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PRESCOTT'S PARADIGM: A NEW LOOK AT A BOSTONIAN'S
IMAGE OF SIXTEENTH-CENTURY SPAIN

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I believe the Spanish subject will be more new than the Italian, more *interesting* to the majority of readers, more *useful* to me by opening another & more practical department of study, & *not* more *laborious*, in relation to the authorities to be consulted, and *not* more *difficult* to be discussed . . .

For these reasons, I subscribe to the history of Ferdinand and Isabel.¹

With these words, entered into a memorandum on January 19, 1826, William Hickling Prescott inaugurated the writing of Spanish history in the United States. Equally importantly, Prescott's decision to investigate the achievements of the Catholic Monarchs represented a milestone within historical scholarship in our country. U.S. readers in the early nineteenth century knew European history, but no scholar from this country had yet dared, as Prescott proposed, to utilize original documents in order to write something new about the history of any nation other than the United States. Not until the end of the nineteenth century did other U.S. historians, Medievalists mostly, duplicate the kind of

original synthesis envisioned by Prescott in 1826 and subsequently realized in his *History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabel*, published on Christmas Day 1837, and a work still well worth reading today.

As a historian, Prescott was not particularly innovative, either in terms of method, philosophy, or technique. Influenced primarily by Edward Gibbon and by Abbé Mably (whose rules of history he admired), Prescott sought to write history that was "romantic" yet also "useful," studded with what he called "general reflections" of a philosophical bent.² Whether in his history of Ferdinand and Isabel or his later books on the conquests of Mexico (1843) and Peru (1847), Prescott attempted to incorporate insights gleaned from documents, contemporary chronicles, and other sources into what he described as "a continuous closely connected narrative" centering on "political intrigue."³ Yet Prescott also wanted his books to be "very interesting" and accessible to a wide audience. In terms of his aims and method, therefore, Prescott resembled his contemporaries: Bancroft, Parkman, and other historians of the

romantic school. Nevertheless, Prescott emerged, at least in this country, as the Lycurgus of Spanish history and as the scholar who shaped both the character and direction of historical research in Spanish studies for well over a century. This essay examines the specific nature of Prescott's contribution and, more importantly, the extent to which his ideas about the juxtaposition of Spanish decadence and U.S. progress—summarily referred to here as “Prescott's paradigm”—still exert influence over Spanish historical scholarship, particularly of the early modern era, in the United States.

* * *

To begin with, it is interesting that an individual of Prescott's background—Boston, Unitarian, money, Harvard—even contemplated a subject dealing with Spanish history.⁴ No U.S. scholar had ever done so before, not even Thomas Jefferson, who otherwise collected Spanish books and encouraged study of “the language, manners, and situation” of both Spain and Portugal.⁵ In general, the impression of Spain in the United States during the early nineteenth century was colored by the so-called Black Legend, first popularized by Anglo-Dutch Protestants in the sixteenth century. One variant of this legend described Spaniards as cruel conquistadors with an insatiable lust for gold. Another portrayed Spanish society as one sunk in the depths of decline: a nation that wasted the silver it had mined in the Indies on monasteries and religious wars without bothering to invest it productively in com-

merce. Most eighteenth-century U.S. authors repeated these observations, adding several of their own. Jedidiah Morse's *American Universal Geography* (Boston, 1793, 1st ed.), a popular school text, taught several generations of schoolboys that Spaniards were not only “bigotted Catholics” subject to “despotic monarchy” but lazy, indolent people prone to “the practice of every vice.”⁶ Other textbooks depicted Spaniards as “a poor, lazy, idle, dirty, ignorant race of almost semi-savages.”⁷

Beginning in the 1820s, Washington Irving, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and other writers of the romantic school helped temper this negative image even though they remained critical of Spain and its institutions. Fastening onto the more traditional aspects of Spain's rural economy, for these writers Spain was “picturesque” because it was both exotic and backward—still Medieval, still subject to Moorish and other “oriental” influences. On a visit in 1828, Longfellow unabashedly referred to Spain's “timeless character,”⁸ whereas Irving, who first went to Spain in 1826, offered an orientalist interpretation of the Spanish character when, referring to Madrid's inhabitants, he observed that “these people preserve the Arab look and manner.” The *New Yorker's* first glimpse of Andalusia elicited an equally fanciful comment: “country like a historic map—full of history and romance, where the Moors and Christians have fought.”⁹

Young Prescott's view of Spain was only a bit less romanticized. He regarded it also as a country whose people suffered from the evil effects of “arbitrary government and

