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J.H. Elliott and Early Modern Europe

Sir John Elliott died in Oxford on 10 March 2022. He found fame as a historian of Spain, both peninsula and empire. There have already been plenty of tributes to his Spanish work and reflections on it.[1] But, alongside this chief focus of his research career, he has earned an important place as a historian of Europe. Elliott became a prominent player in what we can now see as its rise and decline in Britain as a coherent and preferred subject of study during the post-war period. He was one of those who transformed European history into a leading sector of the profession from the 1950s; then played an equally significant role in the mutation of the field—but with its integrity conserved—towards a global context in the new millennium.

Of course, Spain always lay at the heart of his interpretations; that is presupposed in the considerations that follow. I shall proceed in roughly chronological order (a procedure he always recommended) and concentrate on a group of texts that best reflect Elliott's engagement with wider European issues: the survey volume *Europe Divided*; the two inaugural lectures delivered in London in 1968 and Oxford in 1991; and the last substantial works: *History in the Making* and *Scots and Catalans*.[2] Material from the first of these two books, a kind of intellectual autobiography, is spread around this discussion wherever appropriate; the latter will be presented as a kind of summation.

I

John was born in 1930 and grew up in a family of schoolteachers in the Home Counties. He could hardly fail to be inquisitive about Europe: as a young teenager he used a wall map to plot the progress of the Allied armies across the Continent. He was already a keen linguist at school. That meant modern languages, French and German, though Eton still

1. For early examples, both with links to others, see R. Iliffe, 'Sir John Elliott, 23 June 1930–9 March 2022', at https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/article/sir-john-elliott-23-june-1930-10-march-2022 (accessed 12 Nov. 2023); Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, 'John Elliott, Master of Historians of Spain', at https://www.ceeh.es/en/actividad/elliott (accessed 12 Nov. 2023). See also G. Parker and R. Kagan, 'Elliott, John, 1930–2022', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, xxi (2023), available at https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publishing/memoirs/21/elliott-john-1930-2022/ (accessed 12 Nov. 2023). I am very grateful to Geoffrey Parker and Richard Kagan for help with the present text.

2. J.H. Elliott, *Europe Divided, 1559–98* (London, 1968) [hereafter *ED*]; id., 'Revolution and Continuity in Early Modern Europe', *Past and Present*, no. 42 (1969), pp. 35–56 [hereafter 'RC']; repr. in id., *Spain and Its World, 1500–1700: Selected Essays* (New Haven, CT, 1989), ch. 5; id., *National and Comparative History: An Inaugural Lecture* (Oxford, 1989) [hereafter *NCH*]; id., *History in the Making* (New Haven, CT, 2012) [hereafter *HM*]; id., *Scots and Catalans: Union and Disunion* (New Haven, CT, 2018) [hereafter *S&C*].

put some pressure on scholarship boys like Elliott to study the Classics.[3] A voracious reader, he soon, as a History student at Cambridge, discovered foreign texts: Meinecke, and especially Braudel's *Méditerranée*, just published, with its challenge of 'total history'; even if Elliott never—it seems—subscribed to what he viewed as Braudel's social and economic fundamentalism.[4] A still deeper influence would be Febvre, above all for his *Franche-Comté*, which Elliott later acknowledged as the inspiration for much of his own work on the interplay between states and provinces.[5]

At Cambridge, Elliott encountered lecturers who stretched his geographical horizons, such as Steven Runciman, and émigrés who conveyed rich continental traditions: Walter Ullmann and Nikolaus Pevsner in particular. However, he found his way to research on and in Europe without any close guidance at all.[6] He enjoyed a productive but arms-length relation to his supervisor, Herbert Butterfield: Elliott, says Butterfield's biographer, had enough 'of a developed self-confidence' to 'benefit from Butterfield without feeling especially beholden to him intellectually'.[7] John certainly shared with—while not necessarily deriving from—his mentor a prose that has been described for the latter as 'narrative on top but "exposition" below' (albeit Elliott never shared Butterfield's penchant for a core level of providentialism).[8]

Butterfield refracted an earlier phase of concentrated British involvement with the history of the Continent. Himself a pupil of Temperley, he quickly grew away from the latter's whiggish themes and treatments. He had worked seriously on Napoleon and French *étatisme*; he lectured on European civilisation; his reinterpretation of 'whig historiography' had its European dimension; his subversive arsenal had even toyed with German notions of *Gemeinschaft*.[9] An admirer of Meinecke, Butterfield was a close reader of the *Historische Zeitschrift*, with many contacts in Germany, whose universities he toured in 1956 and 1964.[10] During

3. British Academy, London, J.H. Elliott, 'Biographical Notes', 2006, pp. 3–4. This relatively brief (33 pages and C.V.) but informative and engaging document clearly prefigures—and perhaps inspired—*HM*. My special thanks to Geoffrey Parker for sharing it with me.

4. *HM*, pp. 9, 93; F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949). If John had plotted historians on his wartime wall map, the dots for Meinecke and Braudel would have lain remarkably close together, as the latter compiled his *Méditerranée* in confinement near Lübeck.

5. *HM*, pp. 53, 67–8; L. Febvre, *Philippe II et la Franche-Comté: Étude d'histoire politique, religieuse et sociale* (Paris, 1912). Cf. G. Parker, 'Travelling the "Elliott Road"', in 'BSPHS Forum: Golden Anniversaries: Sir John Elliott's *Imperial Spain* and *The Revolt of the Catalans* after Fifty Years', *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*, xxxviii (2013), pp. 222–7, at 223.

