

THE CROWN AND THE NATION. STUDYING ALFONSO XIII OF SPAIN.

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We might begin by asking whether the biographical genre is the correct one for the study of an institution such as monarchy in the modern world. David Cannadine, in an article from 2004 significantly titled ‘From Biography to History: Writing the Modern British Monarchy’ (*Historical Research*, no. 77), considered that the drawbacks are greater than the advantages:

On the one hand, it seems logical to apply a biographical focus to one of the most personalized institutions in existence. In effect, this has been the way that historians have normally approached monarchy: here in Great Britain, there is an established tradition of writing biographies, even including official biographies, of kings and queens, and there are whole sections of bookshops dedicated to them.

On the other, it is clear that this approach contains certain dangers: in the worst case, because biographies of monarchs tend to be books that are acritical and complacent about their respective subjects, or even hagiographical and propagandist; or, in more serious biographies, because they regard the institution of monarchy as something obvious and immovable, without studying its functioning in any depth, and tend to simplify complex political problems. It is not surprising, Cannadine concludes, that the best recent studies of the British monarchy have not been biographies.

Nevertheless, I believe that Cannadine is too severe in his judgements on the utility of biographies in the study of modern monarchies, and that his opinions tend to disregard the

advances that have been made in the genre in the last few decades. A biographical approach permits many different variations, and it is possible to write biographies that are balanced, not idolizing, which interlink an individual life and its social context. As Isabel Burdiel has said, any biography should be written with an awareness of an essential historical problem, that of the relationship between individual and society, between freedom and necessity. A problem that is still more acute in the case of a monarch, since we have to deal here with an exceptional individual submitted to a multiplicity of norms and conventions. We cannot forget that a monarch is at the same time both a person and a symbol.

Even more, as Burdiel's own work has demonstrated, it is possible to write biographies of kings and queens that study their political and social significance by exploring their own capacity to confront the changes of the modern world and affect the development of phenomena as significant as the progress of constitutional monarchy, the establishment of bourgeois family values and the gender roles associated with them, or the construction of nationalist imagery. Regarding these latter questions it will be advisable, in addition, to adopt a cultural conception of politics. To sum up, in order to be useful and interesting, biographies of kings and queens, like all biographies, need to accept the general challenges that are faced by all historiography, but this does not mean that we should disregard them.

The Biographical and Interpretative Traditions

As many of you know, Alfonso of Bourbon and Habsburg-Lorraine, the posthumous son of King Alfonso XII, was King of Spain from the moment of his birth in 1886. After the regency of his mother Queen Maria Christina, he took over the throne when he reached the age of sixteen, in 1902, and reigned for nearly three decades, first under the liberal

Constitution of 1876 and from 1923 over a military dictatorship. In 1931, with the proclamation of the Second Republic, he had to go into exile, where he died ten years later.

Alfonso XIII is, without doubt, one of the most significant figures in the history of Spain in the 20th century. And one of the most controversial. He has been the subject of, that I am aware of, some sixty-five biographies, of very unequal quality, published both inside and outside Spain (some of them in Britain). However, judgements on him and his character are also abundant in publications that study his reign more widely, in which the king commonly appears as a leading actor and determining factor in the political evolution of the country. In the available literature, academic or otherwise, a series of set images and received ideas have become established that make up two opposing interpretative traditions, which I will briefly summarize here:

On one side, in the view of the most critical authors, Alfonso XIII exercised his powers in an inappropriate manner, one that was arbitrary, capricious and excessively interventionist, and always inclined to favour reactionary sectors such as the Church and the army. These authoritarian tendencies culminated in the blessing the monarch gave to the dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera. Some accused him of being an Germanophile in the Great War, and others of seeking his own personal enrichment. Whatever the details, the king was guilty of, or at least complicit in, perpetuating chronic maladies of 20th Century Spanish political life such as clericalism and militarism, or the factional conflicts within the oligarchical political parties, which he encouraged with his predilection for courtier-politicians. Alfonso XIII was, overall, an obstacle to any possible transformation of the Spanish liberal regime into a democracy.

On the other side of the argument, the king's defenders have stressed above all his patriotism, his willingness to sacrifice himself for the good of Spain. He was very Spanish in his personality and his tastes, since they combined the features that made up the

stereotype of the national character as it had been constructed in the 19th century (obstinate, impulsive, sincere, genial or *simpático*, idealistic and brave). And he dedicated his life to seeking the well-being of the nation, to attempting to regenerate it, placing the national interest above those of the monarchy. An attitude that contrasted with the egoism of the corrupt politicians who surrounded him. Alfonso, always attentive to the wishes of a people with whom he communicated easily, preferred exile to unleashing a civil war. This patriotism, according to his supporters, excuses any errors that the king may have committed.

