

Constructing Catalonia

Bill Phillips

Copyright ©2009 Bill Phillips. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged

Abstract: Catalonia, in common with other nations, has long been concerned with the question of identity and difference. Its problematic relationship with Spain has led to an emphasis on differentiating itself from its larger neighbour (if we are to accept, as most Spaniards do not, that Catalonia is not Spain), a situation complicated by the loss of the Spanish colonies of Cuba and The Philippines in 1898, and the Spanish Civil War and subsequent dictatorship from 1936 to 1976. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the construction of a Catalan identity followed a similar route to that taken by other European nations such as England, Ireland and, indeed, Spain, including an emphasis on rural values, activities and the countryside, and the conversion of specifically local traditions into national past times. It is only in the last ten years or so that this model of Catalan identity has been recognised for what it is – a model constructed and encouraged for and by specific nationalist political interests. Ironically, Catalonia's identity abroad has also been constructed and manipulated for political purposes, but from quite a different perspective. Orwell's */Homage to Catalonia/* (1938) narrates an extremely blinkered version of the Spanish Civil War which has achieved iconic status as a result of cold war politics. Subsequent portrayals of the Spanish Civil War – Valentine Cunningham's */The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse/* (ed.), Penguin, 1980, or Ken Loach's 1995 film */Land and Freedom/* base their arguments unquestioningly on */Homage to Catalonia/*, perpetuating a view of the nation's recent history that is both reductive and inaccurate.

Keywords: Catalonia, constructing national identity, Spanish Civil War, George Orwell

Catalonia, in common with other nations, has long been concerned with the question of identity and difference. Its problematic relationship with Spain has led to an emphasis on differentiating itself from its larger neighbour (if we are to accept, as most Spaniards do not, that Catalonia is not Spain), a situation complicated by the loss of the Spanish colonies of Cuba and The Philippines in 1898, and the Spanish Civil War and subsequent dictatorship from 1936 to 1976. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the construction of a Catalan identity followed a similar route to that taken by other European nations such as England, Ireland and, indeed, Spain, including an emphasis on rural values, activities and the countryside, and the conversion of specifically local traditions into national past times. It is only in the last ten years or so that this model of Catalan identity has been recognised for what it is – a model constructed and encouraged for and by specific nationalist political interests.

Ironically, Catalonia's identity abroad has also been constructed and manipulated for political purposes, but from quite a different perspective. Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) narrates an extremely blinkered version of the Spanish Civil War which has achieved iconic status as a result of cold war politics. Subsequent portrayals of the Spanish Civil War – Valentine Cunningham's *The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse* (ed.), Penguin, 1980, or Ken Loach's 1995 film *Land and Freedom* base their arguments unquestioningly on *Homage to Catalonia*, perpetuating a view of the nation's recent history that is both reductive and inaccurate.

“The ideology of England and Englishness is to a remarkable degree rural” argues Alun Howkins in *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*, a statement that can most probably be applied to virtually any nation, the countryside and rural history being common sources for national self-invention, and Catalonia is no exception. This is partly, no doubt, a Romantic response to urbanisation and industrialisation, the city-dweller's desire to return to an Arcadian golden age, if only for a few hours; to a pastoral world of innocence and purity, healthy living and spiritual calm. The Catalans, in common with the English, took to hiking as a means of escaping the city but also, like the Irish, of rediscovering and reclaiming their own land. At the same time that Miss Ivors was persuading Gabriel Conroy to visit the Aran Islands in James Joyce's short story “The Dead” (1914), hiking clubs from Barcelona and the Catalan industrial towns of Sabadell and Terrassa, among others, were tramping the sacred places of Catalonia, mountains such as Montserrat, Montseny and Núria. Their objective, according to the *Associació d'Excursions Catalana* was “to study and learn about the natural and artistic beauties, the traditions, monuments and ancient sites; the local customs, popular songs, the oddities of language” (Marfany 296). Ideologically motivated hiking of this kind, which is still common in the Basque Country, as well as in Catalonia, is a kind of beating of the bounds – the medieval custom of marking the parish boundaries on an annual tramp around the village limits, usually led by the priest - in which the extent of local jurisdiction and identity is physically confirmed. Hiking brings the town to the country, shared characteristics such as language, are reinforced, and rural economies benefit from the arrival of the city-dwellers anxious to try the local food and other produce, all of which is available at better prices and probably fresher, at their local market in Barcelona. More recently – largely coinciding with Spain's entry into the Common Market in 1986 – car ownership became the norm, and other rural activities were revived to cater for the new mobility of Catalan families no longer reliant on associations to provide them with transport. As well as the rise in the number of second homes scattered across the Catalan countryside, and the enormous increase in the popularity of skiing – neither of which are quintessentially Catalan traditions – mushroom collecting has, well, mushroomed over the last two decades, with routes to and from the Bergadà region jammed with cars nose to tail during Autumn weekends. The Catalan government has responded by building motorways and dual carriageways, prioritising those routes used by skiers, and particularly those favoured by the mushroom hunters, as they like to be called. The restaurant trade, specialising in mushroom based cuisine flourishes around the town of Berga, while on the side of the road stalls selling mushrooms, often flown in from eastern Europe, are on sale to those unlucky not to have filled their baskets, but reluctant to return home empty-handed.

