

# THE SEA KING

• SIR FRANCIS DRAKE AND HIS TIMES •



Albert Marrin

ATHENEUM BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

# Young Mariner

*May you live in interesting times.*

—AN ANCIENT CHINESE CURSE



SIR FRANCIS DRAKE AS HE LOOKED ABOUT THE YEAR 1587. PAINTED BY AN UNKNOWN ARTIST, THIS PICTURE SHOWS THE MOST FAMOUS OF ENGLISH SEAMEN AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS FAME AND FORTUNE.

**F**rancis Drake's early life is largely a mystery. He was born sometime between 1540 and 1545 on a farm near Tavistock in Devon, a county in southwestern England. Neighbors said that his father, Edmund, had been a sailor before settling down and marrying a woman whose name has been lost to history. Nothing is known about her except that she bore him twelve sons, of whom Francis was the first—or the first to survive, since disease claimed half of all sixteenth-century children before their first birthday.

Francis was born into a world in turmoil, a world divided into warring camps. When his father was a boy, a German monk named Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation. Luther denounced the Roman Catholic church as corrupt and worldly. The church, he insisted, had rejected the simple virtues of Christianity for the sake of wealth, power, and luxury. In protesting, he demanded reform, in short, a Protestant Reformation.

Luther's ideas landed like a bombshell. Until he came along, Europeans had been bound together by a common faith and outlook. Nations might disagree, even fight, but they still shared the same religious and moral beliefs. The spread of the Reformation, however, forced people to choose sides. Europe at that time knew nothing of religious liberty or the separation of church and state. Faith and citizenship went hand in hand. To be a good citizen, not only did you have to

MARTIN LUTHER, A GERMAN MONK, BEGAN THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION BY BREAKING WITH THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN 1520s. BEFORE LONG, PROTESTANTS AND CATHOLICS WERE PERSECUTING EACH OTHER AND FIGHTING RELIGIOUS WARS THROUGHOUT WESTERN EUROPE.



obey the law, you had to follow the “true religion,” that is, the religion of your ruler.

Rulers used their power to keep their people loyal to Catholicism or to lead them into the Protestant camp. Those who objected were deemed worse than traitors; they were heretics, teachers of false beliefs, who belonged in hell. Heretics were persecuted, often killed, to keep them from “killing” the souls of innocent people. Thus began a cycle of violence lasting two centuries. Persecuted minorities resisted whenever possible, plunging one country after another into revolution or civil war. Wars between nations became crusades. In addition to their usual quarrels over trade and territory, nations claimed to be fighting for God, truth, and holiness. The Reformation, therefore, was far more than a religious movement. Much of what follows in this book could not have happened without it.

In England King Henry VIII and his son, Edward VI, broke with the Catholic church in the 1530s and 1540s. That was fine with Edmund Drake, an ardent Protestant. Many of his neighbors, however, still clung to the old faith. In 1549 Catholic mobs went on a rampage in Devon, forcing the Drakes to abandon their farm. They fled eastward, settling near the main base of the Royal Navy at the mouth of the Thames. Edmund supported his family by reading the Bible and preaching to the ships’ crews. It was a poorly paid occupation, and the family had to make its home on a mastless, rotten hulk anchored off-shore.

Years later, after Francis had become famous, he admitted, “My bringing up hath not been in learning.”<sup>1</sup> Whatever he knew of reading and writing had been learned at his father’s knee. Nevertheless, he had a natural ability with words. He spoke passionately and convincingly, so that even doubters came around to his way of thinking.

Edmund gave his son his outlook on the world. He taught him that God is master of all things, and that whatever happens, good or bad, is according to a divine plan. Francis learned to accept any failure as due to God’s will, although, he confessed, it might be difficult to understand. He had no trouble, however, understanding that Catholics were wicked. From his earliest days, he disliked Catholics. Like his father, he called them “idolaters,” “enemies of God,” and “papists,” that is, servants of the pope in Rome. Dislike turned to hatred after Queen Mary came to the English throne in 1553. Known as Bloody Mary, she was a fanatic Catholic. Determined to undo the work of her father and

brother, she sent hundreds of Protestants to the executioner. After her death in 1558 her Protestant half-sister, Elizabeth, took over and ruled forty-five years.

