

# An Axe and an Armada

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When Bull the executioner cleaved Mary Stuart's head from her shoulders in the hall of Fotheringhay Castle in February 1587 the Elizabethan world was jolted on its axis. Bull's blow helped to sever the notion of monarchy as a sacred thing. Queen Elizabeth knew this and, as she believed that divine sanction was the best defence she had against her enemies, it filled her with revulsion. Her ministers, however, being pragmatic men, argued powerfully that Mary must die. And so it was that Elizabeth, pressed by the unanimous will of Privy Council and the Lords and Commons of parliament, signed her royal cousin's death warrant. She and her kingdom now had to take the consequences.

Sir Francis Walsingham and Thomas Phelipps led Mary Queen of Scots to the headsman's block. By secret means they had uncovered her correspondence with Anthony Babington and his fellow conspirators, unearthing with great patience the evidence they needed to prove Mary's complicity in a plot to murder Elizabeth. By today's standards the methods used by Phelipps and Walsingham look unappealing. They dabbled a little in forgery. Even at the time the word entrapment was used by their enemies to describe the way Mary had been caught and held fast. Her trial by commission was unorthodox. The Queen of Scots was refused the help of lawyers (a fixed principle of Tudor treason trials) and she was not permitted to examine the documentary evidence brought against her. But to Elizabeth's government in 1586 all of this hardly mattered. After so many years of effort they had Mary where they wanted her. The evidence was robust enough for privy councillors and lords of parliament to prove what Elizabeth's advisers had known all along: simply, that the Queen

of Scots was guilty of privity in compassing treason against their queen. Of course it was a political trial whose outcome was never in doubt. But at least Mary's case had been tried in a special court of justice. It would have been so simple to have her quietly killed. That, after all, was what her cousin Elizabeth had wanted: a quiet and discreet murder from which she could have distanced herself.

Even before the blow of the axe, Elizabeth's government braced itself for the coming storm. There was outrage in Catholic Europe, though that was hardly surprising. In Paris clergy preached angry sermons of revenge against Elizabeth's murderous regime. King Philip of Spain, however, was a little more ambivalent about Mary's judicial execution, for it left open his own claim to the Tudor crown. This he began to press with great energy, notionally with the Scottish Queen's blessing. Philip believed in the existence of a will made by Mary to the effect that she granted the right of English succession to Philip; he ordered a thorough search of Europe's archives to find it. It was a phantom; no such document existed.

The outrage of Europe's Catholics was for Philip an instrument of political power. They believed that England was a heretic pariah kingdom where for nearly thirty years Elizabeth's government of atheists had engaged in a vicious persecution of English Catholics, raiding their homes, putting them in prison and making martyrs of their priests on trumped-up charges of treason. That was how exiles and émigrés like William Allen saw it: they stood squarely against evil.

Allen began to work more furiously than ever for his homeland's liberation, putting his faith in what he and others called the Enterprise of England: the invasion of Elizabeth's kingdoms by the combined forces of Spain and Rome. As this chapter will show, the line of causation is clear. Mary Queen of Scots was executed in February 1587. In the following months Doctor Allen and his fellow priest, the Jesuit Robert Persons, petitioned King Philip of Spain for action, energetically supporting his claim to the English throne. With preparations for an invading naval armada in fact already under way, there was at last a reality to the notion of toppling the Elizabethan regime by a Spanish invasion. In the spring of 1588 Allen wrote a bitter, caustic attack on Elizabeth's bastardy and tyranny; his pamphlet would be handed out to the English people by victorious invading forces. Then

at last, in July, King Philip's Great Armada left the coast of Spain. Driven by weather and Elizabeth's navy the Spanish fleet was dispersed before it could do any harm. But for Philip it was a temporary defeat in what became a long war against Tudor England.

