

## **Words of thanks on receiving a degree h.c.**

The best honour for a university teacher and researcher is that which comes from the appreciation of his colleagues in the worldwide academic republic. By granting me a Doctorate honoris causa at your university you have done me that honour, and my first duty is to thank the University of Girona for allowing me to receive this precious gift. I say 'the University'. But a University itself does not make such decisions. They are proposed by one or more individuals, supported by others, and finally approved and promulgated by those who represent the full authority of the University. They are all real people, not formal institutions and I would like to thank all of them personally as well as collectively for what they have done to give me this honour, as well as to thank them for arranging the journey to this beautiful and historic city..

To receive a degree from Gerona is particularly agreeable for three reasons. First, because I have a long, if tenuous, relation with Catalunya. My uncle, in whose family I was brought up, had visited Spain for professional reasons . From a visit to Barcelona in the very early 1930s he brought back a personally signed photograph of the leader of Francesc Macia , which he proudly showed to all visitors. He revisited Barcelona again during the Civil War – I think in 1937 – and brought back his impressions of Lluis Companys whom he also met. My own connections with Catalunya come chiefly through books: Catalan was the first language into which *The Invention of Tradition* was translated and my wonderful publishers and friends at *Critica* have their base here. I am still on the advisory committee of the review *Avenc*, which I joined when it was more of a historical magazine than it is today.

My second reason is that I am not entirely a newcomer to your university. Girona is a young university, and not long after its foundation, it did me the honour of inviting me to give the Ferrater Mora lectures on contemporary thought . I have the most agreeable memories of the time I spent here 15 years ago, but I also have a bad conscience. I hope Professor Terricabras will forgive me for failing to write the book he expected on the basis of these lectures. I hope subsequent Ferrater Mora lecturers – a most distinguished list of names – have proved less remiss than I have so far.

My third reason is that this visit enables me to pay a tribute to two of the finest historians who have written, among many other subjects, about Catalunya .I had the good fortune to meet both for the first time in 1950 in Paris at the International Congress of Historical Sciences, in the newly founded section on Social History. One was that great son of Girona, Vicens Vives, He had come to Paris from the milieu of self-satisfied intellectual autarchy in Franco Spain to make contact with new developments in historiography, and at that time France was undoubtedly the centre of such innovation. The other was Pierre Vilar. I do not need to tell you how close his relations were with Catalunya from his beginnings as a historian . When I made his acquaintance he had no fixed academic position and was still working on his wonderful *These* which was not to be published until 1962 :La Catalogne dans l'Espagne Moderne but shortly after the Paris Congress he was recruited into what became the great power-house of the historical sciences in France, the *Sixieme Section*, of Fernand Braudel and Clemens Heller. I still remember the stimulating discussion between Vicens Vives and Pierre Vilar at the 1950 Congress on whether or how far

the Marxist analysis could be applied to the revolution – as Vives called it - of the remensas in 15<sup>th</sup> century Catalunya.

I had no close relations with Vicens Vives in later times, though I always remember our stimulating conversations in Paris during that discouraging time in the history of Spain. On the other hand I established lasting links of friendship and intellectual agreement with Vilar. I am happy to say that I persuaded him to publish an important article on 'Problems of the Formation of Capitalism' in one of the earliest numbers of our new historical review *Past & Present*. So his work was available in English before it was translated into any other language. The University of Girona is fortunate to be the guardian of this great historian's library. Allow me to congratulate you on their acquisition. Vicens and Vilar were the inspirers and teachers who, by their own work and that of their pupils brought the writing of Spanish history from the provincial backwardness of the Franco era into the contemporary world. This occasion gives me an opportunity both to salute their achievement .

My own work ,unlike Vicens Vives and Pierre Vilar's, has no particular relation to Catalunya, except in one respect, as a student and observer of nationalism and a critic of the tendency of modern states and nations to generate historically inadequate narratives and sometimes myths about their past. This is a subject on which I have found myself in disagreement with readers of my writing more favourable to the sovereign state independence of small nations than I am, including in Catalunya. That is one more reason why I greatly appreciate the honour of a degree h.c. from Girona, a university so closely aligned by its origins and the spirit of this region with Catalanism. I remain sceptical of writing history as though it could be contained within the limits of any particular state or the territory using a particular modern written language, though

I appreciate the enormous stimulus a sense of collective identity has given to historical research. Not least in Catalunya , which has a remarkably distinguished and original historical community. Indeed, it is so mature that Catalan historians,like Irish historians, are recognizing the need to demystify the the nationalist versions of their pas. Let me end by paying tribute to one of its most eminent and influential figures, Josep Fontana and saying how much I owe to Catalan historians since 1950. Let me also conclude my expression of thanks for your generosity with a few words of appreciation for what has been achieved since the end of the old regime for Catalan culture and the Catalan language . In a globalised world the maintenance of national cultures and languages, large and small, is more important than ever. All are equally undermined by the demands for global standardisation and communication. Yet national and regional cultures ,like national histories, can flourish only by recognizing that they exist and must exist within the wider framework in which they are embedded . They cannot cut themselves off from it , even conceptually. In the field of culture, Catalunya has been remarkably successful in combining the maintenance of a regional sense of community with a flourishing participation in the wider world and a recognized role in it . I have to say that in this respect autonomous Scotland and Wales, in my own united but composite kingdom of Great Britain, have a less impressive record than Catalunya. They could learn from your example. It is a pleasure and an honour to receive a degree h.c. from its university of Girona. I thank you.

Eric Hobsbawm

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