

QUEEN ELIZABETH

When Elizabeth Tudor became Queen of England in 1558, her country was but a minor actor on the European stage. The royal coffers were empty, and England was under threat of invasion from Spain, France, and Scotland. Hundreds of people had died at the stake for heresy during the reign of Mary I, and English society was divided along Protestant-Catholic religious lines.

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Elizabeth was only 25 years old at the time of her accession, and she had already lived a tumultuous life. She was born to a royal father, who showed no interest in his daughters. Her mother was executed on charges of adultery, treason, incest, and witchcraft when Elizabeth was only three years old.

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Following her mother's execution, Elizabeth was declared an illegitimate child and removed from the line of succession. She was deeply aware of this demotion, even as a three-year-old. She passed her teenage years in relative obscurity, manipulated by powerful advisors, who wished to use her to further their ambition. To protect herself, the young Elizabeth learned to be silent and watchful, studying how the greatest men in the land wielded their power and thereby learning how to govern.

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Behind a modest, demure façade lay a keen and brilliant mind, filled with knowledge of history, theology, and modern and ancient languages. The teenage Elizabeth knew the day might come when she would be able to reclaim her royal birthright. And she meant to be ready.

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The day finally came on November 17, 1558. When Elizabeth I was crowned Queen of England, she was only the second female monarch in the country's history. Her sister Mary had ruled England for only three years before Elizabeth followed her on the throne. Unhappy and unpopular, Mary I had outraged the population with her marriage to the king of Spain. Queen Elizabeth, however, was still unmarried on the day of her coronation. Many believed that a woman could not possibly have the mental acuity or emotional strength to rule independently. The population expected that Queen Elizabeth's most significant act of governance would be to choose a husband, who would rule in her name and by her authority. But she did not marry.

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Until she was fifty years old, Queen Elizabeth's advisors and Parliament pressured her on the subject of marriage. Even though some of the most eligible royal bachelors of Europe pursued her, Queen Elizabeth rejected them all. By welcoming marriage proposals from England's most potent rivals, she maintained the balance of power in Europe in England's favor when the nation was still weak enough for invaders to overrun it. However, her refusal to choose a husband was not seen as political shrewdness but as evidence of feminine vanity.

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Not every royal son or daughter who inherited a throne took personal responsibility for ruling the nation; some preferred to leave it all to their advisors and councilors. Elizabeth placed most of the burden of government in the hands of her Privy Council. Early in her reign, her Secretary of State, William Cecil, once rebuked a foreign ambassador for allowing her to read a vital state document, saying that it was too much for a woman's mind. However, Queen Elizabeth disabused him of this notion in due time. She was involved at every level of government, presiding over matters great and small. Queen Elizabeth cared deeply for her people.

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Like many royal rulers at the time, Queen Elizabeth saw herself as having been placed in the role of sovereign by God. But she also believed that winning her subjects' love was the key to keeping her throne secure. Ultimately, her impact was such that the cult of the Virgin Queen replaced the Catholic veneration of the Virgin Mary in newly Protestant England.

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Today, Elizabeth I remains one of England's most famous monarchs, regarded by many as the greatest ruler in the country's history. Historians continue to be fascinated by her strength, her intelligence, her originality, and her versatility.

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