Papal superstition.”¹⁰ Under the circumstances, therefore, it seems somewhat odd that Prescott, who was determined to follow a literary career, opted to write about Spain. He entertained other alternatives: a history of ancient Rome; a biographical sketch of eminent geniuses; a study of Italian Renaissance literature. Yet by December 1825, only a year or so after he started reading Spanish history and literature, the Spain of Ferdinand and Isabel attracted him more and more. The subject had its attractions, among them, a connection with the origins of the New World, a linkage already apparent to Irving and one that led to that author’s highly romanticized but enormously successful biography of Christopher Columbus, first published in 1828. Yet Prescott, more of a historian than Irving, understood that Spain afforded numerous opportunities for philosophical reflection. He summarized the many advantages—and the possibilities—of such an inquiry in a memo of early January 1826. These included

a retrospective picture of the constitutions of Castile & Aragon; of the Moorish dynasty—the causes of its decay & dissolution? Then I have the Inquisition, with its bloody persecutions,—the conquest of Granada a brilliant passage,—the exploits of the “Great Captain” in Italy, a proper character for romance as well as history,—the discovery of a new world, my own country—the new policy of the monarch towards the overgrown aristocracy &c &c.¹¹

Here, in short, were all of the elements that an “entertaining” and “interesting” narra-

tive required: battles against Moors; the exploits of courageous captains; the discovery of continents and oceans. Prescott was clearly a romantic. Yet as the above list suggests, Prescott knew his Livy, Tacitus, and Polybius as well, and in keeping with the work of Gibbon, Raynal, Robertson, and other “philosophical” historians, the Bostonian sought to determine the forces that destined certain societies for greatness, others to decadence and decay. With respect to his Spanish project, he noted these particular concerns in a short memo of 1828:

How many of the seeds of the subsequent decay of this great empire are to be fairly imparted to the constitutions of Ferdinand and Isabel? Could not a skilful contrast show that they are mainly imputable to the defective policy of the succeeding monarchs [i.e., the Habsburgs]?¹²

What is not immediately apparent in these notes, but what was evidently paramount in Prescott’s mind, was the comparison between the relative fortunes of the United States and Spain. He toyed with the prospect of writing a history of his own country and recurrently reflected upon the factors that were helping to make it great. So when Prescott decided in January 1826 to write about the Spain of Ferdinand and Isabel, he was also writing about the young United States. In both countries, Prescott detected the enlightened leadership, sound government, national will, and dynamism necessary for monumental achievement. Prescott in fact was undoubtedly thinking of the United States when, in a review of

Irving's *Conquest of Granada*, he used the following language to describe late fifteenth-century Spain: "It was the season of hope and youthful enterprise, when the nation seemed to be renewing its ancient energies, and to prepare like a giant to run its course."¹³

Yet for all his pro-Spanish sympathies, Prescott could not escape the Protestant prejudices of his age. He understood that Spain had two deep-seated weaknesses from which the United States was exempt. One was Catholicism, cruelly manifested in the Inquisition that his avowed heroes, the Catholic Monarchs, had helped to create.¹⁴ His memo book reads:

The reign of Ferdinand and Isabel will thus form an epoch lying between the anarchy of the preceding period and the despotism & extravagant schemes of the succeeding, during which epoch the nation attained its highest degree of real prosperity; although the seeds of its most degrading vice, religious bigotry, were then implanted. (were they not before?).¹⁵

Spain's other fatal flaw was royal absolutism, the inherent defects of which were manifested less by the Catholic Monarchs than by their Habsburg successors, most notably, Philip II (1556–1598), whose biography Prescott published in 1855. For Prescott, a staunch proponent of liberty—the "tranquility that naturally flows from a free and well-conducted government" and the "spirit of independence" embodied in the United States—Philip II was evil incarnate: "[He] ruled . . . with an authority more absolute than that possessed by any

European prince since the day of the Caesars." Prescott, moreover, faulted Philip for having "nurtured schemes of mad ambition" that undermined the dynamism and energy Ferdinand and Isabel brought to Spain, forcing the nation into "a state of paralytic torpor" that contributed, directly and inevitably, to its economic and political decline. Even more reprehensible was Philip's narrow brand of Catholicism, a religion that "admitted no compromise" and led the monarch to embrace persecution, and its handmaiden, the Inquisition, as his principal weapon.¹⁶ Firm in his belief that progress required a liberty that embraced democratic institutions, freedom of worship and of expression, and laissez-faire economics, Prescott blamed Philip for having denied Spain the opportunity to join the modern world.

For Prescott, therefore, an unhealthy combination of political despotism and religious bigotry set Spain and the United States on two fundamentally different paths. The latter, as a republic, enjoyed the energy, enthusiasm, and the "bold commercial spirit" that liberty engendered—the qualities nations required for lasting success. In Prescott's view, Medieval Spain had exhibited most of these qualities in the guise of "free institutions," "liberal and equitable forms of government," "independence of character," "lofty enthusiasm," and "patriotism."¹⁷ However, in the course of the sixteenth century, the Habsburg monarchy, aided by the Inquisition, conspired to crush Spain's ancient "liberties," creating a huge gulf between the United States and the nation that had helped to discover it. In the United States, liberty ensured both

individual enterprise and national prosperity. In Spain, its absence created economic backwardness, intellectual stagnation, political weakness, and moral decay, each compounded by the sloth and corruption that the riches of empire brought in its wake.¹⁸ In the Middle Ages, Spaniards were energetic and hard working, their future still bright. But by the end of the sixteenth century, all this had changed, and Prescott offered a particularly gloomy assessment of the country's future near the end of *Philip II*:

