



THE ELIZABETHAN AGE

The reign of Queen Elizabeth. On Mary's death, Elizabeth (1558-1603), the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, became queen of England. Her reign coincided with one of the most prosperous and glorious periods in English history. To pacify the country, troubled by religious and social contrasts, Elizabeth adopted a cautious policy to be accepted by the majority of the people.

The Act of Supremacy of 1559 once again abolished any link with Rome and slightly modified the royal supremacy subordinating the new established English Church to the State. The Uniformity Act of the same year imposed The Book of Common Prayer, but it preserved Catholic rites and the ecclesiastic hierarchy. This meant that the English Church remained Catholic in form and doctrine, though «reformed» through the abolition of the Pope's authority. This compromise appeared unsatisfactory both to the Catholics and to Protestants who expected more radical changes, but in the long run it gained general acceptance. However some of the most extreme Catholics regarded Elizabeth as illegitimate, and a group of Protestants, called Puritans because of their aim at further «purification» of the English Church, began to organize independently.

Besides religious problems, Elizabeth's reign was characterized by political and economic changes. The enclosures and the confiscation of monasteries contributed to the transformation of agriculture. A large part of the lands had fallen into the hands of owners determined to exploit them to the uttermost, and the new way of cultivation led to the creation of capitalistic agriculture. But as a reverse, the dispossession of the peasantry, the concentration of the wealth in the hands of merchants and capitalistic farmers caused a high level of unemployment which all the legislation of the time proved incapable of checking. The problem was solved only later when the growing industries could absorb the mass of dispossessed peasants. Another characteristic of the period was the origin and the consolidation of the chartered companies engaged in the development of trade in particular areas. The international situation at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign was a difficult one. The Catholic Church had reorganized its forces in the Council of Trent and Spain, the most dangerous rival of England, was the closest ally of the Papacy. The English merchants of the time were well determined to break the Spanish monopoly, as it was an essential condition to the expansion of the trade. This ambition was shared by the Dutch, so the struggle assumed the character of a religious contrast between Catholic and Protestant forces.

Philip of Spain, having lost his political control over England after Mary's death, tried to recover it by marrying Elizabeth; but the queen did not want to repeat Mary Tudor's mistake, so only to gain time she allowed Philip to believe it possible. In the meantime an unidentified fleet, mostly composed of English and Dutch pirates made raids in the Channel and in the North Sea against Spanish and French shipping: among them there were men such as Francis Drake (c. 1540-1596) and John Hawkins (1532-1595).

The tension between England and Spain increased when Mary Stuart (1542-1587), dispossessed queen of Scotland (1542-1567), took shelter in England (1568). Mary was a Catholic, but as a descendant from Henry VIII's sister Margaret, she was the nearest heir to the throne of England. The Catholics looked upon her as a prospective queen and she became the centre of conspiracy against Elizabeth. The situation became much more critical when in 1570 Pope Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth, and the Jesuits, the highly trained body created by the Counter Reformation, began to preach seditions against the queen. Elizabeth, who had avoided systematic persecutions, was compelled to enforce the penal laws against the Catholics.

In 1572 Philip's protest against the raids made by the English ships in the Channel was followed by the capture of Brill in Holland. This provoked a general rising in the Netherlands which Philip's troops failed to overcome because of the secret help the rebels received from England. The «cold war» between England and Spain lasted till 1588; the year before Mary Stuart, accused of conspiracy, was executed. She had bequeathed her claims to the English throne to Philip. The Spanish king armed a powerful fleet, the Invincible Armada, to destroy the English naval power and invade the country. The battle in the Channel was won by the English, whose ships were lighter and faster than the Spanish galleons. Furthermore a terrible storm helped to disperse the Spanish fleet. After 1588 the offensive passed to the English who cut off Spain from the routes to her colonies. The victory of England was the victory of the new classes against the most reactionary feudal forces in Europe.

The conquest of Ireland. In the 15th century English political control over Ireland was slight and a large part of the English settlers merged with the native population and adopted their language and customs.

