

CATALONIA AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

# Francesc Maspons i Anglasell and the League of Nations

José Manuel Garcia Izquierdo



Illustrator: [Jesús Galdón](#)

One of the constants of Francesc Maspons i Anglasell's life (1872-1966) would be his Europeanism and his deep knowledge of international law. Born on 22 July 1872 in the Barcelona neighbourhood of El Raval, at no. 17, Carrer d'en Xuclà, his parents were Francesc Maspons i Labrós and Pilar Anglasell i Buxeres, two families that had been part of the Catalan Renaixença movement in its early days. With strong roots in the town of Bigues (Vallès Oriental) since the 12th century, the lineage had produced a large number of lawyers and notaries. Advocating a romantic, eminently rural Catalanism in which the countryside became a symbol of the country's essence, its linguistic purity, its most significant customs and its own law, the movement played a key role in Maspons i Anglasell's formative years. His father, Francesc Maspons i Labrós, his aunt, Pilar Maspons —better known as Maria de Bell-lloc— and his uncle, Francesc Pelai Briz, formed a work group led by Briz devoted to research in the sphere of traditional culture. Francesc Pelai Briz compiled songs and riddles, while the Maspons i Labrós siblings did the same with fables, games, traditions and customs at a time when virtually no one else was working in this field. All of them would be noted for the profusion of literary works published both in prose and in verse, in addition to their participation in the first Jocs Florals (poetry contests) and their intense activity in the incipient Catalanist press of the time, in which Briz played a prominent role as editor of reviews such as the *La Gramalla*, *Calendari català*

and *Lo Gay Saber*, considered to be the first periodic publications devoted to the Renaixença. Maspons i Labrós also took an active part in the assemblies of the Unió Catalanista in Reus, in 1893, and in Olot, in 1895.

His family, which included his father's twin brother, Marià, known for being the spokesman of the Memorial de Greuges (Catalogue of Grievances) sent by the Catalanists to King Alfonso XII, corresponded regularly with prominent figures around Europe. This practice would have a decisive impact on awakening Maspons i Anglasesell to the need to maintain contacts outside of Catalonia if they were to internationalise awareness of the Catalan cause, especially at a time when the first institutions with suprastate aspirations were being formed [1].

The goal pursued by these activities abroad would be aimed at giving legitimacy to Catalan nationalist demands by grounding them on European and international jurisprudence, as he would argue in numerous articles, especially those written for the journal *La Paraula Cristiana* [2]. Having shown an interest from a young age in internationalising the demands of Catalonia, Maspons started to organise Catalanist activities at the League of Nations in 1926, with the intention of taking the Catalan case to the Congress of European Nationalities.

The Congresses of European Nationalities, held under the aegis of the League of Nations between 1925 and 1936, arose from a bill brought before the Estonian Parliament on the autonomy of minorities, which was passed on 5 February 1925 and which Ewald Ammende, a member of Estonia's German minority, sought to extend to the rest of Europe. It provided an ideal platform for Catalonia's demands and a Catalan delegation took part in the second Congress, which was held in Geneva on 24-27 August 1926. The official delegates were Maspons, the politician Joan Casanovas and the journalist Josep Pla. Joan Estelrich, Ferran Valls, Lluís Nicolau d'Olwer and Rafel Campalans attended the Congress in later years. According to the criteria defined by the organisation, the members of the Catalan delegation had to prove that the country's social majority were in favour of joining the Congress through the inclusion of all the political leanings expressed within the country, except for those that advocated violence. Maspons had no difficulty in accepting this condition as transversality would be precisely one of his maxims within Catalonia's participation in the Congress of European Nationalities, which would encompass the full spectrum, from key figures of Catalan conservatism such as Estelrich or Valls i Taberner to leaders of the Unió Socialista de Catalunya such as Campalans and Manuel Serra i Moret.

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In its first participation, Catalonia would be given a seat on the Permanent Executive Committee and a vice-presidency, since it was the only Latin minority attending. This post

would be held by Maspons. Maspons viewed Catalonia's participation in the Congresses as a triumph of political unity, something he had advocated since the early days, for example, in his articles published in *La Veu de Catalunya* in the 20th century first decade [3], with representatives from most of the leading political formations in Catalonia [4]. The political unity, as Maspons himself would recall, was strongest during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, which opposed Catalonia's participation in the Congresses of European Nationalities and would even mobilise Spanish diplomatic representatives at the Council of the League of Nations to prevent any Catalan presence or, failing that, deny the existence of a Catalan nationality [5].

## The Catalan foreign action programme

Far from accepting a mainly representative role, Maspons' first experience in Switzerland would induce him to give a landmark lecture in Reus on the night of 3 December, entitled *Els drets de ciutadania i la Societat de Nacions*, later published in pamphlet format [6], in which he brings together the master lines of Catalonia's foreign action, becoming a sort of intellectual programme.

In this pamphlet, the author points out that the end of the First World War led states to establish a series of frontiers that did not align with natural ethnic, language or cultural borders. Maspons also draws attention to the demographic and social preponderance of minorities in their historical territories, considering that these are not scattered populations that live isolated from each other, but majority groups in specific territories, in which they are usually the preponderant ethnic group: "In other words, we are not talking about the North Americans, for example, or the Russians who live in Belgium but, for example, the Lusatian Sorbs, which is currently part of present-day Germany. These people are not Germanic either by race or language and, furthermore, they are Catholic in a Protestant country, and they live grouped together in a territory in which they predominate morally; or the Slovenians, who have now become Italians, but have no Italian ancestry nor is Italian their mother tongue, nor have they moved from their ancestral land, but they have been invaded by another stronger nation for reasons of political expediency".

