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Philip II is a fascinating and enigmatic figure in Spanish history, but it was his letrados--professional bureaucrats and ministers trained in law--who made his vast castilian empire possible. In Juan de Ovando, Stafford Poole traces the life and career of a key minister in the king's government to explore the role that letrados played in Spanish society as they sought to displace the higher nobility in the administration through a system based upon merit.

Juan de Ovando was an industrious, discerning, and loyal servant, yet, like all letrados, he owed his position to royal favor. Ovando began his career as an ecclesiastical judge and inquisitor in Seville. From there, at the king's order, he undertook the reform of the University of Alcalá de Henares, one of his most enduring achievements. Appointed then to the supreme council of the Spanish Inquisition, Ovando was commissioned to investigate the Council of the Indies, over which he eventually presided. In this role, Ovando began codifying laws and collecting information about Spain's overseas possessions through the famed Relaciones geográficas--wide-ranging surveys of daily life in the New World. He devised long-term and forward-looking colonial policies for New Spain while, also serving as president of the Council of Finance, he sought to bring order to Spain's chaotic financial situation.

Poole's biography of Juan de Ovando provides an intimate view of the day-to-day influence letrados wielded over the Spanish colonial machine.