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The Escorial: Art and Power in the Renaissance

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Henry Kamen, *The Escorial: Art and Power in the Renaissance*

The Escorial: Art and Power in the Renaissance by Henry Kamen

Review by: Guy Lazure

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were inclined to be relatively indulgent, and for their part Italian officials made several attempts to broker a secret peace and sever the tie with Hitler; it was not until the conclusive defeat of the Axis in North Africa that the Allies took a more rigid and punitive stance and demanded unconditional surrender (Minardi). The American position was also shaped by the presence of a large Italian diaspora in the United States. Stefano Luconi shows how the fall of Mussolini freed Italian-Americans from being perceived as fifth columnists for the Axis cause (in part because so many had hailed fascism's arrival in the 1920s as a restoration of ethnic and national pride). After July 1943, they were able to reconcile their cultural and political loyalties publicly. The collapse of fascism also had a significant impact on other theaters. Giorgio Cingolani looks how the Italian crisis shaped developments in the Balkans by undermining the Croatian Ustasha and creating a vacuum exploited by Tito's partisans. Going even further afield, Franco Savarino examines Italian attempts to cultivate affined fascist movements in Latin America during the war as well as the ultimate failure of these efforts. A few essays discuss internal developments. Mariano Gabriele's evocative chapter on Sicily shows that the island was woefully unprepared for the Allied invasion, suffered acute food shortages, and was essentially abandoned to its fate by the authorities in Rome. Andrea Di Nicola shows how conservative fellow travelers (monarchists, Catholics, etc.) grew increasingly alienated from Mussolini's regime during the war years; the royal "coup" of July 25 allowed them to sever this tie and avoid prosecution in the postwar.

The principal strength of this collection lies in its diversity. A wide variety of topics is addressed, and the contributors include university academics, military researchers, journalists, and public historians. At the same time, however, this breadth is achieved at the cost of depth and consistency. While the research presented is extremely robust, most of the conclusions drawn are not revelatory. Curiously, the events of July 25 itself—which this work is meant to commemorate—are largely absent, with attention focused mainly on the international context and the course of the war. A sense of how regime change was experienced domestically and "on the ground" would have brought a much-needed dimension to the discussion (it should be noted that two essays on the Italian military and the postwar press, originally presented at the conference, were not included in the final publication). The volume would also have benefited from more thorough editing. There is no narrative or thematic thread connecting the various chapters, with the result that the book more closely resembles a conference proceedings than a cohesive collection. The concluding section, which transcribes the participants' closing roundtable discussion, raises many important issues but does not explore them in sufficient detail.

In sum, specialists (needless to say, capable of reading Italian) will find some useful insights here and plenty of raw material for deeper exploration, particularly with regard to military, tactical, and diplomatic issues. One hopes that this publication will push others to investigate this crucial episode of Italian history much more fully.

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The Escorial: Art and Power in the Renaissance. By *Henry Kamen*.
New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010. Pp. xvi+291. \$35.00.

For good or ill, the palace monastery of the Escorial has always been associated with the figure of its builder, the Most Catholic King Philip II of Spain. And even though he wishes to discredit and distance himself from the majority of past and present

scholarship on early modern Spain, Henry Kamen is no different from others before him. In many ways, his latest opus is a reiteration of the by now well-known arguments presented and rehearsed in his previous works, that is to say, a defense and illustration (some would say apology) of Philip the man and Philip the ruler. The book regularly meanders into detailed descriptions of military actions and princely festivities, accounts of the king's daily life, or speculative musings about Philip's personality and character, all of which wander away from the project of the Escorial itself. Therefore, those who hope to read a history of the construction and decoration of the Escorial will be disappointed—as will those who seek an overarching interpretation of its symbolic meaning. Kamen does not seem to appreciate or believe in the power of symbols; he much prefers the comfort and security of hard archival evidence. In his eyes, if the king didn't write about a certain aspect or issue concerning the Escorial in a letter, dispatch, or memorandum (the true relics of Philip II's reign), then modern historians cannot possibly infer or draw any sort of conclusion on the matter. Admittedly, this form of documentary fetishism, applied here to every facet of Philip II's life or regime with an almost missionary zeal to vindicate the king and debunk all possible legends, myths, or misconceptions, can be infuriating at times to the cultural historian sensitive to perceptions and representations. And while Kamen does not present any new major documentary evidence, he offers an extreme revisionist interpretation that occasionally leaves the reader with the impression the author is either pushing down open doors or using a cannon to kill a housefly.

