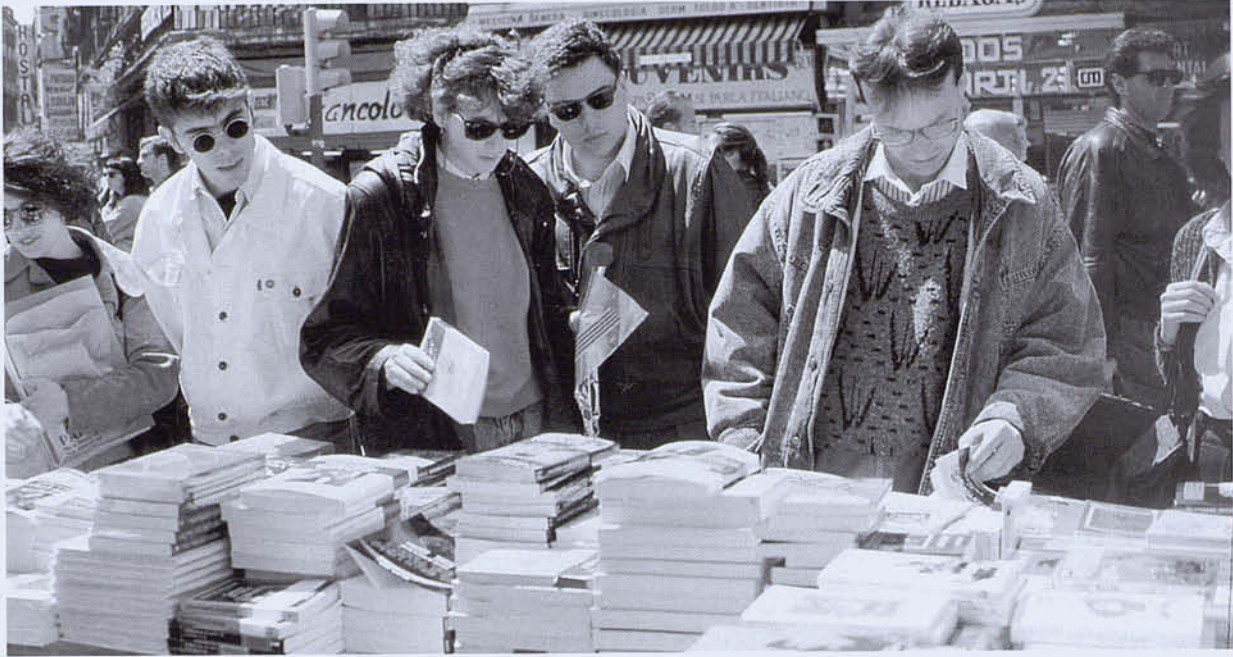


SAINT GEORGE, CATALONIA'S PATRON SAINT AND SYMBOL



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CATALONIA CELEBRATES HER FESTIVAL OF ROSES AND BOOKS ON 23 APRIL. THIS SPRING UNION BETWEEN NATURE AND CULTURE HAS CAPTIVATED MANY VISITORS. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, MIGUEL DE CERVANTES, GARCILASO DE LA VEGA AND JOSEP PLA ALL DIED ON 23 APRIL, FOR WHICH REASON UNESCO, ON 13 NOVEMBER 1995, PROCLAIMED THIS DATE "WORLD DAY OF BOOK AND COPYRIGHT".

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Throughout our recent history, the need for national affirmation, a result of the lack of stable political structures, has given Catalonia's symbols special importance. The case of Saint George, or Sant Jordi as he is called here, the patron saint of Catalonia, has always been an emblematic one. Saint George has had links with Catalonia from the very beginning. A thousand years ago, when Catalonia was taking shape, the cult of this saint spread with the reconquest of new territories by the Counts of Barcelona. Ever since then, the



SANT JORDI. CASA AMETLLER, BARCELONA.

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red cross of Saint George has featured prominently on the capital's coat of arms. In fact, he was adopted as the patron saint of Catalonia in the thirteenth century, before his adoption by England. While the Castilian armies invoked Saint James as they joined battle, the war cry of the Catalan armies was a call to Saint George.

Although at first the saint was mainly venerated amongst the nobility due to his reputation as a knight, his following gradually spread to the population at large. In the fifteenth century the Catalan

Court declared 23 April, Saint George's Day, a general compulsory holiday, adding that it was to be "perpetually lasting". But three centuries later, the Borbon king Philip V abolished it.

In Catalonia, 23 April is the festival of the rose and the book. Legend has it that when the knight cut the dragon's head off, a red rose grew from the blood. From the eighteenth century, Barcelona and other towns celebrated Saint George's Day with the sale of roses, and since the nineteen-twenties it has also been the book festival. Miguel de Cervantes died on 23 April, and what began as a Spanish celebration became especially popular in Catalonia. Today it has become a widespread tradition for lovers to give each other roses and books on this day. The streets are filled with stands with Catalan flags and sales of roses and books rocket: books are 10% cheaper than usual; roses with additions such as miniature Catalan flags, on the other hand, are a little bit more expensive: all's fair in love and war). This festive spring union between nature and culture, symbol, nation and religion has captivated many visitors. In Japan, the custom of celebrating Saint George's Day the way Catalonia does is fast catching on.

The various activities that take place to mark this celebration contrast with the little that is known about Saint George's life. We are not even certain where he was born, though it seems to have been in Cappadocia, in the second century, into a family of the nobility. As an officer in the Roman army, George refused to carry out the emperor's orders to persecute the Christians. For this he was tortured, put to death three times, and three times he came back to life.

It was not until several hundred years later that the well-known episode concerning the dragon was put about. This legend is connected with similar episodes in the life of heroes and gods like Horus, Hercules and Siegfried, so frequently depicted in painting and sculpture by different cultures. According to the legend, Saint George saved the Princess of Silene from the jaws of a hungry dragon who

demanded a human tribute from the townspeople. After a brief fight on horseback, the knight thrust his spear into the dragon's mouth and then cut its head off with his sword.

In Eastern tradition, the dragon is considered a symbol of evil, of the devil, of the forces of darkness. In the Catalan collective unconscious, it is not difficult to identify the struggle between a shrewd and valiant man who refuses to die and a powerful, tribute-seeking, aggressive and incompetent monster: the conflict between the wish to be and the repressive force, between the stateless nation of Catalonia and the Spanish leviathan. It is no coincidence that to the Chinese and the Celts the dragon represents the Emperor and, by extension, omnipotence. In fact, since the *Renaixença*, in the last century, the figure of Saint George has been explicitly represented as a symbol of Catalonia's struggle for freedom. And remember, of course, that the Catalan word "patró" (English patron or patron saint) also means a model of conduct.

It is not surprising, then, that the name of Saint George should appear in Catalan place and personal names far more frequently than in the rest of the Spanish state. Countless towns, shrines, military orders, associations, clubs and sports teams have adopted it. The façade of the Palau de la Generalitat de Catalunya features a prominent carving of an equestrian Saint George, and the Saló de Sant Jordi (presided over by an image of the saint) is where all the most important events take place, including the ceremony to award the prestigious Sant Jordi medals. The most emblematic building of the 1992 Olympic Games was the Palau Sant Jordi, and the Sant Jordi prizes are the most important awarded for literature in Catalan. *Jordi* was also the title of a *noucentista* weekly and Jordi is the first name of many Catalans today, amongst them the President of the autonomous government and also the son of Cruyff, Dutch trainer of such an unquestionably Catalan institution as Barcelona Football Club. ■

