



The Armada

Garrett Mattingly

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Chronicling one of the most spectacular events of the sixteenth century, The Armada is the definitive story of the English fleet's infamous defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. The esteemed and critically acclaimed historian Garrett Mattingly explores all dimensions of the naval campaign, which captured the attention of the European world and played a deciding role in the settlement of the New World. "So skillfully constructed it reads like a novel" (New York Times), The Armada is sure to appeal to the scholar and amateur historian alike.

The Armada Details

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Mike says

This book covers a topic that normally gets a few lines during some history class: "Spain puts together this huge fleet to invade England. England's fewer ships under Francis Drake (pirate/privateer and loyal Brit) fight naval battles and beat the Armada. England becomes great sea power (more or less)."

Well, the 10-second summary gets a couple of facts right: Spain's fleet was bigger (maybe 50% bigger depending on how you count) and there were a number of engagements fought on a few days as the ships went up the Channel. But that's about it for correct. This book not only sets you right on the actual battles and who fought who (as best as we can tell from the original source material available to the author when he did his research), but also fills in the reasons for it.

As interesting as the naval battles are (no Errol Flynns or Russell Crowes attacking ships from the rigging in extended hand-to-hand combat here), I found the political and religious forces that were driving the conflict to be more revealing and interesting. If you are a student of the Reformation and Counter Reformation this struggle for supremacy and how it brought (or nearly so) armed conflict to several European countries (Holland, Zeeland, Brussels, France, Lorraine, England, Scotland, and a few more that I have forgotten) may be old news. But to those whose European history of this era was more of the "overview" style, the details are fascinating.

The other part that I found very interesting (versus the merely interesting naval actions) was how the technology of the two fleets was different and why that mattered. Not only were the ships themselves different, but so was their armament. It is with this engagement and weapons (ships & guns) that lay the foundation of the truly powerful navies of the next 300 or so years. In fact like many new and innovative systems, the users were uncertain how to best employ it. This book shows how even during this relatively short action the commanders were developing the rules for "best practices" with the new technology.

I think this was a great read: carefully researched, well-written, and well planned for the reader. You should try it.

Suzanne says

The Armada, or how bad planning and bad luck saved England from Invasion.

This is a wonderful and detailed book that reads like a novel, but gives a very clear picture of a pivotal moment in history.

Stephen says

In the late summer of 1588, all of Europe held its breath as an enormous Spanish fleet, consisting of a hundred and fifty vessels of varying sizes, set sail for the English channel. Their mission: to rendezvous with the elite troops of General Parma in the defeated Netherlands, and to transport them to England, there to

revenge the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, and depose Anne Boleyn's daughter. That invasion never happened. As is famously known, the Armada met English fire and northern winds, and a third of its number was lost utterly on the shores of Britain and Ireland. It was for Elizabeth, constantly confronting intrigue from Catholics and Puritans alike, a glorious moment: here, before all of Europe, the wind and waves declared that she was the Dread Sovereign of all England. The Armada is a storied history not just of the Spanish fleet's doomed voyage into the channel, but how Spain came to launch such an expensive and unwieldy endeavor.

Much of the weight of The Armada gives the background information for the "English Enterprise". Europe is in the throes of the reformation, and rebellions against princes carry with them the fervor of holy wars. France, who might oppose the sudden envelopment of England into the Spanish empire, is struggling with its own civil war, and every one of the three contenders is a Henry. The Netherlands have risen against their Spanish lords, with the military and fiscal support of Elizabeth – who is presumably more interested in having enemies of Spain at her doorstep rather than Spain itself, given the two powers' mutual hostility. There is a very good chance that Phillip could get away with styling himself the English king: he'd already enjoyed the title as Queen Mary's husband, and Elizabeth reigns over a divided nation. Many of her subjects maintain faith with the Catholic church, secretly or openly, and several rebellions and conspiracies intending to restore a Catholic monarch to the throne have already erupted. If their former king landed and called them to rise against a woman already declared illegitimate by the Church, how easy would it be for them to bury their fears about civil war and declare for Phillip?

