**The Chief Business: the Spanish Armada, 1588**

**By Patrick Williams | Published in History Review 2009**

**Patrick Williams provides us with the results of the latest research on the Armada**

In May 1588, Philip II of Spain sent his ‘Invincible Armada’ to overthrow Elizabeth I, the lawful queen of England. In despatching his great fleet, Philip broke not only with his own reputation as ‘the Prudent King’ but also with the long tradition of friendship between Spain and England – friendship which had been sealed with marriage on three occasions: Catherine of Aragon had married Arthur, Prince of Wales (1501) and Henry VIII (1509), while Philip himself had married Mary I and served as her king consort (1554- 58). Indeed Philip II protected Elizabeth for a decade while she consolidated her hold on the throne and, although the two rulers came to despise each other, they seemed determined to avoid war at almost any cost. For both of them, war was prohibitively expensive – and dangerously unpredictable.

**Origins**

Why, then, did these two conservative monarchs break with each other? Most importantly, a major structural change in European politics facilitated the breach: the collapse of France into civil and religious wars after 1560 – ‘the French Wars of Religion’ – helped fracture the tacit alliance between England and Spain that was based upon their mutual fear of France. Religious hostility deepened the tensions, for in the 1560s Elizabeth established England as a leading Protestant power while Philip II came to be the very personification of the Catholic ‘Counter Reformation’.

Within that overall context, three issues lay at the core of the breakdown, and each began to come into focus around 1567-8, 20 years before the Armada sailed. In 1567 Philip established a powerful standing army (‘the Army of Flanders’) to crush rebellion in his patrimonial lands of the Low Countries. The presence of this army across the Straits of Dover helped destabilise relations with England, for Elizabeth inevitably feared that it might be used against her. Secondly, Spain refused to allow the English access to the fabulously rich colonies in the Caribbean (and in 1568 ambushed John Hawkins and Francis Drake when they attempted to do so). Thirdly, the arrival in England in 1568 of Mary Stuart, deposed queen of Scotland, created a dual focal point for opponents of Elizabeth, since Mary had a claim on the English throne and was a Roman Catholic. In 1570 Pope Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth and freed Catholic subjects from their loyalty to her. Mary took full advantage and – even while under house arrest – encouraged one assassination attempt after another against Elizabeth, unaware that the government knew virtually every detail of her intrigues.

Philip II was among those who saw usefulness in the turbulent Queen of Scots. As relations with England deteriorated, he toyed in 1569 with the idea of invading England from the Low Countries to put Mary on the throne but he had too many commitments elsewhere to follow through on the plan. In 1571 he supported a conspiracy to assassinate Elizabeth (the ‘Ridolfi Plot’); his relationship with Elizabeth never recovered. In 1574 and 1575 Philip prepared large fleets in his northern ports, ostensibly to reinforce the Army of Flanders but almost certainly to invade England. Again, nothing materialised: the first fleet was aborted when its commander died and the second was shattered by a storm off Ushant. While Philip was not ready for all-out war with England, in the years 1569-75 he was tempted by the prospect of invading the country in a sudden, surprise, operation. But always, at this time, he had other more urgent priorities.

Elizabeth looked to her navy for defence. She followed the advice of John Hawkins, who had insisted after 1568 that England needed warships that could sail long distances at speed but which could also manoeuvre quickly to bring their guns to bear on the enemy; production of the new ships (and their guns) began in the early 1570s. Their value against Spanish galleons was demonstrated by Francis Drake, when on his circumnavigation of the globe (1577-80) he sacked Valparaiso and captured an enormous Spanish treasure ship off Peru. These episodes in the Pacific did not count as acts of war because they were private ventures and took place ‘beyond the line’, but when Elizabeth knighted Drake in April 1580 (and gratefully accepted some of his Spanish treasure) she signalled that she had effectively broken the peace with Spain. But still she was not ready for war.

