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## INTRODUCTION

# ‘This reckless undertaking’

THE HAGUE, MONDAY 11 OCTOBER 1688

IT WAS CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT, and Ignatius White was deeply agitated. The streets of The Hague were quiet, and his residence in the centre of the town was perfectly safe. Yet to the English ambassador, his house might as well have been under siege. He had been in post for close to two years, and during that time the relationship with his hosts, the Dutch, had deteriorated to disastrous new depths.

White, an Irish Catholic of minor aristocratic stock, was not the most talented diplomat in the corps, but he was hard-working and deeply loyal to his master, King James II of England and Ireland and James VII of Scotland. As so often, White had the King closely in mind when he penned his near-daily despatches to James’s Secretary of State, Charles Middleton, who would pass on its contents to the King as he deemed fit. On 11 October, White did not hold back, begging Middleton not to dilute the terrible news that followed.

[1]

White's lengthy missive confirmed in a panicked stream of words the news that the ambassador had at first doubted, then suspected, and now accepted with palpable dread: an invasion of England would be launched from the Dutch Republic in a matter of days.

Exactly a hundred years earlier, the treacherous shoals of the Channel, capricious winds and the boldness of the English navy had foiled the attempted invasion of England by a fearsome Spanish Armada. The defiance of Queen Elizabeth and her people towards Philip II of Spain's global empire had long been immortalised as a collective act of national bravery and a symbol of England's unassailable shores. Ignatius White was insisting, however, that the King must prepare himself for an immediate onslaught that would render all talk of inviolable England obsolete. White had 'spared no money' to find out how large the force was that the Dutch, led by William III, Prince of Orange, were planning to unleash.

The Prince did certainly to bring with him 25,000 effective men, 15,000 foot, and 5,000 horse [*sic*], but by the list of ships hired for transporting of them, and by the proviador [quartermaster general]'s account taken this very day, they cannot transport but 12,000 foot, and 2,500 horse, there not shipping to be had for more in all the Provinces [of the Dutch Republic]; though this be so, I hope his Majesty will prepare as if they landed with 20,000 men . . . Artillery, and that very good, they have in abundance, and abundance of pontoons to land, and to march over rivers. . . . These forces accompanied with many volunteers, design no less than a conquest of the three kingdoms [of England, Scotland and Ireland]; never an army was better furnished with all necessaries.<sup>1</sup>

Even more worrying were the signs that the invaders were, according to White, prepared to equip and arm an even larger army of English insurrectionists. The Dutch were bringing 'arms for 10,000 horse, and above 50,000 foot: let not his Majesty be surprised at this quantity of arms, for it is but too true'. They had even assembled 'a great quantity of coats and clothes' to dress these rebels and incorporate them formally into their army. 'They are sure it will increase as they march through the country as a snowball.'<sup>2</sup>

Nine days after penning this alarming letter, the Dutch Armada had still not set sail, but the news from The Hague remained dire. 'The provisions of all sorts, and the quantity of arms, and other

warlike instruments for sea, and land service, that is daily sent from Amsterdam, and other sea ports, to the fleet, and to those ships at the Texel, is incredible, the like preparations was never done anywhere.<sup>3</sup> On 26 October, White revised upward his earlier assessment of the size of the invading army. The King should escalate all measures, as the Dutch ‘will embark 30,000 men’. Again, four days later, the ambassador remarked in a cautious reversal that ‘The Prince [of Orange] has not above 20,000 fighting men; he was so impatient to be embarked that he would not stay for some regiments he sent for.’<sup>4</sup> While perhaps comforting, the implication that the leader of the force heading imminently for England was so determined in his design that he was willing to sail without some of his troops cannot have eased the King’s anxieties.

Ambassador White was tired, lonely and not particularly well connected; by the autumn of 1688, he had become deeply suspicious of the regents of the Dutch Republic and its Prince of Orange. As the reality of the situation gradually unfolded, his fear-stricken mind saw him repeatedly exaggerate the situation, only to correct and recorrect himself, casting doubt on every element of his increasingly anxious letters.