Entry into the common market, which brought the Catalans a new-found mobility, coincided with the political domination, in Catalonia, of the nationalist coalition *Convergència i Unió*, one of whose slogans was “fem país”, or “let’s make the country”. *Convergència i Unió* strongly encouraged those local rural traditions which the newly mobile city-dwellers from the Barcelona region were just beginning to discover and converted them into national traditions. Two examples of local customs, originating from the Tarragona region, and especially from around the small town of Valls, in the Alt Camp, are interesting for the spectacular rise in their popularity over the last twenty years or so. Firstly, the *calçotada*, or onion barbecue, which traditionally was cooked over the pruned cuttings of the local vines in late winter/early spring using locally grown and idiosyncratically cultivated onions. Nowadays you can enjoy a *calçotada* in the smartest Barcelona restaurants and the season has been extended from its late winter/early spring origins to cover most of the year. Restaurant *calçots* are usually cooked in the oven and come as a starter or merely as the garnish to a main course, but eating them remains a profoundly patriotic act.

The second tradition associated with the small town of Valls is the *castellers*, or human castles. The activity itself has its origins in Valencia, but the first ever “*colla*”, or club, dates from the early nineteenth century, in Valls, not far from Tarragona. Making human castles remained a local tradition throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with rival ‘*colles*’ from Valls, Reus, Tarragona and other towns and villages from the region competing against each other. By the late eighties the tradition had spread northwards, with “*colles*” such as the *Minyons de Terrassa*, founded in 1979, beginning to challenge the hegemony of those from Valls. New “*colles*” continue to appear. *Els Saballuts* from Sabadell, not far from Barcelona, were founded in 1994, *Els Sagals d’Osona*, in the north of Catalonia, were founded in 1998 while *Els Capgrossos* from Mataró, a town to the north of Barcelona, were founded as recently as 2002. Mushroom hunting, *calçotades* and *castellers*, although still recognised as having specifically regional and rural origins or centres of excellence, are now perceived as being Catalan-wide traditions, and participating in, promoting or simply enjoying them is a demonstration of Catalan identity.

Another activity although not necessarily perceived as being rural in origin is, in common with other nations’ defining traditions, folk dancing. The traditional Catalan folk dance is the *Sardana*, a profoundly unspectacular sight enacted regularly throughout Catalonia, though it is most likely to be observed in the summer months in provincial towns where, when not forcibly imposed on the local school children, is most likely to be seen performed by those more advanced in years, as is appropriate to the dance’s characteristic shuffling steps and minimal movements. According to Marfany the *sardana* was virtually unknown in most of Catalonia until the early twentieth century when it became “the principal symbolic referent of Catalanism” (328). “The tradition,” roundly affirms Marfany, “was invented” (326). As a dance, however, it was seen to be deeply appropriate:

a ring without top or tail, where everyone, equally, holds hands in a symbol of love, where everyone may freely enter or leave [the ring], which can always grow with more dancers; a dance of the square, of the community, open to all, rich and poor, old and young; a vigorous dance, sportive, healthy, a serious dance, methodical, elegant, suitable

for a people who even when enjoying themselves preserve their dignity, a dance, finally, of the land, of remote, mythical origins (Marfany 326).

