

Don Quixote's celebration.

"When Sancho proposes to Don Quixote to continue the adventure it is because he fears and knows that if Don Quixote did not exist he too would cease to exist." - Manuel Vázquez Montalbán

El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha, by Miguel de Cervantes, is one of the best-known Spanish-language books in the world and one of the best-selling books in history. We have all heard of the ingenious knight who mistook windmills for giants and of his faithful companion in his adventures, Sancho Panza. In fact, right here in Utrecht, there was a statue of Don Quixote between Keizerstraat and Nobelstraat.

All of us who were conscious at the time will remember the 400th anniversary of the publication of the first part of Don Quixote in 2005. Don Quixote and Cervantes invaded the newspapers, the classrooms, the television, the theatres, etc. Nowadays we have all the necessary means to publicize an event of such calibre quickly and effectively. But this was not the case a hundred, two hundred or three hundred years ago.

How did the first centenaries look like? The first, in 1705, and the second, in 1805, were pretty similar: they did not happen! The idea of commemorating personalities of the past began to be used in Europe from the end of the 19th century onwards. This is related to the idea of nationalism, which was booming at that time. A good way to promote the nation and its inhabitants was to highlight the good things that the territory in which they are located has had, and that includes its artists. Greece chose Homer, Italy celebrated Dante, England selected Shakespeare, France praised Molière, Portugal picked Camoens and Spain decided on Cervantes.

By 1905, the idea of the nation had permeated most European countries, and Spain was ready to celebrate Cervantes and his most famous work, Don

Quixote. Moreover, the country was experiencing the "disaster of '98" and was in a delicate economic moment, so the element it could endorse to unite its population and differentiate itself as a country was the cultural one.

Did you know?

The so-called "disaster of '98" was Spain's loss of Cuba to the United States. The loss of its last colonies caused many Spaniards to have an existential crisis and call for a "regeneration". This inspired many artists of the so-called Generation of '98, such as Miguel de Unamuno, Pio Baroja, Antonio Machado or Concha Espina.

The first one to realise this was Mariano de Cavia. On 2 December 1903 he published an article in the newspaper *El Imparcial*¹, inspired by the great celebrations of the second centenary of the death of Calderón de la Barca in 1881 and the fourth centenary of the Discovery of America in 1892. Taking up the entire front page of the newspaper - it should be borne in mind that newspapers had six pages then - he explained the importance of celebrating the Castilian language and referred to Don Quixote as "the Bible of good humour".

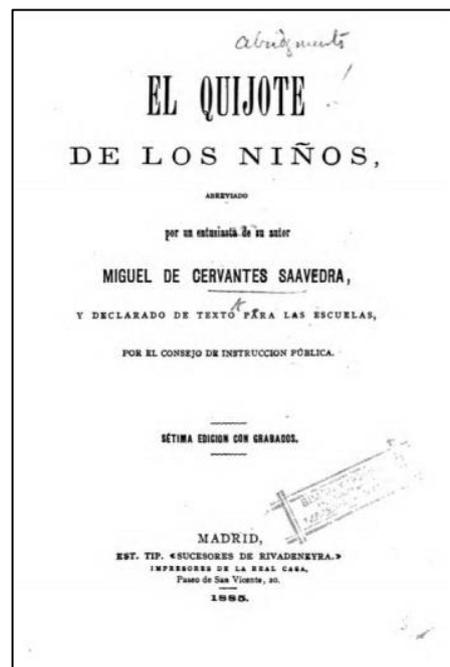


¹ To read the article, use the following link:
<http://hemerotecadigital.bne.es/results.vm?q=parent%3A0000189234&s=13200&lang=es>

This initiative was enthusiastically received and a large exhibition was held in the National Library, where King Alfonso XIII and some ministers were present. There were also processions, celebrations at the Central University and the Royal Spanish Academy, funeral rites in honour of Cervantes, performances at the Teatro Real, concerts by choral societies, etc².

On the other hand, the reading of Don Quixote was made compulsory in schools - although at that time only 63% of the population was enrolled in school. Youth editions of the classic were published, such as *El Quijote de los niños y para el pueblo* [*Don Quixote for the children and the people*] by Fernando de Castro.

The third centenary was also massively celebrated in Latin America, where the Spanish language and culture were embraced in an attempt to fight the new enemy: the United States. According to Javier Moreno Luzón, 212 Latin American cities celebrated the centenary: there were monographic performances in theatres in Costa Rica and Bogotá, celebrations in style in Honduras and collaborations with institutions such as the National Academy of Chile and the National Association of Teachers in Buenos Aires³, among other events.



University of Oxford, "El Quijote de los niños, abreviado por un entusiasta [F. de Castro] de su autor.", Digitized copy of: Bodleian Library Fic. 27623 f.102

http://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/display.do?tabs=detailsTab&ct=display

² Eric Storm, "El Tercer Centenario del Don Quijote en 1905 y el Nacionalismo Español", *Hispania* 58, no. 2 (1998).

³ Javier Moreno Luzón, "El genio de la raza: Las conmemoraciones cervantinas a comienzos del siglo XX, entre lo nacional y lo transnacional", *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* 50, no. 1 (2020).

There was a plan to celebrate the third centenary of the death of Cervantes in 1916, but this event had to be cancelled due to the First World War, although Spain did not take part in the conflict⁴. In 1926, the dictator Primo de Rivera created the Book Day, which began to be celebrated on 23 April, the date of death of Cervantes, William Shakespeare and Inca Garcilaso de la Vega.

Curious fact:

Due to the success of the celebration, UNESCO declared 23 April as International Book Day in 1995. Each year a world book capital is chosen (in 2001 it was Madrid and in 2008 Amsterdam) and this year it is the turn of Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia.

More than 115 years later, Mariano de Cavia's initiative continues to be fruitful, as evidenced, for instance, by the name of this cultural institute or the illustration of Spain's 10, 20 and 50 cent coins. Or the statue of Cervantes, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza that reigns in Plaza de España - one of Madrid's main squares. Or the various film adaptations of the book. Or the fact that the highest recognition for a writer in Spanish is the so-called "Premio de Literatura en Lengua Castellana Miguel de Cervantes" [*Miguel de Cervantes Prize*]. This list could go on forever, but we'd better finish this article with our [Youtube channel](#), where you can find the reading of fragments of Don Quixote in Spanish, Dutch and many other languages.

⁴ Jean-Louis Guereña, "¿Un icono nacional? La instrumentalización del Quijote en el espacio escolar en el primer tercio del siglo XX?", *Bulletin hispanique* 110, no. 1 (2008).