**Preparations**

In 1580, Spanish power expanded substantially with the conquest of Portugal (and its empire). In 1583, Philip rounded out this triumph by having Álvaro de Bazán, I Marquis of Santa Cruz, capture the Portuguese islands of the Azores. Exultant, on 9 August 1583, Santa Cruz urged Philip to use the conquest of the Azores as a template for the invasion of England and – knowing his king – assured Philip that such an invasion would also surely end the rebellion in the Low Countries. Philip grasped enthusiastically at the strategy; he appointed Santa Cruz as ‘Captain General of the Atlantic Sea’. Happily, the conquest of Portugal also provided Philip with 12 great galleons; they would be used against England.

As Philip’s chief admiral enticed him with the prospect of conquering England, his leading general drove all before him in the Low Countries. Alexander Farnese, nephew to the king (and Prince of Parma from 1586), took Dunkirk and Nieupoort in 1583 and Brussels, Bruges and Ghent in 1584. When on 10 July 1584 William of Orange, the leader of the rebellion, was assassinated, the Dutch cause seemed doomed, and Elizabeth acknowledged that she would have to intervene. Exactly as Parma achieved his most brilliant triumph in capturing Antwerp (17 August), Elizabeth formally agreed to send an expeditionary force to aid the Dutch (‘Treaty of Nonsuch’, 20 August). She also loosed Drake, and when at the turn of 1585-86 the Earl of Leicester – personal favourite of the Queen – led 5,000 men into the Low Countries and Drake savaged Philip’s territories in Spain and the Caribbean, Elizabeth had unambiguously crossed the line dividing peace from war.

Philip crossed that line four months later. Enraged by the assaults on his territories, on 29th December he informed Parma that he had decided to proceed to ‘the chief business’ – the invasion of England. On 26th January 1586 Philip ordered Santa Cruz to establish ‘a good fleet’ in Lisbon for action by the early summer. Although it proved impossible to send the expedition in 1586 – Parma did not send Philip his detailed plans until April – the die was cast.

Philip found enthusiastic support from Pope Sixtus V (elected, 28 April 1585), who proclaimed a crusade against England and agreed to deposit one million ducats against the day when the Armada landed in England. A major obstacle to ‘the chief business’ was removed when Mary Stuart finally – and inevitably – went to the block on 18 February 1587; her incitement of ‘the Babington Plot’ to murder Elizabeth was a treachery too far for her royal cousin. Mary’s death relieved Philip of the fear that his fleet would remove Elizabeth only to put the pro-French Mary Stuart on the throne.

Drake forced a further delay when he famously ‘singed the King of Spain’s beard’ (as he put it) by destroying 20 large vessels and many of the provisions of the Armada in Cadiz, Sagres and Lisbon (April-May 1587). However, the most damaging blow that Drake inflicted on the Armada came about almost by accident, for when Santa Cruz learned that Drake had sailed off to the Azores to seize the treasure fleet he felt obliged to use some Armada galleons to protect the treasure fleet and ferry it home safely. He was away for ten weeks and when he returned to Lisbon (28 September), his warships were badly in need of repair and reprovisioning – and his instructions for the invasion of England were waiting for him.

Santa Cruz was dismayed to find that Philip had subordinated his plan to Parma’s: he was to sail from Lisbon and transport Parma and his 27,000 troops across to Kent. Parma would then march on London and impose a settlement on Elizabeth, executing the Queen if need arose, while the Armada protected his flank. Philip neglected to say how Parma’s men were to join the Armada without the facilities of a deep-water port. Santa Cruz was enraged to find that rather than controlling the invasion he was merely to serve as Parma’s troopcarrier. He seriously considered resigning, though his sense of duty would not allow him to do so.

And still the weather was against him: even as Santa Cruz repaired his fleet, a violent storm damaged 39 ships inside the harbour at Lisbon (16 November) and created further delay. When on 12 December Santa Cruz informed Philip that the fleet might be able to sail in a month, he was peremptorily ordered to go to sea without wasting an hour’s time. For Philip even to contemplate sending the Armada in midwinter was an absurdity, born of his humiliation at repeated failures to despatch the fleet. The unrelenting pressure killed the great admiral: Santa Cruz collapsed with exhaustion, and on 9 February 1588 he died.

