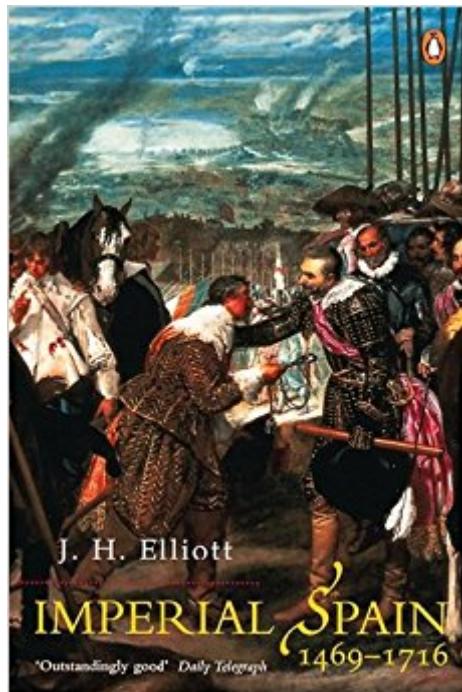


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Imperial Spain: 1469-1716



Synopsis

Since its first publication, J. H. Elliott's classic chronicle has become established as the most comprehensive, balanced, and accessible account of the dramatic rise and fall of imperial Spain. Now with a new preface by the author, this brilliant study unveils how a barren, impoverished, and isolated country became the greatest power on earth—and just as quickly fell into decline. At its greatest Spain was a master of Europe: its government was respected, its armies were feared, and its conquistadores carved out a vast empire. Yet this splendid power was rapidly to lose its impetus and creative dynamism. How did this happen in such a short space of time? Taking in rebellions, religious conflict and financial disaster, Elliott's masterly social and economic analysis studies the various factors that precipitated the end of an empire.

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Customer Reviews

A major work on Spanish history (The Economist)"

J H Elliott recently retired as Regius Professor of History at the University of Oxford.

This book is very good about a number of aspects of internal politics and economics for the period. But it omits almost entirely one of the most important features of Spanish history at this time, namely its foreign wars and empire. The brief statement near the beginning of the book that it will not

investigate the internal histories of Spanish colonies does not prepare one for the big black hole encompassing almost all of Spain's overseas adventures. We get very little about the struggles in the Low Countries, even though these imperial possessions provided important personages in the Spanish ruling house and played an important part in the origins of the terrible Thirty Years' War. There is very little also about the exploitation of New World gold and silver resources, although they funded the Spanish empire. As another reader complained, the book tells us nothing but bits and pieces of the Spanish royal house's complex and crucial interpenetration with the Holy Roman Empire and the Habsburg dynasty. Most annoying of all, we get NOTHING about the Aragonese and royal military involvements in Italy, which stripped the Spanish treasury and hastened the decline of Spanish dominance in Europe, not to mention devastating much of Italy. I read in another book of the fact that Charles V's Spanish army sacked Rome in 1527 and dealt a terrible blow to that city, but there isn't so much as a mention of that fact here. What was a Spanish army doing in Italy in the first place? Beats me. We hear time and again about the fact that Charles V was off in Italy, or the Netherlands, or central Europe, attending to wars about which we hear not a word; but the author is careful to provide us with detailed information about the wool trade in mainland Spain. Same story with Philip II's war against England. I bought this book to get an account of Spain's golden age of European power, in other words of "Imperial Spain 1469-1716", and didn't get it.

I will note first that I am a scholar of Golden Age Spanish Literature, and I consider this book to be absolutely fundamental reading for understanding how Spain amassed one of the most powerful empires the world had ever seen, and then entered into a rapid decline, ironically caused in part by the influx of gold from the pillaging of Latin America, which, in effect, brought about inflation in the Iberian Peninsula. Students and the curious will not only learn many valuable facts about Spain's rise and fall from glory, but will also greatly benefit from the expert analysis of J.H. Elliott. This is truly a classic in the field.

