

ISABELLA OF SPAIN*

THE history of the world has its great people and its great periods which one can isolate for the purpose of more detailed study as representing turning-points in the march of civilization, epochs which seem to sum up all the movements and cultural forces of the preceding centuries, bringing them to a flowering bloom in a few brief years, and seemingly bequeathing a glorious inheritance to the fortunate age to follow. Such a period was the early European Renaissance. Such, especially, was the early Renaissance in Spain.

Calderón, in one of his *autos*, says that the study of history only serves to make men learn their lesson and take warning. He only saw in history the ruin of great enterprises, powerful and prosperous nations brought low by the folly of their rulers, and the human race given over to pleasures and lusts, heedless of the future. Writing as he did in the Spain of the seventeenth century, he voiced the disillusion and despair of the more enlightened and high-minded of his countrymen who saw no hope for humanity in a world eaten through and through with rottenness. Had he lived two hundred years earlier, in 1460, his feelings would have been identical. Passing from the court of Philip IV to that of Henry IV, he would have noticed little difference. He would have seen vice and corruption reigning in the court of Castile, anarchy in the country, the peasants bled white by grasping nobles who only served their country when they engaged in mutual extermination. The Middle Ages in Spain, as indeed in most countries, had sunk as low as this, to an agonizing death in anarchy and civil war. The greatness of the throne once occupied by St. Ferdinand and Alphonso the Learned seemed to have van-

* *Isabella of Spain*. By W. T. Walsh. (Sheed & Ward; 15/- net; 644 pp.)

Isabella of Spain

ished for ever; gone, too, the crusading spirit which had imprisoned the Moor, once master of Spain, within the mountains of Granada. The halls that had echoed with the minstrels' gentle songs of love or the martial beat of the epics singing of the mighty deeds of Christian warriors, now resounded with scurrilous songs relating the notorious events at court. There seemed no hope for the future. Yet at that time there was living a young girl, the King's sister, who was destined to build up a new Spain upon the ruins of the old, and consolidate the work of her great ancestors.

It would seem that the Middle Ages were dying, but they never died in Spain. Infused with the warmth of Isabella's vigour and extraordinary force of character, they merged with the new spirit of Europe into Spain's Golden Age. At her death, in 1504, there were no immediate grounds for pessimism, and all men looked forward to the greatness she had made possible. Spain can number among her daughters two of the greatest women of all time: Isabella and St. Teresa, both so similar in genius, such admirable examples of what are considered masculine qualities—courage, singleness of purpose, strong will and fortitude in adversity—yet both so full of essential womanliness and the charms and virtues of their sex.

Isabella's claim to the throne of Castile rested on slender foundations, but never losing consciousness of her destiny, she asserted her claim with a vigour that brooked no defiance, and overcame all resistance. She married Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of Aragon, against the opposition of the court, and together they united two of the great kingdoms of the Peninsula, thus forming the Spain we know to-day. She was the making of him as a king, and he brought to their marriage the diplomatic skill and subtlety which she lacked. He was unquestionably the most able king of

Blackfriars

his time, and she the greatest queen. They made a united Spain, ruthlessly crushed out all anarchy and rebellion, introduced an efficiency of administration which produced political stability, pressed the crusade against the Moors who, at the conquest of Granada, lost their last hold in Europe. Isabella, for her part, financed the voyages of Columbus and opened up a New World for Spain. Ferdinand, less wisely as we now know, fought for the balance of power in Europe, expelled the French from Italy, and by the marriages of their children sowed the seeds of Spain's future mastery in European affairs. If they sinned at all, it was by opening up too many outlets for Spanish energy and bequeathing to their country an inheritance too great for it to hold for long. But this was rather the result of chance and the tragedies of their family life. Juan, their only son, died young. Isabella, their eldest daughter, died shortly after her marriage to the Portuguese King, leaving a son, Miguel, as heir to Spain and Portugal. It is pleasant to muse on what might have happened had he lived. The Portuguese, so proud and jealous of their independence, might have accepted a united Peninsula under their own King, and, with Lisbon as the Capital, the country would have set its face on America and its back to Europe. Isabella's achievement would then have been complete. But Miguel died as a baby. The succession passed to Juana, the second daughter, married to Philip of Hapsburg, and their son, Charles, became King of Spain and Flanders, and Emperor of Germany, destined eventually to lead Spain to ruin in the European struggle. Ferdinand and Isabella could not have foreseen that their great life-work would fail in time, and this ultimate failure cannot mar the greatness of their achievement.

The historians of this period have, therefore, a splendid canvas upon which to work. It cannot be

Isabella of Spain

said that the more notable among them have succeeded. They have been led away by prejudice and bigotry in matters they have imperfectly understood. Those English readers, in particular, who have been unable to study Spanish history at its sources, and who have turned for instruction to Prescott and Martin Hume, have never had the greatness of Ferdinand and Isabella presented to them in its true colours. They can plead no excuse now for ignorance or misconceptions, for they will find in Mr. Walsh a safe guide and a discerning judge of his subject. His work is refreshing in these days when the writing of history has become either a rigid and difficult science, or an opportunity for pseudo-psychologists to analyse the characters of people long since dead. He does not conceive his task as a sifting of unimportant evidence, but has an eye for picturesque detail and a taste for imaginative reconstructions of events. His pages have all the chivalrous glamour of the last 'spacious days' of the *reconquista*, when the spirit of the Crusaders was still alive, and valiant Archbishops fought in the thick of the fray by the side of no less valiant Monarchs. But in avoiding one pitfall, it must not be imagined that he has fallen into the other. He never allows his imagination to get out of hand, and his vivid and picturesque narrative is never the result of too little regard for accuracy. He reproduces the charm of the contemporary chronicles, while adding a dramatic vigour all his own. The development of the narrative is not sacrificed by extensive excursions into character studies nor does he, on the other hand, allow the greatness of individual personalities to be swamped by the march of events. The work is not only a biography of Isabella, but a history of her reign. Her military campaigns are graphically recounted, and her political institutions described. We follow the fortunes of Columbus, and accompany Ferdinand's dip-

