**Why The Armada Failed**

**By Geoffrey Parker | Published in History Today Volume: 38 Issue: 5 1988**

The Armada – and in English history there is only one – set sail from Lisbon against England on May 28th, 1588. It probably was (as Sir John Hawkins somewhat nervously described it) 'the greatest and strongest combination that was ever gathered in all Christendom', for it consisted of 130 ships, 2431 guns, and 30,000 men.

And yet, despite the title of Felicssima (most fortunate), bestowed by its creator Philip II, ruler of Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and much of America, the Armada's story was one of almost constant misfortune. The fleet had only got level with Cape Finisterre by late June, when storms and tempests compelled it to seek shelter in Corunna. Eventually, in late July, the Armada set off again and entered the English Channel, only to be attacked off Calais by fireships and forced to run for home via the perilous coasts of Scotland and Ireland. In the six weeks which followed (thanks in part to the onset of a tropical typhoon), fully one-third of its ships were wrecked off the coast of Ireland; and (thanks to hunger, thirst and the massacre of almost all prisoners by the English) fully one-half of its men died. It remains the greatest naval disaster in Spanish history. How, precisely, had it happened?

Thanks to the publication of nearly all the major Elizabethan documents by the Navy Records Society, and to the summaries of most of the rest in the Calendars of State Papers, we know a great deal about 'Little England'. On the basis of these sources, apparently so comprehensive, it is tempting to ascribe the Armada's failure almost entirely to the genius of Queen Elizabeth, her gallant captains, and her brave men. But there is now a wealth of new Spanish material available, both documentary and archaeological, which presents a complementary but somewhat different picture – why Spain failed, so to speak, rather than why England won.

The new data is of two varieties. On the one hand, we now have the archaeological evidence from eight Armada ships excavated (or partially excavated) around the British Isles since 1968; and on the other, much new documentary evidence has been found both in the archives of Simancas on the planning of the campaign and the organisation of the fleet, and in those of Brussels on the preparations of the army designated to carry out the invasion of England. All of it sets the Armada story in a new light.

To begin with, it is now clear that the decision to mount a full-scale invasion of England was taken suddenly and irrevocably in October 1585, and not before. It is true that Philip II had been asked before, either by the Pope or by the English Catholics, to overthrow the Tudor state; but, except in 1570-71 in support of the Ridolfi plot, he had always refused. In the second half of 1585, however, Elizabeth in effect declared war upon him. In August, she signed a treaty with the Dutch provinces in revolt against Spain, promising to pay one-quarter of their military expenses and agreeing to supply 7,000 English troops for their defence. Then, in September, she permitted Sir Francis Drake to leave Plymouth with thirty-three warships and a licence to pillage any Spanish ports and capture any Spanish ships that he might encounter. Early in October the English landed in Galicia and sacked Vigo and Bayona. Within a week of hearing this news, on October 24th, 1585, Philip II announced to the Pope that he intended to invade England. He also indicated that he expected the Pope to contribute to the costs of the operation, on the grounds that it would regain England for the Catholic faith.

In the course of the next few weeks, reports poured into the Spanish court concerning both the build-up of English forces in the Netherlands and the trail of desolation left by Drake and his ships, first in the Cape Verdes and then in the Caribbean. If the king had entertained any doubts about the wisdom of taking on Elizabeth, they were soon dispelled; instead, he turned for practical advice to his two most senior serving officers, the Marquis of Santa Cruz (distinguished in numerous naval engagements) and the Duke of Parma (commander of the king's forces in the Netherlands). Both were asked to devise a strategy for the rapid conquest of England.

Santa Cruz sent in his plan in March 1586. It called for a full-scale invasion from Spain, in the summer of 1587, in overwhelming strength and with sustained logistical support. There were to be two strikes: first against some point in southern Ireland, in order to draw off Elizabeth's forces from the Home Counties, and then (some two months later) a second surprise attack on some point on the south coast of England, now (so the marquis hoped) denuded of defenders. The king was clearly impressed, and orders went out in April 1586 to start collecting the 286 ships, the 60,000 men, the copious supplies, and the major train of heavy artillery envisaged by Santa Cruz.

