

**Enric Saguer (co-or.), *Forçats a foc i llum. Una història oral dels últims masovers de la regió de Girona, 1930-2000* Temes d'Etnologia de Catalunya, 22. (Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya, 2011), 500 pp. [Under obligation to maintain a fire and a light: an oral history of the last masovers of the Girona region, 1930-2000]**

*Masoveria* was one of the principal social institutions in the organisation of Catalan agriculture in the past. It was a type of contract involving the leasing-out of a farm unit (*mas*) of approximately 5 to 30 hectares in size, in which the tenant farmer (*masover*) took up residence, in exchange for a share of the crops produced. Residence was a key part of the contract, hence the phrase in the title, which refers to the obligation to keep a fire and a light going in the farmhouse. As with sharecropping, it was a short-term contract (under five years), but which could be renewed indefinitely. Often the contract lasted more than twenty years, and was even bequeathed from fathers to sons. As was also the case with sharecropping, many *masoveria* contracts were not signed before a notary, remaining purely oral agreements. This feature has meant that, despite its dominant presence in the Catalan countryside in the early modern and more recent past, *masoveria* remains relatively under-researched. One of the strengths of this book is therefore the use of oral history to bring us closer to a social group that was of great importance in the Catalan agrarian world, but which has left few documentary traces.

This monograph attempts to gather together the memories and lived experiences of the last generations of *masovers* in the Girona region, the area where *masoveria* was most predominant. It is based on oral history, specifically the life histories of *masovers*, and spans the period from the 1930s (the majority of those interviewed were born between 1910 and 1936) and the end of the twentieth century by which point, following a large-scale abandonment of farms during the 1960s, *masoveria* was more or less extinct. This book therefore deals with the experiences of the last *masovers*, as the title emphasises, which further underlines the importance of this work. It is a collective work, directed by Enric Saguer of the University of Girona, with contributions from eleven different authors, and the participation of 32 people connected to the Association for Rural History of the Girona region (*Associació d'Història Rural de les Comarques Gironines*). It forms part of a research project on the rural world in this region, covering the period 1930-2000, using oral history. In 2005, this project published another work, also edited by Enric Saguer, dedicated to the owners of land.<sup>1</sup> The current study of the *masovers* uses a similar methodology to offer an alternative viewpoint from the previous volume, setting tenants of land against its owners. Both works in turn are situated within a bigger research project under the auspices of the *Centre de Promoció de la Cultura Popular i Tradicional Catalana* (Centre for the Promotion of Popular and Traditional Catalan Culture), which since 1994 has been concerned to record the ethnographic heritage of Catalonia. This fact explains why these volumes appear in a series dedicated to Ethnography and published by the Generalitat (autonomous government) of Catalonia.

The sample, consisting of 39 life stories based on interviews carried out in 2006 and 2007, is not very large, and leaves us with the obvious question as to how representative these cases are, particularly given the diverse nature of this social group. However, as the introduction makes clear, this work is exploratory in nature, and does not seek to offer any firm conclusions. Nevertheless, it provides insights into many diverse aspects, such as the length of tenancies, geographic mobility, the relationships between owners and *masovers*, life on the farm, the organisation of work, the internal dynamics of the *masover* family, sociability and other areas of everyday life that are hard to recover without using oral history. Also noteworthy is the attention paid to gender issues, with a reasonable presence of women among the interviewees (nine).

A question of great importance that emerges from the interviews is the conflict between owners and *masovers*. Compared with other contractual relationships in Catalan agriculture, such as the *rabassa morta* contract (a form of sharecropping that allowed the cultivator use-rights to the land for the life of the vines, which in practice could mean in perpetuity), *masoveria* has usually been characterised as

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<sup>1</sup> Enric Saguer (co-or), *Els últims hereus. Història oral dels propietaris rurals gironins, 1930-2000*. Temes d'Etnologia de Catalunya, 10 (Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya, 2005).

conflict-free and, in a conservative interpretation, seen as an institution which functioned well and minimised tensions between land owners and tenants to create social harmony. The present authors do not subscribe to this conservative view, seeking to uncover hidden conflict in their sources. They are more inclined to explain the relative absence of conflict in terms of ‘class efficiency’ (Badhuri) or as a preference for ‘exit’ rather than ‘voice’ (Hirschman) among *masovers*. This view is a highly speculative one, which would merit further research, although the methodology used here probably does not allow them to go much further.

The study also provides valuable information on the process of transformation that *masoveria* underwent during the second half of the twentieth century, both the changes in order to adapt to the social and commercial changes of modern agriculture (the drive towards pastoral farming, mechanisation and the tendency for the contract to be converted into a fixed-cash rent) and its gradual disappearance in the context of the widescale exodus from the countryside from the 1960s onwards. It is striking in this regard that, of the 39 interviewees, over half left the farm before retirement, and only 5 were succeeded by the next generation.

This work therefore documents the extinction of a social institution that had been central to the organisation of Catalan agriculture. In terms of the methodology used and the rigour with which the study has been carried out, it should be a model for other ethnographic studies that are urgently required to capture a rural world that is disappearing at a dizzying rate.

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