Interestingly, in Sabadell, the sardana was promoted by the local bourgeoisie in the early years of the twentieth century, precisely because of its boring nature. Sabadell, an industrial town to the north east of Barcelona, with its energetic, working class population preferred waltzes, pasodobles and other, sexier dances. The local bourgeoisie, which had become increasingly allied with the Church, frowned on such immoral behaviour, suspecting it of being both excessively Spanish, as well as Republican in nature. The suppression of such dances and the systematic implantation of the sober sardana was not only nationalist, but bourgeois and catholic in inspiration: "one day," writes Marfany, in the supposed words of a bourgeois Catalan nationalist, "we will be able to say that the noble dance of the sardana has expelled the disgraceful local dances from our town forever" (Marfany 325).

The construction of a Catalan identity relies on a binary opposition – to be Catalan is not to be Spanish, rather as the principal attribute of Canadians is that they are not from the USA. Hence the Catalan emphasis on sobriety and dignity in opposition to Spanish excess, exaggeration, idleness and waste. The sardana, together with its musical accompaniment is clearly NOT a jota, a dance with extravagant arm swinging, spinning and loud music, and even less a relative of Andalusian flamenco. The Catalans perceive themselves as sensible, thrifty people, disinclined to drunkenness and ostentation. The rest of Spain sees them as mean, boring and unfriendly. They are not without a sense of humour, however, as demonstrated by the adoption of the donkey as a symbol of Catalonia. A few years ago, silhouette stickers of bulls began to appear on some people's cars denoting their allegiance to Spain rather than Catalonia. The Catalan response was to produce the donkey sticker, symbolising hard work, obstinacy perhaps, and, crucially, humility. A soberly effective response to the fighting bull whose only role is to pose nobly before dying a pointless death and then being dragged to the butcher's by the donkey-fathered mule.

Donkeys aside, it cannot have escaped the attention of many Catalans that the construction of Catalonia offers a disturbing mirror to the construction of Franco's Spain. During the dictatorship the paella, a regional dish from Valencia was elevated to national status, bullfighting, traditional in the south, in Madrid, Navarra, and other regions, became the national spectacle and flamenco, cleansed of any Andalusian gypsy influence, was sold to tourists as a charming example of Spanish song and dance. *Calçotada* or *paella*? *Castellers* or *toreros*? *Sardanes* or *flamenco*? The regional raised to the national.

Most likely, none of this is familiar to outsiders, particularly from the English-speaking world, whose only reference to Catalonia has been supplied by George Orwell. *Homage to Catalonia* is a widely recognised title, though perhaps the book itself is less widely read. For many reading people from English-speaking nations, *Homage to Catalonia*, together with Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, provides an emotional backdrop to the Spanish Civil War which undoubtedly differs greatly from the perception held by most Spanish people, particularly those who lived through the war and the subsequent dictatorship. *Homage to Catalonia* is actually only about a brief period of the war, and

is set in only two places: the Aragon front, and Barcelona. Despite this, Orwell's report of the war has been adopted as the official account, in English at least, of what happened in Catalonia during the civil war, as well as providing a description of the country and its inhabitants in general.

Basically, *Homage to Catalonia* describes the struggle, in Barcelona, during May 1937, between the Anarchists and Trotskyists on the one side, and the Communist party and the Republican government on the other. These events, known as the "Fets de maig", took place between the 4th and 7th of May, and resulted in, according to the government, 500 deaths and 1,500 wounded. Orwell, who describes his growing disillusionment with the communist party throughout the book, has enlisted in the POUM, a Trotskyist militia and, understandably, given the months he has spent fighting at their side on the Aragon front, it is with them that his loyalty lies. The book, then, is a denunciation of the Republican government and its Soviet allies who have betrayed the revolutionary militias. Orwell claims, indeed, that the communists were actually in favour of a bourgeois victory:

The whole world was determined upon preventing revolution in Spain. In particular the Communist Party, with Soviet Russia behind it, had thrown its whole weight against the revolution. It was the communist thesis that revolution at this stage would be fatal and that what was to be aimed at in Spain was not workers' control, but bourgeois democracy" (52).

