents controlled by Walsingham uncovered a similar plot in England. In Ireland, too, Spain was active.

At sea, meanwhile, Spain and England were fighting a war disguised as piracy. **Sir Francis Drake** sailed around the world in 1577-80, the first Englishman to do so; the main purpose of his journey was to attack Spanish property and bring back a fortune for the queen, which he did, and was knighted on the deck of his ship on arriving.

The Spanish fleet was huge, 300,000 tons compared to England's 42,000 tons; this gave the Spanish the idea of launching an **Armada**, a fleet carrying tens of thousands of troops to invade England. Between 1583 and 1585, many rebel cities in the Netherlands fell to the Spanish and at last Elizabeth accepted that a limited force of English soldiers must go to fight there. In 1585, she gave Leicester command, and his nephew **Sir Philip Sidney** became commander of Flushing. For Leicester and many others, this was the first step towards the creation of a Northern European protestant coalition, but Elizabeth hated Calvinism and did not allow the plan to proceed.

## The Death of Mary Queen of Scots

The social climate in England in the mid-1580s was full of tension, with fears that the queen would be assassinated. This insecurity provoked a strong new sense of national identity, and of national fervour. A virtual state of emergency was promoted by Walsingham, and Parliament passed severe anti-Catholic laws to protect the queen. Meanwhile, Walsingham had arranged for his double agents to offer Mary Queen of Scots a way to send secret messages to the French ambassador in London, and she became involved in a plot being organized by Anthony Babington to murder Elizabeth. Mary agreed to the scheme in a letter dictated in July 1586, not realizing that Walsingham was reading everything she wrote. The trap was sprung, the other conspirators were hanged, Mary was put on trial and condemned to die.

Elizabeth had been developing good relationships with the young king James VI of Scotland (Mary's son, but a protestant) and feared that executing his mother would spoil the plan to have him as the next king of England. More important, though, was Elizabeth's horror at the thought of the death of a sovereign, God's anointed like herself. She could not bring herself to sign Mary's death warrant. At last, in February 1587 false rumours spread that the Spanish had landed and Mary had escaped. In panic Elizabeth signed, but then gave orders that the warrant was not to be used. The Privy Council, including Burghley and Leicester, decided to have Mary executed without the queen's knowledge and she was beheaded in the hall of Fotheringhay Castle in February 1587.

The queen was appalled and it took months before she could work with her ministers again. At the same time, Leicester's expedition in the Netherlands failed and he had angered the queen by assuming a role implying a far greater commitment than she was prepared to make in Europe.

## The Spanish Armada

The Spanish preparations for the conquest of England had begun in earnest in 1585; the **Armada** was planned for 1587, but was delayed until the next year after Drake launched raids on Cadiz and the Azores. This gave more time for the English counties to prepare local groups of militia, although the country was ill-prepared for war. The Armada was first sighted on July 19, 1588, as it sailed up past Plymouth, where Drake was in charge, towards Calais. There the main English fleet trapped the 131 Spanish ships with their 7,000 seamen and 17,000 soldiers. The English boats had far better guns, and this was decisive. The main battle began on July 29; soon the Spanish fleet was fleeing to the north. They turned past Scotland and headed towards Ireland, but there in August heavy gales destroyed many ships, only half of the Armada finally returned to Spain.

The war with Spain lasted until 1604, but there was no further attempt to invade England, the fighting continued in France and the Netherlands, as well as at sea; the terrible hardship suffered by soldiers in these campaigns is echoed in Shakespeare's war plays.

## The last years of Elizabeth's reign

In 1588 Leicester died, and the last years of Elizabeth's reign began with a new generation. **Sir Walter Raleigh** was well placed to become her new favourite until he married Elizabeth Throckmorton, one of her maids of honor, without permission. Robert Cecil, the son of lord Burghley, was a main contender for power; opposing him was the elegant and arrogant Robert Devereux, the second **earl of Essex**, who became the queen's third favourite. The 1590s court was dominated by the power-struggle between their two factions, while the queen became older and uglier, and more determined not to let herself be dominated by any man.

Essex tried to become the new militant protestant leader now that Leicester, Walsingham and Sidney were dead. He married Sir Philip Sidney's widow, who was Walsingham's daughter. By 1598 the queen had realized that Essex had the ambition to rule her, and she refused to see him; in reaction, she gave Cecil huge authority. The final break came at a Privy Council meeting where Essex spoke against the queen's suggestions and turned his back on her; she called him to her, and slapped him on the face, which was an intolerable insult to such a proud man. Essex began openly to question whether the queen should be obeyed unconditionally.

In 1599 Essex asked to be sent to Ireland to fight the rebels there, in the hope of earning new favour, an adventure and hope echoed in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. He failed, returned to England without permission, and burst into Elizabeth's bedroom early in the morning! He was placed under virtual house arrest. The story of Richard II and Henry IV offered a clear parallel to these events, and he exploited it.