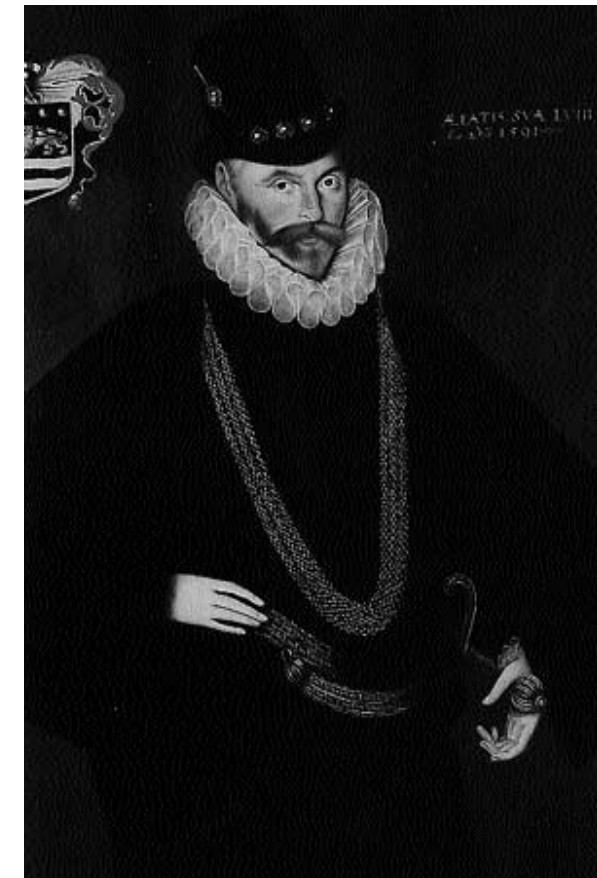
Young Drake, however, had still another teacher: the sea. Life at the edge of the sea was different from anything he had known on the farm. There were different sights, different smells, and different sounds along the shore. Fields and trees gave way a forest of tall masts. Wherever he turned he saw white sails, anchors, and guns—lots of guns. The air was heavy with the smell of salt, tar, and damp wood. The whistling of the wind mingled with the sounds of creaking timbers and gurgling water as his home rose and fell with the tides.

Since the family was large and the father’s income small, the eldest son had to go out on his own. When Francis turned ten, Edmund found him a job on a small vessel that traded with England, France, and Holland. This was not unusual; in those days boys normally went to sea at the age of ten. The life span was shorter than it is today, forcing youngsters to grow up faster. For example, boys of eight went to the wars with their fathers and girls married at nine.

The North Sea became Francis’s new teacher. It was a harsh, unforgiving teacher who punished failure with death.

To survive, Francis learned to navigate by the stars and compass, avoid sandbanks, and steer clear of rocky coastlines. Though only a boy, he was expected to do a man’s work. This meant lending a hand when it came to hauling up the anchor, or climbing aloft to take in or unfurl the sails. It meant going sleepless for days, while storms tossed the vessel like a cork and waves swept over the deck. Yet he met every challenge; indeed, it seemed that he had been cut out for a life at sea. He became such a good sailor that his employer, a childless bachelor, remembered him in his will. And so, at about the age of sixteen, he became skipper of his own vessel.

