Elizabeth I
I.   Introduction

Elizabeth I (1533-1603), queen of England and Ireland (1558-1603), daughter of Henry VIII and his second wife, Anne Boleyn. Elizabeth was the longest-reigning English monarch in nearly two centuries and the first woman to successfully occupy the English throne. Called Glorianna and Good Queen Bess, Elizabeth enjoyed enormous popularity during her life and became an even greater legend after her death.

Elizabeth’s reign was marked by her effective use of Parliament and the Privy Council, a small advisory body of the important state officials, and by the development of legal institutions in the English counties. Elizabeth firmly established Protestantism in England, encouraged English enterprise and commerce, and defended the nation against the powerful Spanish naval force known as the Spanish Armada. Her reign was noted for the English Renaissance, an outpouring of poetry and drama led by William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, and Christopher Marlowe that remains unsurpassed in English literary history (see English Literature). She was the last of the Tudor monarchs, never marrying or producing an heir, and was succeeded by her closest relative, James VI of Scotland.

II.   Background and Early Life

Elizabeth was born at Greenwich Palace in London on September 7, 1533. Her parents, Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, wanted a son as heir and were not pleased with the birth of a daughter. When she was two her mother was beheaded for adultery, and Elizabeth was exiled from court. She was later placed under the protection of Catherine Parr, Henry’s sixth wife, and educated in the same household as her half-brother, Edward. Both were raised Protestant. The noted scholar Roger Ascham later served as her tutor, and he educated her as a potential heir to the throne rather than as an insignificant daughter of the monarch. Elizabeth underwent rigorous training in Greek, Latin, rhetoric, and philosophy and was an intellectually gifted pupil.

Edward VI succeeded his father in 1547 at the age of nine. Because of her position as a member of the royal family, Elizabeth became a pawn in the intrigues of the nobles who governed in the boy’s name. One of them twice proposed marriage to her. When her Roman Catholic half-sister, Mary I, inherited the crown in 1553, Elizabeth faced different dangers. She was now sought out to lead Protestant conspiracies, despite the fact that she had supported Mary’s accession and attended Catholic services. In 1554 Mary had Elizabeth imprisoned in the Tower of London, briefly threatened her with execution, and then placed her under house arrest. Elizabeth lived quietly at her family’s country retreat north of London until she became queen upon her sister’s death in 1558. Elizabeth’s experiences as a child and young adult helped her develop keen political instincts that allowed her to skillfully balance aristocratic factions and court favorites during her long reign.

III.   Elizabethan Economy
The nation that Elizabeth inherited was experiencing a steady increase in population. During the 16th century the population of England and Wales would roughly double, and by Elizabeth’s death in 1603 would reach 5 million. The continued population growth placed strains on the economy, which was made worse by serious harvest failures in every decade of Elizabeth’s reign. Prices for food and clothing skyrocketed in what became known as the Great Inflation. The 1590s were the worst years of the century, marked by starvation, epidemic disease, and roving bands of vagrants looking for work.

Elizabeth’s government enacted legislation known as the Poor Laws, which made every local parish responsible for its own poor, created workhouses, and severely punished homeless beggars. Parliament also passed bills to ensure fair prices in times of shortage and to regulate wages in times of unemployment. One of the queen’s most important economic decisions was to issue a new currency that contained a standard amount of precious metal. This raised confidence in the currency and also allowed businesses to enter into long-term financial contracts.

During Elizabeth’s reign, England expanded trade overseas and the merchant community grew. Private shipbuilding boomed and navigational advances made long sea voyages safer. England’s chief commodity was woolen cloth, traded mostly at the Dutch port of Antwerp for finished goods and such luxuries as French wines. Cloth exports grew over the course of the reign, but suffered from competition from finer Spanish products and from Antwerp’s decline after its harbor silted up and became impassable by the mid-1560s. In the 1560s financier Sir Thomas Gresham founded the Royal Exchange to help merchants find secure markets for their goods.

At the same time, new enterprises like the Muscovy Company were chartered to find outlets for English products. In 1600 the government granted the English East India Company a monopoly to trade in Asia, Africa, and America. The desire to expand overseas trade was also a motive in the ventures of English explorers such as Sir Francis Drake, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, and Sir Walter Raleigh. Such adventurers established the first English outposts in North America.

