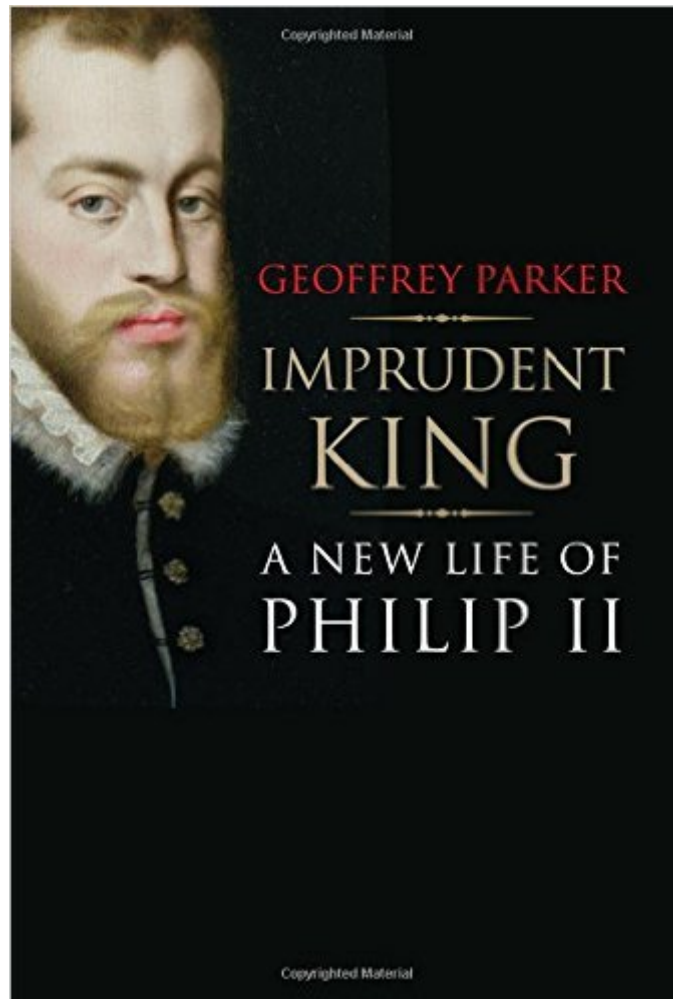


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Imprudent King: A New Life Of Philip II



Synopsis

A vast archive of documents, unread since the sixteenth century, revises the portrait of Spain's best-known king Philip II is not only the most famous king in Spanish history, but one of the most famous monarchs in English history: the man who married Mary Tudor and later launched the Spanish Armada against her sister Elizabeth I. This compelling biography of the most powerful European monarch of his day begins with his conception (1526) and ends with his ascent to Paradise (1603), two occurrences surprisingly well documented by contemporaries. Eminent historian Geoffrey Parker draws on four decades of research on Philip as well as a recent, extraordinary archival discovery—a trove of 3,000 documents in the vaults of the Hispanic Society of America in New York City, unread since crossing Philip's own desk more than four centuries ago. Many of them change significantly what we know about the king. The book examines Philip's long apprenticeship; his three principal interests (work, play, and religion); and the major political, military, and personal challenges he faced during his long reign. Parker offers fresh insights into the causes of Philip's leadership failures: was his empire simply too big to manage, or would a monarch with different talents and temperament have fared better?

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Customer Reviews

Phillip II of Spain ruled over what was arguably the world's first transoceanic empire-at its height, Spain controlled southern Italy, the entirety of the Iberian peninsula, the Low Countries, and a colossal overseas empire stretching across the globe, including the Americas and portions of India. He had access to immense mineral wealth from the Peruvian silver mines, a huge military made up

of hardened veterans, and many able and competent civil servants. And yet, in many respects, Phillip was a failure, despite his many triumphs against the Ottoman Empire and, in the early decades of his rule, the French. His reign saw the permanent loss of the Netherlands, the destruction of the Invincible Armada at the hands of Francis Drake, and the expenditure of so much wealth and human life in futile wars, which so weakened the Castilian economy that within fifty years Spain would be eclipsed by France as the preeminent European hegemon. What went wrong? According to Geoffrey Parker, the Spanish Empire was not predestined to fail, despite the difficulties inherent in managing a global empire with many enemies. Indeed, within Phillip's life, slightly changes in the way events unfolded could have led, for example, to him conquering England or crushing his rebellious Dutch subjects. However, Phillip's flaws as a ruler contributed to his empire's blunders. An obsessive micro-manager who was often unwilling to trust his subordinates, he attempted to command complex military operations occurring hundreds of miles away from Madrid, an impossible task that often left his commanders hamstrung.

The famous dismissal of an author's voluminous effort about the Roman empire could easily apply not to Geoffrey Parker, but his subject "Phillip II, King of Spain. A monarch who was prone to scribble, scribble, scribble. Imprudent King is a testament to one man's ability to squander not only ducats, but time and opportunity, all in equal measure. With a peerless pedigree (Ferdinand and Isabella and Maximilian I and Marie of Burgundy were his grandparents) Phillip was born to the purple, if not a life of leisure. His father, Emperor Charles V had rigorous expectations, which for the most part, his son was able to fulfill. Most importantly, and perhaps most deleteriously father impressed upon son the notion one should only trust (and marry) other Hapsburgs, and God, (who apparently was also a Hapsburg). Early on Parker identifies the king's penchant for considering and then reconsidering all aspects of an argument, along with a complete inability to focus on what today would be called "the big picture." • There is more than a little pop psychology about a stunted childhood due to an absent father and the impact of being taken from his mother at what today would be an early age. Personally, I find this speculation rather silly, but others may not. If not a great mind, Phillip was more intelligent than many and devoted to the success of his dynasty and his kingdoms. Unfortunately that devotion did not always translate into consideration for his subjects or his advisors. Parker documents not only a debilitating tendency to procrastinate but an equally inimical messianic bent. The author properly notes messianic devotion was rife in 16th century Spain, but Phillip seems more fervid than many.

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