

# ELIZABETH I

Susan Doran *provides a fresh assessment of one of the most popular of British monarchs*

## The Myth: exponents and critics

**T**he Armada Portrait (right) is deservedly the most familiar icon of Elizabeth I, presenting as it does an image of the queen which has been assimilated into one of England's most enduring historical myths. Resplendent in her pearls and bows, Elizabeth stands imperiously as the Virgin Queen, whose political power is closely linked to her personal celibacy; note for instance how a white bow and giant pearl are prominent in the position where a codpiece would be placed on a male in order to display his virility. While depicted as remote from her subjects, Elizabeth is also represented as sharing their aspirations; with her hand covering the Americas on the globe she proclaims England's imperial ambitions, an intent made possible by the strength of her navy (symbolised by the ship's prow in the shape of a mermaid to her left). Finally, the portrait shows Elizabeth as the defender of her people and their Protestant faith; her back is turned on the forces of darkness, the invincible Spanish Armada sent to invade her realm and extirpate heresy, for she is confident in the help of God and English sea-power to withstand the foreign attack. Here then is the Elizabeth of national myth: a woman who chose to remain unwed in order to rule rather than reign; a queen who was in touch with the needs and hopes of her subjects; and a leader who guided England through the dangers of international politics by adopting a calm yet resolute defensive policy.

The work of a number of influential Tudor historians has kept this image of Elizabeth alive well into the twentieth century. Professor Sir John Neale, in particular, was an ardent admirer of the queen, and his biography and essays did much to advance the popular perception of Elizabeth as a strong, wise and effective ruler who personified 'the emotion of the nation'. The cultural historian, Sir Roy Strong, who has investigated in depth the cult of the Virgin Queen, also found himself seduced by the image of Gloriana. Even in his recent survey of British history he remains eulogistic about the queen, describing her as 'a great queen, sagacious, brave, tolerant as far as she dare' who 'in a sense ... became England'.<sup>1</sup> On the whole, however, over the last decade historians have tended to adopt a far more critical line. Perhaps the most extreme case is Dr Christopher Haigh's 1988 political profile of the queen, which in seeking to destroy Elizabeth the icon produced a harsh interpretation of Elizabeth the woman: Haigh's Elizabeth was bossy rather than imperious, selfish rather than self-sacrificing, a vain, evil-tempered, and even at times silly creature. Her abilities were slight and her achievements negligible: 'Queen Elizabeth', he wrote, 'did not attempt to solve problems, she simply avoided them – and then survived long enough for some to go away.'<sup>2</sup>

Haigh's profile of the queen, however, is no less one-sided than the laudatory biographies and studies it attacks; it also shares one of their other shortcomings: it is unashamedly sexist. Whereas Professor Neale unconsciously absorbed the gender stereotyping of his own day, Dr Haigh appears to take delight in the use of politically incorrect language and analogies: his Elizabeth is labelled as 'something of a fish-wife', 'a spinster aunt' to her nobles, 'a nagging wife' to her councillors, and 'a nanny' to her MPs. Haigh's piece is often provocative, certainly amusing, but not particularly helpful. Furthermore, a less self-conscious stereotyping creeps into Haigh's more conventional interpretations of Elizabeth's character. Thus he accepts uncritically contemporary descriptions of the queen as 'vain' and 'vacillating', even though they conform so well to sixteenth-century expectations of the 'weaker' sex that they are somewhat suspect as individual character traits. At times he also seems to be taken in by Elizabeth's love of theatricality. Always on public display, she deliberately played a part for public consumption and it is disputable whether or not her behaviour on any single occasion was spontaneous or contrived. Was she as evil-tempered, for example, as Dr Haigh declared, or were at least some of her public rages an instrument of political management?

## The Reality of Power

Despite the limitations of Haigh's profile, it is undoubtedly true that the reality of Elizabeth's character and rule were far different from both the contemporary image and popular myth. In the first place, Elizabeth was not the Virgin Queen who chose to remain unmarried in order to retain power. There is strong evidence that she made no early commitment to live and die a virgin, but on the contrary was prepared to marry if she could obtain conciliar backing for her choice of husband. After the death of Amy Lady Dudley in September 1560, it seems fairly clear that the queen would have taken the widower, Robert Dudley, as her spouse, had the match not been so strongly opposed by Sir William Cecil and others. In 1579, she was bent on marriage to Francis Duke of Anjou but was forced to back out of the match after important members of her Council had not only refused to give it their blessing but had also orchestrated a public relations campaign against it. On a couple of other occasions too, Elizabeth responded positively to her subjects' requests that she marry, albeit without much enthusiasm: in the mid 1560s she opened up negotiations with the Catholic Archduke Charles of Austria; and in 1571 she allowed her ministers to negotiate a marriage-treaty with Henry Duke of Anjou, the brother of





