



John Payne, *Catalonia: History and Culture*, Five Leaves Publications, Nottingham, 2004; ISBN 0 907123 29 5; £9.99.

General studies of Catalan culture and history are few and far between. Perhaps the most acclaimed book since Josep Trueta's *Spirit of Catalonia* (O. U. P., Oxford, 1946) to touch on aspects of Catalonia's medieval and recent past is Robert Hughes's *Barcelona* (Harvill, London, 1992). John Payne's book provides an accessible overview, which focuses attention mainly on the twentieth century, although it introduces broader historical themes in the first eighty pages. The style is straightforward and personal (a mode he shares with Trueta and Hughes), sensitive, perceptive, with original insights that will interest specialists as well as serve the general reader and the student. Payne leads the reader thoughtfully from personal experience and reflection across the terrain of Catalonian history, dwelling equally on the general and particular. Payne's strong hold on the main events of political history are lucidly expounded and he writes sympathetically on questions of art and architecture. But the book does seem to suffer a little from a certain lack of editorial rigour on the part of the publisher.

The general weakness of the medieval section (Part 1: Catalonia – a Sense of History, 31-67) is reflected in the bibliography, which cites not a single work on medieval Catalonia (while references to art and architecture occupy more than a page). This imbalance seems wholly arbitrary, and references could have been made to H. J. Chaytor's *A History of Aragon and Catalonia* (Methuen, London, 1933) or T. N. Bisson's *The Medieval Crown of Aragon* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1986). Medieval literature is also passed over in a way that could have benefited from more elucidation. Muntaner for example is 'not history, but hero-worship... [Muntaner] spent the last years of his life... writing about the exploits of his companions as if they were World Cup winning sportsmen' (49) and of Ausias March we learn that 'the fact that the Catalan words for love and death sound identical

with the addition of the definite article... gave endless scope for word play' (60). Both assessments would have benefited from a more explicit connection to the cultural and historical theme of the book. Part 2 ('The Cultures of Catalonia') contains some very thoughtful pages that combine elements of local popular history (such as Tortosa's giant community) with a reasoned consideration of Ferdinand and Isabel's destruction of Sepharad. The subsequent reinvention of this Jewish heritage is keenly felt by Payne, who quotes Espriu at several points: 'There are once again Jews and Muslims in Catalonia... we owe a debt to Espriu for keeping that ideal alive, in a mythical little fishing village called Sinera' (p. 129).

When it comes to *modernisme* and *noucentisme*, the bourgeoisie deservedly get a fair share of the blame: 'While the bourgeoisie adopted many of the trappings of medieval Catalan culture, the working classes stuck more closely to that long tradition of common action which runs through Catalan history' (p. 84). The fascinating process of transition from *renaixença* to *noucentisme* is tackled in Chapter 7, which ends with a quotation from Alan Yates (pp. 150-1; unfortunately omitted from the bibliography). The author's awareness of the complex formation of Catalan cultural identity is perhaps most evident in his treatment of the Spanish Civil War (Payne prefers 'the Spanish War'), and Payne deals with the topic very persuasively.

Chapter 8 takes us from the failure of *modernisme* as a political ideal to its success as part of the architectural heritage industry, and from the intervening transformations of Barcelona in Franco's 1950s to the renewed buoyancy of the 1992 Olympics and Barcelona in the boom years. Chapter 9 extends these themes to tackle 'Popular Culture', defined as 'that mesmerising agglomeration of the ancient and modern' (p. 173). (Why was he not a little more sympathetic to Muntaner, then, who was not only a populist, but steeped in the pop culture of his age?).

The book sets out the argument that Catalan culture is vibrant and well enough to tackle diversity and thrive (but not in isolation). Chapter 11 develops this thesis by discussing the achievement of artists conscious of their roots and Catalan connections. Chapter 12 argues for the importance of perceiving the relation between the

global and the local in Catalonia. Chapter 13 assesses the language question, books and the mass media, and the idea of *els Països Catalans* to conclude that 'the survival of the Catalan language has not been inevitable. It is a cause for celebration, a small victory for the cause of diversity in a world where large cultures and languages increasingly downgrade the value of local cultures and vernaculars' (p. 269).

Some unevenness of exposition could have been avoided, along with several typographical and factual errors (for example, the text states that Muntaner died in 1313). As a whole, the book requires tightening in several places, and some excellent passages are brought down by a few weaker sections. For example, the closing chapters argue that sustainable and managed development requires political solutions that transcend the traditional perspectives of left and right. This new agenda seeks to take into account consumer needs based on sustainability. Chapter 15 extends this argument by examining what the author calls the 'biodiversity' of immigration in Catalonia, concluding that 'change, rather than stasis, has been the more common human experience' (p. 307). Illustration of a valid point occasionally appears platitudinous, an effect of rushed editing, I suspect, because sustained development of conclusions drawn weakens the exposition. Payne thinks that the experience of the peoples of Catalonia prepares them especially well for the role of mediators in the 'new Europe', given their recent past and their proven skill as negotiators. But is this not a rather naïve assumption, a rather rose-tinted view both of the function of the new European hegemony, of the place of the regions within it and of the EU's general institutional health?

The central question, whether Catalonia – or for that matter any other nation – is indeed undergoing a period of genuine cultural growth and whether the institutional framework is ancillary to this growth, Payne seems to assume *a priori*. That architecture is now on the one hand a heritage industry and on the other a producer of spaces largely divorced from the humanity it allegedly serves would seem to argue against the validity of this assumption.

Leaving to one side the failings of the editors and the present reviewer's medievalist bias, this is undoubtedly a good book and a

worthwhile and much-needed one, for which the English-speaking world will surely be grateful. The academy will certainly acknowledge it as a significant and up-to-date contribution to scholarship in an often-neglected field and extend well-deserved congratulations to the author for the labour that has gone into producing a text both scholarly and eminently readable. Make sure your library purchases a copy!

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