

ROBERT BLAKE, GENERAL-AT-SEA

1598-1657

A Broadcast Address given by

THE RT. HON. ISAAC FOOT, P.C.

President of the Cromwell Association

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TODAY is the Seventh day of August. At the break of day on the Seventh of August three hundred years ago, the ship *George* entered Plymouth Sound. It was laden with precious cargo—the body of Robert Blake, General-at-Sea. He had sailed his last voyage. As his fleet of eleven ships came into English waters it was known that he was about to die. He had hoped to see his beloved West country once again. As they came towards Plymouth the other ships were sent on up the Channel, but the *George* (with two other ships) was turned into Plymouth Sound in the hope that the great seaman might yet reach his native soil. But it was not to be. Within sight of home his great heart broke.

“There lay the Sound and the Island with green leaves down beside the water,
The town, the Hoe, the masts with sunset fired—
Dreams, ay, dreams of the dead! for the great heart faltered on the threshold,
And darkness took the land his soul desired.”

The body of Blake was taken to London to be buried later in Westminster Abbey, in solemn state, but his heart was buried in St. Andrew's Church here in Plymouth. That was most fitting. Plymouth became his second home. If Blake had to die, it was fitting that this great sailor should die at sea, and Plymouth was the rightful place for the burial of his heart. Of the letters of Robert Blake that have come down to us most were written at sea, and many at Plymouth, some from Plymouth Sound.

It was in Plymouth Sound that he had assembled in that August of 1654 the great fleet of about thirty ships, probably the most powerful fleet that England had ever seen up to that time. His Admiral's ship was then the same ship *George*, with its sixty guns and three hundred and fifty men. That armada, upon which the people of Plymouth must have gazed with wonder during a whole fortnight, left for a voyage which, for fame, was to be second to none in our history. That fleet did not return to our shores until the 9th of October 1655. To be at sea for a whole twelve months was, in itself, a tremendous achievement in those days, but it was during that year that the English fleet became an English Navy. I have before me the newspaper of that time, where, under the date, October 17th, there is the entry “General Blake presented himself to the Protector”.

The people of Plymouth therefore knew all about the good ship *George*, and now, three years later, August had come again, and Blake was home again. They had been told of his coming. Indeed all England had been told of his coming after his last victory—a victory which ranks with the defeat of the Spanish Armada and Nelson's triumph at Trafalgar. There was the *George* with its two companion vessels, but Robert Blake was not there to step ashore. His body was to be taken on. That was Blake's last voyage up the Channel. The Channel upon which he spent a great part of his life. The Channel upon which he had met and defeated the greatest sea captains of the age; the Channel from which he had swept clean the enemy fleet under Tromp and De Ruyter; and from which he had chased the ships of Prince Rupert of the Rhine; and where he had taught a lesson even to the ships of France. This Bridgwater merchant, who up to the age of fifty or thereabouts, had known nothing of a ship-of-war, had within three or four years taught the world that the Channel was the English Channel. The people of Plymouth knew all about this. Sometimes the battles took place just off their shores. They could sometimes hear the gunfire of the rival fleets, and often the little town was crowded out with the sick and the wounded. Sometimes indeed, Plymouth itself stood in imminent peril. They had come to look upon Robert Blake as their shield and protector. And now he was gone. His body was taken to London, but his heart was buried at St. Andrew's Church, and the stone marking this sacred spot still remains despite the ravage and destruction of the last war.

They bade farewell to the *George* and the two other ships as they left with their precious burden. It was taken to Greenwich to lie in state whilst preparation was made for a worthy burial. Cromwell, the Lord Protector, knew that he had lost his greatest man, and he was resolved that the manner of his burial should mark not only his own tribute to the man he loved but that of the nation. It was on the fourth of September that the General-at-Sea was laid to rest. The voyage up the Thames and the procession along the streets from Westminster Bridge was made one of solemn splendour. Cromwell wished the whole world to hear the gun-fire. Cromwell loved music and every bugler and trumpeter sounded the Requiem of this great sea-captain, and there at the rear marched the regiment of the soldier, Colonel Robert Blake.

I have spoken of the Fourth of September. My suggestion is that on that day we should honour the memory of this great man.

There need be no elaborate ceremonial—Blake was a modest man himself. When chosen for his high command at sea he was himself surprised. He told his friend Colonel Edward Popham that it was "extremely beyond his expectations as well as his merits".

The first wreath should, of course, be laid at Bridgwater. That was his birthplace, he was their Member of Parliament, and the people of that town are rightly proud of him as their most famous townsman. His statue at their market-place erected amidst great rejoicings at the beginning of this century adds dignity to their civic history. Last month they marked his tercentenary in a manner that deserved the congratulation of all Westcountrymen.

The second wreath should be laid at Plymouth, preferably on the stone in St. Andrew's Church.

Then wreaths should be laid by the people of Lyme Regis and of Taunton. Both these places Blake defended as a soldier in the Civil War. Both these places were saved mainly by his leadership and courage. The defence of Lyme (as it then was called) and of Taunton was, in each case, an epic story. Had Blake failed in either place the war would have ended differently. The defence of Taunton stood only second in strategic importance to the defence of Plymouth. The

statue at Bridgwater is fittingly the figure of a soldier and an Ironside. Oliver Cromwell came to know of him as a soldier in the defence of Taunton, and Cromwell could recognise a soldier when he saw one!