Blackfriars

lomatic representatives to the courts of Europe. The relations of the Catholic kings with the Papacy are traced and explained, and form one of the most valuable parts of the book. There is only one aspect of her reign which Mr. Walsh treats at all inadequately, and that is the general trend and progress of the arts and sciences. The fact that the work opens with Isabella's birth in 1451 and closes with her death in 1504 unfortunately limits its range. The story should not end with her death, but should continue till the advent of Charles V, who by his victorious struggle for absolute despotic power put the seal upon her efforts for unity and order. It is not till his reign that a new period in Spanish history commences and the period of Ferdinand and Isabella comes to an end. But rather than hope that Mr. Walsh will some day continue where he left off, let us pray that he may go back through the centuries. The thrilling story of medieval Spain is waiting to spring to life at his hands!

Mr. Walsh is a Catholic; all that he has to say about the Inquisition will, therefore, be of special interest to Catholics. He presents an excellent picture of this difficult subject, particularly valuable in regard to Sixtus IV's intervention in, and protests against, the work of the Inquisitors. Here Mr. Walsh corrects many misrepresentations made by Prescott and others. He also dispels the calumnies associated with Torquemada, of whom he says: 'A search of contemporary sources discloses no facts to support the monstrous legend that sectarian and rationalistic prejudice has built up about his memory When one follows the legend back to the fifteenth century, it gradually dissolves, leaving a picture of a pleasant, kindly, industrious, able and modest man, whose chief ambition in life was to imitate Jesus Christ' (p. 347). In all this Mr. Walsh maintains a judicious balance of moderation. **He is not one of those Catholics who seek**

Isabella of Spain

to make even the Inquisition redound to the greater glory of the Church. He merely notes that according to our modern standards it is indefensible, but that according to the standards of the time it compared very favourably in its methods with the other legal tribunals of Europe. It is amazing how scholars of repute, to say nothing of lesser writers, still persist in maintaining that the Inquisition killed all civilization in Spain!¹ Against this, even non-Catholic scholars like Mr. Aubrey Bell cry out in vain in words such as these: 'But, like other historians of this period of Spanish history, the writer (Martin Hume) seems to have been struggling painfully between the conviction that the Inquisition must have killed Spanish literature and the evidence that it did nothing of the kind Critics and historians have gone blindly forward blandly unaware, to all appearances, of the colossal inconsistencies in their arguments, in their whole treatment of that great period, during which in every sphere Spain gave to the world fruits of the Renaissance second to those of no other country.'²

Mr. Walsh insists upon the fact that the Inquisition was necessary for the unity of Spain by pointing out the immense and dangerous power wielded by the nominally converted but secretly anti-Christian Jews. Nobody denies their tremendous influence at that time in Spain, but, if I may venture to say so, Mr. Walsh is apt to exaggerate this when he says: 'Had they (the Jews) succeeded—and several times they came perilously near success—they might conceivably have managed, with Mohammedan aid, to destroy the Christian civilization of Europe' (p. 258). Again, he lays some stress upon the view that the exiled Jews contri-

¹ See, for example, A. C. Flick: *The Decline of the Medieval Church*, 1930, Vol. II, p. 263.

² *Notes on the Spanish Renaissance*, in the *Revue Hispanique*, Vol. lxxx, 1930, p. 325.

Blackfriars

buted extensively to the economic decline and subsequent ruin of Spain : ' It is one of the curiosities of history,' he writes, ' that they paid off the score of the Spanish Inquisition at the strategic moment when Spain, in spite of all her phenomenal powers of recuperation, had exhausted herself at last like a good mother in the stupendous effort to colonize and civilize vast portions of the western hemisphere ' (p. 587). This view has been advanced by Jewish writers, but has scanty evidence, if any, behind it. Their influence might have made itself felt in this direction, but it cannot be possible that it played more than a very small part in Spain's misfortunes. In any case, the decline in Spain's foreign trade was but a small factor, and by no means a deciding one, in her ultimate decadence.

As another link in the gradual historical vindication of Spain, Mr. Walsh's splendid book must be heartily welcomed. It should be read by everybody, if only because its six hundred pages contain a story far more thrilling and soul-stirring than any novel ; also because it at last presents to English readers a really authoritative study of one of the greatest of women, a Queen much maligned by those who see in her only the foundress of the Spanish Inquisition, and little understood even by those less biassed against her. No words fit her better than those of Peter Martyr, writing to inform Archbishop Talavera of her death : ' The world has lost its noblest ornament ; a loss to be deplored not only by Spain, which she has so long carried forward in the career of glory, but by every nation in Christendom, for she was the mirror of every virtue, the shield of the innocent, and an avenging sword to the wicked. I know none of her sex, in ancient or modern times, who in my judgment is at all worthy to be named with this incomparable woman.'

ALEXANDER PARKER.