He went on to say that these minorities' spirit is not the national spirit of the State, and this leads to difficulties in the political relations between the parties involved. Maspons warned that the relationship between these diverse groups is usually fraught with tension, to the point of causing conflicts that are difficult to solve. States often opt for a policy of discriminating against the minorities or measures that seek to homogenise the population. Consequently, in his opinion, some groups feel the need to look for alternatives, often outside the established legal system.

However, Maspons proposes parliamentarism as a means for fixing the national minorities' main problems: that of citizenship, understood in the legal sense of individuals' nationality under the law; that of language and culture; and that of the regulation of contacts between the State and the national group included in the territory. Maspons considers that states approach these issues differently, depending on the degree of absolutism that impregnates

their ideology, and that the State's first mission must be to guarantee people's wellbeing and not their submission.

Maspons then goes on to list the three basic points required by the Congress of National Minorities in order to join it: have a high enough density to embody a national awareness; accept that there will be no discussion of specific issues of a specific minority with respect to the State in which it is included, but that more general issues will be addressed that may apply to all members; and eschew violence as a means for attaining their goals. Although Maspons acknowledges that most European minority nations only want legal respect for their rights and the eradication of abuses, the author alerts that continued confrontation may lead to decisions in favour of independence and that separatism, *per se*, is neither better nor worse than the contrary option; in other words, the aim is to analyse whether it is more beneficial to stay together or take different paths.

## The International Association for the Study of Minority Rights at The Hague

Maspons' international standing received a further boost during the last quarter of 1929. In September, in parallel to the League of Nations, the International Association for the Study of Minority Rights (Association Internationale pour l'Étude des Droits des Minorités) was formed in The Hague, with Maspons as president of its executive committee [7]. The Association set itself the primary goal of determining the legal terminology of the main concepts of public law [8], beginning with *nation* and *state*, which could be given different interpretations depending on the history, politics, tradition and even language of the different European peoples.

By virtue of his position, in the aftermath of the proclamation of the Republic and to preserve its international standing, in 1931, Maspons sent a telegram to the International Association at The Hague with the intention of reassuring the international community, stating textually: "I beg you to be confident that both the country's life and its public and private services have returned completely to normal both in Catalonia and in the rest of Spain and there is only an eagerness to get down to work" [9]. However, he soon became disenchanted with the new government and his confidence in a rapid, generous resolution in line with his demands would be replaced progressively by feelings of mistrust and disillusionment [10].

Maspons viewed Catalonia's participation in the Congresses of European Nationalities as a triumph of the Catalan political unity, something he had advocated since the early days

Thus, during the 9th Sokol Festival held in Prague in the summer of 1932 —a gymnastics and cultural activity linked to the resurgence of Czech national identity and directly

inspiring the Catalan *Falcons* or human pyramids—, the Spanish Embassy pressured the government to not authorise the representatives of the Catalan delegation to parade with the Catalan national flag. Maspons, who was to travel to Vienna for that year's Congress of European Nationalities, had been invited to make a stopover at Prague to meet the president of Czechoslovakia. While Maspons was waiting in a hotel before meeting with the Spanish ambassador, he overheard some Spanish delegates sitting at an adjacent table who, so he said, were openly insulting Catalonia and the Catalans. Consequently, Maspons refused to meet the Spanish ambassador and decided to leave directly for Vienna [11].

## The end of the Congresses of European Nationalities

Catalonia's participation in the Congress of European Nationalities would become increasingly testimonial as, after the proclamation of the Republic, the ruling party in Catalonia, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, would not show much interest in continuing with the Congress's activities. For its part, conservative Catalanism would cool down its initial enthusiasm in the light of the new political reality, which enabled it to exert a direct influence on Spanish foreign diplomacy, to the point that Joan Estelrich, the main proponent of Catalan participation in the Congresses of European Nationalities, would attend the Assembly of the League of Nations in 1935 as Spanish delegate [12].

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 and the subsequent Franco dictatorship would condition Maspons' international activity, although not to the point of eradicating it altogether. After hostilities had ceased, emerging unharmed from the political purges, Maspons focused his activity on three main spheres: the first attempts at cultural resistance to the Franco regime and literary creation, invariably in Catalan; involvement in the commissions that were compiling Catalan law; and his activism in denouncing the dictatorship, even publicly. Thus, in spite of his age, approaching 70 at the end of the War, he would travel abroad and meet with exiled leaders who were not favoured by the regime, such as Dr Carles Cardó, whom he would also accompany on the sporadic occasions that the latter returned to Catalonia, with the regime's tolerance to varying degrees. He would also publish articles in reviews specialised in international politics, both within Spain and circulated among the exile community, such as *Occident*, in which he reflected on the main European nations' willingness to forge a political unity that strengthen diplomatic relations and prevent new military conflicts [13]; He would give lectures supporting a continental political union, taking as his starting point the ECSC (European Coal and Steel Community) [14] and he would sign manifestos and letters jointly with other writers and intellectuals in foreign and clandestine publications, condemning the repression of the Catalan language, educational system and culture [15].

His years of dedication and effort in internationalising Catalan demands, whether through his legal, literary and intellectual activism or as president of the Catalan delegation at the Congress of European Nationalities and vice-president of its executive committee, would be explicitly acknowledged by the Patronat Català Pro Europa, which instituted the Maspons i Anglases Award in 1987 for doctoral theses related to the European Union. With the 150th anniversary of his birth being commemorated this year, his intense career as an activist has

not always been sufficiently recognised.

## REFERENCES

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