In late 1600 Essex found himself in serious debt, with no more money available. At the same time, he saw himself as noble by birth, and felt called to purify the realm of people like the Cecils whose family was less high-born but now more powerful than he was. This led him to an act of desperation; on February 8, 1601, Essex provoked a crisis by taking to the streets of London with a few hundred supporters in a dramatic gesture of revolt. Did he really think that the citizens would join him? They did not, and within a few hours he had surrendered. Two weeks later he was beheaded for high treason.

Cecil exaggerated the threat represented by this event, using it to create a climate of anxiety about the possibility of social disorder. At the same time he was in contact with Scotland's King James, preparing the succession without the queen's knowledge. In February 1603 the queen began to grow weaker; plans were agreed for the proclamation of James, and when she died on March 24th everything was ready. James VI of Scotland was proclaimed King James I of England later the same day.

## Early Elizabethan Poetry

The publication of *Tottel's Miscellany* in 1557 brought no sudden change in the kind of poetry people were writing. In the early years of Elizabeth it continued in the style best termed the **native plain style**, that is well represented in Wyatt's songs, having developed in the later 15th century. C. S. Lewis in his *Oxford History of English Literature* volume coined the name "drab" for this style, opposing it to the "aureate" style of Sidney and Marlowe. We find love laments, expressions of wisdom about life, satires, and religious, as well as occasional poems. The writers were often minor aristocrats, with a humanist education and a protestant ideology, attached to the fringes of the court. They mostly wrote in private for a group of like-minded acquaintances, only allowing their work to be printed later, if at all.







No princely pomp, no wealthy store,  
 No force to win the victory,  
 No wily wit to salve a sore,  
 No shape to feed each gazing eye;  
 To none of these I yield as thrall. (slave)  
 For why my mind doth serve for all. (because)  
 (...)

There were many other poets at this moment, engaged in the search for a modern English poetics. **George Turberville** (1540-95) translated Ovid and the eclogues of Mantuan (1567) and experimented with many verse forms. A poem by Turberville is one of the first examples of the *carpe diem* theme in English:

Though brave your beauty be, and feature passing fair,  
 Such as Apelles to depaint might utterly despair,  
 Yet drowsy drooping Age, encroaching on apace,  
 With pensive plough will raze your hue,  
 And Beauty's beams deface.

#### *The Mirror For Magistrates*

One of the most popular works of the period was the *Mirror for Magistrates*; planned as a continuation of Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*, it was first published in 1559, composed of twenty "tragedies" written by various authors. In each tragic tale, a famous man tells how he rose to greatness and then suddenly lost everything. The appeal of the work comes from its combination of tragic history and rhetoric, both of which were immensely popular. Various famous figures, in this first version mainly from British history, tell their own sad tale in retrospect, from the tomb. The book is presented as a moralizing "advice book" (*mirror*) for princes (*magistrates*), but it was popular among the ordinary subjects of the absolutist Tudors.

The enlarged edition of 1563 began with an "Induction" (*introduction*) by **Thomas Sackville**, who had been part-author of the tragedy *Gorboduc*, describing his winter journey to the underworld in a combination of Virgilian heroics and medieval allegory-personification with archaic diction in rhyme royal stanzas that was to influence Spenser:

The wrathful winter, 'proaching on apace,  
 With blustering blasts had all ybared the treen,  
 And old Saturnus, with his frosty face,  
 With chilling cold had pierced the tender green;  
 The mantles rent, wherein enwrapped had been  
 The gladsome groves that now lay overthrown,  
 The tapets torn, and every bloom downblown.

(*The speaker meets Sorrow, whose home is the Underworld*)

"Whence come I am, the dreary destiny  
 And luckless lot for to bemoan of those  
 Whom fortune, in this maze of misery,

Of wretched chance, most woeful mirrors chose;  
That when thou seest how lightly they did lose  
Their pomp, their power, and that they thought most sure,  
Thou mayst soon deem no earthly joy may dure.”

She leads him down the gloomy path past a whole range of personifications: Remorse, Dread, Revenge, Misery, Care... on to Death and War. The verbal emblems derive from Virgil but owe much to Chaucer, especially as they blend into a whole series of episodes painted on the shield of War, culminating in a lengthy portrayal of the fall of Troy:

Cassandra yet there saw I how they haled  
From Pallas' house, with spercled tress undone,  
Her wrists fast bound and with Greeks' rout empaled;  
And Priam eke, in vain how he did run  
To arms, whom Pyrrus with despite hath done  
To cruel death, and bathed him in the baign  
Of his son's blood, before the altar slain.

*(The travellers pass over on Charon's boat)*

Thence come we to the horror and the hell,  
The large great kingdoms and the dreadful reign  
Of Pluto in his throne where he did dwell,  
The wide waste places and the hugy plain,  
The wailings, shrieks, and sundry sorts of pain,  
The sighs, the sobs, the deep and deadly groan,  
Earth, air, and all, resounding plaint and moan.

Suddenly they meet the ghost of Henry, Duke of Buckingham, whose story (also written by Sackville) begins the book's series of poetic narratives. The *Mirror for Magistrates* was a huge success, with five new expanded editions following into the 17th century. Always the centre of interest is the mutability of fortune: men are brought to great political power and human fame, only suddenly to find themselves toppled into pain and death.