

LIGHT ON THE LAND.

The SEG, an institution of high culture

The centenary of the foundation of the Seminary of Galician Studies (SEG) commemorates an institution that Antón Villar Ponte would qualify as being of “high culture”. Founded in 1923, at the initiative of a small number of university students in Santiago, the SEG had numerous similarities with centres such as the *Centre for Historical Studies* of the Board for the Expansion of Studies (JAE) in Madrid (1910) and with the *Institute of Catalan Studies* in Barcelona (1907). Like those centres, the Galician institution was conceived with the aim of casting “Light on the Land”, through research into all the problems of Galicia, studied collectively and armed with the arts and sciences.

The need to “know Galicia” was their emblem. To do so, up to fourteen Sections were created (History, Art, Prehistory, Literature, Sciences, etc.), from which they carried out study *xeirás* (trips) on different Galician Lands (Deza, Melide, etc.), they encouraged the integration of disciplines, worked as a team, made the use of the Galician language a rallying cry, and helped to construct the project for self-governance in the Second Republic. The results were published in the SEG’s journal, *Arquivos*, in *Nós*, and in *A Nosa Terra*, in addition to preparing the editions of *Corpus Petrogliphorum* and of the *Codex Calixtinus*, and maintaining numerous foreign connections.

Its work, carried out with scant institutional subsidies, was unanimously recognised, but the Civil War would sweep away the institution and a number of isolated initiatives along with it. Its heritage and its unfinished projects would have continuity in the Padre Sarmiento Institute and, during the period of democracy, in the Museum of the Galician People and in the re-born Seminary of Galician Studies, promoted by Isaac Díaz-Pardo and the Sargadelos group. Despite its short life, the SEG’s legacy was exceptional for the study and dissemination of Galician culture.

1. Foundational times

The establishment of the SEG was considered by its proponents as a way of connecting symbolically with the figure and work of Rosalía de Castro, and was hailed by Alfonso Castelao as a way of casting light onto the Land, in the manner of the Prophet Isaiah in Santiago Cathedral's Portico of Glory.

Its founders were very young *scholars*, who would bring about a generational rupture in the heart of Galician culture, owing to their social origin, education and working methods. All of them originated from towns or cities from coastal Galicia, unlike their mentors from the Nós generation.

As the last of the great centres of high culture established in Spain in the first third of the twentieth century, it would soon become a model for study and research.

2. Life at the Seminary

The prospective members of the SEG were presented by two active members and selected by the Steering Committee. To be admitted, they had to submit a research project or a work of literary or artistic creation. The total number of members grew to over two hundred, of whom only nine were women.

In addition to the full members, the SEG wove an extensive network of individual and institutional sponsoring partners, noteworthy among whom were various groups in the emigrant Galicia.

The governance of the SEG was entrusted to a Steering Committee which successively selected a total of four chairmen. The most prominent were the first two: Armando Cotarelo and Salvador Cabeza, professors of Arts and Law, respectively. The SEG periodically held general meetings in different Galician cities.

The SEG's installations, library, museum and scientific collections had an itinerant location, almost always linked to the University of Santiago de Compostela, in the College of Fonseca, and in the Faculties of Law and Sciences.

3. Work at the Seminary

Unlike the University, the SEG had no teaching capacity, rather a vocation for research. The organisation of the research tasks was entrusted to the Sections, which programmed the activities and study trips. They also took care of the provision of bibliographic resources, laboratories, and scientific instruments.

The model of working was interdisciplinary, but there were a number of salient themes, such as those of archaeology, ethnography, history and sciences, which explored fields such as those of geochemistry, astronomy and field pests. The arrival in Santiago of University teachers for the new Faculties of Law and Sciences helped to establish strong research synergies.

4. These stones are very old. The study *xeirás* (catalogues)

The study trips to the different Lands were programmed each year and they were carried out in O Ribeiro, Carballiño, Lemos, Melide and above all in the Deza region, which was the most intense of them all. Those trips, prepared with prior studies and contacts with local experts, constituted the most emblematic work of the SEG, enabling it to attain the objective of “knowing Galicia” and of conferring scientific status to the Galician reality.

That field research also served to strengthen the personal and intellectual cohesion of the participants, which included both *scholars* and teachers, with no internal hierarchy. It was a way of conducting scientific excursionism, very common in the Europe of that time, which would be well reflected in Castelao’s cartoon, where the vision of the expert is compared with that of local inhabitants during the visit to a prehistoric monument.