But then, late in June, a courier arrived from Flanders bearing details of another plan devised by the Duke of Parma. This was quite different: it proposed in effect, a Blitzkrieg. Some 30,000 troops from Flanders, led by Parma in person, would slip aboard a fleet of barges one dark night and sail in secret to the coast of Kent, whence they would march at top speed upon London – there to capture (if possible) the queen and her ministers unawares. Since Parma thought the crossing could be achieved in twelve hours, and the march on London within a week, there was no role in his plan for a fleet from Spain except – and this was only added as an afterthought – in the event that the invasion army became bogged down in Kent. Then Santa Cruz and his fleet might be needed to bail them out.

Now here was a serious dilemma. Two excellent strategies: both highly recommended, both carefully researched, both apparently feasible. Which was the king to choose?

Surely only an armchair strategist could have hit upon the solution actually adopted; to attempt both strategies simultaneously! In July 1586, after due deliberation, Philip resolved to continue with the mobilisation of an enormous fleet in Spain, and he held to his decision to launch it first against Ireland and only later against south-eastern England. But that was where Parma's army now came in: as the Armada hove into view in the Narrow Seas (and not before) the army of Flanders would set out in its barges to be shepherded across the Channel to a landing-place in Kent. There would be reinforcements aboard the fleet, and also a siege train (something that Parma himself lacked) for the reduction of any English towns that offered resistance. The expedition was expected to capture London almost at once and to set up a temporary government of occupation (to head which Philip II, interestingly enough, designated William, Cardinal Allen, leader of the English Catholic exiles). Failing that, there were to be negotiations aimed at achieving three distinct concessions from the English government: first, a decree of toleration for English Catholics; second, an end to English aid for the Dutch rebels; and third, a war indemnity to repay Philip's costs.

By April 1587, the plans were well advanced. Parma had engineered a strong build-up of forces in the Netherlands, while Santa Cruz had concentrated a strike-force of fifty fighting ships, plus a few supply vessels, at Lisbon with a large convoy of auxiliaries and transports, guarded by the escort galleons of the American treasure fleet, in Cadiz.

Needless to say, these heroic preparations did not pass unnoticed. Elizabeth's government regularly received valuable intelligence reports of Philip's preparations both from Portuguese exiles in London with links in Lisbon and from English spies abroad, particularly in Italy. But these alone were not enough to justify expensive counter-measures – eventually 500,000 pounds, more than the queen's total annual revenue. After all, the navaI preparations in Lisbon and Cadiz might not be directed against England at all, but against the Dutch Republic or (less probably) against France. However, news from (of all places) Rome left no room for doubt; for the source was the king himself.

It is an edifying saga of greed and suspicion punished. After protracted and bitter negotiations, Philip II had eventually extracted from Pope Sixtus V a promise to pay one-third of the costs of conquering England. But as time went by, the king began to worry that if Sixtus V should die, his successor might not honour the papal undertaking. The king, therefore, insisted that the entire College of Cardinals, from whom the next pope would certainly be drawn, should also swear to make the agreed payment. The cardinals obliged; but, having done so, some of them promptly spread far and wide details of the purpose for which the money – and therefore the fleet – was intended. All hope of delivering a surprise attack on England was thus dashed.

Acting on the basis of this and other information, Elizabeth decided to launch a pre-emptive strike: Sir Francis Drake was authorised to make his celebrated raid on Cadiz in April 1587, commonly known as 'the singeing of the king of Spain's beard'. It was not damaging in quite the way that historians once thought: true, the loss of twenty-four ships, the destruction of some hard-found supplies, and the disruption of all traffic between Andalusia and Lisbon for six weeks was tiresome – but it was not critical.

The real damage resulted from Drake's flamboyant subsequent departure to the Azores, with the avowed aim of intercepting and capturing the rich galleons returning from India and America; for that forced Santa Cruz to lead the Lisbon fleet off in pursuit. The American treasure fleet was known to be carrying 13 million ducats for the crown; and the East India galleons normally brought scarcely less. This treasure had to be protected at all costs. As it happened, Drake only took one Portuguese East Indiaman, the San Felipe, (worth almost 1 million pounds); but his menacing presence in the mid-Atlantic forced Santa Cruz to stay at sea until September 25th, despite storm damage to his vessels and serious losses of men and munitions, lest the English should capture or destroy more. When at last the battered royal fleet returned to Lisbon, it brought the treasure ships home intact; but it was clear that the Armada could not now sail against England in 1587. Drake had given his country one more year in which to prepare.

