

PHILIP II OF SPAIN: THE PRUDENT KING

On the eve of the 400th anniversary of Philip II's death James Casey rejects the traditional portrayal of the Spanish ruler as a cruel despot and argues his achievements were more the result of an extraordinary sense of duty fully in tune with the hopes and aspirations of his people

Next year there occurs the anniversary of the death of one of the most controversial rulers in European history: Philip, king of Spain from 1556 to 1598. Ever since William of Orange's *Apology* of 1580, he has been portrayed as a monster of calculating cruelty – an image reinforced by Verdi's great opera *Don Carlos*. He had the misfortune to live at a time of unparalleled ideological warfare in Europe, between the Protestant North and the Catholic South, and, as one of the protagonists in the fray, was converted into a figure of hate by the nascent forces of printed propaganda. A classic work of modern historiography – Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949) – pays tribute to the king who more than any other left his stamp on that age, but reminds us that rulers were themselves constrained by long-term processes of history and geography. 'I don't think that human strength is capable of everything, least of all mine,' mused Philip himself in 1578. The anniversary of the king's death provides us with an opportunity to take stock of his aims and achievements.

Spain at Philip's accession

The country which the new king came to rule in 1556 was a late arrival on the European stage. Locked during the Middle Ages in her epic 800-year struggle against the Moors, which culminated with the reconquest of the kingdom of Granada in 1492, Spain had acquired unprecedented international responsibilities and influence as a result of her discovery of America and her incorporation in 1516 into the far-flung European empire of Charles V. The empire reached its greatest extent by 1580, when Philip II succeeded to the crown of Portugal. But, as Philip reassured the troubled Portuguese, he did not intend to diminish their existing autonomy; he pointed to Aragon and Castile, united by the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella, yet 'as separate as they were when they had different rulers'. This rambling character of the loosely federated Habsburg kingdoms was to make of Spain a lesser power than she looked on paper. Also, as Philip had to remind his father, Charles V, in 1545 when that monarch was looking for more taxes for his wars, 'The infertility of these realms is well-known to Your Majesty, and one bad year can throw our people into poverty.' Philip's empire very quickly came to resemble a giant with feet of clay.

The character of Philip

Philip was born in 1527, the son of a beautiful Portuguese princess who died when he was only 12, and a much-travelled Flemish father, Charles V, who was absent for most of his formative years. The young heir to the throne became

famous for his reserve and for never betraying his emotions. Self-control helped him overcome many domestic tragedies – the early deaths of his four wives (Mary of Portugal 1543-5, Mary Tudor 1554-8, Elizabeth de Valois 1559-68 and Anne of Austria 1570-80), the insanity of his son and heir Don Carlos and the death in infancy of three of his four sons by Anne of Austria, leaving the ageing monarch with a fragile succession in the person of the timid young prince Felipe (born 1578). Philip II's affections were increasingly centred on his two charming daughters by Elizabeth de Valois, the Infantas Isabella (born 1566) and Catalina (born 1567), and on his nephews, especially the Archduke Albert, of the Austrian branch of the House of Habsburg. His letters to Isabella and Catalina in 1581-2 reflect the emotional warmth of which he was capable in the intimacy of his domestic circle, while to the outside world he presented a facade of impassive coldness. Meanwhile, historical investigation has dismantled the myth of Don Carlos, replacing the heartless, jealous Philip of literature with the bereaved father, inwardly distraught by his son's madness and death from self-inflicted wounds while in confinement (1568).