6. Elliott, 'Biographical Notes', pp. 5–6; cf. *HM*, p. 138. None of the tutors or lecturers he mentions had any research record on early modern Europe. He names George Kitson Clark, Butterfield, Runciman, Ullmann, Pevsner, Jack Gallagher, David Knowles, J.H. Plumb and Michael Vyvyan.

7. M. Bentley, *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield: History, Science, and God* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 286.

8. Bentley, *Butterfield*, pp. 292–3.

9. Ibid., pp. 119–46.

10. Ibid., pp. 267, 288–9, 310.

Elliott's spell as his pupil, Butterfield was engaged with episodes in European historiography—the Göttingen School, Ranke, Acton etc.—including detailed analysis of the St Bartholomew's Day massacre and the Seven Years War.[11] A continental research adventure could draw on Herbert Butterfield's vision, curiosity and encouragement.

But neither Butterfield nor his faculty colleagues had any direct expertise about seventeenth-century Spanish politics and society. Only the presence of a distinguished émigré Catalan historian of culture and literature, Josep Maria Batista i Roca, provided some *color local*.[12] Elliott found his best domestic lead in an article by a private scholar published back in 1907. Yet he ploughed his own furrow to remarkable effect. Having in 1954–5 submitted an extended dissertation for a Cambridge fellowship and a reduced version of it for his doctorate on 'Castile and Catalonia during the Ministry of the Conde Duque de Olivares', he enjoyed an *annus mirabilis* eight years later with the simultaneous publication of his definitive treatment of the Catalan revolt and his model introduction to the whole Spanish experience from the union of the crowns under Ferdinand and Isabella until the end of the Habsburg era.[13]

By this time, Elliott had joined the editorial board of the fledgeling *Past and Present*. Involvement with that methodologically innovative journal widened his vista; but his priority for narrative as the chief vehicle for conveying historical understanding still kept him from overarching speculative pronouncements and the fashionable explanatory precedence accorded to socio-economic factors.[14] He contributed to the 'general crisis' debate in its pages largely as a Hispanist. Later, Elliott apostrophised that debate as a 'critical moment in the history of twentieth-century historical writing', although for him personally it proved rather a critical reckoning with grand theory, and he would welcome the subsequent 'rediscovery of the state' once the arguments had subsided.[15]

They had, however, opened up for him a broader continental perspective, and this found expression in a major work of synthesis, *Europe Divided,* which covered the second half of the sixteenth century, from the treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis to the Edict of Nantes, in the prominent Collins/Fontana series, where it took its place between G.R. Elton's volume on the Reformation decades and his own pupil Geoffrey Parker's

11. H. Butterfield, *Man on His Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship* (Cambridge, 1955); cf. Bentley, *Butterfield*, pp. 291ff.

12. *HM,* pp. 13, 17; personal recollection. On him, see 'Josep Maria Batista i Roca', *Enciclopèdia.cat*, at https://www.enciclopedia.cat/gran-enciclopedia-catalana/josep-maria-batista-i-roca (accessed 12 Nov. 2023).

13. J.H. Elliott, *The Revolt of the Catalans: A Study in the Decline of Spain, 1598–1640* (Cambridge, 1963); id., *Imperial Spain* (London, 1963): for an explanation of this title, see below.

14. Cf. *HM*, p. 94.

15. See the heartfelt comments in *HM,* pp. xi, 64–5.

on the age of the Thirty Years War. Elliott deploys his powerful expository skills on such episodes as the battle of Lepanto, the seizure of Brill and the massacre of St Bartholomew's, with deft characterisations of the likes of King Henri III and the Spanish counsellors Pérez and Escobedo. The story culminates in the 1588 Armada and its aftermath, and in the French drama unleashed at the same time by the *Journée des Barricades*.[16]

It's a Spain-dominated account: tellingly, the Spanish translation was renamed *Europa en la epoca de Felipe II*; and the 'division' of the English title is between Habsburgs, in loose alliance with the papacy, and the enemies of Roman-Catholic hegemony. This is international history—we find little even about developments within Iberia—and it is heavily focused on the diplomatic-military struggle for the Low Countries. The Holy Roman Empire features mainly as the locus for a slightly discordant and feebler exercise of Habsburg hegemony; Poland largely for its kingship elections, with just a hint of its pioneering pluralism.[17] The Ottoman Empire—surprisingly, given its salience in Braudel—is hardly addressed, appearing only as combatant and threat to Spain and Christendom, though here again there are hints at its merits *qua* pluralist empire. Lepanto thus represents a high point; but the limits of its impact are also made clear.[18]

The 'pre-eminence of Spain' concealed intensified overstretch and a serious gap between military 'reputation and reality'. It was partly occasioned by the 'temporary eclipse of France', and exhibited classical features of new monarchy and its trappings: faction; bureaucracy; underfunding; the problem of the absent ruler.[19] Elsewhere in Europe, there was more of a 'dialogue between king and people', mediated by an enhanced role for noble estates opposition. That yielded unrest, above all when Calvinism combined with aristocratic obstruction and popular protest.[20] A common front of 'patriotic' movements for 'liberty' could also nurture, mostly in Protestant soil, the tender shoots of explicit political freedoms and toleration.[21]

