

For the Spanish, the summer of 2012 was exceptionally uncomfortable. The banks needed a rescue, public debt was out of control, borrowing costs were unsustainable, capital fled the country, and unemployment stood at 25 per cent. There were rumours of an imminent intervention by the “Troika” of the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund; some predicted the break-up of the Eurozone. When Catalans returned from their vacations, things heated up still further. On September 11, the national holiday of Catalonia, more than 1.5 million people took to the streets of Barcelona clamouring for independence. Shortly thereafter, the president of the autonomous community, Artur Mas, called early elections, resulting in a resounding majority for pro-independence parties in the Catalan parliament. Wobbling sovereignty and waning Spanish self-esteem presented separatists with a historic opportunity. An unofficial non-binding referendum – euphemistically called a “consultation” (*consulta*) – is set for next month. Whether it takes place, and in what form, remains to be seen.

In *Goodbye Spain?* Kathryn Crameri examines the question of independence without taking sides. She effectively summarizes the academic literature, and contributes to theoretical debates about the effects of mass media, novels, films and social networks on public opinion. The economic crisis has certainly triggered the move towards separation. In 2005, only 13.6 per cent of Catalans supported independence – a figure that had been relatively constant for decades. By 2013, however, between 45 and 55 per cent favoured it. At the top of the list of grievances was that Catalonia was hamstrung by a “fiscal imbalance”. Between 6 and 9 per cent of its GDP (depending on whom you ask) was transferred outside the autonomous community, preventing the government from guaranteeing the adequate provision of infrastructure, education, health and welfare.

As Crameri reminds us, the economic woes fuelled a deepening political crisis. In June

V for voting

STEPHEN JACOBSON

Kathryn Crameri

GOODBYE, SPAIN?

The question of independence for Catalonia
190pp. Sussex Academic Press. £50 (US \$64.95).
978 1 84519 659 2

Angel Smith

THE ORIGINS OF CATALAN
NATIONALISM, 1770–1898
304pp. Palgrave Macmillan. £60 (US \$95).
978 1 137 35448 8

2010, the Constitutional Court in Madrid had voted by six to four that key provisions of Catalonia’s 2006 Statute of Autonomy were unconstitutional. It ruled that Spain was the only “nation” recognized by the Constitution of 1978. Yet even those who applauded the juridical niceties of the decision could not deny that the integrity of the court had been compromised. Political meddling and manoeuvring had caused deliberations to be strung out for four years, during which time four of the judges had completed their terms but had not been replaced. Manipulation took place in Barcelona as well. The autonomous government of Catalonia, the *Generalitat*, deployed its Catalan-language television station, TV3, and funded documentaries, public celebrations and cultural enterprises that spread a narrative of heroic Catalans facing unrelenting Spanish oppression through the ages.

The date of this year’s proposed consultation – November 9 – has been set to follow on the heels of the Scottish referendum. Furthermore, 2014 is the 300th anniversary of the end of the War of Spanish Succession (1702–14), when Spanish and French troops besieged and

bombarded Barcelona, dissolved the Catalan parliament and obviated the original terms of union between the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon.

Angel Smith’s *The Origins of Catalan Nationalism, 1770–1898* is an informative and detailed book that explains how this all began. Smith stresses that nationalism did not grow out of an endless dispute in which the wounds of 1714 festered. Instead, the Enlightenment inaugurated a long period of co-operation in which previous conflicts were relegated to mere history. In the nineteenth century, generations of Catalan politicians, lawyers, literati and other cultivated people took pride in the language, literature, laws, art, folklore and popular culture of Catalonia while working with other Spaniards to build a liberal state. History books portrayed the previous revolts of the Catalan parliament and its people as a legacy of Spanish absolutism. Liberalism, in theory, promised to put an end of arbitrary governance, obscurantism and fiscal discrimination, and spark a renewal of constitutional traditions.

Smith argues that romanticized regionalist culture can become the stuff of nationalism given specific circumstances. The turning point occurred in the 1880s, when previous controversies concerning law, tariffs, language, education and administration began to pile up. A weak and excessively centralized state run from Madrid – built on Napoleonic models – proved unable to address the needs of an industrial society like Catalonia, the most economically developed region in Iberia. When Spain lost its remaining colonies in Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Philippines during the Spanish–American War of 1898, crisis ensued, setting in motion a conflict that has endured to the present day.

Smith mentions in his conclusion that things could have turned out differently had experi-

ments in decentralization and federalism been successful during the Democratic Sexennium (1868–74), a political interlude in which Queen Isabella II was forced into exile. This lesson is worth keeping in mind. After all, “Catalanist” parties have usually – if not always – collaborated in democratic constitutional processes in precarious times. In 1931, Catalan republicans helped bring about the Second Republic in exchange for the promise of political autonomy. In a referendum of 1978, 91 per cent of Catalan voters supported a constitution that again ensured political autonomy following decades of dictatorship. Some optimists believe that the current crisis could open the door to a federalist compromise and a more durable union.

This is unlikely, however. Public opinion in the rest of Spain is not only unionist but, in fact, favours recentralization. A truly federal constitution is as improbable as an independent Catalonia. Recently, the Spanish Constitutional Court – of dubious legitimacy in Catalonia – has prohibited Catalonia from holding even a non-binding referendum while it decides on its legality. Although Artur Mas has vowed to go forward anyhow, this will prevent a proper vote on independence with a multi-party consensus on procedures, an official census and ample electoral participation. The international community will not recognize a broad “right to decide” anywhere for fear of complicating matters in eastern Ukraine and elsewhere. The intransigence of the governing parties in Spain and Catalonia, both mired in corruption scandals, does not invite optimism. No one contemplates violence. A new fiscal deal – now possible given more favourable economic winds – might calm nerves. In the meantime, a million separatists formed a large “V” (for voting, victory and the Via Catalana) on September 11 this year along the central boulevards of Barcelona. In future, some Catalans may be moved to civil disobedience, while others will muddle through this political mess as they have done since the summer of 2012.