Philip was one of Spain's most cultured monarchs. He was certainly no scholar, retaining from his good humanist education only a bare mastery of Latin. Despite his quite extensive travels – through Germany and Flanders, with visits to Italy and England, between 1548 and 1559 – he never managed to speak a modern foreign language. This limited his ability to communicate with many of his subjects, and his addresses to the Estates of the Netherlands, Catalonia or Portugal, for example, were read out by secretaries. But in the fine arts he learned much from his travels. He began to take an unusually close interest in architecture, intervening at every stage of the building of his great monument, the Escorial palace (1563-85), or planning the rebuilding of Valladolid after the great fire of 1561, where his insistence on grandiose regularity of streets and squares pushed up the cost and dismayed local taxpayers. He displayed a keen interest in music, appointing the outstanding composer Tomás Luis de Victoria to the royal chapel. And he was responsible for laying down, in the Escorial, one of the finest libraries of its day, into which were collected heretical books and Islamic manuscripts otherwise forbidden for use in the rest of Spain. He also alarmed some ecclesiastical conservatives by his patronage of the great Polyglot Bible of Antwerp (1568-72), with its fresh Latin translation of the Scriptures. His personal reading remained rather limited, it is true. In a busy life he found little time to read for pleasure; but at his bedside in later years he kept some works of devotion, principally of the great Spanish writers of his age, like Saint Teresa of Avila.

Philip's apartments in the Escorial were hung not only with religious paintings but also with maps of his possessions in Europe and America. It is perhaps in his commissioning of great surveys of the geography and history of his peoples of Spain and America that Philip's lively, enquiring mind is shown at its best – in the sketches of Spanish towns done for him by Anton van den Wyngaerde in the 1560s, in the *Topographical Relations* of Spain and the Indies drawn up in the 1570s, and in the many chronicles which date from his reign.

Spain acquires a capital

Philip's return to Spain from the Netherlands in 1559, like the decision of his father, Charles V, to return there to die a few years before, symbolised the shift which was occurring from a Habsburg to a Spanish empire. Philip consolidated the transition by creating a new capital city: Madrid. It was becoming apparent that the old tradition of peripatetic kingship could not long continue. The

Above, portrait of Philip II, Spanish School, 17th century.
National Maritime Museum London

Right, the imposing monastery-palace of San Lorenzo del Escorial bears Philip's personal imprint. The building contained the mausoleum of the Spanish royal family and one of the finest libraries of its day (see page 9).
Spanish Embassy

It is more for his patronage of painters than of writers that he is remembered, laying the foundation of the priceless collection of masterpieces which is now housed in the Prado Museum in Madrid. He commissioned works by Titian, and decorated his private apartments in the Escorial with some of the weird scenes of earthly vices and their punishments painted by Hieronymus Bosch. He proved initially receptive to El Greco, commissioning a commemoration of the victory of Lepanto, but then lost interest after the painter failed to bring out the message of the picture clearly enough in his *The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice* (1582). It is through the more restrained portrait painters, Alonso Sanchez Coello and Juan Pantoja de la Cruz, that Philip's person and court are so well known to us. Their canvases bring alive the king who had the insight to commission them, and are a tribute, in their own way, to his greatness of spirit. Characteristically,

king's high court, the *Chancillería*, had been assigned a fixed residence in Valladolid in the middle of the 15th century, and near there the increasing volumes of paper generated by government were placed in the new state archive of Simancas from 1547. It seemed only a matter of time before the king's court itself would have to look for a permanent home. There were perhaps up to 1,500 people serving the king's person, to which must be added government officials, purveyors and courtiers, all with their own families. These

many thousands of people constituted a small city in their own right. Madrid was already an important, if not very populous town, protected by a royal castle, at the strategic mountain crossing from Old to New Castile. It had some important advantages over its more historic rivals – cleaner drinking water than Toledo, once the capital of Visigothic Spain, and more timber for building and heating than Valladolid, the seat of the high court, as well as a supposedly healthier, drier climate.