Folded under the dark wing of the Inquisition, Spain was shut out from the light which in the sixteenth century broke over the rest of Europe, stimulating nations to greater enterprise in every department of knowledge. The genius of the people was rebuked, and their spirit quenched, under the malign influence of an eye that never slumbered, of an unseen arm ever raised to strike. How could there be freedom of thought, where there was no freedom of utterance? Or freedom of utterance, where it was dangerous to say too little as to say too much. Freedom cannot go along with fear. Every way the Spanish mind was in fetters.¹⁹

* * *

What I call "Prescott's paradigm" is an understanding of Spain as the antithesis of the United States. Most of the elements contained in this paradigm—anti-Catholicism, criticism of absolutism, support for commerce, and individual liberty—were found in the work of many

Enlightenment writers, but Prescott bundled these together into a single package that offered a means of approaching Spanish history through the lens of that of the United States. Just as Prescott cherished the notion of "American exceptionalism"—the idea that his own country possessed a unique history that destined it for greatness—Spain was equally exceptional but seen from the inverted perspective of a nation separated from the European (i.e., Protestant) mainstream and consequently bereft of the progress and prosperity that flowed in its wake. Earlier New England writers, Cotton Mather and Samuel Sewall among them, had also espoused a negative view of Spain, but Prescott was the first to adopt a truly comparative perspective, setting the trajectory of the two nations side by side. Medieval Spain provided Prescott—and presumably other scholars who shared his conservative political views—an example of a society in which individual liberties had been productively channeled into nation building, a heroic enterprise that offered ready comparison with the colonial era of the United States, and, for Prescott at least, one that served as a refuge from the dangerous populist tendencies Jacksonian democracy had unleashed.²⁰

But Spain's principal attraction was that its history, especially in the Habsburg era (which Prescott regarded as that nation's nadir), represented everything that his beloved country was not. The latter—republican, enterprising, rational—was the future; the former—monarchical, indolent, fanatic—represented the past. As it developed, however, Prescott's paradigm was less

of a clearly defining model of analysis than a series of assumptions and presuppositions about the inherent backwardness of Spanish culture contrasted with the progressiveness and superiority of that of the United States. Yet this particular formulation, especially when combined with a pervasive belief in national character engendered by the rise of nineteenth-century nationalism, managed to exert a powerful influence on the way in which succeeding generations of scholars in the United States thought and wrote about Spain.²¹ Even today, this formulation influences the ways that many in the United States, scholars and nonscholars alike, think and write about Spain.

There is no space here to trace, generation by generation, Prescott's influence upon U.S. writing about Spain. Suffice it to say that Prescott's ideas about Spain exercised a profound influence on Spain's first generation of U.S. Hispanists; notable among them were Prescott's close friend George Ticknor, Harvard's first professor of modern languages, together with a host of U.S. citizens who visited Spain, including James Russell Lowell, another Harvard language professor. Lowell, in a journey to Spain in 1878, purposely shut his eyes to anything in Spanish society—railroads, industry, commerce—that smacked of modernity, a type of myopia that allowed him to write: "They are still orientals to a degree one has to live among them to believe. . . . They don't care about the same things that we are fools to believe in [i.e., ledgers and account books]."²² The Prescottian contrast between Spanish decadence and U.S. modernity also came to the fore during the Spanish-American War of

1898, a moment when the famous Philadelphia businessman turned Medievalist and historian of the Inquisition, Henry Charles Lea, published an essay in the *Atlantic Monthly*. In it, Lea attributed Spain's defeat in this conflict as the inevitable result of a national character that was the antithesis of the United States, with Spain distinguished by a "blind and impenetrable pride," a "spirit of conservatism which rejected all innovation in a world of incessant change," and a profound "clericalism" that had not only ignited a "ferocious spirit of intolerance" but also "benumbed the intellectual development of the people."²³ Lea, moreover, knew exactly where such misfortunes would lead. "While the rest of the civilized world was bounding forward in a career of progress, while science and the useful arts were daily adding to the conquests of man over the forces of nature, and rival nations were growing in wealth and power, the Inquisition condemned Spain to stagnation."²⁴

At the dawn of the twentieth century, therefore, political events seemingly confirmed Prescott's contention that Spain and the United States inhabited different worlds. Most scholars accepted this premise; so did the popular press. Even Archer M. Huntington (1870–1955), founder of New York's Hispanic Society of America (opened in 1908) and a connoisseur otherwise interested in promoting Spanish art and culture, accepted "Spain" and "modernity" as antithetical concepts. Like Irving, Huntington's Spain was romanticized. "In Spain," he wrote, "fanaticism is natural, chivalry a necessity."²⁵ Yet Huntington resembled Prescott to the

extent that he took seriously the general trajectory of Spanish history, especially the reasons for what he perceived as the nation's failure to modernize along western lines. Prescott's influence, for example, may be detected in the list of the ingredients that Huntington concocted to explain Spanish decadence: "Pride, a weak monarch, a dissolute court, religious intolerance, all these are admirable starting points from which to prove a nation's decline." To this master recipe Huntington added one additional, albeit vital, ingredient: "Spain lacks the trading spirit . . . the great primitive developing agency," the absence of which condemned Spain to centuries of isolation and decay.²⁶