Historiography on the subject has generally followed these two lines of interpretation, but more documented studies and the most recent biographies of the king have moved forward in at least two important aspects:

Contrary to the usual practice of both the detractors and defenders of Alfonso XIII, different stages have been identified in the life of the king, whose ideas and behaviour were not the same at every point in his reign. For example, a distinction has been made between the initial period up to the First World War, in which Alfonso appeared quite in harmony with Liberal reformism, and the period of the crisis of the constitutional system, above all from 1917 onwards, when he adopted ever-more conservative views, in close contact with Catholic nationalism. Like any other individual, Alfonso evolved over time, and changed his positions in accordance with his experience and expectations.

At the same time, historians have been concerned to understand the political role of the king in the context of the constitutional regime, of the political system that we call the Restoration and the changes that were occurring within it. In this area there is still no agreement, since some talk of a strong king, capable up to a point of directing the political evolution of Spain (this is the case, for example, of Shlomo Ben-Ami), and others of a weak king, carried along by increasingly complex circumstances and incapable of

dominating the situation (as was argued reiteratedly by Javier Tusell). In either case, few deny that Alfonso XIII enjoyed substantial powers, as were conceded to him by the Constitution, and that decisions made by him were significant in at least some critical moments during his reign, such as when the monarchist parties were divided and he had to choose a government from among them, or when the army intervened in political affairs and the king took the side of the military in their confrontations with the civil powers. In this regard the *coup d'état* of 1923, which began Primo de Rivera's dictatorship, occupies a central place in every analysis.

A New Approach

Having said this, it is worth asking just what a new biography of Alfonso XIII could contribute to our knowledge of the king and his era; that is, why I have proposed to myself to take on such a task.

My interest in the king began some years ago, when I was studying his relations with the politicians of the Liberal Party, one of the two monarchist parties that alternated in power during this period. These politicians, each of them at the head of their own clientelist faction, lived in a state of dependency on the royal palace, and only on a few occasions, when the party stayed united, were they able to oppose any resistance to a monarch who decided who was to govern, and when.

But, looking beyond the interplay of the parties, with time I have moved towards a more cultural approach to the figure of Alfonso XIII, centred on the relationship between monarchy and nationalism. I have already pointed out that the fundamental argument of the king's defenders emphasized his Spanish patriotism, his unconditional devotion to the cause of Spain. We tend to see this simply as an excuse, as a justification for actions that

would otherwise have been unjustifiable. However, why should we not pay attention to this argument, taking it seriously, and examining it properly? Not just to explore the reasons that led the king to act in one way or another, but also in order to study the role that was played by the crown in the development of Spanish nationalism and the nation-building process in Spain during the first third of the twentieth century.

I was encouraged to go down this path by the convergence of two important phenomena:

1 - In the first place, during the reign of Alfonso XIII the national question was one of the fundamental areas of contention in Spanish political life. It was at this time that nationalist movements emerged and grew that challenged the nation-state as it had been constructed during the 19th century. In addition Catalan nationalism became one of the leading actors in the political scene, and even took part in government.

In response to this challenge, a great many political actors equipped themselves with nationalist language and policies. Spain's defeat in its war with the United States in 1898 was interpreted as an authentic national 'Disaster', and unleashed an identity crisis lasting several years that required nationalist and 'nationalizing' policies in every field, the phenomenon we know as 'regenerationism'.

Intellectuals and politicians were continually obsessed by the need to articulate and reinforce the nation, and combat the lack of national consciousness that in their view was shown by Spaniards. It is enough to recall the constant attention governments gave to education, as an economic driver but also as a vehicle for promoting a sense of nationhood.

After the Great War, the conflicts over nationalism led to a shift within Spanish nationalism towards more Catholic and anti-liberal positions. The military dictatorship that was imposed in 1923 took as its mission that of repressing sub-state nationalist movements

and ‘nationalizing’ Spaniards, instilling national consciousness, once and for all with more aggressive and centralized policies.

King Alfonso was implicated, in one way or another, in all these conflicts and Spanish-nationalist policies. He himself took up regenerationist ideas and presented himself as an active monarch who was leading the work of putting Spain in the place it deserved, as a medium-sized power in western Europe. He also encouraged and took part in a range of ‘nationalizing’ measures and policies, attempting to make the monarchy a symbol of the nation, its unity and its progress. A task in which he was accompanied by a great many different political actors, from politicians and the military to a variety of elements from civil society.

