Chapter Twenty-Nine

A NEW IDENTITY

ELIZABETH I was twenty-six when she came to the throne, a tall young woman of commanding presence with auburn hair and piercing grey-black eyes. She was to reign longer than any other Tudor, forty-five years in all. That lay in the future. In 1558 what the people saw was an inexperienced unmarried woman assume control of the vanquished fortunes of England. As in the case of her sister, Elizabeth's childhood had been far from happy and indeed fraught with dangers when, as Mary's heir, she had been suspected of involvement in plots. All of this made her overlay what was an intellect of striking clarity of perception with a quality of evasiveness. The new queen always left room to manoeuvre herself out of the tightest political corner. But her judgment was sound, supremely so in the case of people. Her selection of officials could rarely be faulted and, as a consequence, there gradually emerged a cohesive group of educated and highly intelligent officials who gave the kingdom a sustained stability. Most of them were chosen from the ramifications of her mother's family or that of her principal minister, William Cecil.

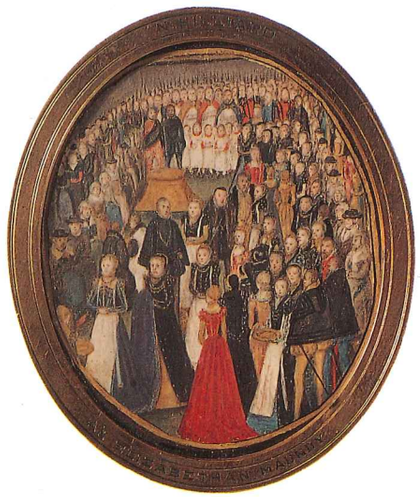
Cecil was the son of a Northamptonshire gentleman who had served both Somerset and Northumberland but who lost office under Mary. But, like Elizabeth, he conformed in the matter of religion. On her accession she appointed him her Principal Secretary and over a decade later he became Lord Treasurer. The history of her reign is the story of this alliance between a great queen, sagacious, brave, tolerant as far she dare, if at the same time vain and capricious, with a minister who shared her conservative instincts, believing also in caution and that in matters of religion a window should not be opened into men's souls. It was a great partnership which lasted forty years and whose main purpose was no longer revolution but consolidation, to bring peace to the country by building on the foundations laid by Elizabeth's father in the 1530s.

There was never any doubt that England would revert to being Protestant. The question was: of what kind? And that is where the queen's impact was to be so significant, for her wish was to return to matters as they stood shortly after Henry VIII's death. Her problem lay in the fact that those whom she needed on her side wanted a

far more extreme form of Protestantism. During her sister Mary's reign the opinion formers had lived in exile on the continent where they had come into contact with a far more radical variety of Protestantism than anything yet seen in England, one which banished bishops and replaced them with a system of ministers and elders chosen by the congregation. These were the type of men who got themselves elected to Elizabeth's first Parliament in 1559. Unfortunately for the queen all changes in religion since her father's reign had been achieved by way of statute. She had no choice but to follow the same course, and in the process found herself having to accept a far more extreme form of faith than she wanted. She was to spend the rest of her reign preventing any further moves in that direction. By doing so she, more than anyone else, was responsible for the emergence of the Church of England.

Initially she had hoped to embark on religious changes piecemeal but after peace was made with France in the spring of 1559, the government was able to proceed with a religious settlement. Elizabeth could not look to her sister's bishops for support. They resigned, and she had to fall back on appointing men who were more radical than she liked. She wanted to return to the moderate, and still largely Catholic, prayer book of 1549 but she was forced to concede to the restoration of the far more radical version of 1552, although she saw to it that some of its more extreme attitudes were eliminated or watered-down. Vestments and church interiors were to be as they had been in 1548 and people were to receive communion kneeling. The queen herself was no longer supreme head but governor of the church. And, as on previous occasions, the acts enforcing these changes came from above.

