

The Biblioteca de Catalunya national library of Catalonia

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Abstract. The Biblioteca de Catalunya (Library of Catalonia) was founded in 1907 as the library of the Institute of Catalan studies. In 1914 was converted into a public and research library. This article reviews the evolution of the library since its origins, and it points out that, due to the circumstances of its foundation, the library has been closely linked to the course of Catalan history.

One of the aims of the institution, since its early times, has been to become the national library of Catalonia. In spite of having acted in some stages of its history as a national library, it hasn't been until 1981 that this status has received legal sanction. Nowadays, the library has got clearly defined objectives, and it lives a phase of changes that affect the reorganization of the library's building and its services.

The origins of the Biblioteca de Catalunya (Library of Catalonia) and its varying fortunes, along with those of its staff and its holdings, are closely linked to the course of Catalan history over the present century. But the present library, or to be precise, the library at the time of its official designation as national library of Catalonia by an act of parliament in 1981, its physical form and its structure are the direct consequence of the long post-war period and its affects on the functioning of library services and access to culture in general.

Barcelona and Catalonia are better known after last year's Olympic Games, but this does not obviate the need to point out that the national library of this autonomous territory within the Spanish state, with its millennial culture, which is closely linked with its language —Catalan— and now strongly integrated into that of Europe, is a young library. It was founded in 1907 as the library of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (Institute of Catalan Studies), at an eventful moment in history which had seen the recent foundation of the Estudis Universitaris Catalans. This was an institution which met a need especially felt by academics and researchers

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of all kinds that the university, highly centralised and under-resourced, was systematically refusing to satisfy: specifically Catalan studies, conducted in the Catalan language, which would bring scientific life much closer to the real needs of society and permit the full development of Catalonia's intellectual potential.

Outside the strict field of teaching, the founding of the Institute of Catalan Studies in 1907, by decision of Diputació de Barcelona (Provincial Government of Barcelona), which was chaired by Enric Prat de la Riba, responded to the need to consolidate and broaden the ambit of high-level research in all fields of scientific activity. In order to improve its ability to meet these aims, the institute created its own library in the same year. This contained some excellent holdings of new and old material, acquired by intense and continuous purchases and donations. The institute and its library were housed at one end of the historic palace of the Generalitat, which then also housed the Diputació, but in 1922 the Hospital de la Santa Creu was proposed as its new location. This had been acquired in the previous year by Ajuntament de Barcelona (Barcelona City Council) and was expected to go out of service in a few years.

In 1914, following up a decision made the year before, the Mancomunitat of Catalonia, which was also chaired by Enric Prat de la Riba (and which had been constituted in 1914, after new laws in 1913 had granted a certain administrative and cultural autonomy to the whole of Catalonia—an autonomy which was effectively exercised), converted the library of the institute into the Biblioteca de Catalunya. This was to be a public library oriented towards researchers and scholars in general, and the aim was to build it into the national library of Catalonia. It was governed by a commission set up by the institute, which met for the first time in November 1913. This was replaced in May 1915 by a trust formed by representatives of the Mancomunitat, Barcelona City Council, the institute, and its director, Jordi Rubió i Balaguer, appointed in 1913.

The library was thus created not by direct action of the central state but on the initiative of institutions with limited powers and politicians and intellectuals mainly connected with the conservative side of the Catalan national movement—although it also enjoyed the broad support and active participation of other political sectors. What is more, the library was not based on any existing public collection (e.g., from a royal library, or from the holdings of a dissolved monastery), but in 1914 it already contained works of great value amongst the 28,000 catalogued volumes and 250 manuscripts, and, in addition to the general reading section, with its open access and loan holdings, it had established or was about to establish the four sections which have made up the closed collection until now: Manuscripts and Archives, Rare Books and Special Collections, Prints, Maps and Engravings, and Music.

Certain structural and functional limitations present from the start and, more than anything, the political vicissitudes suffered under the dictatorships of General Primo de Rivera (1923–29) and General Franco (1939–75), prevented the

fulfillment of the initial objectives and requirements of a large-scale research library and, more particularly, of a *de facto* national library:

1. Comprehensive collection of everything published in Catalonia, with especial attention to research material.
2. The conservation of the bibliographic heritage, with a programme adapted to the characteristics of use and the conditions of access.
3. Bibliographical information, publication of catalogues, provision of suitable reference tools and establishment of norms in cataloging.
4. A broad-based collection of the main sources for study and research and bibliographical indexes, the great works of synthesis and other outstanding works in all fields of intellectual activity, especially humanities.
5. Publication of current and retrospective national bibliographies and the drawing up of union catalogues.