Fortunately for England's men in arms, and their mothers, it never came to that. The English engaged in a running battle with the Armada as it made its way towards the Channel; there was no epic showdown, but a series of smaller skirmishes, two of which – when combined with the storms of the Channel – did serious damage to the fleet. By the time they neared the rendezvous, in fact, the admirals in command had to view their stores of rotten food, ailing men, and badly leaking ships in the cold light of reality. The Armada was no longer capable of breaking the Dutch blockade that would allow the Spanish to take on their army and transport it to Spain. It might not even make it home, if it continued to be harassed. Part of the problem was that the Armada was so enormous and unwieldy. Its ships were gathered together from across Spain's domain, and many were Mediterranean galleys built for ramming that were out of place in a battle that involved more artillery than swashbuckling shipboard raids. Even in the age of standardized equipment and radio communications, the Allies required months of planning and stockpiling to prepare for D-Day. Spain had a similar challenge, but its every piece of equipment might vary from casting to casting, and its barrels of food spoiled as quickly as they could be found. The Spanish sailed in the hopes of a miracle, but they found none. When news reached Phillip II, he wrote to the his bishops and could express only thanks that -- in the light of the storms -- more men were not lost.

I knew virtually nothing of the Armada except that it sailed, met a storm, and failed. Although in retrospect a brief review of the history of the period would have served me well as a reader (particularly in regards to France, whom I seem to ignore utterly between 1453 and 1789), the author's delivery is indeed novel-like. The personalities of the period, like the swaggering Drake, add to the tale's liveliness. Although the wars of the day seem far removed from us now, the author's epilogue couldn't be more current: he cautions the reader that wars of ideologies are always the hardest to win.

Dawn says

I was expecting great things from this book based on its rating and recommendations. I am happy to say that

it did not disappoint.

It details the politics of Spain, France and England that led to the creation of the invasion fleet. From the death of Mary, Queen of Scots to the war of the Henry's in France and the Dutch contribution. The politics of Protestant versus Catholic within these counties was a key part and the armies maneuvering on mainland Europe were seriously affected by the political machinations.

The affects of rumor and propaganda were the most interesting aspects for me. It amused me to find that until reading this, I believed some of the rumors and propaganda that were started in the 16th century.

The economics of creating the fleets, in England and in Spain, from the food & water to the building or buying of ships & boats and manning them was something of a nightmare. The toll that sickness took before either fleet ever left their respective shores and after the battle, was staggering.

Modification of the English ships to make them more maneuverable and new guns changed naval tactics to such an extent that neither side knew quite how to wage a battle with them but this was the beginning of a new kind of naval warfare that was to last for several hundred years.

I'm not a non-fiction fan for the most part (so it took me 2 months to read a 400 page book) but it was worth the time spent.

Catherine says

The way history should be written. A rollicking, swashbuckling tale of one of the most traditionally misunderstood battles in history. The English defeat of the Spanish Armada was no David-beats-Goliath kind of encounter. Old Philip II had it coming.

Bob says

My favorite history book to date. Mattingly has that rare gift of being an historian who can truly bring his characters and the action surrounding them to life. His grasp of the historical facts and his ability to compose in a literary fashion combine to create a world that is instantly alive for the reader. Highly recommended.

Allen says

One of my favorite history books. I have wondered about the battle between the Spanish Armada and the English/Dutch for years. Garrett Mattingly's book is a carefully researched study that reads like an exciting novel.

Al says

An excellent and very detailed review of European history beginning with the beheading of Mary Queen of Scots and continuing through the ultimate demise of the Spanish Armada. A perhaps overlooked aspect of the outcome is the fact that the victory likely resulted in the continuing independence of the French state which may have otherwise fallen under the domination of Spain.

James Cambias says

An excellent and very readable history of the Armada battle and the whole cauldron of English and European politics surrounding it. Mattingly does a superb job of explaining why England and Spain went to war -- and why Phillip of Spain waited until *after* the Catholic heir Mary of Scotland was out of the way before launching his invasion plans. The book devotes a lot of space and attention to the civil war raging in France at the time, as the Spanish-funded Guise faction kept the French state in turmoil, unable to interfere in Spain's wars with England and the Netherlands.