England in reality was still Catholic. What became the Anglican Church slowly emerged as the reign progressed. It was shaped and sharpened by political events and gradually defined as its intellectuals appeared and asserted its midway position



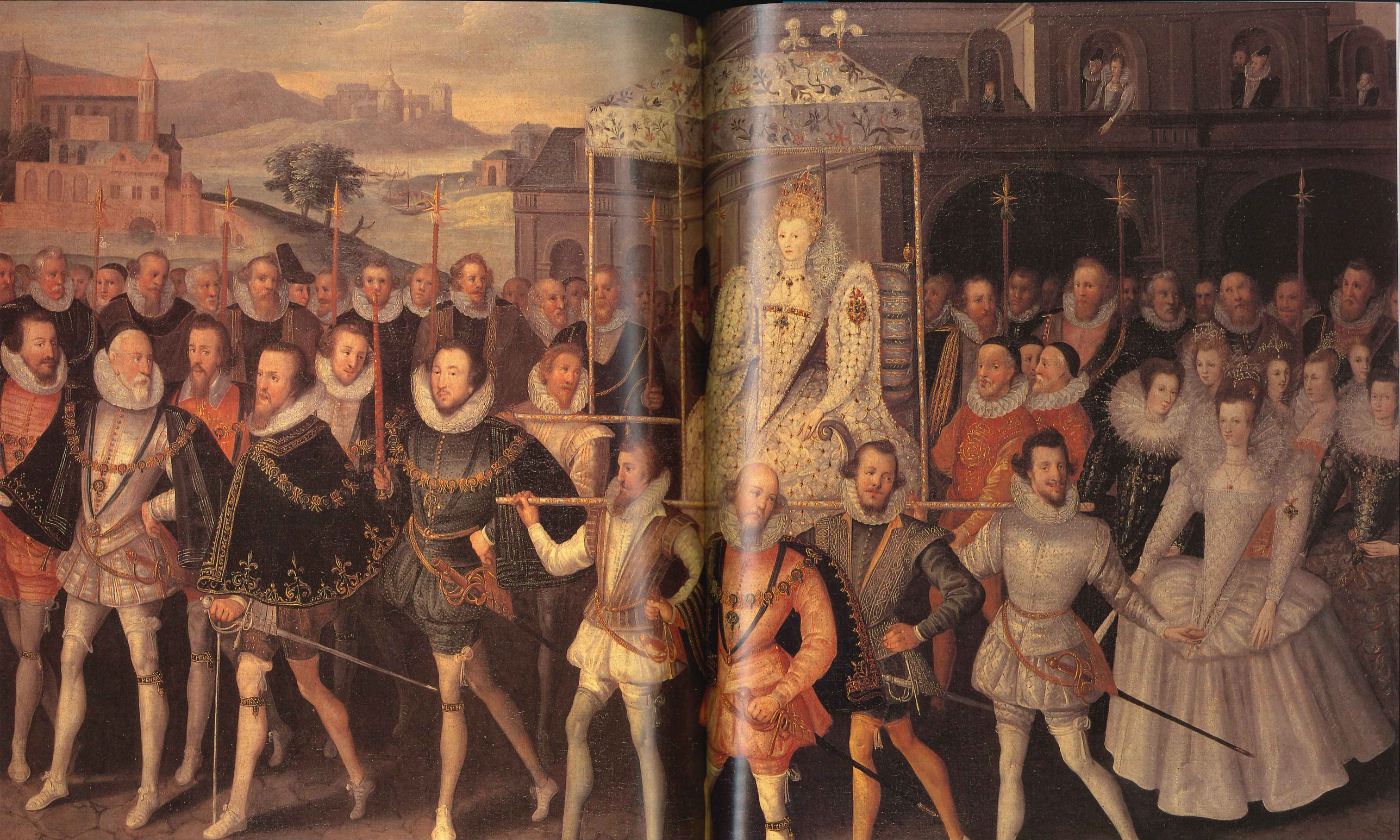
It was customary for the monarch to wash the feet of as many poor people as their age each Maundy Thursday, thus emulating Christ washing those of the disciples before the Last Supper. This ceremony, which emphasised the sanctity of the ruler, continued after the Reformation. Here, early in her reign, the young Elizabeth I, wearing a long apron, advances towards a row of seated old ladies. This rare record of court life was painted, in the form of a miniature, by a woman, Levina Teerlinc.

between Catholic and what was called Puritan, made up of those people who wished to 'purify' or further reform the church. The queen's position was crucial, for she resisted Parliament's repeated attempts to interfere and also saw to it that the stringent acts which laid down penalties on Catholics were not rigorously enforced. Although there were to be victims of persecution on both sides, they were few compared with the bloodbaths over religion which took place across the Channel in France and the Netherlands.

