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

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Kagan, Richard L.

Clio and the Crown: The Politics of History in Medieval and Early Modern Spain.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. Pp. xiv, 342. ISBN 978-0-8018-9294-3 (hardcover) \$57.

Richard Kagan's *Clio and the Crown* offers an insightful approach to the study of Spanish historiography by analyzing the social and political history of the official historiographers who worked for the kings of Spain from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment.

Kagan begins by arguing that his choice of official historiography as a subject for in-depth analysis subverts the stereotype that historical discourse was merely propaganda. He draws a complete portrait of not only what royal historians were supposed to be but also the achievements of these individuals, in particular by studying the political practices and uses related to their writings. The relationship between historical knowledge and practice as discussed

throughout this book offers a good understanding of the dynamics of power in the early modern state.

Kagan uses his own definition of royal historiography—a soft power or a narrative of power—as a starting point to shed light on the many styles of histories produced in the Iberian Worlds. Scrutinizing the careers of official historians, he questions the idea that historiographers were simple artisans of glory committed only to an endless celebration and rewriting of royal deeds. Their ability to move inside or outside the court and the ambiguity of their status allow Kagan to emphasize them as political counsellors guided by their own ambitions and personal networks.

The ambitious chronology of the book, from the thirteenth-century reign of Alfonso X to the creation of the Spanish Royal Academy of History during the eighteenth century, offers a problematized overview of the politics of history in Spain. These politics of history are defined by Kagan as the result of constant negotiation between historians, rulers, and their favourites or secretaries. Many historiographers were appointed precisely so that they would *not* write any history, whereas others were literally converted into royal informants in order to enhance the representation of the king (*Historia Pro Persona*) or political action (*Historia Pro Patria*).

Using extensive archival research conducted all over Europe and America, Kagan dedicates a significant part of *Clio and the Crown* to Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, the historiographer of Castile and the Americas during the reigns of Philip II, III and IV. Kagan uses Herrera's career as an original case study for his insightful essay on the everyday practices of a historian working on the many pasts and presents of a composite monarchy. As one of the first world historians, Herrera offers an excellent opportunity to study the circulation and the methods of acquisition and diffusion of knowledge within and beyond the Iberian Worlds. Herrera incarnates what Kagan has identified as the Spanish political turn in history at the end of the sixteenth century. This idea connects with the wider European political turn during this time and opens the field for comparison among historians such as Jacques-Auguste de Thou in France, Paolo Sarpi in Venice, or Sir Walter Raleigh in England. Nicholas Popper, with his book on *Walter Raleigh's "History of the World" and the Historical Culture of the Late Renaissance*, has also recently underlined the European dimension of this political turn. It is clear that historical practices were an active forum for the political culture of this time and helped form transnational systems of

information. Kagan's book offers a starting point for reconsidering official historiography to better understand the relationship between experience, power, and knowledge during the early modern period.

With his usual engaging narrative style, Kagan avoids the dangers of converting his book into a long prosopographical list of historians, instead offering a clear panorama of the projects and fundamental information about lesser-known historians who transformed and translated the past into political statements. The networks of these historians, and their connections with the composite structure of the monarchy where they lived or travelled, invite us to reconsider the place of the Spanish historians in the mapping of the circulation of knowledge during the early modern period. Kagan demonstrates how official historians contributed—as censors, counsellors, educators, cultural brokers, archivists, polemicists, diplomats or translators—to the overlapping of the administration of empire with the global curiosity of the Republic of Letters. The recent Spanish translation of Arndt Brendecke's *Imperio e información. Funciones del saber en el dominio colonial español*, about the need for information within the administration of Empire, complements Kagan's assertions very well.

There is still much work to be done to understand how the politics of history in the Hispanic monarchy were also elaborated by transnational interactions, and to identify just who made these cultural exchanges possible across often hostile frontiers. One of the most suggestive contributions of Kagan's book lies in the fact that he compares the practices of the Spanish historians and the diffusion of their works with other historiographical *dispositifs* established throughout Europe and America. The understanding of the importance of the transnational making of history supports the conclusions of Daniel Woolf on the global history of history and Chantal Grell on the comparative history of historiographers in Europe.

One of the most stimulating aspects of this book is the way it opens new avenues for research. How did the multimedia system of representation of power in the Hispanic monarchy function? And how did historians, painters, and royal confessors collaborate or struggle in order to monopolize the representations of royal power? Thanks to Kagan's work, we know more about the interactions of a significant number of these historiographers with other scholars involved in the social circulation of the past during the early modern period. By privileging the concept of the politics of history above the rhetoric of

the Spanish Black Legend, his book contributes to how we may think about the range and limits of the cultural exchanges that occurred between the Spanish monarchy and the world that it helped to shape.

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