

Apogee of Empire: Spain and New Spain in the Age of Charles III, 1759–1789.

By Stanley J. Stein and Barbara H. Stein.

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Although most eighteenth-century Europeans still considered Spain to be one of the most powerful polities on the continent, by the time Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), views about Spain and its empire, then headed by Charles III, seemed to have become unconditionally negative. Despite the size of its population, its territories and the silver mines under Spanish jurisdiction, and its monopoly over the commercial trade with its American colonies, Smith and his contemporaries viewed Spain as one of the poorest nations in Europe. Spain's economic backwardness was inevitably linked to its rather traditional political system. Smith, for example, believed that Spain remained a quasi-feudal state and that its colonies were ruled by an "absolute government . . . arbitrary and violent." The predicament of the Spanish empire, according to eighteenth-century Europeans, stemmed from what many believed to be the mediocre character of Spain's rulers and citizens. A nation that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries seemed to represent the virtues of a learned, vigorous, and expanding Europe was now seen as culturally deprived and isolated, dominated by religious fanatics, and ruled by second-rate monarchs and self-interested elites. For many decades historians have debated the merits of these views—whether they in fact reflected the political and economic realities of eighteenth-century Spain or whether they were simply a part of the ideological trashing that accompanies all international struggles for world power. The loss of its American colonies in the early nineteenth century, the political instability that characterized Spain during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and its inability to industrialize until recent times have seemed to many historians sufficient proof that Smith and his contemporaries were essentially right. This view of Spain in time became the interpretative paradigm used to explain an empire that, despite its power, was never able to "modernize" economically and politically.

Stanley and Barbara Stein are certainly familiar with this interpretation of the Spanish empire. In 1970, they published *The Colonial Heritage of Latin America*, in which, analyzing the colonial period, they maintained that the Spanish empire was doomed from the very beginning (Spain, they wrote, was "imperfectly organized, export-oriented, and lacking a national bourgeoisie or merchant capitalist group capable of stimulating indigenous growth" [19]), a situation that did not change during the eighteenth century despite the Bourbons' efforts "at defensive modernization" (88). Thirty years later, these authors have returned to some of the same topics by analyzing economic data and debates about economic reforms in the Spanish empire during the eighteenth century. They have published two volumes in this latest effort: *Silver, Trade, and War: Spain and America in the Making of Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore, 2000), and *Apogee of Empire: Spain and New Spain in the Age of Charles III, 1759–1789*, the main subject of this review.

Apogee of Empire, a densely written volume, full of meticulously collected information, is an important contribution to our understanding of both the intense economic debates that took place during the reign of Charles III (1759–88) and the implementation of important reforms aimed at expanding the number of peninsular regions that could take part in the Atlantic trade. The Steins have analyzed numerous documents and books on these topics, and their findings in general confirm what we already knew from previous studies: that some groups wanted economic reforms while others radically opposed them; that the economic reforms, especially the opening of the Atlantic trade to all peninsular regions, benefited some areas more than others; that even if some

reforms produced spectacular and permanent results, in general they failed to transform the economic structure of the empire; and that other polities, especially Great Britain and France, bitterly objected to Charles's decision to keep them out of the trade with the Spanish colonies. As in *The Colonial Heritage*, however, the problem with *Apogee of Empire* is not so much the Steins' analysis of particular data but their rather conventional interpretation of the reign of Charles III and the eighteenth-century Spanish empire in general. Modern historians view Charles III's reign, the subject of *Apogee of Empire*, as one of the most complex, important, and critical periods in the history of the Spanish empire. The reforms implemented under Charles affected each and every area of the empire (economy, administration, church and religion, education, science, and exploration), and, if we are to believe many recent works on the subject, these reforms helped to stop the decline of the Spanish empire and begin a period of political and economic recovery that continued beyond the death of Charles in 1788. In the eyes of most modern historians, these reforms clearly demonstrated that Charles and his ministers had the resources, the will, and the intellectual means to "modernize" the Spanish empire. If their reforms failed, we are told, it was not because Spaniards did not possess the cultural values necessary to promote progress and development but because Spain was perpetually involved in conflicts with other empires, especially the British, and suffered internal political crises that, together, consumed many of the economic and political resources originally held in reserve to fully reform the nation and its empire.

The Steins question this optimistic view of Charles's reign in *Apogee of Empire*, as they did in *The Colonial Heritage*. The authors agree that Charles introduced important reforms, but they are much more skeptical than other historians about the purpose and significance of these reforms as well as Charles's and the country's commitment to change. For Stanley and Barbara Stein, as for eighteenth-century European observers, the decline of the Spanish empire began well before the 1700s. The main reason for this decline was the Spanish rulers' lack of political will to defeat the dominant traditional elites and the inability of the rulers to put together and implement a truly reformist and all-encompassing economic and political program. "In a long retrospective view," the authors write in *Apogee of Empire*,

eighteenth-century Spain could not recover from the effects of the . . . conflict with the Netherlands that ended in the middle of the seventeenth century. To consolidate support among the new and old aristocracy, Hapsburg policy had enhanced the institutions of privilege, which then effectively blocked efforts to curb them. As a result, Bourbon Spain's political class in the eighteenth century . . . could at best initiate cosmetic change when more radical change was made imperative . . . Which is to say that Spain's policy-makers were not "reformers" but merely anxious to preserve the colonies in America. . . . Their project may best be described as a form of "defensive modernization." (351)

To prove their point, the Steins claim that reformist thought was genuinely radical when it came from outside Spain, as during the ministry of the Prince of Esquilache, who was born and educated in Naples and who became Charles's chief minister in 1759, serving until his fall from power in 1766. According to the Steins, the situation changed after riots known as the Motín de Esquilache (1766) forced the removal of Esquilache and convinced Charles that to avoid political unrest he needed to appoint Spanish royal officials who would defend the internal status quo even if it meant that Spain would remain a backward polity compared to other European countries.

To some extent *Apogee of Empire* is a welcome antidote to some of the most recent

studies of Charles III's reign, which have tended to offer a too rosy, uncritical, and primarily patriotic interpretation of Charles and his policies. But at the same time, the Steins' overall interpretation of the period, and in general of the Spanish empire, is equally one-dimensional. Although the Steins provide useful analyses of economic and technical data, they fail to question and analyze broader historical contexts: the imperial and internal conflicts that influenced the decisions and politics of Charles III; the political, constitutional, and philosophical debates that took place during his reign; the prevailing epistemological paradigms that restricted what people, including governments and kings, were able to think and do. Instead, the Steins tend, for example, to take as their point of departure in analyzing eighteenth-century Spain recent economic theories about economic growth that were not available to Charles and his contemporaries. *Apogee of Empire* is no doubt a book everybody interested in Charles's reign should read, but readers should peruse it in the company of other works that analyze the economic, cultural, political, scientific, and artistic contexts in order to gain a more nuanced and balanced understanding of the period, the king, his ministers, and their reform projects. Even if the imperial system was not fully transformed, it does not preclude the sincerity of many reformers or the seriousness and commitment of many eighteenth-century Spaniards who believed that the only way to save the Spanish empire was to implement radical economic, political, philosophical, and constitutional reforms.

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