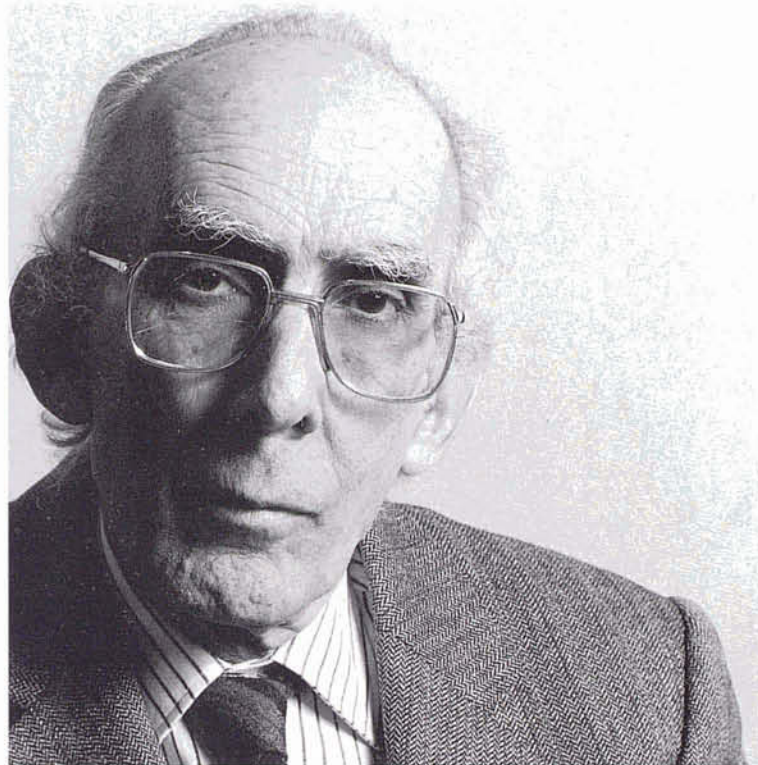


JOSEP BENET, A MAN FOR CATALONIA



THE HISTORIAN, POLITICIAN AND LAWYER JOSEP BENET I MORELL (*b.* CERVERA, 1920) WAS HONOURED ON 12 DECEMBER 1991 ON THE OCCASION OF HIS SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY. THE BOOK *MISCEL·LÀNIA D'HOMENATGE A JOSEP BENET*, PUBLISHED BY PUBLICACIONS DE L'ABADIA DE MONTSERRAT, WAS PRESENTED AT THE CELEBRATION, WHICH WAS HELD AT THE IL·LUSTRE COL·LEGI D'ADVOCATS DE BARCELONA. JOSEP BENET IS ONE OF THE MOST REPRESENTATIVE CATALANS IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE DICTATORSHIP AND THE RECOVERY OF CATALONIA'S DEMOCRATIC AND NATIONAL LIBERTIES. HIS COURAGEOUS DEFENCE OF OUR CULTURAL IDENTITY AND HIS RECOGNIZED MORAL AUTHORITY MAKE HIM AN EXEMPLARY FIGURE NOT ONLY FOR THE CATALANS BUT FOR ALL THOSE PEOPLES WHO ARE FIGHTING FOR THEIR DIGNITY. JOSEP BENET IS CURRENTLY DIRECTOR OF THE *CENTRE D'HISTÒRIA CONTEMPORÀNIA DE CATALUNYA*.



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Josep Benet is a key figure for understanding the character of contemporary Catalonia. Since the end of the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939, we find him involved in all the acts of opposition to the Franco dictatorship. A dictatorship which, amongst its undisguised objectives, apart from defending a society of privileges in the Spanish state in a country which was considerably backward as regards the rest of Europe, was set on making aggressive Spanish nationalism the basis of the cultural genocide of the Catalan language and culture.

—In 1939, as a young man, you and a few others carried on a dangerous struggle for the survival of Catalonia.

