

## IN OPPOSITION TO THE HISTORIOGRAPHER'S DISMISSAL OF 'HOMAGE TO CATALONIA'

### *A critique of Paul Preston's article*

Paul Preston's article in No 16 (2018) of *Hispania Nova*, entitled "Misperceptions and mistakes in *Homage to Catalonia*", is not some neutral historiographical analysis, let alone an honest methodological consideration of the use of personal memoirs in Spanish Civil War history.<sup>[1]</sup> Instead, it amounts to an **ideological settling of scores** with an inconvenient text and with the central place that *Homage to Catalonia* holds in the critique of Marxism and the republican counter-revolution of 1937.

Preston does not deal with Orwell as an eye-witness; he sets out to **discredit him as a source** and in so doing he lifts the lid on an impoverished, authoritarian and profoundly conservative approach to history writing.

#### **1. The initial fallacy: requiring Orwell to be something that he never claimed to be**

The basis methodological error in Preston's article consists of his **sitting in judgment of a personal memoir as if it were an academic treatise written after the event with access to diplomatic, military and police archives**. At no time did Orwell ever make any secret of the limited, fragmentary and subjective character of his testimony. Quite the opposite: right from the outset, he explicitly pointed this out.

Rebutting *Homage to Catalonia* on the basis of its failure to offer a global vision of the Civil War is every bit as nonsensical as taking a trench newspaper to task for a failure to analyse British foreign policy. Preston sets up an **historiographical straw man**: he credits Orwell with a claim to exhaustiveness that never existed and was never claimed, and then proceeds to shoot it down from an elevated and academic position of superiority.

This is not a random occurrence: it helps **undermine the legitimacy of the political content of Orwell's testimony**, without the need to discuss its nature.

#### **2. Contempt for lived experience as an historical source**

Preston systemically downgrades Orwell's first-hand experience to "impressions", "misunderstandings" and "skewed opinions". Thereby adopting a stance that borders upon **the most vulgar positivism**, as if history only exists where it is sanctioned by the existence of State archives or the hindsight of a professional historian looking back decades later.

That approach denies the historiographical value of:

- a. Memoirs
- b. Oral history
- c. The testimonies of activists
- d. Subjective perceptions of the processes of repression

However, in the absence of sources of this sort, **there would be no social history and no history from below where the Civil War is concerned**. The value of Orwell's testimony lies in the very fact that **he was there**, that he saw, lived through and endured the crackdown on the POUM, the disbandment and dismantling of the militias, the liquidation of the social revolution and the imposition of Stalinist order in Catalonia.

The problem Preston faces is not that Orwell is mistaken as to secondary details: it is that he was **spot-on with regard to the essentials**.

It is true to say that there are lots and lots of factual and conceptual mistakes in Preston's article attacking Orwell, particularly when he writes about Antonio Martín and the Cerdanya, the revolutionary committees, the "dissolution of the Barcelona Defence Committee" or the Friends of Durruti Grouping, as he offers a muddled and mistaken interpretation of the texts in which my name is mentioned.[2] Preston fails to understand and is even more cack-handed in his explanation of the Decree establishing the Unified Security Corps (4 March 1937) and the dissolution of the Control Patrols (4-6 June 1937), the chronology of which he even fails to establish. And that is a serious shortcoming.

Preston states: *"The Generalitat disbanded the defence committee controlled by the CNT and assumed the power to disband all of the local policing and militia committees. The Assault Guards and the GNR [Republican National Guard] were amalgamated into a single Catalan police force, the officers of which were banned from membership of any political party or trade union. Ten days after that, the central government ordered all proletarian organizations, committees, patrols and workers to hand over their arms. This process was overseen by the Councillor for the Interior, Artemi Aiguader from the Esquerra."*

Be that as it may, the Generalidad did not disband "the defence committee controlled by the CNT" because no such body existed. The local committees had already been disbanded back in October 1936. What there were were some decrees promulgated on 4 March 1937 establishing a Unified Security Corps. The Control Patrols were not disbanded ten days after that, but on 6 June 1937, rather more than three months after it. And so it goes. We could carry on detailing Preston's mistakes, factual errors and conceptual gaffes ad infinitum. But Preston is a historian and academic of some standing.[3]

### **3. A pointer to the core issue: the Stalinist counter-revolution**

Preston's article takes care not to get to grips with the political crux of *Homage to Catalonia*, the exposé of the Stalinist repression in the republican rearguard, the criminalization of the POUM, the persecution of anarchists and the deliberate dismantling of the worker power that emerged from July 1936.