2 - In second place, as a growing academic literature has highlighted, the adaptations that were made by European monarchies to the era of mass politics made them one of the central elements in their respective national identities, and protagonists in the nation-building process.

In the second half of the 19th century, and up until at least the First World War, monarchies looked for new sources of legitimacy in a world that was ever more secularized and undergoing a transformation of political life, disrupted by the participation of ever-broader social sectors. We should not be surprised by the way that kings and queens embraced the idea of the nation, the origin of legitimacy in modern political systems.

Authors such as Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm or David Cannadine already pointed to this striking phenomenon in their work of the 1980s. Since then many other historians have confirmed the unveiling of the so-called ‘performing monarchies’, which not only expanded their public presence through the communications media but also invented or re-invented ceremonies and rituals that associated them with nationalist or imperialist values.

In Great Britain and some other countries such as Holland or Belgium, this process took place at the same time as the crown was losing political power. There is majority agreement among historians on the correctness of the theses of Walter Bagehot, although many feel that, rather than describing the situation when he was writing in the 1860s, what this author was doing was expressing desires that would be fulfilled later, during the transition from the 19th century to the 20th. To summarize, Bagehot described the crown as one of the 'dignified parts' of the British Constitution, destined to secure the loyalty of the population. In order to do so it played a symbolic role as impartial arbiter, above parties and at the service of the national interest.

Nevertheless, and contrary to what some scholars have supposed, the identification between performing monarchies and their respective national imagery and imaginations also made progress, at least up until the Great War, in countries where monarchs still enjoyed considerable political power, such as the Czarist Russia studied by Richard Wortman. In some cases, such as the German Kaiser or the King of Italy, the respective monarchs played essential roles in the national construction of young states. And, of course, together with the concept of nation another that was of great importance was that of empire, as for example in Germany or Austria-Hungary, where we have been able to see the intensity that was acquired by a kind of imperial patriotism around the figure of the Emperor Franz-Joseph. Especially relevant is the case of Italy, very well studied by Catherine Brice, where the existence has been made clear of a monarchist nationalism that had considerable success across a range of social sectors and Italian regions.

So, I believe it is of interest to insert the Spanish case into this international literature and compare it with other examples, exploring the search for legitimacy on the part of the monarchy in the field of nationalism.

It is in this terrain where, in my judgement, a new biography of Alfonso XIII can be undertaken that, as I have said, should investigate the political role of the king in a much broader sense than that which has been allocated to him up to now, since the available studies generally limit themselves to his involvement with the political parties, the army or diplomacy.

This would be a biography that would cover such matters as the king's thoughts and actions, but also his public image and the use that was made of it by many different political and social forces, together with his influence on the conflict between different nationalisms or between different versions of Spanish nationalism, and his presence in the processes of 'nationalization' or nation-building.

One can give many examples of the king's involvement in nationalist activities and policies. Consider, for instance, the significance that was gained during this period by *hispanoamericanismo* or 'Hispanic-Americanism', one of the fundamental features of Spanish nationalism in the twentieth century. Spanish nationalists from different ideological standpoints coincided in their belief that Spain should take advantage of its historic and cultural links with the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America to present itself as the head of a community of nations that would give it pride and an international presence. The intensive emigration of Spaniards to Latin America at that time and the interests of the American republics themselves in the face of the threat from the United States were creating pressures in the same direction. For many believers in *hispanoamericanismo* and Spain's role in Hispanic America, including Alfonso XIII himself, the monarchy had an essential role to play in this work. Consequently, throughout his reign a string of actions were undertaken and gestures made that were intended to make the King of Spain an essential element, if not the leader, in this imagined Hispanic-American community, the *Raza* or Race: the journey made by Princess Isabel de Borbón,

the king's aunt, as his representative at the celebrations of the centenary of Argentinian independence in 1910, or that of Prince Alfonso, his brother-in-law, to Chile in 1920 for the four-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of the Straits of Magellan; the project for the *Ciudad Universitaria* or 'University City' in Madrid, with special facilities for Latin American students, which was launched as part of the Silver Jubilee of his reign in 1927; and, as a culmination of all these efforts, the Ibero-American Exhibition in Seville in 1929.

