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Spain, Europe and the Wider World 1500-1800

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Professor Sir John Elliott is surely the most distinguished Anglophone historian of early modern Spain and its empire; and his mastery of that topic has enabled him to make an equally distinguished contribution to our understanding of Europe as a whole between the 15th and 18th centuries. In this collection of some of his most recent articles, essays and lectures, Elliott continues to demonstrate the remarkable qualities which have underpinned that reputation.

?Part 1: Europe? opens with Elliott?s important and widely cited *Past and Present* article, first published in 1992, on ?A Europe of Composite Monarchies?, in which he explores more sympathetically than has traditionally been the case this distinctive early modern political structure, its strengths and weaknesses. In ?Learning from the Enemy: Early Modern Britain and Spain?, an otherwise less easily-found Dacre Lecture, given in Oxford in 2007 in honour of Hugh Trevor-Roper, one-time mentor of the author, Elliott explores what he identifies as a rather obscure side to the relationship between England and Spain in the later 16th and early 17th centuries: alongside the very negative reaction of the former to the latter, encapsulated in the so-called ?Black Legend? of Catholic cruelty, there was an understandable readiness to admire and imitate some aspects of a dominant Spanish culture and practice, until a reversal of attitude occurred in face of Spanish decline in the later 17th century. For their part, Spaniards were less inclined to look to England for solutions to Spain?s problems, at least before the 18th century, and not always then. Nevertheless, his

exploration enables Elliott to draw some broader conclusions about a subject which greatly interested the honorand of the lecture ? ?why societies become dynamic at certain moments in their history?, for example Europe between 1500 and 1800 ? and to suggest that the explanation included a readiness (here, on the part of the competing states of early modern Europe) to contemplate the achievements of others. In ?The General Crisis in Retrospect: A Debate Without End? (2005), Elliott provides an invaluable history of, and commentary on that debate, reiterating his view that it was the state which was revolutionary and the upheavals conservative; he also takes the opportunity to repeat a contention familiar to readers of his work, the importance of the broad canvas and of comparison of one state and society with another, to tease out the crucial features of a historical situation. One further observation by Elliott in this essay is elaborated in that which follows. In ?A Non-Revolutionary Society: Castile in the 1640s? (1990), Elliott explores the paradox that Castile exhibited all the ?preconditions? of revolution in that disturbed decade, but did not in fact revolt. In this way, Elliott throws into relief the subject of loyalty in the past, a theme which historians have arguably neglected for its opposite, disloyalty, rebellion, treachery. In the final essay in this section, ?Europe after the Peace of Westphalia? (1999), Elliott reflects upon the view that the Peace of Westphalia was a turning point in European history, suggesting that if that was the case, this was not so much the consequence of the peace itself as of the long conflict which that settlement ended.

In ?Part II: A Wider World?, Elliott considers Europe?s overseas expansion, with particular emphasis ? not surprisingly ? on that of Spain. In ?The Seizure of Overseas Territories by the European Powers? (1990), which has appeared in two previous collections, Elliott considers the two different inspirations to overseas exploration and empire, the desire for trade and that for conquest, and seeks to answer the question just why European expansion took the form of seizure and settlement of the territories of others. In his Creighton Lecture (1991), ?Illusion and Disillusionment: Spain and the Indies?, Elliott ruminates on a subject ? the impact of Spain?s empire on Spain itself ? which is certainly not new, as he notes, but into which he manages to breathe some new life, connecting it with his over-riding interest in the Olivares project. In another public performance, the Stenton Lecture (1994), entitled ?Britain and Spain in America: Colonists and Colonised?, Elliott compares ? or rather contrasts ? the patterns of empire of British and Spaniards in the Americas, and above all their treatment of the native populations to the advantage of the Spaniards, thus implicitly undermining the so-called ?Black Legend?. In seeking to explain it he suggests that the British approach rested on a want of confidence in the superiority of their own religion and culture which Ireland somehow played a part in. In the more recent ?King and Patria in the Hispanic World? (2004), Elliott is in part seeking to locate the Spanish Indies within the composite monarchy, identifying the development of the idea of *patria* there and its reaction against a radical Bourbon metropole after 1808. The reaction of the colonial creole elites to centralising reform in the 18th century reappears in ?The Same World, Different Worlds? (2005), in which Elliott revisits an aspect of the encounter of Old and New Worlds from 1492 ? how Spaniards reacted to the difference ? which he first addressed in *The Old World and the New*.(1) The reaction, the collapse of imperial Spain in the Americas, and the contrasting histories of the two regions after independence, is also the subject of the final essay in this section, ?Starting Afresh? The Eclipse of Empire in British and Spanish America? (2007).

