

OBITUARY

Sir John Elliott obituary

Eminent hispanist and 'historian's historian' who explored Spain's castles and conquests in books and on horseback

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Elliott in front of security boxes at the Cervantes Institute in Madrid, 2017

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John Elliott claimed that he became a historian by accident. In the summer of 1950 he was nearing the end of his first year at Cambridge and spotted a notice in *Varsity*, the undergraduate newspaper, saying that a few places remained for an expedition around the Iberian peninsula in an old army truck.

“With no plans in mind for the summer vacation I decided to sign on,” he recorded in his memoir. “For six weeks in the heat of July and August we drove around Spain and Portugal, staying in cheap boarding houses or spending the night camping out in olive groves, sometimes to find ourselves woken at dawn by an annoyed peasant farmer who told us to clear off his land.”

Those six weeks, in a country that was beginning to take the first steps on the road to recovery after the civil war, made a deep impression on the young undergraduate. Back in Cambridge he discussed doing “something” connected with 17th-century Spanish history with Herbert Butterfield, professor of modern history, whose lectures he had attended and enjoyed. “I partly chose Butterfield as my supervisor because he knew nothing about the subject, and I thought this was a positive advantage, that I could do my own thing,” recalled Elliott, who was tall, thin as a rake, urbane and well spoken.

Nevertheless, Butterfield proved to be a shrewd supervisor, keeping a watchful eye on the young Elliott's work — which proved to be not as easy as the student had expected. “I did have serious problems because of the disappearance of many of the 17th-century documents I was hoping to look at,” Elliott recalled. “In addition, many of the Spanish archives were difficult to work in, in spite of the kindness of many archivists.”

In Barcelona he was berated by a Castilian-speaking police officer for having the temerity to ask directions in Catalanian. “Speak the language of the empire,” retorted the officer. More happily he came across Jaume Vicens i Vives, a charismatic figure and the leading historian of 20th-century Catalonia. “He'd formed a little group of young Spanish scholars who were busy demythologising the history of Catalonia,” Elliott said. “I found this intellectually very exciting.”

The more Elliott investigated, the more he found parallels between Spanish and British history, particularly the loss of empire and intimations of national decline in the Spain of the 1620s and Britain in the 1950s, “an exhausted imperial power and a reforming government, followed by disappointed expectations and at least the partial failure of reform”.

Research was slow and time-consuming, and often had to be squeezed in between teaching and other time-consuming duties. “With no documentation online, as it is in massive quantities today, there was no alternative other than to go in person to an archive or make a request for photocopies, which might, or might not, be granted,” he wrote.

He also had little time for theoretical debates about what could and could not be recovered of the past: “I believe that theory is of less importance for the writing of good history than the ability to enter imaginatively into the life of a society remote in time and place, and produce a plausible explanation of why its inhabitants thought and behaved as they did.”

John Huxtable Elliott was born in Reading on June 23, 1930, the son of Thomas Elliott, a prep school headmaster, and his wife Jane (née Payne). He recalled how, while a pupil at his father's school, he “would devour historical novels in the well-stocked library and pore over the text and illustrations of the capacious volumes, bound in green, of *The Romance of the Nation: A Stirring Pageant of the British Peoples Through the Ages*, published in the mid-1930s”.

After Eton he won a scholarship to study modern languages at Trinity College, Cambridge. He went up after doing National Service, during which he read an abridged version of Arnold Toynbee's 12-volume *A Study of History*, but before arriving had decided that he would instead prefer to read history. "I felt I had enough knowledge of French and German to be able to read reasonably fluently in those languages," he said. Yet the contrasting approaches of his two history tutors, Walter Ullmann and Steven Runciman, left him "with an almost schizophrenic view of the Middle Ages".

He toyed with the thought of researching 18th-century English political history, but the pull of Spain remained strong. There was also the consideration that "if I wanted to have an academic career, there was standing-room only in British history". Nevertheless, he was acutely aware that British hispanism had a long and distinguished history and he "would be just one more in a long line of curious Protestant northerners driven by some inner compulsion to explore the alien world of the Iberian peninsula".

