

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of *Carlos Benito González de Posada (1745–1831): Vida y obra de un ilustrado entre Asturias y Cataluña*

By José Remesal Rodríguez and José María Pérez Suñé, Real Academia de la Historia, 1178 pages, 2013, ISBN 9788415069485

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This is a large work of more than a thousand pages that undertakes an in-depth biographical study of Carlos Benito González de Posada, an antiquarian who lived in the politically troubled decades of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The authors, Prof. José Remesal, a professor of Ancient History at the University of Barcelona and a member of the Royal Academy of History, and the researcher, Josep María Pérez, are both connected to the CEIPAC, one of the most active research centres for the study of antiquity (ceipac.gh.ub.es/). This work links with that of other scholars in Spain who have also focused their attention on eighteenth-century antiquarianism (Almagro Gorbea and Maier 2010; Alvarez Martí-Aguilar 1996; Arasa Gil 2012; Beltrán and Gascó 1993; Cacciotti 1993; Cortadella 1994; Ferrer Albelda 1996; López Trujillo 2006; Mora 1998; Ortiz de Urbina Montoya 1997; Salas Álvarez 2010; Wulff Alonso 2003;) for antiquarians in the Canary Islands and Hispanic America during this period see Alcina Franch 1995; Farrujia 2004, and MacCormack 2007).

The study is divided into two parts. The first, covering six hundred pages, comprises the biography. The second, of just over four hundred pages, is a compilation of a series of documents. This is followed by a day-by-day synopsis of González de Posada's life in forty pages and five indexes for names, toponyms, topics, manuscripts and epigraphic repertoires.

Volume I begins with a thorough and critical discussion of the previously published biographies of Carlos Benito González de Posada (Chapter 1), followed by eleven chapters (2–12) giving a detailed account of his life. He was born in Asturias (northern Spain) in 1745. From 1771 to 1778 he lectured at the Royal Studies in Madrid, a Jesuit institution that taught at university level. During this period he published a book on how to translate from Latin into Spanish (1775). However, his frustration after

two unsuccessful attempts to obtain a chair led him to decide on a change of career.

Chapter 3 relates how in 1777 he became a priest and began to climb in the ecclesiastical ladder (chaplaincy, canonry and bishopric). He started on the bottom rung, managing to obtain the post of chaplain at Masalavés, a small village in the province of Valencia, where he used his spare time to continue working on his catalogues of Asturian authors. His aspirations led him back to Madrid in 1786, where he established contact with two Asturians who held important government jobs, Pedro Rodríguez de Campomanes and Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos. Under the protection of the former, in 1788 he was appointed cathedral canon on the island of Ibiza, where he lived for only a year and a half. A permit would allow him to return to the mainland to pursue his enlightenment dream of writing his *magnus opera* on Asturias. Accordingly, he spent the following three years living in Asturias and Madrid (1789–1792) and continued compiling and organising the material for his *Memorias Históricas del Principado de Asturias y del Obispado de Oviedo*, the first volume of which he would finally see published in 1794. However, the criticism it received led him to desist in his attempt to finish the remaining volumes, which have since been lost. In his first years in Tarragona he also wrote a dictionary for the local dialect of Asturias that also remained lost until 1985 (González de Posada 1986, 1989).

Chapters 4 and 5 detail González de Posada's life in Tarragona from 1792. He moved to that city as canon of one of the most prestigious churches in Spain, the metropolitan see. During his long stay of almost forty years he devoted a large part of his time to archaeology and the collection of antiquities. At that time the city and harbour of Tarragona were going through important changes, which led to many archaeological discoveries. Among them he paid particular attention to the inscriptions, which were mainly Roman, Islamic and Jewish. He regularly sent reports about them to the Royal Academy of History, of which he was a correspondent from 1789. He sent much information, again particularly about inscriptions, to scholars who requested it for their own publications. Among these was

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the French scholar, Alexandre de Laborde (1806–1820). González de Posada's important role in the development of epigraphy is focused on in Chapter 9. He collaborated with and even assisted in establishing important institutions for the study of antiquities in Tarragona, particularly the Academia de Dibujo (Academy of Arts, 1802), which some see as the precursor to the Archaeological Museum of Tarragona, and the Society of the Friends of the Country, which would later become the influential Archaeological Society of Tarragona.

Chapters 6 and 7 detail his final years, when political events led him to leave Tarragona for three years. By 1814, however, he was back in the city and, with the exception of a brief spell in Reus in 1823, he would remain there until his death in 1831. Chapters 8 and 9 are the most important for those interested in archaeology. They provide us with information about his role as an antiquarian in Asturias and especially in Tarragona (Chapter 8) and, as mentioned above, his contribution to epigraphy (Chapter 9). Regarding the latter, the authors distinguish three periods: preliminary (1790–1801), first (1803–1806) and second (1822–1826). Chapter 10 focuses on his role as a historian and Chapter 11 analyses the biographies he wrote during his life, including several autobiographies. Chapter 12 explores his humanist facet as a Latinist, poet, author of plays and a translator of teaching texts written in modern languages.

For those of us who work on the history of later periods, reading this book takes us to a completely foreign country (cf. Lowenthal 1985) in which many of the parameters we would expect to find later had yet to be developed. The eighteenth century was the world of the academies, and while these institutions were a key component in the transmission of knowledge, the rules were essentially different to those that would be established later. Perhaps because of this, the extent of this work contrasts with the meagre written output of his life. Much of his writing was never published, sometimes due to bad luck and sometimes because, apparently, they were not of sufficient quality. This was the case, for example, of the *Catálogo de los españoles aficionados a la numismática (Catalogue of Spaniards interested in the study of coins, 1805)*. It also appears that not all that he wrote was meant to be printed, including the many reports and writings he sent to the Royal Academy of History describing stone or pottery inscriptions. It should also be noted that from 1766 he contributed to the *Diccionario Geográfico-Histórico de España (Geographic-Historical Dictionary of Spain)*, an *opus magnum* promoted by the Royal Academy of History. However, when it was published, his name was mixed up with that of someone else.

Why then write such an extensive biography on a person who could be considered merely a second-rank antiquarian? I propose that it is precisely because of this – he was an important, but nonetheless minor, antiquarian – and it is this that makes him significant. In contrast to the obsession with the good and the great, paying attention to these lesser known figures can go a long way to illuminating the nature of antiquarian work in the years

before archaeology became a fully-fledged professional discipline.

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