Continent-wide topics are engaged with, even if actual coverage of them peters out beyond the Rhine and especially the Elbe: Elliott later saw *Europe Divided* as 'transnational history'.[22] Society's loss of religious unity—indeed, the permanent division of Christendom—went with an interplay of national and confessional allegiance; revulsion against Spain bred countervailing proto-nationalism, notably in England.[23] It

16. *ED*, pp. 251, 272, 322. Cf. Elliott, 'Biographical Notes', p. 18: 'technically the best crafted of my books'; *HM,* p. 191.
17. *ED*, pp. 229, 234, 238, 241, 249, 364, 381–2.
18. *ED*, pp. 180–81, 194, 198.
19. *ED*, pp. 22ff, 70ff, 83, 132, 281, 346, 350, 366–7.
20. *ED*, pp. 89–95, 110, 115.
21. *ED*, pp. 223, 291, 293, 363, 372, 389.
22. *HM*, pp. 72–3.
23. *ED*, pp. 19, 30, 39, 42, 94, 304, 390–91.

was natural, in the circumstances of the 1960s, to identify an expanding European economy 400 years earlier, and to track the extension of that market to America in the west and Transelbia in the east. Whereas the latter phenomenon itself had divisive effects within the Continent, the former would cause a lasting shift from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, though one at the time partly obscured by the continuing role of Genoese financiers. It stoked colonial rivalries.[24] Another important theme is growing inequality, which aggravated the kinds of lawlessness and banditry that Elliott had already identified as endemic in seventeenth-century Catalonia.[25] That would prompt deeper thoughts about the nature and incidence of unrest in the period.

II

In the year of *Europe Divided*'s publication, 1968, Elliott took a chair at King's College London.[26] His inaugural lecture there, on 'Revolution and Continuity', built upon themes from *Europe Divided* to call in question the whole recent historiography of a 'general crisis' centred in the 1640s. What about the 1560s as a decade of equivalent crisis? (That had still been just a footnote in *Europe Divided*.[27]) More fundamentally, Elliott argued, a 'unified conceptual approach' to the purported 'crisis' had been achieved at the expense of early modern reality. Historians had duly found there 'revolution' and 'class conflict', based on 'ideology', because they smuggled in those notions from a much later intellectual armoury.[28]

Indeed, Elliott identified 'serious structural weaknesses in the European monarchies'. However, the 'new authoritarianism' and encroachments of the state, not just in Spain, were caused above all by international involvements and the demands of war; and governments' efforts to reinforce and extend their power met with variegated and shifting kinds of opposition.[29] The watchword of the revolts, whether estates-led or *soulèvements populaires* or some combination of the two, was renovation rather than innovation. It centred on attachment to the *patria*, a concept of increasing importance for Elliott. Such local and regional allegiance tended to be retrospective and oligarchic: Elliott calls it 'corporate or national constitutionalism'.[30]

24. *ED*, pp. 44, 47, 50, 57–8, 268, 270, 313, 374, 376, 395.

25. *ED*, pp. 369, 389–90.

26. For the years at King's, cf. P.J. Marshall, 'Professor Sir John Elliott FBA (1930–2022)', at https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/sir-john-elliott-obituary (accessed 12 Nov. 2023).

27. *ED*, p. 107 n.

28. 'RC', p. 36 and *passim*. Later thoughts in J.H. Elliott, 'The General Crisis in Retrospect: A Debate without End', in P. Benedict and M.P. Gutmann, eds, *Early Modern Europe, from Crisis to Stability* (Wilmington, DE, 2005), pp. 31–51, repr. in J.H. Elliott, *Spain, Europe and the Wider World, 1500–1800* (New Haven, CT, 2009), pp. 52–73.

29. 'RC', p. 37; *HM*, pp. 64, 68–9.

30. 'RC', p. 48. For 'patria', cf. *ED*, pp. 17, 297; *HM*, p. 72.

It is notable for our purposes that this analysis, on the one hand, allocates a central place to Britain: 'The decisive element in the concentration of interest on the revolutions of the 1640s is clearly the supreme importance attributed to the Puritan Revolution in England, as the event which precipitates the collapse of Europe's feudal structure and the emergence of a capitalist society.'[31] On the other hand, the lecture is Europe-wide and Europe-specific in its scope, finding the character of the 'malady' to be recognisably similar across the gulf of the Channel.[32] As in *Europe Divided*, Elliott lays stress on transnational interactions, typically those occasioned by cross-border religious solidarities.

At least as an aspiration, Elliott's vision here embraced Europe as far as Russia. The 'general crisis' debate, with its strong Marxist component, afforded a rare occasion for scholars from the Soviet Union and its client states to participate on equal terms. Notable among them were Boris Porshnev, A.D. Lublinskaya—whose study of Richelieu's rise to power appeared in English translation thanks to Elliott's efforts—and John's friend, the cosmopolitan Czech historian, J.V. Polišenský.[33] However, the issues debated were not, for Elliott, global. He mentions how Merriman's pioneering work on the contemporaneity of seventeenth-century unrest had been preoccupied by the spectre of world revolution in the 1930s, but did not himself explore possible transcontinental ramifications, either then or later.[34]

Into his London years fell the first-fruits of Elliott's long collaboration with Helmut ('Helli') Koenigsberger.[35] The two historians displayed a number of similarities, not least that Koenigsberger also published a textbook on sixteenth-century Europe in that same year of 1968. They were rough contemporaries (given the disturbances to Helli's early career). Koenigsberger too was a product of Cambridge and a pupil of Butterfield; and he too began with research on an unruly—but not necessarily disloyal—Spanish territory during the same period, exploring the locus of authority and the limits of empire. They shared a commitment to supranational and continental perspectives.