?Part III: The World of Art? is the briefest in Elliott?s thematic triptych, and in it he turns his attention to the artistic environment of early modern Europe, which he has long sought to incorporate into his studies of the politics of that era. In ?El Greco?s Mediterranean: The Encounter of Civilisations? (2003), Elliott sees the Cretan artist?s move to Toledo after failing to secure the royal patronage of Philip II as paradoxically the means to resolve the problem of the meeting of different artistic traditions, the Greek and the Latin. In the following essay, Elliott considers ?Court Society in Seventeenth-Century Europe: Madrid, Brussels, London? (1999), arguing that whereas the Spanish Court represented a gilded cage, one in which Rubens self-confessedly could not produce, that same environment could allow others - above all Velazquez ? to produce great works. This point recurs in the final essay in this section, in which Velazquez moves centre stage. In ?Appearance and Reality in the Spain of Velazquez? (2006), Elliott traces the career of the artist in the context of the Spain of Philip III and Philip IV, and the opportunities offered by the Court.

Not entirely surprisingly, the present collection remains largely Hispanic in focus, but it does also reflect

important shifts in the focus of Elliott?s recent research. The most obvious difference, perhaps, is geographical. Elliott?s work on Habsburg, Imperial Spain has always included ? it could not do otherwise ? the Americas, or Indies. Nevertheless, his favoured area was European Spain, the Iberian peninsula. But in recent years Elliott has paid much greater attention to Spanish America, culminating of course in his massive recent comparative study of the British and Spanish imperial experiments in the Americas, *Empires of the Atlantic World*.(2)

Accompanying this development in Elliott?s work is another. Hitherto, Elliott has largely confined himself to Habsburg Spain (which ended with the death of Carlos II in 1700) and its immediate aftermath. Thus, his *Imperial Spain*(3) concluded in 1716, with the termination by the new Bourbon king of the political relationship between Castile and Aragon which had characterised Habsburg Spain. However, the present collection now extends his range into ? and beyond ? the 18th century, going down to the end of empire in the first decades of the 19th century.

Associated with this latter shift is a third, rather buried away but of enormous significance. In his earlier *The Revolt of the Catalans* (4), and in *Imperial Spain*, Elliott emphasised the centre-periphery divide. But now Elliott is less sure. Buried in his essay on ?King and Patria in the Hispanic World? (p. 178) is the remarkable observation that ?it is important not to overemphasise the dichotomy between centre and periphery as a critical fault-line in the structure of the Spanish Monarchy?. (adding in a footnote, ?as I did ? in my Imperial Spain??). Indeed! Clearly, Elliott?s is a mind still on the move, rather than one locked into older ways of seeing and understanding his subject.

In his introduction Elliott repeats the explanation, given in the earlier collection of his essays, also published by Yale UP, *Spain and its World, 1500-1700*(5), of how he became interested in Spanish history while on a tour of Spain when a student at Cambridge in 1950. Looking back, Elliott sees that he was in a very favourable position, given the weak state of Spanish history ? i.e. Spanish historical research and writing ? at that time, still feeling the impact of the Civil War and Franco?s victory. Elliott does not go into the subject ? one which in fact merits more attention than it has in fact attracted ? but Spain?s (academic) historical community was badly hit by the Civil War and its aftermath. Individuals suffered in various ways, while pre-war structures often disappeared to be replaced by new institutions, including for example the journal *Hispania* (1940-), and a new agenda in historical research and writing. It is not entirely surprising, then, that so much could be achieved by foreign historians in the following half century. Elliott undoubtedly heads the list of the ?Anglo-Saxons? who carved out a name for themselves as researchers and interpreters of the history of early modern Spain, but there were many more: Koenigsberger, Parker, Thompson, Stradling, Israel, Kamen, Jago, Kagan, Casey, Lynch, Phillips, Nader, to name just a few. Some of these were pupils of Elliott, who has continued to supervise doctoral research in the field. But, says Elliott, the period in which such a distinctive contribution was made by the foreigners is drawing to a close if it has not ended already, because Spanish historical writing has made enormous advances in recent decades, for a variety of reasons. Elliott may be a little indulgent here, because some Spanish research remains narrow, even parochial, unable ? even unwilling in the case of some histories of the autonomous regions beyond Castile ? to locate itself within the bigger picture (one of the defining strengths of the foreign historians of Spain); some approaches remain wedded to rather dogmatic Marxist-style interpretations and labels. Nevertheless, Elliott is surely right in his broad perception: for all these lingering weaknesses, Spanish historical writing is much healthier than 50 years ago and far less dependent upon the insights of foreigners than it was.(6)

