

The Moor's Last Stand: How Seven Centuries of Muslim Rule in Spain Came to an End by Elizabeth Drayson

The expulsion of the Moors from Spain ended a great empire, says Gerard DeGroot

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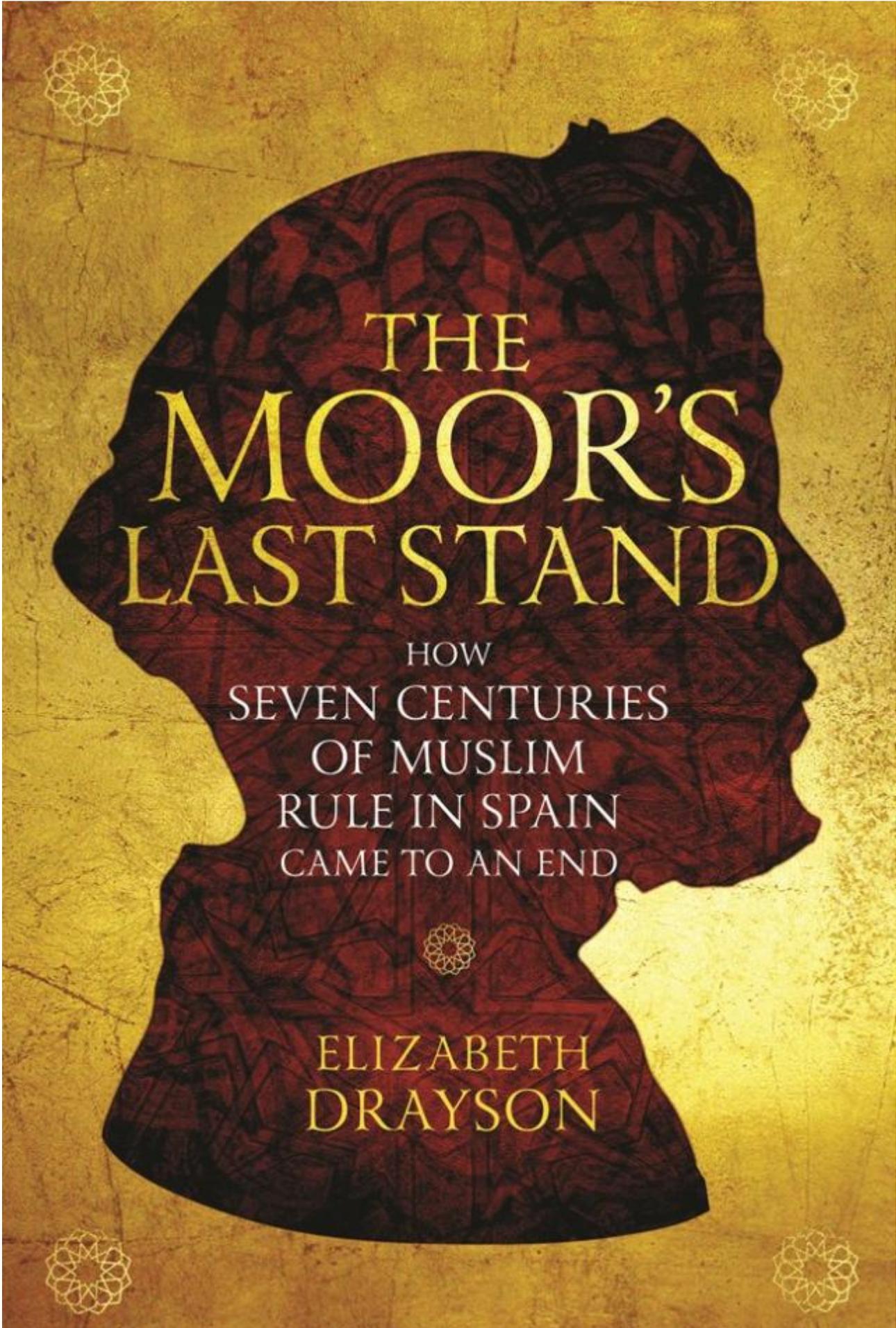
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A 14th-century depiction of Boabdil, the last Moorish king of Granada
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ELIZABETH
DRAYSON

On January 2, 1492, Boabdil, the last Sultan of Granada, handed the keys of the Moorish capital to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. “These are the keys of paradise,” he said. The carefully choreographed event symbolised the epochal transformation of Granada from Islamic state to Christian possession.

Shortly afterwards, Boabdil departed the city with his mother, Aixa. When he reached Padul, the farthest point from which Granada can still be seen, he turned towards his former home, sighed heavily and burst into tears. His mother, with typical venom, spat: “You do well, my son, to cry like a woman for what you couldn’t defend like a man.”

How should we judge the tears of a sultan? The incident of the Last Sigh has often been used to demonise Boabdil. Heroes, apparently, are not supposed to cry. The consensus of opinion agrees with Aixa, casting her son as weakling, coward or traitor. In truth, that incident at Padul was probably mere invention, a fabricated denouement to a preconceived tale of humiliation.

