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Review of: Richard L. Kagan, *Clio & the Crown. The Politics of History in Medieval and Early Modern Spain*

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Kagan, Richard L. *Clio & the Crown. The Politics of History in Medieval and Early Modern Spain*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. 342 pp.

Since 1972 Richard Kagan has been a professor of Early Modern History at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Distinguished in 1997 with the mission of the Order of Isabel la Católica for his research on Habsburg Spain, his extensive list of publications also reflects his interest in art, cartography, culture and, in particular, literature. His firm commitment to the integration of literature in the study of history led to his 1999 incorporation into the Department of Romance Languages and Literature at his university. In *Clio and the Crown* he analyzes a facet of royal power: the control of the narrative of history by royal historians - historians and, at the same time, officers of the Crown - from late medieval to the mid-eighteenth century. The various chronicles reveal the different personalities and preferences of the monarchs that commissioned them: those that focus primarily on the heroic deeds of the king, those that pay attention to the kingdom as a whole, and those celebrating the Spanish conquest of the New World.

In his preface the author admits that this book is the result of a long gestation process: "probably too long" using his own words (IX). Its preparation can be charted in several of his previous publications. In 1993 he wrote an essay on the Spanish chorography during the Modern Age,¹ in which he compared the history of the official chroniclers of the monarchy, the "Official History," with the one that was written specifically and individually for large or small towns, local history or chorography. A more direct relationship can be seen in his two articles "Felipe II, la Historia y los cronistas del rey," published in 1998, and "Los cronistas del Emperador" in 1999. But undoubtedly the clearest antecedent of the work is his collaboration in the tribute book to his master, Professor John H. Elliott, *Spain, Europe and the Atlantic World*, published in Cambridge in 1995. In the Spanish translation of this work, published in 2001 and reprinted in 2002, *España, Europa y el Mundo Atlántico*, Kagan's article "Clio y la Corona: Escribir Historia en la España de los Austrias" is clearly a first draft of the current monograph. Other preparatory work on the official chronicle of the Spanish territories overseas include, "Entre dos Mundos: la ciudad en la Nueva Crónica de Ayala"

¹ Richard L. Kagan, "La corografía en la Castilla moderna: género, historia y nación" in *Studia aurea: Actas del III Congreso de la AISO* (Toulouse, 1993), 79-92, vol. I. Also published in *Studia Storica. Historia Moderna* (13/1995): 47-60.

published in 2003, and “La Historia y la Crónica de las Indias durante el siglo XVII: Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas”, in 2004.

In his illuminating introduction, “Official History,” Kagan explains his intended purpose: history as seen through the work of royal writers, historians and, at the same time, public employees in the service of the Crown, “hired pens,” duly instructed in the task of emphasizing the sanctity of the monarchy, whose actions, questionable as they were, were justified by the fact of enjoying divine sanction and support. The author clarifies that his aim is not to provide an overview of Spanish historiography of that period. Moreover, the official chroniclers that he studies represent only a tiny percentage of the important list of historians who worked independently, without the benefit of royal patronage. He justifies this restriction as a necessary condition to explore the thoughts of each of the Spanish monarchs regarding history, and how that vision influenced the kind of histories their official chroniclers wrote.

The royal history, usually in the form of chronicles of the court, goes back in Castile to the days of Alfonso X. However, the official chronicler of the king was not institutionalized until the middle of the fifteenth century, when Juan II appointed Juan de Mena as such, granting him a fee to write the *Official History* of his reign. These simple medieval chronicles, written in the vernacular, devoted to extolling the deeds of kings, evolved during the Renaissance to rhetorical and refined writings in Latin, adorned with diverse and redundant tropes, which provided the moral teachings that the history had to transmit as a humanistic discipline. The supposed impartiality of such narratives contrasted with the role of writers in the service of kings, whose mission was to exalt the honor and reputation of the monarch. Following the example of his predecessors, Ferdinand and Isabella commissioned the task to the royal chronicler Hernando del Pulgar. However, the events of 1492 marked a shift in the preferences of Ferdinand and Isabella more in favor of universalized history to serve the interests of the state. And thus, when Nebrija was appointed chronicler of the king, he received the request of writing a laudatory and global narrative to show the world the antiquity and greatness of Spain. Thereby Kagan introduces a crucial issue for the following chapters: the diverse use of history by various kings. The royal preferences marked the work of the official chroniclers causing two types of narrative, which Kagan called respectively *Pro Person History*, one that focuses on the exploits and achievements of the king, and *Pro Patria History*, whose primary objective is to praise the successes of the kingdom, “a somewhat more Livy-esque narrative centered on the achievements of the kingdom as a whole” (14).