Many of the essays exemplify Elliott?s favoured comparative method, an approach which he justifies in the introduction to the volume, which is among its most rewarding reads, not least because in it Elliott reflects ? admittedly briefly - on various topics, themes, and historical methods. Among the subjects treated is the transformation of Spanish historical work, Elliott recalling Trevor-Roper?s comments on the possibilities offered by Spanish history, c.1950, an opportunity Elliott himself has certainly seized (see above). Elliott also engages with the supposed exceptionalism of Spain, a subject which leads him onto national history and the conflicting temptations to exaggerate on the one hand differences and on the other hand similarities between states, societies and situations in the past. This paves the way for further rumination on Elliott?s part on the state of historical research and writing more generally. Elliott expresses some concern at what he

sees as the excessive specialisation and concentration on minute detail associated with the recent proliferation of research; at the other extreme, he is concerned at the broad ? too broad ? ?macro-historical? studies of more recent origin, studies so wide-ranging that they lack definition. Elliott sees his collection as some sort of answer to the problem posed by these two very different ? but equally risky ? approaches. Suggesting that the theme of the collection is an aspiration to ?connect and compare?, Elliott expresses the hope that with the essays reprinted here he has achieved some sort of equilibrium between the two approaches, ?addressing problems ? of general interest and importance, while anchoring them in specific historical contexts shaped by time and place?. Adopting a metaphor attributed to the French historian, Le Roy Ladurie, Elliott would like to think that his collection ?is the work of a parachutist with a few truffles in his bag?.

In fact, there are more than just a few truffles here, scattered through the introduction and the various essays. Many of them, as has already been noted, relate to how historians go about their business. Thus, we read on p. 132 that ?if we refuse to postulate any direct causal connection on the grounds of the lack of firm documentary proof, we may well be guilty of a failure of the imagination, which itself leads to historical distortion no less serious ??. Insights ? challenges? ? of this type are surely just one of the many reasons why Elliott?s work will continue to be read. Certainly, knowledge and understanding of one or two of the topics which are the subject of essays in this book has moved on: witness Juan Gelabert?s study (7) of *Castilla convulsa 1631?52*, evidence which supports Elliott?s contention (above) that Spanish historians have picked up the Anglo-Saxon baton. But, in conclusion, and as was only to be expected, this is an immensely readable collection from a historian who is not only capable of adopting a broad perspective, addressing big questions and rooting them firmly in space and time, but is also an excellent essayist. It is usual on these occasions to welcome the publication of essays, lectures and so on which might otherwise be hard to find, but for all these reasons this collection is doubly welcome.

Notes

1. J. H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New, 1492?1650* (Cambridge, 1970).Back to (1)
2. J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492?1830* (New Haven, CT, 2006).Back to (2)
3. J. H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain, 1469-1716* (London, 1963).Back to (3)
4. J. H. Elliott, *The Revolt of the Catalans: a Study in the Decline of Spain, 1598?1640* (Cambridge, 1963).Back to (4)
5. J. H. Elliott, *Spain and its World, 1500-1700* (New Haven, CT, 1989).Back to (5)
6. For the impact of French historians and historical approaches, see the recently published *La historia moderna de Espana y el hispanismo frances*, ed. F. Garcia Gonzalez (Madrid, 2009).Back to (6)
7. Juan Gelabert, *Castilla convulsa, 1631?52* (Madrid, 2001).Back to (7)

The author is happy to accept the review and does not wish to comment.

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