To escape this era, Huntington, like Prescott before him, took refuge in Spain's Middle Ages, especially in the figure of El Cid, a heroic figure whose *Poema* he endeavored to translate. It follows that the art of Medieval Spain figured as the centerpiece of the museum Huntington outfitted in New York. For similar reasons, the first U.S. historians of Spanish art—Charles Caffin, Georgiana Goddard King, A. Kingsley Porter, Chandler Post, and John Kenneth Conant—also displayed a distinct preference for the Middle Ages. An exception was Charles B. Curtis, who in 1883 had published a catalogue of paintings by Velázquez and Murillo, but this scholar viewed Spain's seventeenth century in wholly romantic terms, claiming that upon first visiting Madrid, "I found myself carried in a day to the middle of the seventeenth century. I discovered a country that had preserved almost unchanged their habits, customs, and traditions of a long-buried age."²⁷

In comparison, Chandler Post, Harvard's hard-headed historian of Spanish art, attributed Spain's artistic achievements in the seventeenth century to that "rare artist" (probably Velázquez) with a "rugged, weird, and titanic spirit," one able to free himself from the grave Spanish temperament and the strictures of the Catholic Church.²⁸

* * *

To what extent do the ideas Prescott used to describe Spain still prevail? At present, signs of a shift in the paradigm he formulated are somewhat mixed. One current approach may be characterized as a shift away from Spanish exceptionalism and its concomitant emphasis upon decline as an intrinsically "Spanish" phenomenon. Such an approach began in the 1930s with Earl J. Hamilton, an economic historian who pointed out that nineteenth-century "liberal" historians purposely exaggerated Spanish decadence in order "to place absolutism, the Inquisition, the persecution of minorities, and the Moorish expulsions in the worst light." As he saw it, the German and French (he might have added British and U.S. scholars as well) overestimated the extent of Spain's decline in order to glorify their own country's achievements.²⁹ Hamilton was right, and in this respect he ranks as one of the first scholars to examine Spain's history comparatively and to examine the presuppositions underlying its decline.

Roger B. Merriman, another Harvard scholar interested in Spanish history, adopted a similar approach. His *Six Contemporaneous Revolutions*, published in

1937, offered a comparative analysis of the political history of seventeenth-century Spain, largely in an effort to determine the extent to which the revolts that rocked Europe's monarchies in the 1640s belonged to an international movement, possibly even a conspiracy. At the time, Merriman was interested in drawing parallels between these revolts and the spread of European fascism, but over the decades his study had the effect of reattaching Spanish history to European history.

This particular movement gained momentum in the 1960s, owing primarily to the work of the influential English scholar John H. Elliott, who, having rejecting the notion that an immutable national character rendered the Spanish incapable of innovation and change, interpreted the erosion of Habsburg power in the 1640s as part of the "general crisis of the seventeenth century."³⁰ Elliott's comparative approach to Spanish history won wide acceptance in France, England, and—somewhat more slowly—in the United States, owing to the powerful influence of Américo Castro, an emigré literary scholar who taught generations of Hispanists that Spanish decline was primarily of a function of national character.³¹ Even so, the comparative approach gradually took hold, itself a sign of movement in the Prescottian paradigm and one that signaled a fundamental change in the way scholars in this country thought and wrote about Spain.

One thing is certain: old orientations and presuppositions are definitely under attack. In Spanish art history, the Medievalism of the early part of the century has given way to emphasis on the art of

more modern periods, including that of the era generally associated with Spanish decline. This change in focus is accompanied by a willingness to reexamine some of the fundamental premises associated with Spanish seventeenth-century art. Early in the century, Chandler Post argued for Spanish artistic exceptionalism. No country, he believed, was "less responsive to foreign influences than Spain."³² Yet recent work on a wide range of topics—individual artists, architecture, palace decoration, and artistic genres such as still life—suggests that Spain was anything but isolated from the main currents of European art.³³ Jonathan Brown, moreover, has written extensively about the collecting by Philip IV, emphasizing the extent to which this monarch's preference for painting not only created the largest—and most envied—picture collection in seventeenth-century Europe but also served to make painting, as opposed to sculpture and tapestries, the most respected of all the arts.³⁴ From this perspective, paintings that Prescott might have used as evidence for the decadence of Spain's monarchs are being refigured as markers of the nation's cultural vitality and intellectual interchange, two qualities it supposedly lacked.

