
This volume is a collection of essays that were published or presented between 1992 and 2006 on a wide range of themes that have engaged Elliott over recent decades. In the preface, Elliott remarks: “in so far as they [the essays] possess a unity it is because they arise out of my engagement with a number of themes that have long interested me, and reflect what I hope is a unified vision of the ways in which those themes relate to each other, and to the historical process as a whole” (xiv). The unity in Elliott’s work originates from his rejection of the microhistorical or narrowly national view, with an attendant commitment to histories that draw comparisons and examine “big” questions unfolding over broad spans of time. While the Spanish monarchy figures largely in many of these essays, the majority display Elliott’s dedication to transnational approaches to studying both Europe and the wider world as Europeans perceived it. His methodology is comparative without losing awareness of the nuance between varying historical contexts.

The volume consists of three main sections: Europe, A Wider World, and The World of Art. The first essay is a reprinting of Elliott’s seminal article, “A Europe of Composite Monarchies,” which coined the phrase “composite monarchies” to describe early modern states in which the primary unity that existed was loyalty to a joint monarch, rather than adherence to one law, language, or set of customs. This argument challenges historians to re-think the ways in which they assess the growth of the nation-state during a period when plurality, rather than unity, held sway. The next essay addresses the complex ways the English responded to Spanish political hegemony; reaching beyond the Black Legend, Elliott reveals that the English also demonstrated a fascination, admiration, and desire to emulate their Spanish enemies. The last three essays all discuss the tumultuous events of the mid- to late-seventeenth century: the so-called General Crisis; Castile’s failure to revolt in the 1640s; and the effects of the Peace of Westphalia. Together they illuminate this complex century from a political, diplomatic, and economic perspective.

One could argue that the meat of this collection can be found in Part II, “A Wider World.” As the title suggests, the six essays in this section all focus on European encounters with the wider world, with a particular
emphasis on Spain, Britain, and the Americas. They tackle themes ranging from why European powers established empires (through the seizing of territory) in the first place; fluctuations in Spanish attitudes towards their empire; the different ways in which the British and Spanish approached and understood themselves as colonizers and the indigenous populations they subjugated; Spanish beliefs about the nature of kingship and the importance of the patria; and how Europeans grappled with the awareness of the “difference” between themselves, America, and its inhabitants. Each of these essays explores different developments essential to understanding the emergence of global empire, such as initial motivation, reactions to “otherness,” and the varying relationships between imperial power and local population. The last essay of this section brings the reader full circle to the beginning of Part I, as Elliott argues that the ultimate failure of the Atlantic Empires resulted from the dissolution of composite monarchies (characterized by horizontal power structures), in favor of the vertical structure of empire, which left the colonized increasingly alienated.

The elegance of Elliott’s return to the subject of composite monarchies at the end of Part II creates a sense of finality in the book, which ultimately results in a somewhat jarring transition to Part III of the collection. The last three essays, gathered under “The World Art,” have the flavor of an afterthought. This is perhaps to do these essays a disservice, since they also reflect the unity of thought shaping Elliott’s work cited in the preface. The political symbolism of artistic and architectural works in the early modern period has long been of great interest to Elliott, along with the related themes of royal patronage of the arts and court society. He demonstrates that court culture and the arts played integral roles in the expansion and maintenance of royal and imperial power in the early modern period. The first essay traces the pan-Mediterranean career of El Greco from Crete to Italy to Toledo, while the last two take up more directly the twin themes of royal patronage and the court. Chapter 13, “Court Society in Seventeenth-Century Europe,” lays out the author’s central arguments about the relationship between the arts and court life; as Elliott succinctly contends, “Courts by their nature exalt the majesty of kingship” (p. 276). The last chapter concludes the volume with reflections of the career of the court artist par excellence, Diego de Velázquez, and the theatricality of Baroque Spain. It is something of a disappointment that all of the illustrations in this section are in black and white (a few of which are rather dark); a handful of color plates might have contributed much to the reader’s under-