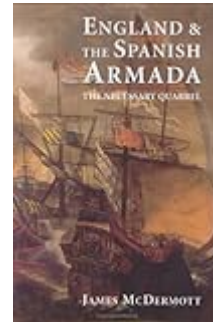


**James McDermott.** *England and the Spanish Armada: The Necessary Quarrel.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. xvi + 411 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10698-5.



**Reviewed by** Thomas Scheben (Independent Scholar)

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Trafalgar, the Battle of Britain, and the English success against the Spanish Armada in 1588 stand among the most outstanding and decisive victories in English history—at least in legend and national memory. The whole Anglo-Spanish War of 1585-1603 was seen by its contemporaries as a conflict for the soul of the nation, and it was only for later generations that it became one of the great turning points of European history. It helped to create the national myth of a small island nation, which, not for the last time, held its own against a world of enemies, thus preserving freedom and independence for itself and Europe against an ambitious and tyrannical foe.

In his book on England and the Spanish Armada, the author is determined to challenge this perception in more than one respect. McDermott starts his survey of Anglo-Spanish relations with Pope Alexander VI's decree *Inter Caetera*, which in 1493 divided the extra-European world into Spanish and Portuguese spheres of influence. Against the legend of an almost indifferent England pitted against an aggressive, belligerent, and oppressive Spanish world power, the author holds that “the apparently reactive policies of Elisabeth's government were often counter responses to Philip's attempts to respond to increasingly bold assaults by Englishmen upon his assets, dominions and sovereign prerogatives.” Doing so, he tells the story from an almost exclusively English con-

temporary perspective, while “the Spanish 'story' of the approach is contextual, not central” (p. xiv). This, however, creates some problems for the reader, as will be discussed later.

Starting from *Inter Caetera*, the long way to war is followed from the reign of the two Tudor Henrys (VII and VIII), the episode of the boy-king Edward VI, the stirring years of “Bloody” Mary and finally Elizabeth I, with the stream of the narrative growing wider towards the culmination point of 1588, and then narrowing again into a few pages covering the aftermath. Initially, both countries were allies, bound together by shared distrust toward the growing power of Valois France and mutual commercial interests. Activities of English merchants touched Hapsburg territories almost everywhere, with trade colonies being established in several Spanish harbors. The main hubs of commerce were the markets in the Spanish Netherlands. The economic welfare of many Flemish cities depended directly on the English trade. The situation of these sensitive commercial communities with their far-reaching networks had an influence on public opinion. Sanctions against Anglo-Spanish merchants influenced public opinion in England, while the termination of trade in time of war eventually forced the end of an earlier Anglo-Spanish conflict, because harbor blockades and the sequestration of ships and goods

brought economic life in the Spanish Netherlands to a standstill, and with it income for influential investors on both sides.

One major reason for Spanish sanctions, against which the English side often retaliated, were attacks of English privateers against Spanish transatlantic trade routes, coastal towns in the Caribbean, and increasingly against the Spanish silver fleets. Since each armed conflict in western Europe increased the number of privateers, and English merchantmen in particular used piracy tactics to enforce access to the otherwise closed markets in the western hemisphere, their activities posed a threat to the very existence of especially Spanish long-distance trade. Sanctions and retaliations against them, eventually resolved by mutual agreements about countermeasures and the occasional payment of indemnifications, were part and parcel of sixteenth-century diplomacy. They were, however, in themselves no reason for war, as the author points out. War was always much more damaging to commerce and economy than living with the risk of losing a ship load here and there to freebooters; the ships and their crews themselves usually survived such encounters.

However, the decade-long tit-for-tat of piracy and sanctions, the ascent of family-based syndicates like the Drakes and the Raleighs, eroded the substance of Anglo-Spanish relations. Another factor adding to the deterioration relations was the Anglo-Spanish War against France, which—in the English perspective—was ended by Charles V at the expense of England, which had to surrender Calais. This was only one aspect of the five-year rule of Mary Tudor, which contributed considerably to the decline of the “auld alliance” with Spain. Her marriage with the Hapsburg heir to the throne, Philip, triggered strong protests among the English elite, many of whom feared an unfriendly takeover despite several clauses in the marriage contract guaranteeing English independence from the Hapsburg Empire. According to McDermott, the presence of Philip’s entourage did much more to promote Anglo-Spanish disenchantment. The highly refined Spanish courtiers found all their prejudice confirmed. For them, their hosts were a bunch of loud, rude, and boorish barbarians. On the other side, the English complained that “the foreigners ... are making Englishmen feel strangers in their own homes, and have taken to manage everything since they landed,” as one contemporary put it (quoted, p. 41). Neither the Spaniards nor the Englishmen made any effort to hide their contempt and their xenophobia from each other. When the last courtiers left England after Mary’s death

in 1558—most had left with Philip a year before—they left behind a deeply embedded resentment of Spanish arrogance, a fear of growing Spanish power, and a rejection of what was felt as a growing dependence on the Hapsburg dominions, i.e. the negative elements of what could be described in positive terms as the emergence of an “Englishness” in proto-nationalist terms.