Mary Stuart's execution threw open to question one of the great certainties of thirty years. Since the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, the Queen of Scots was her cousin's obvious rival heir and successor. Whatever English succession law might say, everyone – even Elizabeth's advisers – knew that there was no other plausible candidate. But Mary had always been more than a successor waiting in the wings for her cousin to die of natural causes. When Pope Pius V had declared Elizabeth a bastard heretic schismatic in 1570, the insinuation was obvious: by the word successor, Catholics like William Allen meant rightful monarch. But after February 1587 the old assumption of deposing Elizabeth from power in favour of her cousin no longer held. So who was the best candidate? The exiles and émigrés of Paris were gripped by factional tussles over competing claimants to the kingdoms of England and Ireland. One group supported the title of King Philip of Spain. Others favoured Mary's son, twenty-one-year-old King James VI of Scotland, hoping that he might make a conversion to Catholicism. Certainly James vigorously protested to Elizabeth at the execution of the mother he never knew. Yet with a pension of £4,000 a year, Elizabeth's government bought the young king's neutrality. It was clear that the real danger to Elizabeth's throne came from Spain.

Doctor Allen and Robert Persons threw their considerable intellectual and political weight behind Philip's claim. They believed, surely correctly, that only Spain had the power to topple the murderous regime of the pretender-queen Elizabeth. The two men put together evidence from the complicated family trees of the English royal line and the old chronicle histories of England. Two of the justifications for Philip's title were his descent from the royal house of Lancaster and Elizabeth's excommunication from the Catholic Church by Pope Pius V in 1570. Persons and Allen also used the theory of just war: 'conquest in a just war and for a just cause,' they wrote, 'is usually considered to give a very valid right to a kingdom'. Besides, they

believed, once a Spanish army forced Elizabeth and her government from power, England's Catholics would certainly elect Philip as their king – as he had been, of course, many years before, as the husband of Elizabeth's sister Queen Mary. If Allen had ever believed what he wrote in 1581 – 'We put not our trust in princes or practices abroad, nor in arms or forces at home' – the execution of the Scottish Queen had changed things once and for all. Now he, Persons and their compatriots threw themselves behind the liberation of their homeland by the global might of King Philip's Catholic monarchy.

So by appealing to genealogy, to history and to the urgent politics of Europe Allen and Persons sought to encourage Philip to commit himself to the great Enterprise of England. They were in fact pushing hard at an open door. Philip had already made the strategic decision to support the Enterprise. After years of having to live with the offensive heresy of Elizabethan England and English provocations in politics and diplomacy, Philip and his military advisers were indeed preparing to invade Elizabeth's kingdoms. Limited only by the complexity of Spain's military dispositions and the bureaucratic bulk of Philip's government, in 1587 the Great Armada was beginning to take shape.

Here we have to make sense of nearly thirty years of Anglo-Spanish relations. In the dying days of Queen Mary's reign, in November 1558, Philip had sent his personal emissary, the Count of Feria, to find out what was happening at the English court, and in particular to interview the queen-in-waiting, Princess Elizabeth. Through Feria, Philip had offered friendship to his sister-in-law. Politely she had acknowledged it. Brushing aside Feria's advice to be a good and obedient Catholic queen, Elizabeth felt she was beholden to no one, and she said so. The new government felt its way carefully through the tangled and fraught politics of a Europe fractured by war and religion.

It had seemed so unlikely that Elizabeth and her government would survive as they did for decades. Foreign war, rebellion, disease, time, chance, conspiracy – life in the sixteenth century was a fragile thing. With no convincing Protestant successor to follow her, England might so easily have been swallowed up once again by a Catholic dynasty. That, after all, was what English exiles and émigrés and foreign poten-

tates wanted: Mary Stuart, daughter of the ultra-Catholic Guise, Queen of England, Scotland and Ireland, the wearer of the imperial crown of Henry VIII though loyal to God and Pope, but one monarch in a Europe dominated by the earthly powers of Spain and France.

Elizabeth and her advisers never trusted Spanish professions of friendship. Time and again they found evidence of Spanish duplicity, as Philip allied himself with the Pope and other Catholic princes. And they were right to be cautious of him. He believed passionately in the unifying authority of his Catholic monarchy, writing within months of the Count of Feria's embassy of the evil that was taking place in England – taking place precisely because Elizabeth was by then queen. By 1569 it was plain to Elizabeth's Privy Council that Spain, first of all intent on crushing Protestant resistance in the Low Countries, would sooner or later shift military operations to England, bringing across the few miles of sea between Flanders and England all the horrors of European war and the instruments of the holy inquisition. And that was before rebellion in the north of England and the proof of Spanish involvement in the Ridolfi Plot of 1569–71 on behalf of the Queen of Scots.

