Short feature

THE SPANISH ARMADA OF ... 1597?

Graham Darby *gives an anniversary account of the later Spanish Armadas, long forgotten, but comparable in size and as threatening to contemporaries as the more famous Armada of 1588*

As every schoolboy and schoolgirl should know, the Spanish Armada set sail in 1588: 'God blew and they were scattered.' However, what they are less likely to know is that this famous victory (more meteorological than military, if the inscription on the Dutch commemorative medal shown below is to be believed) came at the beginning of a very long war, a war that lasted nearly 20 years. Admittedly much of the conflict was intermittent, but the period that saw the most activity came late, during the years 1595 to 1602, though few books make much reference to this fact. Apart from Essex's raid on Cadiz in 1596, accounts usually jump forward to the Treaty of London in 1604, the war's end. It is generally implied that with the defeat of the armada, the Spanish threat was removed – but this was not the case. For contemporaries the war increased in intensity from the mid-1590s and the possibility of Spanish invasion became more rather than less likely, as Irish rebellion and the question of the succession rekindled Philip II's interest.

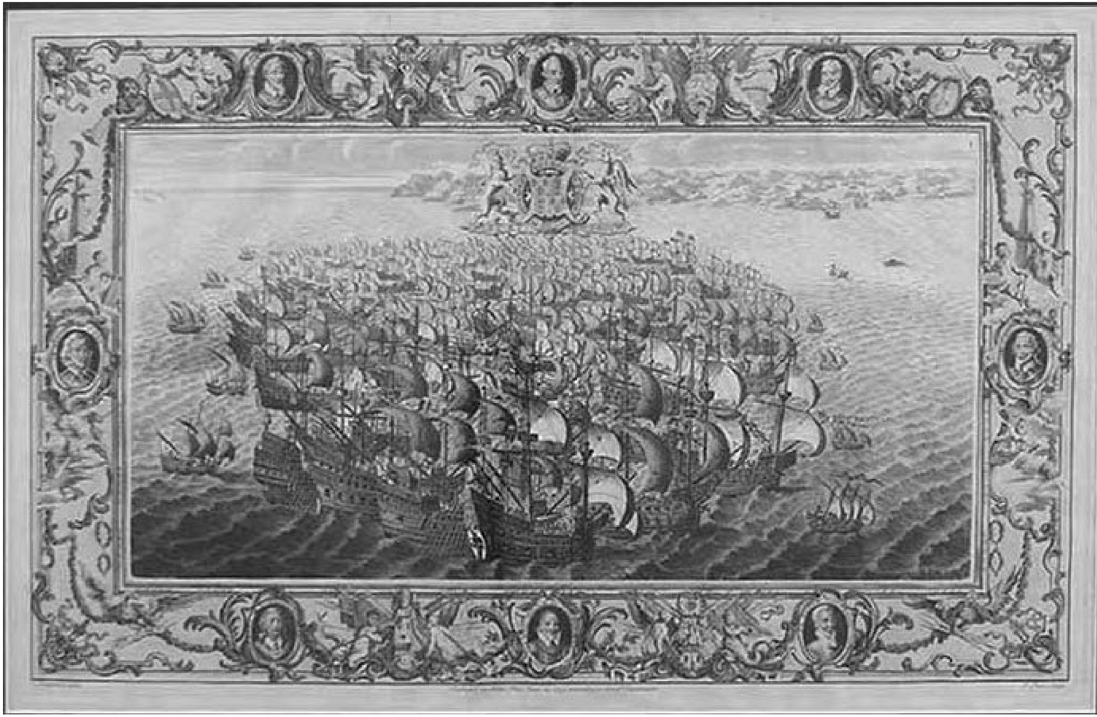
In 1595 the Spanish made a landing in Cornwall and in 1596 and 1597 armadas comparable to that of 1588 set sail, while another in 1599 caused considerable panic even though it was not headed this way! A landing was made in Ireland in 1601 in conjunction with the Infanta Isabella's claim to the English throne and a further campaign against England was only abandoned after the smooth transition from Tudor to Stuart in 1603 rendered the operation pointless.

