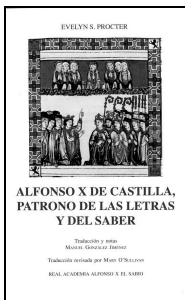




Alfonso X de Castilla, patrono de las letras y del saber



Evelyn S. Procter, *Alfonso X de Castilla, patrono de las letras y del saber*. Traducción y notas por Manuel González Jiménez; traducción revisada por Mary O'Sullivan. Murcia: Real Academia Alfonso X el Sabio, 2003. ISBN: 84-88996-76-4

After all the attention the many facets of the reign of Alfonso X and his omnivorous intellectual appetite have received since 1951, it may seem remarkable that a slim volume on the subject published by an English lady—a *very* English lady—in that year should be thought to merit a translation into Spanish in the year 2003. Yet, for all the scholarly sophistication (not to say mystification) that codicologists and students of science, history and just about everything else have lavished on the enigmatic monarch over the intervening half-century, Evelyn Procter's study of the man retains its freshness still – arguably indeed, and paradoxically, a freshness sharper even than her *Curia and Cortes in León and Castile 1072-1295* possessed at the time of its posthumous publication in 1980. By the lights of her time, Miss Procter's

own history was remarkable too. That an Oxford spinster should have chosen medieval Spain as a subject for research just after the First World War, and (even if she ventured no further afield) have taken her chances in the state archives of Barcelona, Lisbon, Madrid and Pamplona, rather than devoting herself to the edition of an English bishop's register or the relative security of the Public Records Office speaks volumes. 'Mujer de apariencia tímida' she may have been, as her translator reports in the *Presentación* to this elegant little book, but she could prove obdurate too, as the custodians of the Sección de Manuscritos of the Biblioteca Nacional discovered when they tried to frighten her off with horror stories about there being no ladies' lavatories in the building, and as the Principal of St Hugh's College needed to be in the man's world that Oxford was after 1945. Though on the small number of occasions on which I met her she was dry-eyed, legend had it that she was very good at turning on the waterworks and melting the petrified hearts of her male colleague. As Shakespeare's Desdemona sang, 'Her salt tears fell from her, and soften'd the stones.' And, more than that, she was clear-minded, as academic administrators were once upon a time, and ever-conscious of the need to distinguish wheat from chaff and wood from trees. Hence perhaps what stands out as one of the principal virtues of her *Alfonso X of Castile, Patron of Literature and Learning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951): its expository quality. (And be it remembered, the book started life as the Norman Maccoll Lectures in the University of Cambridge for the year 1948-49, and there can be no exercise more demanding for a scholar wrestling with a complex subject, even an Oxford scholar, than that of having to organize his or her thoughts into a form intelligible to a Cambridge lecture audience.) That particular virtue of her cautiously stated account remains scarcely less admirable than her acknowledgement of the need to seek to reconcile the various aspects of her protean subject. Many are the more recent toilers in the field of Alfonsine studies who might have profited by taking her correspondence course. Time and again – as for example in her identification of the different components of the *Crónica de Alfonso X* – she demonstrated that texts long in print can be made to yield their secrets to an acute and uncluttered intelligence. Finally, just consider how poverty-stricken the English-language literature on the

subject was at the time at which Miss Procter entered the fray: little more than translations of Mariana and Altamira's chapters in the old *Cambridge Medieval History*, which were not by Altamira anyway.¹ Of course her work is dated now, as Professor González Jiménez indicates with the assistance of some more recent bibliography. But after fifty years whose work isn't? That is not the point. The point—and the reason why, whatever textual advances may meanwhile have been made in Madison WI. and points east, this translation of her *Alfonso X* is so warmly to be welcomed—is that hers is history that lives.

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¹ As the Cambridge University Press eventually discovered to its horror, they were largely plagiarized work by A. González Palencia to whom the Great Man had delegated his commission. See my 'The Making of the *Cambridge Medieval History*'. *Speculum*, 57 (1982) [repr. Peter Linehan, *Past and Present in Medieval Spain*, Aldershot 1992], pp. 479-81.