31. 'RC', p. 39.

32. See also J.H. Elliott, 'England and Europe, a Common Malady', in C. Russell, ed., *The Origins of the English Civil War* (Basingstoke, 1973), pp. 46–57, a 'concluding review chapter' that, the editor tells us, was written 'at high speed during the 1972 power cuts' (ibid., p. ix).

33. A.D. Lublinskaya [Liublinskaia], *French Absolutism, the Crucial Phase,* tr. B. Pearce (Cambridge, 1968); cf. A. Lossky, 'Alexandra Lublinskaya: A "Valedictory Salute"', *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* ii (1981), pp. 204–8, available at https://archive.ph/20130916181510/http://www.ranumspanat.com/lublinskaya_obit.htm (accessed 12 Nov. 2023). For Polišenský, see R.J.W. Evans, 'A Czech Historian in Troubled Times: J.V. Polišenský', *Past and Present*, no. 176 (2002), pp. 257–74.

34. 'RC', p. 42. He left that to G. Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT, 2013).

35. On Koenigsberger, see M.J. Rodríguez-Salgado, 'Koenigsberger, Helmut Georg, 1918–2014', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, xiv (2016), available at https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publishing/memoirs/14/koenigsberger-helmut-georg-1918-2014 (accessed 12 Nov. 2023).

Neither had a theoretical or confessional axe to grind, though Elliott didn't quite subscribe to Koenigsberger's more Germanic methodological priorities and classificatory urge: the latter's influential distinction between 'dominium regale' and 'dominium politicum et regale' seems to have left John cool.

Elliott and Koenigsberger had a joint role in developing and popularising the concept of a distinctive 'early modern' historical epoch (John's Balzan prize in 1999 was for the category 'History 1500–1800'). Their Cambridge University Press series with that epithet gives a *terminus post quem* for the acceptance, and saleability, of the notion: in the early sixties the publishers told them the expression was too unfamiliar; a few years later a renewed approach was warmly received. Elliott said he learned the term from G.N. Clark, and initially at least took it as extending roughly from the 1350s to the 1750s.[36] He could also have heard it from Butterfield, who wrestled with it as a category in scientific development. Although the series—and the Balzan citation—cover the eighteenth century, that never became part of John's personal remit.

Whereas the 'early modern' designation has proved largely (aside from its positive connotations in certain sub-disciplines like Butterfield's history of science) a working convenience, another coinage of Elliott and Koenigsberger spread rapidly as an important piece of professional vocabulary. This was the locution 'composite monarchy', which they devised collectively as a descriptor for the normal pattern of early modern European statehood. John attributes it to Helli at the latter's inaugural, or at least 'in the mid-seventies'. It received its mature formulation for Elliott in a lecture he delivered over a decade later, in 1991.[37]

'Composite monarchy' was not some kind of makeshift staging-post on the road to the nineteenth-century nation-state, but a way of achieving more-or-less effective and stable governance which respected the Continent's inherent variety and local loyalties. Such monarchies began as dynastic associations of more-or-less equals (*aeque principaliter*: a Latinism John evidently felt comfortable with), before then serving as vehicles for aggrandising rulers, who sought to implement more incorporative or accessory unions. Their stability depended on mutual loyalties to the ruler and to the *patria*, and on proficient management of clientage networks. This was threatened above all by the rise of a new religious dynamic, which sharpened both dominant and subordinate identities and thus aggravated divisions (sometimes

36. *HM*, pp. 58–9: the project appears to have been proposed by Elliott. Cf. now J. Nipperday, 'Die Terminologie von Epochen. Überlegungen am Beispiel Frühe Neuzeit/"early modern"', *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, xxxviii (2015), pp. 170–85, the fruit of a survey in which he consulted John, *inter alios*.

37. J.H. Elliott, 'A Europe of Composite Monarchies', *Past and Present*, no. 137 (1992), pp. 48–71 [hereafter 'ECM']; repr. in id., *Spain, Europe and the Wider World*, pp. 3–24. For the attribution: 'ECM', pp. 50–51 and nn.; *HM,* pp. 61–2.

precisely by enhancing the ideological weight of royal authority, too). Amalgamation could always be followed by severance.[38]

Elliott invokes theorists of the day for commentary on these processes, but as usual is more engaged by the methodical investigation of political practice. Moreover, there was a clear geographical frame of reference for that practice. From the lecture's arresting first sentence, 'The concept of Europe implies unity', he addresses a distinctively pan-European phenomenon with exemplary material from across the Continent. Explicitly too, Elliott had in mind current (con)federal initiatives and the development of European unity on the eve of the Maastricht treaty, as 'union *aeque principaliter* again becomes the order of the day'.[39]

