Isabella of Castile: Europe's First Great Queen

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Reviewer: Elena Woodacre

Before beginning this review, it is important to frame the commentary that follows with two caveats; first, that I (or we as academics), am not the intended audience of this book and secondly, that although I have some criticisms of this work which I will discuss further below, I did genuinely enjoy reading this. Tremlett has consciously written this for the mass market and 'interested public' and thus some of the critique that I have of this book could be seen as rather unfair, given the audience that it was directed towards. The narrative, even dramatic, style of this book and its sweeping statements make the book engaging for its intended audience, even if it is somewhat frustrating for a historian, who is used to nuanced analysis and cautionary caveats about the ways in which contemporary sources should be approached and understood. Using the name Isabella rather than the Spanish Isabel underlines the intended Anglophone mass market audience, although a Spanish language edition will surely follow as was the case for his work on Catherine of Aragon and his *Ghosts of Spain* book.⁽¹⁾ The division of the sources in the bibliography into those in Spanish and those in English and other European languages rather than the customary division between primary and secondary material is another indicator of these two key target groups of readers in both languages. However, the bibliography demonstrates that Tremlett's biography is underpinned by substantial research including a wide range of primary sources and secondary works. Tremlett has been diligent, consulting not only the extensive historiography on Isabel's reign and Iberian history in the period but also contextual works on Isabel's peers, European history and queenship studies. It is this intensive, and indeed impressive, research that makes this book of interest to scholars, even if the text itself has been written with a different audience in mind and quotes and sources are (frustratingly) not always cited.

Tremlett's work is divided into small, easily digestible chapters and arranged roughly chronologically, although occasionally the desire to follow the topical narrative, as in the example of the expeditions and career of Columbus, leads to some doubling back in time. In the introduction, Tremlett is right to note Isabel's ambivalent memory-spanning from ideal, virtuous and saintly queen to a 'black legend' of a hardline zealot driven by narratives of the Inquisition, which has always been closely linked to her reign. However, his assertion that Castile had an entirely 'dismal' reputation for regnant queens in the Middle Ages is highly questionable (p. 2); while Urraca's reign in the 12th century was troubled, her great-great granddaughter Berenguela is known as 'la Grande' or 'the great'. Arguably Berenguela is a difficult regnant queen who could be equally classed as a regent or even co-ruler with her son Fernando III, but then Castile

had also known great regent queens like Maria de Molina or even Catalina de Lancaster before Isabel's birth. Certainly the realm, and Iberia at large, was no stranger to powerful women on or near the throne in the Middle Ages.

The early chapters focus on Isabel's childhood and her experience of Enrique IV's somewhat chaotic court, noting the controlling nature of Juan Pacheco, the Marqués de Villena, although another of Enrique's favourites, the infamous Beltrán de la Cueva, is all but missing. While the treatment of her early years is a little uneven, the strength of this book is its handling of Isabel's relationship with her husband Ferdinand of Aragon. Tremlett's argument that Isabel's choice of Ferdinand was pragmatic rather than romantic is spot on and his exploration of their ruling partnership is well balanced, informed perhaps by his reading of Weissburger and Earenfight's excellent research on this ruling pair. Another element which deserves merit is his discussion of their itinerant court, which is woven into several of the central chapters and gives real depth to his discussion of Isabel's daily life and reign.

No discussion of Isabel's reign is complete without coverage of the momentous year of 1492, which included the fall of Granada, the expulsion of the Jews and the voyages of Columbus. Tremlett covers each of these events and their context in great depth; taken together these topics span 15 roughly consecutive chapters in the centre of the book which cover approximately 150 pages. While Granada is generally well handled, the discussion of the Inquisition and the expulsion of the Jews are mixed. The Inquisition is handled at the dark edge of its own 'black legend', with no hint of the recent revisionist scholarship on the institution in Iberia and beyond as per Henry Kamen or the less emotive view of the excellent sources and essays in Notre Dame's Inquisitio project.⁽²⁾ The expulsion of the Jews is handled far more sensitively with a generally nuanced, balanced and contextualized discussion of this important event in European history. Finally, while the description of Columbus himself is rather fanciful at times, Tremlett stays with the explorer for several chapters and expands on his later voyages and the disastrous early attempts at colonization; an approach which works fairly well, despite breaking the generally chronological coverage as noted previously.