Whatever White’s shortcomings as a gatherer of intelligence, there was no doubting or disguising that the armada destined for England at the end of October 1688 was deeply impressive. It carried an army of more than 16,000 soldiers, among them some of the most experienced regiments of the Dutch army, as well as 5,000 horses and, as White had correctly predicted, a significant train of artillery. It consisted of 48 warships (fitted out with 2,100 cannons) and more than 240 transport vessels, in addition to numerous other auxiliary ships: it was larger than the Spanish Armada of 1588 and constituted the greatest fleet ever to have sailed the North Sea.



This book tells the story of this formidable armada, the last fleet to land a hostile army on English soil, executing the final significant seaborne invasion of Britain. Despite being the last, it is remarkably the least well known in a long line of invasions of England. The numerous successful attempts by Romans, Anglo-Saxons and

Danes, culminating with the invasion of the Norman William the Conqueror in 1066, each define distinct eras of England and Britain's early histories. While multiple invasions were also achieved in the mediaeval period during England's lengthy struggle with France and its civil wars, the popular notion that 1066 marked a final breach of England's natural defences has long been an alluring one. That the immense and well-documented efforts of Philip II of Spain, Napoleon and Hitler to invade England all failed, or were abandoned, has only served to reinforce the impression that no matter the enemy or circumstance, England was secure behind its invulnerable sea wall.

Why has the Dutch invasion of England, a spectacular international event in its day, been so diminished in the historical record that today few people realise that it ever took place? As ambassador White's letters hint, the Dutch Armada was not invisible: the operation was the talk of Europe from late September 1688 onwards, and when the fleet departed at the end of October, all foreign envoys resident in The Hague came to watch it sail away. Two months later, Dutch troops garrisoned London, and King James was arrested by the elite Blue Guards, the household troops of the Prince of Orange, before being forced to flee to France. By the end of February 1689, England had a Dutch king; by the spring William was King in Scotland too, before fighting a bloody war to secure his authority in the northern kingdom, as he would in Ireland.

One would think that the unquestionable success of the invasion and its substantial impact on British politics, culture and society would warrant it a lasting place in public memory. Instead, if remembered at all, the invasion is treated as a sub-plot in the broader narrative of the 'Glorious Revolution'. This label expediently downplays much of the essence of the overthrow of King James and his succession by William (his son-in-law and nephew) and Mary Stuart, Princess of Orange (his eldest daughter). The story of the 'Glorious Revolution' is dominated by the imploding relationship between James and his subjects during the King's short reign. When the King had exhausted the patience of his people, Prince William, who just happened to have crossed the North Sea and English Channel, appeared on the scene as a *deus ex machina*, a convenient device to restore just government.

The sardonic *1066 and All That* (1930), whose title played so effectively on the canonisation of the Norman invasion of England, summed it up in its usual riotous absurdity:

Although a Good Man, James II was a Bad King and behaved in such an irritating and arbitrary way that by the end of his reign the people had all gone mad. . . . The people lost control of themselves altogether, and . . . decided that *the answer was an Orange*. James was thus compelled to abdicate.<sup>5</sup>

The relative rapidity of James’s fall and extraordinary success of the Dutch invasion have rendered them liable to be interpreted as foreseeable events. At the time, the opposite was true. As the Venetian ambassador to France noted in his despatches in mid-October 1688, the Prince of Orange was attempting a ‘reckless undertaking’.<sup>6</sup> The risks involved were so manifold that, ironically, Prince William’s principal enemy, Louis XIV of France, as well as King James, thought the invasion unlikely to take place at all in the autumn of 1688. As a result, they failed to take the necessary measures until it was too late. To the Prince’s supporters, his success against all odds only confirmed that they were taking part in a pre-ordained ‘glorious’ mission, and that their leader was a saviour of biblical qualities.