Following these premises, Kagan entitles his second chapter “Pro Person History: Emperor Charles,” relying on two arguments. On the one hand, that pro patria history did not conform fully to the supranational vision that Charles’ Grand Chancellor Mercurino Gattinara had of the monarchy of Charles V; and second, it did not interest Charles, whose historical

preferences, following his paternal grandfather, focused on his own biography. This explains Charles' lack of support for the publication of *Estoria de Espanna* of Alfonso X – which would be finally edited by private initiative – and his delayed appointment of an official chronicler. Chapter three, "Pro Patria History: Philip II," explains Philip II's sponsorship of some historians, particularly those he honored with the title of royal chronicler. Unlike his father, Philip was suspicious of his biography and chose the history pro patria, vigorously promoting a general history of Spain and its territories.

Chapter four, "His Majesty's History," begins with the biographical sketch of Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, an influential and prolific royal chronicler designated at the end of the sixteenth century as chronicler of the Indies. Kagan then reels off the arguments defended by Herrera in his extensive work: his ideas about history as a "guide to action," a political instrument for the defense of the monarchy, with a dual purpose, moral and political; his interest in the narrative of contemporary events, explaining them in light of the past; and, finally, his high regard for the role of the historian as a prudent adviser for the ruler, whose reputation would be thus increased. In chapter five, "Defending Imperium," the author develops two perspectives. On the one hand, he delves into the task entrusted to the Major Chronicler of the Indies, whose job had to focus precisely on the defense of the empire, although the efforts of successive chroniclers to write the history of the Spanish dominions in America were woefully incomplete. On the other hand, the politics of history during the reign of Philip III were analyzed, a period in which the work of the chroniclers was conditioned by the Castilian edition of the *Historia General de España* by Juan de Mariana. The work, which offered a complete view of the glories of the nation and highlighted the key role of the monarchy, had achieved what successive generations of royal chroniclers had been unable to achieve. In fact it became the "Official History" of Spain for two centuries. It relieved subsequent chroniclers of the task of writing the general chronicle, thereby limiting their focus to specific narrations, usually on contemporary events. Kagan fully explores the chroniclers' intervention in the political machinations and their personal confrontations in the suggestively entitled section, "Dueling Chroniclers."

Chapter six, "'To mortify our enemies': History and Propaganda at the Court of Philip IV," adopts as its title the maxim of the Count-Duke Olivares, who said history had to be used as an "arrow to mortify our enemies." History conceived in terms of propaganda was a constant preoccupation of Philip IV, who knew his reputation was in the hands of historians. In any case, the type of political history the monarch demanded not only reflected the growing importance that rulers of the seventeenth century gave to the public, but also their confidence in the ability of storytelling to communicate with the people and make them understand the message of the king. "Official History" was certainly something that no ruler of the seventeenth century, however

powerful he was, could ignore. Philip IV never aspired to much, maybe because the crisis of 1640 quickly eclipsed the brightness of his glory, but always maintained a deep determination to ensure that history would meet the interests and concerns of the monarchy. Hence his clumsy attempts to impose censorship - without significant results - and hence the strict selection of royal writers, firmly committed to the expectations of the monarch. Under the section "Hired Pens," Kagan analyzes the trajectory of several of those writers whose common denominator was their belonging to the orbit of the royal favorite Olivares.