The failure of the armada in 1588 was a setback for Philip II but not an overwhelming defeat, and he immediately determined on sending another in 1589. Anticipating this, Queen Elizabeth took the offensive, but Sir Francis Drake's expedition to Lisbon was a dismal failure and by the end of 1589 honours were even. Surprisingly, the war did not escalate – in fact quite the reverse occurred. The reason for this was the assassination of King Henry III of France in August 1589. He was succeeded by the Huguenot Henry IV and the prospect of a Protestant France filled Philip II with such alarm that the wars with England and his Dutch rebels were soon relegated to the status of sideshows as intervention in France became the priority.

In the following year Philip established a naval base at Blavet (now Port Louis) in southern Brittany and put forward his daughter Isabella Clara Eugenia as the rightful heir to the kingdom. However, the French were not fighting each other for Spain's benefit, and once Henry IV had converted to Catholicism in 1593, Catholic opposition to the new king (and the Spanish position) rapidly evaporated. It is in this context (together with signs of rebellion in Ireland and renewed interest in the English succession) that the war between Spain and England was rekindled.

Failure in France had rendered the base at Blavet somewhat inactive but it appears that Diego Brochero de Anaya, the Spanish commander, persuaded Philip II that a raid on the English coast would put the galleys to good use and be good for Spanish prestige. Accordingly, on 23 July 1595, four galleys with about 400 soldiers found themselves off Mounts Bay in Cornwall, where they landed and burnt Mousehole, Paul Church, Newlyn and Penzance. This was the only time in the war that Spanish soldiers landed on English soil (in an offensive capacity). Although the raid was small-scale, there were rumours that 50 to 60 additional Spanish vessels were in the Channel; it was only when this was found to be untrue that Elizabeth's government could afford to play the incident down. The raid was over in three days but it was of some significance for the future. From the Spanish point of view it was designed to act as a signal to the supposedly many secret Catholics in England that salvation was at hand. The Spanish held mass at St Mary's Church and vowed to return and found a friary and hold another mass 'when England was Catholic again in two years time'. The raid may also have been designed to forestall Elizabeth's going on the offensive and it is certainly true that Drake and Hawkins' last ill-fated voyage was delayed because of it. From the English point of view, Elizabeth's government believed the landing heralded a new Spanish offensive, and it became convinced that in the following year there would be an invasion armada 'far greater than in the year 88', as Thomas Lake, a clerk of the Signet, put it.

Philip II did plan an armada for 1596 but, unbeknown to Elizabeth, its destination was to be Ireland, to link up with the rebels there. The Earl of Essex's raid on Cadiz in the summer of 1596 was designed to thwart this armada, but in fact it made it much more likely; for one thing the bulk of Philip's ships were not in Cadiz, but in Lisbon; and for another, it galvanised Philip into action so that he might be



Left, engraving by Pine from an original by Lemprière, showing the Armada off the Lizard on 19 July 1588. The famous victory of 1588 came at the beginning of an intermittent conflict lasting nearly 20 years

Below left, Dutch commemorative medal of the 1588 victory, with inscription: 'God blew and they were scattered'

National Maritime Museum, Greenwich

avenged. However, the armada was rather belatedly put together during August and September and sailed very late in the year. As soon as Elizabeth's government got wind of these preparations troops were ordered from Hampshire and Wiltshire to the Isle of Wight (a possible landing ground), all southern ports were to have their 'fireworks' ready, and eight maritime counties together with ten adjacent ones as well as London were to raise a total of 41,000 men for defence. Special arrangements were also made to defend Plymouth, the Thames and the Medway. But ironically, by the time these arrangements were complete at the end of November, news came that the Spanish fleet had been scattered by a storm. In fact the fleet had been dispersed over a month before and this vividly illustrates the problem of communications and intelligence in early modern Europe; in maritime matters no one really knew where anyone else was. In fact the armada had failed ten days before news arrived that it had sailed! A force of 98 ships and 16,000 men (a little smaller than 1588's 130 ships and 19,000 men) had set sail from Lisbon under the command of Don Martin de Padilla, the Adelantado of Castile, on 13 October, but had encountered a ferocious storm off Cape Finisterre five days later and had been scattered far and wide. Remarkably, over two thirds of the vessels survived the storm and returned to port, thus providing the nucleus of a fleet for the following year.