Another sign of a shift in the paradigm is a willingness to challenge the old teleology of Spanish economic backwardness and decline, generally by comparing its record to that of European nations other than Great Britain. This was also accomplished by disaggregating the Spanish economy into various parts and by paying attention to Catalonia, the Basque Country, and other regions whose economic performance was

not nearly so gloomy as that of Castile—the pastoral region previously cited by scholars to support their contention that absolutism, empire, and the Church had rendered the Spaniards commercially unfit. These findings do not make Spain the pioneer of the Industrial Revolution, but they do suggest that the Spanish economy was far more modern—and changing—than earlier historians of the Spanish economy would ever have allowed.³⁵

The old teleology is also suffering at the hands of scholars less interested in the ups and downs of the Spanish empire than in exploring the internal character of Spanish society and culture.³⁶ The monolithic “Spain” that Prescott presented is currently being dismantled as scholars examine it microhistorically, divide it into regions, examine peripheries rather than centers, and peer into the minutiae of everyday life.³⁷ Furthermore, Prescott’s stereotype of the Spaniard as the cruel conquistador and the indolent priest is also giving way to a more varied picture of individuals of vastly different stripes—of a Catalan artisan coping with the rigors of plague; a young Castilian girl dreaming of a better life; university-educated clergymen struggling to educate their parishioners in the rudiments of the faith; Basque shipbuilders diligently attempting to make a profit in difficult times; and courtiers who, together with other European place-seekers, made the promotion of their family and their friends a primary concern.³⁸ Even more pronounced is the growing tendency to temper the old image of omnipotent Habsburg absolutism with that of a monarchy whose power was circumscribed by numerous constitutional

and juridical checks.³⁹

Today’s historians of Spain can therefore be likened to iconoclasts, bent on breaking the old images that had formed the Spain envisioned by their forbears, and in some cases, their own teachers as well.⁴⁰ Even the bullfight, once emblematic of Spanish cruelty and, for the romantics, of the Spanish picturesque, is currently being transformed into a symbol of Spanish commercial enterprise as one scholar documents the way in which nineteenth-century promoters of the *corrida* transformed what had been a popular festival into a commercialized, professionalized, mass-market spectator phenomenon.⁴¹

But perhaps the most significant shift in Prescott’s paradigm—one directly pertinent to the theme of this symposium—involves the role of religion in Spanish history. Of particular interest here is the work of scholars who have examined the trial records of the Inquisition not, as Lea would have done, to emphasize the institution’s cruelty but rather as a vast historical database, useful for reconstructing a society far more complex and far more heterodox than ever previously imagined.⁴² The image of the Inquisition is also experiencing a profound transformation. What Prescott and Lea conceived as a cruel, omniscient monster is rapidly being downsized and domesticated, reconfigured into an institution so poor and so understaffed that it could hardly control the sale of prohibited books, let alone effectively police Spanish intellectual activity and thought.⁴³ In addition, the “regime of terror” associated with the late fifteenth century, when the Holy Office persecuted thousands of *conversos* accused of secretly

practicing Jewish rites, is now seen as but a brief phase in the Inquisition's long history.⁴⁴ By the mid-sixteenth century, the Holy Office transformed itself into a bulwark against Protestantism—although, in truth, often not strong enough to stage an impressive *auto-de-fé*. It subsequently evolved into a watchdog over public morality, specializing in the prosecution of bigamists, blasphemers, fornicators, and sodomites in an effort, only marginally successful, to make Spanish secular culture conform with the strict clerical standards dictated by the Council of Trent. The latest studies also suggest that the Inquisition was something other than the crown's obedient servant. It is viewed instead as an institution whose officials were regularly at odds with royal judges, as well as one that local elites manipulated for their own purposes, using it, as they did in Murcia during the 1570s, to help resolve vendettas among the city's warring factions.⁴⁵

Yet for all of these signs of a shift in the paradigm, old perceptions die hard. Inherited notions of Spanish exceptionalism, for example, help to explain why so many historians (and art historians) in this country still write and teach European history as if the continent, as Dumas suggested, actually stopped at the Pyrenees. Habits of a similar sort may also be responsible for the tendency of scholars in the United States who actually write Spanish history to employ what John Elliott has described as an "excessively 'internalist' approach" to their subject, rarely bothering to compare what was happening in Spain (and its empire) with the experiences of other states.⁴⁶ Too frequently, it seems,

Spain remains something of an aberration, a nation inherently different from the rest of Europe, albeit a Europe that is generally (and erroneously) equated with either England or France.⁴⁷ This "excessively 'internalist' approach" applies to a whole range of issues, ranging from the nature of Spanish absolutism to regional rivalries to its treatment of women and religious minorities, all of which are still conceived as if rooted to what Prescott called Spain's national "spirit," what Lea described as its national "trait," or what is now called *españolismo* ("Spanishness").⁴⁸ Otherwise, it is difficult to understand why a new and fascinating study of Spanish funereal customs would attribute, albeit obliquely, Spain's economic problems in the seventeenth century to the excessive investment in masses arising from the nation's alleged—and supposedly ongoing—collective obsession with death.⁴⁹

