Sir Humphrey Gilbert, Elizabeth I, and the Anglo-Spanish Conflict

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During the spring and summer of 1585, several of Elizabethan England’s most prominent naval leaders, including Sir Francis Drake, Sir Richard Grenville, and Sir Martin Frobisher, sailed to the Americas to challenge Spanish dominance there. They commanded over three thousand men aboard dozens of ships, and their depredations of Spain’s American territory constituted the first belligerent actions of the Anglo-Spanish War. Though Sir Humphrey Gilbert was not among the crews of these noteworthy voyages, as he had vanished at sea in his attempt to reach the Americas two years earlier, he wrote two groundbreaking treatises in 1577 that significantly influenced these three successful expeditions. He helped devise the schemes that Elizabeth I and her government implemented to weaken Spain in the Americas, which not only destroyed some of Spain’s greatest West Indian port cities and severely damaged its merchant fleet, but also gave England a foothold in the west and strengthened its position for the impending war.

Scholars have long acknowledged that the ideas expounded by Gilbert in 1577 resembled the three expeditions that sailed from England in 1585. From Gillian Cell’s research on Newfoundland in the late 1960s to James Horn’s recent work on Roanoke, historians have noted, however briefly, that Gilbert’s ideas did not die with him.¹ While several writers have recognized the relationship between Gilbert’s writings and later expeditions, his precise impact on the three 1585 voyages and Elizabeth’s part in their execution have yet to be fully articulated.² Though known more for his bravado and cruelty than his naval treatises, Gilbert displayed great foresight in his documents on Spain. By juxtaposing his two 1577 documents to the objectives and results of the later voyages, it becomes clear that the government based their attacks largely upon Gilbert’s ideas. Analyses of the letters patent that Elizabeth granted to Gilbert and her role in the 1585 voyages also shed light upon her involvement in English privateering. Such comparisons make it clear that Elizabeth and her advisors retained worthwhile proposals like Gilbert’s to utilize when they were required. Nearly a decade before war broke out, the English government

EIRC 37.1 (Summer 2011): 119-35
recognized the threat posed by Spain and received a well-devised scheme to counter any attack. The ever-pacifistic Elizabeth attempted to maintain an edgy peace with Spanish King Philip II throughout the late 1570s and early 1580s; but when pushed to the brink, she revived Gilbert’s proposals. His innovative notions, which included taking the initiative and weakening Spain in the Americas before Philip could unify his forces, gave England the upper hand in the imminent Anglo-Spanish conflict.

Gilbert and Elizabeth became acquainted as early as 1558, when the young Gilbert served in the princess’s household. Four years later he fought for her at Le Havre, where he may have met Frenchmen who had been to America, thus influencing the course of his later voyages. During the mid-1560s Gilbert wrote A new passage to Cataia, petitioning Elizabeth for a charter of discovery to reach the Far East and use America as both a rendezvous point and trading post, and he requested her permission to search for the Northwest Passage on at least two other occasions.3 The Muscovy Company protested his encroachment upon their territory, however, forcing Gilbert to capitulate (SP 12/42/16-8). In 1574 he headed a group of English West Country adventurers, including Grenville, Christopher Carleill, and George Peckham, who petitioned Elizabeth and Lord High Admiral Edward Clinton for permission to find “unknown landes” to the west (SP 12/95/136-42). Even though they requested no royal investment and agreed to settle areas uninhabited by Christians, the queen and her government rejected their appeal.

By 1577 Gilbert had spoken to Elizabeth numerous times to no avail, so he finally changed his tactics. Hoping to take advantage of the recent anti-Spanish hysteria that gripped England due to Spain’s increasingly brutal war in Low Countries, he wrote two tracts for the queen on how she might attack the Spanish directly. The latter document comes to an abrupt end in the original folio, suggesting that Gilbert may have hurriedly submitted it, or the document may be incomplete. His tracts are rather secretive in nature, though Gilbert’s attempt to conceal his intentions would have hardly confounded Spanish spies. He uses unimaginative abbreviations such as “NF” for Newfoundland, “WI” for the West Indies, and “S” for Spain (SP 12/118/30-32). To his credit, he did leave the second document unsigned, but he inadvertently signed the first and someone simply scratched out his name. The obliterated signature is certainly his own, and though the documents are not in his hand, they are decidedly his doing.4 His hesitancy to claim them and his attempt to conceal his objectives, however uninspired, indicate that he feared repercussions for his writing, most likely from Spanish officials in London. Luckily for