Mattingly livens up the narrative with entertaining thumbnail portraits of the main actors. The reader comes away feeling as if one knows Elizabeth I, Francis Drake, Phillip of Spain, and Henri III of France.

The account of the battle itself is not the typical British triumphalism. Mattingly emphasizes how well the Spanish fleet withstood the English attacks, and it was only the disruption of the fireships coupled with an unexpected storm that finally did the Spanish in. He also looks closely at the tremendous hole in the Spanish tactical plan -- the key detail of how the Spanish army in the Netherlands was supposed to link up with the Armada even though they controlled no deepwater ports.

All in all, a fun, informative, and highly readable book.

M Nagle says

Fucking brilliant! Written in a day when outstanding Historians were also occasionally excellent and entertaining Writers, and Garrett Mattingly was certainly both. Unusual for a history tome in that it is riveting enough to be difficult to put down, and is written as a series of vignettes laying out the larger conflict from the point of view of the different participants, from Philip of Spain and Elizabeth of England to Henry of France and Mary, Queen of Scots.

Charlie Brown says

“The Armada” is nominally about the English defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. But it is more: it is a profile of Elizabeth Tudor in the thirtieth year of her reign; it is an in-depth look at the savage “War of the three Henrys” that devastated France and the Low Countries; it provides some insights into the character of Phillip, king of Spain; and above all, it is a panorama of a Europe that, having taken the first step out of the long medieval night, is now groping for the next step leading ultimately to the industrial revolution and the modern world.

There can be few more fascinating historical characters than Elizabeth. She is that most appealing of historical subjects, the executive who grows in office. That she survived to age 25 without losing her head is a combination of luck and skill. In an age when the royalty of Europe was characterized by extravagance and bizarre, irrational behavior Elizabeth favored fiscal prudence, a long-term view, and a deep affection for her yeomanry which formed the backbone of the realm. That Elizabeth was able to manage advisors such as Lord Burghley and Walsingham, not to mention the kings of France and Spain, is ample testimony to her

political astuteness. That she earned and retained for forty-five years the enthusiastic support of the common people and the business community in England is a testament to her management of the nation's finances. Mattingly begins with the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, drawing the connections between the political murder and the on-going war on the continent with Phillip's launching of the famous Armada.

Mattingly does a good job of explaining the information (sometimes slim) that has come down to us, and then providing one or more interpretations of what it might mean. One example is the encounter between the Duc de Joyeuse and Henry of Navarre on October 20, 1587: "Henry had meant not to fight Joyeuse, but to elude him...The Protestants scarcely ever won a pitched battle, and for years had not risked one...The Béarnais [Henry] moved fast; it was one of his chief distinctions as a captain. But this time he was too slow...Now as he listened to the crackle of small arms which showed that his outposts were being driven in, he faced the unpleasant fact that although he himself could still get away, he would have to leave most of his troops behind. Nothing in the record suggests that Henry entertained for a moment the idea of escape. Rather, he gave his captains the impression that this was just the place he would have chosen for a battle...Across the few hundred yards of open ground, the opposing horsemen had time to eye each other. The Huguenots looked plain and battle-worn, in stained and greasy leather and dull gray steel. Their armor was only cuirass and morion, their arms mostly just broadsword and pistol...Opposite it the line of the royalists rippled and shimmered...Three thousand common soldiers were slaughtered, more than four hundred knights and gentlemen, and an impressive roll of dukes, marquises, counts and barons...'At least,' said Henry of Navarre at the day's end, 'nobody will be able to say after this that we Huguenots never win a battle.'"