As Elizabeth Drayson writes: “The fall of Granada was of such magnitude . . . that a mythical story was needed to explain, accept or legitimate the immense upheavals the conquest brought about.” Boabdil’s reputation has been manipulated to suit the message that chroniclers have wanted to convey.

“We might think that a man conquered and accused of treason could never be a hero,” Drayson argues, “but Boabdil may prove an exception.” His heroism, she feels, lies in recognising the futility of resistance and thus saving his people from slaughter and starvation at the hands of their Christian conquerors. He willingly colluded with Ferdinand and Isabella to secure the best terms of surrender. He saw no glory in annihilation, no virtue in martyrdom. Boabdil willingly sacrificed his reputation so that his people could survive. In today’s warped perception, a Muslim who scorns martyrdom is an intriguing concept.

Ignominy is often inversely proportional to glory — the higher one reaches, the farther one falls. Boabdil was the end point of a magnificent empire that lasted 700 years and once stretched from Malaga to the Pyrenees. It had all the characteristics of a modern state — a single language, a single religion, a well-organised government. The 10th-century Cordoba had paved roads, street lighting and more than 70 well-stocked libraries at a time when London was a warren of fetid, dark and disease-ridden streets. The Moors were also models of religious tolerance; Muslim, Christian and Jew lived together in harmony, or *convivencia*.

By the time the Nasrid dynasty emerged in the early 13th century, that glorious empire had begun a slow decline. The Nasrid clan was a feuding, cantankerous family, short on filial loyalty and inclined to violence when disputes over the line of succession arose. Sultans came and went at a dizzying pace as nephews fought uncles and fathers sons. One of Boabdil’s earliest memories was watching his father attack his grandfather with a knife. Amid this turmoil, the humane values that had once characterised Moorish Spain began to evaporate.

After stabbing the wrong royals, al-Jarbi was overpowered and hacked to pieces

Nasrid fortunes were further imperilled by the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon to Isabella of Castille in 1469. When their respective grandfathers died ten years later, the two kingdoms were united and a powerful nation emerged. Ferdinand was the model of the Machiavellian prince — a man whose avuncular nature camouflaged ruthless ambition and devious intent.

He and Isabella were bent on destroying Muslim Granada, an ambition that had the blessing of Pope Julius II.

Boabdil, who became sultan in 1482, was keen to resist Ferdinand's aggression, but painfully aware of the futility of doing so. By this stage, Moorish Spain had shrunk to an enclave around Granada and was no match for Aragon and Castile. Boabdil's fortunes plummeted farther when he was captured by Ferdinand in 1483 and forced to bargain with his nemesis to secure release. He became, in effect, a vassal of Ferdinand, who kept Boabdil's son Ahmed hostage for the next nine years to ensure compliance.

Among the Moors, Boabdil became the scapegoat for Nasrid weakness. Thus, family feuding made Ferdinand's task even easier. He was a brilliant military strategist, but also a patient one. Towns and villages in Al-Andalus were methodically captured until, by 1491, Ferdinand's troops were in sight of Granada. Rather than meet the Moors head-on, he preferred to starve them into submission, destroying the crops in the fields surrounding Granada. Worried that his troops might become vulnerable as winter approached, he built a new town to provide them accommodation. Villages farther away were razed to build Santa Fe, erected in just 11 weeks from recycled masonry.

Boabdil was inclined to negotiate, but many of his compatriots preferred to fight. Among them was Ibrahim al-Jarbi, a holy man from Tunisia, who decided to assassinate Ferdinand and Isabella. His plot was foiled due to a case of mistaken identity — speaking no Castilian and having no idea what the king and queen looked like, he attacked the first well-dressed couple he encountered. After stabbing the wrong royals, al-Jarbi was overpowered and hacked to pieces. His body parts were hurled back at the Moors using a siege catapult. In thrall to martyrs, the Moors sewed al-Jarbi back together with silk thread and gave him a sacred burial.

There were many like al-Jarbi, but few like Boabdil. *The Moor's Last Stand* is the tragic story of a refined young sultan who had the courage not to fight, a man scorned for his refusal to embrace futility. This is a short book, but it does not need to be long to do justice to Boabdil's life and to illuminate the lessons he offers. It is rare today to find a historian with a talent for brevity. In just 180 pages Drayson tells an enthralling and terribly sad story, while forcing the reader to reflect on the nature of heroism.

There's an intriguing immediacy to these events that happened more than 500 years ago. Drayson sees Boabdil as "a last stand against religious intolerance, fanatical power and cultural ignorance", a poignant lesson about "violence and prejudice between Muslims and Christians".

The conquest of the Moors is often carelessly labelled progress. Yet to do so is to adopt the prejudice of the early Christians who believed that Muslims were violent brutes, descendants of the murderer Cain. Boabdil, however, contradicted that stereotype. He perceived no virtue in violence. His demise was more calamity than good fortune. The year 1492 is generally seen as a beginning. We should spare a thought for what ended.

***The Moor's Last Stand: How Seven Centuries of Muslim Rule in Spain Came to an End,* by Elizabeth Drayson, Profile, 224pp, £17.99**