

**Carme Puche**

# A century of science in Catalan

## *The Institute of Catalan Studies a hundred years ago*

To enter the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (Institute of Catalan Studies - IEC), speak with its members, attend the activities they organise, roam around the Biblioteca de Catalunya (Library of Catalonia), discover the quantity of publications it generates... is an incitement to knowledge. One wants to ask questions, do research, read, learn and reflect upon any of the thematic areas for which they are responsible, which is to say all those that might impinge on Catalan culture.

To be precise, if there is any suitable definition for this academy of academies, it is that of inciter of knowledge because in the Institute research is done, publications are produced, and studies in all the different thematic areas —many of which would probably not find space in any other institution— are circulated. However, its members have also come to terms with the fact that the Institute is very little known for, since it tends to be associated with the Catalan language, the scientific endeavour that has characterised it since its beginnings has not always been recognised.

Organised into five independent sections, in the style of the French Institute, the Institute is a federation that brings together 26 affiliated societies with some 8,500 members. In the words of Antoni Riera, IEC vice-president and president of the commission organising the centenary that the Institute will be celebrating in the coming months, it represents “an extraordinary human patrimony, with roots that spread in a very well-balanced way through all the Països Catalans (Catalan language territories)”. Since it was founded by Enric Prat de la Riba in 1907, a hundred years of innovation,

resistance and subsequent modernisation have gone by in an Institute that has come down to our times with a desire to “open up its doors and windows”, an expression repeated by its members as a maxim clearly indicating that this commemoration is not just to remind us of its history —which is, in part, the history of us all— but also that it aims to open up a process of reflection in order to keep abreast of scientific changes and not to lose ground in the internationalisation of Catalan culture, which is one of the main goals the Institute has made possible from its earliest days.

### Academy of academies

The early years of the twentieth century saw the beginnings of a revolutionary project that would represent the Catalan scientific community as distinct and particular *vis-à-vis* the academies of other countries. It drew together prior efforts such as that initiated with the First International Congress of the Catalan Language (1906) and found background support with the resulting electoral victory of Solidaritat Catalana. However, on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1907, the Catalan government officially founded, for the first time, an advisory body that was also an autonomous centre of studies with systematic and well-planned functions. With a strategy delineated by Enric Prat de la Riba, the newly-elected president of the Diputació (Provincial Council) of Barcelona, the Institut d’Estudis Catalans made its appearance with a first section, the Historical-Archaeological Section, because studies in this field were the most advanced at the time and it was therefore a way of ensuring a good start for a truly innovative project. A hundred years later, the IEC has five sections: the original Historical-Archaeological

Section and the subsequently established Philosophy and Social Science, Science and Technology, Biological Sciences, and Philological sections. Each of these sections is simultaneously extended into specialised affiliated societies —the first of which was the Societat Catalana de Biologia (Catalan Biology Society— 1913) —and these are spread throughout the Països Catalans. It was a complex structure with a complex task: producing science in Catalan and disseminating internationally recognised, high-quality culture, “without much economic support and, in many cases, having to deal with hostility from the government of the day”, as Riera says. Indeed, the history of the IEC is inscribed through two dictatorships and two world wars that have thwarted the internationalisation that defines it but that has, at the same time, protected it against some forms of aggression. In Riera’s formulation, “In 1922, the Institute was accepted by the International Union of Academics (UAI). Under the Franco regime, the UAI never withdrew recognition and we always participated in it. Even though they confiscated all our property, there was still a certain respect for us thanks to these relations”. And these relations are alive and well today. To go no further, in July 2006, the UAI entrusted the IEC with the coordination of a research project on human dignity, in which researchers from different countries are participating.

The support of the UAI was not the only help the Institute received in difficult times. With the coming of each dictatorship, when the IEC was left without a headquarters and funding, some sector of the Catalan bourgeoisie came to the rescue. “Since we are a minority sector”, Riera explains, “ours is not a story like that of the Royal Academy

of History in Madrid, which began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century without any kind of problem whatsoever, and without ever having been in opposition. It has been complicated for us but also enriching. There have been errors, contradictions, internal tensions... but our activity has never been interrupted". This continuity can be demonstrated with dozens of examples, but perhaps the most significant moment came in 1942, with the harsh Franco regime in power, and all the uncertainties of the Second World War. "There are members who have had to go into exile for political reasons and some have become Franco supporters. Those who are left behind in 1942 are talking about reconstituting the Institute and covering the vacancies. But, of course, our headquarters have been closed and they've taken all the publications and a lot of them have been sold as used paper!" Such was the lament of Albert Balcells, president of the Historical-Archaeological Section and author of *Història de l'Institut d'Estudis Catalans* (History of the Institute of Catalan Studies) of which Volume One was published in 2002, with Volume Two scheduled for the end of 2007. "They did two very significant things", Balcells continues, "for they never stopped publishing in Catalan, even though publishing scientific essays in Catalan was prohibited, and they never cancelled the membership of people who went into exile. The more persecuted, shrunken and limited Catalan culture was under Franco, the more important was the Institute. It is not that less work was done in the 1950s and 1960s, but the setting was not so oppressive. The Institute acted as a springboard between a language and a culture that, at the time, were dead for the coming generation".