We can be very clear about the purpose of the 1597 armada, because not only were the English able to capture instructions from vessels that were driven onto our shores, but also because Philip II actually prepared (but did not issue) an invasion proclamation in English, something he did not do in 1588 – in fact, this was the only time he did so during the entire war. The absence of any clear proclamation in 1588 has of course been a tremendous boon to historians who have been able to argue endlessly about Philip's precise purpose. However, Geoffrey Parker made it clear in *History Today* in 1988 (May, pp. 26-33) that Philip had a number of acceptable outcomes. Clearly a successful full-scale invasion, the capture of Elizabeth and the establishment of a Catholic government would have been ideal, but toleration for Catholics and the abandonment of English aid to the Dutch rebels would also have been acceptable. As it happens all the armada did achieve was a display of Spanish might – but this too was an important element in Spanish thinking. As Lord Howard said: 'I do warrant you all the world never saw such a force as theirs was.'

1597 saw a comparable armada – 136 ships and 12,000 men – but initially with more modest aims. The objective was to capture Falmouth in Cornwall, establish a base, march on Plymouth and foment a general rising. However, the entire Spanish strategy was largely based on a misapprehension – that England was full of secret Catholics yearning to be free. For Philip the invasion was to be a liberation. As his proclamation put it, he was 'moved by the universal outcry of the oppressed Catholics of these nations'. A Spanish report of 1604 estimated that fully one third of the English were Catholic at this time, but Spanish perception was often derived from Catholics in exile – mainly English Jesuits – rather than from contact with Catholics in England. It is of course extremely difficult to determine the extent of Catholicism in England in the late 16th century, but there is no doubt that Catholics were a sizeable minority, perhaps as many as one million, a quarter of the population. However, whether or not their level of dissatisfaction extended to supporting a foreign invasion is a matter of conjecture; it seems rather unlikely.

England was special to Philip because it had been 'his', albeit briefly, during his marriage to Mary Tudor (1553-8), and all along he felt that given a change of government and a change of religion, England could be brought back into the fold and 'the ancient confederation between the crowns of Castile and England' would be restored. Hence the conciliatory tone of his proclamation. Philip was at pains to emphasise 'the innocence of the greater part of the subjects of the said kingdoms' who had been oppressed by 'the malice of some few persons ... in the government'; he promised

favours to those who joined his enterprise, and he even gave opponents the opportunity to be neutral and come over later. Private property was to be preserved, the invading army was to be well-behaved and no harm was to come to the Queen. On the matter of the succession there was to be no prescription; parliament and 'persons who have legitimate authority' (including in all probability a captured Elizabeth) would choose 'the most suitable successor for-the preservation of the Catholic religion'. Of course it required little imagination to guess who that might be, but Philip was concerned not to foist Isabella on the English without some semblance of legality. He was, however, concerned to create a Catholic England; the 'brutal and cruel yoke' was to be lifted from Catholics' shoulders; government officials and magistrates 'who are considered heretics' were to be replaced and ancient noble families were to be 'restored ... to their former state and grandeur which they once enjoyed before heresy might have marred and ruined them'. It is hard to see how this could be reconciled with the preservation of all private property but clearly Philip had to offer both rewards and reassurance to Catholics and Protestants alike – an impossible task.

Once again in anticipation of a Spanish offensive, Elizabeth had sent the Earl of Essex out to seek and destroy, but adverse winds, reports from prisoners that there would be no armada that year, and just a slight interest in the silver fleet, convinced Essex that a raid on the Azores would be more profitable. Essex finally set sail on 17 August 1597 and was in the Azores by September, where, unfortunately, he was unsuccessful. Here was Philip's opportunity and to his invasion plans was now added the order to station ships between Falmouth and the Scilly Isles to pick off Essex's fleet as it returned.