The book begins by dealing with the European travels of the young prince Philip, his artistic apprenticeship, and the genesis of the Escorial. It sheds some interesting light on the stock of visual references and influences the Habsburg heir accumulated during his time in Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands and the possible sources of inspiration for his palace monastery. The intention here is to show the future monarch as open, accommodating, and conciliatory and not nearly as ferociously opposed to Protestantism as hitherto depicted by his enemies or later generations of chroniclers and historians. Therefore, the author does not deem that the Escorial should be considered a monument to the reactionary and defensive spirit of the Catholic Reformation (rightly so, in this reader's opinion, but not for these reasons). Likewise, Kamen insists on downplaying the role of Spanish armies in the battle of St. Quentin, this time in order to disprove the commonly held notion that the foundation of the Escorial directly resulted from this victory. He then wisely moves away from the sense of uniqueness and the exceptional nature of the Escorial, by setting it back in the context of other Spanish or European palace monasteries in Spain and Europe and relating it to Philip II's direct and personal involvement in the construction and maintenance of his other residences (the Alcázar in Madrid, and the nearby estates of El Pardo, Valsain, and Aranjuez). Here, Kamen provides an interesting chronology of the monarch's seasonal visits to the Escorial, which were often dictated by religious feasts, hoping to erase that age-old image of a sedentary, hidden, and melancholic king, the reclusive and cloistered prisoner of massive granite walls, which symbolized Spain's isolation from the rest of Europe.

But Henry Kamen's boldest and most challenging claim is perhaps that the Escorial was decidedly not an expression of Philip II's power, that he did not use the Escorial to assert or enhance his monarchical authority. In fact, according to the author, the Spanish ruler did not cultivate any image of power through either visual or textual propaganda, simply because he did not require it or feel the need for it since he was the most powerful monarch of his day. Since his rule was not challenged or questioned by anyone, Kamen continues, he did not need to promote his public image or spend fortunes on lavish displays of splendor and magnificence to impress his subjects, like

other European rulers did; instead, “he downplayed the status of the monarchy and paid little attention to symbolism or images” (146). For Kamen, affirming power through palaces was just not part of the Spanish tradition; it was never a priority of Spanish kings. That is why “nothing in the groundplan of the Escorial was meant to promote royal authority” (165). In his mind, there was never any conscious program to promote Philip II’s power in Spain. Others may have done it for him, mostly outside of Spain, but he never actively took part in the process: “Philip expended little energy, inside or outside the Escorial, on trying to construct a royal image” (150). In support of his thesis, Kamen invokes (among a number of unevenly convincing arguments) the puzzling absence of power portraits, equestrian portraits, or public statues of the king, as well as an alleged lack of expansionist or imperialist ambitions on his part.

Building on this new image he has fashioned for the Catholic monarch, Henry Kamen draws a parallel between the archenemies Philip of Spain and Elizabeth of England, showing how the two were both closer and further apart than historians have so far assumed in terms of power, absolutism, and imagery. In a final section, he tackles the “enigma” of the Escorial’s Hall of Battles. Why did it take so long to decorate the walls of the gallery? Why weren’t such recent glorious victories as the conquest of Granada or the battle of Lepanto depicted instead of an obscure and minor medieval skirmish? And why the belated depiction of St. Quentin? The ultimate purpose of these probing questions is to promote the image of a fundamentally peaceful king averse to military solutions, which Kamen has continuously defended over the years. He also challenges the notion that the Escorial epitomized the stern spirituality and religiosity of Catholic-Reformation Spain, a fortress of faith against the rising tide of heresy, arguing with the utmost conviction that “there is absolutely no doubt that Philip’s religious policy was forward-looking, even revolutionary. . . . Never a religious conservative, Philip embraced change with enthusiasm” (209). Finally, Kamen ends by looking at the criticism leveled against the monarch and his palace, both inside and outside Spain, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, concluding his study with this arresting statement: “As a collector but also as a creator, Philip can rightly lay claim to be a prodigy—his intellect soared above those of most of his contemporaries . . . [he] did not make use of art to express his power; rather, he used his power to give expression to art” (244–45). Sadly, Kamen’s Philip II, much like Kamen’s Escorial, seems to have lost sight of the power of art and culture, something Renaissance men and women were surely not so quick to dismiss.

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Remaking Madrid: Culture, Politics, and Identity after Franco. By

Hamilton M. Stapell. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Pp. xii+276.
\$85.00.

There is something refreshing in a book that passionately defends a good cause and presents an admirable hero, as Hamilton Stapell’s new volume does. The cause is what the author identifies as the birth of Madrid’s modern identity in the 1980s; the hero is Enrique Tierno Galván, the gentle, mild-mannered professor and Socialist politician who was mayor of Madrid from 1979 until his death in 1986. Having laid out his plot in the opening pages of the book, Stapell goes on to create a story that is rich in information and characters, sometimes beautiful, yet sometimes repetitive and occasionally restricted to somewhat rigid arguments of positive versus negative.