The reality, in fact, was that Philip of Spain was much too busy in the 1560s and 1570s to consider an invasion of Elizabeth's kingdoms. Heavily committed elsewhere, he could give neither money, ships nor troops to an English campaign. To the queen's advisers, however, the plain (if secret) intention of the European Catholic powers was to crush Elizabeth's government: everything they saw over decades, from the eager plottings of émigrés and exiles to the subversive activities of foreign ambassadors consorting with the Queen of Scots, told them that sooner or later a great contest would come. All the plots, conspiracies and plans for invasion discovered in the 1580s by Burghley and Walsingham gave cumulative weight to the feeling of dangerous emergency. And behind all of these conspiracies, in some way or fashion, were the two constants of Mary Queen of Scots and King Philip of Spain. By 1587 Mary at least had been eliminated.

So with this outlook, it is hardly surprising that relations between Tudor England and Habsburg Spain were from the beginning chilled by a rather frosty diplomatic formality. Over the years this cooled still further. Ambassadors at both royal courts were expelled. Trade

embargoes and confiscations were used as political weapons. English towns and cities gave refuge to Protestants fleeing war in the Spanish Netherlands. Spain's military commanders and government officials involved themselves in plots against Elizabeth's government. It was not open war, but nor was it an obvious peace. Indeed it was much as the seventeenth-century English political theorist Thomas Hobbes wrote: 'the nature of war, consisteth not in actual fighting; but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary'. Today, remembering the history of the twentieth century, we might call the troubled state that existed between England and Spain before the 1580s a cold war. But the parallel is not exact, for the two sides were disproportionately matched in their capacity to fight. Faced with the power of Spain, Elizabethan England would surely be very quickly broken.

Two critical years in the irrevocable breakdown of relations between Spain and England were those of 1584 and 1585. In October of the first year Lord Burghley wrote in a policy paper that his queen had 'many just causes to think that the King of Spain mindeth to invade her realm and to destroy her person'. It was a stark analysis based upon two facts. The first was the continued military effort of Spain in the Low Countries to destroy Protestant resistance. The second was the assassination, on King Philip's orders, of William of Nassau, Prince of Orange, the leader of Dutch resistance to Spain. Coming soon after the revelations of Spanish involvement in the Throckmorton Plot, the killing of Orange provoked the appalling fear of Elizabeth's assassination. This, too, was the most powerful reason for the visceral revulsion in parliament and the Privy Council at William Parry's murder plot. A highly significant response to Orange's assassination was the Association for the revenge of any attack upon Elizabeth or her kingdom, to be followed a few months later by the Act for the Queen's Surety.

But how could England defend itself against Spanish power? At first Elizabeth's advisers had few great ambitions. Walsingham's view in the spring of 1585 was that England's naval commanders and adventurers could harry Spanish power at sea. In a proposal 'for the annoying of the King of Spain', he suggested that English ships should engage the Spanish fleet. This was exactly the sort of thinking that lay

behind official support for Sir Francis Drake's voyage to the West Indies in 1585 and 1586 to attack Spanish ports and shipping and to intercept Spain's treasure fleet. Drake and his expedition caused havoc. To King Philip Sir Francis was a licensed pirate. To Elizabeth's government, by contrast, he was a blunt but effective instrument of policy.

A more powerful statement still was military intervention in the Low Countries. In summer 1585 Queen Elizabeth signed treaties with the Dutch whereby the English royal treasury would pay for thousands of soldiers to fight the King of Spain's forces. The Earl of Leicester, for many years one of the queen's closest advisers, was appointed commander of the expeditionary force. Already furious at Drake's devastating war at sea, the provocation of these Anglo-Dutch treaties was almost the last straw for Philip and his advisers. The final and decisive shift in the king's thinking came with more news in October 1585 of Drake's campaign in the West Indies. Late in the same month Philip informed Pope Sixtus that he accepted His Holiness's invitation to conquer England. The king was a little cautious; the Enterprise, he said, would have to be delayed till 1587; he could bear only half the cost at most. But the strategic case was clear. Its clinching argument was that Elizabeth's England, in supporting rebels in the Low Countries and setting Drake loose, was the greatest threat to Spanish global interests. Though doing so might risk the campaign in the Netherlands and the security of Spanish America, it was essential to divert resources temporarily to England. At the end of December 1585 Philip asked the Prince of Parma to set out a plan for the invasion.

