



Queen Elizabeth

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Elizabeth I is one of the most famous monarchs of England, and one of the most curious and complicated women in history. Her long reign was one of the most important transitional periods in English history, and was a relatively peaceful and prosperous one—this in spite of the fact that all of Europe was reeling from the dislocations of the Reformation at the time, and that England's relationship with Spain, the most powerful country in Europe, was highly antagonistic. Although Elizabeth is not generally recognized as a bastion of personal virtue, she shepherded England through a very treacherous period quite effectively. Elizabeth was the daughter of Henry VIII and his second wife, Anne Boleyn. Her mother fell out of favor with Henry soon after her birth, however, so for her early life Elizabeth was neglected. Henry's sixth wife, Catherine Parr, helped restore her fortunes, and before Henry's death she was named third in line to the throne after her younger brother Edward VI and her older sister Mary I. Although Elizabeth was raised as a protestant, she was too politic to make her personal beliefs a major issue. She therefore remained on reasonably good terms with both the Protestant advisors during her brother's reign, and the Catholic advisors during her sisters reign. She was however, suspected of being involved with a protestant rebellion that occurred early in Mary's reign, and was imprisoned on that account. She denied wrong-doing however, and on Mary's recommendation, was eventually released. When Elizabeth ascended to the throne, she proceed to govern as a Protestant, but did not actively persecute Catholics, and in some cases allowed Catholics to hold high positions in government. Her toleration of religious differences is one of the finer points of her administration and helped unify the country at a time when civil war would have been disastrous. Instead of marrying, Elizabeth had a series of "favorites" and courtiers who competed for her favor. The most famous of these were Robert Dudley, (a.k.a the Earl of Leicester), Sir Walter Raleigh, and the Earl of Essex. The later two came to bad ends, but all three benefited greatly from her favor during most of their lives. She never, however, granted much power to any of her favorites, and left much of the government of the realm in the capable hands of Lord Cecil. Elizabeth's court was also known for its daring seaman, the most notorious being Sir Francis Drake. Sir Richard Grenville, Sir Martin Frobisher, and Sir Humphrey Gilbert were also important explorers of the Elizabethan age. English literature also thrived under her reign, during which William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, and Ben Jonson wrote many of their masterpieces. Although Elizabeth managed to avoid a war with Spain for the early part of her reign, eventually, the two countries came into open conflict. By the time Anglo Spanish Wars broke out however, England was in a good position to defend itself, and had a great many daring sea-men ready to meet the Spanish in battle at sea. The Great Armada was one of the most important naval battles in history because by destroying almost the entire Spanish fleet, England ended Spain's domination of the seas. This not only freed England from the threat of invasion by Spain, but also opened up the possibility of English settlement in the New Worlds. The other war of significance near the end of Elizabeth's reign was the Nine Years War in Ireland. England and Ireland had been at war for much of the 16th century, but it was not until the final years of Elizabeth's reign that the Irish overlords were driven entirely out of Ulster. Elizabeth died after a reign of forty-four years, and was succeeded by her grand-nephew, James VI of Scotland (later James I of England).

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