

Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain

1474-1516

a re-assessment

Historians have long admired the achievements of the Catholic Monarchs, Isabella, Queen of Castile (1474-1504), and Ferdinand, King of Aragon (1479-1516). 'The most glorious epoch in the annals of Spain', wrote W. H. Prescott in 1837. 'The monarchy was falling apart at every joint; the Catholic Sovereigns restored it on a new plan', claimed J. H. Mariéjol in 1892. 'It was a happy golden age', declared Ramón Menéndez Pidal in 1962. And it was the verdict of John Lynch, writing in 1981, that their reigns produced 'the makings of a nation state, united, peaceful beyond any in Europe'. Recent biographers of Isabella, notably Joseph Pérez (1988) and Peggy Liss (1992), have been similarly fulsome in their praises. Contemporary writers had a near unanimous verdict on Isabella. She was the ideal monarch who brought greatness to their country. She was *El Encubierto* (the hidden one), who saved her people from anarchy and heresy, slayed the infidel and re-established order in a war-torn land. In the words of one of her chroniclers: 'It can be said in truth that just as our Lord wished that our glorious Lady might be born in this world because from her would proceed the Universal Redeemer of the human lineage, so he determined that you, My Lady, would be born to reform and restore these kingdoms and lead them from the tyrannical government under which they have been for so long.'¹

In an age when female rulers were a rarity, Isabella was certainly an exceptional woman. She introduced the Inquisition, assisted Ferdinand in the reconquest of Granada, and purged her country of heretics. Her reign saw the end of civil war and the restoration of royal justice, and, together with her husband, she unified the Spanish kingdoms and established an overseas empire. Any one of these accomplishments would be a major triumph, and to be successful in so many fields may well justify the view that this was a 'golden age'. The aim of this article is not to re-state these achievements but to consider some of them in a wider context. Three questions will be asked. Firstly, what was the legacy of



In assessing the achievements of the

Catholic Monarchs, Geoffrey Woodward

has to distinguish between

propagandist myth and historical reality

in order to reach a verdict.

Henry IV, King of Castile, in 1474? Secondly, was the role of Ferdinand deliberately played down by Castilian chroniclers? And thirdly, and more controversially, did Isabella actually solve her country's political problems?

The legacy of Henry IV (1454-74)

Most chroniclers claimed that Henry was impotent, incompetent and unfit to rule. In the 1480s a Castilian chronicler, Andrés Bernáldez, looked back upon his reign and stated:

'At this juncture envy and covetousness were awakened and avarice was nourished; justice became moribund and force ruled; greed reigned and decadent sensuality spread, and the cruel temptation of sovereignty overcame the humble persuasion of obedience; the customs were mostly dissolute and corrupt.... And Our Lord, who sometimes permits evils to exist on the earth in order that each malefactor should be punished according to the extent of his errors, allowed so many wars to break out in the kingdom, that nobody could say that they were exempt from the ills

that ensue from them.... These wars lasted for the final ten years for which this King reigned. Peaceful men suffered much violence at the hands of new men who rose up and wrought great havoc.'²

How accurate was this judgement? Was his reign really that bleak?

Henry ruled Castile for 20 years and historians now acknowledge that, in the first half of his reign, he administered his country effectively, commanding widespread respect and obedience. In the absence of a central administration, the Crown depended upon the support of the principal nobles, clergy and towns. Political tension was always near the surface and any attempts by the Crown to interfere in local affairs by, for example, appointing *corregidores* (royal governors), were resented by town councils. The Crown was also restricted financially and militarily. Neither the nobles nor the clergy paid direct taxation and, as the King could not afford a standing army, he depended upon them for loans, troops and co-operation. In effect, his position was very vulnerable. Though most subjects recognised the advantages of strong



The tomb of the Catholic Monarchs

kingship, there were always elements in society that were ready to put their own interests first.

