

Obituary

LUIS GARCÍA BALLESTER
(1936–2000)

The death of Luis García Ballester while still at the height of his powers is a great loss to the world of medical history, not only in Spain. Born in Valencia into a Catalan family, he trained as a doctor, taking his MD in 1966 at Valencia. But already he was turning to a career in medical history, under the influence of J M López Piñero, with whom he collaborated from 1961 to 1971 during the first years of the Valencia Institute. But it was an encounter with Pedro Laín Entralgo that encouraged him to work on Galen and to produce for his 1968 PhD thesis an annotated translation of Galen's treatise *That the soul's faculties depend on the body's temperaments*. This was the first of a long series of Galenic studies, initially of Galen's psychology, and later of his symptomatology, which also included a short biography of Galen (1972). All were characterized by a feeling for the historical encounter between doctor and patient; the philological tasks of the translator were subordinated to the need to understand Galen as a medical man in Greek and Roman society.

With García Ballester's move from a lectureship at Valencia to one at Granada in 1971, where he set up the first Department of the History of Science in Andalucía, his interests developed to encompass the Later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, first with his *Historia social de la medicina en la España de los siglos XIII al XVI* (1976), and then with a memorable series of studies on the Moriscos and their medicine (1976, 1984). These volumes broke the traditional mould of Spanish medical history by concentrating on the social as well as the intellectual forces that influenced medicine. Not only was García Ballester, an admirer of Erwin Ackerknecht, determined to locate 'medicine and society in a mediterranean region' (the subtitle of his 1988 history of medieval medicine in Valencia), but he also showed his enormous sympathy for the oppressed and the down-trodden in provincial Spain. In Franco's Spain this was a political as well as a historical statement. His colleagues and his students knew well how passionately he believed in freedom, of thought and of human society in general, and how willing he was to encourage them to discuss topics with implications far beyond the lecture room.

His years in Granada, where he held the chair of medical history from 1976 to 1982, also saw the creation of the journal *Dynamis* in 1980. The preface to its first number encapsulates his intellectual credo as well as the vigour with which he set about implementing it. In 1975, he supervised the publication of the first volume of a major critical edition of the works of the great Catalan, Arnau de Vilanova (d. 1311), prepared in collaboration with pupils and colleagues within and without Spain. His willingness to help in international academic projects and organizations was untiring. He was involved in the planning of international conferences on Galen from 1982 to 1995, and, from the mid-1980s, organized a fruitful series of joint meetings on medieval and renaissance medicine with the Cambridge Wellcome Unit. His collaboration with the American Michael McVaugh also opened up the riches of the Spanish archives of Valencia and Aragon to wider scrutiny, and helped to bring Spanish medical history out of its isolation.

In 1982 García Ballester left Granada for Santander, where his wife held a post as a marine biologist, moving on in 1987 to Barcelona as a research professor in the CSIC Institucion Milà i Fontanals. In both places he had to build up a group almost from scratch. In Barcelona in particular, he could conduct and organize further research into late medieval Spain, with its varied communities and languages. He encouraged studies on medieval Jewish medicine

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as well as on Arabic and Latin, writing himself major books and articles on the development of medieval Galenism. At the same time, he was also the co-author of a book on the development of the modern hospital in inter-war Spain (1990). In 1996 he returned to the University of Santander, producing a stream of works on a variety of topics, but mainly concerned with the Middle Ages. A large monograph on medical practice in medieval Castile is in press, and two collections of his essays will appear as part of the *Variorum* series in 2001 and 2002. Cancer was first diagnosed in 1999, and although he was thought to have made a good recovery and had embarked on a very productive period of writing, he became ill again in September 2000 and died only a few weeks later. He is survived by his wife and three children; another son died tragically young in 1976.

Luis García Ballester's scholarship, his abilities as an organizer, and his inspirational talents as the teacher of a whole generation of leading Spanish medical historians were also allied to a natural friendliness. The eyebrows would twitch, the eyes would sparkle, and a broad smile would accompany even a warning to "Be careful" (a favourite expression when he wished to dissent). But woe betide those who failed to live up to his standards or whom he suspected of idling their time away in academic politics. Scholarship, for him, was a life-enhancing activity: the good otologist ought to know the history of otology, the historian's reconstruction of the past should illuminate the present. Those who joined him in his search became firm friends, not least because his own difficulties had given him a sympathetic ear for the concerns of others. With his death, the history of medicine in Spain has lost one of its most ardent champions; many historians of medicine, well beyond the Iberian peninsula, have also lost a true friend.¹

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