

Elizabeth I: An Overview

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A different kind of Queen

The reign of Elizabeth I is often thought of as a Golden Age. It was a time of extravagance and luxury in which a flourishing popular culture was expressed through writers such as Shakespeare, and explorers like Drake and Raleigh sought to expand England's territory overseas. This sense of well-being was embodied by Queen Elizabeth who liked to wear sumptuous costumes and jewellery, and be entertained in style at her court. But life in Tudor England did not always reflect such splendour. The sixteenth century was also a time when the poor became poorer, books and opinions were censored, and plots to overthrow the Queen were rife. Elizabeth's ministers had to employ spies and even use torture to gain information about threats to her life

In 1558 the Protestant preacher John Knox wrote, 'It is more than a monster in nature that a woman should reign and bear empire over man.' So was he right? Were women fit to rule the country? The people had lived through the unpopular reign of Mary I, known as 'Bloody Mary' for her merciless persecution of Protestants. Lady Jane Grey was Queen for only a matter of days before being toppled and eventually executed. And Mary Queen of Scots made a series of ill-judged decisions which led her to the executioner's block in 1587.

Elizabeth was a different kind of Queen: quick-witted, clever and able to use feminine wiles to get her own way. Elizabeth could be as ruthless and calculating as any king before her but at the same time she was vain, sentimental and easily swayed by flattery. She liked to surround herself with attractive people and her portraits were carefully vetted to make sure that no physical flaws were ever revealed.

She relied upon the ministers close to her but would infuriate them with her indecision - 'It maketh me weary of life,' remarked one. Faced with a dilemma - for example whether or not to sign the execution warrant of Mary Queen of Scots - Elizabeth would busy herself with other matters for months on end. Only when the patience of her ministers was running short would she be forced to make up her mind. She had a formidable intellect, and her sharp tongue would quickly settle any argument - in her favour.

Early years

So what influences had shaped the young Elizabeth? Her mother was the ill-fated Anne Boleyn who had caught the eye of Henry VIII at court. He was soon bewitched by her, arranging to divorce Catherine of Aragon and quickly making Anne his second wife. But her fate was sealed when she failed to provide Henry with what he desperately wanted - a son. Everyone, from court astrologers to Henry himself, was convinced Anne would give birth to a boy. It was a girl, Elizabeth. Henry, beside himself with disappointment, did not attend the christening. When Elizabeth was just two years old her mother was beheaded at the Tower of London.

Elizabeth was brought up in the care of governesses and tutors at Hatfield House and spent her days studying Greek and Latin with the Cambridge scholar, Roger Ascham. In later years Katherine Parr, Henry's sixth wife, took a keen interest in the young Elizabeth and made sure that she was educated to the highest standards. Elizabeth was taught the art of public speaking, unheard of for women at the time. But the ability to address a large number of people, from ministers in Parliament to troops on the battlefield, stood Elizabeth in good stead for the future. She learnt how to turn the tide of opinion in her favour, and this became one of her most effective weapons.

Elizabeth is crowned

The main part of Hatfield House, built after the reign of Elizabeth I © On 17 November 1558 it is said that Princess Elizabeth was sitting under an oak tree at Hatfield House when a horseman appeared with the news that would change her life forever. Elizabeth, aged twenty-five, was now Queen of England. Mary I had died unpopular with her people and tormented by her own inability to produce an heir. The country now looked to the young Queen for salvation. A new era was dawning, the age of Elizabeth I.

The celebrations for the Coronation, two months later, were spectacular. As Elizabeth walked along the carpet laid out for her journey to Westminster Abbey, the crowds rushed forward to cut out pieces as souvenirs. Elizabeth made sure that everyone - down to the lowliest beggar - played a part, pausing to listen to congratulations from ordinary people on the street. She knew that, in political terms, she needed their support but she also felt a deep sense of responsibility for their welfare. For their part, the people were thrilled with their new Queen. Elizabeth was an instant hit.

As soon as her Council had been appointed, Elizabeth made religion her priority. She recognised how important it was to establish a clear religious framework and between 1559 and 1563 introduced the acts which made up the Church Settlement. This returned England to the Protestant faith stating that public worship, religious books such as the Bible and prayers were to be conducted in English rather than Latin. The new Book of Common Prayer was introduced, adapted from earlier Books used under the Protestant Edward VI.

But Elizabeth was careful not to erase all traces of Catholic worship and retained, for example, the traditions of candlesticks, crucifixes and clerical robes. By pursuing a policy of moderation she was attempting to maintain the status quo and, although Puritans were particularly upset by the continuance of some Catholic traditions, an uneasy compromise was reached and maintained throughout her reign.

The question of marriage

The welfare of her people was of paramount importance to Elizabeth and she once remarked, 'I am already bound unto a husband which is the Kingdom of England.' But her reluctance to marry was to become one of her biggest headaches and would cause her ministers, particularly the anxious Lord Burghley, sleepless nights. Marriage was a political

necessity and a way of forming a useful alliance with a European power. Children would secure the line of succession. This was Elizabeth's duty and she should get on with it.

