GOD OF HIS MERCY KEEP US FROM SICKNESS: DISEASE AND DEFEAT IN THE AGE OF FRANCIS DRAKE

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The age of Francis Drake is identified with England's emergence as a sea power of the first rank. It witnessed the repulse from the British Isles in 1588 of the mighty Spanish Armada sent by Philip II of Spain to collaborate with his army in Flanders in striking down this kingdom. It also saw an entirely new phenomenon: the employment of English sea forces in far distant waters in offensive operations against enemy territories and shipping. Cadiz was assaulted in 1587 and again in 1596; Corunna and Lisbon, with disappointing results, in 1589. The range of the sea forces was extended into extra-European waters. Drake swept through the Caribbean in 1585-6, leaving behind in the Spanish settlements a trail of pillage and destruction. He repeated the venture without success in 1595-6, the year of his death off Porto Belo. However, the increased radius of action of English fleets and the advanced nautical skills of English seamen were outstripping the capacity of the logistical services to sustain these new ambitions.

The most awesome of many problems, especially when large fleets, packed with large numbers of men, were assembled, was to prevent their disintegration through the spread of disease. Men were much more likely to die on active service than to be killed in action. Physicians with appropriate skills, had they been available, would have been of greater service than surgeons. The virtual collapse as a fighting force of the English navy during the Armada campaign of 1588 is a vivid example of an unequal encounter with natural, and largely uncontrollable, forces. These were rooted in the inadequacies of an impoverished government's victualling agencies and in the limited efficacy of contemporary methods of preserving food and drink. Men living off tainted rations on board overcrowded and unhygienic ships were living precariously. The anguished prayer of Charles, Lord Howard of Effingham, who commanded the sea forces

in the national mobilisation of 1588, reminds us of a neglected truth concerning the Armada campaign:

> 'God of his mercy keep us from sickness, for we fear that more than any hurt that the Spaniards will do, if the advertisements be true. Well, Sir, I would her Majesty did know of the care and pains that is taken here of all men for her service. We must now man ourselves again, for we have cast many overboard, and a number in great extremity which we discharged'.

These words, written at Plymouth only six days before the Spaniards, who were also plagued with victualling problems, were sighted off the Lizard, give a foretaste of what was to come.

English battle casualties in the Armada campaign were remarkably light. Yet after the battle of Gravelines on 29 July, when the Armada was dislodged from its anchorage off Calais and forced into the North Sea, the English fleet was able to act only as a squadron of observation. And on 2 August it was compelled because of shortage of powder and shot, scarcity of victuals and signs of sickness to return to harbour. The sickness was hardly scurvy since refreshment ashore failed to alleviate it. Indeed its worst effects were observed at Harwich, Margate and Dover. Evidence of the mortality rate is no more than impressionistic. Howard's report from Dover of 22 August talks of infection 'grown very great and in many ships and now very dangerous'. John Hawkins's report of 4 September suggests that the great ships were seriously undermanned. The sickness, whether food poisoning or typhus, wrought sufficient havoc to put an end to talk of an immediate counter-offensive and compelled acceptance of Hawkins's verdict that the ships were utterly unfitted and unmeet to follow any enterprise.

Ominous though it was, the rapid collapse of the sea forces in home waters in 1588 did not deter the advocates, Drake prominent among them, of operations against the Iberian peninsula in 1589. Drake may have taken heart from his campaign in Iberian waters in 1587, perhaps the greatest success, both financially and strategically, of his career. In 1587, however, he had been at the head of a comparatively small force. Unencumbered by an army, he had succeeded in keeping chronic sickness at

bay through the replenishment of his stocks of provisions and wine at Cadiz, through the acquisition of access to fresh water at Sagres and through wholesale capture of Spanish and Portuguese fishing boats.

1589 was on an altogether more unmanageable scale: seven royal warships, 78 armed auxiliaries and a squadron of transports having on board an army of more than 13,000 officers and men. The problems, especially those of victualling and overcrowding were apparent at Plymouth during the preparatory stages. They were compounded by the grandiose plans of Drake and his associates, all of whom were heavily committed financially to a campaign in Portugal leading, it was hoped, to the overthrow of Philip II's government there and its replacement by that of the Portuguese pretender, Dom Antonio. The chances of success, which depended heavily upon a Portuguese uprising in favour of the invaders, were at best remote. In the sixteenth-century circumstances they were virtually non-existent.

