

# Charles Dickens's *A Child's History of England* and Spain

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## Abstract

In this article I endeavour to analyse the image of relevant Spanish historical figures such as King Pedro I, Catherine of Aragon, Christopher Columbus, Philip II, the Spanish Armada and other pro-Spanish English characters such as Mary I, as depicted in Charles Dickens' *A Child's History of England* (1851-53). In his overtly didactic attempt to convey a specific image of the legendary antagonism existing between Spain and England to his contemporary English children and youngsters through this peculiar history book, Dickens amply shows his prejudiced view of Spanish history and his overtly patriotic description of England's history. Proof of the relevance and the persistence of Dickens' anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic attitude that prevailed in English society throughout the second half of the 19th century is that C. R. L. Fletcher and Rudyard Kipling insist on similar ideas of Anglo-Spanish relations in *A School History of England* (1911).

[**Keywords:** Dickens, *A Child's History of England*; King Pedro I, Catherine of Aragon; Christopher Columbus; Philip II, the Spanish Armada; Mary I.]

Charles Dickens is not usually remembered as the author of *A Child's History of England*, a history book for children published serially in *Household Words* between January 1851 and December 1853.<sup>1</sup> This simplified history of England was written with the purpose of making English history understandable for children as well as for those not so young. The idea of writing an adapted history book came to Dickens' mind in 1843, when his first-born Charley was six years old. However, when he actually had it published, his son was no longer a child but near sixteen when he published the first part, and around eighteen when the book was ended, a fact that proves the writer's intention to cater for youths more than actual children, in spite of the title. True to his didactic interests, Dickens' idea was to allow not only his son to learn the history of his country in the way that his own father wanted him to know it, but to convey a particular authoritative viewpoint as to how English youths should learn the history of their country, that is, with an England-centred bias. Literary criticism has not been kind with Dickens's incursion into children's and youngster's historiography and has not therefore been too generous in terms of appraisal. The Macropaedia in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1978) has described it as "lamentable" (1978, 5:708).

Dickens is not the only example of an English-speaking novelist who occasionally ventures into children and youngsters' literature with varying degrees of success. Indeed, another novelist, poet and short-story writer who succeeded in writing for young readers in the peak of post-Victorianism was the Nobel Prize-winning Rudyard Kipling, who, together with the historian C. R. L. Fletcher, published the tremendously popular *A School History of England* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1911). As they write in the Preface, Fletcher and Kipling's work was aimed at "all boys and girls who are interested in the story of Great Britain and her Empire" (1911:2). Kipling's role in the making of *A School History of England* seems to have been limited to writing the patriotic poems inserted between the different chapters with the purpose of illustrating and highlighting main historical events of English history. Nevertheless, this book will help us understand the development of the anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic feeling that prevailed in children's English history books during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

A conscientiously didactic and socially-minded writer such as Dickens often used children and young protagonists (*Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Little Dorrit*, *Pip*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, etc) with gusto to confront the main issues of injustice of the rigidly-industrial and inhumanely-implacable Victorian society. Dickens did not hide his personal childhood traumas. Though originally addressed to his first-born son, Dickens' attempt at writing English history for young readers can be said to form part of his well-known concern for the cultural welfare and spiritual elevation of the younger members of society. *A Child's History of England* is therefore an –alas– unsuccessful attempt to humanise and simplify history for the benefit of the beaten and suffering English Victorian children. The extensive and complex history of England, so full of dates and complications and so devoid of mercy for young minds, has an understanding though unfortunate adapter in Dickens. He tries to explain the purpose of his book to his young readers by addressing them directly. Indeed, he states, "If I were to relate to you the intrigue and plots that took place (...), you would think the History of England the most tiresome book in the world" (1851-53:227).

The first educational trait to be found in Dickens's history book is his attempt to teach young English readers to love the Monarchy, a fact that does not prevent him from criticising English kings such as John I for the latter's meagre sense of patriotism, Henry VIII for his cruelty, or Mary I for her anti-Anglicanism. However, the main purpose of Dickens' book is to teach children English patriotism above individual interests and Christian values which coincide with those of the Church of England. He also shows his disagreement towards social revolts that may jeopardise the status quo except for when they try to rid certain nobility of their unjust rights, for Dickens, as we all know, is a declared defender of populism and the weaker social classes. Papism and Catholicism are presented by Dickens as the main enemy of both England and Anglicanism and therefore he does not disguise his antipathy for them. Neither do Fletcher and Kipling.

This Dickensian patriotism of Victorian society can be fully appreciated in *A Child's History of England* especially when it comes to depict the role of foreign powers such as France and Spain in English history, as their respective political, economic and religious interest had very often overtly opposed those of England's and Britain's colonial and imperialistic expansion. And here is where Spain rears her ugly head. Not only is she described as the main obstacle for England's comfortable expansion but also as being guilty of trying hard to convert England to Catholicism.