Philip II, recognising that his cover was blown and that surprise was no longer possible, was forced to devise a new invasion strategy. On the one hand, he decided to increase the size of his Armada still further, by adding to it the Indies fleet which Santa Cruz had just shepherded home. On the other, he resolved to drop the diversionary attack on Ireland. The 'strike- force' in Lisbon and the 'convoy' in Cadiz would now sail in a single, unwieldy, but overwhelmingly powerful unit directly to the Channel, there to join forces with Parma and his veterans.

The task of implementing the new strategy proved too much for Santa Cruz, who died in February 1588 of typhus (and not, as Garrett Mattingly engagingly suggested, of frustration) and he was replaced by the Duke of Medina Sidonia. Historians have now come to appreciate Medina Sidonia's remarkable success in supervising the vast work of assembling more ships, more troops and more munitions than had ever been collected in a single European port before. A mere three months after the duke assumed command, everything was ready. On May 28th, 1588, the great fleet put to sea and the world held its breath.

But perhaps the duke had been too successful? To be sure, to facilitate communication with the numerous units under his command, he took over a printing press at Lisbon and ran off all his orders in multiple copies, leaving blanks for all variable data. He thus invented the modern bureaucratic form, hundreds of examples of which have survived in Simancas. But not all the Armada's problems could be solved by pushing paper. Before long, rations were being consumed faster than they could be replaced and the daily allowance had to be cut by a third. Furthermore, some of the guns, powder and stores produced in the spring of 1588 turned out, as we shall see, to be unfit for use.

Nevertheless that was not what caused failure. If the Armada had won a beachhead in Kent, there would have been enough of everything to secure the Spanish position. Philip II failed to conquer England, not because of defective supply, but through unsound strategy and faulty tactics.

It has become customary to accord the Duke of Parma a large part of the blame for the failure of the Grand Strategy, on the grounds that his forces were not ready to join the fleet from Spain when it arrived. Yet the records of the Armada de los Estados de Flandes in Simancas tell a different story: the duke had hired sixteen ships in Hamburg in 1587 and brought them to Dunkirk; there he also embargoed thirteen French and seventeen Flemish ships; and he chartered 170 barges. All were given rigging, artillery and even special campaign pennants ready for the Channel crossing. Paymasters' accounts show all the boats retained in constant readiness from September 1587 until August 31st, 1588.

Ready, that is, except for final embarkation because the boats were clearly too small for either men or stores to be left aboard for long. As Parma repeatedly pointed out to the king, his little ships (like those of Dunkirk in 1940) were fit only to transport troops, not to fight. He put it particularly crisply in a letter of January 31st, 1588: 'These craft are so light and small [he told the king] that four warships could sink every boat we have'. In the teeth of the blockade of the Flemish ports maintained by the heavily-gunned Dutch cromsters, until the Armada could render the seas safe, Parma's men and ships would perforce remain confined to port. But they were as ready as they could possibly be, without the fleet. In the event, thanks to the thorough drills upon which Parma had insisted, the final embarkation in Nieuwpoort and Dunkirk took just 48 hours.

The problem was that, when the Armada finally reached the Narrow Seas, Parma did not have forty-eight hours. Historians, like Philip II, have often underestimated the problems posed by co-ordinating two huge military undertakings separated by one thousand miles of water. It was all very well for Medina Sidonia to send messages announcing his progress from Lisbon to the Duke of Parma in Flanders; the question was – when would they arrive? Each messenger dispatched from the fleet, and there were seven of them between July 31st and August 7th, was expected to carry his dispatch to Parma's headquarters in the fastest possible time, despite the fact that the Channel was alive with English ships, while France was sinking into civil war. Not surprisingly, the courier sent by Medina Sidonia on July 31st, at the mouth of the Channel, did not manage to reach Parma until early on August 6th; while the man sent on August 6th did not arrive until the evening of the 7th. But unfortunately for the two dukes, on August 6th, the Armada was already waiting at Calais, and by the evening of the 7th it was facing the attack of the English fireships! So by the time Parma knew for certain of the fleet's arrival, it was already too late.

But why was it too late? Why could the Armada not wait? In late July and early August 1588, enjoying ideal weather, Medina Sidonia had made his ponderous way from Corunna to Calais, lamenting that the entire fleet could travel no faster than the slowest hulk (roughly the speed of a rowing boat!), so that the English were thereby able to do more damage. Nevertheless, thanks to his fleet's tight formation and excellent discipline, the duke was able to bring his fleet to Calais with only three losses (none of them due to the English). But there, anchored amid the powerful tides of the Channel off Calais, he forfeited strategic control of the situation. Medina Sidonia simply did not know what to do next. He waited vainly for one whole day and two nights, in ignorance of the fact that Parma was not yet aware of his presence.