III

Meanwhile, John had moved to the USA (his King's chair passing to Koenigsberger), and taken up a largely research-intensive position as member of the permanent faculty at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Above all, this gave him the opportunity to complete his great work on Spanish government, in the form of a political life and times of Olivares.[40] That, in itself, introduced grand European themes from the very beginning: after all, as the reader of *Europe Divided* had already been reminded, the future Count-Duke was born in Rome in 1587 while his father, as ambassador there, sought to secure papal support for the Armada. One enthusiastic commentator likened the biography, with its 'regenerative vision' successfully accomplished over a span of some twenty years, to the (failed) campaigning endeavours of Olivares himself at much the same age over a similar period.[41]

Residence in America favoured in Elliott the development of an Atlantic perspective, embracing the English as well as the Spanish empire, to which we shall return. It intensified his receptivity to interdisciplinary influences so strong at the Institute, from the anthropology of Clifford Geertz to the development economics of Albert Hirschman. It also drew him, especially in partnership with Jonathan Brown, into the international world of art history, as he studied visual culture and explored the power of the image.[42] These influences all contributed to what, for our purposes, became the most salient legacy of Elliott's

38. 'ECM'; cf. *HM*, pp. 107, 110.

39. 'ECM', pp. 48, 70–71.

40. J.H. Elliott, *The Count-Duke of Olivares: The Statesman in an Age of Decline* (New Haven, CT, 1986).

41. J. Boyden, 'The Historian in an Age of Decline, 1963–2013', in 'BSPHS Forum: Golden Anniversaries: Sir John Elliott's *Imperial Spain* and *The Revolt of the Catalans* after Fifty Years', *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*, xxxviii (2013), pp. 214–18, at 214.

42. Cf. *HM*, pp. 31–2, 116ff. Cf. Elliott, 'Biographical Notes', pp. 19ff. The chief outcome of this was J. Brown and J.H. Elliott, *A Palace for a King: The Buen Retiro and the Court of Philip IV* (New Haven, CT, 1980).

Princeton years: the heightened commitment to a comparativist understanding of early modern Europe.

He had long been aware of the exhortations of Pirenne and Bloch to the comparative method back in the 1920s, since then more honoured in the breach.[43] Now Elliott sought ways to implement that programme. For his return to Cambridge as Trevelyan lecturer in 1982–3, he chose to set Olivares alongside Richelieu—initially to see how the mutual interplay in their exercise of power could be construed in terms of similarities and differences between Spanish and French society and political culture. That would lead to a wider collaborative study of favourites and clientage across the Continent in the age of Olivares.[44] Through one of the Institute's then *éminences grises*, Felix Gilbert, who had produced an English edition of them, Elliott also discovered the essays of Otto Hintze, with their penetrating comparative analysis of the evolution of constitutions and estates in Europe.[45]

Elliott had always recognised that Spain was 'different': that's what attracted him at the start—though not in the way the then Spanish government promoted it, as a cover for xenophobic exceptionalism. He was a 'Protestant northerner', exploring the 'alien world of the Iberian peninsula'. Equally, however, he recognised a research imperative that called for measurement against international yardsticks: especially so for the notion of 'decline', a recurring theme, indeed highlighted in the subtitle to his Olivares biography.[46] Whereas Elliott encountered it initially as a specifically Spanish phenomenon, and in that guise made it the subject of one of his first published papers, decline always needed to be set against an external standard. At the outset he weighed it, half involuntarily, against the United Kingdom's post-war experience of fading status; this, to his surprise, earned him some transient fame among British political pundits from the sixties to the eighties. Increasingly, he viewed the perception of decline, beginning with contemporaries, as no less important than its reality.[47]

Elliott did not seek any metahistorical answers—a youthful dose of Arnold Toynbee had immunised him against that. He accepted, at least provisionally, a 'conventional historical framework of the rise and fall of states and empires'.[48] Rather, he placed decline in a European context of commentaries on the condition of Spain. However carefully he sought to measure its nature and extent, as a real issue of power and status, and

43. Cf. *HM*, p. 168.

44. J.H. Elliott, *Richelieu and Olivares* (Cambridge, 1984); cf. *HM*, p. 98; J.H. Elliott and L.W.B. Brockliss, eds, *The World of the Favourite* (New Haven, CT, 1999); cf. *HM*, pp. 70, 112.

45. F. Gilbert, ed., *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze* (New York, 1975); cf. *HM*, pp. 66, 169.

46. *HM*, pp. 1, 4–6, 9, 11, 36–7, 114–35. Olivares was 'the statesman in an age of decline'.

47. J.H. Elliott, 'The Decline of Spain', *Past and Present*, no. 20 (1961), pp. 52–75, repr. in id., *Spain and Its World*, ch. 10; id., 'Self-Perception and Decline in Early Seventeenth-Century Spain', *Past and Present*, no. 74 (1977), pp. 41–61, repr. In id., *Spain and Its World*, ch. 11. Cf. *HM*, pp. 114–17.

48. *HM*, pp. 122, 134.

as a perception on the part of political actors within and outwith Iberia, this may have coloured his view of early modern Europe as a whole, at least in rendering him especially sensitive to some of those conservative and backward-looking features that marked it off decisively from the age that followed.

