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Galicia, The Times y la guerra de la independencia. Henry Crabb Robinson y la corresponsalía de The Times en A Coruña (1808-1809)

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by Elías Durán de Porras

THE BRITISH DIARIST, barrister, university founder and German-scholar Henry Crabb Robinson (1775-1867) has often been described as that country's first war correspondent. He spent six months in Galicia reporting for *The Times* from a crucial vantage point in the port of La Coruña (usually called Corunna in English) during the early stages of the Napoleonic invasion. The city itself was a central node for the flow of information because it was the point through which the post between Britain and Spain passed. Robinson's experiences there thus provide an important window into transnational information networks during the Peninsular War. La Coruña was also the site of the disastrous Battle of La Corunna on 16 January 1809; while facing the onslaught of the French occupying troops, military general Sir John Moore was killed and subsequently became the subject of much Romantic myth-making and patriotic wartime propaganda. To a very large degree, Durán argues, Henry Crabb Robinson's war reports framed events for a reading public and implanted a particular interpretation that formed popular opinion.

Durán's book appeared in 2008 as part of the extended bicentennial commemorations of those Galician events, which also gives his historical research a measure of contemporary value. Indeed, the president of the Real Academia Galega, Xosé Ramón Barreiro Fernández, has provided a brief introduction written in the Galician language in which he states explicitly that "the celebration of the bicentennial of the War of Independence has brought about a new historiographical focus which combines regional, state and international aspects." In his view, the war against the French was fought mainly at the local and regional level and represents "a war of liberation on our own territory" that has been mistakenly recast as a national struggle over the course of the subsequent two hundred years (11). At a time when Spanish regionalism is reasserting itself in several provinces, including Galicia, the book therefore obliquely but self-consciously participates in contemporary politics. Durán himself explicitly identifies the two main protagonists of his book as Henry Crabb Robinson and the Coruñan people (22). Similarly, the book's title and text names the city as A Coruña, the currently-preferred Galician variant, rather than La Coruña, its standard Spanish form.

The book is divided into eight chapters. It opens with a brief retrospective look at Robinson's biography considered from the perspective of the old man looking backward at his remarkably long and friend-filled life. Indeed, virtually all published accounts of "old Crabb" depict him in a similarly fond, grandfatherly sidekick sort of way. Robinson has personal associations with

nearly all major literary figures of the Romantic era, was himself a minor literary figure who sadly acknowledged his own limitations and eventually opted for a solid career on the circuit courts instead. He became involved with the founding of the University of London which was the great passion of his declining years. Durán's summary account does not add anything new – fair enough since writing a biography was not his intent – yet it evinces tremendous fondness for his subject, even mentioning Robinson in the acknowledgments as a force who "has been present alongside me in some form in this work" (19).

The second and third chapters are focused more specifically on the development of the newspaper as a genre. Chapter Two offers a glancing overview of the British press on the eve of the Napoleonic War, a discussion that is straightforwardly descriptive and based mainly on older sources. Because the author's purpose is outlining the prevailing print culture in order to give Robinson's work some context, he does not engage with any of the theoretical arguments recently put forth about Romanticism and the British press by authors such as Stephen C. Behrendt, Kevin Gilmartin, Paul Keen, and Iona Italia. He includes a ten-page list with brief description of the London newspapers operating in the first decade of the nineteenth centuries. The third chapter focuses more specifically on Henry Crabb Robinson's decision to sign on with *The Times*, mainly for financial reasons it seems, and discusses his first stint as a special correspondent at Altona (today a suburb of Hamburg) in 1807. Durán notes that this was a crucial period of experimentation and confidence-building for the ever-insecure Robinson. His articles of foreign reportage were crucial for *The Times*, which was only a four-sheet upstart at that time, and his anti-Bonapartism had a disproportionate effect on public opinion (84). Robinson urged the newspaper's proprietors to adopt a clear editorial position in order to attract readers and exert political influence. His on-the-spot reporting also helped move *The Times* away from its earlier focus on commercial and financial affairs to become a more comprehensive chronicle of current events (77). Both trends would only grow in scope and importance a year late in Spain, where the stakes were even higher.

