# ELIZABETH I AND THE EXPANSION OF ENGLAND

A Conference held at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, 4–6 September 2003

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# INTRODUCTION

## By Simon Adams

The four hundredth anniversary of the death of Elizabeth I and the accession of James I inspired a number of conferences, the majority seemingly devoted to the new Stuart Britain. The last queen of England received her commemoration in the exhibition *Elizabeth* held at the National Maritime Museum from May to September 2003.[1] The Museum and the Royal Historical Society also agreed to sponsor a conference to accompany the exhibition. Nigel Rigby, head of research, and Robert Blyth, curator of imperial and maritime history, organised both the mounting of the conference and the subsequent editing of the papers with the consummate professionalism that has become the National Maritime Museum's hallmark.

Fairly early on in the preparations it was agreed that the conference should close the exhibition, although an unfortunate previous booking on 7 September prevented the conference itself from concluding on Elizabeth's birthday. Given the location, a maritime emphasis was irresistible, and the title 'Expansion of England' was then shamelessly plundered from the second volume of A. L. Rowse's portrait of the Elizabethan Age. A more immediate text was Richard Hakluyt's proud if not bombastic claim in the dedication to the first edition of *The Principal Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation* that 'in this famous and peerless government of her most excellent majesty, her subjects . . . in searching the most opposite corners and quarters of the world . . . have excelled all the nations and peoples of the earth'.

The range of possible subjects encouraged the exploitation of a wide variety of scholarly expertise, the panel of speakers being selected jointly by the National Maritime Museum and the Royal Historical Society. To avoid yet another explosion of the myth of Elizabeth I, the conference was given a deliberately neutral stance with contributors encouraged to take whatever positions they chose.[2] David Starkey, guest curator of the exhibition, provided the opening address. As the conference proceeded it

[1] See the catalogue, *Elizabeth: The Exhibition at the National Maritime Museum*, ed. Susan Doran (2003).

[2] The 'Myth' was the subject of a conference held at St Mary's College, Strawberry Hill, in July 2002; see *The Myth of Elizabeth*, ed. Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman (Basingstoke, 2003).



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became clear that despite its formal structure it was implicitly addressing two broad questions, and these in turn have shaped the present order of the papers. The first was how England's place in the world changed during the second half of the sixteenth century. The second was would this have occurred whoever had been on the throne?

The reality of the myth of an heroic age of maritime endeavour forms an initial sub-theme of its own. If the supreme artistic celebration of the Elizabethan Navy – the Armada Tapestries – was destroyed with the Old Palace of Westminster, the tapestries themselves are commemorated *in situ* in the House of Lords in John Singleton Copley's *Death of the Earl of Chatham*. Moreover, as Karen Hearn shows in her detailed study of a fanciful painting of the defeat of the Armada, the tapestries were merely the grandest of numerous depictions of the Armada battles privately commissioned in subsequent decades. Charles Knighton and Nicholas Rodger explore the naval heritage further. The scale of naval operations after 1660 effectively made the Elizabethans irrelevant as direct examples, yet men as knowledgeable as Samuel Pepys were still very conscious of living in their shadow. The heroic image of the Elizabethan Navy was further politicised by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debates over naval policy. Haunting the gentlemen versus tarpaulins debate was the ghost of Drake, implicitly or explicitly the greatest of the tarpaulins.

But the myth rested on solid foundations, as two surveys of the technical aspects of maritime expansion reveal. The assessments of the growth of English navigational skills and map-making by Susan Rose and Peter Barber are clear evidence of the advances of 1603 on 1558. No less important was the contemporary interest in travel literature, which, William Sherman argues, reveals a Hakluyt appealing to an audience already in existence. Among the voyages Hakluyt celebrated (albeit in his second edition) was William Harborne's establishing of direct commercial contact with Constantinople in the 1580s. The late Susan Skilliter published much of the related correspondence between Elizabeth and the sultan Murad III, which is here reprised by Lisa Jardine. The Turkey trade also had its nuts and bolts aspect. The principal attraction of England to Murad III, like Ivan the Terrible and the sharif of Morocco, Mulay Ahmed, was ordnance, of which Elizabethan England was the chief manufacturer in Europe.[3]

If the reality of Elizabethan naval power – the best ships and guns in Europe – shaped the international perception of England, there was also an intellectual shift. Despite the perennial argument about England's peripheral place in Europe, Charles Giry-Deloison and Peter Lake reveal how the events of Elizabeth's reign were also European. If it is no surprise

[3] See Simon Adams, 'Britain, Europe and the World', in *The Shorter Oxford History of the British Isles: The Sixteenth Century 1485–1603*, ed. Patrick Collinson (Oxford, 2002), 205–7.

