

THE COLLECTION OF PUBLISHER ESTHER TUSQUETS: A VERY BAD EXAMPLE

On 14 January the press, and the Spanish Official Gazette, featured the acquisition by the Catalan Ministry of Culture of the collection of the publisher and writer Esther Tusquets i Guillén. The press followed word for word the press release issued by the Ministry of Culture and no one reflected further than what 'good' news this acquisition is for Catalan culture. Well, not so much an acquisition, as a purchase. Because the Esther Tusquets collection was acquired for the modest sum of €366,065 (it is unclear from the accessible documentation on the Catalan Government's Public Procurement website, file CU-2013-968, whether this is inclusive of VAT or not). The AAC considers this purchase a commodification of cultural heritage that is mistaken and far from edifying. We cannot continue to set a price on archive collections in this way, emulating the Spanish Ministry of Culture with the Carme Balcells collection or the well-known case of Agustí Centelles' photographic collection. To continue to put a price on archival collections is to enter a dangerous spiral.

We cannot go on commoditising holdings, creating business- and *tourist*-class collections, where only those in the former are paid for and the others get nothing more than a moral or symbolic reward. What are municipal and regional archivists supposed to tell the private citizens, associations, groups and businesses large and small that have donated their collections so freely, generously and committedly over the years, moved by public-spiritedness and social respect? How will those citizens who have made donations react to the news that the Esther Tusquets collection, a total of 1,046 documents, has been considered worth such a sum? Because this is not just a large amount of money—considering the lack of budget we've had to work with over the last few years in an attempt to do a reasonable job, it is frankly indecent. We could discuss whether €350 per document is a high market price, but that would be avoiding the issue. The crux of the matter is whether we should play a dangerous game of supply and demand for our documentary heritage, be it text, photographic or audiovisual, and whether this way of doing things is promoted directly by the Ministry of Culture. Is this the message we, as professionals, have to take on board as the Government's policy on archives? Why follow a policy that allows the social elite to be paid for their collections, while those not so distinguished merely get a 'pat on the back'? Who decides when a collection is worth money and when it is not? Where are we going with this? Why such unequal redistribution of the Ministry of Culture's paltry budgets?

It is worrying that the acquisition of publishers' collections for conservation be defended as priority policy of the Ministry of Culture when at no time during the National Council on Archives in October 2013 was mention made of the fact. In this respect, it should be remembered that talks with the family of Esther Tusquets began last June and went on until December, when the supply contract was finally signed. Why did the National Council make no mention of a policy that would involve the need for a huge budget to cover such an expense? We think this shows a lack of transparency of the first order. Maybe the Ministry thought that as it is really an acquisitions policy aimed at the National Library of Catalonia, there was no need to mention it to the highest consultative body on archives? We are concerned that large sums from the meagre Culture budget (a meagreness repeated to us like a mantra every time we archivists make a request) should be allocated to such specific collections. Specific, and unfortunately not as random as they might

appear, as all too often acquisitions decisions are based more on the 'fondnesses' and interests of Culture ministry members than on real general interest.

It is not demagogy to wonder what the Catalan archives could have done with €366,065 in 2013. To begin with, it could have been used for subsidies to local authorities for records management and descriptive instrument production, which were eradicated with no explanation early in March. A policy that, chanting the same old poverty mantra, has cut archival activity to the bone in many towns and private institutions in Catalonia that got by thanks to this funding. But we can also do a little cost study. You know that a linear metre of shelving in compact cupboards currently costs around €32. With what was spent on the Esther Tusquets collection we could have bought 11,440 metres of shelves or, which is the same thing, fitted out more than adequately the regional archives of both El Vallès Occidental and El Baix Llobregat, who have been waiting for three years for this to happen so that they could open. And we could go on. Shelving would mean 114,400 units could be systematized, in other words, 22,879,000 documents could be archived (if we count each unit as a container for 200 documents on average). But the whole amount was allocated to 1,046 documents.

This policy of acquiring collections that completely prioritise subject and the information it contains over technical criteria such as source, significance for the region, collection unit or even the very definition of a record, merely equates the Esther Tusquets collection operation with the creation of other archives according to subject matter or area, like the General Archive of the Spanish Civil War or the Historical Memory Documentary Centre, where the collection unit or respect for ownership are incidental, and what counts is that they're about the Civil War. In the case of the Esther Tusquets collection and its location in the National Library of Catalonia, the aim is for the library to centralise the collections of Catalan editors, publishers and writers. And why can't the National Archive of Catalonia, which has had a collection of writers of repute such as Carles Riba, Clementina Arderiu, Montserrat Roig, Maurici Serrahima and Juan Ramon Masoliver for some time now, do it, too? What will happen to these collections? Will they end up in the National Library? Do we now have to redistribute collections according to random policies or individual interests? Unfortunately, amongst the policies of the Ministry of Culture the role of the National Archive is confined to the never-ending affair of the Salamanca 'blood papers', but not much else of consequence or that allows it to defend publicly its role as Catalonia's central archival institution.

In short, we cannot agree with the policy implemented in the purchase of the Esther Tusquets collection. A collection, it has to be said, that is of paramount importance, with fascinating correspondence with writers and authors from all over the world, that raise the importance of the Catalan collection to international level. For precisely this reason, the decisions made are even more painful to archivists, who are also entitled to manage and promote this type of collection. Therefore we see the case of the Esther Tusquets collection more as a show of contempt for the archivist's profession and for what archivists do in Catalonia than as 'good' news, and the Ministry of Culture, with its biased view and ignorance, hasn't even realised.

Obviously this is recurring theme that is always in the news. We hope that the 8th Laboratori d'Arxius Municipals (Conference on Municipal Archives), which will take place

shortly on the subject of the acquisition, management, preservation and dissemination of private collections to local authorities, leads to a useful debate on making convincing responses as a profession to decisions as controversial as that made in regard to the Esther Tusquets collection.