In 1464 certain aristocratic factions, like the Enriquez and Manrique families and the archbishops of Toledo and Seville, who resented Henry's autocratic style of kingship, were joined by the Marquis of Villena when he was dismissed as the King's principal adviser. They declared that Henry was unfit to rule and impotent – despite the alleged birth of a daughter, Joanna, in 1462 – and called for his deposition and replacement by his step-brother. Civil disturbances occurred between 1465 and 1468, and Henry was fortunate to survive. When his step-brother unexpectedly died of plague, Henry convinced his nobles that peace was preferable to war and agreed that Isabella, his step-sister, should succeed him. He even blessed her marriage to Ferdinand, heir to the Aragonese throne, in 1469. The king's Achilles' heel, however, was Joanna. He appears to have genuinely hoped that she would inherit his throne and consistently claimed that she was his legitimate daughter. Nevertheless, several aristocratic families were willing to take sides. Some, like Villena, exploited Henry's vulnerable position and received extensive gifts; others, like the Mendozas and Enriquez, ral-

lied to Isabella's cause. Though there was little fighting between rival supporters in the rest of Henry's reign, the country remained politically unstable.

How incompetent, then, was Henry IV? In many respects, he was a victim of powerful nobles and his own misjudgement. Much of the Crown's estate and wealth – worth some 30 million *maravedis* – was given away to his nobles in lands, pensions and grants in an attempt to win their support for Joanna's succession; but, in the early years of his reign, he had also developed the foundations of an effective administration. The *hermandades* or cavalry militia were revived to deal with rural disorder; the King-in-Council often heard judicial cases, a practice Isabella would continue, and a court of appeal operated in Valladolid. And, *corregidores*, who had existed since the fourteenth century, increased in number and became more permanent royal officers. Modern historians now believe that his reign was not an unmitigated failure. Indeed, it is the view of William Phillips that 'Enrique [Henry] left a set of policies and programs that his successors took over and preserved. Fernando and Isabel were merely successful in implementing them.'³ Henry resolutely denied the allegations that he was impotent and that

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Joanna was not his daughter, and modern research suggests that he was right. It suited disgruntled nobles and Isabella's chroniclers to damn him and to stress the poor condition of Castile at her accession. He was contrasted with the honourable Isabella, his weaknesses with her strengths, his daughter's spurious claim with Isabella's legitimacy. In their biased and retrospective view, her succession in 1474 marked the beginning of a new era.

The role of King Ferdinand

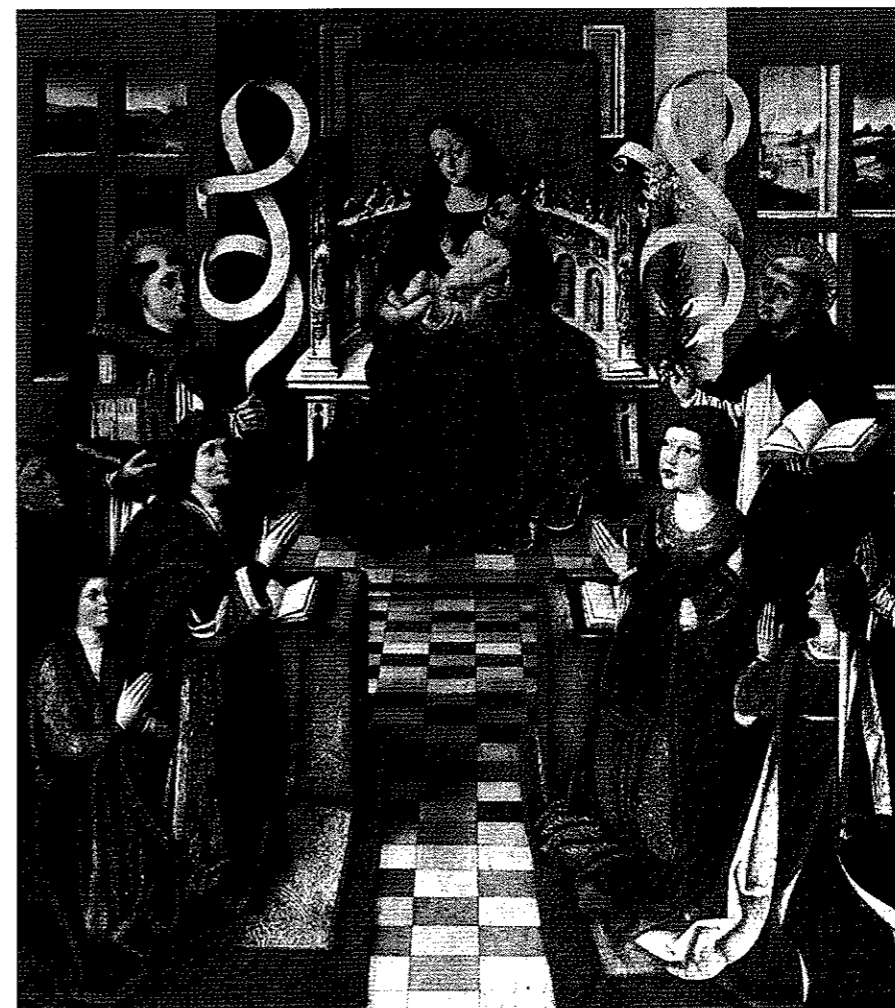
Castilian writers were understandably biased in favour of Isabella. They courted royal patronage and were not averse to writing partisan accounts, even against her husband. 'If anything worthy of praise was accomplished in Andalusia', wrote Alonso de Palencia, 'it seemed to be due to the Queen's initiative.'⁴ 'It was certainly a marvellous thing', declared Fernando del Pulgar in 1485, 'that what many men and great lords could not agree to effect in many years, one lone woman carried out in a little time.'⁵ Ferdinand was thus portrayed as indecisive, weak, and subordinate to a dominant Queen. Yet this is a historical travesty since, without his help, she might never have secured her throne.