According to McDermott, Mary’s rather violent anti-Reformation politics, which claimed about 2,000 English victims, were not blamed on the Spanish presence. Nevertheless, the Catholic-Protestant rift in Europe became more and more a driving force in Anglo-Spanish relations. During the first years of Elizabeth’s reign, especially as long as Philip hoped for a marriage with the young and attractive queen, Catholic circles did not receive much support from Madrid. During the 1560s, the first cracks in the Anglo-Spanish relationship resulted from pressures upon the countries’ mutual interests which were neither of either ruler’s making nor within their control. The Union of the Crowns of Portugal and Spain, the low ebb of Protestant political power in Europe, and the decline of France seemed to be stepping stones for Hapsburg ascension to world power. England, which had always supported the anti-Spanish revolt in the Netherlands to a certain extent, significantly geared up its assistance when the Duke of Alba appeared in the Netherlands with a major army to crush the rebellion once and for all. The low-level conflict which also involved French Huguenots became a fully fledged war, and Protestant England feared it was next in line after the rebels were disposed of. Consequently, Elizabeth geared up English assistance to the rebels and did nothing to contain the attacks of English, Huguenot, and Flemish “sea beggars” (often based in English harbors) and the daring raids into the Caribbean against Spanish and French Catholic commerce. Here, the Guise-led St. Bartholomew Day’s Massacre had a lasting impact on the overall English sentiment towards Catholicism and its Spanish champion. Eventually, the melange of a few major and many more minor elements led to the impression on the English side—in the words of Elizabeth’s chief advisor Cecil—of an imminent threat through a conspiracy of two monarchs and a pope. Philip, on the other hand, saw Elizabeth as the head of an emerging alliance of all Protestant princes in Europe, thus adding to Philip’s sea of troubles with the rebellion in the Netherlands, unrest in Spain and the aggressive Ottoman great power in the Mediterranean and North Africa. From 1567/68 on, the overall political situation in western Europe deteriorated markedly, leading to a four-year crisis, which McDermott

describes as the “first Cold War” (p. 64). It became clear that an enduring peaceful coexistence between England and its two powerful Catholic neighbors could no longer be expected.

The forces that dragged both sides into a “wider European struggle for the soul of Christianity” (p. 92) were stronger than the intention of the monarchs to reach a further negotiated settlement. The traditional diplomatic channels and instruments of crisis management and conflict resolution were ever more visibly unable to control the forces which drove towards a solution by armed conflict. Thus the agreement of February 1572 provided only a lull in the coming storm. When the connection between Catholic faith, Spanish barbarism in the Netherlands, and the massacre of Protestants in France became firmly entrenched in English public opinion, every move of the Catholic powers in Ireland, Scotland, and the Netherlands was transformed from the more or less accepted Renaissance power play to a lethal threat to the very existence of English identity. Mary Stuart (and the innumerable plots and conspiracies associated with her years in England) was the living symbol for the option of a regime change in London, which Philip still preferred to an open war. The Catholic Fifth Column and their Spanish supporters were suspected of seeking to drive England into a civil war as they had done in the Netherlands. During the 1580s, England became ever more active in supporting the cornered rebels there, plotting with a Portuguese pretender, and, of course, openly fostering privateering, which did more damage to Spanish interests than ever before. Quite obviously, Elizabeth did not fully realize that all these isolated measures, actions, and reactions were perceived in Madrid as elements of an integrated anti-Spanish design.

The eighteen-year Anglo-Spanish War eventually began in 1585, when Francis Drake left Portsmouth with twenty-five ships, two of them royal property, for an extended expedition into his transatlantic hunting grounds. This was preceded by the dispatch of 7,000 English regulars to the Netherlands some weeks before. Two years later, the execution of Mary Stuart, which aroused the outrage of Catholic Europe, triggered Philip’s decision for a major military effort against this provocation. Ten days after receiving the message of Mary Stuart’s execution, he ordered the assembly of the Armada.

From here on, a well-known story is retold, though once more almost exclusively from an English perspective. McDermott analyzes moves and countermoves, providing a lot of detailed information. He sees the major

English advantages as lying less in technology, human resources, or seamanship. On the contrary, the Spanish crews and soldiers are highly praised for their bravery and stubbornness while the leadership of its captains (especially that of Medina Sidonia, who managed to get his Armada through the English Channel without major losses) are also highly rated. The English fleet’s main advantage was its much more homogeneous organization on land and at sea. In just two months, they had their ships equipped, manned, provisioned, and assembled—something the clumsy Spanish bureaucracy hardly achieved in a year and a half. And as the campaign showed, English leadership and organization was much more flexible and adaptable to changing conditions.

When the Armada came in reach of the English coast, its target was by no means obvious. The options included landing troops in Ireland or Scotland to gain local support and establish a base for further operations, an independent landing—it carried enough soldiers and equipment—somewhere along the English coast or linking up with the strong army of the Marquis of Parma in the Netherlands for a joint landing, or even a pincer move by two independent amphibious assaults.