Orwell, through the Independent Labour Party, had joined the POUM, the *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*, a small militia described by the historian Paul Preston as "anti-Stalinist marxists" (184). The usual explanation for what happened is that during the early part of the war only the militias were sufficiently organised to hold back the uprising, but as the government gradually came to grips with the situation it attempted to centralise control over the military rather than allow independent and uncoordinated groups such as the POUM to operate as they wished. Orwell, who fought with the POUM on the Aragon front and was understandably loyal to his comrades felt that the government, backed by the Stalinist Soviet Union had betrayed the revolution. Perhaps he is right, but one of the great mysteries of Orwell's account, and that of his followers is the virtual absence of the rebel forces. Certainly they are there, largely at a safe distance, at the front, and Orwell is careful to recognise that they are unhappy conscripts, forced to fight for a cause that is not their own. But a reading of the whole book suggests that the Spanish Civil War, at least in Catalonia, was really a fight between, on the one hand, sturdy anarchists and honest revolutionaries, and on the other, wicked Stalinists and a despotic Republican government.

This version of the war in Catalonia is not shared by historians or by the majority of those who remember the war "...when, from October 1936, Soviet arms began to arrive in the Republic, sympathy for the Soviet Union increased considerably," (241) argue Catalan historians Pagès i Blanch and Perez Puyal, while Paul Preston suggests that "the Communist Party, for all its crimes and errors, played a major role in keeping Republican resistance alive as long as it did" (190). The Catalans themselves, it seems, were less keen on revolution than Orwell believed: "eventually," observes Norman

Jones, "Lluhi's prediction that the Catalan masses would abandon anarchism and opt for either reformist socialism or communism was realized" (110).

For most Catalans who lived through the war, and especially the combatants, their memories are of the arrival in Catalonia of the National forces, of the trek to France, the French concentration camps, exile, the reprisals, the forty years of dictatorship. Orwell experienced none of this as he left Spain and returned to Britain in 1937. As such, he can hardly be blamed for merely describing the brief period that he was there. Indeed, he says "beware of my partisanship, my mistakes of fact and the distortion inevitably caused by my having seen only one corner of events" (247). Hugh Thomas, rather more damningly, says that "His account of the [...] riots, marvellously written though it is, should be read with reservations. It is more accurate about war itself than about the Spanish war" (424). Furthermore, in his essay "Looking Back on the Spanish War", published in 1942, Orwell himself quite clearly states that "[t]he outcome of the Spanish war was settled in London, Paris, Rome, Berlin – at any rate not in Spain. After the summer of 1937 those with eyes in their heads realized that the government could not win the war unless there was some profound change in the international set-up [...] the much-publicized disunity on the Government side was not a main cause of defeat" (300). A view shared, nowadays, by most historians. Franco won because he had extensive help in arms and men from Germany and Italy. The Government lost because it received only minimal help from the Soviet Union and Mexico, and none at all from Britain or France.

Orwell's account in *Homage to Catalonia* would be of little significance – except perhaps as a minor contribution to an understanding of his particular *corner of events* – were it not for the fact that *Homage to Catalonia* seems to have been taken up by later writers as the definitive account of the war. One of the most blatant is Valentine Cunningham in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse*, published in 1980, which, as well as drawing heavily on *Homage to Catalonia*, rather unsubtly transfers Orwell's experiences to the war poet John Cornford. Cornford, claims Cunningham, "whether out of ideological naivety or, more likely, because he was still just a young and romantic revolutionary, [...] promptly joined the wild, ragged, but exhilarating POUM" (36). Most of Cunningham's description of Cornford's experiences dwells on the various ways in which the Stalinist supporters in the British Communist Party, which Cornford was, in fact, a member of, did their best to write the young, doomed poet out of history once his treachery was discovered. Elsewhere in the introduction Cunningham, again in very similar language to Orwells, rhapsodises about the early years of the war in Barcelona, "the sudden alliance between what left-wing intellectuals and writers had longed vainly for in England and the tangible hopes for poetry incited by the Spanish revolution and its defence of culture" (58).

