

WRITERS IN ENGLISH ON TWENTIETH CENTURY CATALONIA



JOHN LANGDON-DAVIES (1897-1971).

TRAVELLERS AND VISITORS TO CATALONIA DURING THIS CENTURY HAVE AT LONG LAST STARTED TO SEE THROUGH THE OLD MYTHS. BRITISH AND AMERICAN PUBLISHERS HAVE PRODUCED A SERIES OF BOOKS WHICH HAVE HELPED TO PRESENT TRULY SPECIFIC FEATURES OF CATALONIA.

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None of the work produced by the British travel writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was devoted specifically to Catalonia. If anything, references to Catalonia were contained in the “travels to Spain” (in this respect, see Ribbans, Geoffrey W., *Catalunya i València vistes pels viatgers anglesos del segle XVIIIè*, Publicacions de “La Revista”, Barcelona, 1955). Otherwise, everything was swallowed up in the all-pervading image of the *Cosas de España* (a possible precedent for the more recent “Spain is different” campaign?), which was, in a way, consecrated by Richard Ford in his *Gatherings from Spain* (1846). Ford, the illustrious nineteenth century traveller who introduced the work of Velázquez to England, established the clichés that English culture was to attribute to the Spanish in general for a long time to come: Spaniards are lazy, dirty and they smell of garlic. To this must be added the *Carmen* effect (they dress in bright colours, wear flowers in their hair and spend all day dancing) and the *black legend* effect (they are a backward, cruel and superstitious people).

Even the most optimistic public-image specialist would consider this an unencouraging start. But during the twentieth century travellers and visitors have begun to see through the myths, and British and American publishers have produced a series of books which have helped to present truly specific features of Catalonia. But it was not until the recent Olympic Games in Barcelona that the image of the city as the capital of a separate country finally took shape and was popularized to extremes that were unthinkable a few years ago (one need only look for confirmation at some of the articles published in the American press, normally so little inclined to geographical or cultural accuracy).

This article is a quick look at some of the most significant titles. The first book of any importance devoted exclusively to Catalonia is Rowland Thirlmere’s *Letters from Catalonia* (1905),

a curious document describing the country at the start of the century and at the same time a delightful evocation of one particular way of travelling. Interest in the 1929 International Exhibition was the background to the first book in English to present Catalonia as a community with a nationalist issue. This was John Langdon-Davies’s *Dancing Catalans* (1929), not yet published in Catalonia. Two works on Catalonia which took the Civil War as their backdrop were *Behind the Spanish Barricades* (1936), also by Langdon-Davies, and *Catalonia Infelix* (1936), by Professor Allison Peers (Catalan edition 1986). In 1938 George Orwell produced the better-known *Homage to Catalonia*. Orwell’s experiences in Catalonia took the form of a political *revelation* which profoundly marked his later writing. The “homage” of the title must therefore be taken not so much as one to the country as to the times and the events that Orwell lived through in the country. Nevertheless, the author’s fame and the book’s title, rather than its contents, made the book an important reference point for Catalonia in Anglo-Saxon culture.

Amongst writings on Catalonia during the period of the Franco regime, I would mention Norman Lewis’s *Voices from the Old Sea* (1989, Castilian edition 1991), a blend of memoirs, novel and anthropological study of life on the

Costa Brava during the forties. From the following decade we have Langdon-Davies’s testimony, once again, in *Gatherings from Catalonia* (1953), unpublished in Catalan, and Patrice Chaplin’s memoirs *Albany Park* (1986, Catalan edition 1990), which bring us, via a sentimental journey, up to the sixties.

With Barcelona’s nomination as host to the Olympic Games and a renewal of interest in nationalist causes as a result of the break-up of the Soviet Union, Catalonia and Barcelona have continued to attract the attention of writers and publishers. This has given us *Homage to Barcelona* (1990), by the Irish writer Colm Tóibín; *Catalonia: Portrait of a Nation* (1992), by the Briton John Payne, and *Barcelona* (1992), by the Australian-American Robert Hughes. The Olympic fever also produced two noteworthy travel guides to Barcelona and Catalonia for the more conventional tourist. These are *Barcelona: a Celebration and a Guide* (1992), by Charlie Pye-Smith, and *Catalonia: Tradition, Places, Wine, Food* (1992), by Jan Read and Maite Manjón.

Not to be forgotten are the magnificent *Catalan Cuisine* (1988), by the American Colman Andrews, a knowledgeable presentation of the national cuisine—an important element in any differentiated culture—or the works of dissemination for the reader in English, written by exiles. The most important of these are *The Spirit of Catalonia* (1946), by Dr Josep Trueta, in England, and *Catalonia: a Profile* (1975), by Víctor Alba, in the USA.

Travel writing is by definition an open genre. It has room for a variety of literary forms and authors with quite different objectives. According to their intentions, the journalist, anthropologist, historian, novelist or reflexive tourist make use of epistle, journalism, autobiography or novel. All of these can be found in the works mentioned here. In the mass of English writings on the subject of travel, Catalonia has at last found its modest place. ■