Foreword

I do not have the credentials to introduce a historian, much less one of the caliber of Vicens Vives, but I can contribute a few reminiscences that will help the reader to understand somewhat the spirit in which *Approaches to the History of Spain* was written.

I met Vicens Vives in person about the year 1951. Everything by him that I had read — a thorough doctoral dissertation in three volumes on Ferdinand II and the city of Barcelona (published 1936–37), various history textbooks written and published during and after 1942, and his contributions to *Estudios de Historia Moderna*, a historical and bibliographical journal he published in collaboration with his students — had made me imagine him as the meticulous type of historian who concentrates on facts and documents and is not at all disposed to let himself be carried away by rhetorical considerations. This impression was confirmed by our first personal meeting, in 1951, which was followed by others during each succeeding summer until the very sad one of 1960, when Vicens Vives died at the peak of his career and with many projects still to be carried out.

Vicens Vives was a man who did not play with historical facts. His every affirmation was based upon a solid pile of documents. There was a reason why Vicens had a reputation for some years of “devouring” archives, of being a man who could literally go through an entire archive in one fell swoop. He was a born historian, a man for whom the past was a living presence in the traces left behind by men and institutions. But it would be erroneous to think that he simply restricted himself to collecting documents and presenting

them in an orderly fashion. A true historian does not merely reproduce the past verbally; he must also, and above all, synthesize it and give it meaning. *Approaches to the History of Spain* bears witness to Vicens Vives' power of synthesis; never has so much been said about this history in so few pages. Vicens was, then, a complete historian, able to proceed from a synthesis to an analysis. He was a man who never overlooked a document, but was also one who knew which facts were essential and would not allow history to become a sheer accumulation of facts.

All that I have said, although it is a great deal, is still not sufficient to characterize Vicens Vives' work and personality. Of these there are three aspects that I should like to emphasize.

In the first place, Vicens Vives was possibly Spain's first truly modern historian. Rhetorical history, into which so many Spanish historians had fallen, or stumbled, completely repelled him; no one was so unrhetoical or so adverse to resounding phrases as Vicens. History that concerned itself merely with ideologies struck him as suspect; under the guise of any ideology whatsoever, a historian might very easily jettison facts and documents. Purely political and institutional history merited somewhat more his respect, but still wasn't really what he wanted. What, then, was Vicens Vives' criterion for the writing of history? Simply the criterion (which had already been cultivated outside of Spain but which reached Spain for the first time, and in its full maturity, through the works of Vicens) that, instead of stopping at major events of greater or lesser renown, one should try to penetrate through them to the firmer subsoil of social and economic developments, as analyzed from a rigorously statistical viewpoint. It isn't that Vicens Vives did not know about the great events, or even that he disdained them; what he did was to consider them in terms of data that Spanish historians have not normally used. For Vicens Vives it was very important, of course, to know whether the Cortes had or had not met in a certain year. But it was also extremely important, and at times even more important, to know how many ships had unloaded cargoes in the city of Barcelona on such and such a date, what the tonnage of the ships was, and, naturally, what merchandise they brought. It seems

unnecessary to say that it was also very important to know how men had organized themselves in social groups and what pressures these groups had exerted.

Secondly, Vicens Vives was perfectly aware that, even given all the data and documents one might want, to write history is — in the last analysis — to interpret. This is not just a matter of selecting facts — which might very well be selected not in order to interpret but simply to support a prejudice — nor of more or less vague and profound hermeneutics (more often vague than profound) by means of which a historian penetrates “sympathetically” or “emphathetically” into the men of the past. The kind of interpretation that he advocated and achieved involved a very special operation: to allow one’s imagination to flower without ever loosening its roots in the solid ground of facts. There is a Catalan expression which seems made to order as a description of Vicens Vives’ attitude, one that might be translated as “to keep your feet on the ground.” Vicens, historical writings, no less than his entire personality, are living testimonies to the attitude expressed in the Catalan expression which means not “to beat about the bush” (“*andarse por las ramas*”) and consequently, not to get lost either in the clouds or in a labyrinth. It means simply to be firmly rooted in reality, which is where Vicens was from the beginning to the end.

The third aspect of Vicens Vives’ work and personality can be easily deduced from the first two, but it deserves a brief comment. Because he was alert to the reality of the past, had no illusions, and yet was free of any paralyzing skepticism, Vicens Vives was highly interested — and with each year increasingly so — in a part of history that still does not exist: the future. My conversations with Vicens, which were enriched by his always very pertinent references to the past, were almost invariably oriented to the future — the future, obviously, of Catalonia and of Spain. These were not merely daydreams; Vicens Vives was thinking about the future in terms of very specific and very concrete possibilities. Besides being a historian, Vicens Vives was thus, in a way, a politician. Unfortunately, the era in which he lived did not permit him much freedom to maneuver, but he took full advantage of the little he had.

Historians usually get together with historians, and Vicens Vives did not disdain such professional contacts. But he was more frequently in the company of writers, economists, philosophers, scientists, industrialists, workers. All learned from him, but at the same time he learned from all of them. He learned that a human community, which is what makes history, is composed not of any one kind of person but of many kinds, often in mutual conflict. Vicens Vives certainly did not restrict himself to an academic discussion of the problems of Catalonia and of Spain. An academician by profession, Vicens Vives had the least academic personality one could imagine. He did not live in an ivory tower; he lived out of doors, because that was where the history he had done so much to scrutinize and interpret takes place.

The reader has in his hands a work that Vicens Vives considered "minor"; after all, it was originally only an article for an encyclopedia. But the best qualities of an author are often revealed in certain minor works. With no display of documents, with the minimum of facts, yet always the essential ones, *Approaches to the History of Spain* is the work of a historian who, had he set out to do so, could have written a book on each one of its sentences. Instead he preferred to condense a book in each sentence.

This book is thus "essential" in many ways: it goes to the root of the problem; it teaches much more than many a series of voluminous and indigestible tomes. It was an excellent idea on the part of Professor Joan Connelly Ullman, whose abilities as an historian I learned to appreciate during her years at Bryn Mawr College, to translate this work, and an excellent decision on the part of the University of California Press to publish it. Anyone who would like to start learning something about the history of Spain can without hesitation begin with these *Approaches*.

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