With the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, administration and responsibility for management was returned to local level, to Diputació de Barcelona, with the obvious aim of "localising" it in order to strip it of any connotation of being a national institution for Catalonia, turning it into a library distinguished more or less by its holdings and its mere coordinating functions, as is seen in its change of name to Biblioteca Central de la Diputació de Barcelona (the Central Library of Barcelona Provincial Government; "central", that is, to the network of local libraries). Other legal measures had even stronger effects on the library's basic reason for being and aims, e.g. the prohibition of the use of the Catalan language:

"With the object of ensuring the due fulfillment of the orders prescribing the use of the official language [referring to Spanish] in the services and offices of this Provincial Body, I must remind you that it is absolutely essential to use the said language in official correspondence, registers, inventories, cards, letterheads, notes and inscriptions, etc. and in general in every sort of document and publication" (Order from the board of Public Inquiry of the Provincial Commission of Barcelona to the director of the Biblioteca de Catalunya, Barcelona, 26.9.1925).

The return to constitutional rule under the republic in 1931 made it possible to restore the national character of the institution, increase the qualitative growth of holdings and services and to move to a new location: in 1931 the City Council ceded part of the former Hospital de Santa Creu, including the great Gothic halls of the 15th and 16th centuries, as a new site for the library. Basic restoration and fitting out took place from 1932 to 1937, and between the latter date and 1939 the holdings were moved there.

From the Civil War to our own times

In 1939, however, the Biblioteca de Catalunya came under Franco's new military order, and all its measures affecting the Catalan language, which was only to be used in private, and the purging of both people and materials.

The first director of the library was dismissed and it was not possible to open the new site until February 1940. A resolution of the Diputació on 25 September 1939 changed the library's name back from the Biblioteca de Catalunya to the Biblioteca Central (Central Library), its name until 1973. It took on a role of coordinating the public network similar to that of 1925, but the changes were more drastic due to its long political subordination to the interests of Francoist propaganda and to directives and organisational and economic restrictions which limited it and turned the library into what was in fact an undefined, general research library, its doors gradually opened indiscriminatingly to an unqualified public. Its new role was, in fact, to make up for the lack of big, well-resourced public libraries, even though the state owned the Biblioteca Pública Provincial i Universitària (Provincial Public and University Library), which had important holdings from dissolved monasteries but was always badly endowed with resources. Smaller and less well known libraries were closed despite the quality of their holdings, such as the Biblioteca Arús, which specialised in sociological and political subjects (anarchism, freemasonry, etc.).

The downgrading of the library's status included limitations of every sort, especially serious in the lack of continuity in acquisitions and lack of staff for the cataloguing and processing of the existing holdings. Meanwhile, areas which would become necessary in the mid-term were given to institutions unrelated to the library.

The Francoist regression to totalitarianism seriously affected Catalan society in two ways, firstly through its authoritarian rule, the repression and the palpable economic and social decline of Spain, but also, and more especially, through the repression of its indigenous language and culture, the negative effects of which were irreparable due to the linguistic and cultural effects of the large-scale immigration from other areas of Spain.

The political events of 1975 gave rise to new and genuine possibilities of thoroughly reforming the political and legal situation, and thus of reforming the organisation of culture in Catalonia and Spain in general. In 1978, at the start of the constitutional period, powers in the area of culture and other services were transferred to the autonomous territories, and the Estatut de Catalunya (Statute of Catalonia) in 1979 recognised its exclusive power in this area, therefore giving it the power to organise, define and enlarge cultural structures. Thus, in 1981, the Parliament of Catalonia passed an act concerning libraries which gave the Biblioteca de Catalunya, which had recovered its name in 1973, the status of national library and made it the depository library of Catalonia, responsible for receiving, conserving and disseminating books published in Catalonia.

In 1987 the library was transferred to a consortium of institutions headed by the Generalitat of Catalonia, with the Diputació (these being the two institutions which support it financially), the City Council, owner of the building, and the Institute of Catalan Studies, its founder. The staff from the Diputació remain in place, now functionally assigned to the Library Consortium, which has also con-

tracted staff, until the library's constitution as an autonomous administrative body attached to the Department of Culture of the Generalitat of Catalonia.

The Catalonia Libraries System Law act passed on March 3rd by the Parliament of Catalonia (embracing public libraries, those of public interest and, to a limited extent, in accordance with the applicable legislation, libraries administered by the Spanish state), restructures the Catalan library system and creates the legal conditions for the integration into or fusion with the Biblioteca de Catalunya of different library services and institutions with powers in the area of bibliographic heritage, and for the effective exercise of its functions as the national library of Catalonia.

Reform, enlargement and reorganisation of the library

The site it was given in 1931, a smaller area of which has been occupied than originally envisaged, has, after restorations, enlargements and successive modifications of varying scales and quality, become partially inadequate or insufficient. An inappropriate use of space, which has led to the occupation of areas badly suited to technical work and to a close packing of the stacks which poses risks to the conservation of the holdings, made it necessary to draw up plans for reform and enlargement. These plans were based on the idea that the library should remain in the Gothic building and its annexes precisely because these were suitable premises, and not—or not only—due to the aesthetic attraction of the building (which according to some had conditioned this choice in 1931), nor for reasons of historical inertia.

