To Catalan Story Short

Reviewed by José Borghino.

A forum entitled 'Unlocking the Academies' opened to much fanfare in Melbourne earlier this year, as part of Donald Horne's latest pet project, the Ideas for Australia summits. To the credit of the organisers, the 'unlocking' was conceptualised as a two-way process. Not only does academia need to open itself up more to general consumption by rethinking the problem of specialisation and arcane jargon, but popular culture and its most potent agent of consumption, the media, need also to realign themselves in relation to the knowledge-making machines of academia.

As the forum investigated how best to promote two-way traffic between the technical and the journalistic, the focus fell on the position of the 'public intellectual' in contemporary society. It's in this context that the work of Robert Hughes becomes particularly important, beyond the intrinsic interest of his subject matter.

When Hughes' history of the Australian convict system, The Fatal Shore, appeared in 1987, there were a number of red faces among the serried ranks of mainstream Australian historians. Hughes had written an admirably accessible work and a runaway bestseller; that much, at least, was predictable, given Hughes' background as a prolific journalist-critic for Time magazine and his connections with the New York publishing world.

But The Fatal Shore is also full of wit, acuity and vision. It is well-written (winning prizes such as the Age 1987 Non-fiction Book of the Year Award) and it is very good history. What got up some historians' noses was that Hughes had achieved a commercial and critical success while unearthing new and hitherto ignored material: letters, journals and other primary sources relating to the convict experience in Australia between the arrival of the First Fleet and the end of transportation in 1868. The expatriate art critic had not only popularised the preexisting work of musty professors (the only function begrudgingly allowed the 'non-specialist' or 'journalistic' writer); Hughes had actually beaten them at their own game.

With his latest book, Barcelona, Hughes has once again stolen a march on the unsuspecting. This time, however, he hasn't just outsmarted the slow-moving manatees of academe, he's also one-upped the sleek sharks of the travel and tourism publishing world.

1992 has already been dubbed 'The Year of Miracles'; the quincentenary of Columbus' encounter with the New World is competing for attention with the imminent unification of the EC. However, the Spanish have snatched the Triple Crown: Culture (Madrid is the current Cultural Capital of Europe), Commerce (Seville is hosting World Expo '92) and Sport (the Barcelona Olympics). The last of these events will attract the most intense and extensive media attention; it is estimated that over 10,000 journalists from all over the world will be in Spain for the Olympic Games. And you can bet your bottom peseta that a good number of them are already reading Hughes' book as background.

Hughes' commercial timing is impeccable, but Barcelona is by no means a trivial, fly-by-night affair. Hughes conceived the idea for the book in 1983 but by the time he began writing in 1987, his original idea (for a thin tome on the Art Nouveau period in Barcelona, concentrating on architecture) had changed. Hughes realised that understanding Barcelona's architecture from 1875-1910 meant exploring the city's social and political history as well as its art history. As he puts it, to do otherwise would have been like "examining the foliage of the tree without considering its trunk and roots".

But that meant looking at Catalan history, too, and its relationship to the broader history of Spain, Provence, Languedoc and the western Mediterranean all the way back to the founding of the small Roman fortress of Barcino in about 15 BC. And then there are the economic links with the New World (especially in the 18th and 19th centuries), the Catholic connections, the artistic and philosophical interactions with Paris Impressionists and Russian Anarchists, the web of popular myths and legends, and so on.

The result is breathtaking. Barcelona is 573 pages long and ranges across more than 2,000 years of cultural and political history, from the Bronze Age oysters that once inhabited Barcelona Bay to the still unfinished saga of Gaudi's spectacular toffee cathedral, La Sagrada Familia. Along the way Hughes introduces us to the Hispano-Roman writers Seneca and Martial, to the Vandals, Visigoths, Moors and Franks—and to Wilfrid the Hairy, the legendary unifier of Catalonia.

There are chapters on Barcelona's medieval empire (stretching across the Balearic Islands to Sardinia, Sicily and Naples) and tantalising digressions on figures like Arnau de Vilanova (the chief Spanish exponent of the most powerful ideology to arise between Jesus Christ and Karl Marx—the teachings of the Italian mystic Joachim de Fiore), Ramon Lull, the 13th century neo-Aristotelian who, according to Hughes, "created Catalan as a literary language", and the 19th century poet-priest, Jacint Verdaguer.

The last two chapters of the book—on late 19th century Catalan modernisme and on Antoni Gaudi—are the best, and probably contain the germ of the original book. They display an outstanding ease of reference and breadth of knowledge, but are still full of humour, humanity and even sadness; Hughes' descriptions, for instance, of the deaths of Verdaguer and Gaudi are quite touching.

To say that Hughes is ambitious with Barcelona is a gross understatement. Social history, literary, economic,
political, intellectual, cultural, religious and art history—Hughes covers them all. He indulges in jocular asides about the centrality of images of shit in Catalan humour, or of hair as a sign of virility. Hughes weaves all these threads together entertainingly, with a sharp eye for the dramatic and for the emblematic figure who can embody a movement, a revolution, a disaster.

There are parts of the book where I wished Hughes had had time to slow down and give us more. With so much detail and so many overlapping plots, it seemed at times that characters would barely be raised above the ruck before they suddenly had to be killed off.

It is clear from Hughes' book that Barcelona's history inverts what the West accepts as the 'natural' direction of history. Thus, Barcelona's Golden Age was the Middle Ages, not the 16th and 17th centuries as it was for Spain in general. The periods which elsewhere saw the Renaissance and the Enlightenment were singularly boring in Barcelona—Catalan historians dubbed this period La Decadencia. And the Catalan Renaixença arrived finally in Barcelona only with the last years of the 19th century and the beginning first of the 20th.

Hughes draws the parallel between Barcelona and Australia as secondary centres, as provinces forever relating to an imperial centre. And ultimately, it was Hughes' sympathetic yet firm disregard for the self-delusions of the Catalans that I found most appealing about this book. Perhaps because he is Australian, he understands why Catalans have had to fight to construct a national identity in opposition to the centralist octopus of Madrid. Hughes concedes that there that there are substantive differences between Catalans and other Spaniards—but in the end he doesn't swallow the self-serving nationalist guff beyond it being somehow important for the natives to espouse it.

As a guidebook to Barcelona, this book has some drawbacks. The lack of any useful maps of the city or of Catalunya is particularly annoying, and could have been easily fixed. But as an example of public intellectuals doing what they do best—producing a useful cultural artefact—it is hard to beat.

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