By July 1586 the first of a number of evolving plans was ready. In the following summer a great armada of ships would sail from Lisbon for Ireland. Two months later the fleet would enter the English Channel, at which point, and not before, 30,000 veteran troops from the Spanish army of Flanders under the Prince of Parma's command would leave the Netherlands and land on the coast of Kent. The place of landing would be near Margate. Parma's forces would march on London, quickly taking the city with the queen and her government still in it. Over the following months, this remained the central proposition of the expedition.

One man more passionate than anybody else about the great Enterprise of England was William Allen. Allen's pen was always an effective weapon against his enemies in Elizabeth's government, and it was soon busy with a pamphlet about an English commander in the Low Countries, Sir William Stanley, who in 1587 surrendered himself, his regiment of English and Irish soldiers and the town of Deventer to Spanish forces. Allen vigorously defended Stanley's actions and made a public declaration of his own support for Spain. Stanley became one of the most feared and elusive of Elizabeth's émigré enemies. By the 1590s practically every plot against the queen's life, plausible as well as implausible, involved one or more of Stanley's desperate Irish renegades.

Knowing that only Spain could secure the success of the Enterprise of England, Allen worked tirelessly in the cause of King Philip and his invasion. While Spanish diplomats in Rome pressed the Pope to make Allen a cardinal, Allen used his formidable powers of encouragement and persuasion to urge King Philip 'to crown his glorious efforts in the holy cause of Christ by punishing this woman [Elizabeth], hated of God and man, and restoring the country [England] to its ancient glory and liberty'.

In July 1587 Sixtus V and Philip came at last to a formal agreement on the Enterprise of England. The Pope promised money in two instalments, the first to be paid on the landing of the Great Armada in England, the second once the kingdom was captured. Sixtus granted Philip the right to name as Elizabeth's replacement one who would 'stabilize and preserve the Catholic religion in those regions, and who will stand acceptable to the Holy Apostolic See, and accept investiture from it'. Days after the agreement William Allen became a cardinal.

If much of the money was to come from the Pope and the ships and troops from the King of Spain, it was Cardinal Allen who, as the pre-eminent expert on England, was given the task of rebuilding the Catholic Church in his homeland. But most urgently of all in 1588 Allen put his mind to a political defence of Philip's invasion. He wanted to persuade his countrymen of how much better off they would be without Elizabeth as their queen. Till this point in his career as a pamphleteer and propagandist he had only ever denounced the queen's advisers: they were atheists and Machiavellians intent on

securing power through the murder of innocent Catholics. The nearest he had come to articulating a political argument for the overthrow of Elizabeth was in his *Modest Defence* (1584), where he explained how popes and even priests could remove temporal princes from power. Now, with the Great Armada so near, he cast off all inhibitions. For the first time ever in print he attacked Elizabeth personally and directly. In *An Admonition to the nobility and people of England and Ireland* Allen held nothing back. What makes his pamphlet truly gripping is that it was printed all ready to be shipped over to England once the Armada had made a successful landing.

Writing provocatively as ‘the Cardinal of England’, Allen excoriated Elizabeth for her bastardy, her open rebellion against Church and Pope, her ‘Luciferian pride’ in setting herself up as head of her own Church, her theft of the English crown, and her slaughter of Mary Queen of Scots. Just as venomous, in a form even more concentrated than the *Admonition*, was Pope Sixtus’s sentence of deposition against Elizabeth. This too was Allen’s work, in which he again explained and justified Spain’s great Enterprise. In deposing ‘this woman’ and her accomplices ‘so wicked and noisome to the world’, Philip of Spain was England’s saviour.