Above, Elizabeth I (Armada portrait), George Gower c. 1588  
Marquess of Tavistock and Trustees of Bedford Estates

the French king. It was only after hard bargaining that both these projects foundered over the problem of religion. Matrimony was a realistic option for Elizabeth because she had no reason to fear that marriage to either an Englishman or a foreign prince would deny her political power. Not only were contemporary tracts written which argued that the consort of a queen regnant was obliged to obey her laws, just as any other subject, but also she and her councillors insisted that her husband-to-be should sign a matrimonial contract which would exclude him from policy-making and government. Nonetheless, some of her privy councillors had reason enough to dislike the prospect of a royal consort; political self interest, religious concerns as well as anxieties about the succession often led them into vocal and active opposition against a particular match. Had the Council united behind one candidate, it is likely that Elizabeth's virginity would have been temporary.

Just as Elizabeth listened carefully to the advice and exhortations of her councillors over the question of marriage, so she was far less authoritarian and dictatorial in her approach to other political issues than is often appreciated. In her method of rule Elizabeth usually followed the art of the possible and the advice of her councillors. There were times when she would take an independent line on important matters of state, particularly when the council was divided. Thus in the 1560s she was able to elude conciliar pressure to name a successor largely because she knew that her councillors could not agree on who her designated heir should be. In the early 1570s she rejected the advice of the earl of Leicester and Sir

Francis Walsingham that she send military help to the Protestants fighting Spain in the Netherlands, secure in the knowledge that the earl of Sussex and Lord Burghley opposed direct intervention. On the other hand, there were many other occasions when she was forced to pursue policies she disliked, or had to give up a certain course of action that she favoured. Thus, in December 1559 Elizabeth reluctantly ordered military intervention in Scotland in support of the Protestant Lords of the Congregation, after Sir William Cecil had threatened to resign if she continued to reject his advice. In 1566 she was forced to modify her earlier demand to Archbishop Parker that her ministers should wear vestments at communion service, and accepted unofficially that a surplice would have to suffice for the parish clergy. In 1587 under extreme pressure from a united Council she eventually signed the death warrant of Mary Stuart, very much against her will. In these cases and others, Elizabeth knew when she was beaten by the concerted pressure from her ministers, and gave way. Although it might be thought that a disunited Council would suit the queen and allow her freedom of action and dominance over her ministers, there is little evidence that she regularly exploited conciliar divisions for these ends. On the contrary, many examples can be found of the queen encouraging rival politicians to work together to formulate and execute policy, as well as instances of royal intervention to calm down passions which had arisen from disputes. As a result, rivalries and differences of opinion



between politicians were contained until the late 1590s when the competition for favour between the Cecils and the earl of Essex slipped out of control.

In her relationship with her parliaments, Elizabeth also preferred conciliation to confrontation. Certainly she attempted to stifle debates on 'matters of state', rejected parliamentary petitions that she name a successor, vetoed a number of religious bills passed by both Houses, and ordered the arrest of MPs who challenged her prerogative. For the most part, however, she tried to avoid conflict with her House of Commons: she promised them she would marry in 1563 and 1566 as the way of resolving the succession question; she agreed to the execution of the duke of Norfolk in 1572; and she pledged reform of the church in 1587, purveyance in 1571 and 1589, and of monopolies in 1597 and 1601. Although Elizabeth allowed parliament no power in the making of national policy she recognised that it was a channel for public opinion and a mechanism for smooth government. As such, her Commons needed conciliating, and Elizabeth did so with honeyed words and fair promises, some of which she actually kept.

### **Protestant Heroine?**

The image of Elizabeth as a Protestant heroine owes more to propaganda than to reality. Very soon after the introduction of the 1559 religious settlement, Elizabeth ran into trouble with her Protestant subjects, not just a fringe group of radicals but members of the establishment: bishops, court preachers, university academics and lay members of her court and Council. In their eyes Elizabeth was not fulfilling the propaganda role of the Old Testament prophet Deborah, which had been laid down for her at her coronation. Far from uprooting idolatry, the queen was allowing it to remain undisturbed in her Prayer Book and within the confines of her own chapel. The Ornaments Rubric of the 1559 Prayer Book retained the use of priestly vestments and liturgical furniture, while the communion, baptism and churching services included traditional rites and ceremonies deemed popish by most Protestants. As far as the royal chapel was concerned, Elizabeth resisted all criticisms of and attacks on a silver cross and two candlesticks, 'standing altar-wise' on the communion table. She also enjoyed elaborate church music and employed the Catholic organist and composer, William Byrd, in her Chapel Royal. In her personal life too, Elizabeth failed to act out the model of a pious Protestant princess; she would dance and hunt on a the Sabbath, and freely utter oaths, behaviour offensive to the godly. To make matters still worse, as the reign went on, Elizabeth restricted godly preaching, the hallmark of a Reformed Church, and ordered the removal of godly ministers from their livings when they followed their consciences by refusing to conform to all parts of the Prayer Book.