The personal stakes of the scholars involved in Spain's presentation in exceptional terms are none too clear. Yet for many U.S. historians, and possibly many others in this country as well, Spain remains a nation whose leaders within living memory declared itself hostile to the political and religious pluralism championed by the United States. Spain in this sense still remains something of an Other, a nation synonymous with the ominous figure of the inquisitor Torquemada (as in Mel Brooks's 1981 film, *The History of the World, Part I*) and connected, inextricably perhaps, to Columbus, Cortés, and other conquistadors now credited with the extermination of the civilizations and of the ecology of the New World.⁵⁰ The quincen-

tenary celebrations of 1992, for all of their expensive, commemorative pomp, did little more than to spark a revival of Black Legend themes, making it even easier for the U.S. public, even those with little of the anticlericalism evinced by Prescott and Lea, to distance themselves from both Spain and its history. In part, this distancing can be attributed to a lack of mass emigration from Spain to the United States, in part to the inability of U.S. citizens to associate Spain with anything except the pathetic figure of Don Quixote tilting at windmills or the more picturesque elements of its culture—bullfighting, castles, flamenco, gypsies, and the like.⁵¹ Racism too plays a role here, as few Americans truly understand the difference between Spaniards and the Latinos in search of citizenship in the United States. It is no accident, therefore, that Spanish olive oil in the United States is generally marketed under assumed Italian names such as “Pompeian” or “Progresso.” Put simply, a gap still separates the two societies, reinforcing (mutual) misunderstanding and increasing the temptation on the part of this country’s people to view Spaniards through a Prescottian lens.

Yet something has definitely changed since Prescott first published *Ferdinand and Isabel* over 150 years ago. In the nineteenth century, this country’s historians regarded Spain as their opposite. They looked back to its seventeenth century as the exemplum of everything our young nation was not: backward, enervated, a society in decline. Few scholars understood—or cared to understand—that decline was a relative rather than an absolute concept. Even fewer compared Spanish accomplishments,

economic and otherwise, to those of nations other than Great Britain, France, Germany, or the United States. Fortunately, such rigid thinking is increasingly a thing of the past, and the changeover is accompanied by the understanding that imperial power is rarely long-lasting. Of particular moment, therefore, is the view that Spain’s empire in the Americas—with a life span of more than three centuries—be examined in terms of the factors that contributed to its longevity instead of to its decay. In doing so, our long-held beliefs and notions about Spanish history become more complex, with new meanings attached to seventeenth-century events, ideas, and people. Paul Kennedy, writing in the 1980s, portrayed seventeenth-century Spain without Prescott’s Protestant bias or references to Spaniards’ instinctive abhorrence for trade. What remains is a portrait of a mismanaged kingdom top-heavy with military expenditures; and through this image, Kennedy transforms a society that Prescott conceived as the antithesis of our nation into a specter of what an overextended United States might soon become.⁵²

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A final anecdote, trivial perhaps, will illustrate that the topic of Spanish decline retains much of the popularity Prescott described in 1843. About a year ago, during a routine medical examination in Baltimore, my physician, upon learning about my interest in Spain’s history, asked me for a quick summary of what I considered the reasons for the nation’s decline as a great power. The question, he avowed,

was one he had long considered but one to which he had never received a satisfactory answer. As a historian, I tried to explain decline as a relative phenomenon, briefly alluding to Kennedy's book and to the general crisis of the seventeenth century that affected, in addition to Spain, the whole of the European economy. I even asked him to consider carefully what he meant by the term "decline." The examination was soon over, my shirt buttoned up, but my measured response to the query was clearly inadequate. My doctor's view of Spain is surely different from Prescott's, yet, without saying so directly, he wanted an answer with at least one of the elements that Prescott would have assigned to Spanish decline: the rise of the Inquisition, the expulsion of the Jews, the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the leadership qualities of the Habsburg monarchs, possibly even Spanishness itself. Generalizations are risky, but the incident seems to suggest that Spanish history possesses a popular appeal far greater than most universities and colleges are likely to admit. More importantly, it serves as a reminder that our U.S. identity may still depend on national histories that are both conceived and constructed as antithetical to our own.

This article represents an abbreviated and somewhat revised version of my previously published "Prescott's Paradigm: American Historical Scholarship and the Decline of Spain," American Historical Review 101 (1996): 423-46.

1. *The Literary Memoranda of William Hickling Prescott*, ed. C. Harvey Gardiner (Norman, 1961), 1: 68.
2. *Ibid.*, 1: 51, 97.
3. *Ibid.*, 66. These memoranda are invaluable for understanding Prescott's methodology.
4. For his life, see George Ticknor, *The Life of William Hickling Prescott* (Boston, 1864); Stanley T. Williams, *The Spanish Background of American Literature* (New Haven, 1955), 2: 78-121; and C. Harvey Gardiner, *William Hickling Prescott: A Biography* (Austin, 1969).
5. Thomas Jefferson to John Rutledge, Paris, July 18, 1788, in Edward Dumbauld, *Thomas Jefferson, American Tourist* (Norman, 1946), 148. Jefferson's Spanish books are catalogued in *Thomas Jefferson's Library: A Catalog with Entries in His Own Order*, ed. James Gilreath and Douglas L. Wilson (Washington, D.C., 1969).
6. Jedidiah Morse, *The American Universal Geography* (Boston, 1816), 2: 349. See also the entries for Spain in Morse's *Geography Made Easy*, 5th ed (Boston, 1796).
7. Quoted in Sister Marie Leonore Fell, *The Foundations of Nativism in American Textbooks, 1783-1860* (Washington, D.C., 1941), 37. See also Francis Fitzgerald, *America Revisited: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Boston, 1972), 49.
8. *The Letters of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, ed. Andrew Hilen (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), 1: 222.
9. *The Complete Works of Washington Irving*, ed. Wayne R. Kime and Andrew B. Meyers, vol. 4, *Journals* (Boston, 1984), 140. Irving had been invited to Madrid by Alexander Hill Everett, the American consul, to translate the first volume of Martín Fernández de Navarrete, *Colección de los viajes y descubrimientos que hicieron por mar los españoles desde el fin del siglo XV*, 5 vols (Madrid, 1825-1837).
10. *The Papers of William Hickling Prescott*, ed. C. Harvey Gardiner (Urbana, 1964), 8.
11. Gardiner, *Literary Memoranda*, 1: 66.
12. *Ibid.*, 97.

