



The Correspondence of Asturian emigrants at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries: the case of José Moldes

Castropol, 8 April 1874

Dear mama: I take up my pen to show you my route from here to Coruña; so far thanks be to God I have lacked for nothing here, we are intending to make the trip on Friday; we will rent a carriage in Castropol, we are all well. I send greetings to everyone who asks after me and a kiss for my brothers and sisters and especially Florentino and finally to you with all my heart from a dear son W(ho) K(isses) Y(our) H(and).

José Moldes.¹

When José Moldes, then 14 years old, wrote this letter to his parents to tell them he was travelling to Coruña to take ship for Puerto Rico, he could not have imagined that it would end up in our hands 130 years later. We have 121 other letters of his, written over a 50-year period, the last one dated ten days before his death. This epistolary collection, quite exceptional for a single author, forms the basis of my presentation, which also draws on testimony from other Asturian emigrants. Thanks to what José has left us we can reconstruct the essential experience of one of millions of emigrants, and analyse the material, graphic and linguistic features of his correspondence.

1. Emigration from the Asturias

José, like so many other young Asturians, left his native province in search of a better future. Between 1830 and 1930, about 300,000 departed from this northern Spanish region, and from 1880 onwards, Asturian emigration became a mass phenomenon. The rate of departures was maintained until about 1930, with the preferred destinations being countries like Cuba, Argentina and Mexico.

The majority of emigrants were young bachelors with a family history of migration. They travelled to America at an early age: for decades almost all were boys and adolescents between 13 and 15 years old, who clearly could not have taken such a decision of their own free will.² In the 20th century, however, their average age increased to between 18 and 24.

Asturian migrants were frequently involved in agricultural work, and consequently departures tended to be concentrated in the period after the harvest, especially between September and December. This, moreover, was the time when many other seasonal workers came home – weavers, quarry-workers, labourers – and could contribute some of their recently-earned wages to the cost of the journey.³ They generally came from the working classes and the lower middle class. The departure of one or more family members involved a financial investment beyond the reach of more modest families. It has been estimated, for example, that around 1910, a third-class passage to Chile cost 800-850 pesetas.⁴ For this reason they needed to have at least a little property to mortgage in order to support the emigrant's expenses, in the hope that, once in his new destination, he could repay their sacrifices.

The majority did not come back. A large number found work in the Americas, in trade, industry or banking, and managed to achieve an acceptable standard of living. Some were lucky enough to build a great future for themselves and their families. But fate did not smile on everyone: the ‘indianos de maleta al agua’, whose plans did not succeed, returned in poverty, sometimes secretly and at night. The emigrants who did not make their fortune were also known as ‘jamjar Americans (americanos de pote)’ or ‘black-edged Americans’. To avoid causing any suffering, their insecurity and the harshness of their work could never be communicated to their loved ones, especially not their parents. Often the frankest accounts and complaints were reserved for their brothers and friends, as in the case of Ceferino Rodríguez in Cuba, who told his friend Manuel Suárez, living in Cancienes (Asturias), of the harsh conditions in which the migrants lived:

I am 20 and still I have had no time to think about whether I am a young man, a boy, or an old man, but now I think I am none of these three things. If I was young, I would be enjoying myself as all young men do, if I was a boy I wouldn't be responsible for anything, and if I was old I wouldn't have to work. So what am I, then? A slave.⁵

2. Writing to survive

When the first wave of Spanish emigrants left, conditions for success in the new life which awaited them were not favourable. In 1860, the first Spanish census to provide data on literacy showed Spain's relative backwardness: 80 per cent of the population

were illiterate (this includes those able only to read).⁶ The Asturias was an important part of literate Spain, with illiteracy rates here always below the national average. Asturian illiteracy was gradually reduced between 1887 and 1930 from 59% to 15%. Nevertheless, in accordance with nationwide trends, the proportion of illiterate women was much higher than that for men. In 1887, 35% of Asturian men could neither read nor write, nor could 77% of women. By 1930, there had been significant progress: 8% of men were illiterate and 21% of women.