Sailing under a flag claiming that he came to save the ‘Protestant Religion and Liberty’ of the people of Britain, William himself was also largely responsible for diminishing the martial aspects of his invasion. While the dictum that ‘victors write history’ is well worn, it is less common that victors deliberately write themselves out of their triumph. This is exactly what Prince William and his Dutch backers repeatedly attempted. This was not an invasion but an ‘undertaking’, ‘expedition’ or ‘venture’; the Prince was merely ‘coming over’ to assist the oppressed British and mediate a political crisis as a neutral party. That he had to do so with a substantial portion of the Dutch army and the better part of its navy was only to ‘protect his person’. Few other diplomatic mediators in history have required a bodyguard of 16,000 well-armed men. Even fewer have, in the act of mediation, forcefully overthrown a monarch and had themselves declared King instead.

William was encouraged to intervene in British affairs by a growing but small band of English and Scottish statesmen and officers disillusioned with King James. Widespread popular dissatisfaction with James's policies also inspired a fear in William and the Dutch of an anarchic British realm that could pose a significant threat to the security of the Dutch Republic; in this respect the gamble to invade was strongly conditioned by the internal political affairs of Britain. Yet any formal British conspiracy that encouraged William's 'descent on England' was largely confined to a small segment of the political elite who wished to use William for their own means but failed to control him. The invasion was William's design as much as that of the Dutch state and people. Their unwavering support for William was vital and extensive: around 5 per cent of all able-bodied men in the Dutch Republic were on board the Dutch Armada, with many more men and women engaged in the preceding logistical preparations in the Republic.<sup>7</sup>

Central to the myth of a 'Glorious Revolution' is that William was formally, if secretly, invited to appear in England by seven leading men, later sanctified as 'the Immortal Seven'. That the Prince had specifically requested such an 'invitation' tends to be ignored, and so does the fact that the Prince's supporters in Britain had relatively little influence on the preparations, financing or execution of the invasion. The aggression of the invasion – a sudden pre-emptive strike on a neighbouring state under dubious pretexts – and the illegality of its political settlement are similarly rarely remarked upon. Transplanted to another age, the notion that it could be glorious for a small, disillusioned and covert cadre of elite men to invite a leading foreign ruler to stage a hostile takeover of a country backed by serious military force seems less appealing.

Despite their principal role in staging the revolution, Prince William and the Dutch stressed at every juncture that their 'enterprise' was, in fact, mostly one propelled by the British themselves. In this they fooled few contemporaries. William's enemies widely denounced the 'Dutch conquest', 'Dutch invasion' or 'Dutch usurpation'. William's allies simply turned a blind eye, or, as one leading British member of the Prince's entourage would write, 'shut their mouths'. Yet later historians have all too readily accepted Dutch claims that they were

barely involved and that the invasion was largely orchestrated by British exiles or other British ‘volunteers’.<sup>8</sup>



A narrative of self-liberation and domestic revolution, with the people of Britain ridding themselves of a king bent on trampling their collective will, has been at the heart of the ‘Glorious Revolution’ since it was enacted. The term itself, which emerged soon after 1688, referred firstly to the principle of religious glory, of a ‘British’ Protestantism prevailing over the foreign, despotic Catholicism of King James. When the confessional struggle of the period and the repression of Catholics in Ireland that resulted became less fashionable, ‘glorious’ could be reinterpreted as political glory. The Dutch invasion, and William’s extensive propaganda efforts, directly inspired the formulation of the Bill of Rights of 1689 that enshrined parliamentary sovereignty in English law, blazing a path for a constitutional monarchy that has since remained at the core of British political culture.

The triumphalism associated with the ‘Glorious Revolution’, epitomised and canonised by Thomas Macaulay’s brilliant and influential account (first published in 1848), has long fallen out of favour. While the term has stuck, alternatives have been trialled, from ‘bloodless revolution’, ‘sensible revolution’ and ‘respectable revolution’ to the ‘first modern revolution’.<sup>9</sup> Undoubtedly, King James’s disastrous reign and the consequences of the Dutch invasion of 1688 helped transform Britain. Much excellent ink has been spilled to chronicle this transformation, chiefly of England but more recently also of Scotland, Ireland and the wider world.<sup>10</sup>

What unites the great variety of accounts of 1688 and its aftermath is that their stories are told principally through a British prism. Some lone voices, on both sides of the North Sea, have sought to point out the continental connections of the ‘Glorious Revolution’ over the past century and foreground the importance of the Dutch invasion.<sup>11</sup> This book follows in their wake by presenting the first comprehensive account of the Dutch Armada and invasion from its genesis to its settlement and immediate aftermath.

