

# PRESCOTT'S FERDINAND AND ISABELLA

*[Author Unknown]*

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The Harpers<sup>1</sup> have lately issued the *tenth* edition<sup>2</sup> of Mr. Prescott's invaluable "History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic." It is not our intention of course, at this late day, to say anything *critically* of a work whose preeminent merit is as definitely settled, and as a generally admitted as that of any history in existence. It would be difficult indeed, to urge anything, with a show of reason, *against* the book, considered with reference to Mr. Prescott's intention in undertaking it—and it seems a matter of nearly equal difficult to add, in way of approbation, a syllable to what has already been said. We are guilty of a sheer trueism in maintaining that "Ferdinand and Isabella" is a thorough, elaborate, well arranged, well-toned, and original record of an epoch replete with events of importance to mankind and of especial importance to Americans<sup>3</sup>. If there lies upon this record a shadow of blame it is on the score of very pardonable partiality for the principal personages introduced.

Our purpose in penning this notice, now, is simply to call attention to the issue of a new edition, and to say a word or two of the book as a book merely, and as a very desirable acquisition to any library which shall happen to be without it.

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the Harper & Brothers publishing company, based out of New York City (Prescott 1845). First established as J. and J. Harper in 1817, the company would eventually become HarperCollins in 1990, one of the biggest publishing houses in the world ("Company Profile" 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The article refers to the tenth edition, or tenth printing of the book. Due to a lack of copyright law at the time, it is difficult to ascertain just how many editions were publishing domestically and abroad, as Hickling's obituary in the *Littell's Living Age* claims that the work was popular both in the United States and Europe, being translated into several languages ("Death of William H. Prescott" 1859). In recent years, the Heritage Press, the Library of Alexandria publishing company, and the University Press of the Pacific have all released edition of the text, as it has long been out of copyright ("The History of the Reign" 1967, 2003, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> See "Editor's Note" for details.

It is the sole work giving a particular account of the epoch it discusses—the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella—although there are particular narratives, in an unbroken series, from Charles the First to Charles the Third. Yet it was in the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella that the several provinces into which Spain had been so long parcelled off, were reduced into one dominion—that the kingdom of Naples was conquered—that the Spanish Arabian empire was overthrown—that the Jews were banished—that the Inquisition was established—and, finally, that America was re-discovered<sup>4</sup> by Columbus. This reign, too, (which should have been the historical basis of all the others) was rendered notable not only through Columbus, but through the illustrious statesman Ximenes<sup>5</sup>, the “Great Captain” Gonsalvo de Cordova<sup>6</sup>, and several other remarkable individuals, to say nothing of Isabella herself, in the illustration of whose character alone a bulky volume might be profitably written.

The only continental histories of the period are “*L’Histoire des Rois Catholiques Ferdinand et Isabelle par L’Abbe Mignot*”<sup>7</sup> —and the “*Geschichte der Regierung Ferdinand des Katholischen, von Rupert Becker*.”<sup>8</sup> These works, however, are very brief and compendious; neither of them equalling in bulk one of our ordinary novel volumes. Their authors refer only to the most accessible materials, and make no claim to research.

The truth is, that previous to the period at which Mr. Prescott commenced his task (which was, we believe, in 1826 or 1827), there were comparatively no facilities for its accomplishment. The researches of Spanish *literati* have lately thrown much light, at random, on various points of the theme. Llorente<sup>9</sup>, for example, the noted Secretary of the Inquisition, has issued his pregnant history of that memorable institution; Conde<sup>10</sup> has given a literal version of the Spanish Arab chronicles; Sempere, Marina, and Capmany<sup>11</sup> have

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<sup>4</sup> The usage by the author of the article of “re-discover” seems to hint at some mild form of political correctness. However, the average readers of the time were unlikely to believe that America was impossible to discover as it already had a flourishing Native American population. As Prescott makes clear several times throughout his essay, Christopher Columbus is “the discoverer of America” (Prescott 2011). The use of “re-discover” is more likely to do with the fact that Columbus made several journeys to the Americas, thus discovering them again on each subsequent trip. It could also be a sarcastic nod on the part of the article’s author to the fact that Columbus was supposed to be finding a new route to India, and “re-discovered” it in the West Indies.

<sup>5</sup> Most likely Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros (1436-1517), a religious reformer and regent of Spain in 1506 and 1516–17 (Koenigsberger 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba (1453-1515) was known as El Gran Capitán or “The Great Captain,” and is particularly famous for his military exploits for the Spanish military (“Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba” n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> Translates from French as “History of the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella in L’Abbe Mignot”

<sup>8</sup> Translates from German as “The History of the Government of Ferdinand the Catholic, by Rubert Becker”

<sup>9</sup> Juan Antonio Llorente’s “A Critical History of the Inquisition of Spain” (Llorente 2000).

<sup>10</sup> José Antonio Conde (1765-1820) and his posthumous work “*Historia de la Dominación de los Arabes en España*” or “History of the Dominion of the Arabs in Spain” (Conde 1840).