We nowadays accept that there is rarely, if ever, one history. Rather, there are many histories and many accounts of events both in the past and the present. The Spanish Civil War is no exception, or at least should not be. My contention is that the perception outside Catalonia of Orwell's highly limited and *partisan* description of *one small corner* of the Spanish Civil War as a representative account of the conflict –within Catalonia it is largely celebrated for its flattering title– is a mythologising of events as a result of Cold War propaganda. Indeed, Eric Hobsbawm, in an article in *The Guardian* in 2007 argued that "the public showed no interest in the book. It was published in

1938, in a run of 1,500 copies, which sold so poorly that the stock was not yet exhausted 13 years later when it was first reprinted. Only in the cold-war era did Orwell cease to be an awkward, marginal figure.” Orwell has been used and popularised because his account demonises the Soviet Union while, rather indirectly, praising the anarchists. From a Cold War point of view anarchists are quite cuddly, posing, as they do, no threat to the established order and being, indeed almost fellow travellers of the more libertarian factions within the Republican Party in the United States. Furthermore, Franco posed something of a problem for Cold War historians, being, rather inconveniently, a cold-blooded dictator, a former ally of Mussolini and Hiler, and no friend of democracy. He was, however, an enemy of communism. What better way of reinterpreting history than simply writing Franco out of the Spanish Civil War and turning it into a struggle between heroic anarchists and evil Stalinists. Orwell provides the model, and Valentine Cunningham, Professor of English Language and Literature at Oxford University, and Tutor and Senior Fellow in English Literature at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, snaps it up. How ironic, also, that Red Ken Loach, in his 1995 film *Land and Freedom: The Spanish revolution betrayed* should offer the same discourse. The World Socialist Web Site, published by the International Committee of the Fourth International praises the film, arguing that “British director Ken Loach's film about the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, says [...] that the working class is capable of uplifting and liberating itself. It says further that the cause of the failure of the Soviet Union lay not with socialism, but Stalinism.” Extraordinary. Loach’s film, then (which closely follows *Homage to Catalonia* in plot and sympathies) is not about the Spanish Civil War at all. It is about opposing Stalinism. Admittedly Stalin was a monster – worse indeed than Franco, if such comparisons have any meaning. But does this perverse interpretation of history really do homage to Catalonia?

References

- Cunningham, Valentine (ed). *The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse*, 1980. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. New York, 1940.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. “War of Ideas” *The Guardian*. 17th February, 2007. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/feb/17/historybooks.featuresreviews>>
- Howkins, Alun. “The Discovery of Rural England” *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*. Robert Colls & Philip Dodd (eds). London, New York, Sydney: Croom Helm, 1986.
- Jones, Norman. “Regionalism and Revolution in Catalonia” *Revolution and War in Spain 1931-1939*. Paul Preston (ed). London: Methuen, 1984.
- Joyce, James. *Dubliners. 1914*. London: Grafton Books, 1988.
- Marfany, Joan-Lluís. *La cultura del catalanisme*. Barcelona: Editorial Empúries, 1995.
- Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia. 1938*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1980.
- Orwell, George. “Looking Back on the Spanish War” *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell. Vol 2. My Country Right or Left. 1940-1943*, 1958. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980.
- Pagès i Blanch, Pelai and Alberto Pérez Puyal. *Aquella guerra tan llunyana i tan propera (1936-1939): Testimonis i records de la Guerra Civil a Catalunya*. Lleida: Pagès editors, 2003.
- Preston, Paul. *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War*, 1986. London: Fontana, 1996.

The World Socialist Web Site, published by the International Committee of the Fourth International. <<http://www.wsws.org/arts/1998/aug1998/land-96.shtml>>. 23 October, 1995.

Thomas, Hugh. *The Spanish Civil War*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961.

Dr. Bill Phillips is a senior lecturer in the English and German Studies Department in the Faculty of Philology at the University of Barcelona. His research interests embrace English Romantic poetry, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, gender studies and detective fiction, on all of which he has published widely. Recent publications include “Shelley, Catalonia and the Spanish Civil War” (/The Reception of P.B. Shelley in Europe/ ed. Susanna Schmid and Michael Rossington: London, Continuum, 2008), /Frankenstein/ and Mary Shelley's "Wet Ungenial Summer" (/Atlantis/ Vol. 28/2. Madrid, 2006) and “Representacions de masculinitat a la novel·la negra” (Representations of Masculinity in the Detective Novel) *Masculinitats per al segle XXI. (Masculinities for the 21st century)* Barcelona: Centre d'Estudis dels Drets Individuals i Col·lectius (CEDIC), 2007.