Dickens' first mention of Spain in *A Child's History of England* takes place when the author criticises King John, Richard Lion's Cour's (sic) unpopular brother. According to Dickens, the Pope (no name is given, for all Popes must be the same) had excommunicated King John for not willingly accepting the bishops sent to him. This infuriated the king to such an extent that he sent an envoy "to the Turks in Spain, offering to renounce his religion and hold his kingdom for them if they would help him" (104) as a result of his personal anger towards the Pope. Spain –Muslim Spain to be precise–, is therefore presented for the first time as a potential invader of England for religious reasons.

According to Dickens, "Pedro the Cruel of Castile" "deserved the name remarkably well, having committed, among other cruelties, a variety of murders" (153). The "Black Prince", a charismatic and emblematic character in English history, a symbol of English devotion and knightly behaviour, had provided the Spanish king with valuable military aid when his throne was at risk of being lost. To Fletcher and Kipling, the Black Prince "was beguiled by a Spanish scoundrel, called King Pedro, to interfere in a Spanish civil war" (1911:96). According to Dickens, the English prince did nevertheless receive no sign of the promised reward:

The Prince, himself, going into Spain to head the army of relief, soon set Pedro on his throne again –where no sooner found himself, than, of course, he behaved like a villain he was, broke his word without the least shame and abandoned all the promises he had made to the Black Prince. (154)

Dickens' description of the Castilian king in terms of "murderous", "villain", "without the least shame" is presented as the antithesis of what a true knight's qualities should be, in contrast to the Black Prince's gentlemanly qualities. The Spaniard's cruelty is brought to the fore by Dickens, but this is not new in English interpretations of Spanish typical traits. Another one of the typical characteristics of Spain, its tawny weather, takes part in the Black Prince's defeat and death, according to Fletcher and Kipling. Where the Spanish army could not defeat the English, the weather could: "Wherever the Prince and his archers fought they won, but his army suffered dreadfully from the climate" (1911:96), they write. Soon afterwards they affirm that the Black Prince died "sore stricken with fever", in 1376 (96).

The sad story of Catherine of Aragon comes to the scene with little fortune in Dickens' interpretation of English history, not only for her early widowhood from prince Arthur, Henry VII's first born son and heir to the English throne, but because after being offered to the younger prince and new heir, the future Henry VIII, a great part of the English clergy declared their opposition to Catherine's marriage to Henry, an opposition that the Pope did his best to counteract. This, according to the novelist, was a bad omen as to what was to come in the future. But Dickens' main criticism seems once again to point at the Pope figure: "There were objections to this marriage on the part of the clergy; but as the infallible Pope was gained over, and he must be right, that settled the business for a time" (1851-53:219).

In spite of her misfortunes Catherine of Aragon is not respected in Dickens' history of England. He describes her as "not particularly good-tempered, having been always very melancholy" (227). He therefore seems to justify King Henry VIII's rejection of his Spanish wife. In Fletcher and Kipling's version, the Pope is once again to blame. Indeed, they write, Henry VIII wanted to divorce Queen Katharine (sic) and applied for this divorce to Pope Clement VII. "Popes were in the bad habit of doing these little jobs to please kings", they add (1911:116), but not this time, due to the fact that "he dared not offend King Charles of Spain and Germany, called the 'Emperor'", who happened to be Katharine's nephew.

A "Spanish" character such as Christopher Columbus, the discoverer of the New World for Spain, has hardly any presence in Dickens' historical account. According to Dickens, his discovery only served to encourage England's waking to "great wonders, interest and hope of wealth" (1851-53:220). Fletcher and Kipling blame Spain for the social and economic uncertainty of the age:

Moreover, since the discovery by the Spaniards of rich gold and silver mines in America, money had come into Europe in great floods, and this had sent up the price of all goods at a fearful rate; all trade seemed uncertain; great fortunes might be suddenly made, and as suddenly lost. (1911:123)

Spain's sudden encounter with wealth, Dickens goes on to say, is the reason why the English king and the Bristol merchants decided to launch a maritime expedition under the command of Sebastian Cabot, who he states is "of Bristol" (thus omitting his Italian origin) with the purpose of discovering new lands in America. Of this sailor Dickens writes that "he was very successful in his voyage and gained high reputation, both for himself and England" (1851-53:220). Of Columbus he says nothing, and the latter's discovery is minimised to the utmost. Of Spain's protagonism in the American enterprise, he writes absolutely nothing. He is after all trying to teach English children and youngsters that no foreign country should cross England's path in her colonial aspirations. The expansion of England within America is presented to the English child reader as a natural consequence of a perfectly legitimate aspiration, as, for Dickens, and

presumably for his contemporaries, neither Spain nor any other foreign power should monopolise the exploitation of the new continent. For Fletcher and Kipling, Spain did not discover America. They talk of "the discovery by the Spaniards of rich gold and silver mines in America" (1911:123). They also criticise the fact that the Pope decided to divide America between Spain and Portugal, and not count on England. Naturally, the English, they say, did not really pay much notice to the Pope's whim:

And a Pope had had the astounding insolence to divide these seas, countries, and trades between the Spaniards and the Portuguese, giving the Western World to Spain, the Eastern World to Portugal. Englishmen, when they abolished the Pope, naturally laughed at this exclusion; (...)" (133)

According to Dickens, another Spanish character interferes in England's history in open alliance with Catholicism, this time through matrimony to an un-English queen such as Mary I: This is Prince Philip, the future Philip II of Spain. The young Spanish prince is described by Dickens as "not an amiable man, being on the contrary, proud, overbearing and gloomy" (1851-53:252). Bad temper, cruelty, pride, ambition and a melancholy nature seem to be the main traits of the Spaniards that venture to show their heads in English history. This "Spanish marriage", in Dickens' words, did not bring anything but misfortune to the English people, for Philip used every trick to convince Mary to declare war on France and therefore involve England in a war that only benefited Spanish interests. Dickens appeals for the young reader's complicity when he declares to be happy that Mary had an early death: "There was a bad fever raging in England at this time, and I am glad to write that the Queen took it, and the hour of her death came" (256).

Dickens reminds the young readership that Mary should be remembered as "Bloody Queen Mary". Her crime was both her repressive and cruel Catholicism and to allow herself to be badly influenced by her Spanish husband; that is to say, for her poor sense of patriotism. When Fletcher and Kipling analyse this convulsive period of English history in *A School History of England* sixty years after Dickens they change Mary's nationality by declaring that "she was Spanish at heart and never an Englishwoman" (1911:125), and that "like a Spaniard she was vindictive, and, unfortunately, she had deep wrongs to avenge" (125). This English queen nationalised Spanish by Fletcher and Kipling shares the typical Spanish temperamental characteristics: she is cruel and vindictive. They believed her reign of five years and four months to be "the greatest tragedy in our history" (125).

Back to Dickens. During Elizabeth I's reign the Spaniards' annoying presence appears again in the figure of a mysterious young man with the surname of Savage who unsuccessfully attempts against the queen's life (1851-53:270). Needless to say, according to Dickens, Savage is a Spaniard (despite the little Spanishness that the surname depicts). However, Elizabethan and Protestant England's main enemies at the

time were Philip II and his Armada. Naturally Dickens omits any reference to the English pirates and their attacks on the Spanish galleons coming from America or Elizabeth's appliance of the death penalty on her cousin Mary Queen of Scots. Spain's attack on England through her Armada in 1588 is described as having a merely religious purpose. He states that the Spanish king was trying to invade England to impose his religion on Queen Elizabeth and on her people: "Philip, King of Spain, however, threatened to do greater things than ever had done yet, to set up the Catholic religion and punish Protestant England" (273).

The Armada enterprise represents the highest point of the despicable relations existing between England and Spain. Dickens describes the Spanish fleet as a colossus of twelve kilometres of width that advances forming the shape of a half moon, a subtle reference to Spain's "Turk" past. The novelist narrates the various navy battles that took place in the English Channel emphasising the English soldier's bravery and above all Drake's ingenuity and popularity. The adjectives first employed by Dickens to refer to the Spanish Armada are "proud" and "invincible" (274), which turn into "disgraced" and "defeated" (288) a few pages later. After the collapse of the Armada, Spaniards are described by the novelist as "resentful" and "great fools" (290). Fletcher and Kipling (1911:136-37) insist on the fact that the English were fighting the right cause and that the Spanish proved to be inefficient in the organisation of the Armada enterprise and too happy to flee whenever they came across efficient English military skills, despite the fact that the Spanish fleet was double the size of the English *Royal* navy (132). "Our country, and, with her, the great cause of freedom and Protestantism, were saved. Spain was now known to be mainly a bugbear to frighten children", they write (137).

The image of Spain that Dickens tried to convey to his young readership is that of a country full of the following vices: ambitious for their persistent conquering inclination, obsessively religious, ungrateful and treacherous, cruel and vindictive, naïve and to some extent even cowardly. Never in the whole book does Dickens use a single adjective that denotes any admiration or justice towards a country whose political, cultural and military hegemony had in her years of glory been unquestioned. This negative opinion of all things Spanish remained fairly unmovable throughout the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1911, in a pre-Great War atmosphere of patriotism, the school history written by Fletcher and Kipling did not fail to present similar negative traits of Spain.

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<sup>i</sup> I have used the undated London edition of Odhams Press Limited, illustrated by Marcus Stone and J. Mahony.

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