Within weeks of her accession, several nobles and towns declared their support for Joanna, revolts occurred throughout the kingdom, and, most seriously, the King of Portugal invaded Castile with the intention of marrying the princess. Ferdinand assumed command of Isabella's army and directed military operations. Between 1475 and 1476, he travelled from Burgos to Zamora, fought the battle of Toro, and stopped the Portuguese; two years later, he was on hand to repel a second invasion. There can be little doubt that if Alfonso, King of Portugal, had not been defeated, resistance to Isabella would have been much greater. Alfonso's

subsequent acknowledgement that Isabella was the legitimate Queen, and his agreement to keep Joanna in Portugal, ended the War of Succession in 1479.

That same year, Ferdinand succeeded his father as King of Aragon. Like Castile, the kingdom was slowly recovering from civil war and foreign invasions. Royal finances were poor, trade and commerce had declined, and social conflict between landlords and peasants and between towns and nobles was endemic. Ferdinand spent very little time in Aragon – only eight out of 37 years – leaving the administration to viceroys and a council. Instead, he lived with his wife in Castile, the largest and most prosperous of their lands. From the outset of Isabella's reign, she directed Castilian domestic affairs and

Ferdinand was responsible for the foreign relations of both Castile and Aragon. Historians have long acknowledged the Queen's religious zeal and especially her crusade against the Moors in Granada (1482-92), but of equal, if not greater significance, was Ferdinand's role in this holy war of reconquest. He led the combined Aragonese and Castilian army, was present at the sieges of Ronda, Málaga, Baza and Almería, and accompanied the Queen on their triumphal entry into Granada in 1492. The war had been much harder, far longer and more costly than the monarchs had expected; but these lessons were not lost on Ferdinand who, at the same time, had been skilfully constructing a network of European alliances in preparation for his next war.



In this anonymous painting of 1490 Ferdinand and Isabella, with two of their children, kneel reverently before the Virgin. On the right is Isabella's infamous confessor, Torquemada, who revived the Inquisition.