The conduct of the campaign did not help. There is general agreement among contemporaries that sickness manifested itself during a superfluous operation against Corunna. According to Sir William Monson, an Elizabethan seaman and writer on naval matters who did not serve in this expedition, the outbreak was caused by 'the immoderate drinking of the soldiers'. We are probably on safer ground in following two participants, Sir Roger Williams and Anthony Wingfield, whose observations appear to suggest that the infection was typhus. The enfeebled army was put ashore at Peniche, some forty miles north of Lisbon, failing during its march upon the capital to attract indigenous support. Drake meanwhile reached the mouth of the Tagus, but was deterred from advancing up river to the aid of the army because 'the sickness and weakness of the mariners and soldiers was so extreme as they were not able to handle the tackle of the ships'. Unsupported by the fleet, the army was forced to retire from before Lisbon. *Sauve-qui-peut* now became the order of the day as the expedition struggled back to England with losses of about 9,000 men. Once again impersonal forces of nature had upset strategic calculations. But the conduct of the campaign had been at fault in so many ways that the Drake's reputation, especially with the queen and her council, was

permanently dented. The great opportunistic gambler had lost his reputation for invincibility.

Drake was to meet the last enemy in the Caribbean in January 1596 in the shape of a dysenteric condition which was sweeping the fleet. It was ironical that death should find him in an area where he had made his first reputation (and his first fortune) as a young anti-Spanish maritime guerrilla in 1572-3 and where he seemed to have established himself in 1585-6 as the embodiment of English sea power and saviour of the nation. The 'great West Indies raid' of 1585-6 was Queen Elizabeth I's first open, if undeclared, act of war against Philip; and Drake, the self-appointed scourge of Spain and of papist idolatry, was its natural leader. This raid has been compared with that of 1595-6 in terms which suggest that Drake, rather like a sportsman in decline, knew what to do a decade later, but no longer possessed the energy and powers of concentration to do it. The truth seems rather to be that all the danger signs were present in the 1580s and that, when closely analysed, the operation did not fully achieve its targets and displayed some of the symptoms of collapse.

The aims in 1585 were to capture the Spanish treasure fleet and to attack important places in the Indies including the Isthmus of Panama across which travelled, as Drake well knew from earlier experience, the silver trains from the mines of Potosi to Nombre de Dios. Drake also contemplated the seizure of a permanent base in the Caribbean as a means of waging war against Spain through the establishment of a permanent threat to its settlements and its imperial communications. He sailed from Plymouth in September 1585 at the head of twenty-one public and private fighting ships and eight pinnaces. The whole force including soldiers numbered 2,300 men. It was the largest and most ambitious expedition so far sent from England to strike at targets in the New World.

The trail of pillage began in Europe with the replenishment of supplies through the seizure of ships and cargoes at Vigo. The second port of call was Santiago in the Cape Verde Islands where more supplies of food and drink were obtained. As the expedition got ready for the transatlantic crossing there were no reports of serious medical problems. Within two

days, however, of putting to sea, the threat to oceanic strategy posed by disease manifested itself. All the extant journals and narratives take notice of this sickness and there is agreement that it began just after departure from Santiago. The journal of the *Primrose* notes that within two days of setting sail there was great sickness throughout the fleet, 'so that in the Admiral there were sick above a hundred men at one time, and so in other ships according to their number. There died divers of this disease both in our ships and others, sometimes one, sometimes two or three in a day'. The disease is nowhere specifically identified, but the symptoms are described. *A Summarie and True Discourse*, attributed to Walter Bigges a military captain, describes it as a very burning and pestilent ague - the *calentura* - of which many died and of which the survivors did not recover their strength. J.J. Keevil in his notable work *Medicine and the Navy* identified it as malignant malaria, contracted at Santiago.

It was therefore with a force weakened in both numbers and fitness that Drake entered the Caribbean at the end of 1585. He led with *élan*. The first target was Santo Domingo on the island of Hispaniola which was occupied, looted and ransomed for 25,000 ducats. Cartagena on the Spanish Main was similarly occupied and evacuated on payment of a ransom of 107,000 ducats. The evidence suggests that Drake intended to continue with an attack upon Panama which 'standeth upon the sea coast in the South Sea, and doth [receive] all the treasure that cometh by water from the new kingdom of Peru, which may be taken without resistance: this town may be a prey of a million of ducats'. The toll taken by disease, however, put this glittering prize out of reach. According to the *Primrose* journal, one hundred died at Cartagena; and Spanish sources put the number of deaths higher again. Faced with this high mortality rate, a council of army officers, called upon by Drake to offer an opinion, recommended, in the words of Walter Bigges, its 'resolution to returne homewards'. The West Indies raid of 1585-6 was hardly a disastrous failure. It created a mood of insecurity among the Spanish settlers; it shook the nerves of European bankers upon whom Philip II was dependent for advances of money to sustain the great power status of Spain and it produced a modest profit for those, including the queen, who had contributed to the funding of the

