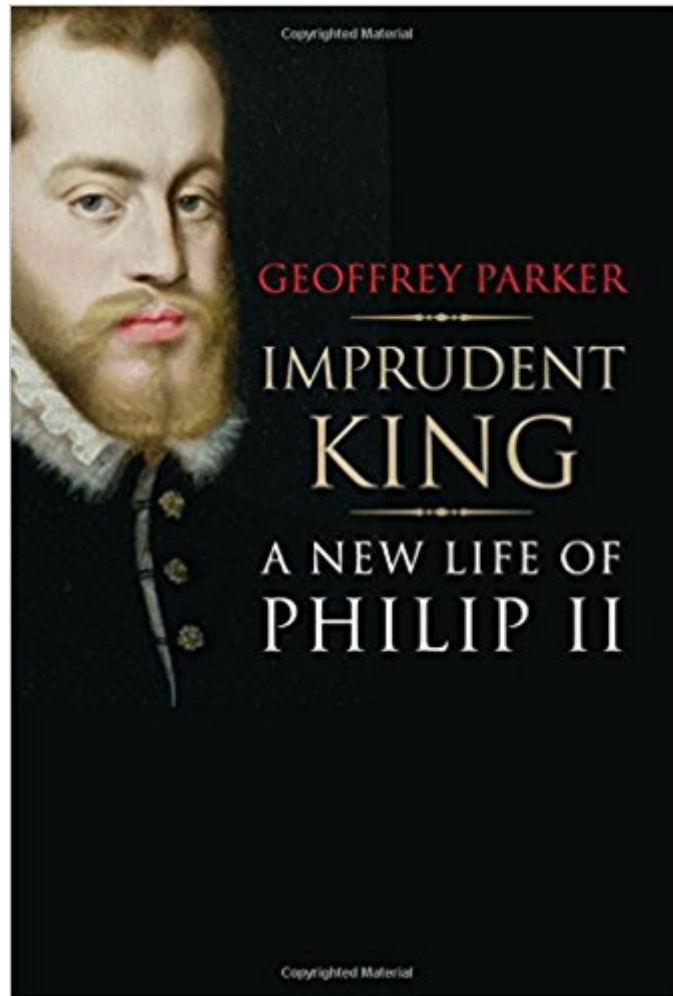


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Imprudent King: A New Life Of Philip II



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

"Parker's highly detailed but also immensely readable book has come far closer to that than any previous account of the most enigmatic of Spanish kings."—Anthony Pagden, New York Times Book Review on The Grand Strategy of Philip II "He is at pains to know Philip

through the testimony of his friends, foes, courtiers and his own words and this authoritative, intelligently revisionist biography must stand now as the primary reference." —Iain Finlayson, *The Times* "Parker has managed to navigate the archival whirlpools with remarkable flair. His admiration for his subject is evident on almost every page, yet the book is no whitewash. We are constantly made aware of the possibility that Philip might be deceiving us." —Fernando Cervantes, *TLS* "This is no mere updating of Parker's previous work on Philip, though. It is the consummate biography of the king, the mature reflection of a master historian at the height of his craft writing about the subject he knows best." —*MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* "A splendid biography of Philip II, ruler of Spain and the world's greatest empire. In short, highly readable chapters, the author examines Philip's youth and education for his future role. . . . Based heavily on extensive research in primary sources and a cache of previously unknown documents. Scholars, students, and general readers will enjoy this book. All libraries should purchase it." —*Choice* "The research . . . is astoundingly thorough and impressive. The writing is superb. . . . This biography is as definitive as can get. And, best of all, it's as splendid a book as one could ever hope to read." —Carlos Eire, *Books & Culture* "Readers will find in it . . . a superbly informed narrative of Philip II's long career as Europe's most powerful king." —Henry Kamen, *Little Reviews* "Lively . . . Impressive." —John T. Wing, *Historian* "The first global empire, a master historian, and a wealth of new archival documents provide the essential elements for this terrific biography of Philip II as both statesman and man. Parker has brought Philip to life and, with him, the challenges of ruling an early modern empire." —Stuart Schwartz, author of *All Can Be Saved: Religious Tolerance and Salvation in the Iberian Atlantic World* "Geoffrey Parker, one of the world's leading early modern scholars and, most certainly, the greatest authority on Philip II, has written a remarkable, erudite, thoroughly researched, and thoughtful book. *Imprudent King* benefits from the exhaustive research undertaken for his monumental, definitive study of Philip II published in Spanish, but Parker's deployment of close to 3,000 new documents permits a very different understanding of Philip II's successes and failures. This, together with Parker's unique gift as a historian, makes *Imprudent King* a profound, original and engaging new interpretation of the king's life and of the manner in which he wrestled with the almost hopeless task of managing the first truly world empire." —Teofilo F. Ruiz, author of *Spanish Society, 1400-1600*

Geoffrey Parker is Distinguished University Professor, Andreas Dorpalen Professor of European History, and associate of the Mershon Center, Ohio State University.

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. Phillip's obsessive nature also led him to waste tremendous amounts of time on irrelevant minutia, for example devoting countless hours in designing his magnificent palace complex at El Escorial while the situation in the Netherlands spiraled out of control. Phillip, for all of his genius at administration, was ultimately a flawed, and at times tragic figure. Parker is skilled writer and an excellent historian. One is not likely to find such a readable biography about this time period, particularly in English.

I'm an avid reader of what's new on medieval and renaissance Spain. I'd recently read "Queen Isabella, The Warrior Queen" by Kirstin Downey and I thought that it would be a good idea to follow through with this biography of Philip II. After all, he was Isabella's great-grandson. I wasn't disappointed! Mr. Geoffrey Parker opens up a new side of "El Prudente", his obsessive nature, always trying to keep matters under his control, and trying to deal with tons of minutiae and documents. The author also sheds light on the magnitude of the Spanish Empire at the time of Philip, but what I most appreciated was the personal side that is highlighted by Parker: the

near-incestuous marriages among the Spanish Habsburgs, their deficient offspring, (including Philip's firstborn son who was deformed in body and mind, as well as the last of the line, Charles II). The author also exposes Philip's neurosis regarding religion which, of course, can be traced right back to his great-grandmother Queen Isabella. Grace in Simi Valley, CA.

Parker has added to his analysis of this enigmatic and fascinating monarch; deploying and defending a very persuasive historical thesis which explains the king's failures and successes. The author studies the complexity of Philip's character and, most importantly, his christian messianism which governed a over ambitious and open ended foreign policy. This element of ideological primacy combined with the need to control everything are the threads that entangled Philip's epic reign. Parker does end his biography by noting that even with all this Philip came remarkably close to success in governing a transoceanic empire the like had not been seen before!!!

A great example of a great biography. Parker is at his finest in this new book on his favourite topics: early modern Spain and Philip II. He is truly the leading contemporary expert on the subject. This book gives us both a personal story of a king as a human with fears, errors, and hopes and a management analysis. Parker's conclusion is very convincing: the king suffered from obsessive-compulsive syndrome that led to a very inefficient management of his empire. Though hard-working, Philip procrastinated by spending time on issues of minor importance, organised abundance of reports that gave him information overload, and, most of all, he failed to delegate tasks. Multiplied by religious hope for miracles and intransigence, such leadership was doomed to breed troubles, but we can't help but feel a pity for such a great mind, which was lost in the labyrinth of his own creation.

Parker uses newly released archives to draw a three dimensional portrait of this enigmatic monarch. esp. enjoyed the many direct quotes of frustrated contemporaries. Philip reigned as an absolutist of uncompromising zealotry, his legacy a cautionary lesson applicable today.

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