IV. Elizabethan Religion

Elizabeth’s accession marked the final change in the nation’s official religion. Her father and half-brother established Protestantism in England, but her half-sister, Mary, attempted forcibly to restore Catholicism. As Henry VIII’s reign had terrorized Catholics, so Mary’s persecuted Protestants. Under Mary, prominent Protestant clergymen were either executed or they fled abroad. The power of the pope was reestablished in England, though even Mary could do nothing to restore the church lands sold off during Henry’s reign.
Elizabeth inherited a highly charged religious situation, which she handled with great skill. Although there was never any doubt she would return England to Protestantism, Elizabeth had to contend with opposition from both Catholics and radical Protestants. Catholic bishops and peers controlled the House of Lords and fought Elizabeth’s first attempts to bring back Protestantism. Protestants exiled under the reign of Mary I returned to England, and many brought with them new and radical Protestant ideas, especially those of John Calvin, a French religious reformer. Calvin stressed the importance of predestination, the belief that salvation was predetermined for some people and not for others. Calvin also wanted the clergy to play a less important role in the state church and to concern themselves with preaching the gospel rather than in becoming bishops.

Under Elizabeth, England again broke with the pope, Catholic services were forbidden, priests were allowed to marry, and relics and decorations were removed from the churches. In attempting to diffuse the religious situation, Elizabeth tried to accommodate Catholic sensibilities in matters she judged less essential. She used Parliament to establish the official doctrine of the new church, which ensured that the voice of Catholic peers would be heard. Under the Act of Supremacy, she assumed the title of Supreme Governor of the Church, rather than the title of Supreme Head, a move to placate critics because Supreme Governor sounded less powerful. She would not allow retaliation against those who had assisted Mary, and she treated with some leniency those who refused to swear an oath to her supremacy.

The English form of Protestantism was defined in part by two measures enacted during Elizabeth’s reign—the Act of Uniformity of 1559 and the Thirty-nine Articles of 1563. The Act of Uniformity established a common prayer book and set the basic ceremonies of the church. The Thirty-nine Articles established religious doctrine that governed the church until the English Revolution in the 1640s. Both acts were compromises that favored the views of more conservative or moderate Protestant groups.

Elizabeth viewed the church as an inseparable part of her monarchy and would not tolerate challenges to it. Such challenges came from both Catholics, who clung to the old faith and plotted to remove the queen, and from Puritans, radical Protestants who wanted to abolish all traces of Catholicism (see Puritanism).

Catholic challenges and plots persisted through much of Elizabeth’s reign, and Elizabeth reacted to them strongly. In 1569 a group of powerful Catholic nobles in northern England rose in rebellion but were savagely repressed. The northern earls were executed, their property and those of their followers was confiscated, and their heirs were deprived of their inheritance. In 1570 the pope excommunicated Elizabeth, sanctioning Catholic efforts to dethrone her. In 1571 an international conspiracy was uncovered to assassinate her in favor of her cousin, Mary, Queen of Scots. Although Mary was beheaded in 1587
after years of being at the center of Catholic plots against Elizabeth, such plots did not end until England defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588.

Elizabeth’s battles against the Puritans were less conclusive. She suspended Archbishop of Canterbury Edmund Grindal when he would not punish Puritans who refused to kneel or make the sign of the cross. She also imprisoned a member of Parliament in 1576 for introducing a bill to change the prayer book, and she refused to accept the Lambeth Articles of 1595, which contained a Calvinist, and more radical, interpretation of the doctrine of predestination. But Elizabeth’s efforts did not stop the Puritans from criticizing the established church, attacking bishops, and converting others to their views. The significance of the Elizabethan religious settlement is that it was able to hold the vast majority of the people together, despite being a compromise few would have chosen.

V. Elizabethan Government

The difficulties Elizabeth experienced governing the English state were enhanced by prejudices against women rulers. Though she presented herself in the traditional images of the monarchy, such as carrying the sword of state, commissioning a portrait showing her bestriding the counties of England, and even appearing in armor, Elizabeth realized the importance of securing the cooperation of powerful men in order to rule effectively. She made extensive use of the Privy Council and summoned ten parliaments during her reign. She used Parliament to raise taxes and to endorse her policies, but also allowed its members to suggest laws regarding local issues, something rarely permitted by prior monarchs. The House of Lords and the House of Commons both grew in size during her reign, but they remained councils of the queen rather than parts of an independent legislature. When she did not like the advice Parliament offered, she ended its sessions.

Elizabeth effectively expanded royal government by increasing the role of sheriffs in the counties and by relying upon justices of the peace to perform the basic administrative work of local government. Thousands of gentlemen served in this capacity, each an official, if unpaid, member of the regime. Meeting in quarter sessions (that is, in sessions held four times a year), justices enforced everything from the Poor Laws to statutes against theft.

