

CATALAN DIARY

Peter Costello

Before there was *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*, there was *Homage to Catalonia* written by George Orwell in 1938. It is an account of his time in the Spanish Civil War as a volunteer on the side of the Republic. Except that he found himself in the wrong wing of the anti-fascist brigades. The Republican Government, increasingly under the influence of Communists manipulated by Stalin, turned on his group. They were vilified by Communists as traitors and collaborators. He began to realise that lying and betrayal were systemic to Communism - 'Four legs good two legs bad'. There in Catalonia he got a penetrating insight into the whole fraud of the enterprise. Subsequently he began to expose it. Ever since reading the book as an undergraduate I have wanted to pay my own homage to Catalonia.

So I start by visiting the Plaça de George Orwell in Barcelona. I am hoping it will have a statue of the author, or a testament to his work, or a passionate sculpture declaiming the twin totalitarian ideologies that blighted the 20th Century. But, alas, there is nothing to see but a children's playground. Do great passions really get overrun by the ordinariness of daily life? Or is it trying to tell us that nothing is as important as children, whose care and nurture as individuals is more important than any ideology? It is hard for me to tell.

The Catalans have a great eye for humour. The principal tourist attractions of Barcelona are the buildings of Antoni Gaudi - houses and palaces with crooked lines decorated in bright and lurid colours. He might as well have spelled his name 'Gaudy'. His masterpiece is the astonishing Church - 'Sagrada Familia' - which is built to epic proportions. He began construction in the 1880s. It was not finished when he died in 1926, nor despite almost continuous building is it finished today. The builders have vowed to finish it by the centenary of his death. There's a long way to go. People say that if the building is ever finished it will be a miracle and Gaudi, the man responsible, will be sainted.



A left-wing Mayor is elected on the weekend I visit but there is little evidence of *La Revolucion* in the streets. I had hoped to see the red and black flags of the Anarchists waving over the telephone exchange or at least a street skirmish or two. Despite all the problems of the Spanish economy (unemployment around 23 per cent) central Barcelona looks incredibly prosperous. The boulevards are wide and leafy, the restaurants are full. Fashionistas stroll up and down the Passig de Gracia. 'What is the basis of the economy?' I ask my local guide. It turns out that starting from the Olympics of 1992 Barcelona hitched its star to the tourist trade. Cruise ships disgorge wealthy Americans on a daily basis to wander up and down the main street - Las Ramblas. This could be one of the few cities to have actually benefited itself (as opposed to the fat cats of the IOC) from the Olympic movement.

But there is another sporting arena in Barcelona that outsells the Olympic arena. It is Camp Nou, home of the Barcelona Football Club. Barcelona, or Barca as it is known, attracts a fanatical following. Tickets for the weekend game are hard to come by and are selling for between 200 and 300 euro. Its motto - 'More than a Club' - means it is a statement and source of Catalan pride. *Forbes* magazine claims it is the second most valuable sports team in the world. All of a sudden I realise where the revolutionary fervour has gone. It has gone into supporting a professional football team. The Romans knew a thing or two about managing public expectations: - 'bread and circuses' they said. In Barcelona it is 'tapas and football'.

Barcelona was, in fact, founded as a Roman settlement. But it is not a Roman that greets the cruise liners rolling into the harbour. It is a giant column bearing the statue of a Genoan, Christopher Columbus. Now it is a bit rich for Catalans to claim Columbus. He neither sailed from there nor returned there from his journey of discovery. Apparently, some time after he arrived back in Spain, he was received by the King and Queen in Barcelona. Which is enough to warrant a giant statue if you have an eye to the tourist trade. But as history it is a bit wonky. After leaving Barcelona, I fly to New York which has its own Columbus Monument. Columbus never got to New York either, not even North America, but I guess he was a trailblazer for those Europeans who did.

This veneration of Columbus, on both sides of the Atlantic, gets me thinking about our own European discoverer, Captain James Cook. The Americans have a holiday to commemorate the arrival of Columbus in the New World. We have no Cook Day to match their Columbus Day holiday. There is a Statue of Captain Cook in Sydney's Hyde Park but it has nothing like the centrality of Columbus Circle to New York. In Melbourne's Fitzroy Gardens there is a house that Cook once lived in which has been transported out from England and reassembled. It's a weird little monument known as 'Captain Cook's Cottage.'

I wonder whether children are ever taught about Captain Cook in schools these days other than to be told that he interrupted a perfectly happy loving and caring society by sailing out from England. I have decided that I will promote the legacy of the man. I may begin by asking the Catalans for some marketing tips. *Homage to the Captain* I shall call it.

Peter Costello is a former Treasurer and the current Chairman of the Future Fund.