Timecheck on the Catholic Monarchs

- 1454 Accession of Henry IV, King of Castile
- 1462 Birth of Joanna, daughter of Henry IV
- 1465-68 Civil war in Castile
- 1469 Marriage of Isabella and Ferdinand
- 1474 Death of Henry and accession of Isabella
- 1475-9 War of Succession in Castile
- 1479 Accession of Ferdinand, King of Aragon; birth of Joanna, daughter of Isabella
- 1482-92 Granada War against the Moors
- 1495 Joanna marries Philip Habsburg, Archduke of Burgundy
- 1497 Death of Prince John, son of Isabella
- 1500 Death of Prince John, son of Joanna
- 1504 Death of Isabella; Joanna becomes Queen
- 1506 Death of Philip
- 1508 Ferdinand assumes regency of Castile
- 1516 Death of Ferdinand

We have already seen his role in the War of Succession in Castile (1475-79) and the Granada War (1482-92); but he also went to war with France over Brittany (1488-93), Naples (1495-1504), and Milan (1509-16). Ferdinand's skill lay in his balancing different yet connected objectives; harmonising Castilian and Aragonese resources; and achieving his aims with the minimum of inconvenience. He concluded marriage alliances with the royal houses of Portugal, Burgundy, England and Austria to secure Castile and Aragon's political position, and, after the death of Isabella, he married Germaine de Foix to strengthen his claim to Navarre. He joined Holy Leagues in 1495 and 1509 to safeguard his interests in Naples and Milan; and he made treaties with any enemy of France – with Henry VII of England in 1489, for instance, in order to recover Roussillon and Cerdagne for Aragon, and with Henry VIII in 1512 to seize Navarre and drive the French out of Milan. Under pre-

tence of fighting defensively to expel an aggressor, he emerged on numerous occasions with more territorial gains than anyone else. In an era when no country was strong enough to force its will upon another, Ferdinand recognised the importance of combining diplomacy with aggression, of building up allies and never being isolated, and thus of outmanoeuvring his enemies. Machiavelli, a Florentine diplomat, admired his statesmanship rather than his probity, claiming that 'if he had ever honoured either of them [peace and good faith], he would have lost either his standing or his state many times over'.⁶

Some of Ferdinand's finest successes in foreign affairs, particularly resulting from his wars with Islam, occurred after the death of his wife. A plan to attack the north African coastline between Melilla and Orán, devised in the 1490s, was put into operation and seven settlements were seized between 1505 and 1510. The sea routes between Sicily, Sardinia and Tunisia were thus secured and the way was opened to advance into the interior of north Africa. Antonio de Nebrija, court poet and historian, was convinced that the Catholic Monarchs' reputation rested on their foreign achievements. Ferdinand agreed but believed that the credit should be attributed to him. Writing in 1514, he declared: 'For over 700 years the Crown of Spain has not been as great or as resplendent as it is now, both in the west and the east, and all, after God, by my work and labour.' Even allowing for his proud boast, there can be little doubt that Ferdinand was the power behind Isabella's throne.

Did Isabella solve her country's political problems?

The Queen faced two serious problems at her accession: firstly, insubordinate nobles undermined the government's authority and flouted royal justice; secondly, the succession was disputed and civil war beckoned. Though she inherited other difficulties – economic, social and religious, for instance – it was the political problems which would test the mettle of the young monarch. Thirty years later, in her will written shortly before her

death, she reviewed her reign and expressed concern for the future.

She acknowledged that the Castilian nobility were far from politically subdued. She had secured her throne with their assistance but in so doing had compromised her authority. In 1470 the Crown certainly recovered much property lost in the recent civil wars, but by allowing the nobility to keep former Crown lands, and in confirming their grants of nobility and their right to collect financial annuities awarded by Henry IV, she had relinquished far more. Indeed, she not only confirmed that the nobility would be exempt from paying direct taxation, she also granted them control of the assessment and collection of the principal indirect tax, the *alcabala*. In effect, these measures guaranteed their economic and social supremacy and went a long way towards securing their political independence.