At the center of her government, Elizabeth was fortunate in having a succession of capable ministers, including Sir Nicholas Bacon, Sir Francis Walsingham, and Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, who was her personal favorite. She favored Leicester so extensively their relationship became the subject of rumors. But the ablest of all Elizabethan ministers was William Cecil, 1st Baron Burghley, who held the offices of secretary and treasurer. Burghley served the queen loyally for 40 years and more than anyone else guided Elizabeth’s policies.

Burghley’s lifelong concern was for the queen to provide an heir for succession. Having refused suitors pressed upon her when a princess, as a queen, Elizabeth was never able to
make a decision to marry and she had no desire to share power with a husband. She rejected her sister Mary’s husband, Philip II, king of Spain, who wished to remain allied with English naval power, as well as nearly every eligible European royal bachelor, including a future king of France. At first Burghley feared Elizabeth would marry his rival, the earl of Leicester, whose wife had died under mysterious circumstances. Then he feared Elizabeth might suddenly die, throwing the kingdom into chaos, a fear magnified by her bout with smallpox in 1562.

The failure to settle the succession encouraged aristocratic factions to grow around the queen. Until her execution, Mary, Queen of Scots, was a focus of intrigue. In her prime, Elizabeth was adept at balancing competing claimants for her favor, keeping them loyal and dependent. But toward the end of her reign, the contest between Burghley and Robert Devereux, earl of Essex, led to an open rebellion against her. Essex’s attempt to overthrow Elizabeth in 1601 was successfully put down, but it demonstrated that the queen’s power had weakened.

VI. Foreign Policy

The failure to secure her succession was also a factor in the international struggles for power in which England engaged. Because she would not marry a Catholic prince, she was drawn into the conflicts of European Protestants. Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558 at the end of a disastrous war that her sister Mary fought against France. One of Elizabeth’s first acts was to conclude a treaty that gave up English control over the French port of Calais, a blow to England’s prestige. Despite this truce, trouble with France continued over developments in Scotland. Mary, Queen of Scots, a Catholic, was married briefly to the king of France, and after his death in 1560 returned to rule Scotland. But Scotland was undergoing its own Protestant Reformation that was supported by Elizabeth and, with France’s assistance, opposed by Mary. In 1568 Mary lost her Scottish crown and was exiled to England, where she continued to conspire against Elizabeth.

A similar struggle took place on French soil in 1562 and 1563, as French Protestants, supported by Elizabeth, fought for religious freedom from their Catholic monarch. English military expeditions to Scotland and France proved expensive and ineffective. Troops were badly trained, poorly equipped, and none too eager for battle. Most importantly, Elizabeth never gave her wholehearted support to the French Protestants, whom she regarded as rebels against their monarch.

The most significant English international expeditions were in support of the Dutch Protestants. In 1581 the Dutch, then part of the Spanish Empire, proclaimed their independence, which was contested by Philip II of Spain, a Catholic. Spain was the most powerful nation in Europe, and the Dutch could not hope to survive as an independent nation without outside help. The earl of Leicester persuaded a reluctant Elizabeth to support the Dutch Protestants, and in 1585 he was given command of an army that fought
with the Dutch. The campaign was a disaster—not only did it fail to prevent the loss of the crucial port of Antwerp, but it also roused the anger of Philip II against England.

Philip feared that English assistance would hinder his efforts to reconquer the Dutch, especially since English ships could easily send vital supplies. In 1587 Philip began organizing an immense naval fleet, the Spanish Armada, for a direct attack upon England. His objectives were to destroy the English navy, force Elizabeth out of the war in the Netherlands, and gain concessions for English Catholics. The Spanish Armada, one of the most powerful fighting forces ever known, was no match for the “Protestant wind” that blew many of the Spanish ships off course in August 1588, or for the smaller, swifter English vessels that were able to fire cannonballs more quickly than the Spanish galleons. The defeat of the Spanish Armada was the high point of the queen’s reign and united the nation. But it did not end the war with Spain, which continued for the remaining 15 years of Elizabeth’s life. She died on March 23, 1603, and was succeeded by her closest relative, James VI of Scotland, who became James I of England.

VII. Assessment

When Elizabeth died, one of the great epochs of English history ended. Her 45-year rule decisively shaped the future of England as a stable monarchy governed through the cooperation of crown and local elites. The roles played by Parliament and the justices of the peace, two of the most characteristic of all English institutions, solidified during her reign and were indispensable thereafter. The Protestant religion was firmly established as England’s faith, and though religious conflict was to be a serious problem for another century, it was within the context of the Elizabethan church settlement that the battles were fought. The defeat of the Spanish Armada was a cause for national celebration, and “Glorious ’88” was spoken of generations later when Elizabeth’s birthday was still celebrated as a national holiday. The defeat of Spain established the glory of the English navy and inspired merchants and explorers toward colonization of a wider world.

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