<sup>11</sup> All three Spanish authors are notable only in that Prescott cites them several times in “History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic” (Prescott 2011) No other English language sources could be found referring to the three.

written diffusely on the political aspect of Spain; Navarrete<sup>12</sup> has made an extensive collection of original documents concerning Columbus; and Clemencin<sup>13</sup> has completed the sixth volume of the Memoirs of the Royal Academy of Spanish history. To these sources Mr. Prescott is, of course, very greatly indebted, and he is the first to avail himself of the vast advantages they afford. Mr. Irving's "History of Columbus" and "Chronicle of Granada"<sup>14</sup> were very partial and very unexpected, although unquestionably very beautiful anticipations of *small portions* of Mr. Prescott's great design.

The edition now issued by the Messrs. Harpers<sup>15</sup>, is carefully prepared from the *third English edition*, which embraces many important matters not embodied in the original work. While the second edition was passing through the press, Mr. Prescott received [*sic*] copies of two valuable Spanish works having reference to his theme, but which from the recency [*sic*] of their issue, had not previously come to his knowledge<sup>16</sup>. He was also enabled to avail himself of the "Mahomedan Dynasties of Spain," a book of great merit just then published by Don Pascual de Gayangos<sup>17</sup>, and which throws much light upon the Arabian portion of the Peninsular Annals.

The mechanical execution of the "Ferdinand and Isabella" is every thing that can be desired. It is issued in three royal octavo volumes of about 400 pages each<sup>18</sup>, printed on fine thick paper, with bold type, and illustrated with portraits of Isabella, Ferdinand, Columbus, Ximenes, and Gonsalvo of Cordova. It furnishes also numerous autographs of these and other celebrated personages of the time discussed. The binding is very neat and durable.

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<sup>12</sup> Martín Fernández de Navarrete (1765-1844) was a Spanish historian and naval officer who collected information on Spanish maritime history, including information on Christopher Columbus (Phillips 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Diego Clemencín (1765-1834) was a notable Spanish historian who was known for a commentary on "Don Quixote" and his own eulogy on the death of Queen Isabella (Knight 1858).

<sup>14</sup> The American author Washington Irving (1783-1859) and his multiple works: Columbus (1828), The Companions of Columbus (1831) and A Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada (1829) ("Washington Irving" 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Messrs." is the shortened for of messieurs, a French term for addressing multiple men ("Messrs., n." 2014). This coincides with the fact that the Harpers being referred to are brothers, thus two males.

<sup>16</sup> This information is taken from the preface to the third edition, first printed by the A. L. Burt publishing company of New York in 1838 (A. L. Burt 1838).

<sup>17</sup> Pascual de Gayangos (1809-97) pioneered Arabic studies in Spain (Millan and Heide 2008). He often helped Prescott by retrieving rare books and manuscripts ("William H. Prescott" 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Since Prescott supposedly started this piece in 1826-7, and the first edition was printed in 1837 by the American Stationers' Company, the book took almost ten years to complete (American Stationers' Company 1837). Prescott did this while being almost completely blind with the help of assistants and a writing device for the visually impaired called a noctograph (Ticknor 1863).

### *Editor's Note*

William Hickling Prescott (1796-1859) was an American historian who specialized in the histories of Spanish speaking countries despite not being fluent in the language (Ticknor 2000). He lost sight in his left eye during an accident in 1813 as a student, and soon after the sight in his right eye deteriorated due to the strain. As a result of his almost complete inability to see, he became well known as a blind historian, a man whose determination and love for his subject was a constant battle (Tollebeek 2000). It is still unknown what exactly sparked his interest in Spanish history. George Ticknor, who wrote his biography, claimed that Gabriel Bonnot de Mably's *De l' étude de l'histoire* sparked Prescott's interest in the subject (Ticknor 1863). However, other's claim that Prescott started writing history to prove a point because of a remark made by Samuel Johnson in 1781 claiming that Milton (who was also blind) could not write history (Tollebeek 2000). Along with "History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic," Prescott's other notable works include "Conquest of Mexico" (1843) and "Conquest of Peru" (1847), though his work on the Spanish monarchs was the most popular ("Death of William H. Prescott" 1859).

The author indicates the topic of this book is "of importance to mankind and of especial importance to Americans," but to the modern reader, this significance can be unclear. Spanish-American relations were of a particular interest to many—academics, politicians, businessmen, etc.—due to steadily increasing tension between the two. During the American Revolution (1776-1783), the thirteen colonies looked to Spain for help with a common enemy, but Spain had too much to lose in the New World to lend more than tentative support against the British Empire. America in turn succeeded in gaining independence and became a serious threat to Spain's holdings in the West. Tension over resource-filled Cuba became particularly important in the 1820's and onward; this period marks Spain's final struggles to remain a global superpower in the midst of the ever-increasing shadow of the United States (Cortada 1980). With potential political and economic upheaval hinging on America's understanding of Spain, the growing interest of Prescott and other historians is more than justifiable.

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