Although literacy rates favoured single men, who were the main agents in the emigration process, a large number had to face the experience without even the basic ability to read and write.⁷ For many of them leaving Spain was the first time they felt the need to resort to pen and paper. Separation from family and friends exposed their limited ability to maintain links with home via correspondence, and gave them a sense of their own lack of education as a personal handicap. When the wave of mass migration began, they soon became aware of their deficiencies in this respect. Even if at the outset they had no serious problem finding work, difficulties would arise eventually because they lacked basic literacy. This was especially a problem when they tried to improve their working situation and to maintain contact with family and friends.

We should not forget that a large number of emigrants left home as children or adolescents, so that many could not have completed their primary education, if they had even started it. Alfonso Camín recalled his schooling around 1910 in his memoirs:

In school in Ceares (Asturias), I learned many lessons fluently which have been of no use to me ever since. Perhaps it wasn't the teacher's fault, perhaps it was mine and certainly that of my family, who nagged my teacher so that I would make very rapid progress, and get on a boat to cross the Atlantic as soon as possible, and see Havana.⁸

Other more fortunate migrants managed to acquire just enough skill to trace a few lines or handle some rudimentary mathematics, either before they left or in their destination country. Only a few enjoyed a good education, which enabled them to rise quickly.

Suddenly torn from their surroundings, they discovered writing was fundamental for communicating with family and friends. If the emigrant was too illiterate to send them any news of himself, loved ones might think he had disappeared. Juaco López tells the heart-rending story of one illiterate emigrant who saved the letters he received from his sister and his niece, although he could not read them until he found another migrant who could do so for him. His family interpreted the absence of news from him as a sign that he had died.⁹ For some emigrants, America offered not only work but also an opportunity to acquire basic literacy skills. On many occasions, 'an emergency literacy' was hurriedly put to use. The rush to learn by copying and imitating models produced a form of mimetic literacy, generating a few set clichés rather than a truly personal writing style.¹⁰

Several saw the need for action in the home country to prevent young people from leaving in the same state of illiteracy or semi-literacy in which they themselves had undertaken the journey. Generally speaking, emigrants were supporters of education in the Asturias between 1870 and the outbreak of the Civil War.¹¹ There was plenty of scope for private initiatives from migrant sponsors because the state had not yet assumed responsibility for education.

Many emigrants placed huge emphasis on cultural development. They had a hand in setting up a large number of schools, and often they had in mind the young men who intended to emigrate, knowing that reading, writing and counting would be useful to them.¹² This promotion of schooling also obeyed the imperative to provide a more modern, practical and sometimes secular education, although foundations also existed under the direction of religious orders. This migrant contribution was fundamental in the creation of a network of primary schools in the Asturias.¹³ No other group – including trade unions, aristocratic and bourgeois initiatives - made such an important contribution to education in the region.

3. José's Letters

José Moldes' 122 letters are preserved among the Moldes-Barreras family papers in the Museo del Pueblo de Asturias in Gijón. I will begin by outlining the general characteristics of the corpus. Then, I will examine three examples in more depth, from the point of view of the history of scribal culture. I will focus on several aspects of the letters, and their evolution in relation to their author's life.

The Moldes-Barreras family settled near Castropol in the western Asturias. They sent three sons to America – José, Florentino and Benigno. They first went to Puerto Rico, then later to Chile where the first two finally stayed, while Benigno settled in Buenos Aires. In Chile, José and Florentino took advantage of the favourable situation they encountered on their arrival, acquired different businesses connected with the saltpetre mining industry, like grocery stores, and re-invested their profits in various companies. When their economic situation improved and stabilised, they often travelled to their home country and settled in Spain to send their sons to school there. Their sons, and their brothers' sons, would make up the next generation of emigrants, but without the same success.

The archive in the Museo del Pueblo de Asturias tells us a great deal about the family. The documents refer to the period from 1818 up to 1979, but most data is concentrated in the last third of the 19th and the first third of the 20th centuries. The records of this period tell us about five different generations, with the middle three most strongly represented. Correspondence makes up a substantial part of the archive, with over 300 letters.