It is written through the eyes of its protagonists and numerous eyewitnesses (Dutch, British, German, French) and chiefly from its contemporary evidence. The invasion was rightly recognised as a momentous event in its own day, and we are fortunate that copious letters and diaries from numerous participants and observers have survived. An even greater corpus of contemporary printed sources, from newspapers, proclamations and polemical pamphlets to ballads, poetry and sermons, is also available, even if the veracity of such printed matter, as this book will demonstrate, is often questionable and deserves careful scrutiny.

Some of these sources are well known to historians and mostly are to be found in British repositories: those found in Dutch archives are, in contrast, rarely consulted. The planners behind the invasion, Prince William and a band of his closest advisors, left an extraordinary quantity of notes, memoranda and correspondence, which take centre stage in this account. This book is thus one that prioritises the perspective of William III and his circle, and the Dutch Republic more broadly, yet without excluding the struggle faced by British men and women in encouraging, opposing and reacting to the historic events of 1688.

What made the Dutch invasion so different to other invasions of England is the complex relationship between Britain and the Netherlands. The threat of Spanish, French or German invasions was easily characterised as the work of fearsome, alien and domineering continental powers seeking to subjugate Britain. Yet while the Dutch became a global power in the seventeenth century and engaged in a serious maritime rivalry with England, the Republic was hardly a behemoth. It remained a small state that relied predominantly on international commerce to finance its prosperity. The Dutch could never subdue Britain when they were partners in a political union, let alone administer it as conquered territory.

The Dutch and British also shared a long history of close trade, cultural exchange and neighbourly friendship. Even if their competition saw this friendship deteriorate and erupt in three successive naval wars between 1652 and 1674, the relationship between Britain and the Dutch Republic remained close. The Netherlands was in many respects for Britain the cultural and commercial gateway to the European continent; to the Protestant Dutch, Britain was a

leading religious mentor and a historic saviour in the fight against Catholicism and ‘Spanish tyranny’. English commentators remarked frequently on their innate paternalistic role over the ‘infant’ Dutch. Queen Elizabeth, in declaring her support for the Dutch rebels more than a century before the Dutch Armada, specifically referred to the rebels as the submissive wife to England’s husband.<sup>12</sup> That these inferior and historically insignificant people should attempt, no less achieve, a transformative invasion of England has been a reality difficult to place in the history of England: not least because in the aftermath of the Dutch Armada, Britain rapidly reasserted its position over the Netherlands as a superior, wealthier and more industrious power.

A further perplexing reality behind the Dutch invasion of England was that it was only ever partially about Britain. Prince William and the Dutch regents who gave their approval for the military strike were primarily motivated by the threat posed by Catholic France and the attempts by King Louis XIV to enmesh the embattled King James in an alliance against the Dutch Republic. While the Dutch state relied on the sea for its wealth, it could not escape its fate as a country on the continental European landmass. The eyes of the protagonists behind the invasion were therefore as much, if not more, fixed on continental European politics as on British affairs.

In all these respects, this book seeks to chronicle the Dutch invasion of 1688 on its own terms. As its chapters range from the marriage of Prince William to Princess Mary Stuart in 1677 to the battlefields of Ireland in the early 1690s, it emphasises several key themes throughout: the military character of the Dutch Armada, demanding immense political, diplomatic and logistical preparations in the Republic; the inherent risk of the invasion and the multiple near misses that would have rendered it an abject failure; the attempts by William and the Dutch to disguise and diminish their achievement; and the unexpected course of events in England after the landing of the Dutch. In this final context, it is critical to stress that most of William’s adherents in Britain envisaged a very different conclusion to the Dutch invasion, which certainly did not include the coronation of a ‘King William’. If the story of the Dutch Armada teaches us anything, it is that those who look abroad for their salvation should reflect on their saviour’s priorities before their own.

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