- 13 William H Prescott, *Biographical and Critical Miscellanies* (New York, 1845), 118. His review of Irving first appeared in 1829. Prescott resented Irving's intrusion into a subject he regarded as his own, once confiding to a friend that Irving "helped himself to two of the biggest and fattest slices" in the Catholic Monarchs' reign. See William Hickling Prescott to Jarold Sparks, February 1, 1841, in *The Correspondence of William Hickling Prescott, 1833–1847*, ed. Roger Wolcott (Boston, 1925), 204.
- 14 Prescott's view of the Inquisition was undoubtedly influenced by José Antonio Llorente, *A Critical History of the Inquisition of Spain* (London, 1823), first mentioned by him in 1826. See Gardiner, *Literary Memoranda*, 1: 74, 96.
- 15 Gardiner, *Literary Memoranda*, 1: 140.
- 16 William H. Prescott, *History of the Reign of Philip II of Spain* (Boston, 1855), 1: 3, 145, 554. Many of Great Britain's nineteenth-century Hispanists held similar views of Spain, and of the Inquisition in particular. See, for example, Richard Ford, *A Hand-Book for Travellers in Spain and Readers at Home* (1845), ed. Ian Robertson (Carbondale, Ill., 1966), 1: 418–21. The history of British Hispanism, along with that within the United States, remains to be written, although the latter may be approached through Williams, *Spanish Background*.
- 17 Prescott, *Biographical and Critical Miscellanies*, 112.
- 18 Prescott's negative view of empire, derived in part from Adam Smith, helps to explain his determined opposition to the Mexican War and the annexation of Texas. See, for example, Prescott to George Sumner, April 1, 1847, *Correspondence*, 627, where he refers critically to "our mad ambition for conquest." See also the letter to Sumner cited below in note 20.
- 19 Prescott, *Philip II*, 2: 446.
- 20 For Prescott's political views, see Gardiner, *Biography*, 95, 166–68. That history offered Prescott a refuge from domestic politics became patently clear in 1846, when in the midst of writing *The Conquest of Peru* and with specific reference to the Mexican War, Prescott wrote the following in a letter to George Sumner: "I am sick of our domestic troubles. . . . I take refuge from them in Peruvian hills, where the devildoms I read of—black enough—have at least no reference to ourselves." Prescott to Sumner, May 15, 1846, *Correspondence*, 597.
- 21 For the myth of national character, with particular reference to Spain, see Julio Caro Baroja, *El mito del carácter nacional* (Madrid, 1970).
- 22 *Letters of James Russell Lowell*, ed. Charles Eliot Norton (New York, 1893), 2: 235, 241.
- 23 Henry Charles Lea, "The Decadence of Spain," *Atlantic Monthly* 82 (1898): 40.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Archer M. Huntington, *Note-Book on Northern Spain* (New York, 1898), 2.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 2, 7.
- 27 Charles B. Curtis, *Velázquez and Murillo: A Descriptive and Historical Catalogue* . . . (New York and London, 1883), 1.
- 28 Chandler Post, *A History of Spanish Painting* (Cambridge, 1930), 1: 10. This work was preceded by E. W. Washburn, *The Spanish Masters* (New York, 1884); Charles H. Caffin, *The Story of Spanish Painting* (New York, 1910); Georgiana Goddard King, *The Way of Saint James* (New York, 1920); John Kenneth Conant, *The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela* (Cambridge, 1926); and A. Kingsley Porter, *Spanish Romanesque Sculpture* (Florence, 1928).
- 29 Earl J. Hamilton, *American Treasure and the Price Revolution in Spain, 1501–1650* (Cambridge, Mass., 1934), 303.
- 30 Of crucial importance was John H. Elliott's essay, "The Decline of Spain," *Past and Present* 20 (1961): 52–75, now reprinted in his *Spain and Its World, 1500–1700* (New Haven, 1990), 217–40.
- 31 Many of Américo Castro's ideas about Spanish culture may be found in his influential study, *The Structure of Spanish History*, trans. Edmund L. King (Princeton, 1954).
- 32 Post, 1: 23.
- 33 Representative titles include Jonathan Brown, *Images and Ideas in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Art* (Princeton, 1978) and his *Velázquez: Painter and Courtier* (New Haven and London, 1986); Jonathan Brown and John H. Elliott, *A Palace for a King: The Buen Retiro and the Court of Philip IV* (New Haven and London, 1980); William B. Jordan and Peter Cherry, *Spanish Still Life from Velázquez to Goya* (London, 1995); and Catherine Wilkinson Zerner, *Juan de Herrera: Architect to Philip II of Spain* (New Haven and London, 1993).