The discussion of Isabel's sometimes strained relationship with her children is interesting, although it is very unbalanced in favour of their eldest daughter Isabel and the famous Juana 'la Loca'. I take umbrage however, at his insensitive depiction of the younger Isabel as suffering from an eating disorder that he claims indicates the Infanta's 'perfectionist nature, and perhaps, a demanding mother' (p. 374) – we must be extremely careful of diagnosing the ailments of those who have been dead over 500 years, particularly with regard to their mental health. While Tremlett gives focus and credit to the impressive and effective matrimonial diplomacy of the *Reyes Católicos*, no mention is given to their strenuous efforts to contract a marriage with the Navarrese queen Catalina I and later her offspring, in order to bring Navarre into their orbit, which is a missed opportunity.

The final chapter is somewhat frustrating; as an epilogue Tremlett sweeps over the complicated political situation after Isabel's death and the reigns of her successors in a rather simplistic and Whiggish narrative which does not do justice to the turmoil of the early modern period or the legacy of the Spanish empire. Isabel is both damned for her connection to the Inquisition and hailed as the progenitor of the modern era – again perhaps this reflects the general divergence of opinion that Isabel has often generated. This final section highlights the constant tension in Tremlett's approach to Isabel; at times Tremlett has consciously tried to contextualize Isabel in her own period while at other moments he seems to judge her through an entirely modern lens.

Overall, Tremlett has worked hard to keep Isabel tied to his narrative but at times this work feels more like a history of her reign rather than a biography of the woman herself. With any ruler however, the divide between personal and political history is extremely difficult to maintain. He tries to connect with the woman wearing the crown but his tendency to ascribe emotions and feelings to his protagonist can be frustrating when there is no definitive evidence of how she may have felt. Historians are always extremely careful not to make assumptions about the thought processes of long dead figures – while some of her letters and actions

can be interpreted in a certain light, we cannot say with certainty that she was feeling or thinking something particular at a given moment. This is territory best left to fiction and media, such as the excellent RTVE series *Isabel* which does an impressive job of making the queen a sympathetic and well-rounded character. I concede however that Tremlett's audience will be looking for this personal touch, though his Isabella is far less likeable than Michelle Jenner's Isabel on RTVE.

In sum, this book is engagingly written and a deeply interesting read. I would heartily recommend it to those who are perhaps unfamiliar with Isabel and want an extended and intensive examination of her life and reign. For students, this book would be a good read for those studying the queen herself or the long Siglo de Oro period, and the bibliography is strong and offers a window into source material that they may want to explore in both English and Spanish. Scholars may take some umbrage as I have at particular elements of this work, but will hopefully appreciate that Tremlett has clearly put tremendous effort and research into this project and has created an in-depth and approachable biography which will bring Isabel to a wider audience.

Notes

1. Giles Tremlett, *Catherine of Aragon: Henry's Spanish Queen* (London, 2010) and *Catalina de Aragón: Reina de Inglaterra* (Madrid, 2012). Giles Tremlett, *Ghosts of Spain: Travels through Spain and its Silent Past* (London, 2006) and *España ante sus fantasmas: Un recorrido por un país en transición* (Madrid, 2006). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The Inquisitio project and sources at Notre Dame: < <https://inquisition.library.nd.edu/collections/RBSC-INQ:COLLECTION> [2]> [accessed 4 June 2017]. See also Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (4th ed., New Haven, CT, 2014). [Back to \(1\)](#)

Other reviews:

Times

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/isabella-of-castile-europes-first-great-queen-by-giles-tremlett-tngdrs2tn> [3]

Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/19/isabella-of-castile-giles-tremlett-review> [4]

Kirkus Reviews

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/giles-tremlett/isabella-of-castile-first/> [5]

New York Journal of Books

<http://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/isabella-castile> [6]

History of Royal Women

<https://www.historyofroyalwomen.com/isabella-of-castile/isabella-castile-europes-first-great-queen-giles-tremlett-book-eeview/> [7]

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