

**Michael Eaude 2007: *Catalonia: A Cultural History*. Oxford:  
Signal Books. 281 pp.**

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Michael Eaude's *Catalonia* is part of the series *Landscapes of the Imagination*, and the collage of urban and landscape imaginaries described in the pages of this book has been put together in a very skilful manner. This is psychogeography at its best! The author leads the reader through dreamlike towns and cities, which narrate the stories of their past and open doors to secrets carefully withheld from the buzz of sun-seeking tourists. All kinds of boundaries are crossed here, space, time, fact and fiction. Reader and author enter into a dialectical relationship with each other, imagining and remembering experiences, laughing at anecdotes, but most important of all, sharing the love for the country and the people who live in it. This is not a handbook for the weekend tourist but for those who know Catalonia and have emotional roots here.

Eaude writes with passion and sympathy and his knowledge of the country's history and culture is excellent. Although the book cover offers a very brief bio-note on the author,<sup>1</sup> and the "Acknowledgements" page explains that he "first became aware of Catalonia as a country that had a specific identity apart from Spain on 9 April 1973" (viii), the reader's suspicions are confirmed on page 200, when he refers to Horta as the place "where I live". He constructs the identity of the Catalans and of Catalonia by choosing specific events from the past as examples of their uniqueness whilst, at the same time, deconstructing some of the pride the Catalans have in their heritage. Thus, in Part Two, dedicated to "*Geniuses*", Gaudí, Güell, Rusiñol, Casas, Picasso, Dalí and Miró share the heights with Raimon (no women geniuses). Gaudí's modernist architecture attracts visitors from all over the world to Catalonia, but while admirers gaze in awe at the buildings, they should be aware that it was Gaudí's patron, Güell, who paid for them, having made his fortune in the slave trade. Remember "the Africans who died to create Barcelona's booming tourism industry" (75), notes Eaude and remember also that other heritage sites, such as Empúries and Tarragona, were built with the blood and sweat of slaves of the Roman Empire.

What makes Eaude's account of Catalan cultural history different is his stress on recovering historical memory, and giving voice to the down-and-outs of the past and present. From the past, he mentions the trials of African slaves and then makes references to the proletariat working in the textile mills. From the present, the Romanian women who have no legal papers, and therefore no citizenship, and the Eastern European prostitutes who line the roads. They are all members of the modern slave trade, often organised by ruthless European

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<sup>1</sup> The bio-note reads: Michael Eaude writes for the *Guardian* and *Independent*. He is the author of *Barcelona, the city that reinvented itself* (Five Leaves, 2006).

mafias. He comments on the half-hearted attempts of the various Catalan Governments to recover the historical memory of those who lost the war, were condemned for treason, shot and thrown into common graves. Catalonia—like Spain—is still torn in two. And, in an act of consciousness-raising, he points out that Catalonia may be considered an oppressed nation in many ways today, but, in looking backwards into the past, Catalonia also colonized and repressed. At the turn of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Roger de Flor's army waged war on the Athenians and set up two Catalan states in Greece, imprisoning or putting to death those who refused to speak the Catalan language. Joaquim Nadal travelled to Athens in 2005 and publicly offered apologies on behalf of his government for the atrocities committed by the Catalans some 700 years ago.

Eaude does not make the reader writhe with guilt about past wrongs but he does put his readers through a whole range of emotions as they turn the pages: humour, curiosity, horror and suspense. There is an underlying sense of humour throughout the whole book, which should make readers laugh. In the chapter on the Gothic Quarter in Barcelona, he writes about the Christmas Market, *el mercat de Santa Llúcia*, which sells figurines made of plastic, wood and plaster for the nativity scene that is often put on show in shop windows and living rooms, near the Christmas tree. This is where the tourist will find the most Catalan of all souvenirs to take home! The *caganer* is an essential part of any Catalan Christmas and, although its origin seems to be a mystery, it cannot come as a surprise that, as Eaude writes, "the Catalan family firm Roca has turned shit into gold. It is the world's biggest toilet manufacturer" (184). From laughter to horror... it is difficult to imagine that the city of Barcelona's most popular food market, the Boqueria, was once the site of executions, and that the gallows were probably surrounded by brothels (Langdon-Davies 1953: 175), or that Eulàlia, the co-patron saint of Barcelona, suffered the most terrible tortures to her body, the amputation of her breasts, before being crucified in Barcelona by the Romans.

Chapter Two is dedicated to the "Mediterranean, the Centre of the Earth: Tarragona" and one of the sayings that Eaude cites describes the division of Catalonia into its four capital cities: "Girona for tourism, Barcelona for industry and commerce, Lleida for agriculture and Tarragona for the shit" (20). The Generalitat's centralist politics has repeatedly concentrated its wealth in Barcelona and its metropolitan area, making it even more densely populated and inevitably unsustainable. The "shit" in Tarragona is a reference to the petrochemical industries, which blacken its blue skies, and the menacing presence of its nuclear power stations. Politically, Catalonia has many challenges to face. The pages of Eaude's book are scattered with European Union statistics: Catalonia has failed in its educational system (196); it has the highest percentage in short-term contracts and deaths resulting from accidents at work (229); the country has the highest consumption of cocaine in Europe (196) but the Barcelona Football Club has more members than any other football team (261); and finally, the Catalans live longer than other European nationals—except for the Icelanders, who are "conserved in chill air" (249).

Because Michael Eaude's *Catalonia* is so very respectful of the underprivileged of the past and the present, of all those who have put all their energies into surviving but also into constructing the nation that we have today, I feel I should mention a failing. His Catalan imaginary seriously represses the presence of women. It is true that he is very careful in writing non-sexist

language, but if a list is made of all the references to women in Catalonia, it is reduced mainly to prostitutes and perhaps one internationally renowned Catalan woman, Carme Ruscalleda, named Spain's chef of the year 2004.

Catalonia is a "*terra de pas*" (xiv), an entrance and exit to France and Spain, and these two powerful presences probably do more for Catalan nationalism than they are aware of. If the nation does not promote a strong identity politics, it will sink or dissolve into its powerful neighbours. The opening pages of this book may well introduce Catalonia as a "*terra de pas*" (xiv) but it is also a place where many foreigners want to settle down. The author's description of the location of the Palau Güell serves as an excellent metaphor for the new multicultural Catalonia. This fine palace is one of Barcelona's main tourist attractions and its splendour is surrounded by noisy traffic and the hubbub of shops, restaurants and peoples from all over the world. This is the *Barri Xinès*, Barcelona's Chinatown, which is a mixture of "traditional business and the new worlds brought together by globalization: through it all, the vibrant and lively yet poor and sordid nature of the Raval has persisted in the century plus since the palace was built" (101). Herein lies the real challenge facing Catalonia today, and indeed, facing all countries with an increase in their populations due to immigration. Eade's closing words ask whether the country will be able to offer "the democratic rights, welfare and recognition that it, as an oppressed nation, has long demanded for itself" (266). The reader-traveller leaves Eade's landscape of the imagination and enters a landscape of desire, and wonders...

### Works Cited

Langdon-Davies, John 1953: *Gatherings from Catalonia*. London: Cassell.