And, of course, we have the famous events at Tilbury, August 18 and 19, 1588, when Elizabeth went down from London to review her troops mustered to resist the threatened invasion: "Elizabeth was easy to upset but hard to frighten...Undismayed, she led the martial procession of barges down the river, regaining on the way a sense of participating in great events such as she had not known since the initiative passed from the diplomats to the fighting men...When her Captain General came to welcome her and take her orders for the inspection and review, the queen told him...She needed no guards among her fellow countrymen in arms for her service...And so, whoever may have protested, the inspecting party was arranged...That was the whole escort, four men and two boys...the little party advanced into the ranks of the militia, which exploded in a roar of cheers...The day was so successful she decided it would bear repetition. She passed the night at a manor house some four miles off and came back the next day. This time there was a review and march past...and then the queen went to dine in state in the general's pavilion, and all the captains of her army came to kiss her hand. But before that, perhaps at the end of the review, she had spoken to her people words they would cherish: 'My loving people, we have been persuaded by some that are careful for our safety to take heed how we commit ourselves to armed multitudes, for fear of treachery. But I assure you, I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people. Let tyrants fear...I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and a king of England too, and think foul scorn that...any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm; to which, rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms...'"

Mattingly brings Elizabeth and the other players in this intense drama forward from the one-dimensional enumeration of events that frequently passes for history into a three-dimensional relief where their motives, characters, and decisions can be seen. His presentation is excellent for the general reader; his chapter notes provide guidance for one that might wish to delve deeper into the subject.

Stephanie says

Had to read this for my History of Spain of class in college. So glad I did--really, an outstanding book.

Dana Stabenow says

Garrett Mattingly's classic *The Armada* will put you at Sir Francis Drake's elbow on board the Elizabeth Bonaventure when he sails into Cadiz to singe the beard of Philip of Spain. A marvelous you-are-there book, beginning with the beheading of Mary Queen of Scots and ending with Elizabeth the First's butt sitting more firmly on the throne of England than ever before in her precarious reign. I so want someone to make a film from this book, and make it well. Colin Farrell as Drake, maybe?

Tim Vicary says

This book is a classic which I wish I had read years ago. It was first published in 1959 but it is still in print and on kindle and it deserves to be. Garrett Mattingley must have been a top-class historian; he is both a master of detail and skilful story-teller. The book is not just about the Armada itself, but about the whole European political context which gave rise to it, and which it affected. It begins, therefore, with the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, who had been such a threat to Queen Elizabeth's throne for so many years. Mattingley explains thoroughly how this fitted into the game of international politics: Mary was a devout Catholic, so all Catholic rulers, including Philip of Spain, theoretically supported her and were appalled by her execution; but on the other hand she was a former Queen of France, so if she had become Queen of England that would have created a powerful Anglo-French alliance which was not in Philip's interests at all. But with Mary out of the way, he not only had an excuse to invade England to avenge her and reimpose Catholicism; he also had an opportunity to unite England with Spain against France - much better!

There is a great deal in the book about the machinations of Mendoza, the Spanish ambassador to France, in his largely successful attempts to neutralise any French opposition to Philip's plan to take over England; and also more about events in Rome, where the Pope and Dr William Allen, the exiled English Catholic leader, were negotiating with each other. And yet more about the Duke of Parma - the Spanish general who was supposed to provide the troops which the Armada would escort across the Channel, as well as the problems which the Duke of Medina Sidonia inherited when the original Admiral of the Armada, the Marquis of Santa Cruz, died. Mattingley has a great deal of sympathy for Medina Sidonia, who he thinks played a losing hand quite well. And of course there is plenty of fascinating information about the ships, the ammunition and supplies which they needed, and the sea battles as well. This was the first time that such large fleets of sailing ships - as opposed to oared galleys - had ever met in war, so the admirals on both sides were making up their tactics as they went along.

So this is history on a grand scale - detailed, exciting, human, fascinating. It makes you think not only about what happened, but what might have happened if one or other thing had been different. Highly recommended for anyone who wants the big picture of the whole event. The only reason I am giving it 4 stars rather than 5 is that the library version which I read could really do with more maps and pictures. If you can find a modern edition which has added more of these, it would be even better.

