

19 April 2010

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The Emperor Who Could Not Be King: The Emperor Charles VI and Spain (1700-1740)

'Sad news', wrote the Archduke Charles of Austria, self-styled King of Spain, on learning of the death of his elder brother, the Holy Roman Emperor Joseph I, in 1711. 'From my house, only I remain. All falls to me.' Terse as it may be, this obiter reveals the twin pillars of Charles VI's imperial ideology: dynastic providence and universal dominion. In this expansive and absorbing paper, William O'Reilly offered an account of the career of the Emperor Charles VI as *manqué* King of Spain. The childless death of Charles II, the last Habsburg King of Spain, in 1700, ignited a succession crisis that engulfed Europe in conflict. Standard accounts of the War of the Spanish Succession treat the two pretenders, Philip Duc d'Anjou, grandson of Louis XIV, and the Archduke Charles, younger son of the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I, as ciphers in a game of grand strategy. But Dr O'Reilly presented a compelling case for re-appraisal. His study of Charles revealed the decisive influence of personal ambition and court politics on the business of state formation in the early-eighteenth century. Arriving in Barcelona in the late summer of 1705, the Archduke was immediately proclaimed King Charles III of Spain throughout Catalonia. During his six years in Barcelona, he cultivated long-standing Catalan suspicions of Madrid (in Bourbon hands from 1707) to construct a Habsburg party among the Aragonese elite. Energetic patronage, a reforming agenda and the promise of equality with Castile drew the Catalan nobility to the Habsburg cause. Far from slaking his desire to restore Habsburg supremacy in Spain, Charles's likely election as Holy Roman Emperor after the death of his brother Joseph I in 1711 fired his universalist aspirations. For Charles, though for few others, the prospect of resurrecting the global empire of his namesake and kinsman Charles V now appeared within reach. Adopting his motto 'Plus Ultra', Charles VI imagined himself as emperor of a realm that stretched from the Americas through Spain, the Netherlands and Austria to the East Indies. In Charles's mind, true integration could only be achieved through national parity, the free movement of populations and an inclusive, itinerant court, centred on his person. Reluctantly forced to return to Austria in 1712, Charles transplanted his Barcelona household wholesale to Vienna. Thereafter, Iberian influences permeated every aspect of Austrian court culture. Although he was a polyglot, Spanish remained Charles's language of choice. His councils were thick with Catalans and Spanish court ceremonial was for the first time introduced to Vienna. The 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, by which the great powers finally recognised Philip as King of Spain, only fuelled his Hispanophilia. Charles commissioned a new monastic palace at Klosterneuburg in direct imitation of El Escorial. At the same time, he established a rival Order of the Golden Fleece in Vienna, claiming for himself the mantle of Iberian-Burgundian chivalry. Spanish mentalités were also absorbed into Charles's foreign policy. The struggle to drive the Ottomans out of eastern Europe was reconceived as a Reconquista. Lands recovered from Turkish occupation were not restored to their Hungarian title-holders, but distributed among Charles's Spanish courtiers, who introduced silk-weaving, vines and mulberry trees to the Pannonian Plain – along with a racist attitude to the multi-ethnic communities of south-eastern Europe. Meanwhile, Jesuit missionaries were sent among the Muslims of the Balkans to restore the true faith. All legitimist campaigns require a degree of self-deception, but in Charles VI's case – as described by Dr O'Reilly – this shaded into delusion. To the end of his life, he styled himself King of Spain. In Vienna, he maintained a clutch of shadow departments for the government of Spain and the Americas, now distant chimeras. The ships

he sent out from Fiume and Trieste ('Cadiz', as he called it) to settle new colonies flew the Castilian flag and demanded commensurate privileges. Although Habsburg gains in eastern Europe were extensive, they did not satisfy the Emperor, whose sense of dynastic mission was global. Goaded by his Spanish courtiers, Charles continued to covet a seaborne empire, a dream that was hardly satisfied by such bagatelles as the purchase of the Frisian Islands from the Danes. By the time of Charles's death in 1740, it was clear that the Habsburg imperial destiny lay in the east. But this was as much in spite of Charles's efforts as because of them. Months before his demise, Charles was still aching for Spain, writing plaintively in his diary: 'It belongs to me and my house.' 'He was,' Dr O'Reilly concluded, 'rather like Miss Havisham: dressed for an imperial ball to which he was never really invited.' **DG**