34. Jonathan Brown, *Kings and Connoisseurs* (New Haven and London, 1995).
35. David R. Ringrose, *Patterns, Events, and Preconceptions: Revisiting the Structures of Spanish History, 1700–1900* (Cambridge, 1995). David Sven Reher employed a similar methodology in his *Town and Country in Pre-Industrial Spain* (Cambridge, 1992).
36. Representative titles include Ida Altman, *Emigrants and Society: Extremadura and America in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1989); Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Santa Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City* (Ithaca, 1989); Carla Rahn Phillips, *Ciudad Real, 1500–1700: Growth, Crisis and Readjustment in the Spanish Economy* (Cambridge, 1979); and David E. Vassberg, *Land and Society in Golden Age Castile* (Cambridge, 1984) and his recent *The Village and the Outside World in Golden Age Castile* (Cambridge, 1996).
37. The Catalan periphery has proven especially attractive in view of the many differences between this part of the peninsula and Castile, the region that Prescott and indeed most historians have identified with Spain. Catalonia is the focus of James S. Amelang, *Honored Citizens of Barcelona: Patrician Culture and Class Relations, 1490–1714* (Princeton, 1986), and Peter Sahlin, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, 1989).
38. I allude here to James S. Amelang, *Journal of the Plague Year: The Diary of the Barcelona Tanner Miquel Parets, 1651* (New York, 1991); Richard L. Kagan, *Lucrecia's Dreams: Politics and Prophecy in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Berkeley, 1990); Sara T. Nalle, *God in La Mancha: Religious Reform and the People of Cuenca, 1500–1650* (Baltimore, 1992); Carla Rahn Phillips, *Six Galleons for the King of Spain: Imperial Defense in the Early Seventeenth Century* (Baltimore, 1986); and James Boyden, *The Courtier and the King: Ruy Gómez de Silva, Philip II, and the Court of Spain* (Berkeley, 1995).
39. Helen Nader, *Liberty in Absolutist Spain: The Habsburg Sale of Towns, 1516–1700* (Baltimore, 1991), examines the checks limiting the exercise of monarchical power in Castile. I expect that the formulation of the Habsburg monarchy as more limited than absolute will soon establish itself as a new orthodoxy.
40. Bethany Aram, "Joanna 'the Mad's' Signature: Linking Individual and Corporate Bodies," unpublished paper. Aram, whose senior thesis at Yale dealt with Juana, is presently a graduate student in history at Johns Hopkins.
41. Adrian Shubert, *At Five in the Afternoon* (Oxford, forthcoming).
42. Among a recent avalanche of revisionist works on the Inquisition, notable studies by U.S. authors include Stephen Haliczzer, *Inquisition and Society in the Kingdom of Valencia* (Berkeley, 1990), and E. William Monter, *Frontiers of Heresy: The Spanish Inquisition from the Basque Lands to Sicily* (Cambridge, 1990).
43. On this point, see Henry Kamen, *The Phoenix and the Flame: Catalonia and the Counter Reformation* (London and New Haven, 1993).
44. See Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (London and New Haven, 1998).
45. I refer here to Jaime Contreras, *Sotos contra Riquelmes: Regidores, inquisidores, y criptojudíos* (Madrid, 1992).
46. Elliott, *Spain and Its World*, 69.
47. I refer to Nader, *Liberty in Absolutist Spain*, which, its lack of a comparative focus notwithstanding, remains an important and provocative book. James S. Amelang has offered similar criticism of this and other recent books (primarily by U.S. authors) on various aspects of early modern Spain; cf. *Journal of Modern History* 65 (June 1993): 357–74.
48. John Crow, *Spain: The Root and the Flower* (1963; reprint Berkeley, 1985), 9.
49. Such ideas are expressed in the introduction and conclusion of Carlos M. N. Eire, *From Madrid to Purgatory: The Art and Craft of Dying in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Cambridge and New York, 1995).
50. See Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise* (New York, 1991) and other publications spawned by the quincentenary of 1992.
51. These stereotypes may be found in James Michener's *Iberia* (New York, 1968), but they are by no means unique to the United States. Encouraged by the Spanish Ministry of Tourism during the 1960s in order to attract foreign visitors, they can also be found in Bartolomé Bennassar, *L'homme espagnol* (Paris, 1975); trans. Benjamin Keen as *The Spanish Character* (Berkeley, 1979).
52. For his discussion of Spanish decline, see Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York, 1987), 31–55.