An overall project for articulating the Biblioteca de Catalunya as the national library in accordance with the new act had to consider the projects which were already under way or planned to be put into action in the short term, and confirm them as useful, reject them or modify them. These projects included general computerisation, adaptation of an area specifically for consultation and reference, integration of holdings, construction and adaptation of stacks, the fitting out of new work areas, improvement of existing ones, etc.

It is the aim of the Biblioteca de Catalunya, with the physical and organisational transformations under way, to be able to carry out as efficiently as possible through its constituent units, and in every part of Catalonia, its functions as the national library of Catalonia.

This objective requires adaptation and renovation of the premises and the construction of a new storage area for books (a five-level basement), the complete renovation of the consultation and reading rooms of the beautiful Gothic building and the improvement and enlargement of the internal areas devoted to library work, administration and management.

It was decided from the outset that the execution of the building and remodelling project must allow continued consultation of holdings and use of services in the best possible conditions. To this end, the general holdings have been transfe-

rred to a provisional store, following a study, based on usage statistics, of the holdings to be located and the priority and means of making them accessible to the readers and users. Meanwhile, a general revision of the contents of the store and the state of conservation of the holdings, with special attention to ordering the existing periodicals had begun.

In general terms, and with particular reference to the improvement of compatibility between quality public service and conservation of holdings, especially those which undoubtedly constitute the main and most valuable core of the historic bibliographic heritage of Catalonia, it would be useful to point out some of the aspects of the orientation and consequences of the remodelling of the library and construction of the new store:

1. The availability of a greater space for access to consultation and reference works and data bases. A definitive reduction in the number of reading points for the general holdings, sufficient for the intended users of the library. A growth in the number of researchers is expected since many have stopped using the library due to the inconvenience and, more than anything, because certain holdings and means of consultation have not been available. The reduction in reading points will affect rather the users who use them to read their study notes or who continue to use holdings which are accessible in other more suitable centres.
2. A clear differentiation, as far as possible, given the character of the building, between areas open to the public and those reserved for staff. Improvement of the working conditions for library staff in larger and better equipped areas.
3. A clear differentiation between the general reading rooms and the consultation area for the reserve holdings, along with special access points for a limited public. Optimisation of security and of conditions of conservation, both in the consultation area and in the stores. A clear differentiation between habitual work areas and storage areas.
4. A substantial improvement of bibliographic information and general consultation services, both in terms of the installations and the reference holdings and the general open access holdings. Increased possibilities for consultation with new facilities (CD-ROM, etc) and on-line catalogues (for both the library and other on-line centres). It should be pointed out that the ordinary catalogues and the majority of the special holdings are being computerised, as are library management and administration, using the equipment provided by the Department of Culture. As a consequence of the increased consultation facilities and the new access conditions it will be necessary to rationalise lending and limit the duration of inter-library loans.
5. Distribution of holdings in the new underground store, bearing in mind that their provisional location in the present store make it possible to undertake a thorough-going revision of holdings and to prepare a more suitable definitive organisation of the new storage area.

The Catalonia Libraries System Law mentioned above establishes that the new internal organisation of the Biblioteca de Catalunya, defined as the national library, must be based on a structuring in units which cover all material in a variety of media and which will exercise in the library and all over Catalonia the relevant functions with autonomy and coordination. The new act specifically entrusts the Biblioteca de Catalunya with the following functions: 1) collecting, conserving and disseminating works connected with Catalonia, including the legal depository and those of a multidisciplinary and universal nature suitable for research; 2) conserving, preserving and disseminating the bibliographical heritage of Catalonia, giving the necessary support to the different centres of the Biblioteca de Catalunya and drawing up the current and retrospective national bibliographies and the union catalogue of the bibliographical heritage; 3) in the same manner, adapting or drawing up the norms for cataloging in Catalonia and establishing the catalogue of authorities.

The Biblioteca de Catalunya resulting from the development of the provisions of this act must therefore be a new institution which redefines and reorganises its sections and services, incorporating library institutions (the newspaper library of Catalonia, the record library, the Centre for lesser and non-book material, etc.) and management services which were not previously integrated.

Each of the units will undertake the internal and territorial management of the corresponding part of the heritage and will establish preservation and conservation programmes, carry out the relevant cataloguing and draw up the relevant inventories or give the necessary support for doing this, establish the conditions for consulting its own holdings and participate, via the governing council and technical council, in the management of the library as a whole and, in particular, in the coordination of acquisitions, the application of the conservation, dissemination and researcher service programmes.