Later on, when Cromwell in Ireland needed a second-in-command his choice fell on Robert Blake, and if Blake had consented he would have been at Cromwell's side at Dunbar and Worcester, but fortunately for England, and indeed for Cromwell himself, Blake chose to remain a General-at-Sea.

So much for the wreaths at Bridgwater, at Plymouth, at Lyme Regis and at Taunton. There are other places too and amongst them the Channel Islands and the Isles of Scilly.

When the Commonwealth came into being, the Channel Islands and the Isles of Scilly were in the possession of the young King, and held by able Royalist commanders. If the Commonwealth was to survive, both these strongholds had to be taken. Both places were thought impregnable. They were taken, and taken in two desperate encounters, and the man who did that work was Robert Blake.

The importance of the Isles of Scilly at that time has never been sufficiently realised. The command of the Scillies virtually meant the command of the Channel. The command of the Channel meant the command of the Seven Seas. Prince Rupert had been given the command of the King's ships, and I have here in my hand the letter written by Charles to Rupert, exhorting him to hold the Scillies at all costs. Rupert, in turn, proudly boasted he would make the Islands "a second Venice". The Scillies were also coveted by Holland at the height of her maritime power, and the young King, in his desperate need for money, was on the point of selling them or pawning them to the wealthy merchants of Amsterdam. Somehow the Scillies had to be recovered, and that recovery meant naval and military operations. Blake was both soldier and sailor. Blake knew what was at stake. Had he failed, either here or in the Channel Islands, the victory at Dunbar and the "crowning mercy" of Worcester would have counted for very little. One of the Commonwealth ships was named the 'Trescoe' and another ship was named the 'Jersey'. Trescoe is one of the Scilly Islands. That is where the wreath should be laid on September the Fourth, in the Isle of Trescoe, and another in the Island of Jersey.

The Commonwealth had learnt the value, and the significance of sea power. Parliament had held predominant sea power during the Civil War. Marston Moor and Naseby were the decisive battles of the Civil War, but it was sea power that made both victories possible.

Within three or four years from the establishment of the Commonwealth there occurred one of the greatest miracles of our history. As a result of the execution of the King, the Commonwealth found itself ringed in on every side by its enemies. Ireland and Scotland were hostile. England had not a single friend in the whole world, and for a time we were a pariah state. Englishmen abroad were scorned and insulted. An envoy and an ambassador were stabbed to death, one in Holland and another in Spain. And every representative abroad stood in fear of assassination. Every English ship that put out to sea was in constant peril.

Within four years all that was changed. Foreign Ambassadors became beggars at our gates. No price was too high to pay for England's favour. That miracle was brought about mainly by two men—the one was Oliver Cromwell, the other was Robert Blake.

Not content with making the Channel the English Channel, he went far towards making the Mediterranean Ocean an English Sea. He wrote his name and the name of his country across the known world. His name brought fear to all the enemies of his country, the pirate in his

lair, the King of Spain upon his throne. Both alike dreaded his name, and even the Duke of Savoy gave orders for his massacre of the Vaudois subjects to cease. The exhortation of Cardinal Mazarin he could perhaps ignore, Cromwell's army was a long way off, but Blake's ships might blow his sea ports to pieces. What Blake could do with a few ships the King of Spain was to learn when, at Santa Cruz, this man struck a blow as heavy in its results as the defeat of the Armada fifty years before. What he could do with a few ships the Bey of Tunis was to learn, when, early one morning on the 3rd April 1655, Blake paid him an unexpected visit, at his fortified harbour of Porto Farino. It was an early call; the Bey's fleet of nine vessels were burnt to cinders; and it was all done before breakfast.

There are yet other wreaths that should be laid. One at Wadham College, Oxford, underneath his portrait in their Great Hall. One, also, at Westminster Abbey where a memorial tablet was unveiled in the midst of a great company during the last war.

One more should be laid in St. Margaret's Church beneath the memorial window placed there in the year 1898.

Lastly there is one other place that must not be forgotten. That is the grass plot outside St. Margaret's Church adjoining the Abbey. That is where the body of Robert Blake was cast after it was disinterred from the Abbey by the express instruction of Charles the Second immediately after the Restoration. Others were disinterred too, including John Pym, Cromwell's mother, Popham and Deane, Blake's fellow Generals-at-Sea.

At the beginning of this talk I spoke of Robert Blake coming into Plymouth Sound on August Seventh. The Commissioner for the Navy at Plymouth was Captain Henry Hatsell. It was the melancholy duty of Captain Hatsell to write to the Admiralty Commissioners in London. Captain Hatsell knew Blake very well. He had served under him in the conquest of the Scilly Islands and had been in touch with him at Plymouth. His letter was noteworthy: "This day, about twelve o'clock, the *George*, *Newbury* and *Colchester* came into the Road and two hours before it pleased the Lord to put a period to the days of General Blake. Captain Clarke says he was very desirous to be ashore, and if God saw it good, to add some days to his life for settling of his estate, but his course was finished and his memorial shall be blessed. As he lived, so he continued to the death, faithful . . ."

Those words written on the same day were well chosen. The word 'Faithful' was the word everyone thought of first in thinking of Robert Blake.

"As he lived, so he continued to the death, faithful . . ."

If any words are needed on the wreaths I have spoken of they might well be chosen.

