



*Isabella of Castile:
Europe's First Great Queen*

Giles Tremlett

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Isabella of Castile: Europe's First Great Queen. By Giles Tremlett. London: Bloomsbury, 2017. ISBN 978-1-4088-5395-5. x + 607 pp. £25.00.



Queen Isabella of Castile—Isabel la Católica—is one of the most debated political figures in the history of the Castilian monarchy. It is incontestable that she had an extraordinary life: born an infanta of Castile, she was able to assert her aspirations to the government of the kingdom in a very complex political period, which saw the birth of the modern state. Many historians have approached this historical period, whether to analyse different aspects of her reign, or in order to try to better understand the facts that surround the Queen. Giles Tremlett's book can be placed in the second group, because it's a biography of Isabella that focuses on her political impact and, at the same time, provides a broad study of the historical framework in which the Queen's life took place.

Although it is difficult to emulate some of the biographies produced in recent years in Spanish—such as those of Tarsicio de Azcona (2002) or, more recently, that of Ana Isabel Carrasco Manchado (2006)—Tremlett solves the challenge with great expertise. He writes in a lively way, which is easy to read. The author goes deeper into the development of the political figure of the Queen in the Castilian Court, without moving away from historical rigor in his narration. At the same time, he incorporates explanations that are useful to contextualize the Castilian situation and to understand the historical facts. Using simple, yet precise, language, his work is able to convey the particularities of Castilian political history of the late-fifteenth century. For instance, Tremlett deftly describes the mechanisms Isabella engaged in to degrade the *grandees* who had opposed her royal authority (145–154), and he skilfully explains the importance of the death of Juana of Castile—the daughter of Enrique IV who was nicknamed “*la Beltraneja*” for her supposed illegitimacy—for the legality of Isabella's reign (165–176). The book will thus be of great value to both scholars and those interested in the history of the Crown of Castile in its transition to modernity.

Thanks to a fluid structure based on short chapters, the author emphasizes certain aspects and characters crucial to the life and reign of Queen Isabella. Thus, appearing throughout the book's pages are people such as Álvaro de Luna, royal favourite during the reign of King Juan II; Enrique IV, Isabella's half-brother, nicknamed “the Impotent”; Calixtus II, “Pope Borgia”; and, of course, the queen's husband, King Ferdinand II of Aragon. All these characters are crucial to understanding the political complexity of the Queen's choices. Tremlett helps the reader not only imagine Isabella, her entourage, and key political figures in luxurious receptions and ceremonies experienced by the court of Castile, but also in acts of great solemnity and

political significance, such as the signing of the Pact of the Bulls of Guisando in 1468, or her proclamation as queen in the city of Segovia in 1474. Tremlett allows us to witness the way in which the Queen was perceived before the court, and we can appreciate how the chronicles of the reign were commissioned to make her appear as 'the chosen queen' destined to restore order in Castile. In this sense, the emphasis given by Tremlett to the royal chronicler, Hernando del Pulgar, and his words of rejoicing that he dedicates to the birth of Prince Juan, the coveted male heir to the Castilian Crown, are key: "[Pulgar] now decided that the birth was final proof that God had chosen Isabella above both of her brothers to raise Spain back to glory" (165).

One of the most interesting aspects of Tremlett's work is his ability to re-create the world in which the Castilian court and Queen Isabella existed. Given the close relations maintained with different European courts and with Rome, as well as the trips carried out by Christopher Columbus in order to seek a new route to the Indies, the narrative does not only revolve around the Iberian Peninsula. Moreover, the book also transcends the temporal borders of her own reign, which brings a greater depth to the author's analysis, reflected in his account of the international consequences of the marriage policy designed for her son and daughters, or the impact of the arrival of America—although, in the latter case, the author introduces a perspective of our own contemporary mentality when judging the behaviour of the Castilians, in particular about the expansion of Christianity (486–487), and his views about the expulsion of the Jews, or the forcible conversion of Muslim communities. These expansions are especially interesting with regard to the legacy of her reign in Spanish history, traces of which were visible in later centuries in relation to international politics, but also in the cultural field, where figures like the writer Miguel de Cervantes, or the painter Diego de Velázquez, excelled.

The book's image appendix is also worth mentioning. It contains some of the most representative portraits of Queen Isabella, alone or with her husband, King Ferdinand II of Aragon. These images, along with others in which some of the main characters of the Castilian court—such as Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros or the navigator Christopher Columbus, together with the portraits of the daughters of the Catholic monarchs and the royal houses with which the Crowns of Castile and Aragon established matrimonial alliances—allow the reader to recreate with greater ease the story narrated by the author.

Isabella of Castile: Europe's First Great Queen is not only a biography, but also a work that goes much further. Through the figure of the Catholic Queen, the author builds an enriching discourse about a historical period and some of its great characters, linking the Queen to her international

contemporaries, such as the Borgias or the Tudors. Tremlett's work situates the dialogue between the Queen and her political era to relate historical facts and social processes that were to become fundamental in the formation of the new world with its global dimensions. As Tremlett shows, while these processes are associated with the beginning of the early modern era, their repercussions are still felt in the present.

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