Shortly after the decision to place the capital in Madrid (1561), Philip began to draw up plans for a great mausoleum, which would enhance the glory of his dynasty. Spain lacked any equivalent to Westminster Abbey or Saint Denis, the burial places of the kings of England and France. Her monarchs and her historical memory lay scattered in different locations, following the path of the Reconquest, from Burgos and Leon to Seville and Granada. The great monastery-palace of San Lorenzo del Escorial, set in favourite hunting grounds of Philip II in the Guadarrama Mountains north-west of Madrid, was to be the final resting-place of the kings of Spain, starting with Philip's father, Charles V. The central feature of the building, therefore, was its basilica, and the attached convent of Jeronimite monks engaged in study and prayer. The palace was dedicated to Saint Lawrence, on whose feast-day (10 August) in 1557 Philip had decisively beaten the king of France in battle and established Spanish hegemony in Europe. Off the basilica lay the royal apartments, small and austere, and beyond them the rooms set at the disposal of the court when it came out from Madrid during Holy Week and then again during the hot summer months. Philip intervened decisively with the royal architects, Juan Bautista de Toledo, who was responsible for the building from 1562 until his death in 1567, and his successor, Juan de Herrera, who saw the work through to completion by 1585, and it bears the personal imprint of the king. The grandeur and uniformity of its proportions set forth the majesty of the ruler, but also perhaps his anonymity as a mere servant of God.

'People talk to me on Sundays ...'

Government at this time depended very much on the personal relationship of the king with his subjects. As the 'father of his people' under God, in the imagery of the time, he was expected to travel among them, to take a personal interest in their welfare, and to be accessible to their petitions. The notion of 'private life' would not develop fully until the 19th century, and public affairs were anyway conducted very much through the king's own household. Though Philip II travelled as a young man in northern Europe, between 1548 and 1559, and later made several expeditions to the Crown of Aragon (1563 and 1585-6, and again, rather exceptionally, after the riots of 1591) and one major foray to assume the crown of Portugal (1581-3), he undoubtedly became rather sedentary after the fixing of his capital in Madrid. This does not mean that he did not travel about: in fact, he would usually only spend the winter months in Madrid, then travel out to other residences in Toledo and Aranjuez in the spring, before moving on to the Escorial in the summer, and to Valsain (near Segovia) or the Pardo for the autumn hunting season. But much of the administration remained in Madrid, and these regular trips were more in the nature of

retreats for the king from the pressure of business than an opportunity to get to know his subjects.

In Madrid he was accessible to petitioners, though he had an unnerving habit of listening quietly and talking little, and, in any case, never gave direct replies but referred petitions to his ministers. In general, he disliked conducting business face to face. 'I need time and peace,' he protested; 'if I gave audiences, believe me, I would have neither. Anyway', he argued, against charges of closing himself off from his subjects, 'people talk to me on Sundays and give me petitions' – as he processed to the chapel for mass. The great advantage of the retreat to the Escorial and the other rural residences was the opportunity for tranquil reflection. The spartan office and bedchamber in the Escorial reflect his preferred method of governing – in private, consulting with one or two confidants, with his beloved daughter Isabella near at hand in his later years, while he would pore over state papers late into the night until, as he sometimes complained, his eyes smarted and he could hardly hold a pen in his gout-ridden hand.

The government of an Empire

Philip's last instructions of 1597 for his heir warned the young prince that he would be 'very foolhardy' if he were to govern alone. 'But then you would not be worthy of the crown, but, instead, an enemy of the public well-being of your vassals.' Philip – the 'prudent king', as he was known to his contemporaries – was rarely foolhardy; rather, he came to be criticised for the opposite defect, of listening to too many conflicting pieces of advice and failing to make up his own mind quickly or at all. 'I and time shall arrange matters as we can', he is alleged to have said on one occasion. Though Pierson suggests that 'doing nothing, in fact, was often more efficacious than doing anything else', there were occasions – for example, in regard of the disturbances in Flanders in 1565-6 – where his temporising seems to have encouraged the very outbreak it was meant to avoid.