—Following the defeat as a consequence of the military occupation by General Franco's troops, a policy of cultural genocide was followed in Catalonia. General Franco's régime initially was totalitarian, established on the basis of the totalitarian régimes of the time, Nazism and Fascism. Democratic liberties were lost here as in the rest of Spain. International aid allowed the Franco régime an unconditional victory. You have to remember that the régimes that were later

to provoke World War II seemed indestructible; the danger was absolute.

—When did the first contacts take place with a joint plural opposition, other than individual moves?

—Most of the intellectual and even technical formations in Catalonia went into exile: to France, to many American countries and especially to Mexico. This is something that will leave its mark on the history of Catalonia for a long time, because most of these people died in exile. The Catalan language—which was banned in all public use—found refuge in

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these countries, mainly in the publication of books, magazines and newspapers.

—Before the military uprising, Catalonia was a country that had almost been normalized culturally.

—Yes, you could say that. As regards press, radio, translation, etc., it would be true to say that the Catalan world was that of a flourishing culture. Which makes this policy of cultural genocide even worse.

When World War II started, people who were active inside Catalonia in spite of the brutal repression of those years shared in the general idea that the Catalan problem was the same as all those others who were fighting for democratic freedom. That's why so many people active in the Resistance were arrested and sent to Nazi concentration camps, where thousands of them were to die. In other words, Catalanism didn't restrict itself to this country, it joined in democracy's fight against Nazi-Fascism.

—Has the Catalan national issue always manifested itself pacifically, by the way of integration?

—This has been a characteristic of its entire history. Political Catalanism, which was born more than a hundred years ago, has always shown solidarity for those peoples who demand their freedom. With Greece, for example, when Crete was fighting to free itself from the Turkish yoke, this provoked hostility on the part of Spanish nationalism, but also the fact that in Europe people realised that there was a very important national problem in Spain, and that unless it was solved there couldn't be a normal situation in the Spanish state. This was already obvious to *Le Journal de Genève* a hundred years ago, when it said that another European issue was that of Catalonia. The Catalan question has always been present to a greater or lesser extent in the international context.

—Has historical Catalanism always

looked to Northern Europe for its model?

—From the very beginning, Catalonia has always looked towards Europe. This has been so in all spheres. If we think of the art world, its centre was Paris, and not Madrid, obviously. The great names in Catalan painting made themselves known in Paris. Picasso, Miró, Casas, Nonell, etc. are proof that they went to Paris for consecration, the cultural capital of the world at that time. The same goes for literature.

—Without formal or democratic liberties, how did Catalonia manage to maintain a modern cultural level, with hostility from the state on top of everything else?

—Very often through translations, and later thanks to visits to Europe. A lot of people from the world of Catalan culture had never been to Madrid, but had strong links with Paris, where they went in search of more open-minded intellectual positions. You have to bear in mind that the participation of Catalan volunteers in World War I was for the same reason. In the French army, with the Belgian information services. Catalanism has always wanted to be present on the international scene.

—Is this behind its contacts with the international press?

—Of course. On one hand what we did was to join in the open fight of the allies against Fascism, of the resistance against the information services, and on the other, later on, to take advantage of these contacts to publicize the case of Catalonia.

—You were a key figure in this work.

—Perhaps so, because my work as a lawyer allowed it. At that time I was secretary to Fèlix Millet, one of the people with most international contacts. Remember that in the forties the only newspapers available came from Nazi-Fascist states. A newspaper as unrevolutionary as *La Croix* was banned. You can imagine the rest.

We had to pass out information on what was happening inside the country and bring in newspapers from outside so that people wouldn't come to accept what was happening as normal.

—As a broad-minded Republican Catholic, you were constantly trying to bring together the working-classes and the Church, which gradually grew away from the Franco régime.