After years of clever evasions, William Allen’s views were now plain to read. His mask, for so long held carefully in place, had at last slipped – though what Allen revealed underneath it hardly came as a surprise to Elizabeth’s advisers, who knew that he was a traitor and a staunch defender of treasons. With some forewarning, Elizabeth’s government saw exactly what propaganda Spain would use in its invasion. Lord Burghley had a copy of the *Admonition* four weeks before the Armada set sail. He read Allen’s ‘vile book’ with ‘much indignation’. He sent it immediately to Walsingham, so furious at Allen’s pamphlet that he ended the covering letter to Sir Francis still ‘in choler’. But at least Burghley and Walsingham now had the satisfaction of knowing that their enemy, coming a little more into the light, was showing his true colours.

The Great Armada of Spain was probably the worst-kept secret in sixteenth-century Europe. Philip’s government was notoriously leaky; indeed some of the king’s most secret planning was known in the

states of Italy, long skilled at gathering foreign intelligence, within weeks of being decided in Spain. And yet it was vital nevertheless for Elizabeth's Privy Council to have reliable information of Spain's intentions. As ever, the problem was one of finding out the truth of what was really happening from the heavy fug of rumour and report. Walsingham and his colleagues knew that the news they received was often exaggerated. Sometimes the enemy planted false information. Frequently, though genuinely believed by those who provided them, reports were just plain wrong. In January 1586, for example, some sailors arrived back in England talking of rumours of great Spanish naval preparations in Lisbon. The report, Walsingham wrote, was 'but a Spanish brag': it was simply a boast.

So how could they discover the enemy's plans? By now, after practising his technique in the Babington Plot, Thomas Phelippes was adept both before and after the Armada at using double agents to extract information from Catholic exiles in mainland Europe. One of those agents was Thomas Barnes, Gilbert Gifford's cousin, whom Phelippes used to establish a correspondence with the dangerous English exile Charles Paget. Paget believed that Barnes was his agent and sent questions for Barnes to answer in England about political and military affairs. In this way, with some skill and cunning, it was possible for Phelippes to find out what Paget and his Spanish masters knew about the state of England and its preparedness for a naval assault. Barnes's reports to Paget also allowed Phelippes to deceive and disinform the enemy. With the advice of Walsingham, Phelippes carefully answered Paget's questions. They had to do with political divisions within Elizabeth's Privy Council, the morale of her subjects, those ports and havens suitable for landing an army, numbers of English soldiers, their stores of armour and ammunition and the size of the queen's navy. All of these were important topics for Spanish war planning.

As significant as Phelippes's system of double-cross was the intelligence Walsingham gathered from merchants and diplomats working abroad. He paid for reports from men positioned on the coast of France, especially in the Bay of Biscay. The London merchant and financier Sir Horatio Palavicino, a man of enviable contacts in foreign courts and embassies, was skilled at providing Walsingham with

secret intelligence. Equally, Palavicino found himself to be the object of Spanish efforts to deceive and disinform Elizabeth's government. In his work for Walsingham, a man as well connected as Palavicino negotiated a steady path through a hall of mirrors. Often he succeeded; occasionally he failed.

The most vital thing of all was patiently to assess the information that came from all these sources: diplomats, merchants, intelligencers, military experts and the agents and double agents who worked for Phelippes. With a timely combination of luck, ingenuity, chance, skill and the propensity of the Spanish government to leak information, Elizabeth's advisers knew much in advance of the Great Armada of the kingdom of Spain.

Two important names here are Anthony Standen and Stephen Powle, two English gentlemen living abroad. Standen was an adventurer, a Catholic exile who lived on a Spanish pension. But his loyalty was for sale, and throughout these years he was encouraged by Walsingham to offer for money intelligence to Elizabeth's government. Sir Francis canvassed Standen about Spain's preparations at sea in April or May 1587. From Florence, Standen duly sent his reports.