The Catholics during the first decade of the reign stood abandoned by the pope. Most of them occasionally conformed to the Church of England and, as there was no pressure on them to take the Oath of Supremacy, they were not faced with any dilemma of choice. This suited the temper of the queen's government, for by the time that the pope began to act, a huge number had already drifted into Anglicanism by default.

In 1570 all that was suddenly to change, for in that year the pope excommunicated the queen, that is, he declared her a heretic and as such unfit to wear the crown, therefore absolving her subjects from any need to obey her. Catholics had now to choose between pope or queen. Most chose the latter. Those who did not were inevitably seen as enemies of the state, and Parliament demanded heavy penalties. The queen resisted. In the middle of that decade, priests trained in special seminaries began to arrive from abroad, so that those who had remained loyal to Rome now had their faith rekindled. Then, in the 1580s, priests of a very different kind came, members of the Society of Jesus called Jesuits, trained in a fervent revived Catholicism known as Counter-Reformation. For them loyalty to the pope was paramount. Although priests were told to avoid any pronouncement on the queen's status, if they were caught they were unable to dodge the implications of the papal bull. Parliament, strongly Protestant, put up the fines for recusancy (non-attendance at church) to twenty pounds a month and declared conversion treason. Spain, by then England's greatest enemy, spearheaded the Catholic cause. In the face of this the Elizabethan government had little choice and so the martyrdoms began. About two hundred and fifty Catholics suffered imprisonment or execution for their faith. Nothing could have been further from the queen's tolerant intention.

The legend of Elizabeth I as the Virgin Queen was created in her own lifetime through public appearances of the kind seen in this imaginary triumphal procession at the close of her reign. Young courtiers support a canopy over the queen while ahead of her walk some of the greatest noblemen including, second from the left, the hero of Armada, Charles Howard, Lord Howard of Effingham, later Earl of Nottingham.



By the year she died the Catholics had settled down to being a small, closely-knit, albeit from time to time beleaguered, community. Their faith eliminated them from public office and from the universities. This exclusion was not reversed until the nineteenth century. Almost without exception they were loyal to the queen and state, yet they suffered much from the rudimentary equation of their faith with England's enemies abroad.

In the queen's eyes the Puritans posed an even greater threat, for they worked within the fabric of the established church and Parliament to change it. They had powerful allies at court, including the queen's favourite, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester.

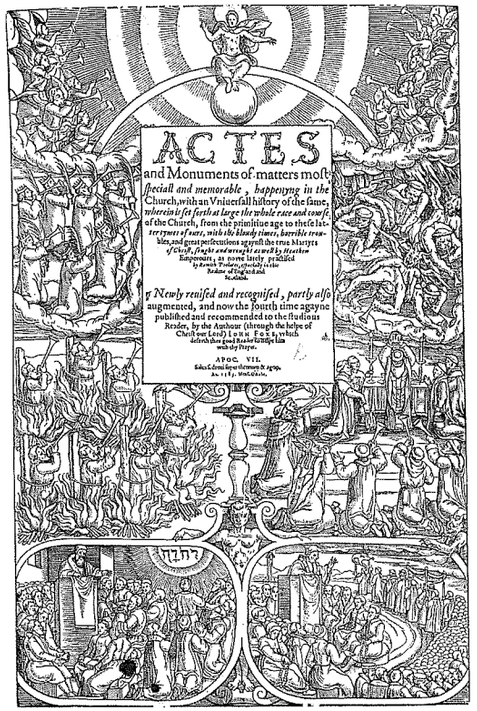
Polarisation, however, was gradual. As the 1560s progressed, the queen's new archbishop, Matthew Parker, began to enforce conformity insisting, for example, that copes and surplices were worn and the sign of the cross used at baptism. As a consequence the Puritans began to form their own groups within the church and press for changes through Parliament, changes which would have not only abolished the bishops but any trace of ritual reminiscent of Rome. Time and again, the Commons, basing themselves on their claim to free speech, tried to initiate legislation to effect change. And time and again the queen vetoed any discussion of the topic as infringing her royal prerogative, power sacred to a monarch alone. For this offence one member, Peter Wentworth, was sent twice to the Tower. These skirmishes between the queen and the Commons laid the foundations for far more serious conflicts in the next century.