The Adelantado first attempted to set sail on 9 September, but adverse winds kept him bottled up in port for over a month. He finally set sail from Ferrol, 400 years ago this October, on the 9th, rather reluctantly and rather late in the season – but Philip was adamant that he should do so. At first the fleet made good progress propelled by a gentle breeze. Indeed by 12 October the armada was reckoned to be only 30 miles off the Lizard, but by midnight a violent gale was blowing, which grew worse. For three days the armada battled against the wind until it became so scattered that the Adelantado only had a couple of dozen ships in sight. At this point he took the decision to return to Spain and by the 20th he was back in harbour. Losses were comparatively light as 108 out of 136 of the vessels eventually returned to port. Several ended up on the Cornish and Welsh coasts (as far north as Aberdovey) including the 40 ton carvel *Nuestra Señora Buenviage* at Milford Haven which yielded up the sailing instructions as did a bark at St Ives.

For a third time, then, 'God blew and they were scattered'; however, this armada had come perilously close to success. Unlike the previous year, Elizabeth's England was totally unprepared; the fleet was away and the land defences were almost entirely unmanned. Then on 26 October (11 days after the Spanish had turned back) news finally arrived of their presence off the Scilly Isles! The Privy Council immediately took steps to create a makeshift defence, but on this occasion the fate of the armada was soon discovered from the ships that were washed up on the shore. By the end of the month the panic was over, but it had been a close-run thing and Sir William Monson wrote that 'the Spaniards never had so dangerous an enterprise on us'.

1597 was not the end of the story, though 1598 was largely a year of negotiation. The dying Philip II struck a deal with France at the Treaty of Vervins, recognising Henry IV, and settled the Spanish Netherlands on his daughter Isabella (and her husband-to-be, Archduke Albert). However, negotiations between England and Spain did not really get off the ground, and when Philip III came to the throne in September 1598, he was determined to prosecute the war against the Dutch and the English with renewed vigour and determination. By the end of July 1599, the Adelantado had gathered a large armada together, but it was decided to use it defensively, to seek out a Dutch fleet in the Azores and escort the silver fleet home. In the event it failed to do either but it did have a dramatic effect on England. From mid-July to mid-August rumours abounded that the armada was not only on its way, but that it had landed, in Southampton or on the Isle of Wight. Preparations were made to gather an army of 25,000 around London; 10,000 more were to gather in Kent; 2,000 men were recalled from Holland; every ship was put into commission; a bridge of boats across the Thames was proposed and at one point even the gates of London were shut. It is a considerable irony that such preparations should have been made for this 'Invisible Armada' as it became known, and none for the very real threat of 1597.

At the beginning of 1601 Philip III formally declared his half-sister, Isabella Clara Eugenia, to be the rightful heir to the throne of England and later in the year he sent an expedition to Ireland in support of this claim and to assist the rebels there. This fleet actually achieved a successful landing but was a rather modest affair and turned out to be very much a case of 'too little too late'. The rebels were all but defeated and the landing force of 33 ships and 4,500 men was very small compared with the previous armadas, and insufficient to achieve success. The Spanish were forced to surrender at Kinsale in 1602, but peace did not finally come until 1604, after Elizabeth Tudor had been followed by James Stuart in an untroubled succession. How different it all might have been had it not been for the storms of October 1597, 400 years ago! We often complain about the weather in this country but our ancestors in this war had some reason to be grateful for it.

Further reading

These later years of warfare have been given detailed treatment by R. B. Wernham in *The Return of the Armadas* (Clarendon Press, 1994) though this is entirely from the English perspective and does not do justice to the landing in Cornwall. There is nothing comparable from the Spanish perspective though A. J. Loomie did publish 'Philip II's Armada Proclamation of 1597' in *Recusant History XII* (1974) pp. 216-226; and *Kinsale* by J.J. Silke (Liverpool, 1970) is a very thorough treatment of the later years. Still useful is E. P. Cheyney's *A History of England 1588-1603* (Longman, vol I, 1914 and vol II, 1926), if it can be found!

Graham Darby is Head of History at King Edward VI School, Southampton and a committee member of the Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole branch of the Historical Association. He is the author of *Spain in the Seventeenth Century* in the Longman Seminar Studies Series (1994).