Chapter seven, "Critical History or Official History?" discusses the historical policy in a period of change: a new century, a new dynasty and a change of postulates would bring an end "Official History." Charles II did not demonstrate any ability to transmit to his chroniclers the kind of history he wanted them to draft. Each of his forefather Austrians, with the possible exception of Philip III, had adopted a clear policy about history: *pro person*, *pro patria*, or class propaganda, as promoted by his father. The Bourbon dynasty gave the *coup de grace* by abolishing the offices of chronicler of the kingdom of Aragon and royal chronicler and replaced them with a new "national" institution, the Royal Academy of History, whose main responsibility would be to write "a history commensurate with the new nation that the monarchy endeavored to construct" (278). In 1738, Philip V authorized its establishment, following the Colbertian model of *L'Academie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles - Lettres*. The new institution was the creation of a small group of scholars, mostly locals, who, since 1735, had planned an academy of universal knowledge with the intent to promote the full spectrum of the arts and sciences in Spain. But soon the founders decided to limit its horizons and transform it into a universal academy dedicated only to the history of Spain. The main function of the Royal Academy was to rewrite the history of Spain in accordance with the critical methods of the *novatores* and "to exile the fables introduced by ignorance and malice, and to increase knowledge of many things either obscured by antiquity or which carelessness has left undiscovered" (279).

The book's conclusion, "Rethinking Official History," emphasizes the need to understand the "Official History" in context. Judged by the standards of the present, the work of official historians is classified as *controversial*, in the best of cases, and as *false*, in the worst. Most present critics of the "Official History" seem to share the assessment of Franchi di Conestaggio who considered it the work of "historians in charge of lying." And while over the pages of this book Kagan points out examples of extreme attitudes of the kings to exercise full control over the official history of their reigns, intimidating historians by destroying and confiscating manuscripts, rewriting past chronicles and restricting the narration to authorized persons, however, he believes that many of these chronicles should not be regarded as outright lies

but as selectively chosen information, depending on the interests of the monarch. The author concludes that in history, as in life, the lie of some is the truth of others: those official chroniclers obtained their position by the confidence of the monarch and that confidence itself was what guaranteed the solvency of their work. That is why very few of those writers forgot the reference to their position on the cover of their chronicles. The trust placed in them, and the title that this entailed, became later the authority of the author, and finally, veracity, especially to those who were already predisposed in favor of the monarch the historian concerned served: a situation that Kagan compares with other "official histories" nowadays when the great political leaders entrust their press officers to explain their questionable actions. And he does not hesitate to use as example what was a hot issue in public opinion when he was writing this book, the history published by the United States Army on June 30, 2008 - which has been called an "official history" of the turbulent years 2003-2005 - about the invasion of the Islamic Republic of Iraq. "These two histories, though separated by space, time and culture have much in common. Both are counterhistories, intended to refute other, nonofficial histories dealing with the same event. Therefore they offer a narrative in which certain facts are included, while others, allegedly for reasons of state security, are either omitted or downplayed as irrelevant"(299).

Like other works of this author², an excellent translation into Spanish of *Clio and the Crown*³ has recently been published, a brilliantly written book that has the virtue of capturing the reader's attention to the last page, which is no small merit in a work so dense and documented. Originality and rigor, along with suggestive and sensible considerations that reveal a deep understanding of Spain's early modern history, make Kagan's most recent publication highly recommended for reading.

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² Richard L. Kagan, *Universidad y sociedad en la España moderna* (Tecnos, 1981); Richard L. Kagan, *Pleitos y pleiteantes en Castilla, 1500-1700* (Junta de Castilla y León, 1991); Richard L. Kagan, *Los sueños de Lucrecia: la profecía y la política en la España del siglo XV* (Editorial Nerea, 1991); Richard L. Kagan and Fernando Marías-Franco, *Imágenes urbanas del mundo hispánico* (El Viso, 1998).

³ Published under the title *Los Cronistas y la Corona. La Política de la Historia en España en las Edades Media y Moderna* (trad. Pablo Sánchez Léon) (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica–Marcial Pons Historia, 2010). In May 2012 this work was awarded with the prestigious MENÉNDEZ PELAYO PRIZE.