The heart of the book, and the part in which Durán's own original contribution is clearest, is in the middle section of the book that deals with Robinson's six-months spent as a field reporter in Galicia. It was a relatively new approach to the dissemination of foreign news – having a reporter on the ground—and so Robinson helped to define the nature of the job itself. Chapter four sets out the context of La Coruña on the eve of Robinson's arrival, and Chapter five discusses his experiences and the resulting articles. The narrative follows his diary and correspondence very closely and periodically interjects some evidence from other sources (newspapers, private letters etc) to confirm or contradict Robinson's commentary. As the author reconstructs Robinson's daily life, readers are simultaneously presented with a picture of the Coruñan people's patriotism, their heroic response to the

hardships occasioned by warfare and their endurance of bitter privation. Robinson cannot help but be caught up in their jaunty resistance to "Napo-ladrón" [Napo-thief], which he then transmitted back to his British readers via his wartime reports (147). In Appendix One, Durán includes transcriptions of the thirty-five articles that Robinson filed with *The Times* between August 1808 and January 1809, which will be useful both for Spanish-speaking readers without access to the originals and for English readers who want quick identification of Robinson's unsigned articles by date printed. The overall discussion is a factual, straightforward, and detailed narrative of Robinson's brief but impactful time in La Coruña.

The remaining chapters discuss the competition among London newspapers, their editorial lines, their personnel, and the phenomenal growth of *The Times* in prominence and ambition during the war years. A final chapter poses the often-asked question of whether Henry Crabb Robinson was, indeed, the "first war correspondent." Durán outlines the various opinions of previous writers such as Arthur Aspinall, Frederick Bullard, Philip Knightley, Joseph Matthews and Trevor Royle. Some of them consider Robinson to have been a mere dilettante or fellow-traveller while others consider his brand of on-the-ground war reporting to be both innovative and indicative of personal bravery. For his part, Durán clearly sides with the latter, stating that Robinson was most definitely a true war correspondent because he met all the criteria set out for the genre: he was a civilian non-combatant who aimed for impartial, systematic reports of events to which he was an eyewitness, one who risked his own life, narrated suffering of soldiers and citizenry alike, and always aimed to uncover the truth (360-364).

This book represents an impressive amount of work. Growing out of the author's extensive research conducted since 1998, the subject first served as his doctoral dissertation and has been published here in a moderately-revised form. It is drawn from a comprehensive source base; Durán visited ten research and newspaper libraries, ten regional and national archives, consulted twenty contemporary newspapers, and read through seventeen pages of secondary source titles in both English and Spanish. It includes five appendices totaling over a hundred pages which includes: transcriptions of Robinson's articles in *The Times*, a list of his expenses while in Galicia, copies of notes from his friend (and future Holland House librarian) John Allen who was the correspondent for rival *The Morning Chronicle* in A Coruña at the same time, Allen's published articles, and a list of contemporary London newspapers.

In many ways, however the book's ambitious scope is also its weakness. While very strong on details, chronological narrative and information presented in listed form, the author is less keen to draw meaning or advance arguments based on his own dense Crabb-ian reportage. To be fair to the author, though, he explicitly sets as his dual tasks first to discover Henry Crabb Robinson's opinion of Galicia and Spain in general, and second, to write the intra-history of the Galician people's resistance to Napoleon (22). A different

sort of book might have tried to develop a clearer connection between the German and Spanish phases of Robinson's journalistic work, or built a characterization of his lifelong devotion to liberal causes emanating from his wartime experiences, or situated his war reporting in a broader matrix of his written oeuvre (literary pieces, diaries, academic studies, legal opinions etc). None of those subjects were Durán's particular project, and so his painstaking work will serve to open the door to those future scholars who wish to befriend Robinson as he did, and spend some time exploring the past and commenting on the present in the old bachelor's company.