Instead of discussing this underlying problem, Preston opts to:

- a. Relate events to one another
- b. Downplay them.
- c. Dilute them in a sea of "complex contexts"
- d. And accuse Orwell of exaggeration or political naivety.

He does not show that Orwell lied. **He simply shifts the focus.** This is a classical technique: when the testimony proves inconvenient, discredit the witness. But Preston is a historian and an academic of some standing.

### **4. The omniscience of hindsight as an ideological weapon**

Preston takes Orwell to task for failing to understand the role of the fascist powers, the Non-Intervention policy, or diplomatic strategies. This is a deeply dishonest accusation. Orwell was **writing in 1937-1938** and not from the study of some 21<sup>st</sup> century historian.

There is nothing neutral about this insistence upon all-knowing hindsight: it helps to **nullify the political validity of eye-witness testimony**, which happens to be what poses the greatest danger to

the official versions. Orwell was not analysing the war “from on high”; he was watching it **from the trenches, the hospital, under persecution and a position of clandestinity**.

Preston, by contrast, writes from the comfort of an archive, but seems incapable of understanding what it means to live through a revolutionary process and the defeat thereof from the inside, the way Orwell did. But Preston is a historian and an academic of some standing.

### 5. Phoney neutrality and actual bias

His article portrays itself as “historical complexity” championed against Orwell’s alleged simplistic view. In actual fact, what it does is **replicate a normalized, institutional and domesticated version of the Civil War**, whereby social revolution is a pointless hindrance and the repression within the antifascist camp just inevitable collateral damage.

Preston charges Orwell with bias, but fails to recognize his own bias: his partisanship **in favour of the restored republican order**, the legitimacy of the state apparatus and the historical need to crush the revolution in order to win the war. The old, old argument, re-cast in academic jargon.

### Conclusion: why Orwell remains intolerable

The issue with *Homage to Catalonia* is not its lack of rigour but its **undue honesty**. Orwell makes no secret of the repression, and neither justifies nor relativizes it. And it is this that remains unbearable for a school of history writing that is out to wrap the Civil War up with a conciliatory, de-politicized narrative.

Preston’s articles does not refute Orwell: **he is out to neuter him**. And in order to do that, he lifts the lid more on the ideological boundaries of a certain school of academic history-writing than on the alleged “errors” of the British writer.

*Homage to Catalonia* does not need defending as a history manual. It is enough that it should be acknowledged for what it is: a perceptive, inconvenient and politically dangerous testimonial to the defeat of a revolution. And, nearly ninety years on, that remains unforgivable.

Between Preston and Orwell, I have no hesitation: I am sticking with Orwell.

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KSL Notes

1, ‘Engaños y errores en el Homenaje a Cataluña’ is at: <https://doi.org/10.20318/hn.2018.4033>. The London School of Economics has two relevant pieces for English-speaking readers. ‘Lights and Shadows in George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*’ (*Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, 59 pages) <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/85333/> and ‘George Orwell’s Spanish civil war memoir is a classic, but is it bad history?’ (*The Guardian*, 4 pages) <https://www.lse.ac.uk/canada-blanch/Assets/Documents/media/media2017/7May17Guardian.pdf>

2, On the KSL site articles relating to Antonio Martín Escudero (1895-1937) are at <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/9kd693>. Articles relating to the Friends of Durruti Group are at

<https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/q83cc0>. Works by and about Guillamón are at <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/nvx19v>.

3, There is an echo of “*Brutus is an honourable man...*” (Shakespeare) in the refrain about Preston being *a historian of some standing*.

Trans. PS for <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/>