

Introduction



Nos dió por los centenarios.
El País, 4 March 1910¹

On 23 April 2020, World Book Day, in the midst of a terrible global pandemic that was causing hundreds of thousands of deaths and had shut everyone up inside their homes, dozens of Spanish institutions nevertheless marked the event. They did so with participatory public readings—albeit, this time, in virtual formats—of *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. This was a well-rooted practice, which had become widespread since the 1990s as a commemoration of the death of the book's author, Miguel de Cervantes, on the same date in 1616. The ritual was repeated in places such as Benidorm in the province of Alicante, Marcilla in Navarra, Zamora, and Córdoba, as well as in small cities and towns across the Castilla–La Mancha region and the Comunidad de Madrid, organized by local councils, public libraries, and neighborhood associations. The town council of Alcantarilla, in Murcia, for example, invited residents to read from balconies and open windows, while the staff of the Department of Hispanic Languages and Literature of the Universitat Rovira i Virgili, in Tarragona in Catalonia, proposed online recitations of a multilingual version of the great classic. The reading hosted by the Circle of Fine Arts in Madrid was begun, as in other years, by the most recent recipient of the Premio Cervantes, Spain's foremost literary award, in this case the Catalan poet Joan Margarit, followed by the daughters of the king of Spain, Princesses Leonor and Sofía. However, the most impressive commemoration, and the only one with all participants present, was the one held in the enormous temporary hospital that had been improvised in the IFEMA exhibition center on the outskirts of Madrid, where patients and health workers wished to express the special bond that had formed between them. Community bonds were woven around *Quijote*.

Commemorations, in the form of anniversaries or centennials, have acquired an importance that is impossible to ignore in the cre-

ation and maintenance of collective identities, due to their capacity to bring people together. This is true above all of national identities, decisive factors in the political arena for more than two centuries, during which time some commemorations have developed into lasting symbols and celebrations. This book focuses on the celebrations that emerged almost in a flood during a key period in the history of modern Spain, the first decades of the twentieth century, a time of intensity and frequency of such events that enables us to speak of a real *centenariomanía*, a “centennial fever.” It was during this time that some of the most solid and enduring elements in the Spanish imaginary were given their definitive form, such as the Guerra de Independencia, or War of Independence, against Napoleon, the discovery and conquest of the Americas, and the embodiment of the national genius in the work of Miguel de Cervantes, above all *Don Quijote*. Many other emblematic individuals and events were also commemorated in these same years, from El Greco to Saint Teresa of Ávila, but they did not attain the importance of the previous three. In fact, Spain had incorporated itself into the international fashion for anniversary commemorations a few years earlier, albeit with a certain delay by comparison with other Western countries, when it celebrated the theater of Pedro Calderón de la Barca in 1881 or the painting of Diego Velázquez in 1899. The four hundredth anniversary in 1892 of the first voyage of Christopher Columbus had similarly stimulated interest in celebrating the imperial side of the nation’s glorious past. However, it was the defeat in war with the United States in 1898, soon known simply as *el Desastre* (the Disaster), that sparked a thousand and one campaigns of *españolismo* (emphatic Spanish nationalism) determined to *regenerar* (regenerate) a degenerate fatherland, and also marked by a strong sense of anxiety regarding the simultaneous upsurge in nonstate nationalisms, Catalan and Basque, which placed the structure of the state in question.

An exploration of the “centennial fever” of the regenerationist era, between 1898 and 1918, enables us to look deeper into certain general questions that are related to the study of all nationalisms, and the Spanish case in particular. One still encounters from time to time a belief in a single uniform pattern, particularly in terms of tools of nationalization such as commemorations, that governed modern processes of national construction—a pattern from which Spain became separated, to become something of an exception, a separation that eventually led to emphatic failure. Most specialists in this field have abandoned this old paradigm of “difference,” but the impression still survives in the commonsense assumptions of many who declare opinions on these issues, and in some historical studies. In this book we

will put forward a nuanced position on the subject, one that is not always fully understood: that there was no single rule to which every country had to be subject, not even in Europe, but instead each state followed its own path, without losing certain common features. The Spaniards of a century ago threw themselves, like their contemporaries, into the commemoration of national myths and, as happened elsewhere, had to deal with significant challenges, such as the rise of substate nationalisms or the never-ending inefficacy of the state when it came to realizing some of its declared objectives. At the same time, rejecting the exceptional status of Spain does not suppose any denial of the problems *españolismo* undoubtedly encountered in imposing itself, and which it has carried with it to the present day.

This analysis also refutes some assumptions that are habitual when one speaks of the development of nations in the modern world. Firstly, that its sole driving force was found in the centralized powers of the state, when a more frequent—and, in some places, the most basic—element was the participation of a diverse range of political and social forces with which governments had to negotiate. Similarly, there has been a belief that the national was opposed to the local or regional when the reality was rather the contrary, for it was often the circles closest to local level, and to ordinary individuals, that were most effective in channeling nationalist loyalties. One of the most widely repeated errors made when judging developments in Spain in this regard consists of looking for its failings by comparison with the idealized model of France, according to which the only means of establishing a sense of nationhood in a population would stem from the initiatives of a uniform, centralized government. In Spain, in contrast, not only very low-level bodies but also localist variants of the national identity played significant roles. In addition, we will also place a spotlight on a dimension of national construction that has almost been forgotten, the contribution of transnational factors, which in the case of Spanish national construction, long alert to—and in many ways dependent upon—Hispanic America, were highly significant. There were several centenaries that were celebrated simultaneously on different continents and that represented a challenge for Spain's foreign policies.

Lastly, we should note that the narratives of the past that set commemorations in motion were not carved in stone like monolithic blocks but lent themselves to multiple interpretations, prompting a constant struggle between different groups who wished to claim them as their own—that is, to impose their own version of what had happened in certain chapters of essential importance for the history of political culture in order to legitimize their own particular positions and interests.

These observations do not contradict but rather complete the images given by traditional political history. In the course of our examination we can see the involvement of political leaders of different colors, members of the royal family, academics, military officers, journalists, writers, members of the clergy, emigrants, diplomats, recreational or professional associations, city councils, a whole range of commissions, and even ordinary people such as the nurses and patients at IFEMA, sometimes beneath the umbrella of a broad consensus on the need to commemorate this or that event, and at other times in intense disagreement on just what there was to be celebrated. However, these conflicts, severe though they might seem, should not be confused with a lack of interest in nationalist projects. Overall, this was an especially dense historical period, which left a lasting mark on the way Spaniards still look upon themselves today. This book narrates some of the vicissitudes of the era, and reflects on the meaning of its commemorations, in the evocation of heroes and heroines, near implausible feats of heroism, epic struggles for liberty, and venerated symbols. When I was a student with intellectual pretensions, it bothered me when friends and acquaintances said that I spent my time reading and recounting *historias*, stories, while I preferred to think of *Historia*, History, with a capital letter. Today I do not think they were entirely wrong.

Madrid, Spring 2020

Notes

1. "We were taken with centenaries."