Yet Elizabeth's Protestantism cannot be doubted, even if her beliefs were closer to those of the evangelical reformers and Lutherans who had influenced her in the 1540s than to those of the Swiss Reformed bishops of her church in the 1560s. She denied papal supremacy, rejected transubstantiation, recited prayers which incorporated a belief in justification by faith alone, and asserted the supremacy of scriptural authority. She disliked images and ceremonies that tended towards superstition, although she certainly had a narrower view than her early bishops about what these were.

While it is difficult to pin her down theologically, it is probably safe to say that she was closer to being a Lutheran than anything else; and it is significant that one of her chaplains was the Lutheran Bishop Edmund Guest of Rochester. For political reasons too, Elizabeth was keen to have her church appear in outward form not too far apart from that of Rome or Wittenburg. In part, her objective was to allow conservative, even Catholic parishioners to feel comfortable at the services they were compelled by law to attend; perhaps still more importantly the queen hoped to convince the Catholic powers of France, Austria and Spain that she had not entered the radical Calvinist fold which they abhorred and viewed as seditious.

Elizabeth also failed to live up to her image as a Protestant heroine in her foreign policy, for she often displayed a reluctance to give active military aid to coreligionists who had taken up arms against their lawful rulers. She was slow to respond to the entreaties for military assistance from the Scottish Lords of the Congregation in 1559, and was 'full offended' with the lords who took up arms against Mary Stuart in 1567. Similarly, in the late 1560s she was unwilling to help the Huguenots in their armed struggle against the king of France, and even after the massacre of St Bartholomew in 1572 she sent no armed assistance to the survivors. As for the rebels against Spain in the Netherlands, despite numerous pleas for help, she delayed giving financial aid until 1577 and sending an army until 1585. Her greatest concern was to avoid direct confrontation with Spain, for not only might it lead to a disruption of trade (as indeed occurred in 1564, 1569 and 1585) but also to an armed clash which an English army could scarcely hope to win. Thus, even after Elizabeth eventually entered into an alliance with States General of the Netherlands in the Treaties of Nonsuch 1585 and ordered Sir Francis Drake to attack Spanish shipping, she opened up discussions for peace with the prince of Parma, Philip II's viceroy in the Netherlands. To her mind, a war on behalf of international Protestantism contained too many risks and she still preferred to see a negotiated settlement with Spain that would protect English interests as well as the liberties of the Netherlands.

Elizabeth, moreover, was out of sympathy with those English Protestants who saw the on-going hostility between England and the Catholic powers in ideological terms and believed that she should take up the sword to advance the godly cause. She had no wish to act as Deborah, sending a force against the idolatrous Canaanites, nor as Judith who had slain Holofernes, both models pressed upon her by her more zealous subjects. Unlike them, she can not be found referring to Philip II as the agent of Antichrist or to Catherine de Medici as Jezebel. Furthermore, she had serious doubts about the resistance theories advanced by Protestants who took up arms against their lawful rulers. In the words of Cecil: 'Her Majesty being a Prince herself is doubtful to give comfort to subjects [in rebellion]'. Her attitude infuriated those of her advisers (most notably Leicester and Walsingham), who had established close links with refugee Protestant communities in England and Calvinist leaders abroad, and longed to see Elizabeth become the political and military leader of international Protestantism.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to conclude that Elizabeth had no sympathy for Protestants who were facing persecution from their Catholic rulers, and no desire to act as their protector. Wherever possible, she tried to use diplomatic

pressure on her fellow monarchs to persuade them to tolerate their religious minorities. She also allowed Protestant rebels unofficial help: English volunteers to go to the Netherlands; Calvinist leaders to be received at court; and her ports to be used as safe havens for Calvinist privateers. On some occasions, moreover, when conditions seemed right and her own interests were involved, she would agree to give them material aid. From the mid 1570s onwards her anxieties grew about the power and intentions of Philip II and the ultra-Catholic Guise party in France. As a result she agreed to act as banker for the Protestant cause on the Continent; in 1575 she planned to provide financial assistance to the anti-Guise coalition which had taken up arms against Henry III and his Guise allies; a little later, she negotiated loans with John Casimir of the Palatinate (1577) and Francis of Anjou (1579 and 1581) to help finance their military expeditions against the Spanish troops in the Netherlands; and after 1585 she gave regular loans to the Huguenot leader, Henry of Navarre. The sums she forwarded were normally far less than those requested by the recipients and those recommended by some members of her Council, but she was determined not to waste money on unsuccessful foreign enterprises. Although her caution has been criticised by contemporaries and historians alike, it was not unreasonable, for her resources were limited while her allies abroad were consistently unreliable.