José's letters form an important part of the Moldes family's personal correspondence. The elder brother was a good writer as witnessed by the 120 or more surviving letters. They are in good physical condition, almost all legible and complete. They are quantitatively significant, and they cover a wide chronological span from 1874 to 1921. Although we don't know his exact date of birth, we can deduce from data in the letters that he was born around 1860.¹⁴ Since he died in November 1921 when he was about 61, we can say that he left written traces of almost his entire life.

Most of his letters were addressed to his brother Florentino. Only eight were sent to his parents. This can be explained by the nature of the corpus itself, composed as it is of documents copied by Florentino. It thus provides a representative sample of the correspondence he received throughout his life, although there is a more intense focus on certain family members. When Florentino settled definitively in Castropol in about 1909, he recovered a few of the letters that his parents had received. We can guess, considering what José tells us in his own letters and his great writing capacity, that José would have written many more letters than this.

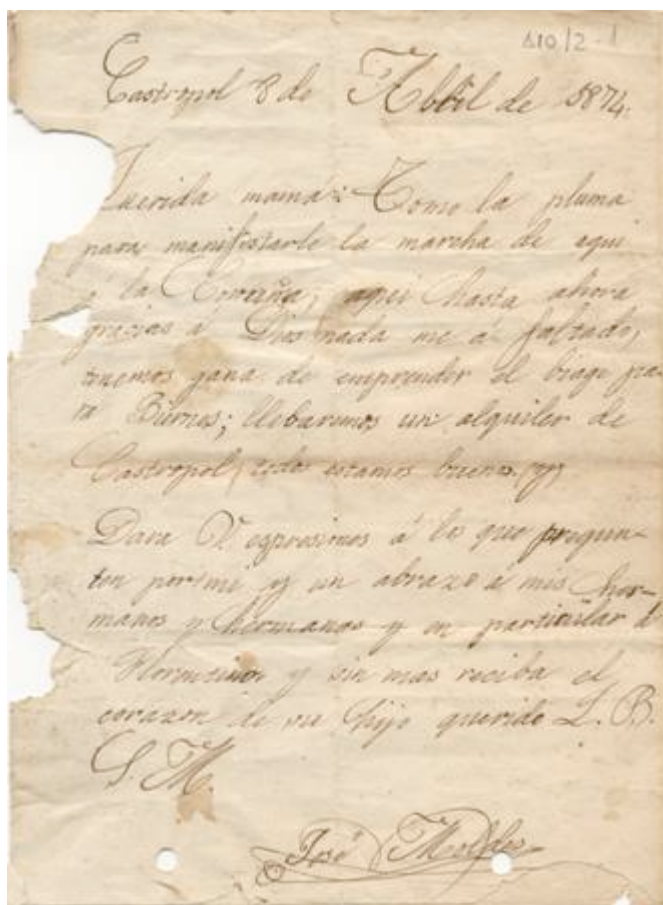
Another important aspect of this epistolary corpus is its distribution over time.

Normally, the first letters written after departure are the longest and are sent at a faster rhythm. As time passes, the new life ceases to be a novelty and becomes a routine, a new family is established and the letters become shorter and the intervals between them longer, to the extent sometimes of losing contact with one's original family. In this corpus, however, the early years yield the least number of letters, and letter-writing actually increases 25 years after emigration. On one hand, this might reflect José's youthful inexperience and insecurity about writing, since each letter required an elaborate effort on his part. On the other hand, the hazardous process of loss and preservation may have played a role, and perhaps many letters written in those early years have simply been lost.

In general, José Moldes' letters are distinguished 1) by their plentiful narratives, giving detailed accounts of all sorts of events which concerned both himself and those around him; 2) by their fidelity, as shown by the consistent rhythm he maintained wherever he happened to be; 3) by their length, since his letters usually filled many

pages; 4) by the familiarity and deep feeling that he communicated; and 5) by his capacity for rich introspection in describing his own life. Certainly, some of these qualities could never have developed unless he had had a respondent at his own level. Florentino, always hungry for news and an avid reader, enlivened the exchanges between them.