The king's advisers were grouped in a dozen or more councils: the Council of State, consisting of nobles, which advised on foreign policy; the Councils of Castile, Aragon, Indies Portugal or Italy, composed largely of university-trained lawyers and former high-court judges, which handled the business of their respective territories; and a series of more specialised committees for finance, Military Orders, Inquisition, appointments to office and the like. The humanist writer and statesman, Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, commenting on the difficulties experienced by his nephew, the 3rd marquis of Mondejar, in preserving his authority as Captain General of Granada against the efforts of the royal high court to discipline the Moors of that kingdom in the 1560s, wrote that the government of Spain had fallen largely into the hands of bureaucrats – men of 'the middling estate' – since the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella. These university-trained lawyers were the backbone of the domestic administration in church and state, and under Philip II they were given renewed backing to impose religious and social order in the provinces. Cardinal Espinosa, President of the Council of Castile between 1565 and 1572, demonstrated the power of a man of lowly origin to rise to the top through hard work, craftiness and a certain 'political correctness' (in his case, rigid adherence to Catholic orthodoxy).

reports (*consultas*) of these to the king in his private apartments for final discussion and decision. Antonio Pérez developed a close relationship with Don John of Austria, the king's half-brother, while the latter was governor of Flanders (1576-8), and seems to have been encouraging him to marry Mary, Queen of Scots, and invade England — without telling Philip. He then had Juan de Escobedo, Don John's secretary, murdered in 1578 when his double-dealing was beginning to come to light. Philip's subsequent attempts to punish Antonio Pérez failed to allow for the latter's readiness with the pen and powerful friends — which helped to precipitate major disturbances in Aragon in 1591. Helping to dispose of Pérez and taking over his influence with Philip was the 'arch-secretary' Mateo Vazquez (c.1543-91). A quiet-spoken priest of obscure family in Seville — though he later, when in power, managed to get witnesses to affirm that he was of noble Corsican ancestry — Vazquez rose initially as secretary to

Cardinal Espinosa. His discretion and hard work won him the confidence of Philip II, and his career gives an insight into the methods of royal absolutism at the time, with the networks of patronage and faction binding even the great families into submission to the king's low-born favourites.

The taming of the nobility

If administration was largely in the hands of men of the 'middling sort', the tone of society remained fundamentally aristocratic — after all, Mateo Vazquez drew up a noble genealogy for himself and Antonio Pérez lived like a prince. The king's natural companions were the great Spanish nobles, men like the duke of Alba (died 1582), who served

'Dream of Philip II' by El Greco (1541-1614). This picture was commissioned in 1578 to commemorate the death of the king's half-brother Don John of Austria, victor of the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. Monasterio de El Escorial, Spain/Bridgeman Art Library, London

But Espinosa's sudden fall from grace a few months before his death in 1572 also served as a warning of how quickly the king could break his servants if they tried to become too independent.

A similar fate befell the notorious Antonio Pérez, illegitimate son of an Aragonese priest of Jewish origin. Antonio succeeded his father as royal secretary in 1566 and held an unrivalled influence with Philip until his fall from grace in 1579. The secretaries occupied key roles, assigning incoming dispatches to the various Councils and carrying the

him as chief steward of his household as well as in the Council of State, or his boyhood friend Ruy Gomez de Silva, prince of Eboli (died 1573), who, as *sumiller* or chief gentleman of the bed-chamber, saw Philip first on waking and last on going to bed at night. The faction fights between Alba and Eboli drew into their orbit some of the secretaries (Antonio Pérez was part of the Eboli connection). They became the nearest thing to political debate that a secretive, absolutist system of government could permit, with Alba being associated with repression of discontent at home and Eboli with conciliation. The party lines were not hard and fast, and Philip wove his way between them at will, his own authority strengthened by the divisions within the nobility.

Up to a point Philip's reign witnessed a devolution of power onto this class, as municipal office and feudal jurisdictions had to be sold in order to meet the needs of a bankrupt treasury. The nobility were mainly still resident in their own localities, the move to court of the great families coming in the 17th century. Nevertheless, the court remained, as it had done during the Middle Ages, a magnet for the ambitious, a place where they would go to celebrate the great feasts and to manoeuvre for honours and posts of command. Philip was inundated with petitions for favours. His household was not a particularly glamorous or attractive place; even under his lively, fun-loving third wife, Elizabeth de Valois, it suffered from the king's shyness and devotion to his papers. Not many visiting nobles could be accommodated in the palace anyway and, essentially, coming to court meant looking for accommodation and entertainment in Madrid. Not until the 17th century was Madrid a cultural and social centre to compare with London and Paris.