### **From a culture of resistance to modernisation**

With a catalogue of publications consisting of over a thousand entries and agreements signed as to the Institute's participation in research programmes of the universities of the Països Catalans and with the Spanish National Research Council, as well as daily activities concerned with making knowledge available, the IEC is fully recognised in institutional and international terms although it is still far from receiving the popular recognition it deserves in Catalan society. As Riera notes, "in times when it is not working in opposition to the government and when it has economic resources, it is a very innovative and creative institution, while when it has to engage in resistance resisting is evidently the main concern and then, if the resistance has to continue for a long period, as happened under the Franco regime, staff renewal becomes very difficult. Forty years of surviving generates a distrustful, rather susceptible and highly personalised way of thinking. With the coming of democracy in the 1970s", Riera continues, "we found we had an Institute without any personality or legacy. In 1976 came the royal decree that once again recognised it and gave it scientific authority in all the Catalan-speaking territories, but without any economic support". Despite everything, a process of modernisation was carried out, including breathing new life into the staff, which was almost doubled. "The transition was a tough time for the Institute", remarks Balcells, "and at the end of 1977 a new statute was being considered. Unplanned growth was occurring and the Science Section was pressuring more than anyone to regulate the situation as this is the one with most

people. At the end of the 1980s, this was all recast and reform of the statutes was undertaken. The Science Section had grown so much that it was split into Biological and Technological Sciences. The reforms were completed in 1988 after ten years of insecurity in which things did not function smoothly enough, so it was a very long transition”.

This process of reconstruction went hand in hand with the promise to produce an IEC dictionary, which did not appear until 1995, at a time when the Institute’s publications were multiplying at an extraordinary rate. Modernisation has borne fruit. “When I came to work here, the computers were not interconnected”, Riera exclaims. “We had computers from the times of Quixote. They were huge! We had to install a fibre-optic system and nowadays we are on the cutting edge of computer systems in general”. Now revitalized and totally organised, the Institute’s aim this century is to make itself known. “Our doors and windows are open to everyone. We want people to come here and to see that their lives are affected by the Institute. Here, decisions are made on a daily basis about such important things as the language! We want people to see the Institute as their country’s academy, and we want them to ask for things: scientific reports, opinions, debates... If you require an opinion about any matter, in this house you can have the views of fourteen different scientists. In ten minutes you can be in touch with a physicist, a philologist, a mathematician... and this is extraordinarily enriching!” says Riera.

### **A critical celebration**

“We thought long and hard about who we wanted to open the centenary celebrations. We believed it should

have great symbolic impact and, out of all the Catalans, we had to choose one person. We wanted someone who could show that Catalonia produces first-rate scientists who, even though they may be based in the United States, still feel Catalan. And, also very importantly, we wanted to demonstrate that we are not only concerned with philology and the humanities but that we are also working with the experimental sciences, health problems, doing cancer research... things that are of concern to society at large. We are not only the academy of the language, though we are very happy to be that, but we are many other things as well.” With these words, Riera explains why they have asked the biochemist Joan Massagué to make the inaugural speech for the centenary celebrations. “And there is yet another reason”, he adds. “In choosing a top-ranking scientist, we are opening the centenary with the very latest that Catalan science has to offer right now, without nostalgia or looking back to the past, but with our eyes are turned to the future”. This latter reason is why a cycle of conferences on the experimental sciences and technology in 20<sup>th</sup> century Catalonia is being held (from 6<sup>th</sup> February to 11<sup>th</sup> May) as one of the activities of this centenary celebration, with a view to achieving two objectives. First is analysing the process of the country’s scientific modernisation over a hundred years and, second, to discover challenges that are worth confronting in the future. As Riera puts it, “We shall hold a first cycle of lectures so as to see what our roots are and what our successes and our errors have been. This does not mean an examination of history as a teacher of life, but rather to obtain some perspective from the more scientific point of view. On the basis of this, there will be a

complementary second cycle of lectures in order to make medium- and long-term predictions and to analyse the present in order to see what might happen with the bottleneck that can be caused by uncontrolled development”.

The centenary commemoration also includes activities in the spheres of language (a commemoration of the First International Congress of the Catalan Language, and an International Symposium on Catalan in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: a Balance of the Present Situation and Future Prospects), history (Symposium on the Catalan-language Territories and Europe over the Last Century) and key 20<sup>th</sup> century personalities (a course of advanced studies on Catalan culture, power and society). For Riera, it is very important to emphasise that the IEC does not neglect art and, in this domain, the programme also includes an anthological programme of Catalan music over the last hundred years, featuring the premiere of a work exclusively created for the centenary celebrations by the composer and conductor Joan Albert Amargós. In the publishing field, the celebration will also make its presence felt with a series of specific publications that will include novelties such as the first catalogue of IEC publications since its very beginnings and the exhibition “Cent anys de l’Institut d’Estudis Catalans” (A Hundred Years of the Institute of Catalan Studies), supervised by the historian Francesc Fontbona with the assistance of Josep Maria Camarasa. This will be open to the public in Barcelona from 2<sup>nd</sup> November to 31<sup>st</sup> December and, in Valencia, in March and April, as well as in other Spanish cities on dates that are still to be determined.

In this country, achieving a hundred years in operation has been a complicated task for any entity promoting Catalan culture but, in the case of the IEC, there are the additional factors of its structural complexity and the scientific goals described above. Yet, despite all this, the centenary celebrations have not been planned as some expression of complacency by the Institute’s members, but rather with a view to offering a critical celebration of the past, present and future of a “house”, as its members call it, whose work has constant repercussions in Catalan society. “We have to criticise ourselves”, says Riera. This is why the lecture cycles are not confined to conference halls but are produced as written material in documents and, once the centenary celebrations are over, the IEC will embark on a period of reflection, section by section, so as to assimilate this material and open up a period for offering proposals in order to bring about the changes that will see the Institute and Catalan culture through the 21<sup>st</sup> century ||

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