

HISTORICAL CORNER

THE CENTENARY OF THE CATALAN INSTITUTION FOR NATURAL HISTORY*

The end of 1999 marks the 100th anniversary of the decision, taken on the 3 December 1899 by three young students in Barcelona, to found the Catalan Institution for Natural History, with the intention of bringing together experts and amateur enthusiasts in the fields of zoology, botany and geology in one association.

There were two main reasons underlying the decision of these students to set up a scientific society: their vocation as naturalists, which found no adequate outlet in the institutions of the day, and, even less so, in a somewhat stagnant university atmosphere; and the manifest desire – though not exclusively – to centre their research within Catalonia and, preferentially to work in the Catalan language. It is perhaps no coincidence that the Institution was founded, as a positive response, immediately after the war with United States – which meant the loss of Cuba and the Philippines, all that remained of the Spanish empire.



Meeting of the ICHN at Menorca, 1933

The three young founder members formed the first Committee. By the end of 1902, when the Institution had still not yet been operating for more than two years, the first full Committee was constituted; the association now boasted some 60 members all told. From that moment, the Institution grew without interruption.

A highly significant feature of those early years of the Institution was that it was students or recent graduates who took the initiative in all fields. The majority of established sci-

entists in the field at that time played no role in the Institution or limited themselves to offering advice or to providing encouragement. The Institution was founded with the aim of being a progressive association, faithful to the community in which it had been formed and eager to develop a scientific culture, and out of necessity to challenge – though perhaps not always gladly – the official scientific bodies of the day, which had a little to envy.

Between 1905 and 1936 the Institution not only consolidated its position but it grew rapidly. All this was to be interrupted by the Civil War (1936-1939). Those that had been no more than students or young post-graduates back in 1899 had quickly established themselves as professionals of some standing, and many of the established scientists of the day became members of the Institution, impressed by the seriousness and rigour of its undertakings. A simple glance at the work published between 1900 and 1915, for example, indicates the rate at which the association reached full maturity.

In 1915 the Institution was invited to collaborate with the Institute for Catalan Studies, founded a short time earlier (1907) by Enric Prat de la Riba, president of the *Mancomunitat*, Catalonia's first body of self-government. This participation marked the official acceptance of the Institution, as it was called on to collaborate in the most ambitious cultural work being undertaken in Catalonia at that time. This participation conferred indisputable prestige on the Institution and provided it with the facilities which it had previously lacked: this new support was immediately reflected in its publications. In 1917 the Institution became an affiliated association of the Institute for Catalan Studies.

The movement in the number of members offers a clear indication of the fortunes of the association during these years. Thus, from a total of 14 in 1900, membership had grown to 217 on the eve of the Spanish Civil War. Among these members were to be found the leading Catalan scientists of the day and many others who had taken up residence in Catalonia.

In 1939, the military manoeuvres at an end and the state of the war over, the circumstances were, however, not favourable in order to resume the activities of the Institution due to the repressive measures introduced by the Franco dictatorship against the Catalan language and culture, above all in the field of science. The Institute for Catalan Studies found itself dispossessed of its premises, which up until this time it had occupied in the *Palau de la Generalitat* and in the former Hospital of *Santa Creu*, and deprived of its library – renamed the Central Library, a name which it continued to hold until only recently. Similarly the Institution for

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Natural History lost all its premises and its library; even its publishing funds were embargoed. On top of this was the more painful and irreparable loss of those members killed in the war or forced into exile. However, those members that survived continued to meet and work, though in secret.

Discreet attempts to refound the Institution were made in 1949 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of its original foundation, but the atmosphere was still highly unfavourable and the attempts were not successful.

It was not until 1972 that the Institution abandoned the moribund state into which it had fallen for so many years. A group of members, together with some young biologists, decided to set up a provisional committee and to initiate the reestablishment of the association. Since then, the Institution has enjoyed constant growth and today boasts almost 900 members.

The *Butlletí*, the Institution's main publication, responsible for the diffusion of information about the natural heritage, was first published in 1901 and thereafter regularly until 1936, after the Civil War and during the postwar years, the normal operation of the association was not possible, and publication of the *Butlletí* only resumed in 1974.

The *Butlletí* is not the Institution's only publication. In addition to the *Memòries*, among which *Natura, ús o abús?: Llibre blanc de la natura als Països Catalans* (1976), which remains a point of reference on environmental issues, we

should highlight a collection *Treballs de la Institució Catalana d'Història Natural*, including research on the natural systems of the River Ebro. Other works include *Seminaris d'Estudis Universitaris*, *Notícies de la Institució* and a recent collection of guides to areas of natural interest.

The Institution also organizes environmental seminars, courses in natural history, and other academic meetings; it runs groups in the *comarques* of Catalonia and welcomes other associations of specialist naturalists.

Today, the Institution is concerned with the development of objectives and projects for the conservation and sustainable use of the biological diversity of Catalonia based on reports and data provided by more than 60 experts around the country.

Now, one hundred years on, we are in a good position to evaluate the contributions made by the Institution to our society. We can only admire the continuity of a non-official association through years of great hardship and offer it our gratitude for having made Catalan a language of science.

Finally, the work of the Institution, and its contribution to society and Catalonia, has received official recognition in this the year of its centenary. Thus, on 18 May 1999 it was awarded the *Creu de Sant Jordi* by order of the *Generalitat de Catalunya* «For its recognized prestige as an interdisciplinary platform for the promotion of the study and the dissemination of our understanding of all beings and natural systems».