Philip, too, was exhausted but he responded quickly to the crisis by appointing his leading nobleman to succeed Santa Cruz. The decision has been much criticised but was eminently practical: Alonso Pérez de Guzmán, VII duke of Medina Sidonia, was an experienced naval administrator and had the rank to ensure that all on board would obey him. Certainly he bitterly resented his appointment, but when on 1 April 1588 Philip issued him with his instructions for the Enterprise of England, he bowed to the royal will, as Santa Cruz had done before him. He could rely on the advice of a prodigiously experienced group of naval commanders – men such as Alonso Martínez de Leiva, Juan Martínez de Recalde, Miguel de Oquendo and Diego Flores de Valdés. He had, too, an ideal commander for his soldiers in Francisco de Bobadilla, a field general of legendary bravery (and ruthlessness). Meanwhile, Parma did his best to solve the problem of getting his men out to sea; he cut a canal from Antwerp to Bruges and built flat-bottomed boats to carry them. But he barely bothered to disguise his scepticism about ‘the Enterprise of England’, much less his resentment at having to abandon his campaigns in the Low Countries to be part of it.

Elizabeth’s advisers were also deeply divided. Drake and Hawkins urged the queen to destroy the Armada in Lisbon but her political advisers insisted that the fleet had to remain in home waters at a time of dire national peril: it was to these latter men that Elizabeth listened. Like Philip, Elizabeth chose a leading nobleman to control her fractious seadogs, naming Charles Howard, Lord of Effingham. Drake – who terrified his colleagues almost as much as he did the Spanish – was fobbed off with the position of vice-admiral. By 3 June, Howard and the main fleet were stationed at Plymouth while Lord Henry Seymour guarded the Straits.

On 9 May, Medina Sidonia mustered his men and sealed his fleet off in Lisbon harbour (not least so that no one could flee from it). But still it was not ready to sail for a further three weeks, and so its men continued to use up its provisions and to endure worsening sanitary conditions – three weeks, after all, was as long as most voyages lasted at this time. When on 30 May the Armada at last edged out to sea, it consisted of 141 ships and 26,961 men (7,666 seamen and 19,295 soldiers). Still, the weather would not relent, and Medina Sidonia decided to re-provision at Corunna. As the fleet entered the harbour (19 June) it was struck by a powerful storm that threw scores of ships into the Atlantic and Biscay. For Medina Sidonia, it was the last straw: he urged Philip to abandon the enterprise and negotiate an honourable settlement with Elizabeth. Outraged, Philip ordered him to sail on at once. On 21-22 July – ten weeks after the last men had gone on board – the Armada set to sea again. It consisted now of 127 ships – 20 galleons and four galleasses; 44 armed merchantmen, 38 auxiliaries and 21 supply ships.

**Victory and Defeat**

On 29 July at about 4.00 pm the Armada sighted England. *The Golden Hinde* carried the news of its arrival to Plymouth: the story that Drake refused to interrupt his game of bowls is – alas ! – almost certainly apocryphal. Some commanders urged Medina Sidonia to attack the English fleet in Plymouth Sound but he insisted on pressing ahead for the Straits. Unknown to him, in the late afternoon the English beat out of Plymouth against the prevailing wind and sailed around the Armada to take up position to the windward: Howard had seized a defining advantage. The Armada was now in a crescent formation to protect its fighting galleons in the centre but the formation had the disadvantages of preventing it from using the majority of its guns and of making it more likely that ships could collide with each other.

At 9.00 am on 31 July the English fired the first cannonade, subjecting the *San Juan de Portugal* to 300 or so rounds. At about 5.00 pm the *San Salvador* was disabled by an explosion and taken by the English. Shortly afterwards, Medina Sidonia reluctantly abandoned the *Nuestra Señora del Rosario*, which had been damaged in a collision. Drake sneaked up on her during the night and – to the disgust of Frobisher – claimed her as his prize. Possession of the two ships made it evident to the English that the men on the enemy fleet were enduring conditions of dreadful hardship and squalor; they must have been heartened by the knowledge.

