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978-1-107-63980-5 - Spain: Its Greatness and Decay (1479–1788)

Martin A. S. Hume

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Cambridge Historical Series

SPAIN

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BY
MARTIN A. S. HUME

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PREFACE.

THE mere relation of the events of history adds but little to the stock of useful knowledge, unless it enables us to apply the experience of the past to the conduct of the present, and so to avoid for our own time some of the errors into which previous generations have fallen. This end can best be attained by regarding history not as a disjointed collection of facts, but as a harmonious concatenation of causes and effects. In the case of most national histories this is difficult, because the actions and the results which follow them are usually distant in point of time, obscured by side issues and complicated by intervening circumstances. It is otherwise with the history of Spain. There the ordinary observer may see the working of the process by which nations are ruined. He who runs may read the lessons that unsupported pride and unwarranted ambition are as disastrous to nations as to men, that riches gained without labour produce no extended or lasting prosperity, that the true basis of wealth is industrial production, that beneficent ends cannot be attained by means which disregard human sufferings or trample on human rights, and, above all, that the hereditary transmission of unrestrained power from father to son is certain to end in disaster, because sooner or later the power

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must descend to an individual too weak or too vicious to exercise it worthily.

The period dealt with in these pages covers the rise and decadence of Spain and the commencement of a fallacious resuscitation. The rise was unwarranted by the stage of development which the nation had reached, and the ruin was consequently complete. In the history of no other European country is the whole cycle of national potency and exhaustion presented in so small a space, or in so simple a form. The tale is one of almost unexampled and unrelieved misfortune, and yet each succeeding catastrophe, each recurring disgrace, each repeated sacrifice, can be traced almost with certainty to the unwise act or short-sighted policy from which it sprang.

To the modern student of political economy the financial and administrative systems successively adopted by Spanish ministers will appear grotesquely perverse and calculated to destroy the sources of wealth. Statesmen will note that the first and greatest disaster of Spain was the inheritance by her King of extended territories in Central Europe, which made her the great continental power with a prospect of universal dominion; and that trade, in her case, did not “follow the flag,” notwithstanding the strenuous efforts to maintain a monopoly, because the home manufactures were crushed with intolerable burdens, while the workers were demoralised by constant wars, and by the false belief that coin was wealth, instead of a token of value. It will be observed that despotic personal government, with its consequent suffering and disaster, only became possible when the weakness of the people’s representatives allowed the national purse-strings to be wrested from their grasp by force or bribery; and that the oppression

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of the people and the sacrifice of their welfare followed as a natural result from the emasculation of the national parliaments.

These are a few of the lessons which may be learnt from the history of Spain more easily than from that of any other nation; and for this reason, amongst others, it is to be deplored that so little attention has hitherto been devoted to its study by English readers. In order to render the application the more direct, the history of Spain related in the following pages has been separated, so far as appeared possible, from the tangled skein of European foreign politics, and the vicissitudes of the Spanish nation itself have been traced with as much detail as the limited space permitted. An attempt has been made to present the story with absolute impartiality, and to render it a trustworthy and readable relation of events.

MARTIN A. S. HUME.

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