Her ministers knew and Elizabeth certainly knew. But there was no announcement, no wedding bells. The years passed until in 1566 Parliament refused to grant Elizabeth any further funds until the matter was settled. This was a big mistake. No one told the Queen what to do and, using the skills of rhetoric she had been taught, Elizabeth addressed members of Parliament. The welfare of the country was her priority, not marriage. She would marry when it was convenient and would thank Parliament to keep out of what was a personal matter. This was clever talk from the Queen. She knew the political implications of remaining unmarried but effectively banned further discussion.

That is not to say that Elizabeth didn't enjoy the company of men. On the contrary she thrived on the adoration of her ministers and knew that flirtation was often the easiest way to get things done. In the political arena she encouraged the attentions of Henry, Duke of Anjou, and later his brother Francis, Duke of Alençon, which could form a useful alliance with France against Spain. But neither proposal led to marriage. As the political landscape in Europe changed, the Queen knew that she would need room to manoeuvre. More than that, Elizabeth simply did not wish to be married. 'If I followed the inclination of my nature, it is this,' she said, 'beggar woman and single, far rather than queen and married.'

Elizabeth's favourite

Despite all these tactics Elizabeth was capable of falling in love, and the one who came closest to winning her heart was Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. They had known each other for years, and he was one of the first to be appointed to her Council. But their intimacy alarmed the other ministers. Leicester was an unknown quantity. He had the ear of the Queen and might poison her mind against them. Their anxiety amused Elizabeth, and this gave her an excuse to exert her independence every now and then. But just how close was she to Leicester? The Queen asserted her virginity throughout her life, but was also an attractive woman who thrived on male attention. Whether or not the relationship was ever consummated remains open to speculation.

The dashing Earl of Leicester was something of a showman. He wanted to impress the Queen and, in the summer of 1575, threw a party at Kenilworth Castle which no one could forget. It took years to prepare for. He altered the layout of his castle, building luxurious new apartments for the Queen and her huge entourage. The entertainment lasted several days with fine banquets, jousting and spectacular firework displays. He had shown the Queen how much he adored her and, just as he had hoped, eclipsed everyone else. It was Leicester's finest hour.

No matter that the entertainment at Kenilworth practically bankrupted him. That was par for the course. Ministers longed for the glory and prestige a visit from the Queen would bestow on them, and would decorate new residences in her honour. Houses were even converted into the shape of an 'E' to flatter her. But years of work and expense often ended in disappointment when she failed to visit.

Elizabeth was clever to encourage this degree of devotion. She was well aware that plots were being hatched against her and that she needed the undivided loyalty of those around her as protection. In 1568 one such problem presented itself to Elizabeth in the shape of Mary Queen of Scots.

The Scottish Queen

Mary was born at Linlithgow Palace in Scotland in 1542, the daughter of James V of Scotland and the French Mary of Guise. She became Queen of Scotland aged only six days following the death of her father, and spent her early childhood with her mother in Scotland. In 1548 the French King, Henry II, proposed that the young Mary would be an ideal wife for his son, Francis, the marriage forming a perfect alliance between the two countries at a time when England was attempting to exert control over Scotland. Mary went to live at the French court and at the age of fifteen married Francis, heir to the French throne.

Francis II reigned for only a few months with Mary as his Queen and, when he died in 1560, Mary was left without a role. She decided to return as Queen to Scotland, agreeing to recognise the Protestant Church as long as she could privately worship as a Catholic. The Scots regarded this with some suspicion and John Knox stirred up anti-Catholic feeling against her. It was not, however, until she married Lord Darnley in July 1565 that things took a turn for the worse. As time passed it became clear to Mary that her husband was, in fact, an arrogant bully with a drinking problem. Now pregnant with Darnley's child she turned for support to her secretary, David Riccio.

From this point on, events spiralled out of control. In March 1566 Darnley and his accomplices burst in on Mary at Holyroodhouse and stabbed Riccio to death. A year later Darnley himself was murdered, his residence in Edinburgh blown apart by an explosion. Mary had grown close to the ruthless Earl of Bothwell and rumour soon spread that Bothwell and Mary had been responsible for the murder, particularly following their hasty marriage a few weeks later. But by now the Scots had had enough of Mary and, imprisoned at Lochleven Castle, she was forced to abdicate the Scottish throne. Her young son was crowned James VI on 29 July 1567.

Mary and Elizabeth

But Mary was not giving up without a fight. Having already shown herself to be a poor judge of character, Mary now made the huge mistake of misjudging Elizabeth. If only she could meet her, she thought, Elizabeth would rally to her cause. Ignoring the pleas of her advisors Mary managed to escape from Lochleven and, disguised as a man, fled the country. She landed on English soil ready to meet her fellow Queen.