Powle was a less colourful character than Standen, a keen continental traveller who (as he wrote himself) was Lord Burghley's 'feet, eyes, or ears' in Germany. In 1587 Powle moved on to Venice, from where he sent intelligence to Walsingham, proving himself a very effective gatherer of news and information. In Powle's meticulous newsletters, the earliest indications of the Armada came in December 1587. His information two months later was that the fleet would not sail out before spring of that year. By the end of March 1588, Powle's sources told him that the Duke of Medina Sidonia would command the Armada; it was intelligence that turned out to be correct.

In June and early July 1588, with the Enterprise imminent, reports began to multiply. Walsingham and other councillors turned their minds to what could be done to resist the invasion. A month before the Armada sailed from Lisbon, Walsingham's intelligence told him that the Spanish fleet would make for Sheppey, Harwich or Yarmouth on England's east coast, carrying 30,000 men of the Prince of Parma's army. Walsingham believed that the best way to defend the English coast was to have at each of the three potential landing sites a force

of 1,000 footmen and 200 cavalrymen, to remain there until the Spaniards' intentions were clear.

By now naval commanders on the English south coast were receiving and weighing news of the movements of Spanish ships. Breton sailors in Dunkirk reported seeing 150 'ships of war of the King of Spain' sailing in a company from Cape Finisterre. The information had reached Dover by means of an English merchant called Skofield. However, there were competing reports of the Armada's readiness. In early June Sir Horatio Palavicino received out of Italy intelligence that men, money, ships and ammunition for the Armada were far from plentiful. Palavicino believed the source, a Genoese commander in the Spanish fleet. His assessment, wrongly, was that King Philip would wait for more favourable conditions to launch the Enterprise.

But for all the uncertainty, as well as the energetic exchange of letters between Elizabeth's senior advisers in June and early July 1588, one fact was clear. Though England's defences were far from ready to withstand the sheer weight of a concerted assault by the King of Spain's forces, Walsingham, Burghley and their colleagues had a very clear idea of the form and scale of what was heading towards the coast of England.

While it prepared in the summer of 1588 for the Spanish invasion it had so long expected, Elizabeth's government engaged King Philip in peace negotiations. The simple truth was that England was poorly prepared both militarily and financially for the fight. Its limited resources of men and money were already heavily committed in the Low Countries. Royal coffers could not hope to pay for those troops and sailors waiting for the Duke of Parma to arrive, and for this purpose the government turned to the Merchant Adventurers of London and Sir Horatio Palavicino to raise the huge sum of £40,000. In a strange way, the kind of information Walsingham was able to gather about the forces of Parma and the Duke of Medina Sidonia over months only prolonged the agonies of expectation. Intelligence perhaps shifted the balance of probability one way or another, but it could not in the end win a battle at sea or on land. It certainly could not pay the bills or alter the weather.

When it came, after long months of anxious watching, King Philip's

Great Armada of 130 ships was defeated both by the weather and by the virtuosity and aggression of the formidable naval officers under the command of Elizabeth's lord admiral, Charles Howard, second Baron Howard of Effingham. Combat between the two fleets, which were roughly equal in size, was sporadic but fierce. The Armada was beset by accident. The weather in the English Channel was terrible, and Medina Sidonia's fleet was battered by gales. One ship had to be abandoned because of an explosion of gunpowder. Another, the *Nuestra Señora del Rosario*, one of the Armada's pay ships carrying 50,000 gold ducats, found itself in difficulty and had to limp behind the other ships. It was captured, with all its gold and guns, by *The Revenge* of Sir Francis Drake. There was a ferocious battle led by two English commanders, John Hawkins and Martin Frobisher. Heading for Calais, Medina Sidonia's navy was harried by the English fleet, whose fire ships caused chaos in the Armada, forcing Spanish captains to cut their cables. Drake, ever aggressive, engaged the enemy ships in close combat.

All of this meant that careful Spanish preparations came to nothing. The final plan for the combined forces of the two dukes was for Medina Sidonia's fleet to give protection to the hundred or so vessels lying in Dunkirk harbour and the 200 boats at Nieuport waiting to carry Parma's army of 26,000 infantry and 1,000 cavalry over to England. They never made it. Instead a broken Armada fled north around the eastern coast of Scotland, pursued as far as the Firth of Forth by an English fleet left with practically no powder and shot. As Lord Admiral Howard put it, 'we put on a brag countenance [a boastful display] and gave them chase'. The Armada, and with it the cherished Enterprise of England, hoped for and then planned for so long, failed.