I recently was looking for something to read and realized my understanding of Spanish history pre-Civil War was light on the details, so off to to look at what's out there. Man. That's a thin field to pick from. Hugh Thomas' histories of High Imperial Spain seemed to have the most noise online about them, so I grabbed one and started reading.. meh. "Celebrity biography masquerading as history". I don't need seven paragraphs on the bloodlines of a minor court functionary, thanks, and it's some serious Big Man history that spends next to no time on economy or social, so I put that volume aside. The only other general survey that seems to exist in English AND in e-book format is

this one, J.H. Elliott's "Imperial Spain". So I grabbed that. I tend to lean towards very recent history as there has been a lot of new source material and re-examination going on in a lot of historical fields, particularly since the fall of the USSR and, as regards Spain, the post-Franco era. That said, this book originally dates from the 70's, I believe, but you wouldn't know it from the reading. The author is clear to note that he considered his research source-challenged for a variety of reasons, and is clear on what points he's making that he believes may change if more evidence is uncovered. I appreciated this clarity of purpose and problems throughout. Overall, I found this an EXCELLENT history, particularly for the reader who has a good understanding of the general flow of European, Colonial and Spanish history to begin with. It covers specifically an expanded understanding of the reign of the Habsburg Dynasty over Spain, including the reign of the non-Habsburg Catholic Kings that immediately preceded it as well as the very beginning of the Bourbon Dynasty that supplanted it. This ordering, his choice of which he goes into detail about in the Introduction, makes clear sense as Ferdinand and Isabella obviously finished the Reconquista, thereby ushering in "modern Spain" as an entity in the first place, and they set the table for the entire Habsburg reign that would see Spain rise to its absolute height of imperial power and majesty as well as crash from that perch in disastrous fashion. The Bourbon denouement serves as a proper coda to the entire era, immediately after which Spain effectively retreated into a broken shell of itself for, arguably, two more centuries. Elliott gives equal focus to the domineering personalities of this era as well as broader socio-economic forces at play that influenced the range of and final choices of action those "Big Men" could choose from. This is, in my opinion, the proper mix that history should aspire to, as I don't believe in either a pure Big Man or Inevitable Trend view of history, so I was glad to see it strongly represented here. He doesn't go into great detail on, say, the myriad military campaigns that occurred throughout this era, instead focusing on the effects of those campaigns upon greater Spanish politics, society and economy. As the military efforts of any one Habsburg ruler of Spain could easily fill its own thick volume, again, I agree with the author's choice here. The writing is quite lively and enjoyable, which helps when dealing with such a large book covering such a wide topic. As an example, here's his description of Charles II, one of the last and arguably the worst of Spain's sovereigns during this period: "The poor King himself, the centre of so many hopes, turned out to be a rachitic and feeble-minded weakling, the last stunted sprig of a degenerate line." That's... some powerfully descriptive stuff right there. Elliott doesn't go overboard with this sort of flowery language, saving it for when its impact is actually called for. One can tell that he has written a lot in his career and has put a lot of work into sharpening his craft. The book moves along thanks to this, going into enough detail to evoke the scenes and settings without getting mired

down in minutiae that doesn't add to the overall understanding. Just to note, there are a few small technical problems with the e-book addition; there's a handful of garbled phrases and the maps, which look to have been low-detail linework typical of 70's history books to begin with, were not scanned well, with spine seams visible and a muddy resolution at best. Be prepared to Google some more-readable maps when they pop up. Overall, though, particularly given the paucity of books covering this topic, I can whole-heartedly recommend this volume for anyone looking for a general history of Imperial Spain.

Elliot attempts to assess the rise of Spain at the time of Ferdinand and Isabella to the nadir during the time of Philip IV. Most of the attention concerns the European context of Spain's "rise and fall." There is very little detail on the American Empire and readers who are searching for this will be disappointed. He covers the economic aspects of Spain's problems, but not in much detail, and as an anthropologist I would have liked to have more analysis of the 16th century Castilian dominant ethos -- that wealth and power proceed from honor, glory and military success, rather than the more prosaic Protestant virtues of the north. Extremely readable- I went through it in two evenings. Were I to ever teach a course in Spanish or early modern European history (unlikely), I would certainly require this book.

This review is from the perspective of someone who knew nothing of the period, and read the book to gain an overview. The book is very readable, but detailed account of the history. Traces the arc of Imperial Spain, relating the political, religious and commercial factors into a cohesive picture of the time.

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