The condition of the Crown's finances had also suffered. Difficulties were already evident in 1489 when the Crown could only balance its budget by borrowing from the aristocracy and offering them high interest bonds known as *juros*. Some nobles negotiated very favourable deals. The Duke of Cádiz, for example,

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was given the Granadan village of Casares in exchange for a loan of 10 million *maravedis*. Already the foundations of royal indebtedness had been laid and possible solutions – for instance, making the nobility pay direct taxation, eliminating some of the corruption in tax administration, and expanding the Crown's estates to make rents the basis of its revenue – had been compromised. By 1516 the Crown was paying out in *juros* one-third of its annual revenue and, in the opinion of the historian Stephen Haliczer, the treasury was in a 'state of extreme disorganisation and confusion, with frauds of unprecedented dimensions'.⁷

The nobility also retained control of regional politics. Vizcaya, for instance, was dominated by the courts of Haro and Treviño, and León by the Court of Luna. Some nobles continued to threaten the freedom of nearby towns: the Court of Benavente controlled Valladolid, and Medina Sidonia the port of Gibraltar. Indeed, nothing better illustrates the nobles' power in the country than the number of castles built during Isabella's reign. In spite of royal orders to destroy rebel fortresses, apparently only 84 had been demolished by 1504, and at least 265 fortifications had been rebuilt or repaired. Given these conditions, the Crown appears to have conceded to the nobility its social dominance in local administration in order to retain its control of central government.

The major casualty in this political bear garden was justice. Intermittent civil war had left deep scars and the restoration of royal justice would be a slow process. Most nobles kept retainers whereas the Crown had no standing army, only a small number of *Hermandad* troops, which was never sufficient to challenge a disobedient noble. Both Isabella and Ferdinand took an active part in upholding law and order. In her early years the Queen attended public hearings every Friday in the *alcázar*, and twice a week the royal council acted as a supreme court of justice. Occasionally it was necessary for the monarchs to deal with a problem personally. In a celebrated case in 1486, the Count of Lemos, having ignored repeated warnings, was visited by the monarchs in

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the north-west of Castile and ordered to return disputed lands and pay compensation to his victims.

By visiting every town in Castile, the Catholic Monarchs confirmed their resolve to restore justice and impart effective government but they could not be everywhere at once and had to prioritise their time. The Queen's frequent pregnancies restricted her journeys and, in the years following the Granada war, the nobility reasserted itself in the face of royal justice. In the 1490s Constable Velasco threatened villagers in Old Castile, the Count of Burgos seized property near the town, the Cabrera family illegally claimed lands in Segovia, and the Duke of Nájera terrorised people in Leniz. It is a myth that the aristocracy had been tamed by the Crown. They remained hungry for land and broke the law with impunity. Many townspeople, who peti-