But kingship as a fount of favours was crucially important. To be out of favour was a risk few ambitious men could afford. The duke of Alba fell into disgrace in 1578, when he arranged the marriage of his son and heir against Philip's wishes. After a few months exile from court, the great general took up his pen in March 1579 to beg for the king's 'customary clemency'. If His Majesty only knew, he affirmed, how painful it was for him to have to ask forgiveness, 'he would realise that he could punish me more this way than by long, harsh imprisonment'. Indeed, Alba was so useful that he was pardoned in February 1580 in order to lead the invasion of Portugal that summer which would establish Philip's claim to succeed to that crown.

There was cooperation with the nobility, therefore, but mainly on the king's terms. As if to make the point clear, no pain was spared in order to bring noble lawbreakers to account before the royal courts. One of the great monuments of Philip's reign is the *Chancillería* (high court) building in Granada, begun around 1530 but completed in 1587. A Latin inscription proclaims that no expense was spared, 'so that the majesty of the court might be in no way inferior to the greatness of the business herein transacted'. And legend has it that the grand staircase was paid for out of a fine levied on a Granadan nobleman for failing to take off his hat to the judges. 'Certainly you are qualified to keep your hat on in my presence,' Philip is alleged to have told him, 'but not in the presence of the law, which my judges embody.' The story is certainly apocryphal, but it sums up the quality for which many people would remember the age of Philip II: the equality of all before the law.

'I do not wish to rule over heretics ...'

The majesty of Spanish kingship was displayed not only in its association with the rule of law but also in upholding the Catholic faith. Spain had taken shape in the course of a centuries-long conflict against Islam: the wars of the *Reconquista*. Philip inherited the traditions and responsibilities of the Crusade – which also contributed mightily to the revenues of the exchequer (around a fifth of the king's income came from religious taxes of one kind or another). Philip was personally devout, and went to the trouble of amassing an unusually large collection of relics of saints (some 7,000 items) for the Escorial. His devotion to the great national shrines of Our Lady – Montserrat in Catalonia, El Pilar in Saragossa, Guadalupe in Extremadura – gave him a moral legitimacy in the eyes of his subjects which other monarchs perhaps sought in the glamour of their courts or charisma of their own sacred image. It has often been pointed out that the kings of Spain, unlike those of England or France, were not crowned or anointed. Instead, their inauguration depended on the oaths which they swore before the parliaments of their different kingdoms to uphold the law. And the distinguished tradition of Scholastic Philosophy in 16th-century Spain, culminating with the defence of tyrannicide by the Jesuits Mariana and Suarez, reminded monarchs that they were the servants of God and the people, not their masters. Philip III's ambassador in England, the Count of Gondomar, seems to have been genuinely surprised at James I's fury at the publication of Suarez's apparently seditious ideas.

Philip lived through a period of intense religious renewal and conflict, in his own country as in the rest of Western Europe. Spanish bishops played an outstanding role in the reformulation of Catholicism at the Council of Trent (1545-63), because of the vigour of the church in their own country. Though we are now discovering how very 'pagan' the ordinary Spanish people perhaps were, the same can hardly be said of their friars and nuns, who had gone through a magnificent cultural and spiritual renewal at the start of the century, culminating with the work of Saints Teresa of Avila and Ignatius of Loyola. The emphasis of Spanish spirituality was different from that of Luther or Calvin: more role for an ascetic, mystical caste of holy men and women, more authority over the individual conscience vested in the community and its representatives, the hierarchy of priests. Spanish kings had traditionally exercised great authority over this priestly class, appointing the bishops and inquisitors. 'Secular princes are not bound to carry out the mandates of the Pope in temporal matters', affirmed Philip in 1578; and, though he encouraged the bishops returning from Trent to convoke councils in order to implement the reforms, he insisted on scrutinising their resolutions in case of any threat to the royal supremacy.

