

2014

## Review of Diccionario Biográfico Español

Richard Herr

*University of California, Berkeley, herr@fake.com*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs>

---

### Recommended Citation

Herr, Richard (2014) "Review of Diccionario Biográfico Español," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 39 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

<https://doi.org/10.26431/0739-182X.1177>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol39/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* by an authorized editor of Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. For more information, please contact [jesus@udel.edu](mailto:jesus@udel.edu).

***Diccionario Biográfico Español*, (50 vols., Madrid, Real Academia de la Historia, 2009-2013)**

Across the nineteenth century the leading European nations and the United States produced dictionaries of national biography. Spain was not among them. Ever since its founding in 1735, the Real Academia de la Historia had on its agenda a historical dictionary of Spain which would get rid of the errors and fables that plagued the history of the nation. Academies are notoriously slow in getting out their dictionaries, but the Academy of History far outdid them, for after more than two and a half centuries it had got no further than assembling piles of information in its archives.

In 1998 the members of the Academy of History chose their colleague Gonzalo Anes, known for his studies of early modern Spanish history and long-time editor of *Moneda y Crédito*, to be its director. Conscious of Spain's shortcoming, he promptly proposed that the Academy undertake the editing of a *Diccionario Biográfico Español* and obtained from prime minister José Aznar a generous subsidy for eight years for the project. Remarkably, the materials were all assembled in ten years and publication was complete in fifty volumes in 2013. It contains some forty thousand entries, contributed by five thousand authors. (The contributors of each volume are listed in its last pages). The editors decided that the cut off date for the birth of biographees would be 1950, so that many persons still alive are included.

To gain an impression of the nature of the work, I have sampled entries, mostly in the modern period. The editors who selected the subjects have cast a very wide net, from famous to little known men and women, noble, political, military, ecclesiastical, academic, literary, artistic, professional, and other figures. Besides the obvious entry on Federico García Lorca, it includes his brother Francisco, who became a professor at Columbia University, and his sister Isabel, who taught at Hunter College and Sarah Lawrence College during her years on the United States. The five-page entry on General Francisco Franco y Bahamonde is preceded by a few lines on Rodolfo Franco, an *aguafuertista* of Seville, born in the nineteenth century, died in the twentieth century, precise dates unknown.

The quality of the articles and the approach of their authors are uneven, as is to be expected in such a massive work. Shortage of space does not appear to have been a problem. The articles have in common a detailed account of the lives of their subjects, so far as it is known, a very extensive if not full listing of the publications of writers and scholars, and an ample and up-to-date bibliography. How the biographer goes beyond these matters appears to depend on their

background and interest. Extending over a number of pages, some biographies call for the leisurely reading one gives to a literary essay. Gonzalo Anes's detailed biography of that central eighteenth-century figure, Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos gives an insightful and balanced account of Jovellanos' career and accomplishments, but only a cursory analysis of his thought. On the other hand, Helio Capintero Capell's biography of Julian Marías, well known disciple of Ortega y Gasset who was out of favor with the Franco regime, and Carmen Iglesias's biography of José Antonio Maravall, prominent historian of the University of Madrid, include detailed analyses of their subject's thought and writing. Both biographers had published earlier on the work of their subjects.

When the first volumes came out in 2010, some Spanish journalists pounced on the biographies of Franco and his supporters, criticizing them for being partisan to the regime. The biography of Franco was assigned not to a student of the regime but to Luis Suárez Fernández, a medieval historian and member of the Academy. The article is brief on Franco's role in the Civil War and does not mention the executions and atrocities he was responsible for, but is more detailed on his government and diplomacy during his rule as head of the Spanish state. Beyond Franco's fervent Catholicism the author judges Franco to be practical rather than ideological in outlook. The bibliography includes the works of Stanley Payne and Paul Preston. Overall I find the biography objective, but not unfavorable, if somewhat weak on details and dates.

To counter the implication that the *Diccionario* is tilted toward the right, one need only read the biography of Enrique Eymar Fernández, a cripple of the Moroccan war who became the judge in charge of cases dealing with those accused of communism and anarchism and other opponents of the Franco regime. The article points to his responsibility for the tortures carried out by the Civil Guard, the Brigada Político-Social, and other police units leading to forced confessions and executions that Eymar personally observed in his official capacity. The author, Juan José del Aguila Torres, had published an article on Eymar in a work on Franco's concentration camps. My assessment based on an obviously limited reading is that, given the delicacy of defining the lives of contemporary controversial figures, the editors of the *Diccionario* have sought to maintain a judicious balance.

The *Diccionario Biográfico Español* is an impressive achievement, drawing on the scholarship that has flourished in Spain since the transition to democracy. A person undertaking research in Spanish history would be well advised to consult the relevant biographies at the outset. Unfortunately the current state of academic and library budgets means that it will not be widely available to

American scholars. We can urge the Academy of History to find the funds that will enable it to put the work on the web.

**Richard Herr**  
**University of California, Berkeley**