Tactically speaking, albeit for quite different reasons, it was also here that the Armada campaign fell down. Philip II's masterplan now depended, not upon surprise, but upon Spanish command of the sea lasting at least as long as it took Parma's men to embark, or to march, and reach the fleet; yet unless the English and Dutch navies were decisively defeated, such a long period of security could not be vouchsafed. Spain's enemies were unlikely simply to sit and wait patiently for the dukes to make their next move.

This was an eventuality that Philip II had never considered. To be sure, the king had always recognised that his new plan, lacking the advantage of surprise, required a decisive battle to be fought; and he explicitly admitted the possibility of defeat on the day – that God, in his inscrutable wisdom, might permit an English victory – although he naturally hoped not. But it never seems to have occurred to him that his great fleet might reach the straits of Calais without gaining effective command of the sea. But of course that is precisely what happened, condemning the Armada to remain in the Narrow Seas for as long as possible, taking the worst England could throw against it; for Medina Sidonia still hoped against hope that Parma would find a way of getting some of his soldiers through the blockade and onto the fleet.

But, in spite of all that, in the end there was a battle; and from it the English emerged clearly victorious. Why? Certainly it was not a foregone conclusion. Previous accounts of the superior sailing qualities of the English ships have perhaps been a trifle over-patriotic. It is true that the achievement of John Hawkins in rebuilding or laying down a fleet of 'race-built' warships was important. They were, in all probability, the best warships afloat anywhere in the world. But by 1588, only two-thirds of the queen's ships were of the new design – a total of twenty-four galleons out of a fleet of over 135. Other ships on the English side were still of the traditional design, some built in the reign of Henry VIII, others (ironically) laid down on Philip II's orders in 1557 and 1558 while he was king of England as Mary Tudor's consort (such as the *Elizabeth Jonas* , begun in 1558 as the *Philip* but hastily renamed after Elizabeth's accession).

Perhaps because of the presence of so many veteran vessels, the initial reaction of the English fleet to the Armada was strikingly cautious. 'Our first onset,' complained Henry Whyte, a volunteer aboard the Mary Rose, '[was] more coldly done than became the value of our nation and the credit of the English navy.' 'We pluck their feathers little by little,' wrote Lord Admiral Howard; but apart from the fortuitous capture of the San Salvador and Nuestra Senora del Rosario, his feather-plucking was largely intellectual, for it was conducted in the main at excessively long range.

Nothing the English tried seemed able to prevent the Armada's orderly progress up the Channel. Indeed, after the battle off the Isle of Wight on August 3rd/4th, they did not even try: their next assault only came four days later, off Gravelines.

But that attack, when it came, was of an entirely different nature. The English had, by now, evidently got the measure of the enemy; and Howard's galleons, now reinforced by Seymour's squadron from the Thames estuary, launched an aggressive close-range gunnery assault on the Spanish fleet, only temporarily disordered by the fireships. 'Out of my ship the Vanguard,' wrote William Wynter afterwards, 'there was shot 500 rounds of demi-cannon, culverin, and demi-culverin: and when I was farthest off in discharging any of the pieces, I was not out of shot of the harquebus, and most time within speech of one another.' Now if the protagonists were within hailing distance (which, amid the noise and chaos of battle, must have been very close indeed), then really serious damage could be inflicted by the heavy artillery.

According to the Spaniards, it simply 'rained shot': no one on the fleet had seen anything like it. Some claimed that it was twenty times more furious than Lepanto. Although only one Armada ship was sunk outright, many others were so seriously damaged that they were soon in difficulties: the San Mateo was observed to be 'riddled with shot like a sieve' and broke up shortly afterwards; the San Juan de Sicilia, better known as 'the Tobermory wreck', was described as 'completely shattered... with shots above and below the waterline, from the prow to the stern'. She sought refuge in Tobermory Bay because she was sinking. Two more of the excavated Armada wrecks, the Trinidad Valencera (Donegal) and the Gran Grifon (Fair Isle) also sustained hull damage so severe that their crews were forced eventually to run them ashore. And even Medina Sidonia's flagship only got back home because she was, quite literally, tied together with string: 'We were shipping water at so many points' according to one survivor, 'that we cinched one great hawser round the hull at the poop, and another before the main mast' to keep the ship in one piece. One month later, with their pumps working flat out, and straining on the hawsers, they just made it back to Spain.