3.1. The first letters



Letter n. 1

Although José's surviving letters are full of external details, they are eminently personal and fulfilled an intimate need. He understood the importance of the written word right from the start of his separation from the family group. Even before

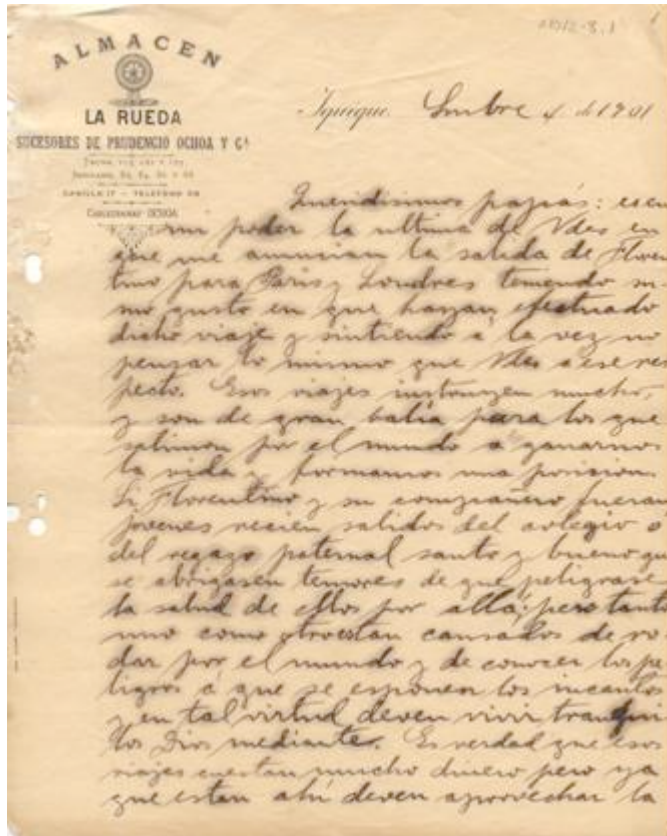
embarking for America he told his parents about the steps he had taken. His correspondence begins with Letter No.1. As testimony of a young man leaving home, it shows the emotion of a son writing to his mother and his need to keep his loved ones informed about what was happening to him.

These first attempts reveal the writing of a novice. Letter No.1 is among the shortest of the corpus. José must have been about 14 at this time and already he was capable of writing quite correctly, taking special care and composing capital letters very well. His ability was even better than in later letters, because he showed good alignment and ligatures, without isolating or displacing his letters.¹⁵ His graphical competence was the fruit of a school education which was no doubt reinforced in his case by his mother who was a schoolteacher. Although there are a few spelling mistakes (*biaje*, *biernes*, *espresiones*) the rules are certainly observed. He possessed an acceptable expressive ability and grammatical knowledge, even if the flow is interrupted, as we can see in line 8, where he writes ‘(y)’, no doubt thinking of adding something but then not doing so. But he avoids crossings out and there are no ink-stains. On the verso, he began to write the date but then hesitated over the month, turned the paper round and started again. In addition, he knew how to structure his letter appropriately. Note that he divides it clearly into several parts; date, greeting, text, farewell and signature.

Even though the paper is not lined, he could write straight and maintain consistent spacing between the lines, possibly assisted by a ruler as was usual. Moreover, he used wider spacing at the beginning, between the two paragraphs and before the

farewell, showing skill at laying out the page. He is equally consistent in his use of margins, which are a little fuller on the left.¹⁶

3.2. The mature writing



Letter n. 2

We jump forward in time to 1901. Now José is in his forties. He is prosperous and well-established in Chile. As for his personal life, he has been married to Lucila Gallego for four years and they have two sons.

In Letter no.2 we can detect a mature hand.¹⁷ Although this letter carries traces of the standard instruction he received, it presents a more personal *ductus*, especially noticeable in the formation of capital letters. The characters are uniformly shaped, a

feature which appears throughout his letters. As for his spelling, there remain some question marks about his use of *b* and *v* (he writes *deven* for *deben*), and his use of *x* (*esponen* for *exponen*), but there are far fewer mistakes than previously. His word separation is correct with rare exceptions and he has much greater control over his punctuation. Previously his paragraphs grew longer as he added parts of the narrative, but in this case José organises his story more confidently, using different punctuation marks, including the semi-colon which did not appear in his earlier writing.