Research Already Carried Out

So far, my work has centred on the first decade of the effective reign of Alfonso XIII, between 1902 and 1913, and on several phenomena that are all inter-related:

Firstly, the identification of the monarch himself with some central aspects of the predominant Spanish nationalist discourse of the period, that of regenerationism. The nation was imposed as a necessary priority ahead of other important elements in discourse such as the dynasty, religion, social order or the Constitution.

In both private meetings and public speeches, Alfonso presented himself as the first Spaniard, a patriot king, committed to the progress of the country and its national greatness and to the regeneration of Spain, understood as its emergence from the backwardness and decadence that had led to the Disaster of 1898.

This could be seen in the king's intervention in political affairs, which was greater in scale than those of his predecessors, and especially intense when the Conservative and Liberal parties were each entangled in conflicts over their respective leaderships, conflicts that only abated between 1907 and 1909 and between 1910 and 1912, and which intensified irremediably from 1913.

It was also reflected in several policy areas in which the king was particularly involved, such as foreign policy, where the course that was set led to an alignment with Great Britain and France, a new colonial war in Morocco and plans to intervene in Portugal, policies in which Alfonso always acted ahead of his ministers and showed himself to be quite imprudent; or in the encouragement given to agricultural production and all kinds of public works, an authentic obsession for regenerationism.

Within this general picture, the king saw himself, above all, as a soldier, the heir to the legendary history of the great Spanish victories of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the head of an army that distrusted professional politicians and had proclaimed itself to be the defender of the unity of Spain against its enemies.

Secondly, the elaboration and putting into practice of a nationalist cultural policy that aspired to preserve the monuments that recalled the glorious past of Spain, such as the Monastery of San Lorenzo at El Escorial or the Castilian city of Toledo, which was converted into a national symbol. The king himself undertook to commemorate great landmarks or individuals from the national mythology, such as the painter Domenico Theotokopuli or *El Greco*, who was thought to have portrayed the Spanish soul like no one else; Miguel de Cervantes, enshrined as the national writer *par excellence*; or the heroes of the Peninsula War against Napoleon at the beginning of the 19th century, known in Spain as the War of Independence, and the great nationalist epic.

Third, the ceremonial events around the monarchy, a reflection – modest, but significant – of the rituals that were then being exhibited by performing monarchies throughout Europe.

The public display of the Spanish royal family, as happened in other Catholic monarchies, was very closely linked to the Church, which provoked protests from the anti-clerical groups of the period. The regular official ceremonial events included the opening of

the parliament, the Cortes, the king's Saint's day, and his birthday, occasions when all the pomp of the palace was put on show in the capital. The king's Saint's day or name day, the 23rd of January, became the principal national holiday, with receptions, military parades and charity dances and other celebrations throughout the country. Rather like the official birthday of Queen Victoria in the British Empire.

The Spanish monarchy did not invent new ceremonial events, like the Victorian jubilees, but did take advantage of official and family occasions. In fact, the reign began with two extraordinary celebrations, the swearing of an oath to uphold the Constitution by the king when he reached his majority in 1902, and his marriage to Victoria Eugenie of Battenberg, granddaughter of Queen Victoria of Britain, in 1906. In both cases, the predominant message put forward in the press and from governmental circles expressed a nationalism with a liberal tone: Spain was a country that was rising again and looking forward to a future of peace and progress, captained by a young king who acted in constant communication with his people, as the motor of this regeneration. In addition, the number of foreign guests who attended underlined Spain's openness to the world.

The king's wedding was tarnished by a dreadful anarchist assassination attempt. However, Alfonso's image emerged reinforced, as that of a valiant hero who met the assault with serenity. In these celebrations a form of banal monarchism was propagated, associated with all kinds of royal souvenirs, photographs and films.

Fourth, royal tours and visits to the various parts of Spain, the principal means used to build up popular support for the king. As in other European countries, these visits made the monarch known and attempted to create loyalties and build a political community. Here the 'nationalizing' or nation-building strategies of the governments of the monarchy played a part. Above all those of the Conservative Party, which wished to strengthen the links between Spain's regions through the symbolic figure of the king. This was especially

significant in Catalonia, where repeated royal visits counteracted the growing strength of Catalan nationalism and sought to bring about its integration in the Spanish political landscape. The Conservatives, in contrast to the Liberals, favoured a conception of Spain that was compatible with the existence of regions with strong ethnic identities, united in a political construction crowned by the monarchy.

Alfonso was delighted with these visits, and thought that they were necessary to win the support of Spaniards. During them he always appeared to be a spontaneous and approachable individual, at times reckless in disregarding measures for his own security.