The Puritans in effect failed and in the long run were forced, like the Catholics, out of the Church of England, particularly later in the reign when an ecclesiastical court was set up to stamp out nonconformity. In spite of this, the new church began to emerge as remarkably comprehensive with an identity which claimed to be at once Catholic yet reformed, beginning with the rudimentary statement that membership of the state equated with that of the church. As before the Reformation, there was still an ecclesiastical hierarchy but members were appointed by the queen and a degree of Catholic ritual and colour survived: the use of copes and surplices, organs and music. Its worship and beliefs became enshrined in three works which were to be familiar to all Englishmen for nearly four centuries, profoundly affecting how they thought and regarded the world around them. All three were written in the vernacular, and two of them still rank amongst the great classics of the English language. Their significance cannot be overestimated, for they were read and used in every parish church and home.

The first was Thomas Cranmer's *Prayer Book* which contained the liturgy of the

Church of England, those services familiar to everyone who went to their parish church. The nobility of its prose has never been surpassed and it remains in use even to this day. The second work was to come only a few years into the reign of Elizabeth's successor, James I. *The Authorised Version of the Bible* still figures among the glories of English literature. Both were to affect the minds and hearts of generations of English people not only in their native country but wherever they voyaged and settled around the globe. Both, too, were foundations of a piety which was Anglican, one which combined a strong sense of dignity and order in public worship with an equal commitment to the inner spiritual life, often finding its truest expression in flights of poetic revelation.

The last of this trinity gave ordinary people a view not only of their church as being a true continuation of what had existed before the Reformation but also of their own history and their place within it. Its influence was to last until our own century. John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* or *Book of Martyrs* as it was commonly called, not only narrated the sufferings of Protestants under Mary but went on to cast England and the English into an heroic role, that of the chosen nation of God which had thrown off the shackles of Rome. The whole of human and English history was cast into a dramatic story in which light overcame darkness, Protestantism Catholicism, and the valiant kings of England the wicked popes of Rome. Its climax was the accession of a virgin queen. In Foxe's eyes, the advent of Elizabeth the deliverer was the culmination. As time went by and the rule of the queen fulfilled these prognostications, what had begun as a pious hope became a reality. And never more so than in the aftermath of the defeat of the great Armada sent by Spain.


ACTES
and Monuments of matters most
speciall and memorable, happening in the
Church, with an Vniuersall history of the same,
wherein is set forth at large the whole race and course
of the Church, from the primitiue age to these last
perrylous times of ours, with the bloudy times, horrible treas-
sons, and grose superstitions vpryall the true Martyrs
of Christ, stought and wrought as well by Heathen
Emperours, as some lately practised
by Romish Prelates, speciallie in the
Realme of England and
Scotland.
Newly reuised and recognifed, partly also
augmented, and now the fourth time agayne
published and recommended to the studious
Reader, by the Author (through the helpe of
Gods worthie Seruant, I o H N F o x, which
dedicateth his paines and whole labours vnto
his louing Flocke.
APOC. VII.
Saluation to our God which sitteth vpon
An. 1583. M.D.LXXXIII.

For three centuries this book was to be familiar to every Englishman. John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, 1563, cast the English as God's chosen people and Elizabeth I as their deliverer. Copies were placed in every parish church. Its vivid text and illustrations celebrated the martyrs of Mary's reign and fuelled a fear and hatred of Catholicism which was to be part of the British heritage into the present century. The title-page presents a crude contrast between the two faiths, one in which Protestants are seen as listening to the Word of God, dying for their faith and taking their place in heaven, while Catholics wallow in a welter of ritual and images and are condemned to hell.