enterprise. But it undermined, or should have undermined, the idea, fashionable at the time in England, that the appropriate strategy in war with Spain was a sustained offensive in the Indies supported by the seizure there of a base or bases. The attraction of the theory was that, given the disparity between England and Spain in military terms, the only offensive action open to England was in the New World. But the view of Sir Walter Ralegh that England had it in her powers to 'break that great empire in pieces' seems in the face of logistical realities to have been a fantasy.

It remained, however, an article of faith among people like Francis Drake who thought of maritime war as an entrepreneurial adventure whereby self-interest and the public interest could be brought into harmony through a predatory strategy. The aims of the 1595-6 expedition were to proceed first to San Juan de Puerto Rico where, according to intelligence, lay a disabled Spanish galleon laden with treasure. After the successful completion of this treasure hunt, the expedition was to strike a blow at Panama. Leadership of this transoceanic enterprise was in the hands of Francis Drake and his old patron John Hawkins. Both men were now in their fifties and Drake, at least, was desperate to restore the reputation so badly dented in 1589.

The contemporary narratives, written of course in the knowledge that things had gone tragically wrong, give the impression that, even before it sailed, the expedition was bedeviled by victualling problems and tensions between Drake and Hawkins. We get the impression that after it sailed these tensions were exacerbated by Drake's failure to solve the problems with regard to the ships for which he was personally responsible. Whatever the truth of this allegation, it was found necessary at sea to postpone the crossing of the Atlantic until an attempt had been made to obtain replenishment at Grand Canary. The time lost was fatal to the chances of success. It enabled the Spaniards, rather fortuitously, to reinforce the defences of San Juan and the Isthmus of Panama and to thwart the marauders.

The sources of 1595-6 do not provide such vivid evidence of disease and death as those of 1585-6 and 1588, but they register, in an almost matter of fact way, a steady trickle of deaths of people important enough to be named and of humble and anonymous seamen. The deaths of Hawkins and Drake are logged. We are told that Hawkins, 'not able to bear his grifes out longer', sickened and died off Puerto Rico. Drake lived long enough to witness the repulse of the army from the isthmus. His last days were spent in a mood of dejection. 'Since our returne from Panama he never caried mirth nor joy in his face.' He died on 29 January 1596 after an apparently short illness of a dysenteric nature.

Drake thus joined the comrades in arms who had gone before him and those who perished in the same epidemic as carried him off. By dying not in battle but in the sick bed he shared the fate of thousands of fighting seamen in the sixteenth century.

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A NOTE ON SOURCES

There is in print an abundance of contemporary evidence, though hardly of a statistical or diagnostic sort. The impact of disease in 1588 is well illustrated by J.K. Laughton (ed.), *State Papers relating to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada, Anno 1588*, 2 vols. (Navy Records Society, 1894). Julian S. Corbett (ed.), *Documents relating to the Spanish War, 1585-1587* (Navy Records Society, 1898) and Mary Frear Keeler (ed.), *Sir Francis Drake's West Indian Voyage, 1585-86* (Hakluyt Society, 1891) contain much valuable first-hand evidence which is supplemented from Spanish archives by Irene A. Wright (ed.), *Further English Voyages to Spanish America, 1583-1594* (Hakluyt Society, 1951). Documents and narratives of 1589 are printed by R.B. Wernham (ed.), *The Expedition of Sir John Norris and Sir Francis Drake to Spain and Portugal, 1589* (Navy Records Society, 1988). The last voyage and death of Drake are documented by K.R. Andrews (ed.), *The Last Voyage of Drake and Hawkins* (Hakluyt Society, 1972).

J.J. Keevil, *Medicine and the Navy*, vol.I, *1200-1649* (1957) is a valuable study. The most recent syntheses of the age are K.R. Andrews, *Drake's Voyages : A Re-assessment of their Place in Elizabethan Maritime Expansion* (1967 and 1970) and D.B. Quinn and A.N. Ryan, *England's Sea Empire, 1550-1642* (1983).

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