It was a positively miraculous deliverance. Queen Elizabeth ascribed victory, not to the weather, but to the agency of providence. God's victory in scattering the Great Armada was celebrated in verse:

He made the winds and waters rise  
To scatter all my enemies.

But the failure of King Philip of Spain's Great Armada masked the still dangerous reality facing Elizabeth's England. No amount of English Armada propaganda could disguise what for Spain was a temporary

defeat. There were other ways and methods to carry on the fight against heresy. The Duke of Parma himself anticipated this only a few days before the Armada left port. The duke spoke to one of the English commissioners at the Anglo-Spanish conference in Flanders, saying:

In mine opinion you have more cause to desire [peace] than we, for that if the king my master do lose a battle he shall be able to recover it well enough without harm to himself, being far enough off in Spain; and if the battle be lost of your side, it may be to lose the kingdom and all.

The war could be fought in other ways. It was a lesson no sensible Elizabethan politician, inoculated against his own government's anti-Spanish propaganda, could ever afford to forget. Sir Francis Walsingham, for one, felt that the breaking up of the Great Armada had done little good: 'our half doings doth breed dishonour,' he wrote, 'and leaveth the disease uncured'.

Throughout the years of the 1590s the fight against Spain consumed men and money, corroding the morale of Elizabeth's subjects. English troops, ordinary men impressed into service, fought in the Low Countries. There was fighting, too, in Ireland, a long and debilitating campaign against the rebel Earl of Tyrone. The expense of all these commitments was enormous. They were paid for by loans, much of the money borrowed from the merchant community of London. The sums are eye-watering: £575,000 on the war at sea, £1,420,000 on the campaign in the Low Countries and £1,924,000 in Ireland. The Tudor crown saddled itself with debts it could not hope to repay. More than this, mutinies of troops, failed harvests, long and murderous outbreaks of plague and influenza, rising prices and fears of social unrest all punctuated and haunted the 1590s.

If this seems a cheerless way to write of the years after 1588 – was not the Armada the glorious moment of Elizabethan ambition and prosperity? – the facts speak for themselves. Elizabeth was fifty-seven years old in 1590. She had no heir and no inclination to make a new succession law. Her successor by default was likely to be King James of Scotland. What would really happen on her death was open to the vagaries of international politics and the collective will of an English

political elite now more inclined to squabbling and faction than it had been so far in Elizabeth's reign. Sheer chance would surely play its part. With the rise of young and ambitious courtiers like Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex – at twenty-five in 1590 the favourite of the queen – some of the old continuities and structures at court and in council were quickly disappearing.

In fact a whole generation of Elizabeth's first advisers was dying away, leaving new men to navigate old and difficult problems of war and foreign adventure. Sir Francis Walsingham died in 1590, and along with him went his system of espionage, which was much too expensive to maintain in times of crippling government expenditure on war. Thomas Phelippes was left without a master, having to make the best of uncertain times. For the first time ever in his life Phelippes faced professional failure, even humiliation, in his espionage work. He continued to operate his own secret agents at home and abroad. But, experienced as he was, he found employment in the young Earl of Essex's fledgling intelligence service a precarious business.

The great constant of the Elizabethan political world was Lord Burghley, who, though he said he wanted to retire, found it impossible to release the mechanisms of power and patronage. Ever the dynast, Burghley was training as an apprentice his son, Robert, a young man of immense ability and talent. In 1591 Sir Robert Cecil, together with his father, recruited a secret agent called John Cecil, alias John Snowden, a priest close to the circles of Robert Persons and William Allen. For Sir Robert it was an early chance to practise the technique he would later perfect as the queen's secretary, for by the end of Elizabeth's reign in 1603 he oversaw an intelligence system probably even more formidable than Sir Francis Walsingham's had been.

These were years of war, strain and uncertainty. More than ever before we begin to hear in the 1590s the sharp notes of paranoia and anxiety as men like the Earl of Essex, Lord Burghley and Sir Robert Cecil fought their political battles at court with their spies and agents.