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Review of Geoffrey Parker, *Emperor: A New Life of Charles V*

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Parker, Geoffrey. *Emperor: A New Life of Charles V*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. xix + 737 pp. + 5 maps + 3 fig. + 39 ill.

Historian Geoffrey Parker has now added a substantial new biography of the Emperor Charles V to the shelf containing his award-winning book on the global crisis of the seventeenth century, his pioneering work on the military revolution and military history, his studies of the Dutch Revolt, and his celebrated Philip II biographies. Those who read Parker for an in-depth introduction to European archives, diplomacy, war, and politics will not be disappointed by this new biography of Duke of Burgundy, King of Spain, and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500-1558), which characterizes the emperor's reign as a beginning, not an end. The inspiration for this new biography rests in a previously unknown archival source, uncovered by Parker's digging in the Hispanic Society of America, which—with the paleographic help of David Lagomarsino, Richard Kagan, Rachael Ball, and Bethany Aram—yielded a new scholarly edition edited by Ball and Parker, *Cómo ser Rey* (2014). Forty-eight folios in length, Charles's secret *Instructions* to his son Philip were composed by the emperor in 1543 (288-293). Using this hand-written manuscript, Charles's *Memoirs*, and a vast multitude of correspondence and diplomatic and political paperwork located in archives scattered across Europe, Parker has found further evidence for two of his previous arguments: 1) the military revolution of early modern Europe, and 2) that Charles V and Philip II had a “grand strategy,” which he outlined in his previous books about Philip II.

The result is an immensely thorough book. No other biography of Charles V has more detail regarding Charles's earthworks or sieges—“in all, he would design or build new-style defenses in almost seventy places” (299). In addition to the practical details of war, Parker paints a picture of a powerful and martial Charles V—when he was not ill with gout—enthusiastically putting his own person at risk. An ambassador describes the emperor “visiting each unit and surveying the trenches and the artillery and the places where the enemy might mount an attack” (321). *Emperor* also contains a dramatic account of the Schmalkaldic Wars replete with acerbic comments parried between Charles and the rebelling German nobles. Parker marks Charles's “resilience under extreme threat” (439). At age 54, an observer described how the emperor, near Binche, now Belgium, in his final military campaign, “drew his army up in battle order and rode up and down the ranks, preceded by a large red banner with the kettle drums beating” (457). This was a Charles V truly worthy of Titian and Leone Leoni.

The biography is structured chronologically with Part I covering Charles's life until age 17, Part II taking him to age 31, Part III to age 48, Part IV to his death at 58. After each part is a brief “portrait” of the emperor as “a young man,”

“a Renaissance prince,” “the Emperor in his prime,” and finally “The Emperor in Legend and History,” and “The Balance of the Reign.” Within all of these detailed historical reconstructions, the chapter that I found to be the newest and farthest removed from any of Charles’s other modern biographers, such as Robertson, Stirling, Brandi, Fernández Álvarez, Tyler, Tracy, Blockmans, or Maltby, is “The Taming of America,” a chapter at the end of Part III.

Far from being marginal to his governing strategies, Parker argues that the New World was on the emperor’s mind often. Charles systematically tried to govern his far flung empire, issuing for it “over 1000 legislative acts...compared with 700 for Spain” (371). He founded a university in Mexico and one in Peru, and appointed his confessors to positions of influence for imperial policy, as the question of the way its native inhabitants were treated affected “the royal conscience.” The emperor’s grand chancellor Gattinara appointed Las Casas to serve as a secretary, summarizing “all letters and papers that arrived for Charles about American affairs,” such that Las Casas was actually an employee (346). After Gonzalo Pizarro rebelled, a pamphlet author called the *conquistador* a Lutheran. Rebellion was impious because it did not allow Charles to rule justly (375). The emperor showed interest in the artifacts Cortes sent back from Montezuma, yet when Pizarro’s Inca objects arrived, Charles said to melt them down quickly to make the currency he needed urgently for his wars.

Parker uses contemporary accounts of Charles speaking French, Spanish, German, Italian, Portuguese, and even Latin, as well as an episode described by the diplomat Girolamo Aleandro as early as 1531, to dismantle the myth that Charles V had a lackluster ability with languages. Aleandro writes that he was reading in Hebrew one day and the emperor observed this, then “recited the first two verses of the Bible in Latin,” and gleefully listened to Aleandro recite the same in Hebrew and then in Greek. “The nuncio rejoiced ‘to see how much pleasure His Majesty took in the variety of languages’” (378). This information provides a counterpoint to Henry Kamen’s *Empire* (2003, 497), where Kamen argues the misunderstandings between Spanish conquistadors and Indigenous peoples represented a lack of “imperial discourse” to unite so many realms, which he called the “silence of Pizarro.” The emperor’s mastery of languages, however, reveals his desire for (though not necessarily the outcome of) better communication. Furthermore, while Parker does not frame it in this way, this episode is clearly evidence for the emperor’s interest in the intellectual and Christian humanist Renaissance in Spain, best exemplified by the interlinear Polyglot Bible, published in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew at the University of Alcalá after it met papal approval in 1520.