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to find from Giry-Deloison's detailed survey of contemporary French printed literature on England that the fate of the Queen of Scots took centre stage, the volume of publications is still revealing. Much may have been propaganda, either public relations exercises by the Elizabethan government or the Catholic *ligue* retailing horror stories of the cruelties suffered by English Catholics, but the very existence of these propaganda campaigns was itself significant. Even that most apparently introverted subject, the English succession, had its wider resonance. As Peter Lake shows, the Stuart claim of indefeasible right to the English throne, whether argued by Mary or James VI, had an immediate impact in France, where the contemporary succession debate raised similar issues. If James VI's *True Lawe of Free Monarchies* has traditionally been seen as a rebuttal to George Buchanan, it was no less a response to Robert Persons's succession tracts. Fundamental to the wider defence of absolute monarchy was the freeing of the succession from regulation by an external power.

But did Elizabeth I herself matter? One important sub-theme illustrated by Maurice Howard as well as by Barber and Hearn is the lack of interest of this profoundly literary woman in the visual arts and her diffidence about her own image.[4] In the absence of active royal patronage – as found under Henry VIII or Charles I – propagation of the regime's image rested effectively in private hands. Yet at the same time it is one of the paradoxes of Elizabeth that she surrounded herself with men who were fascinated by the visual arts, as well as maps and geography. It was, after all, Sir Francis Walsingham to whom Hakluyt dedicated *The Principal Navigations* in 1589, not the queen.

On this level there are strong reasons for denying Elizabeth any personal role in an expansion of England in her reign. Indeed, David Armitage disputes whether the Elizabethans had any concept of empire at all. This was certainly true of her attitude towards the other inhabitants of the British Isles. Roger Mason argues that Elizabeth was almost completely unresponsive to the concept of Britain, which, with a few exceptions, caught Scottish imaginations rather than English. In a persuasive survey of contemporary Irish historical writing Hiram Morgan argues that Elizabeth failed decisively to rise to the challenge of being queen of Ireland. All three effectively give the Stuarts the credit – negative or positive – for the founding of a British Empire.

The argument that Elizabeth can claim no credit for the achievements of her reign was first popularised by J. A. Froude and has been sustained more recently by Wallace MacCaffrey and Christopher Haigh. But Elizabeth also made a virtue of her lack of ambition for territorial

[4] An exception can be made for the portrait miniature, of which Elizabeth was at least a collector.

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expansion, as the editor argues in his account of her response to the two separate offers of sovereignty from the Netherlands. The reign opened and closed with the surrenders of foreign garrisons in Britain, the French at Leith in 1560 and the Spanish at Kinsale in 1602. In both cases the garrisons were supplied with passage back to their homelands. These were civilised gestures in which Elizabeth took great pride and were, whatever had occurred in the interval, how she wished to be remembered. Hakluyt's 'peerless government' thus unites myth and reality. The later sixteenth century saw the battle between the ancients and the moderns begin in earnest. By 1603 there was a wide perception that great personages of the age were the equals of those of the classical world, and in the case of Drake, for example, actually surpassed them. In the eyes of both domestic and international opinion, Elizabeth's place in that pantheon was assured.[5] Which brings us back full circle to the Apothecaries' Armada painting.

[5] For an excellent example of both the wider contemporary comparison between ancient and modern and Elizabeth's place in it, see the memoirs of Michel de Castelnau, sieur de Mauvissière, the French ambassador in England 1575–85, most conveniently published in *Collection complète des mémoires relatifs à l'histoire de France*, ed. C. B. Petitot, XXIII (Paris, 1823).

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