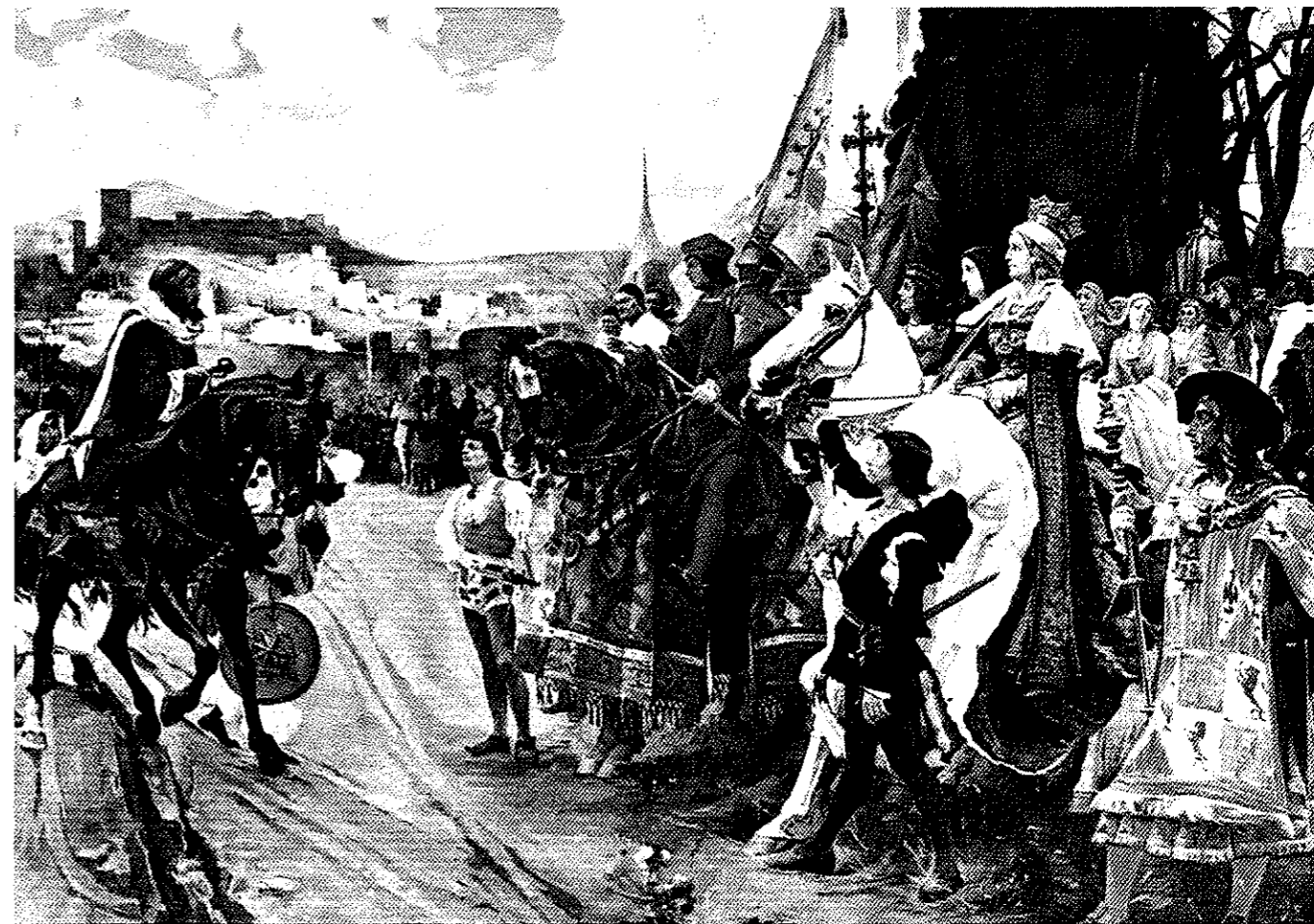
tioned the Crown to impart justice for all, were of the opinion that the judicial system was corrupt and that royal administration was breaking down.

Indeed, any misgivings Isabella may have had in 1504 seem to have been borne out after her death. Between 1506 and 1508, the Duke of Medina Sidonia tried to regain control of Gibraltar, the Marquis of Priego and the Count of Cabra stirred up trouble in Andalucía, and that inveterate trouble-maker the Count of Lemos overran the town of Ponferrada in Galicia. Political anarchy and domestic strife had not been suppressed, and public confidence in the Castilian government appears to have been justifiably low – and in sharp contrast with official propaganda. Ferdinand did little to remedy the situation. In 1512 the Cortes was still complaining that the judiciary was biased and officials corrupt; the Crown

was either unable or unwilling to restrain the rich and powerful. And further disturbances accompanied news of Ferdinand's death in 1516: the Mendoza, Enriquez, Velasco and Guzmán families rebelled against the new government and revolts broke out in Navarre, León and Andalucía.

The Succession

The second serious problem facing Isabella in 1474 was how best to secure her throne for her family, the Trastámaras, having spent the early years of her reign fighting off a rival claimant. For much of their married life, Isabella and Ferdinand had laboured to secure their dynasty by producing as many children as possible, marrying them into powerful royal families, and acquiring a list of claims to European thrones. Though they produced four daughters, only one son reached



The surrender of Granada in 1492, which brought to an end a ten-year campaign against the Moors. As a result the Pope gave Isabella and Ferdinand the title of 'Catholic Monarchs'.

