

John Elliott. 2009
Spain, Europe and the Wider World, 1500-1800
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With his accustomed degree of honesty and responsibility, for which many have expressed gratitude over the years, J. H. Elliott offers with this book a necessary sequel to his previous volume of selected essays *Spain and its World, 1500-1700* (New Haven and London, 1989). Articles and lectures dating from 1990 onwards have been collected and, in certain cases, reprinted again to show, primarily and convincingly, Spain's leading role in the history of the early modern period and its many points of affinity with other European states. This does undoubtedly give unity to the enterprise while it shows the great scholarly capacity of the author to search for connections, thus destroying the myth of exceptionalism with which, for several and dubious reasons, Spanish history of the period has been too often associated. The impressive network of connections established –diplomatic, political, commercial, personal etc– serves the central purpose of showing links between lands and peoples of early modern Europe which, in turn, were extended across the Atlantic during the age of colonial expansion.

The search for connections, however, does not result in an underestimation of differences. Spain may well have occupied an exceptional position in early modern Europe, but the danger of exaggeration for the historian is patent. Elliott occupies the middle ground, explaining difference and similarity, and subverting, when necessary, traditional approaches which new facts render dubious. Chapter I, which explores “unity” and “disunity” in a Europe structured round the axis of a number of “composite” monarchies, becomes in itself a clear example of the above-mentioned capacity for the establishment of similarities and differences by means of comparison. It also shows the need to assess history of the period

abandoning, to a great extent, the idea of unitary nation states, which a basic comparison of numbers makes evident: the five hundred independent political units of Europe in 1500 become about twenty-five by 1900, the Versailles settlement of 1919 signalling the triumph of the so-called "principle of nationality." The need, therefore, for a change of perspective in the historian of the period is obvious, and Elliott does it by applying "contemporary" tools, such as the writings of Juan de Solórzano, a seventeenth-century Spanish jurist, who explains the two basic different ways of "uniting" acquired territories with a king's other dominions. On the one hand there is the "accessory" union, where a province or a kingdom was regarded juridically as part and parcel of another one, with its inhabitants in possession of the same rights and subject to the same laws; and, on the other hand, the *aeque principaliter* type of union, where different constituent kingdoms maintained after their union the right to be treated as distinct entities. This second method, employed with considerable success by the Spanish Habsburgs in trying to hold together the Spanish Monarchy during the sixteenth century, brought about, however, a myriad of problems that need new evaluation: resentment in certain areas, from subjects who felt neglected by the prince; restraints imposed on monarchs by local institutions, which became acute when they tried to impose, for instance, a fiscal policy; disparity in customs and ways of life; the political need for integration; loyalty... Elliott enumerates and examines them all, bringing into the picture the new religious dynamics of the sixteenth century and the sense of self-worth that certain areas acquired in opposition to others with the colonial expansion of the period. In so doing, therefore, he inevitably recognises the need to explore in parallel, for instance, the gulf between England on the one hand and Scotland and Ireland on the other, this being a phenomenon which does not differ much from the position of Castille in relation to other areas of the Spanish Monarchy. Thus, "unity in disparity" became for many of the following years an acute political problem, shared by contending monarchies who inevitably examined each other in their respective searches for a solution, the one adopted by Madrid, with its victory over the rebels of Aragon, Valencia and Catalonia being in the end the most unitary.

This capacity to learn from others, even if it meant copying enemy solutions, is examined in several chapters, though the most

detailed analysis is rendered in Chapter II, in which Elliott pays homage to the figure of Hugh Trevor-Roper, one of the first figures to explore the possibilities of comparative historical studies. Aspects, for instance, such as court etiquette during the rule of Charles I in England or political manoeuvres like the Anglo-Scottish alliance, find a well studied background in the parallel cases of the court of Philip IV or the union of Castile and Portugal. Elliott, of course, moves with incomparable confidence with this material. To readers of his masterpiece, the biography of Count-Duke of Olivares, the amount of new information supplied may perhaps appear to be scant, but, all in all, chapters like the above-mentioned offer a superb compendium of facts and well-defined fields which, in many cases, as admitted by the author, are still in need of new evaluation. One such case, for instance, is Ireland and the role it played in the early colonial efforts that England made in Virginia. Once again, the comparative case with Spain, with its very strong *conquistador* element, is well established. But Elliott goes a step further when he admits in the second part of his book (Chapter VIII) the need to reevaluate the question of Ireland in connection with the lack of confidence that English settlers showed in America when it came to the treatment of native populations, in contrast with the inclusionist philosophy of the Spaniards. This capacity, therefore, to demonstrate new areas for research, for which many of his students have benefited over the years, appears as a very relevant fact to be taken into account. United to the very wide spectrum of fields analysed, in itself a lesson on the possibilities of research open to the new historian, it becomes a generous and inviting offer on his part for any scholar interested in the period.

To conclude, this book, divided into three sections (Europe, A Wider World, and the World of Art), will no doubt occupy a well deserved place both among the selected bibliography of the period and the works of general reference and introductions. With its double perspective, factual and methodological, it is compulsory reading.

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