5. Dissemination of the studies

One obsession of the members of the SEG was to disseminate the results of their fieldwork and laboratory investigations. It was a way of gaining entry into the scientific community of the period, and of exchanging experiences with similar centres in Europe and the Americas. To this end, the SEG's Journal, *Arquivo* came into being, of which there would be six editions, and in which around seventy articles would be published. Many others were published in various journals, such as *Nós*. The principal publisher for all these publications was Ánxel Casal.

Beyond scientific studies, the SEG practised cultural extension as a formula for instructing primary school teachers in basic education and of encouraging the massive diffusion of Galician knowledge through the collection of text books designed in the nineteen thirties.

6. Foreign relations

Connection with the exterior was practically constant for the members of the SEG, who inherited the idea of going abroad from their mentors from *Nós*. These foreign relations were conducted through travels or *scholarships* abroad (Portugal, Brittany, Germany, Ireland and Italy) or through the exchange of publications.

There were two places to which special attention was paid, as would be common in the Galicianism of that period: the Celtic countries and Portugal. Filgueira dedicated his book *Os nenos* to Ireland, and Castelao travelled to Brittany, whence he returned with the study of the *Cruces de Pedra*, published by the SEG. With Portugal, in addition to having a number of members, the SEG organised the Galician Week of 1935, a milestone in relations with the lands beyond the river Miño.

7. Culture and politics

The SEG's relationship with the demand for self-government for Galicia formed part of its institutional identity, as it came into being linked to the legacy of the Brotherhoods of the Language and the Nós generation, and participating actively in republican Galicianism. Its most salient contribution was of a cultural nature to ensure the **cultural resurgence** of Galicia.

The SEG's most direct participation in politics came about as of the proclamation of the Second Republic, given that many of its members formed part of the Galicianist Party and championed self-rule as an alternative for Galicia. Milestones in this commitment were the preparation, commissioned by the SEG itself, of a *Preliminary Draft Statute* in June 1931, and the campaign calling for a referendum on the Statute in 1936.

8. Mourning for the Seminary

The SEG's activity ceased as of July 1936, and at the end of the Civil War it ended up being considered as a "defunct" Centre. Its assets and cultural heritage were seized by the University of Santiago, following in this transition a similar course to equivalent Spanish institutions. Moreover, some of its members were killed, and many took the path of exile.

Those "seminarists" who remained in Galicia, such as the chairman, Otero Pedrayo, and the secretary, Xesús Carro, were unable to secure a solution of continuity for the institution, however much they may have mourned its disappearance. Nonetheless, its memory was not extinguished, given that it was cultivated particularly in Buenos Aires, where Castelao published *As cruces de pedra na Galiza* as a homage to the SEG.

9. The Padre Sarmiento Institute

The Padre Sarmiento Institute was founded in 1944, as a result of the disappearance of the former SEG. The new centre inherited patrimony and assets from the SEG, but ceased to be formally attached to the University, to go on to form part of the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), as one of its numerous research centres. Its leadership was entrusted to Sánchez Cantón, but its headquarters remained in University premises.

This centre retained the SEG's mode of management (Sections) and incorporated the principal "seminarists" who remained in Galicia after the Civil War, including various members of the Nós generation. Nonetheless, the spirit of the SEG would change substantially. In place of the *Arquivos*, it would create a new journal, *Cuadernos*; the work areas would be reduced to the humanities (with a special focus on the history of art), while the Galician language would cease to be used in its publications and activities until the nineteen sixties.

10. Democracy and autonomy. A new Seminary

The SEG's recuperation was proposed several times in exile in the Americas, but without success. It would be during the period of democracy, at the initiative of Isaac Díaz Pardo, when an extensive list of researchers, originating from exile (Martínez López and Tobío), from internal Galicianism (Parga Pondal and Piñeiro) and from the University (Díaz-Fierros) would join together and agree to "restore" or establish a *new* Seminary of Galician Studies.

This institution—which would not substitute, but would rather coexist with the Padre Sarmiento Institute—attempted to recover the spirit and orientation of the former SEG, but focusing its activity on the field of agricultural and marine sciences, biology and geology and, in its final phase, on mediaeval history and the history of science. Sustained mainly by the Sargadelos group, its activity began to decline as of 2005.