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Review of: John H. Elliott, *History in the Making*

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John H. Elliott, *History in the Making*. Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2012. 249 pp.

Once there were giants, and some are still with us. We meet them in every chapter of this book: Braudel, Butterfield, Domínguez Ortiz, Ullmann, Vicens Vives, and others. We see them in a painting, *Historians of "Past and Present"* at the National Portrait Gallery in London: Eric Hobsbawm, Rodney Hilton, Lawrence Stone, Sir Keith Thomas, Christopher Hill, Sir John H. Elliott, and Joan Thirsk. We meet Elliott on the cover of this book (in a Hernán Cortés painting), in a wonderful early photo as a young man with his host family in Barcelona, and sitting, much later, in the Prado Museum with Jonathan Brown. These historians, the dead and the living, populate the pages *History in the Making*, reminders of the enduring links that bind us to entire historiographical traditions and transmit these traditions into the future.

Sir John H. Elliott's engaging and thoughtful reflection on the writing of history offers us a vivid portrait of European historiography, advocates the benefits of scholarly cooperation, and suggests research agendas for present and future generations – as illustrated by his own evolution as a historian. Along the way, we see glimpses of Elliott's intellectual biography. *History in the Making* is a moving reflection on what being a historian means, what the historian's craft truly entails. A personal account without being an autobiography or a memoir, a road map to the historiographical and methodological trends of the last half century, the book traces the author's experience as a historian and his intellectual journey. We follow John H. Elliott from his early fateful encounter with Velázquez's equestrian portrait of Olivares in the Prado, an experience that was to set the course of his research. We hear the scholarly advice offered to him by a veritable pantheon of historians at Cambridge, France, and Spain. We come to understand Elliott's fascination with a Spain barely emerging from the disasters of the Civil War and the harshest of Franco's years, and with Catalonia's yearnings for freedom. It was a Spain, then, in which the past could be experienced "unfettered by modernity." We also see how Elliott wrote from his own experience of Great Britain's distress in the twilight of imperial hegemony, as he chronicled Spain's demise in the seventeenth century. Why Spain? Why Catalonia? The past as he teaches us, is always imbricated in the present.

The questions that animate Elliott's vast research project focus on the

issue of decline, on how to deploy comparative approaches as a way to understand the past, on the concepts of unity and fragmentation, on the relationship between art and history. After laying out the agenda for the book, Chapter 2 explores the contrasts between national and transnational approaches, borrowing examples from his own monumental early work, *The Revolt of the Catalans* (1963), as well as from later books. Chapter 3 takes on political history and biography. Neither embracing the strong Marxist tradition found in English historiography and in *Past & Present's* editorial board (on which Elliott served for many years) nor taking up positivism, Elliott carved his own space, acknowledging human agency and contingency. His discussion of the importance of "reputation" (a concept deployed in his magisterial study of Olivares) in seventeenth-century politics provides new interpretative tools for the study of individuals and societies in early modern Europe and Spain. One tends to forget how precocious his *Imperial Spain* (1963) or his *The Old World and the New* (1970) were in offering new ways of doing political or transnational history.

Chapter 4 turns to questions of perceptions or representations of decline in early modern Spain as compared to England in the second half of the twentieth century. These accounts were often influenced by the example of existing master narratives of the rise and fall of empires. A veritable sojourn through the scholarly landmarks on these topics, Elliott has made seminal contributions to this area of inquiry. Chapter 5, reflecting Elliott's versatility as a historian, details the difficulties and rewards of working on art and cultural history. His fruitful collaboration with Jonathan Brown yielded the remarkable *A Palace for a King* (1980). This book, as well as others, validates Elliott's ringing call for collaboration. As he argues in this book, the very future of history lies in these joint enterprises. His efforts to reconstruct the Hall of Realms at a Prado exhibit and an ambitious project to recreate the original iconographic order of paintings once displayed in the palace of the Buen Retiro show that his words were indeed matched by deeds.

Chapters 6 and 7 make the case for comparative history, describing how it may or may not work. His own extensive comparison of colonial empires in the Americas offers an insight into the methodology deployed in such projects. In the end, a comparative approach works best when placed within a global context. Using Atlantic history (and his earlier work, *The Old World and the New*) as examples, Elliott advocates historical perspectives that transcend national history. Noting the Eurocentric bias of such terms as globalization and modernity, he calls for histories that blend the particular and the general, seeking, as he has done throughout his life, to understand the past.

This is a generous book. It is generous in its praise of those who came before him, those who have worked with him, those who have learned from him. This trait is, of course, one of Elliott's many virtues. His scholarly greatness is matched only by his extraordinary kindness to many of us. Hispanists in this country and abroad owe him a great debt. His tenure at the Institute for Advanced Study catapulted Spanish history to a heightened place in American academia. His willingness to read, comment on, and promote many young American and Spanish Hispanists had a salutary impact on our access to academic positions and validated our own research. His unique sense of right, his understanding of the obligation of historians qua human beings to do the good has had an enduring influence on the life of his students (and we are his students, even though we may never have taken courses with him) and many of us who have long admired and benefitted from his work and his life. In *History in the Making* Elliott reaffirms his commitment to being a historian who seeks to understand, but also to reflect and reveal, the complexity and wonderment of his own life and scholarship. For that, I am profoundly grateful. For that, we should all be.

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