Voyage followed voyage. Francis worked hard, spent little, and was able to put aside “a pretty sum of money.” When he had enough, he decided to seek his fortune. He sold the ship and went to Plymouth, a bustling seaport in Devon. There he joined John Hawkins, a distant cousin and the town’s leading citizen. Next to his father, Hawkins was to become the most important man in the youngster’s life. Hawkins,



SIR JOHN HAWKINS IN 1591, AS SEEN BY THE PAINTER FEDERIGO ZUCCARO. DRAKE’S COUSIN WAS NOT ONLY A WEALTHY PLYMOUTH MERCHANT, BUT A LEADING SLAVE TRADER AND THE HEAD OF THE ROYAL DOCKYARDS, WHERE HE BUILT THE FINEST WARSHIPS OF THE TIME.



RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IN ENGLAND. THE CATHOLIC QUEEN MARY, KNOWN ALSO AS "BLOODY MARY," HAD SCORES OF PROTESTANT "HERETICS," OR FALSE BELIEVERS, BURNED TO DEATH DURING HER REIGN, FROM 1553 TO 1558.

who was about ten years older, had grown rich by trading with the Spanish colonies in the New World. We must leave them for a moment to take a closer look at those colonies.

In the century before Drake's birth, the countries of the Iberian Peninsula—Spain and Portugal—had pioneered in overseas exploration. Between 1440 and 1520 the Portuguese explored the western coast of Africa and sailed eastward across the Indian Ocean to India, China, Japan, and the East Indies, or Spice Islands. Their boldness paid off—big. Every year large ships known as carracks arrived at Lisbon, Portugal's capital and leading seaport, laden with spices, silks, and jewels. Meantime, Spain tried to find a shorter route to Asia by sailing westward. Instead, Christopher Columbus stumbled upon a new world in 1492 and Vasco Núñez de Balboa found a new ocean in 1511. Eight years later, Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese working for Spain, explored that ocean, naming it the Pacific. Magellan died on the voyage, but his crew became the first to sail around the world, returning to Spain in

1522. Of the 237 men who began the voyage, only seventeen survived. Circumnavigation was a very costly business.

Both countries claimed the new lands, plus any yet to be discovered for themselves. This was only right, they argued, since their explorers had led the way and taken all the risks. In 1494, they persuaded the pope to divide the world by an imaginary north-south line, as if it was his to divide. Everything west of the line, apart from Brazil, went to Spain; everything to the east went to Portugal. His Holiness forbade foreigners from visiting or trading with the new lands without their owners' permission. It seemed like a good deal, except that no one knew that Spain would get the best of it.

Spaniards said they came to the New World for "gold, glory, and the Gospel." True, they wished to spread the word of God and win glory by doing so. But gold came first. "Gold," Columbus wrote after his first voyage, "is the metal most excellent and above all others . . . and he who has it makes and accomplishes whatever he wishes in the world and finally uses it to send souls into Paradise."<sup>2</sup> Eighty years later, his words were echoed by Lope de Vega, Spain's leading playwright. In his play *The New World*, he has the devil say of his countrymen: "It is not Christianity that leads them on, but rather gold and greed." Oro, or "gold": The word itself seemed to drive Spaniards out of their minds. Indians called it "the crazy-making metal."

The native Americans were no match for the Spanish conquistadors. Brave warriors, they fought on foot with spears, clubs, and bows and arrows. The Spaniards had steel armor, swords, and guns. Most of all, they had horses, which did not exist in the New World until brought from Europe. Thus, no matter how outnumbered they might be, Spaniards easily won most battles. Within a generation of Columbus's arrival, they had conquered the islands of the Caribbean and founded colonies on the east coast of South America. Between 1518 and 1522 Hernan Cortés destroyed the Aztec Empire in Mexico, renaming it New Spain. In 1531 Francisco Pizarro invaded Peru with fewer than two hundred men and fifty horses. In less than

THE SPANISH CONQUISTADORES, OR CONQUERORS OF THE NEW WORLD, WERE CRUEL, GREEDY MEN WHO WORSHIPED GOLD. THIS PICTURE SHOWS INCA INDIANS BEING FORCED TO BRING TREASURE TO THE INVADERS DURING FRANCISCO PIZARRO'S CONQUEST OF PERU IN THE 1530s.