Robert says

This was such a readable and informative book. I really liked it, and I feel that I learned a great deal. The author provided a wealth of information to create a fully developed historical context in which the entire campaign of the Spanish Armada might be understood. In addition to actually being the first modern naval battle in which ships stood off and exchanged broadsides without grappling and boarding, the entire saga of the Armada was perhaps the most famous part of a larger overall struggle, which was the Catholic counter-Reformation, led by Spain. This conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism continued and was not ultimately resolved in Europe until the completion of the Thirty Years' War. I had never understood this throughout my schooling, and had wrongly assumed that the Armada was the result of the struggle for colonial empires in the western hemisphere between Spain and England, never realizing that it was actually part of a larger pan European conflict.

There was actually much less in the way of actual fighting involved than I would have assumed. The prolonged time on board ship with poor nutrition and hygiene may have caused more loss of life than the conflict itself. The political conditions in France, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, and England all contributed to the context in which the "Enterprise," as the Armada came to be considered actually occurred. There was on-going conflict in France over the royal succession, the Huguenots, and the counter-reformation forces. Elizabeth I was threatened on her throne by Mary Tudor's presence as a potential Catholic monarch. The Duke of Parma was leading Spanish troops in an attempt to conquer the Netherlands and re-assert Catholicism there. The plan was to have the Armada control the English Channel crossing in order to allow the Duke of Parma to actually invade England. Elizabeth's government was maneuvering to support the rebels in the Netherlands, control the French royal succession in such a way as to assure that France should not become essentially a vassal state of Spain's, as had happened to Portugal.

In many ways, the political maneuvering seemed very modern. The issue was ostensibly religious rather than political, but the lines became very blurry, with the Pope of the time offering a bounty for Elizabeth's assassination and seeking to reassert universal Catholicism throughout Europe. The author detailed all of this in a chapter by chapter progression and a brilliant epilogue, which tied things neatly together as well as revealing how the results impacted the major players going forward. This was history, but it read like a novel.

Kagan Taylor says

I am an aspiring narcoleptic or perhaps just experiencing hypnagogic hallucinations (thank you Wikipedia) though I believe this book caused most of my daytime drowsiness over the last week. for what it is worth, I always wanted to keep reading when I woke up. THE SPANISH LOST!!!! that came way out of left field, good thing I was sitting (laying) down.

Evan Brandt says

The New York Times review of this book is right, it reads like a novel.

I was particularly attracted to Mattingly's view of Elizabeth and her policies. She played all sides against each other in an effort (which drove her male advisors mad) to maintain the status quo.

Her kingdom was thriving, she had nowhere near enough money to wage a war, but enough to lend a hand in the wars of others on the Continent, keeping them there. She cultivated the image of a fickle female ruler to gain maneuvering room to keep everyone confused and, most importantly, at bay.

So many of the men around her wanted, like men so often do, some kind of defined conclusion to the disputes of the day. But Elizabeth had lived through Bloody Mary's brief reign and she knew you cannot force beliefs on a people by the sword.

She gambled with the timing of her defense too, and timed it perfectly by not keeping an expensive fleet armed, fed and paid while doing nothing, as Phillip was forced to do. And she used Drake perfectly, making the most of his legend, but denying him command of the defense and so diminishing the danger of his quest for glory dooming the entire enterprise on some foolish stunt, which he undertook anyway.

However, Drake's raid on Spanish shipping the year before proves yet again Napoleon's maxim, that an army marches on its stomach. Even more true of an Armada.

And an Armada without adequate storage for its food and water is a short-lived Armada.

The true benefit of Drake's raid the year before, as Mattingly mentions several times, was the capture and burning of many of the barrel staves the Spanish were shipping to Lisbon for their supplies.

As a result, when Philip, previously known as an over-cautious king, became uncharacteristically truculent about moving head on schedule, supplies were put in hastily constructed barrels made of rotten or green wood which denied an Armada far from home and supplies, food and water.

Essentially, Drake starved them while Howard delayed them.

This, combined with the new "modern" designs of the English ships which Hawkins insisted upon, longer range and more powerful English guns and English superior gunnery, with a strange oversight by the Duke of Parma, made the result nearly inevitable.

