Spain’s golden age

Global power

Spain: The Centre of the World 1519-1682.

By Robert Goodwin. Bloomsbury; 587 pages;

$40 and £30

H

ABSBURG Spain in the 16th century

was the world’s first global super-

power, with an empire stretching east

across most of Europe to the Philippines

and India and west across the Atlantic to

the Americas. It was an age of expansion

and cultural efflorescence and ended with

Spain’s steep decline from which it never

fullyrecovered.

Robert Goodwin’s new book begins

with the arrival in Seville in 1519 of the

Santa María, the first ship to reach Europe

from the newly conquered coast of Mexi-

co, laden with such riches that “there was

no other ballast than gold”, and ends in

1682 with Juan Valdés Leal’s gruesome

painting“In Ictu Oculi” (“In the Twinkling

of an Eye”), an allegory of death—and for

the author a perfect symbol for the “end

times” ofSpanish imperialism.

Mr Goodwin, a research fellow at Uni-

versityCollege London, hasmined deep in

the archives and produced a wealth of

wonderfully evocative and offbeat detail

that is both scholarly and accessible to the

general reader. The most coveted office in

the monarchy’s Privy Chamber was

Groom of the Stool, who attended on the

king’sdefecation and looked afterthe royal

chamberpot. The physical closenessnatu-

rally led this most intimate of courtiers to

become someone in whom much confi-

dence was placed and with whom many

royal secretswere shared.

The author’scastofprotagonistsduring

this Counter-Reformation period when

costly wars were waged against Protestant

heretic enemies, most notably the Dutch,

includesthe chronicallyill mysticSt Teresa

ofAvila, who believed thateverytime she

heard a thunderclap God was communi-

cating with her soul, and Sister María de

Ágreda, the closest confidante ofFelipe IV,

who claimed to be in two places at the

same time (evangelisingIndianswhile she

was asleep). The Inquisition’s torturers

forced a strip of linen down a suspected

heretic’s throat, held the victim’s mouth

open by an iron plug and poured water

slowly, causing a sensation ofsuffocation.

The method was later abandoned in

favour of more “merciful” treatment.

Waterboardingwasa scandal longbefore it

came to the fore in the administration of

George W. Bush.

In the most fascinating section, Mr

Goodwin explores the paradox ofa possi-

ble correlation between the artisticand lit-

erary splendours of the Golden Age and

political decadence. As well as the imperi-

al victories recorded in magnificent paint-

ings, includingDiego Velázquez’s“The Sur-

render of Breda” and Titian’s “Equestrian

PortraitofCharlesV” (pictured), there were

the dark monk paintings of Francisco de

Zurbarán, the plays ofLope de Vega, Tirso

de Molina and Calderón de la Barca, the

poetry of Góngora and the sacred made

real in the lifelike images ofChrist, carved

in wood, for Holy Weekprocessions in Se-

ville, which todayare a touristattraction.

Mr Goodwin cleverly weaves into his

own narrative the social observations in

“Don Quixote” by Miguel de Cervantes,

widely regarded as the father of the mod-

ern novel. Don Quixote’s enthusiasm for

the heroics of the romances of chivalry

mirrorsthe greatexploitsofthe Spanish in

Europe and the New World, whereas his

gradual disillusionmentin the second part

ofthe bookcould reflecta sense ofdecline.

Like Cervantes’s hero, Spain’s elite had

become deluded and had lost touch with

reality. By the end of the 17th century the

empire had become overstretched on al-

mosteveryfront, while the vastquantities

of precious metals pouring into Spain

caused massive inflation. The fall in the

value of these riches led to unpopular in-

creasesin taxation and massive borrowing

to sustain the empire. The English and the

Dutch were taking over; the new spur to

globalisation wasinter-imperial rivalry.