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T. N. Bissón, *The Medieval Crown of Aragon* (Oxford University Press, 1986)

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F. Fernández-Armesto, *Ferdinand and Isabella* (New York, 1975)

S. Haliczer, *The Comuneros of Castile: The Forging of a Revolution, 1475-1521* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1981)

P. K. Liss, *Isabel: The Queen* (Oxford University Press, 1992)

W. D. Phillips, *Enrique IV and the Crisis of Fifteenth-Century Castile, 1425-1480* (Medieval Academy of America, Cambridge, Mass., 1978)

G. H. Woodward, *Spain in the Reigns of Isabella and Ferdinand, 1474-1516* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1997)

adulthood, and he predeceased his mother in 1497. Since he had no heirs, the Castilian succession passed to Isabella's eldest surviving daughter, Joanna, and to her husband, Philip Habsburg, Archduke of Burgundy. Isabella knew that Joanna's mental condition was very unstable and that her husband was likely to assert himself. She therefore declared in her will that, if Joanna was 'unwilling or unable to govern', Ferdi-

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nand would become regent until Joanna's son, Charles (who was four at the time), came of age. Since Ferdinand had no constitutional right to rule Castile, he was obliged to give up his title of King. Though these instructions made sense to Isabella, they caused confusion, resentment and civil war.

Upon the Queen's death and the ensuing deterioration in Joanna's health, the nobility and city councils split into rival camps. Some, like the Admiral and Constable of Castile and the archbishops of Toledo and Seville, supported Joanna; a second group, led by Mendoza and Villena, backed Philip; and a third faction, dominated by Alba and Tendilla, gathered round Ferdinand. No wonder an Italian diplomat commented: 'The nobles sharpen their teeth like wild boars with the hope of a great change.' The death of Philip in September 1506 may have removed one contender but it also provoked civil disturbances, and the political crisis only ended when Ferdinand intervened with an army. By 1508 he regained control and was recognised as regent but the Castilian succession was still far from settled. He accepted that Charles would succeed to both Castile and Aragon but, as the prince was still a minor and currently ruling and living in the Low Countries, arguments soon broke out between rival councillors and Ferdinand as to who should head the administration. Cardinal Cisneros, the Archbishop of Toledo, opposed Ferdinand's nominee, the Duke of Alba; there was support in some circles for the insane Joanna, now incarcerated in Tordesillas castle, and another faction viewed her younger son, Ferdinand, who had been born and brought up in Spain, as an alternative claimant. All these tensions surfaced at the death of King Ferdinand in 1516 and received varying support in the revolt of the Comuneros in 1519. If the main aim of the Catholic Monarchs had been to continue the Trastámara dynasty and to secure an undisputed throne free from the nobles' interference, then they failed on all counts.

Conclusion

The triumphs of the Catholic Monarchs were far-reaching and, in many respects,

unprecedented. Isabella and Ferdinand were remarkable rulers and merited many of the plaudits heaped upon them. Many, but not all. This article has sought to set their reigns in a wider context beyond the blinkered vision of Castilian chroniclers. It has suggested that the reign of Henry IV was not an unmitigated failure, that Ferdinand played a vital part in laying the foundations of Castile's 'golden age', and that Isabella bequeathed serious political and dynastic problems, not altogether dissimilar to those which she had inherited. The political achievements of the Catholic Monarchs in general, and Isabella in particular, have been exaggerated by court propagandists and by historians – propagandists by a desire to look at the past nostalgically and historians by a readiness to accept such accounts all too uncritically.

Notes

1. Diego de Valera, *Prostistas españoles*, ed. Mario Penna, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1959), no. 17.
2. Andrés Bernaldez, *Memorias del Reinado de los Reyes Católicos*, ed. M. Gómez-Moreno and Juan de M. Carriazo (Blass SA, Madrid, 1962), Cap. 1.
3. W. D. Phillips, *Enrique IV and the Crisis of Fifteenth Century Castile, 1425-1480* (Medieval Academy of America, Cambridge, Mass., 1978), p. 125.
4. Cited in V. Rodríguez Valencia, *Isabel la Católica en la opinión de españoles y extranjeros* (Valladolid, 1970).
5. Fernando del Pulgar, *Crónica de los Reyes Católicos*, ed. J. de M. Carriazo (Madrid, 1943), Cap. CV.
6. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. G. Bull (Penguin, London, 1981), p. 102.
7. Stephen Haliczer, 'The Castilian Aristocracy and the Mercedes Reform of 1478-82', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 55 (Duke University Press, North Carolina, 1975), p. 467.

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