Philip's reign has traditionally been associated with the intellectual 'closure' of his country to foreign influences, symbolised by the hunting out and burning of alleged 'Protestants' at the great *autos de fe* of Valladolid and Seville in

Philip was responsible for laying down, in the Escorial, one of the finest libraries of its day, into which were collected heretical books and Islamic manuscripts otherwise forbidden for use in the rest of Spain.

Spanish Tourist Office

1559, the prohibition in the same year of Spaniards studying at most foreign universities and the development of the Index of Prohibited Books. Philip had not initiated these policies. The reaction against the values of Renaissance enquiry had set in at least as early as 1533, when prominent followers of Erasmus were forced to abjure, and 1551-2, when the Inquisition drew up its blacklist of Protestant books. If Philip was simply heir to the developing zeal of his countrymen – to a religious enthusiasm which bore both good fruits and bad – his reign witnessed a relentless move towards bureaucracy and control. More bishoprics and parish churches were set up, especially in the Moorish areas of Valencia and Granada, and parish registers of baptisms, marriages or burials became characteristic features of the Spanish as of other European churches at this time. It was an increasingly bureaucratic age, and Philip merely reflected values which were prevalent generally. But the trial of Carranza, Archbishop of Toledo, for heresy (1559-75) is rather a blot on the Catholic king's record – an episode, one may feel, where Catholic theology had fallen into the hands of lawyers. It was precisely this narrow-minded definition of Catholic orthodoxy which was to create the most thorny political problem which Philip had to face: the Revolt of Flanders.

Wars of Religion: the Revolt of Flanders

'The graveyard of our armies, the swallowing up of our treasure, the interruption of our progress and well-being': such were the comments of the chronicler of Seville, Ortiz de Zúñiga, as he looked back in 1677 at the long struggle in the Netherlands which began in 1566. He found something to admire in the heroism of the Spanish armies and 'the most constant zeal' of Philip II against heresy; but overall the balance-sheet was negative. The issue in Flanders was much more than one of religion. At the heart of the problem was a characteristic struggle for power between the nobility, traditionally represented in the Council of State, and a ministerial class of king's servants, often middle-class, often churchmen or lawyers. Philip's absence from the Netherlands after 1559 aggravated the conflict. The king's best efforts to be conciliatory – disbandment of the small standing army of 3,000 men (1560) and withdrawal of his much disliked chief minister, Granvelle, in 1563 – failed. The issue of authority was being aggravated by the spread of Calvinism and by the king's own efforts to reform the Catholic church. The Flemish nobles, in the homeland of Erasmus, may have been largely Catholic but were not enthusiastic about Philip's interpretation of orthodoxy. The effort to expand the Flemish bishoprics

from four to eighteen was costly, and disquiet was aroused by the staff of inquisitors into heresy attached to each. Philip protested, truthfully enough, that his intention was not to introduce a 'Spanish' inquisition, but merely to inject new vigour into the local tribunals set up in 1522. The gathering of the lesser gentry – the Beggars or *Gueux*, as they were called – to demand full religious toleration in the spring of 1566, followed by the Iconoclastic Fury in August 1566, when the common people ransacked Catholic churches in major cities – brought the crisis to a head.

'You can assure His Holiness', Philip now wrote to his ambassador in Rome, 'that rather

than suffer the slightest prejudice to religion and the service of God, I will lose all my states.' The decision to send the Duke of Alba with an army to punish the insurgents owed as much to the need to uphold royal authority as anything else. But this calculation badly misfired. The nobility had rallied to the crown after the popular upheavals of August. But Alba's execution of Counts Egmont and Hoorn, together with so many of their countrymen in the notorious 'Council of Blood', and his attempt to introduce a permanent sales tax – the 'Tenth Penny' – which would render the king independent of the Estates, envenomed old political grievances. When the Protestant party reasserted itself in 1572, Philip had to change tack and try to conciliate the Catholic leaders by abandoning the Tenth Penny and issuing a general pardon. In the complex politics of the next few years events acquired a momentum of their own, which made it difficult for Philip to take full control

Duke of Parma as governor (1578-92), Philip pursued a steady policy of political concession and military advance that converted the rebel camp into a firmly Protestant one, which formally deposed its Spanish ruler (1581). At this stage the rebels had no compunction about applying for foreign aid, and the capture of Antwerp by Parma in 1585 brought Elizabeth of England to send soldiers to stave off their defeat.