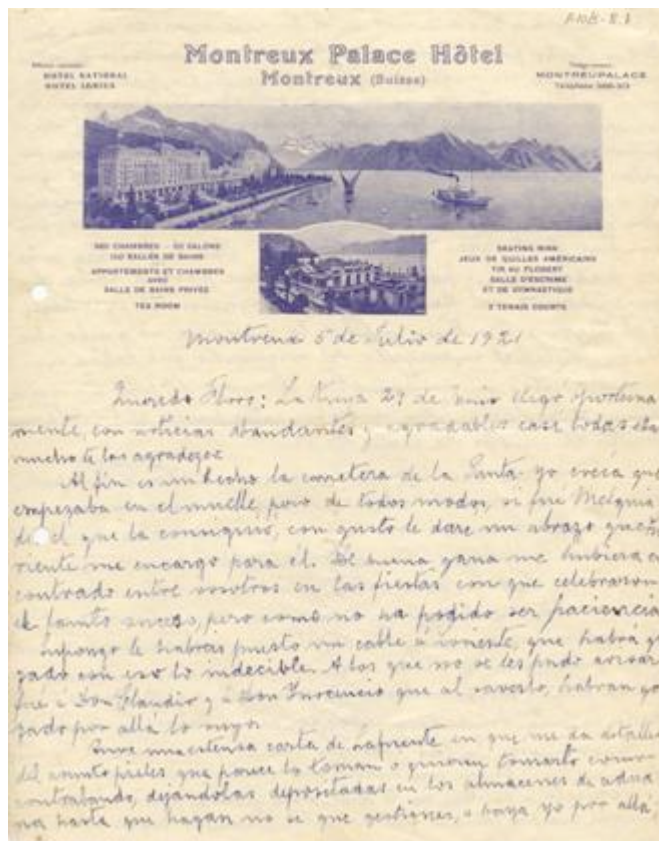
The passage of time has also influenced his education. Although his vocabulary was initially limited, at this stage of his life he is skilled at deploying a wide range of words and connecting terms. His narrative is well-organised and not excessively repetitive, so that he addresses each theme one by one in order of importance. This ability to organise his text and enrich his vocabulary was helped by the intense exchange of letters which he maintained, because writing was a daily practice at work, and he was interested in maintaining the habit of reading, especially newspapers.

In this particular example, José filled four pages. This was about the average length of his letters, which, as I pointed out, were long. The paper is lined and carries the letterhead of the warehouse where he started work in 1894. The structure of the letter followed the pattern we have already noted, but the farewell occupies more space. Besides sending greetings to all the family in the Asturias, he used this part to relieve his mother of this job given her advanced age.

José's role in the family had changed. Although his parents were still alive at this point, they were very old and, as the eldest brother, he became the head of the family

even though he was thousands of kilometres away. This is clear in the tone he adopts in Letter no.2, giving advice, comforting his parents and resolving some domestic problems.

3.3. Last Writings



Letter n. 3

I mentioned previously that the number of surviving letters grew as his death approached. In general, testimony from this period covers some of the themes already dealt with. But as well as dwelling more specifically on his and his family's social life, he becomes sad for his home country and prepared to help his brother Florentino financially. He seems to have travelled more in these last years and up to a short time

before his death he continued to visit Chile. Letter no.3 is representative of the letters of José's final years, composed four months before his death, and sent from Montreux (Switzerland) where José was holidaying with his family.¹⁸

His handwriting has clearly deteriorated. It has lost its fluency and spontaneity. His writing is less confident, many characters remain open and they are formed less regularly. His cursive style has almost disappeared. Normally age has an adverse affect on writing, as eyesight weakens or declining motor skills make it difficult to use a pen. Age, however, has not affected his spelling, syntax or expressive skills.

The text is clearly structured. The themes are coherently linked and he addresses different subjects one by one. These last letters show most frequent trace of linguistic expressions particular to Chilean Spanish (such as *por acá*, line 24). This letter has a letterhead with an image and information from the hotel where he is staying. He maintains a consistent spacing and clear arrangement of the text, which in this last period becomes more densely packed. Blank spaces disappear, although the paragraphs are well-indented, and his writing slopes as he tries to keep a straight line. The opening consists of a few brief lines in which he reports having received an earlier letter from Florentino. The farewell is more concise, just mentioning his brother's family, and the signature shows his nickname.