—Yes. We wanted to publicize the case of Catalonia. We attended the International Congresses whenever we could. For example, I went to the talks organised by Florence City Council. At the same time, we found out what was happening in the world of ideas and told our people about it. All these international contacts made for contacts between members of all the parties. But we had great difficulty getting to the Vatican and giving them direct information about what Franco's dictatorship was and what its attitude was towards the Catalans. We were boycotted by Spanish prelates who were on Franco's side, and who from the state secretariat prevented our reports from getting through. We got round this censorship by means of the press. A Catalan, Monsignor Bonet, said to us, "the Pope reads *Le Monde* every day". After that, a lot of our efforts were directed at making sure this newspaper reported on



our situation. We avoided the Church being used against Catalonia. In all these years, not one Catalan bishop was appointed; the bishops that were appointed were not only outsiders, they were also Francoists. It was essential then to consolidate our contacts with the leading journalists of the international press. Which we did, to explain the truth about the situation in Catalonia and Spain and to activate communications and open up ideas.

–The younger generations have always presented you as the link between the Republican period and the period of recovery of democracy and autonomy.

–*Those of us who did what we did was because of what we had lived through. There were very few of us left in the sixties; a lot of people had died because of the repression or exile. So we had to form the bridge, so that people would know about the past and have an idea of what the country had been. To avoid political sectarianism from imposing itself.*

–After the resistance to the worst of the Franco years came the time to build.

–*We had two objectives. To resist all we could and also to reconstruct the country. Francoism lost the little political hegemony it could have had at the beginning of the sixties. You could say that Francoism in Catalonia was sociological, strongly marked or produced by the trauma of the civil war.*

Reconstructing the country in all its aspects was vital; it was what was called “fer país” in every possible field. From publishing clandestine books and newspapers to promoting popular and modern music, the choral movement, and gradually occupying what we called areas of freedom. It had to be done during those years so that the younger generations, who had been brought up under Francoism, would realise that the frontiers had been opened and that the way to the world wasn’t the way of Francoism.

–What kind of country is this that creates a parallel country to the official one, from Catalan schooling to clandestine cultural institutions?

–*Catalan was forbidden, but we needed teachers, educators, etc., and all this was done clandestinely. It was done through cultural and recreational organisations, the Church, or in private homes. And so at the end of the Franco era thousands of people appeared who had been formed clandestinely. It’s something very interesting and not very well-known; a people’s fight to teach and learn its language in clandestinity.*

–And what was this struggle like, bearing in mind that Catalonia had a large non-Catalan immigrant population?

–*The arrival of thousands of people who didn’t speak the language of the country was a problem. A language that wasn’t present in schools or in any of the media. There was a danger that two communities might be formed. Luckily, the right approach was found. The political parties and trade unions in clandestinity acted in such a way that, while respecting the rights of the people who came to Catalonia from all over Spain, at the same time these people learned the language and culture of the country that was to be their home from then on. This case has gradually been resolved in a peaceful and civilized manner.*

–What was the Assemblea de Catalunya?

–*It was another sign of the time, a movement with special characteristics. Taking part were clandestine organisations along with organisations that were tolerated and others that were totally legal like the Professional Associations. It was exemplary; it allowed this coexistence that later showed itself in Catalan politics, and at the same time it was a political training ground. It was also a manifestation of the Catalan people’s fight against the Franco régime to recover democratic liberties and once more retrieve the Catalan autonomy stolen as a result of the civil war. Without this great movement, the political transition in Spain would have been different. When Franco died, the Assemblea de Catalunya alone was able to mobilize thousands of people. This gave Catalonia a lot of political weight at the beginning of the transition.*

–And the neighbourhood movements?

–*There’s been nothing like them in Europe or Spain. That was quite unique too. From Barcelona it spread all over the country. Helped by the clandestine political parties, it was very much a grass-roots movement. It helped stimulate people’s awareness, not only of the need for political change, but also of the need to take part directly in local politics, from which we were absent. By giving the population access to municipal democratic life, very often it was possible for them to take on posts of responsibility in the democratic Town Halls. They were important in halting the savage speculation, both in tourist areas and in the cities.*

A prestigious Italian journalist, Angelo del Boca, wrote at the end of the fifties of Josep Benet disappearing into the labyrinth of streets in the old quarter of Barcelona, on his way to another resistance task. More than thirty years later, this is still an accurate description of his life. ■