The enterprise of England

Conflict with England was probably only a matter of time. Certainly Philip had done his best to avoid it. He intervened to prevent the excommunication of Elizabeth by the Council of Trent in 1563, and was not pleased when the Pope eventually did declare the Queen a heretic and released her subjects from allegiance to her. It would 'embitter feelings in England', he warned, and do the Catholics there

of the situation. His governor in the Netherlands in 1576-8, Don John of Austria, made overtures to the rebels, which included some hope of limited religious toleration, withdrawal of the Spanish troops and complete autonomy for the Estates. Whether Don John and Antonio Pérez could actually win Philip over to this policy remained doubtful. The bankruptcy of the crown in 1575 and the mutiny of the soldiers for pay, culminating in the Spanish Fury of 1576 when they sacked Antwerp, drove the Catholics closer to the Protestants. Amid all the confusion, one can detect perhaps a certain guiding line in Philip's thought: that the maximum concessions of autonomy should be made to the local elites on condition they agreed to uphold Catholicism. 'If it is clear that other sovereigns do not allow their subjects to have a religion other than the one they themselves profess, for reasons of state as well as for religious motives, why then should this attitude be denied to me?', he told the Lutheran King of Denmark in 1586. Under the

Launch of the fire-ships against the Spanish Armada on 7 August 1588. The loss of the Armada inflicted a serious moral and material blow on Spain, and on the prestige of Philip II. *National Maritime Museum London*

no good. Though he may have countenanced some of the plots against Elizabeth in these years, he was not their author. His decision to do something about England matured only slowly, under the impact of events in Flanders and America.

The growth of English piracy in the Caribbean under Drake and Hawkins, motivated initially by a refusal to accept the Spanish trading monopoly there, together with Elizabeth's open support of the Dutch rebels in 1585, forced Philip's hand. Having built up his fleet in the Atlantic in 1580-3 anyway in order to master dissidents within his new kingdom of Portugal, he now determined to put it to good use. Philip had a healthy respect for English sea power, and preferred to use the Armada to escort Parma's troops across the Channel for an invasion on land rather than

leave matters to be decided at sea. Against the advice of the Duke of Medina Sidonia, commander of the great fleet, and of the Duke of Parma, Philip insisted that the hazardous operation was feasible. It is a tribute to Spanish seamanship that the 130 ships of the invading force were able to force their way up the Channel in unbroken formation during the first week of August 1588, defying all the English bombardment. Tragedy struck on the night of 7 August, as Medina Sidonia lay at anchor off Calais, waiting for Parma, who was not quite ready to embark. Fireships disrupted the Spanish formation, and on the morning of 8 August the better gunned English ships were able to move in among their selected targets. Unsure about Parma's movements and facing a stiff gale which blew his ships out into the North Sea, Medina Sidonia decided not to try to fight his way back down the Channel but to take his 112 surviving vessels back home by the north-west. Here, on the coasts of Ireland, the real losses of men and ships were incurred, in an inhospitable and unfamiliar sea.

The loss of the Armada inflicted a serious moral and material blow on Spain, and on the prestige of Philip II, who, after such long years of prudence, seemed to have thrown caution to the winds in 1588. Though new fleets were sent against England in 1596 and 1597, and though the fortifications of the Indies were strengthened to a point where Drake and Hawkins were no longer able to breach them (both dying on their last, unsuccessful expedition of 1595), the cost for Spain was horrendous. The last years of Philip's reign witnessed warfare on all fronts, as Henry of Navarre, champion of the Protestants, succeeded to the crown of France in 1589, motivating Philip's armed intervention there too (1589-98) in order to dispossess him.