### War Leader

Even after 1585 when embroiled in a war against Philip II, Elizabeth failed to live up to the image in the Armada Portrait. Her war aims, though realistic, were limited. She was fighting to preserve her throne, the security of her realm, the continuation of the Protestant Church in England and (eventually) the independence of the United Provinces, but she had no intention of overthrowing Spanish power or establishing English colonies to rival the Spanish Empire. Consequently the military strategies that she favoured were usually small-scale and unambitious in scope. Her sea dogs concentrated on seizing Spanish treasure and were discouraged from establishing colonies in the Americas: Roanoke was abandoned when Elizabeth forbade the departure of any ships from England during the Armada scare; and in the late 1590s Sir Walter Raleigh could not persuade the queen to support an expedition to plant a colony in Guiana. Although many Elizabethans showed a strong interest in overseas explorations and shared a vision of England's destiny as an imperial power, no colonies were in fact founded during the reign of the queen.

In many ways Elizabeth was a poor war leader. Like Winston Churchill she was good at the martial rhetoric; the printed version of her speech to her troops at Tilbury in 1588 and her addresses to her parliaments, when requesting money, were inspired and inspirational. Policy-making, however, came less easily to her. She often seemed at a loss when faced with conflicting opinions about military strategy, and had few ideas of her own. Even in relation to domestic policy the war years were a time when Elizabeth often lacked energy and judgement. After deaths had depleted her nobility and Privy Council, she failed to fill the vacancies with new creations or appointments; this not only allowed her government to take on the appearance of a narrow clique but also created an intense competition for the relatively few rewards and promotions on offer. Much needed reform of the taxation system was not forthcoming, and venality pervaded the whole

administrative structure. She should have secured the retirement of Burghley from the office of Lord Treasurer, but her loyalty to her old servant and dislike of change precluded such drastic action. The queen's affection for the young earl of Essex was another source of weakness; she tolerated too long his disrespect towards her person and disobedience to her orders, and she paid the price in the factional politics of the late 1590s and the rebellion of Essex and his followers in 1601.

By the end of the reign, the image of Elizabeth as presented in poetry, portraits and pageantry was wearing thin. At court, even the dim lighting could not hide Elizabeth's age while the Essex Rebellion exposed the narrow base of her rule and her failing powers as a manager of men. In the country the burdens of war during a period of renewed demographic crisis were provoking seditious words against the queen. Other symptoms of social dislocation also give the lie to the cohesiveness and unity of Gloriana's England. Not surprisingly, therefore, Elizabeth's death was greeted with relief rather than grief.

Clearly then, Elizabeth's political aims and style of government were more complex than her image-makers and admirers have admitted. In addition, her popularity and solidarity with her subjects can no longer be taken for granted, especially during the last decade of the reign. Nonetheless, her achievements as a ruler should not be underestimated. Despite enormous difficulties and several major crises, she survived as monarch with her Protestant religious settlement intact, while her realm was preserved from successful invasion and the civil wars, which afflicted her neighbours, Scotland, France and the Netherlands. Fifteen years of warfare created stresses certainly, but not the financial collapse or large-scale political unrest which often came in the wake of war. This stability and security owed much to Elizabeth's firm but flexible leadership, and her conservative and relatively cautious policies. What more could be expected of a sixteenth-century ruler?

### Further Reading

Christopher Haigh, *Elizabeth I* (Longman, 1988) provides a very readable revisionist interpretation of the queen, while Wallace MacCaffrey, *Elizabeth I* (Edward Arnold, 1995) makes accessible to students and general readers the detailed research contained in his three volume narrative on Elizabethan political history. Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* focuses on the issues of marriage, succession and foreign policy. John Guy (ed.), *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade* (CUP, 1995) contains some invaluable articles on the period 1585 to 1603.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> e.g. J. E. Neale, 'England's Elizabeth' in *The Age of Catherine de Medici and Essays in Elizabethan History* (1963), pp.199-218; Roy Strong, *The Story of Britain* (1996), pp.191, 204

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Haigh, *Elizabeth I*, (1988).

**Susan Doran** is Reader in History at St Mary's University College, a college of the University of Surrey. Her publications include *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (Routledge, 1996), *Elizabeth I and Religion* (Lancaster Pamphlet, 1993) and a revised edition of *England and Europe 1485-1603* (Longman, 1996). She has also written with Christopher Durston: *Princes, Pastors and People: The Church and Religion 1529-1689* (Routledge, 1991).