So if the range was close enough for the English to inflict such serious damage on the Spanish hulls, what punishment had the Armada been able to mete out in return? Fortunately we possess the apparently objective evidence of a full dockyard survey carried out on the queen's ship's shortly after the emergency ended. In it, as we should expect, a number of unservicable components were noted as due for replacement being variously described as 'worn', 'cracked', or 'decayed'. On occasion, perhaps, these were euphemisms for battle damage, although the frequency with which they occur is little greater than might be expected in any routine survey of ships that had been at sea for several months. Some minor damage to spars and ship's boats was indeed directly attributed to enemy action; but of substantial structural damage – the kind of damage sustained by so many of the Armada ships – there is scarcely a mention.

Why was this so? We know what guns were aboard Philip II's great fleet, and all our evidence suggests that, at close range, the Spanish armament should have been its most devastating. Admittedly, some pieces were definitely sub-standard, especially those cast in 1587-88 ('con mucha furia' as the records significantly state), just before the Armada sailed: one found on the wreck of the Gran Grifon, and another found in 1986 on the Juliana were horribly defective. But that was not true of the vast majority of the Armada's guns.

Now historians used to believe that, by the time it reached Gravelines, the Armada had almost completely run out of shot, particularly in the heavier 'ship-smashing' calibres. Medina Sidonia himself stated as much. His most powerful ships, he noted in his journal, were finally rendered ineffective 'on account of the cannon fire to which they had. been exposed, and their own lack of ammunition.' After Gravelines, his San Martin had to supply extra shot to several other ships that claimed to have run out. And perhaps some of the principal Spanish ships really did run out of shot, as the duke claimed. But many certainly did not. The excavated Armada wrecks, all of which had undoubtedly been heavily engaged in the Channel battles, without question ended the fight with substantial stocks of roundshot still on board, especially shot of 'ship-smashing' calibre, because several of them have produced large quantities of iron shot of nine-pounder size or above! And there was enough powder on the San Juan de Sicilia to blow her up in Tobermory Bay on the way home.

Exactly the same picture emerges from the extremely detailed administrative accounts concerning the ships which eventually returned safely to Spain. The papers on many vessels include a round-by-round record for each gun throughout the campaign, and this reveals that the twenty-two-gun Levanter Trinidad de Escala – for example – fired only thirty-five shots on August 2nd (1.6 rounds per gun), and thirty-eight shots during the crucial Gravelines engagement (1.7 rounds per gun). The Guipcizcoan Santa Barbara, which appears to have had twenty guns, likewise fired a mere twenty-two shots on July 31st (1.1 rounds per gun), and forty-seven on August 2nd/3rd (2.35 rounds per gun). And, over the full period of fighting, the Andalusian San Francisco fired 241 rounds from her twenty-one guns, an average of only 11.5 per gun, or one shot gun per day. These figures come nowhere near to accounting for the fifty rounds with which, according to the Lisbon muster, each gun had been provided; and, indeed, these vessels were all able to return much of their ammunition upon their return. Of the 1421 shots which had been issued to the Concepcion Menor, for example, no less than 1,256 were handed back on her return!

What, then, went wrong on the Spanish gundecks at Gravelines? Why could the Armada not fire more frequently and to better effect? The guns were, as we know from Medina Sidonia's instructions to the fleet, and from actual examples of Armada artillery recovered from the wrecks, always kept loaded; so that when battle was joined one salvo was available for immediate use. This is exactly how a galley was expected to loose off its close-range cannonade just before it rammed its foe; there would be neither opportunity nor need for a second round, and so no procedure existed for reloading as a battle-drill. Spanish sailing ship tactics in 1588 also envisaged the broadside as a device for crippling and confusing an adversary as an immediate prelude to boarding.

However the kind of fighting the English employed against the Spaniards at Gravelines involved a continuous close-range bombardment intended to destroy the enemy by attrition of gunfire alone. Since inferior sailing qualities prevented the Spaniards from closing and boarding as they would have liked, their only counter to such tactics was to attempt to reply in kind. To do this, however, they would have had to reload their big guns time and again during the course of an engagement. Not only was this practice outside the tactical experience of the Spanish commanders and their crews, but it was also one for which their equipment was fundamentally unsuited.

