

## Gloriana

I recently had the pleasure of visiting the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I happened to arrive just a few days after Britain's Independence Day which, as we all now know, is June 23. I had assumed, like many, that the referendum would produce a lot of the usual whinging about the horrible European Union but that in the end the British would stay in the club because it was good for business and it was the best topic for a good moan they had ever had.

Surprise, surprise, they decided that what they wanted more than anything was a jolly good adventure. And what better way for a country to look for adventure than to throw forty years of treaty and trade arrangements to the winds in exchange for the complete unknown? In the adventurous spirit of Drake, Cook and Scott they said, To hell with this cosy arrangement with the Continentals and their fetish for predictable cucumbers and all those pesky Poles, we're going to have an adventure!

Admittedly, not everybody I met while I was there was pleased to be going on an adventure. Many British people are rather hobbit by nature and adverse to adventures. Some of these stick-in-the-muds were actually a bit cross about this decision. One lady I spoke to was in tears. Naturally, these feeble souls were being told by the adventurers to stop snivelling and get stuck in and make the best of it. You can see their point. Britain would never have conquered a quarter of the world's land area if Drake had decided he preferred sitting by the fire toasting muffins to singeing the king of Spain's beard or if Scott had

declined to visit the South Pole just because it was a bit nippy there.

It is worth remembering that this lust for adventure is predominantly an English thing. They had spent centuries being top dog, mostly in their own little corner of Europe but also, for a glorious century or so, in the wider world. It couldn't last of course and by the Swinging Sixties the English realised that, although they were swinging, they were also becoming progressively poorer, while the united Europeans, who couldn't swing if their lives depended on it, were nonetheless getting steadily richer. It was time to swallow English pride and admit that those ludicrous Continentals might be on to something after all. Following two humiliating '*nons*' from de Gaulle the UK was finally admitted to the European Economic Community in 1973.

However, from day one the English were never really happy. No longer top dog they were now merely first amongst equals. Worse, those equals were France and Germany, both of which were the countries the English most liked to hate (or at least laugh at). But the English hung in there and in time Britain became a founding member of the European Union and profited from the arrangement. Surely, for a nation of shopkeepers, this should have been enough?

Not at all. Despite the profits, the English were stuck with the nagging sense that they were in the wrong club. It took four decades but in the end this was the sentiment that prevailed.

For most English people the popular parts of their history are the bits where the doughty English are standing alone against the European hordes. What could be more

glorious than the summer of 1940 when Britain saw off the Luftwaffe? And there's 1815, when Britain finally destroyed the Corsican ogre at Waterloo (with a little help from some Prussians, but this detail is often forgotten). Stirring stuff.

I would argue that the English person's absolute favourite period is the Elizabethan era. Then England was up against an almighty Spain and was isolated and in danger of being invaded by what were generally acknowledged to be the best soldiers in the world: the Spanish Tercios. Imagine if *they* had made it onto the Kent shore. Why, English people today would all be speaking Spanish.

Yes, Elizabethan England was isolated but they had heroes, lots of heroes, and they sank that Spanish Armada (with a little help from some North Atlantic storms, but this detail is often forgotten). What English heart does not beat a little faster at that famous roll call? Howard, Drake, Hawkins, Frobisher and good Queen Bess, Gloriana herself. (Drake and Hawkins were freebooters and slave traders, but this detail is often forgotten.)

Prime Minister May is being coy about what she will be demanding of the Europeans during the departure negotiations but I have every reason to believe that the big plan is a new and glorious Elizabethan age. Free of the deadening embrace of the EU, England's mini-empire (England, Wales, Scotland, a bit of Ireland, the Falklands and Tristan da Cunha) will send its freebooters out into the world again where they can return to doing what they do best: selling slaves, pushing opium and preying on European shipping. Ah, the good old days. Gloriana is back!

Happy Independence Day.