Parma, the ultimate soldier, failed to take and hold a deep water port in the low countries on the channel which would make the transport of his soldiers across the channel possible. He also failed to secure (or build) the small ships needed for transport. One might suspect he had little faith in the likely success of the whole invasion...

Unsung heroes of the event were the Dutch, whose fleet made a meet up between the Armada and Parma's army impossible. They are, not surprisingly, so often left out of the English version of events.

As Elizabeth knew, war itself is unpredictable, though even still our leaders today always predict swift victory; and war and sea and amphibious invasion, even more so.

Truly, when we see that the Spanish were defeated as much by logistics and the difficulty of holding a multi-national alliance together as by the English defenders, I come to even greater respect for Eisenhower and what he managed to accomplish.

I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the history of the period.

David says

The English had smaller faster ships and better long range guns. The Spanish were defeated before they began to fight, They pulled into port with their tails between their legs. This is where Sir Francis Drake made his name.

James Castle says

One of the best histories I've ever read, *The Armada*, (a modest title, since book is about a lot more than that) begins with the execution of Mary Stuart and ends with Elizabeth's New Year celebrations of 1589. Mattingly elected to relate the history as if it were a narrative, and the quasi-novelistic approach works brilliantly. Each chapter focuses on one viewpoint, the primary ones being:

- Henry of Navarre
- Henry III
- Philip II
- Elizabeth I
- Francis Drake
- Bernardino de Mendoza
- the Duke of Parma
- Medina Sidonia

Some other, less major viewpoints include Sixtus V, William Allen, Charles Howard, Henry of Guise, and Justin of Nassau, among others.

The author's use of different viewpoints is very effective, and even though there are a large cast of characters, so to speak, Mattingly unfolds the events in such a clear and readable manner that I had no trouble at all following along. Mattingly is a rare historian in this accomplishment, since reconciling complexity with readability seems to be one of the biggest difficulties historians face.

The book is also refreshingly non-provincial: Mattingly, quite rightly, shows sympathy and respect for the English as well as the Spanish, especially for Palma, Medina Sidonia, and for the common soldiers left to starve their way back home.

Another thing I liked about this book was how it treated the main figures in this drama as the highly intelligent, fully human individuals they were, beset with uncertainty, anxiety, bias, and contradictory motivations. This is another pitfall historians face; too many of them treat historical figures as if they were automatons, devoid of feeling or personality. And as he shows several times throughout, Mattingly is not afraid to question the historical mainstream when that mainstream is based upon assumptions that these people were stupid.

Finally, Mattingly is a fine writer, such that I found myself bracketing passage after passage not only for the interesting information related therein, but for the dry, intelligent way in which it was expressed.

Overall, this book represents history writing at its best: exciting, deeply informed, lucid, and humane.

(Mattingly on Elizabeth at Tilbury in August, 1588:

"Perhaps an objective observer would have seen no more than a battered, rather scraggy spinster in her middle fifties perched on a fat white horse, her teeth black, her red wig slightly askew, dangling a toy sword and wearing an absurd little piece of parade armor like something out of a theatrical property box. But that was not what her subjects saw, dazzled as they were by more than the sun on the silver breastplate or the moisture in their eyes. They saw Judith and Esther, Gloriana and Belphebe, Diana the virgin huntress and Minerva the wise protectress and, best of all, their own beloved queen and mistress, come in this hour of danger, in all simplicity to trust herself among them. The touching rightness of the gesture whipped them to a pitch of enthusiasm which could find expression only in a wild babel of shouted blessings, endearments and protests of devotion. It must have been a long time since Elizabeth had enjoyed herself so much" (pg. 349.).

Grant says

An older but still highly valuable work. Mattingly should especially be commended for placing the events of 1588 in the context of the English succession, the Dutch Revolt, and even France's War of the Three Henri's. This was neither simply a Protestant-Catholic struggle nor an English-Spanish national rivalry, but a far more complex inter-mixture. Though Mattingly emphasizes context, he does not neglect detail, and engages the gaps in the sources effectively. Well worth reading.