IV

In 1990, John was tempted back to the Old World by the offer of the Regius chair at Oxford. The associated inaugural lecture stimulated him to reflect further on 'national and comparative history', and to present an agenda for Oxford and Britain more widely, reflecting both his ambition to leave a mark and his sense of the delicacy of the task, particularly for an outsider very conscious of protocol. His audience were presented with a broad stocktaking. They heard of the retreat of the *Annales* school, even of Braudel, with his 'reductionism' and his 'misguided tripartite organization'. But they also learned that the resultant lacuna could not be filled by fashionable studies of microhistory and *mentalités*, which yield only partial insights, not general truths.[49]

Instead, Elliott announced the return to historiography's centre-stage of *homo politicus* and the state. We should not readopt earlier centralised and institutionalised versions of national history—although he does commend the balanced stance of certain (unnamed) 'major historians of the mid-20th century'. Rather, it is time for fresh ways of thinking about 'national character', using the insights of comparativist and cross-cultural thinking *à la* Bloch and Hintze, and lessons learned about composite monarchies.[50] Such priorities ought not only to guide research strategies, but to be embedded in the undergraduate curriculum too. This was a statement of intent to which John remained actively committed during his tenure of the Oxford professorship.[51]

Elliott urged vigilance against the ever-present threat of 'exceptionalism'. Of course, he had in mind traditional assumptions of the Spanish kind, which he had always called out; but there were also British ones. Altogether this was a plea, from the first holder of his chair to 'have published entirely outside the field of British history', to embrace European perspectives extending 'as far as the Urals'.[52] Again, we are on the eve of Maastricht! Yet Elliott simultaneously enters the *quid pro quo* that the comparative methodology he advocates will often show up differences quite as well as similarities. Elsewhere, he quoted Hintze

49. *NCH*, p. 5ff; cf. *HM*, p. 162.

50. *NCH*, pp. 20–21, 24; cf. *HM*, p. 51.

51. Elliott, 'Biographical Notes', pp. 30–2. For the faculty background, see J. Harris, 'The Arts and Social Sciences, 1939–1970', in B. Harrison, ed., *The History of the University of Oxford*, VIII: *The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 216–49, at 237–8; personal recollection.

52. *NCH*, p. 12.

to that effect.[53] Ultimately, such comparisons, if carefully considered, can have evaluative force too: thus, at least by the criteria of future material success, the 'Anglo-Dutch model' based on 'liberty and representative institutions … possessed greater resilience and staying-power than the French or the Spanish.'[54] Moreover, as Elliott later observed, the study of foreign history naturally furnishes material with which to widen horizons and open up unfamiliar vistas on familiar topics.[55]

This zenith of Elliott's professional career perhaps witnessed a zenith too in special British academic focus on the history of Europe, using the benefits, as Elliott acknowledged in his own case, of liberal-inquisitive, empirical, detached but sympathetic, unconstrained and relatively well-funded scholastic engagement, backed by some excellent library resources and at least intermittent official support for language learning.[56] By the time some of us—including John himself—began to reflect on the nature of this phenomenon (he remarked upon the potentially 'distinctive contribution' by British historians to neighbouring realms), it was already beginning to ebb away or at least mutate.[57] The Owl of Minerva was spreading her wings.

The vogue for Europe could be seen to have enjoyed a first *floraison* in the early twentieth century: Acton and Ward, Creighton and Trevelyan, Gooch and Temperley. Despite or because of the rupture of 1914–18, it gained more popular expositors thereafter, for example H.A.L. Fisher and G.N. Clark, as well as an important extension to the centre and east of the Continent, while a visionary element was contributed by the likes of Christopher Dawson.[58] After World War II there was still a long way to go, in terms of any wider resonance at home. In 1946, the foreign history option for Oxford undergraduates could still be described as 'a dim oil lamp in an even darker street'.[59]

Yet the revival now proceeded more quickly than before, afforced by many émigrés such as Helli Koenigsberger; by international conferences; by wider mental and political horizons; by the institutional growth of higher education in the 1960s; and then by the United Kingdom's accession to the EEC in 1973. This was already an age of Elliott, as John

53. *HM*, pp. 169, 176.

54. *HM*, p. 75: 'a better recipe for raising revenues and ensuring credit-worthiness'.

55. *HM*, pp. 171–2, 175.

56. *HM*, p. 23; cf. pp. 33, 41, 43, 47. But he suggests, in a further twist, that the role of the external *Hispanista* may itself have been *sui generis*: *HM*, p. 35.

57. *NCH*, p. 12; cf. *HM*, p. xi. R.J. Evans, *Cosmopolitan Islanders: British Historians and the European Continent* (Cambridge, 2009); R.J.W. Evans, 'Europa in der britischen Historiographie', in H. Duchhardt, ed., *Nationale Geschichtskulturen. Bilanz, Ausstrahlung, Europabezogenheit* (Mainz, 2006), pp. 77–93; R.J.W. Evans, 'The Creighton Century: British Historians and Europe, 1907–2007', *Historical Research*, lxxxii (2009), pp. 320–39, repr. in D. Bates, J. Wallis and J. Winters, eds, *The Creighton Century, 1907–2007* (London, 2009), pp. 1–29.

58. C. Scott, *A Historian and His World: A Life of Christopher Dawson* (London, 1984); R.J.W. Evans, *Great Britain and East-Central Europe, 1908–48: A Study in Perceptions* (London, 2002).

