

Book reviews

Europe

Juan Carlos of Spain: self-made monarch. By Charles Powell. London: Macmillan. 1996. 253pp. Index. Pb.: £13.99. ISBN 0 333 64929 X.

On the basis of primary material culled from the archive of the Spanish Foreign Ministry, the Public Record Office, interviews, public opinion polls and memoirs, and a patent mastery of the relevant secondary sources, Dr Powell provides a fascinating account of Spanish contemporary history with King Juan Carlos placed centre-stage. For obvious reasons, the author devotes most space to the problems posed by Franco's succession and the transition to constitutional monarchy.

The Spanish royal family must be grateful to Dr Powell for this vivid portrait of a sovereign who appears to have no darker side. Apart from fleeting references in the last chapter to womanizing and extra-marital affairs, the only trace of a political wart is in the author's admission that 'Juan Carlos has never been noted for his discretion'.

Dr Powell is particularly strong on certain specific actors on the political stage of Spain during the transition. Full justice is done to the intricacy of the thought-processes of Torcuato

Fernández-Miranda, the subtlety of Manuel Gutiérrez Mellado and the sophistication of José María de Areilza. Yet, probably because of the limitations of space, connections are not explored. Thus, in the key case of Adolfo Suárez, his use of his Segovian contacts is not examined. In Areilza's case, his son and heir married a sister of the King's close friend, Jaime de Carvajal y Urquijo. Yet another sister of his married Gómez-Acebo and is thus linked with the King's elder sister, the Infanta Pilar, Duchess of Badajoz, as well as with the Bulgarian royal family.

It is in such a context that the Madrid-watcher may wonder about the aptness of seeing King Juan Carlos as a 'self-made monarch'. The author himself admits in the foreword that such a reading may seem odd. Obviously, such a focus has serious interpretative consequences. It has to be assumed that it was the King who was in control after Franco's death and other factors are seen to be subordinate. Although the royal household is rightly praised for the political skill displayed throughout the transition, the reader is left with only a vague sense of the on-going importance of the King's inner circle.

It might perhaps have been more prudent for Dr Powell to have paid more heed to the King's own reference to his son: 'the most important thing is that he should learn from me. I had nobody; I had to learn everything myself' (p. 213). For at least one admirer of this monograph, it seems to make more sense to see King Juan Carlos as self-taught, rather than self-made. It also gives added point to Dr Powell's main thesis that the present King of Spain 'is one Bourbon of whom it can never be said that he had learnt nothing and forgotten nothing' (p. 205). Even so, there can be no doubt that both Dr Powell's and King Juan Carlos's performances are impressive by any standards.

Ronald Cueto, University of Leeds

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