On 2 August, Howard launched the first full assault, attacking Medina Sidonia’s own galleon, the *San Martín*, for ten hours. The engagement made it obvious to the English commanders that although they would not readily sink Spanish galleons they had little to fear from the long-range guns of the Armada: while the English discharged over 500 cannon balls, the *San Martín* fired only 80 shots, and all of them were from one side. Accordingly, Howard decided to conserve his ammunition for the decisive battle at the Straits. Certainly, there was heavy fighting off the Isle of Wight as the English ensured that the Spanish could not attempt a landing there, but otherwise the Armada was not attacked for three days after 3-4 August – but still, of course, it continued to use up its valuable (and rotting) provisions and water.

At about 4.00 pm on 6 August, the Armada moved into Calais Roads. Now, Medina Sidonia received the shattering news that Parma would not be able to join him for at least a week, even assuming he could escape the flotilla of Dutch ships barricading him in. Wracked with anxiety, in the late afternoon Medina Sidonia gave the fatal order to weigh anchor: he was 35 kilometres from Dunkirk.

Lord Seymour now joined Howard, and the combined English fleet – 160 or so strong – took up position facing the Armada. Still, Howard waited, until as the sun went down the Spanish were terrified to realise that eight fireships were being towed towards them. Believing that the fireships were packed with explosives and incendiaries, Medina Sidonia ordered his fleet to disperse and regroup after the danger had passed. In fact, the fireships were not laden with bombs and did hardly any damage, but their very appearance achieved what the redoubtable English commanders had been unable to do: they broke the formation of the Spanish fleet. As panic spread through the Armada, some captains even cut their anchors: their actions would have dreadful effect in the terrible hours and weeks to come.

At dawn on 8 August, the English moved in the wind and currents ran strongly in their favour. The onslaught was ferocious and unremitting. The ‘battle of Gravelines’ lasted for nine hours, and in essence it involved a score or so fighting galleons on each side. Much of the battle was fought at such close-quarters that sailors could hurl abuse at each other, though the English were careful not to allow the Spanish to come close enough to grapple and board. The wisdom of Howard’s decision to preserve his ammunition now became apparent. It has been calculated that the firepower of the Armada was at best only three-quarters that of the English. Certainly, the Spanish ships had less than one-third of the long-range guns that the English had (172:497) and only one-half of the heavy and medium guns (165:251). Worse still, the Spanish heavy guns could not be reloaded and fired quickly, and indeed, since many of the guns had been acquired from across Europe, the ships often did not have the correct cannonballs to use in them. The Battle of Gravelines was desperately uneven.

The *San Martín*, isolated with only four galleons to protect it, was struck by more than 200 cannon balls and lost about 40 men. But the Spanish rallied to their commander and fought with a courage that deeply impressed the English. Only one ship was sunk in battle but others were captured or ran aground; galleys would have been useful in these dreadful hours to tow ships to safety. It has been calculated that, of the 2,636 men who were lost from the Armada in battle, probably 1,000 died (and a further 800 were wounded) at Gravelines.

On 9 August, as Medina Sidonia consulted his commanders as to whether he could fight his way back into the Channel, fierce winds – ‘Protestant winds’ – forced the Armada into the North Sea. The duke decided that he had to head home around the British Isles: the men who had survived the hardships of the voyage and the battle of Gravelines still had their worst ordeal ahead of them. The English pursued the Armada for two days but turned away as it neared Scotland; Seymour stayed on guard at the Straits to prevent Parma attempting to invade while Howard devoted himself to helping his wounded sailors, hundreds of whom were dying in the streets of Margate.

As the Armada struggled northwards, ships began to fall away. A last muster was held on 19-21 August – 112 ships were counted – but now it was every ship for itself. For a month the Armada was hammered by gales as it headed round Scotland and Ireland. Now it suffered its greatest losses: at least 13 major ships were among the 28 that were lost and 6,554 men died, many of them slaughtered after they had struggled ashore.

Of the 127 ships that had left Corunna in July, 92 returned home but only half of these were fit to be used again. A total of 13,399 men reached Spain – 3,834 sailors and 9,565 soldiers – but even then hundreds died before they could be taken ashore.