In 1958 he married Oonah Butler, who prepared the indexes for his early books and accompanied him on lecture tours. On one occasion, in 1973, they went on a memorable horseback tour of the Alpujarras in Andalusia, where they were obliged to groom their horses every night before collapsing exhausted on to their spartan beds. Their home, initially in Long Road, Cambridge, with a study full of books from floor to ceiling and spectacular wisteria in the garden, was a place where students were welcomed with open arms.

He spent the summer after graduating in Santiago de Compostela, capital of the northwestern province of Galicia, taking a course in the Spanish language. Gradually he found that, “outside the realm of art and literature, 17th-century Spain had not fared well at the hands of its historians”. This, he decided, would be the focus of his doctoral dissertation. He was acutely aware, however, that political and diplomatic history were only part of the story; his work would pay due attention to the economic and social history of the country.

Some of his earliest research was undertaken at the castle of Simancas, which dominates the village of that name on the high Castilian plateau. “We researchers would cross the bridge over the deep but dry moat and announce our presence by banging on the castle gate with its heavy iron knocker, scorching to the heat of the afternoon sun by the time we arrive for the evening session,” he recorded. At times the work was frustrating. “I called up bundle after bundle of state papers for the 1620s, but none of them contained the kind of material that I had confidently expected to find.”

Discovering that the papers had been destroyed in two fires in 1794 and 1795, he instead shifted his attention to Barcelona and the Catalan revolt of 1640. He placed an advertisement in *La Vanguardia*, a local newspaper, to the effect that a young Englishman wanted to live with a family to learn Catalan, and was deluged with replies. “Before my stay was over I was even dreaming in Catalan,” he recalled.

Back in Cambridge his dissertation won him a fellowship for further research, but by 1956 he had been appointed a teaching fellow at his college and was soon an assistant lecturer at the university. Nevertheless, he was back in Spain at almost every opportunity, poring over more archive material and getting to know Spanish historians and gaining an appreciation of the difficulties they faced. “As a foreigner during these grim Franco years I was in a privileged position,” he wrote. “Marxist publications were banned, as were any books on contemporary Spain that were judged to be unfavourable to the regime.” Books soon followed, including *The Revolt of the Catalans* (1963), *Imperial Spain, 1469-1716* (1963), *Europe Divided, 1559-1598* (1968) and *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650* (1970).

Elliott was appointed professor of history at King's College London in 1968, but in 1973 took up a permanent position at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, New Jersey, where he spent 17 years largely free from the burden of teaching and administration, building on his studies of Spanish history in what he called "a scholar's paradise". In 1986 his book *The Count-Duke of Olivares*, which had been many years in the making, was published, shedding light on one of the most intriguing figures at the court of Philip IV in 17th-century Spain.

Later his attention turned to the history of colonial North America with *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492-1830* (2007), which considers how the modern country "leaves little or no space for the incorporation into the national narrative of Native American and imported Africans, without whom the evolution of the colonies into the United States as we know it today would have been profoundly different".

Meanwhile, he had returned to Britain in 1990 as regius professor of modern history, but now at Oriel College, Oxford, where he remained until retirement in 1997. He was now considered by many to be the pre-eminent British historian, receiving numerous honours and awards from institutions in Britain and Spain. In 2012 he published a memoir called *History in the Making*, more a critical examination of his works than an autobiography, which he concluded thus: "This book will have served its purpose if it is read as the testimony of a historian who has tried to understand."

Despite his interest in 17th-century Spain, Elliott was a historian for all ages, even if Professor Sir Richard Evans, his fellow historian, once wrote that he had “always been a historian’s historian”. On one occasion he discussed the value of historical knowledge to politicians. “Sometimes it’s better, as Tony Blair did with Northern Ireland perhaps, to forget the past, but I do think it can save you from walking into quagmires at certain moments,” he said. “If you knew for instance, that the British had been in Iraq in the 1920s and had run into problems there, this might at least make you pause before taking major policy decisions.”

Sir John Elliott, historian, was born on June 23, 1930. He died on March 10, 2022 aged 91