These visits and tours were very repetitive rituals, loaded with religious and military content. In them an unchallengeable leading role was played by local élites, which acted as intermediaries before the population of their localities, and by a broad collection of associations, such as sports clubs or gentlemen's clubs. The king's great popularity was undeniable, even for republicans. Some sectors of society, such as the middle classes of provincial cities or students, showed enormous enthusiasm for these visits. Not always because of simple support for the monarchy, but also due to their interest in receiving favours from the state, for themselves and for their city. Nevertheless, the success of these royal visits was not translated into electoral victories for the monarchist parties, which lacked the organization necessary to mobilize public opinion.

And fifth, military ceremonies. As in other monarchies, in Spain the king retained great power in this area, a factor that was revealed to be especially dangerous when, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the army began to intervene once again in political life and Alfonso XIII took its side.

With the assistance of the king, military officers set in motion a coherent and ambitious programme to 'nationalize' Spaniards, to foster national awareness and patriotism. This included constant parades, acts of homage to fallen soldiers and other

heroes of the colonial war in Morocco, and other initiatives such as providing support for the Spanish boy scouts, created by military officers to inculcate patriotism in the young.

The events that best represented the fusion of monarchy and nation in the time of Alfonso XIII were the ceremonies of *Juras de Bandera* or swearing an oath to the flag, which every soldier had to perform when they completed their basic training, and which could also be repeated several times during their military service. These were mass, public spectacles, in which soldiers swore to die for Spain and their king. They also became true national holidays when the Liberals introduced compulsory military service in 1912, and the Spanish army could claim that it was a truly national army. The king took part in many *Jura* ceremonies and presided over an annual one in Madrid. He thus associated himself with the flag, the principal national symbol, now tinged with additional warrior and sacrificial overtones.

Provisional Conclusions

From everything I have said up to now certain provisional conclusions can be drawn, which constitute the framework of a future biography of Alfonso XIII. In this biography the individual will be understood in direct relation to his political and cultural context, one marked, as in other European countries, by a dominant nationalism in which the monarchy sought to find a new legitimacy. Not as an individual overwhelmed by established structures, immersed in a discourse that he did not control, but as an individual who contributed to elaborating and defining this discourse, who learnt from experience and moulded his own image.

In the same way as other monarchies of Europe, the Spanish monarchy associated itself with the idea of the nation, within the nationalist discourse that in Spain was called

regenerationism. The king himself agreed with many other different political tendencies and sectors of opinion that it was necessary to undertake an effort to modernize the country that would imply economic growth, an opening to the outside world and the 'nationalization' of the citizenry, increasing their national consciousness, an effort in which it fell to the crown to play a very active role.

These monarchist and nationalist aspirations were publicized by means of the constant public presence of Alfonso XIII and his family. The press – especially the illustrated press, which was experiencing a golden age – and the cinema spread the image of a king loved by his people, accessible and interested in everything. The great rituals such as his swearing of his oath and his wedding, the numerous tours and visits he made around all Spain's regions, and the military ceremonies all underlined this nationalist commitment of the monarch, who was seen as a patriot at the service of national greatness, the key to the regeneration of Spain. An idea that was shared not only by a majority of ruling politicians but also by a good part of the country's élites and civil society, who represented a monarchist political culture much broader than that which was mobilized by the Conservative and Liberal parties, who were almost alien to any ideas of mass politics. That is to say, that the nationalization of the monarchy was quite successful in this period.

Even moderate republicans, who wished to democratize the constitutional regime, thought that they needed the help of a king who was delighted to involve himself in political affairs. In effect, during the first decade of his effective reign his political role grew steadily, above all because the divisions in the governmental parties made him the arbiter of the situation.

By 1913, Alfonso XIII was perceived as the fundamental leading actor in the Spanish political system, surrounded by a providential aura and with strong militarist associations. That is, far from moving towards the British model previously described by Bagehot, the

monarchy in Spain was becoming closer to the German model and Alfonso more like a young Kaiser, who held together the reins of military and political command in order to place them at the service of nationalist objectives. The personality of the king, who saw himself as a patriot and a soldier, encouraged this tendency.

The king was for many Spaniards a symbol of the nation, though not a symbol above political disputes, but rather one more actor in these conflicts, whose actions were openly discussed and criticized in the parliament and the press. A situation that could still be maintained and still function in Europe before the Great War, but which in the long term, in the context of the collapse of thrones and generalized democratization brought by the end of the war, would be unsustainable. But that is another story.