There were only two ways in which muzzle-loading artillery could be reloaded at sea in the sixteenth century. The guns could either be brought inboard and the necessary operations carried out within the ship, or they could be left in the fully run-out position and loaded outboard. The much more efficient process of allowing a gun's own recoil to bring it inboard under the restraint of a breeching rope was not developed until well into the seventeenth century (although, it was possible, after firing, to unhitch the piece and haul it back manually). This process would have been laborious but reasonably efficient, and during the course of it the crew would be covered from the view, and to some extent from the fire, of the enemy. Outboard loading was far more awkward and dangerous, though it required a much smaller crew, for the loader had to straddle the barrel outside the port and carry out all the clearing and charging operations from this exposed and difficult position.

Which of these procedures the Spanish gunners used in 1588 is not known for certain but the inefficient design of their guncarriages suggests that it would have been impractical, mainly because of the lack of working space on the gundecks, for the pieces to have been loaded inboard while a ship was closely engaged. Even the largest ships in the fleet were no more than nine metres in the beam. At the same time it would have been little short of suicidal for the crews to have attempted outboard loading while they were within small-arms range of an enemy. It might also have been somewhat uncomfortable to bestride a hot barrel!

The probability is, therefore, that once close action was joined, most Spanish ships only managed to fire off their previously prepared salvo, after which sustained gunfire ceased. This does not necessarily mean that no further firing was possible. Every ship carried a number of breech-loading anti-personnel cannon, aptly known as 'murderers'; and these could be (and, no doubt, were) fired as often as possible. But they could not sink ships. Although outboard loading of the biggest pieces might sometimes have been effected in comparative safety on the disengaged side, it now seems certain that the Spanish ship-killing guns were never able to apply a continuous close-range cannonade against the enemy, although this was the only way in which they might have achieved success.

So it was not, as some recent historians have suggested, a spectacular inequality of guns that explains Spain's defeat at Gravelines, so much as a more prosaic inequality of gun carriages. The four-wheeled truck carriage had been in service with the royal navy for at least half a century; examples have been found on the Mary Rose. But this device might still be regarded as England's decisive secret weapon in 1588. In contrast to the clumsy and inefficient gun mountings on the Spanish ships, which made reloading in action virtually impossible, the small wheels of the English truck carriages meant that the gun muzzles could protrude much further through the gun-ports, and that there was no awkward trail or wide wheels to obstruct the sides or rear. Broadsides could therefore be delivered consecutively during the course of a fight, range being dictated by the superior sailing qualities of the English ships.

Philip II had always known that, somehow, a real danger lay here. 'The enemy's objective will be to fight at long distance, to get the advantage of his artillery and shot (said to be in great quantity)', he warned first Santa Cruz and then Medina Sidonia. Therefore 'the objective of our fleet must be to attack and close with them, ready for hand-to-hand combat.' The king added to the draft in his own hand: 'He should also be told of the way they have of firing low'. But he offered no advice on how to avoid these pitfalls; rather he chose a strategy that made his fleet a sitting target for precisely those tactics known to be favoured by the English.

Here, then, lay Philip II's true error: he was not only an armchair strategist, but an armchair tactician too. Although he had maps and reports to hand, he never summoned his senior commanders for a face-to-face meeting to discuss how best to carry out the grand design, nor did he invite them to voice their doubts and queries about the strategy he intended to force upon them. Instead, he did everything he could to stifle their criticisms. Yet none of his plans corresponded to the proposals they had made; and the final version depended for success upon a tactical edge which Spain's ships simply did not possess. In this disharmony between strategy and tactics, therefore, lies the true explanation of the Armada's fate.

And if that is so, then when the responsibility for the failure of the Spanish Armada is apportioned, the lion's share of the blame should go neither to Parma nor to Medina Sidonia, but to Philip II. As Sir Walter Raleigh tersely put it somewhat later: 'To invade by sea upon a perilous coast, being neither in possession of any port, nor succoured by any party, may better fit a prince presuming on his fortune than enriched with understanding'. The king had created the Armada, and in the end the king destroyed it.

* **The material in this article is based on *The Spanish Armada* by Colin Martin and Geoffrey Parker (Hamish Hamilton, 1988).**