Henry VII tried to restore the English supremacy over the country. During his reign Sir Edward Poyning (1459-1521), the king's Deputy, imposed the Poyning's Law (1495) limiting the power of the Irish Parliament and subduing their acts and laws to the previous sanction of the English Crown.

During Henry VIII's reign the rebellion led by Fitzgerald of Kildare (1513-1537), who belonged to one of the most powerful clans, provoked the intervention of the English troops. Thomas Fitzgerald, known as Silken Thomas, was captured and executed; in 1541 Henry VIII assumed the title of king of Ireland.





After the English Reformation every attempt to impose new religious beliefs in Ireland encountered a stubborn resistance. In 1595 a new rebellion broke out in the country and the Irish army, under the leadership of Hugh O'Neill (1550-1616), Earl of Tyrone, defeated the English forces in 1598. Every English effort to crash the persisting rebellion failed because of the disobedience of Queen Elizabeth's favourite, the Earl of Essex. Order was restored only in 1603 by Lord Mountjoy (Charles Blount, c. 1562-1606), who subdued the country; O'Neill, to avoid capture, fled abroad.

Under the reign of James I the introduction of the so called «plantation system» provoked new discords. In Ulster (the north of Ireland) the native population was dispossessed of their lands by Scottish Presbyterian settlers.

The reign of James I. On Elizabeth's death in 1603, James VI of Scotland, son of Mary Stuart, became king of England and Scotland under the title of James I (1603-1625), and the two countries were united in one kingdom, though they maintained administrative independence till 1707.

James I was a foreigner, half Scottish and half French, and he did not possess the exceptional qualities of Elizabeth. In tackling religious problems he adopted an uncompromising policy which disappointed both the Puritans and the Catholics. The former expected stricter reforms from a king brought up as a Presbyterian, the latter expected more tolerance from the son of Mary Stuart. The Catholic reaction provoked the Gunpowder Plot in 1605. The members of the Parliament and the king himself scarcely escaped being blown up in the conspiracy led by Guy Fawkes (1570-1606). The anniversary of the plot is still celebrated in England: on November 5th people use to light fires in the streets and to burn effigies of Guy Fawkes.

During James' reign a great number of religious opponents fled the country to take shelter abroad. An important event was the sailing of the Mayflower to North America, where a group of English Puritans founded a colony which was the first step in the colonization of the country.

In foreign policy James was an active defender of the peace: he tried to avoid all entanglements which might lead to wars, even at the risk of diminishing English prestige and influence abroad. But on the whole, James I's reign was marked by instability and tension. The main difficulty facing the king was to balance his budget. In the 16th century prices were rising throughout Europe and the Crown's revenues had become insufficient for the complex organization of the State. But the primary cause of the financial difficulties which troubled the country was not generally understood and entirely attributed to bad management. Moreover the influence of king's court, his own extravagancies in granting favours to unworthy favourites, increased the discontent. His continuous demands for money were either voted in part or resisted by Parliament. To face the increasing opposition, James appealed to the Divine Right of kings, deriving directly from God, and asserted that neither Parliament nor any other earthly power had the right to limit his authority.

This doctrine laid the seed for further dissensions, and the long working agreement between the Crown and the Parliament, which had characterized the Tudor period, was seriously compromised. James' lack of political judgement prevented him from realizing the new trends of the time. The absolutism of his predecessors had been based on popular consent, and in the Tudor period the Monarchy had exerted a specific function in destroying what was left of feudal forces and in creating the premises for a new capitalistic economy. But at James' accession to the throne the situation was different: the arising middle class began to see Monarchy, itself a feudal institution, as an obstacle to further expansions.

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF EVENTS

1558-1603 Reign of Elizabeth I: 1559 → Act of Supremacy and Uniformity Act; 1568 → Mary Stuart took shelter in England; 1587 → Mary Stuart was executed; 1588 → Defeat of the «Invincible Armada»; 1598 → The Irish army defeated the English forces; 1603 → Lord Mountjoy subdued Ireland.

1603-1625 Reign of James I: 1605 → Gunpowder Plot.