The Renaissance and Reformation, the twin movements of renewal based on the past which transformed Western Europe in the sixteenth century, do not have a starring role in this political biography, but they are discussed in the

context of political negotiations or personal scruples. In relation to Charles's 1543 *Instructions* to Philip, Parker argues that "...given the size and complexity of his transatlantic empire, the past provided no model for the lessons he now wanted to impart...he then laid out his grand strategy..." (289). Thus, his many realms and vast new empire divorced him from any precedent, ancient or medieval, which led to "the haphazard nature of his decision-making" (513). So how did the emperor make haphazard decisions but also have a grand strategy? I think the nuance gained here is that Charles's strategy was just a set of goals he set in front of himself and his son to achieve, and it is not necessary that a strategy be fully successful to be a strategy. Since "the past provided no model," Parker's explanation of Charles's advice creates an image of Charles V standing vulnerable and alone, without precedent (289).

This analysis divides Charles from the imperial Renaissance movement, exactly when Thomas J. Dandeleet has argued that Charles's court was at its very heart. In this way, Parker captures Charles's real emotions and frustrations, helping us to feel the emperor's own sense of isolation, almost like the image Fernand Braudel gives us of Philip II floating in that little boat, surrounded by the vastness of the Mediterranean. Yet, in the *longue durée*, perhaps Charles was not alone. As Christian emperor, Charles had a great cloud of witnesses in mind when he said in his response to Luther at Worms in 1521, "what my forefathers established at Constance and at other Councils, it is my privilege to uphold" (B.J. Kidd, 85-86, 1911)—this imperial speech at Worms, Parker said was "soon forgotten" in comparison with Luther's (124).

In *Emperor*, modern allusions abound, including to Henry Kissinger, FDR, Game of Thrones, and "alternative facts"—lesser so earlier ones, though Charlemagne and Maximilian I do appear. Parker's Charles V is forward-looking—the subject of the first lecture in a course, "Europe from 1500 to the Present." This Charles V is a beginning, not an end—having not, as Royall Tyler wrote, "passed like a medieval stranger through his own age, which we call the Renaissance" (Tyler, 1956, 28). Parker notes that the advice Charles V provided his son Philip in 1543 included injunctions to "honour God and rule justly" (289), to avoid flatterers, and to rely on the advice of his ministers, such as Zuñiga, Los Cobos, and Tavera. Charles penned a portrait of each of them for Philip, and gave him a strategy for dealing with them. Parker interprets this text as fundamentally new, and "perhaps the most remarkable political analysis ever committed to paper by an early modern ruler" (289). He does not see Charles as relying on either ancient, medieval, or contemporary models in the 1543 mirror for princes he wrote for his son.

In *Emperor*, Parker discusses several early modern histories out of the large number of imperial humanist texts that Dandeleet analyzed in *The Renaissance of Empire in Early Modern Europe* (2014). To Parker, these

contemporary histories were opportunities for good public relations, not a place for today's historian to discover the ideology of rulership at the court of Charles V. The emperor shaped his own image and the narrative of his reign by censoring historians and by dictating his own *Memoirs* to Van Male. Charles applied his advice about flatterers to his own court historians and had, upon his majority, become a ruler who was governed by no one—though he *did* listen to Erasmus (515), he had some favorite books, and Gattinara told Charles to “place God first” (523). The conclusion of *Emperor*, that Charles's contemporaries were right to call him “extraordinary” and “his successes far outweighed his failures” is in line with the traditional conclusion of the school of Elliott—giving Philip both Spain and the Low Countries was a mistake, yet Charles probably did better than anyone else could have done. Parker tweaks this by saying that even though Charles wanted his son to avoid flatterers, “groupthink” came to dominate the emperor's own court in his later years, causing him to trust too much in “Caesar's luck or a miracle” (532-533).

Guided by “dynasty, chivalry, reputation, and faith,” (515-517), the emperor emerges from this biography as a complicated individual, at times upholding high principles and at others pursuing a “realist” Machiavellian statecraft, ordering the assassination of French ambassadors; at times flirtatious and flip and at others deeply pious, often retreating to a monastery for a week or more. A father with an overbearing concern that his son Philip not die through sexual exertion after his marriage (perhaps due to what was said about Charles's uncle Juan), but also a dedicated and helpful political mentor to Philip. Charles made sure some of his other children, and some of their mothers, were cared for. He used his daughters as bargaining chips in the marriage politics of early modern Europe. Parker argues that Charles was cruel towards his family and his pregnant wife, when he left her alone to govern, and that “despite his undoubted physical courage, the emperor was thus sometimes a moral coward” (212). Young Charles was self-controlled at the table, but an older Charles indulged a gluttony, which, along with malaria, ultimately killed him.

Geoffrey Parker's *Emperor* is a significant political biography of a central figure in early modern European history by an expert in the field. It provides a comprehensive account of Charles's successes and failures, with a personal touch, as we are often reading Charles's own words as he complains to his sister or to a courtier about his many enemies. In this way, Parker employs his encyclopedic knowledge, archival know-how, and new primary sources to bring the first half of the sixteenth century alive for us—giving the starring role to a very human, harried, yet extraordinary Charles V.

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