

# **EL ALMA DE LOS MUERTOS RECOVERS A GREAT FORGOTTEN IBERO-AMERICAN HUMANIST: ALFONSO HERNÁNDEZ CATÁ**

—In this volume, Fundación Banco Santander gathers a selection of short stories, bestiaries, haikus and journalistic semblances that illuminate the work and life of this great cultural promoter and Spanish-Cuban author who always cultivated a singular and powerful style.—

**This is the Prince of all stories, according to the critic Federico Sainz de Robles; the playwright, the poet, the novelist and journalist of breed who left excellent chronicles and profiles in some of the major Spanish and Latin American newspapers of his time. A diplomat and cultural humanist -founder of the Chilean and Brazilian-Cuban Institutes in Rio, Santiago and Havana-, when Catá died in a plane crash in 1940 -as did Saint Exupery a little later- he was mourned by Gabriela Mistral -in an unpublished farewell that is included in the volume-, who emphasized the "resounding spiritual nature he applied to his diplomatic mission", and the writer Stefan Zweig, who expressed his admiration for the extraordinary quality of his prose and the profound psychology of his characters.**

**Listen to el alma de los cuentos, bestiarios y haikus by Hernández Catá:**

<https://www.fundacionbancosantander.com/es/cultura/literatura/el-alma-de-los-muertos>

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**"El alma de los muertos. Cuentos, bestiario, haikus, semblanzas", by Alfonso Hernández Catá (Salamanca 1885-Río de Janeiro 1940) is a new issue within our Cuadernos de Obra Fundamental collection, edited by Fundación Banco Santander [www.fundacionbancosantander.com](http://www.fundacionbancosantander.com), with an anthology and prologue by Juan Pérez de Ayala, writer and literary researcher who has delved into the figure of this short-story writer, poet, journalist and diplomat, whose father was in the Spanish military and whose mother was the daughter of one of the great Cuban nationalists. Catá "enjoyed recognized prestige in both his homelands, and is now more remembered in Cuba than he is in Spain", affirms Ayala, and it is "our desire to remedy this unjust situation".**

To understand these attitudes in Catá's life and work, it is important to understand his first encounter he had with the military discipline, at the age of sixteen, which led to a strong feeling of rejection and would influence many of his stories, "he will gradually develop a strong pacifist attitude that will become more radical in the face of the conflicts that will arise in Spain and Europe", writes **Pérez de Ayala**. For example, two episodes of his biography describe his combative and anti-imperialist nature, as a journalist and cultural dynamizer of his time who, as consul of Cuba in Madrid during 1921, was dismissed for a few months due to a series of chronicles -published in *El Mundo*- where he had expressed his opposition to the Rif War and recounted the social unrest and protests due to the military drafting of young Spaniards.

The same occurred in 1933 when he expressed his opposition towards the government of General Machado in Cuba and supported the student revolution, "a courageous attitude of Catá that led to his dismissal as Cuban consul in Madrid and his confrontation with the ambassador," says the anthologist and author of the prologue of this volume, which he would translate into his book of short stories, *Un cementerio en las Antillas*, in which he caricatures Machado and the Ambassador, and which provoked great unrest at its presentation at the Ateneo de Madrid. Gabriela Mistral, at the funeral rites after his death, wrote -and included in this volume- that "we Hispanic Americans owe Hernández Catá the strong spiritual nature that he applied to his diplomatic mission".

For the writer and academic **José María Merino**, who presented the volume, "this is a magnificent collection of stories located in very diverse spaces, including the sea, the jungle and war, which skilfully show, through a peculiar symbolism, the obsessive and hallucinatory capacity of the human being". **Francisco Javier Expósito**, head of literature at Fundación Banco Santander, believes that "we are before the rediscovery of one of the great forgotten figures of 20th century Ibero-American culture, not only from the point of view of his stories, which dive into the collective shadow of the human being, but also for the humanist vision of cultural freedom that he expanded in Ibero-America".

Catá lived the bohemian life of Madrid in which he navigated with ease without being engulfed by it, as Emilio Carrere tells us, "his daily, exciting life, of prodigious

funambulist leaps from one plane to another, from Spain to America, from the melancholic freedom of the bohemian madrileño to the posh diplomatic in the young Cuban republic". That is why, for **Juan Pérez de Ayala** "he is a man of the world who is accustomed to moving with ease in all environments", influenced by European modernism.

His teacher was Benito Pérez Galdós, whom he deeply admired, and his stories and articles were published in magazines such as *La Estafeta Literaria*, *Mundo Latino*, *El Imparcial*, *Blanco y Negro*, *La Libertad*, etc. where he gave free rein to his incredible talent for journalistic portraits and portraits of characters such as Oscar Wilde, Galdós, Valle Inclán, Henry James, María Zambrano, among others.

Together with his friend Alberto Insúa, whose sister, Mercedes Lila, he married out of love, he produced several plays that were a success with audiences and featured actresses of the stature of Margarita Xirgu. In addition, Catá advocated the importance of Nature and the relationship of human beings with it, and in his book, *Casa de fieras*, he devised a wonderful bestiary that we publish in the volume, and that was "dedicated to our companions on land, sea and air, the animals". Not to mention poetry, which he cultivated with delicacy in his Haikus, a selection of which is included here.

Catá "developed a style and a narrative framework of enormous personality", affirms **Ayala**, and this can be seen in the characters of his stories, which are very Galdosian, "weak, fragile and helpless, tremendously human, who are living in a state of distress", which have madness, death and despair, "as constant companions of these essentially good beings", in which the unknown East will also be the protagonist, where tormented sailors seek the meaning of their existence. All this, without forgetting his reaction to the violence and horror of World War I, which led him "to a belligerent attitude towards the tragedy that devastated Europe, and he developed a strong pacifist spirit that can be seen in his merciless stories", relates **Ayala**.

When his life was evolving and he had found a new way to face his literature and life, Alfonso Hernández Catá died in a plane crash. Two years earlier, in 1938, he wrote "I want to try to remake my conception of life. America has me troubled, in love. And I hope that in my remaining years I can give her...some proof of the good that this reunion has

done for me....". In her farewell remarks, Gabriela Mistral stressed his "quality journalism", with a phrase that describes him beautifully: "Cuba gave the writer the infancy and the tropical heat left in him, as in the cane of the plantation, a burning sweetness or a sweet ardour as visible in his face as in his actions".

#### **PODCAST TO LISTEN TO AND DOWNLOAD FROM THE WEB and PLATFORMS**

Fundación Banco Santander has also made available to all users an exquisite selection of five dramatized stories (*Cuento de lobos, El crimen de Julián Ensor, La hermana, A muerte y Marte*) which show the varied short story production of the Spanish-Cuban author; a selection of *bestiario animal, y sus haikus*, which can be listened to or downloaded from the Fundación Banco Santander website at <https://www.fundacionbancosantander.com/es/cultura/literatura/retratos-a-medida--entrevistas-a-personalidades-de-la-cultura-es> and from a QR code on the volume or also via Spotify, Apple podcast, etc.

#### **About Fundación Banco Santander**

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With this objective in mind, we develop initiatives grouped into three lines of action: the promotion of culture as a tool to understand the world around us, social action to facilitate the progress of vulnerable groups and environmental care to protect the natural heritage.

In all our programs, we strive to create collaborative networks with the third sector to address major global challenges together.