

THE HOUSE OF LORDS AND THE ‘CASE OF THE CATALANS’

by Manuel Manonelles i Tarragó

In April 1714, the House of Lords devoted several of their plenary sessions to what became to be known as the ‘Case of the Catalans’.

In the context of the Spanish Succession War (1701-1713), that indeed became a fully European war, Catalunya had taken the side of the House of Habsburg over the

House of Bourbon for several reasons, a central one being the Treaty of Genoa, signed in this Italian republic in 1705 between the Catalan delegates and the plenipotentiary agent of Queen Anne of England. In the treaty, Catalunya’s entry into the war was agreed on condition that it received logistical support from England, with a special emphasis on England ensuring the defence of the Catalan historical Constitutional system, whatever the outcome of the war.



Lord Halifax, one of the Catalans’ stronger supporters during the debates in the House of Lords

Eight years later many things had changed. The ‘Balance of Power’ in Europe had dramatically changed, the Bourbon successor –Philip V– was safely installed on the Spanish throne in Madrid and the Catalans were betrayed by the English ministers in the peace negotiations at Utrecht (1713). Against all expectations, and faced with a vastly superior army, the Catalan institutions decided to stand against King Philip, and defend their constitutional system and freedoms at the highest price.



Detail of the House of Lords in the early 18th century from a painting by Peter Tillemans

To this end, the Catalans sent ambassadors to the main courts of Europe, in particular to London, to call on the Queen and her government to make effective the relevant articles of the Genoa Treaty. Given the reluctance of the ministers to effectively honour their promises and pacts, the issue ended in the House of Lords, which resulted in a series of strong, heated debates that surprised the Tory government, which was obliged to manoeuvre in order not to lose its majority in the House.

Indeed, in those early days of British political journalism, two anonymous pamphlets devoted to the case appeared in London and warmed up the political intrigues

and debates: *The Case of the Catalans Considered*, and *The Deplorable History of the Catalans*.

Moreover, that the Catalans counted on the sympathy of a relevant part of the British society is clear from these contemporary verses by Ambrose Philips:

*“Catalans, who for your freedom strive,
And in your shatter’d bulwarks yet survive,
For you alone, worthy a better fate,
O, may this happy change not come too late!”*

Nevertheless, this was not enough, and as the English historian Tindal wrote in 1745:

“The Catalans, thus abandoned and given up to their enemies, contrary to faith and honour, were not however, wanting to their own defence; but appealing to Heaven, and hanging up at the High Altar the Queen’s solemn declaration to protect them, underwent the utmost miseries of a siege; during which multitudes perished by famine and the sword, many were afterwards executed, and many persons of figure were dispersed about the Spanish Dominions and dungeons.”