**Aftermath**

The Armada had failed. Philip absolved Medina Sidonia of culpability for the disaster, accepting – like Elizabeth! – that God’s winds had blown against his fleet. Instinctively, the king recognised that he would have to send another armada against England to re-establish his prestige and he committed himself to a massive shipbuilding programme. But – dramatically and unpredictably – he then rescheduled all his priorities in foreign affairs when the assassination of Henry III (1 August 1589) made Henry of Navarre heir to the French throne. The second Armada would not sail until 1596. Twice, in 1590 and 1592, Philip diverted Parma into France to thwart Navarre, but to no avail: Henry reconverted to Catholicism in 1593 and in 1594 was crowned as Henry IV. In January 1595 he declared war on Spain.

Triumphant though Elizabeth was – it has been remarked that there now began ‘the years of Gloriana’ – she was deeply anxious that the Armada veterans might be promptly repaired and sent against her, and so in 1589 she equipped Drake with 180 ships and 23,000 men to destroy the surviving ships in Santander. Once again, Drake ignored orders and indulged in some old-fashioned pillaging before again setting off – in vain – to catch the treasure fleet at the Azores. So irresponsible was he that he lost the staggering number of 11,000 men to illness and disease: it was a greater loss than the Armada had suffered – and the surviving Armada galleons were undamaged. Lord Howard was more successful; in 1596 he destroyed 30 galleons that were being laden in Cadiz for the Indies, but when Elizabeth learned how much plunder had been lost she was indignant with her commander.

For Philip II, the sacking of his greatest seaport was the worst humiliation of his reign, more damaging to his reputation than even the defeat of the Armada. He knew that he had to respond with a new armada against England. Again, he mismanaged the campaign, forcing his commander – the *Adelantado* of Castile – to sail late in the season and with a fleet that he knew to be under-prepared: the *Adelantado* sailed from Ferrol on 16 October 1596 with 98 ships and 15,000 men but the fleet was duly dispersed by a storm off Finisterre. In 1597 Philip again forced the *Adelantado* to sail late in the year (18 October) with 136 ships – a fleet larger than that of 1588 – and 12,634 men. This time, he reached the Western Approaches before a storm obliged him to return home. For the third time, a Spanish Armada had been defeated by Protestant winds. Now it was evident to all Europe that if Spanish power had not been broken, it had certainly been fractured and diminished by its failures against England.

Philip II died on 13 September 1598. Philip III sent a fourth armada, but although it landed men in Ireland they were easily defeated. The era of the armadas came thereby to an end. Elizabeth I died on 24 March 1603 and Philip III and James I brought hostilities to an end (Treaty of London, 18 May 1604). Anglo-Spanish relations moved tentatively back towards their traditional friendship as both states came to fear the renewed power of France under Henry IV. In 1605, James I sent an embassy to Spain to ratify the peace and to open negotiations for a marriage. With delicious irony he named Lord Howard, now Earl of Nottingham, to lead it, and so the man who had led the fleets that defeated the Armada in 1588 and sacked Cadiz in 1596 enjoyed the lavish hospitality of the King of Spain The Duke of Medina Sidonia stayed far away, tending to his estates in the south.

**Issues to debate**

* To what extent did Elizabeth I provoke Philip II into sending the Armada of 1588?
* Why did the Armada fail?
* What was the significance of the Armada for Anglo-Spanish relations?

**Further reading**

* English translations of important Spanish documents are printed by G. P. B. Naish,‘Documents Illustrating the History of the Spanish Armada’ in D.W.Waters, *The Elizabethan Navy and the Armada of Spain* (Greenwich, 1975).
* Recent advances in the study of the Armada can best be approached through the study by Colin Martin and Geoffrey Parker, *The Spanish Armada* (Manchester University Press, 1999).
* An important collection of essays produced for the anniversary in 1988 is M. Rodríguez-Salgado and S. Adams (eds.), *England, Spain and the Gran Armada* (John Donald, Edinburgh, 1991).

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