In this example, as in so many throughout José's correspondence, he shows great interest in accumulating and passing on information in profuse detail. In fact he has a constant and sometimes exaggerated need for news of this kind, but it is his way of keeping up to date with a world that is growing more distant each day.

Like many other documents, the letter is defined by its author, his narrative style, his language, expressions, handwriting and so on. All this denotes a certain social and cultural system. As this presentation has shown, José's correspondence evolved in parallel with his life story. The words and the content of his letters developed a narrative complexity which reflected his own life course. His personal and cultural development enabled him to adapt his text to the needs of the moment. The most personal aspects of the letters ensured their author's survival, an impression which is reinforced when we confront all his writings gathered together at once. His words captured living moments and give us a glimpse into his world as an adolescent or as an adult. This is how one epistolary manual of the period sums it up:

To know an individual it is enough to read his private correspondence, because he always leaves something of his spirit in what he writes.¹⁹

[Translated by Martyn Lyons]

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¹ José Moldes to his mother Adela Taramundi. Museo del Pueblo de Asturias (MPA), Fondo de la familia Moldes-Barreras, A10/2-1.

² Pedro Gómez, *La emigración a América y otras emigraciones (Llanes 1830-1950)*, Llanes (El Oriente de Asturias - Temas Llanes no.96), 2000, pp. 34-35 & 106-10.

³ Ibid., pp.96-97.

⁴ Jesús María Risquez Alfonzo & Melchor Ordóñez, *Cartilla del emigrante*, Madrid (Imprenta de los hijos de M.G. Hernández), 1910, p.29.

⁵ Ceferino Rodríguez (Media Luna, Cuba) to Manuel Suárez (Cancienes), 26 Jan 1926, MPA, fondo de la familia Suárez Roza, A1/17-2.

⁶ Mercedes Vilanova Ribas & Xavier Moreno Juliá, *Atlas de la evolución del analfabetismo en España de 1887 a 1981*, Madrid (Centro de Publicaciones del Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, CIDE), 1992, p. 62.

⁷ Ibid., p. 52.

⁸ Alfonso Camín, *Entre manzanos. Niñez por duros caminos*, Gijón (Ayuntamiento de Gijón), 1978, p. 289.

⁹ Juaco López Alvarez, 'Cartas desde América. La emigración de asturianos a través de la correspondencia, 1864-1925', *Revista de Dialectología y tradiciones populares*, LV, 1, 2000, p. 119.

¹⁰ Verónica Sierra Blas, '<Puentes de papel>: Apuntes sobre las escrituras de la emigración', *Horizontes Antropológicos*, special issue on 'Cultura escrita e prácticas de leitura', 22, 2004, p. 129.

¹¹ Cosme Cuenca, Maria Fernanda Fernández & Jorge Hevia, *Escuelas de indios y emigrantes*, Gijón (Trea), 2003, p. 21.

¹² José Ignacio Gracia Noriega, *Indianos del Oriente de Asturias*, Oviedo (Servicio de Publicaciones del Principado de Asturias para la Fundación 'Archivo de Indianos'), 1987, p. 63.

¹³ Cuenca, Fernández & Hevia, *Escuelas de indios*, op.cit., p. 20.

¹⁴ José Moldes to his brother Florentino, 9 Jan 1920, MPA, familia Moldes-Barreras, A10/4-33.2).

¹⁵ For more on the common mistakes of inexperienced writers, see Rita Marquilhas, *A Faculdade das Letras. Lectura e escrita em Portugal no séc. XVII*, Lisboa (Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda), 2000, pp. 237-45.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 245.

¹⁷ José Moldes from Iquique to his parents in the Asturias, MPA, familia Moldes-Barreras, A10/2-8.

¹⁸ José Moldes from Montreux to his brother Florentino (location unknown), MPA, familia Moldes-Barreras, A10/5-8.

¹⁹ *El arte de escribir cartas*, Madrid (José Yagües Sanz), 1917, pp. 58-59.