The impoverishment of Spain

In 1596 one of the deputies to the Cortes of Castile resisted the imposition of more taxes: 'they will only suck the blood and marrow from these kingdoms'. Ever since 1575, the year of the second bankruptcy of the reign, when taxes had had to be increased dramatically, the Cortes had been restless, pointing out the damage done to the Spanish economy. The great inflow of American treasure in the 1580s and 1590s failed to keep pace with royal commitments, constituting at most a fifth of the budget. After the loss of the Armada, Philip had to turn again to the taxpayer, forcing the Cortes to levy a new sales tax, the *millones*, which acquired a notorious reputation. He also began to turn, tentatively, to the non-Castilian provinces, to see whether they could be persuaded to contribute more. 'Except in the most urgent cases, it is not the custom to transfer the burdens of one kingdom to another', he wrote to the Council of Italy in 1589. However, 'since in the defence of one all are preserved, it is just that all should help me'. But this 'Union of Arms' really had to wait for Olivares in the 1620s for its implementation.

The legacy of the reign

During Philip's reign Spain seemed to run the course from hegemony to decline. The increasing complaints about the impoverishment of the country appeared to reflect the burdens of imperialism. Philip's wars can hardly be dismissed as mere dynastic ambition or quixotic crusading zeal. In

this nascent age of mercantilism, wealth and state power marched hand in hand. On 30 September 1588 Philip II justified the failed Armada to his parliament: it had gone 'for the service of God, and the welfare and security of these realms ... for the safeguard of the Indies and the fleets that come from there'. And the deputies from Granada, in rare unison, agreed that somehow more money must be found for another strike at England — 'for the preservation of the Indies trade, on which depends the upkeep of the kingdom', as well as for the 'Christian Faith'.

The image of Philip as a sanguinary despot, who sought to destroy the liberties of Flanders and who killed his own son, Don Carlos, has not survived the searchlight of historical investigation. The king emerges as a more prosaic figure, perhaps conscientious, hard-working, rather cautious on the whole. In Flanders for most of the time, in Portugal after 1580, in Aragon after 1591 (when riots in that kingdom forced him to intervene with an army), he was ready enough to use force in order to maintain his authority. But he was also a conciliator, doing his best in all these cases to safeguard the inherited privileges and autonomy of the individual realms.

'We can boast', proclaimed the parliament of Valencia in 1585, 'that we have never witnessed nor lived under a king and lord who so earnestly, and with such care and solicitude, looks to the welfare and proper government of his subjects and vassals.' There was something more than rhetoric in this loyal address. It reflected a genuine sense that here was a great ruler, in tune with the traditions and aspirations of his people, for better and for worse. In spite of much economic suffering and some political questioning, Spain mourned when he passed away, after a long illness stoically borne, on 13 September 1598.

Further reading

- John Lynch, *Spain 1516-98* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1991)
 Geoffrey Parker, *Philip II* (Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1978)
 Peter Pierson, *Philip II of Spain* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1975)
 Henry Kamen, *Philip II of Spain* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1997)
 M.J. Rodríguez-Salgado, 'The Court of Philip II of Spain', in R.G. Asch and A.M. Birke (eds.), *Princes, Patronage and the Nobility* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 207-44
 A.W. Lovett, *Philip II and Mateo Vázquez de Leca: the Government of Spain 1572-92* (Geneva, Droz, 1977)
 James M. Boyden, *The Courtier and the King: Ruy Gómez de Silva, Philip II and the Court of Spain* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995)

James Casey will be lecturing on 'Philip II and the Crown of Aragon' at the University of East Anglia on 25 March 1998 as part of the Spanish Embassy's series of events to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Philip II's death.

SEE AGENDA PAGES FOR A FULL LIST OF EVENTS + DETAILS OF HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION/SPANISH EMBASSY JOINT LECTURES.

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