59. Harris, 'Arts and Social Sciences', p. 235.

did much to ensure a high profile for the early modern period and to build up a network of pupils and other *Elliottistas* across the expanding university sector. And he facilitated publications to match: witness, for example, the simultaneous appearance in 1970 of volume 4 of the *New Cambridge Modern History*, with 'The Decline of Spain' in its title; and *The Diversity of History*, a tribute to Butterfield edited by Elliott and Koenigsberger.[60]

V

By the time of Elliott's retirement in 1997, then, the first signs of a retreat from Euro-enthusiasm had begun to appear; or at least we can detect them in retrospect. With John they took the form of a reorientation towards research on empire. Of course, the word had been associated with his oeuvre from the start, initially through a kind of accident: he styled his influential textbook of 1963 'Imperial' Spain because the adjective was 'euphonious' (though not strictly accurate).[61] Since Elliott always set himself to examine, alongside inter-state diplomatic-military relations, the whole domestic socio-economic evolution in Spain, a colonial dimension was always present. In the 1991 inaugural, he already pointed to the following year as an American anniversary.[62]

Now Elliott undertook a pathbreaking study of the Spanish and British overseas empires, building on the comparative thinking and contemporary perspective already developed in a European context, with narrative still explicitly the chief organising principle: 'juxtaposing and interweaving the two stories, I have sought to reassemble a fragmented history.'[63] There had already been plenty of 'globalization' *avant la lettre* in John's professional experience; after all, Herbert Butterfield was an early purveyor of 'world history'.[64] And Elliott had first set out some of the issues in his Wiles lectures of 1969 on 'The Old World and the New', although these were not consciously 'Atlanticist' in any current political sense, despite their innovative attention to the impact of America on sixteenth-century Europe.[65] In some respects, that impact had been strikingly limited and gradual in the early phase; and Elliott continued to insist that processes overseas were always revealing of the 'national character' of colonisers. In 2012, he still issued words of caution about

60. J.P. Cooper, ed., *The New Cambridge Modern History*, IV: *The Decline of Spain and the Thirty Years War, 1609–59* (Cambridge, 1970); J.H. Elliott and H.G. Koenigsberger, eds, *The Diversity of History: Essays in Honour of Sir Herbert Butterfield* (London, 1970).

61. Ironically, that title helped the work to find favour with the Francoist authorities, who took it to be a vindication of Spanish greatness: *HM*, p. 28.

62. *HM*, p. 29. *NCH*, pp. 25–6. See also Elliott, 'Biographical Notes', pp. 16ff, 29.

63. J.H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven, CT, 2006), p. xviii; cf. *HM*, pp. 185, 188–9, 191.

64. Bentley, *Butterfield*, p. 315ff.

65. J.H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New, 1492–1650* (Cambridge, 1970); cf. *HM*, pp. 200–201, 203–4.

the whole enterprise: 'world history' has grown since the 1980s out of empire studies and built on dissatisfaction with an older 'parochialism'; but it doesn't necessarily yield novel or coherent paradigms.[66]

That verdict appears in the next and penultimate of Elliott's books, *History in the Making*, which has supplied me with much material throughout the present analysis (and will therefore not be discussed further here). It offers personal insights into its subject's career as it was structured by a series of international professional debates. To adapt an Elgarian image, we might envisage the form of the work as a kind of accompanied cadenza, with John Elliott's solo part recalling themes of his own oeuvre in their interplay with a subdued orchestra of other historians.

For what proved his final book, Elliott returned to Europe. The appearance of *Scots and Catalans* could hardly have been timelier, signed off as it was in January 2018, at the height of constitutional deadlock in both Spain and Great Britain. His early work, it will be recalled, had been seized upon by others for its topical relevance ('decline'), but in this case the linkage was certainly more deliberate. Elliott reverts to the theme of periphery versus centre, perforce in his thinking from the beginning of his career; indeed, to some of the same linkages that he might have explored with his old friend Batista i Roca at Cambridge decades earlier.[67] Elliott had become a historian of great empires, but it was the provinces within them that had first engaged his attention, if not his undivided sympathies.

Already in the lecture on 'A Europe of Composite Monarchies', the tumultuous mid-seventeenth-century experience of the British and Spanish states was the most invoked juxtaposition at the heart of the interpretative scheme. Then came the panorama of their parallel or contrasting kinds of colonial enterprise. Elliott also returned to the direct interplay of those two polities in a paper on 'Learning from the Enemy', in which he considered borrowings and adaptations derived from mutual intelligence-gathering.[68] In *Scots and Catalans*, it is not central governments, or their overseas dependencies, but key associated territories within composite monarchies which set the terms of the enquiry: a kind of extended meditation on the whole phenomenon of compound states, extending well beyond the bounds of the early modern period, but perhaps savoured as a vindication of his own longstanding chronological priorities and the lasting relevance of the issues he had addressed.

Deeply researched and carefully crafted, *Scots and Catalans* above all shows off Elliott's continuing reliance on the power of narrative to

66. *HM*, pp. 193, 199, 211.

67. *HM*, pp. 16, 26–7.

