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### [Spanish:] Narrative literature (historical)

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**Publication date**

2018

**Document Version**

Other version

**Published in**

Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism

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[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Rodríguez Pérez, Y. (2018). [Spanish:] Narrative literature (historical). In J. Leerssen (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism* (Vol. 2, pp. 1403-1404). Amsterdam University Press. <http://romanticnationalism.net/viewer.p/21/56/object/122-160085>

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## **Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe**

### **Narrative literature (historical) : Spanish**

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The Spanish 19th century was marked by political, social and economic upheavals which also affected the new genre of the historical novel. The novel, having lain dormant since its creative peak in the 17th century, resurfaced as literary genre in Spain, where, as in the rest of Europe, it helped to convert ideas of national history into appealing stories for a wide readership. Driven by readers' unquenchable thirst for history, historical novels became a mass medium and overshadowed other genres such as historical patriotic verse and [historical theatre](#). Underresearched and critically dismissed by Spanish literary historians, the corpus of historical novels includes no less than 500 titles and poignantly reflects the historical preoccupations of the time. Whereas the high point of [the genre in Western Europe](#) falls in the period 1820-40, the Spanish Romantic historical novel was successful between 1820 and 1870. There were, obviously, precursors like Pedro Montengón's *El Rodrigo: Romance épico* (1793); but the Romantic genre kicks off its 19th-century career with Rafael de [Humara's](#) *Ramiro, Conde de Lucena* (1823), situated in 13th-century Seville. Through its *Reconquista* setting, it subtly reflects the anxieties about contemporary politics and civil dissent in the wake of the uprising against the absolutist king Ferdinand VII. Some of the most important historical novels that followed are: *El doncel de Don Enrique el Doliente* (1834) by the famous *costumbrista* and satiric writer Mariano José de [Larra](#), *Sancho Saldaña* (1834) by José de [Espronceda](#), the Duke of [Rivas's](#) *Don Alvaro o la fuerza del sino* (1835), José [García de Villalta's](#) *El golpe en vago* (1835), Enrique [Gil y Carrasco's](#) *El señor de Bembibre* (1844), Eugenio de [Ochoa's](#) *Auto de Fé* (1837), and Francisco [Navarro Villoslada's](#) *Doña Blanca de Navarra* (1846) and *Amaya o los vascos en el siglo VIII* (1877), which helped to spread the Basque ancestral myth of [Aitor](#).

Around the 1840s, the literary climate began to move towards the new novelistic register of Realism, with Cecilia [Böhl de Faber's](#) *La gaviota* (1849) as a tipping point; nonetheless, historical novels continued to be written until well after the end of the century. The subject of these later novels was not only the remote past, but also more recent history. Benito [Pérez Galdós's](#) cycle *Episodios nacionales* (1873-1912) with five series and 46 historical novels, manifest how interest in recent history (he starts with *Trafalgar* in 1873, set during the Napoleonic Wars) shifted to more contemporary social issues. In the epilogue to the illustrated edition of his first two series, the writer remarks that his novels were the first to deal with the subject of modern history. In his *Episodios*, Galdós intends to furnish his readers with relevant information to understand the process which had shaped the nation and to realize that society must learn from its past. His novels were highly popular among the Spanish middle classes, which were starting to become aware of their historical role.

The Spanish Romantic historical novel was, as in the rest of Europe, strongly influenced by Sir Walter [Scott](#) and by his epigons (Victor [Hugo](#), Alexandre [Dumas](#)) as well as [Chateaubriand](#). Their works were widely read both in translation and in the original. The depth of Scott's influence went beyond its superficial characteristics which were imitated and plagiarized by lesser imitators, such as Ramón [López Soler](#) with his *Los bandos de Castilla* (1830). Although this novel is derivative in the extreme (tournaments, hermits, outlaws and chivalry, with a little addition of Byronism, and an Ossianic "Lay of a Provençal troubadour" thrown in for good measure), it nonetheless marks a literary transition by virtue of its prologue, with its programmatic character amounting almost to a Spanish Romantic manifesto. The author asserts that Spanish history also contains a treasure of great stories worth telling, and that therefore Scott should be emulated in Spain. He actually presents Romantic historicism as a transnational phenomenon: to take part in this international trend implies to establish one's own Medieval and national past. Scott is praised for having been the first to identify and draw on the prestige of history in the pursuit of national self-legitimation. This was acknowledged by Spanish authors both at a national and regional level. Valencian and Catalan Romanticism found its expression in novels like Estanislao Kostka [Vayo's](#) *Los terremotos de Orihuela, o Henrique y Florentina* and *La conquista de Valencia por el Cid* (Valencia, 1829 and 1831), and Juan [Cortada y](#)

Salas's *La heredera de Sangumí* (1835) or *El templario y la villana* (Barcelona, 1840).

The novels, with their basic template of a hero/heroine involved in some great struggle or (civil) conflict, run counter to Scott's model by featuring deeply tragic endings and Romantically tormented characters. The themes range widely, including the Knights Templar (at a time when the Spaniards were confronting Church power in the state), the Habsburg past (specially Philip II, critically portrayed as a tyrant and supporter of the Inquisition), and colonial America. The key theme, however, was the Iberian peninsula's Islamic past. Spanish Romanticism evoked the greatness of the *andalusí* past, while presenting it as not only an obvious proof of Spain's advanced civilization from the Middle Ages, but also as a demonstration of its decisive role in European history. Even so, authors like Hartzenbusch, the Duke of Rivas, or José Zorrilla continued to present the Islamic characters as cruel despots. Spanish intellectuals of the time were aware of the Orientalist and Romantic exoticism projected onto Spain and engaged in a national dialogue about these foreign perceptions when constructing and defining their nation.

Particularly interesting in the Spanish context is the existence of a group of liberal exiled writers producing and translating historical novels outside Spain. This group of writers is a poignant example of the transnational dimension of the Spanish historical genre. Following the War of Independence and the return of the despotic Ferdinand VII to the Spanish throne, a group of liberal intellectuals left for countries like England and France in the 1820s. For example, Telesforo Trueba y Cossío lived in both countries and wrote in English Romantic historical novels such as *Gómez Arias, or the Moors of the Alpujarras* (1828) and *The Castilian* (1829), where he attempted to familiarize his British readers with the politics and culture of Spain. *The Castilian* reveals clearly the entanglement of past and present inherent to the historical novel, and in particular to the devastating Carlist wars. As for José Joaquín de Mora, he can be considered as a cultural mediator between Spain and England who translated two of Scott's novels (*Ivanhoe* and *The talisman*) while in England. During his exile in London, he closely collaborated with Jose María Blanco White, a famous émigré and librarian to the hispanophile Lord Holland, to whom the historical novel *Vargas, a tale of Spain* (1822) was until recently unjustly attributed. The exile of Iberian liberal intellectuals contributed not only to the literary development of the historical genre, but, most importantly, to the emergence of a liberal national history-writing that contested a conservative-Catholic interpretation of the national past.

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