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PUBLISHERS, CENSORS AND COLLECTORS IN THE EUROPEAN BOOK TRADE, 1650-1750

Edited by Ann-Marie Hansen
and Arthur der Weduwen



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School Books, Public Education and the State of Literacy in Early Modern Catalonia

Xevi Camprubí

In 1556, the council of Mataró, a Catalan village with less than 1,000 inhabitants, approved the decision to employ a teacher to instruct children how to read and write. The argument was clear: the teacher was needed, in the words of the council members, ‘for the benefits provided by knowledge and for the detriment that comes from ignorance’. The council provided an annual wage to the teacher and also lodging in exchange for teaching the sons of the poor families at no charge.¹

A similar example comes from the village of Olot, with 1,700 inhabitants, located in the countryside 75 miles north of Barcelona. In 1565, the council’s members reached an agreement with some local friars to open a school for children. Among the conditions, the friars were required to teach, free of charge, all the poor boys in town. In 1581, the council of Olot hired a new teacher for the public school. The conditions, however, did not change. The teacher was asked to teach the sons of all poor families of the village for free.²

Provisions of this sort were common in early modern Catalonia. Although grammar schools existed before, mainly for aspirant clergymen, from the sixteenth century onwards education was extended to the laity, even in the rural areas, and also to the poor. One reason that explains this development is the influence of humanism across Europe. The spread of humanist ideas on education prompted local authorities to promote learning to read and write among children. As we will see below, the books of important humanists, like Erasmus

1 Arxiu de la Corona d’Aragó (Archive of the Crown of Aragon. Hereafter, ACA), Notarials, Mataró, 1556–1558, C-3, June 29th, 1556. The subject of this article has been previously developed in the framework of research that I have been doing as an independent researcher since 2014. See: Xevi Camprubí, *Els mestres de minyons i l’ensenyament públic a la Catalunya Moderna (segles XVI–XVIII)* (Barcelona: Fundació Noguera, 2023). I wish to thank professor Paul Freedman, from Yale University, for ensuring the accuracy of my written English in this article.

2 Arxiu Comarcal de la Garrotxa (Archive of Garrotxa County. Hereafter, ACGAX), Ajuntament d’Olot, Llibre de deliberacions, 1564–1578, fol. 59v, July 6th, 1565; *ibid.*, 1578–1588, fol. 195v, August 20th, 1581.

of Rotterdam, Antonio de Nebrija or Lluís Vives, were well known across the country, even in small villages. The works of classical authors like Cicero or Virgil were also used in the public grammar schools. This was nothing new in Europe. According to Lawrence Stone, in the sixteenth century some sectors of English upper classes were influenced by Vives' optimism about education as a mean to improve society.³

There were, however, practical reasons as well. Geoffrey Parker has pointed out that both religious and civil authorities desired that ordinances and proclamations were understood by the common people. In 1588, the Bishop of Barcelona, Joan Dimas Lloris, reminded the school teachers of his diocese of the importance of teaching children to read all kind of legal papers: 'He [the teacher] will take care that children are capable of reading notarial deeds, legal proceedings, letters and other difficult documents, in order to be good readers of all kinds of writing'. It was common for ecclesiastical and secular authorities to post decrees in public spaces to inform people about important occurrences. In 1599, for example, the Bishop of Barcelona had a note affixed at the main door of the cathedral, so that it could be 'easily read by everyone', as he pointed out.⁴

In early seventeenth-century Catalonia, access to public jobs, which required a basic level of education, was open to peasants and artisans. Many became jurors or councillors in municipal governments in cities, towns and villages of the region. In Barcelona, artisans were granted the sixth councillor's seat in 1641, a political achievement that had been demanded for years. Artisans also worked in a large variety of civic posts which required education, such as guards of the city gates (supervising passports and bills of health), or controlling the weight of some of the products that entered into towns. Finally, to read, write and count was also important for the trade of many artisans, mainly for business accountancy.⁵

The aim of this paper is to show that in Catalonia, from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, there was an effective public education system, provided by the local councils, that gave a basic education to children from lower and middle classes, including the sons of the poorest families, in most cases for

3 Lawrence Stone, 'Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900', *Past and Present*, 42 (1969), p. 90.

4 Geoffrey Parker, *Europa en crisis, 1598-1648* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1981), pp. 372-373. Arxiu Diocesà de Barcelona (Archive of the Diocese of Barcelona. Hereafter, ADB) Comú, 1591-1594, Llibre 69, fol. 173. February 13th, 1588; *ibid*, Comú, 1597-1599, Llibre 71, fol. 189v, July 6th, 1599.

5 An explanation of the social structure of early modern Catalonia can be seen in English in: James A. Amelang, *Honored citizens of Barcelona: patrician culture and class relations, 1490-1714* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).