68. J.H. Elliott, 'Learning from the Enemy: Early Modern Britain and Spain': the first Dacre Lecture, 2007, printed in *Spain, Europe and the Wider World*, pp. 25–51.

sustain analysis. Here it's a particularly tight-knit narrative, amounting in places to *histoire croisée*, in full interactive mode. More often than not, there is a broader international picture that helps to explain simultaneities. These can be remarkable. The struggle from 1700, which drew Great Britain and the whole of Iberia into war over France's putative aspirations to European hegemony, yielded in 1707 an exact coincidence of the Anglo-Scottish incorporative Union with a first version of the *Nueva Planta*, Spain's tougher and more centralising equivalent. Again, in the context of enhanced European integration since 1945, the earliest official plans for devolution within the United Kingdom were unveiled in the very month of 1975 that the same debate was reignited inside Spain with the death of Franco.[69]

In cases of conspicuous divergence too, as between the Scottish Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and the Catalan *Renaixença* a full hundred years later, they were alike movements of intellectual renewal that became central for national identity and confidence, such as occurred right across the Continent. In fact, the larger European dimension is mainly left implicit in *Scots and Catalans*. It might seem strange, for example, that Elliott hardly even mentions, here or elsewhere, the closest parallel from farther east, Hungary's uneasy cohabitation with Austria over four hundred years, which likewise experienced a climacteric around 1707, especially given his acknowledgement that the classic work on that relationship, by Louis Eisenmann, had impressed him deeply as a student.[70]

Elliott was no spokesman for Catalan independence, in either the seventeenth or the twenty-first century, perhaps because he saw it as corrosive of larger European as well as Spanish values. His last words on present-day *independentistas* are uncharacteristically fierce and reproachful about their intolerance, amounting to victimisation, of no-less-patriotic Catalans who remain loyal to a Spanish identity too.[71] At the same time, he was conscious of an alternative scenario, a possible *longue-durée* trajectory by which Catalonia might have entered the modern era as a 'centralized nation state' of its own.[72]

69. *S&C*, pp. 71ff, 221ff.

70. 'Even the modern history works which have most appealed to me, like Febvre's Franche Comté and Eisenmann on the Austro-Hungarian compromise, seem to me to pall after page 600, and I've no wish to bore my readers'. This (slightly backhanded) compliment is in a letter from John to Butterfield: Cambridge University Library [hereafter CUL], Butterfield Papers, E 16.8, Elliott to Butterfield, 18 Apr. 1956. I'm grateful to CUL for permission to cite it, and to Yonatan Glazer and Richard Kagan for making the letter available to me. There are passing references to Hungary in *HM*, p. 75, and *S&C*, pp. 2, 148, 194. For Eisenmann, see R.J.W. Evans, 'Remembering the Fall of the Habsburg Monarchy One Hundred Years On: Three Master Interpretations', *Austrian History Yearbook*, 51 (2020), pp. 269–91, at 272ff.

71. *S&C*, p. 250ff. Cf. Elliott, 'Biographical Notes', pp. 10–12; *HM*, pp. 48, 78. Privately, John made clear that he had in mind cases of particular friends and colleagues who had suffered in this way.

72. *HM*, p. 53.

The *patria*, that often-idealised self-representation of political communities, whose fortunes form a thread throughout Elliott's career, here finally becomes the chief theme. Yet at the same time, he returns at the last to the 'inherently unstable' societies of early modern Europe, about which he could already generalise earlier from his evidence of their breakdown in Catalonia in the 1640s, and which always imperilled self-government at the regional level.[73] It is striking that, as late as 2014, he took the trouble to write a long review-article about a new edition, fifty years after the original, of his friend Rosario Villari's account of the great mid-seventeenth-century Neapolitan revolt against Spanish governance. In it, he stresses not so much the continuing relevance of the general crisis debate to which Villari's monograph had contributed; but rather how his analysis now helps us better than before to an understanding of the subtle interplay between a province and royal authority in the composite state. Elliott seems to be invoking an exemplar of the workings of *une Europe des périphéries*.[74]

Of course, we shouldn't think of *Scots and Catalans* as John Elliott's last word. He had emerged from its completion with energy undimmed, and was planning a broader imperial enterprise, to embrace Portuguese alongside Spanish colonial development. Yet there is something appropriate too in this terminus, the result of an effective strategy whereby he had 'consistently tried to expand the range of my work and my interests'. It's a proxy for all the parallels, and the wider interconnectedness, that he found in European history; for an enterprise that—as we noted earlier—had all along been 'transnational' *avant la lettre*.[75] Beginning as an anatomist of decline in the Old World, he had taken a path into fields of dizzying transcontinental expansion in the New. He had turned himself into a global historian, but without any sign that he saw European historiography in terms of decline.

John was, however—as a loyal but critical observer of his own *patria*—very mindful of a longer-term threat to British historical scholarship. Thirty years ago, in the peroration to his Oxford inaugural, he urged his colleagues towards more intensive study of Europe and beyond. Otherwise, he concluded, we could all too easily, as Horace Walpole had once put it, 'moulder piecemeal into our insignificant islandhood'.[76]

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73. Cf. *HM*, pp. 56–7, 69. John identified this key theme in Catalonia at an early stage of his archival research there: see CUL, Butterfield Papers, E 15.3–4, Elliott to Butterfield, 29 Feb 1956; E 16.5–7, Elliott to Butterfield, 18 Apr 1956.

74. J.H. Elliott, 'Reform and Revolution in the Early Modern Mezzogiorno', *Past and Present*, no. 224 (2014), pp. 283–96.

75. J.H. Elliott, 'Response', in 'BSPHS Forum: Golden Anniversaries: Sir John Elliott's *Imperial Spain* and *The Revolt of the Catalans* after Fifty Years', *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*, xxxviii (2013), pp. 227–9, at 228; *HM*, p. 73.

76. *NCH,* p. 29.