England’s defense rested firmly on its ships. In contrast to the fleet which ranked as the strongest naval establishment of its time, the army lagged behind in every way. The possible outcome of a field battle between the English levies and the Spanish tercios is pure speculation. But while the English fleet was considered the world’s leading naval force, the Spanish tercios were in turn the most formidable battle formation on land.

Contrary to the legend, at sea it was by no means the few against the many. During the battle, the number of ships was almost equal, although about only twenty-five of the English ships could dare to challenge the ninety biggest Spanish ones on equal footing. The Spanish held a numerical superiority of soldiers—not seaman—on board, which forced the English ships to avoid the boarding battles the Spanish were looking for. Since artillery was only effective at close range, the superior Spanish infantry fire did indeed have an impact, because it endangered the crews of the enemy. Lord Howard reacted by increasing the number of soldiers in the course of the battle. This was another advantage to the English side—since they were close to their bases, they were able to reinforce and re-supply easily. Several times during the campaign, particularly heavily engaged fighting ships—the numerous armed merchantmen were less combative—had to have their stores replenished after shooting their gunpowder

magazines empty. Lack of ammunition finally ended the campaign for the English fleet because England's available gunpowder supply was almost exhausted. There was barely left enough to keep the important fortresses and the army provisioned.

When the Spanish host approached English waters, it did so with the least promising plan. In order to link up with the Duke of Parma's army, the Armada had to pass the Channel unnoticed or to make the cooperation work under English guns. The first option was almost impossible in the presence of about ninety English ships in Plymouth. This number—while an additional smaller concentration kept the Flemish coast under close surveillance against a sortie of Parma—made the second option at least as unlikely. When the Armada entered the Channel, it “was almost defeated in its objectives,” according to the author. Critics should take into account that this upcoming running battle between 300 ships on both sides was “a conflict â beyond contemporary experience” (p. 217).

By July 20th, the three squadrons based in Plymouth lifted anchor and sailed against the approaching Armada, attacking the horns of its half-moon-shaped formation and causing two Spanish ship losses by accident and the explosion of a powder magazine. The second day brought no major action, because Drake wasted his time capturing and looting an already damaged Spanish galleon—something Martin Frobisher later called outright desertion. Danger loomed from July 23rd to 25th, when the wind kept the English from putting themselves between Armada and the coast of Dorset and Hampshire, which contained several convenient landing spots, and it was only Medina Sidonia's strict obedience to his sovereign's orders that prevented a landing. English attacks against the Armada's rearguard did more damage to Spanish morale than to the ships. These gunnery duels “graphically demonstrated clearly the superior fighting qualities of the English ships.” (p. 231) They also demonstrated that no English guns—not even the later idolized “ship-smashing” 9-pdrs—could break the massive wooden hulls of the heavy galleons. In addition, the conduct of most Spanish ships was as competent as it was brave, and as a leader in battle, McDermott gives equal credit to Medina Sidonia as to his English counterpart, Lord Howard.

Neither one single encounter nor the naval campaign as a whole can itself be described as a decisive victory from a military point of view. The best English op-

portunity slipped away when six fire ships that were launched against the anchoring Armada at Calais duly caused panic and disorder. The opportunity to pick up unprotected individual ships was, however, missed, and when Drake and Hawkins finally attacked they took on the strongest Spanish unit, the flagship San Martin. It was soon reinforced, and the squadron bought enough time for the remaining ships to regain their formation. This was definitely the fiercest fight of the campaign, and its last. Out of ammunition, any pursuit was impossible for the defenders. The Armada was still capable of landing troops anywhere in England or Scotland, but not of joining Parma. The wind pressed it away from the Flemish coast into the North Sea, where the Armada's final destruction was left to the hostile elements of nature. By August 2nd, the English fleet lost all contact and so does the reader.

The exclusive focus on the English side makes this otherwise outstanding work not an easy read. It is therefore definitely not a stand-alone general history of the Armada campaign and even less a military history. One cannot really appreciate the wealth of this book without a more than basic knowledge about sixteenth-century European history and an even deeper insight into the intricacies of English domestic politics. Particularly in the first two thirds of the text dealing with the international and domestic power play there are frequent leaps between events and periods. There are no graphs, no sketches, and above all no maps. The reader therefore needs to have a good map of western Europe, the Channel, and England at hand since in visualizing the deployment and moves of the naval encounters the reader is left completely to his or her own devices. The very detailed, vivid descriptions of the naval encounters and the conditions and characteristics of the English coast deserve better.

A reader wanting to gain insight into how high-level Renaissance decision-makers communicated, acted, and reacted, and on which information and constructions of reality they based their decisions, will find ample information here. The frequent quotes are given in their original contemporary orthography, thus providing a sense of the “feel” of the period—and they were obviously not selected without a good sense of humor and a twinkling eye, adding considerably to the pleasure of reading the lucid text of this work. The reviewer hopes that one day a work of comparable depth will permit us to re-read the story through Spanish eyes.

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