But Elizabeth had other ideas. Mary was the granddaughter of Henry VIII's elder sister, Margaret, and so had a claim to the English throne. She had married Darnley whose lineage could be traced back to Henry VII, creating an even stronger claim. Worse still, Elizabeth had herself been declared illegitimate in a statute which had never been formally repealed, and knew that many Catholics considered Mary to be the rightful Queen of England. Her

presence in England could spark a Catholic uprising. Mary was immediately taken to stay at Carlisle Castle by one of Elizabeth's ministers but as days turned into weeks, she became suspicious. Eventually, sent to stay in the unwelcoming Tutbury Castle, the truth dawned on her. She was a prisoner.

Elizabeth, meanwhile, was paralysed by indecision. She did not wish to meet the woman she considered her rival, but knew that if she released Mary her own life would be in danger. Elizabeth remained, however, fascinated by the Scottish Queen. Mary was said to be a great beauty who exerted a strange power over men and, whenever any minister returned from a visit to the now belligerent Mary, he was quizzed by the Queen on her looks, her clothes, her attractiveness compared to herself. Similarly Mary would ask after Elizabeth. But the two Queens never met.

Plots and conspiracies

As predicted, Mary quickly became the focus of plots to overthrow Elizabeth and return England to the Catholic faith. In 1569 the Northern Uprising failed when the Catholic Earls, marching southwards, discovered that Mary had quickly been moved from Tutbury to Coventry and their plans to rescue her were thwarted. The Ridolfi Plot of 1571 went further by enlisting Spanish support to depose Elizabeth and place Mary on the throne. It was clear that, as long as Mary Queen of Scots was alive, Elizabeth's life would be in danger.

Francis Walsingham, one of Elizabeth's most loyal ministers, was acutely aware of this. He set out to nail Mary and, in 1586, his moment came. Walsingham's spies discovered that she was secretly corresponding with a group of Catholic plotters and, having intercepted her letters, they forged a postscript in her hand asking for the identities of those involved. The names and details were duly supplied by the plotters. At last Walsingham had proof of her guilt.

Mary is executed

Mary's trial began on 15 October 1586 at Fotheringhay. But she was not allowed a lawyer and, attempting to defend herself, was not even permitted to consult her own papers. Found guilty of treason, Mary was sentenced to death. Problem solved. But Walsingham had reckoned without the Queen's reluctance to sign the execution warrant. To Elizabeth, Mary was a fellow Queen. To execute any Queen was a precedent she did not wish to set, for her own sake. She also feared that Mary's relations in Europe would take revenge on England. As the weeks passed, Elizabeth procrastinated. For someone who disliked making decisions, this was torture.

In February 1587 the warrant was finally signed and the execution took place before the Queen could change her mind. But when Elizabeth heard the bells pealing to celebrate the death of Mary Queen of Scots, she was horrified. It had all happened too quickly. The warrant had been taken to Fotheringhay before she was ready. Elizabeth was inconsolable and locked herself in her room. She wept for days.

As she had feared, Catholic Europe reacted swiftly to the news and the Pope urged Philip of Spain to invade England. Mary's execution would be one of the factors contributing to the Spanish Armada the following year. Her death took a heavy toll on Elizabeth, one observer noting, 'I never knew her fetch a sigh, but when the Queen of Scots was beheaded.'

Elizabeth's final years

The 1590s proved a difficult decade for Elizabeth. The question of how to govern Ireland had created terrible problems for the Queen over the years but 1594 saw the start of the Nine Years War in which hundreds of English troops were killed. Elizabeth sent out the impetuous Earl of Essex who only managed to create further difficulties. Her most trusted ministers, including Burghley and Walsingham, passed away. Leicester, to whom she had remained close, died in 1588 and Elizabeth kept his last letter beside her bed until her own death.

The Queen herself was not as sharp as she once had been. Ministers often dealt with matters without consulting her, and she became paranoid about the threat of assassination. But by now Elizabeth was nearly seventy. Her health deteriorated and, when death came on 24 March 1603, it was: 'mildly like a lamb, easily like a ripe apple from the tree'. The crown passed to the Protestant King James VI of Scotland who became King James I of England.

The mourning which followed her death was unprecedented. However, details of the legacy she left the country are open to interpretation. Certainly, her reign had seen England prosper and become a major player in Europe. Protestantism was now firmly established as the country's religion. The people had enjoyed stable government, and Poor Laws had created a new framework of support for the needy. But problems remained. There was widespread corruption amongst ministers involving the abuse of monopolies and tax evasion. Local government was inefficient. Elizabeth had often shied away from making difficult decisions and this had sown the seeds for future conflict, particularly in Ireland.

Elizabeth's greatest achievement lay in the relationship she had forged with her people. She was ahead of her time in her grasp of public relations, and her popularity had remained undimmed. 'This I account the glory of my crown, that I have reigned with your loves,' she said in her Golden Speech of 1601. Elizabeth was rewarded with loyalty and, enhanced by the glow of nostalgia, her own unique place in history.