Reflecting on the 2nd Biennial Conference in Madrid
by Rosa Bautista and Edward Eason, conference organizers

To hold the Second Biennial Conference in Spain was a unique opportunity to emphasize the role that the country played in Dos Passos’s life, not only as a writer, but as an artist, a chronicler and a friend. Indeed, Spain was the thread, the driving force that gave cohesion to our Conference Program throughout. Madrid became a privileged location from which to better understand the ‘Spanish Dos Passos.’

And Madrid provided the perfect location to continue the mission established by the First Biennial Conference: to maintain John Dos Passos’s literary legacy and to encourage diverse academic engagement with his works. We were elated to welcome participants from around the globe studying the oeuvre of Dos Passos’s prolific literary career—from his first published novel, One Man’s Initiation (1920), to his later works, including The Portugal Story (1969). Panels covered his major works as well as current scholarly interests in the ways in which his literature is translated, influential, visualized and taught, among other topics.

Once immersed in the organization of the Conference, our view as co-organizers was that there should be opportunity to look at Dos Passos from other perspectives beyond the strictly academic. Indeed, we were preparing for an international scholarly conference with participants from a dozen different countries, but we also felt it was an occasion to include other elements that would help us travel back to the actual, real-life settings of the story and thus, enrich the Conference experience.

These elements included some extra activities which we had planned ahead, such as the screening of the documentary film Robles, Duelo al Sol or the wonderful dinner at Botín’s—the restaurant where “Hem” and “Dos” had once been regulars—along with other unplanned, inspirational moments that seemed to magically connect the past and the present, academic research and real life, the writer and the man.

The interest still raised by Dos Passos in today’s Spain became palpable during a press conference held at Madrid’s International Press Club, which in turn resulted in several press accounts of the Conference in major newspapers, along with three radio programs in which some of the Society members were interviewed about the event.

In the evening of the first day, the Chancellor of Universidad Alfonso X el Sabio, our host, welcomed all participants in a brief opening ceremony. Then John Dos Passos Coggin addressed the participants in a welcome speech that warmly highlighted his grandfather’s sentiments towards Spain. A jazz combo formed by five talented students of the Music and Performative Arts Undergraduate School directed by UAX professor Emmet Crowley, played well known hits of the 1920s, all of them present in
Dos Passos’s novels. All in all, it was a fine example of transcultural exchange that made the perfect closing for our first day of scholarly panels.

Dos Passos’s best Spanish friend, José Robles, was inevitably—and rightly so—a co–protagonist during part of the Conference. Robles and Dos Passos had been friends since 1917, and his yet unsolved execution during the Spanish Civil War some time in 1937 prompted the American writer’s “farewell to Europe.” Quite unexpectedly, shortly before the Conference we found that one of Robles’ grandsons, Professor Mario Ortiz–Robles from University of Wisconsin–Madison, was in Spain on sabbatical, and we invited him to take part in the Conference as a guest. For those familiar with the story of the Dos Passos–Robles friendship, it was indeed a very special happening to symbolically re–unite them in Madrid some 80 years later through their grandchildren, meeting for the first time.

For American critics, the death of Robles meant the departure of Dos Passos from leftist politics and a gradual loss of literary fame; for Spanish critics, Dos Passos’s efforts to find out about the fate of his friend has kept his central position within the Spanish cultural system amidst the Civil War literary boom. The screening of Robles, Duelo al Sol, the documentary by Spanish filmmaker Sonia Tercero on the tragic fate of Robles, left many of us in the audience aghast. This moving documentary was complimented by a lively roundtable in which Sonia Tercero discoursed with John Dos Passos Coggin and award–winning Spanish writer Ignacio Martínez de Pisón, the author of To Bury the Dead (2005) in which he unveiled some of the interpretative keys surrounding the death of Robles.

We know that Dos Passos enjoyed many aspects of Spanish life, including the food and the wine. A gathering of Spanish scholars in Madrid would not have been complete without a dinner at Botin’s, a Dos Passos favourite. Once more, we travelled from the past to the present and back again, with a feeling of history experienced first–hand, in the company of good friends over a glass of Spanish wine. Afterwards, a night walk through narrow, pebbled streets into the magnificent square of the old palace where one of Dos Passos’s best friends had been a curator in the times of the Second Republic; a group of Dos Passos’s friends talking about the ancient kings of Spain and old Spanish traditions. We think John Dos Passos would have thoroughly enjoyed it as much as we did!

“A Mosaic of Perspectives”: Other Voices on the Conference

(In this added Madrid coverage, participants Soledad Fox, Mario Ortiz–Robles, and John Dos Passos Coggin give us their interrelated impressions.)

“A Double Dos Passos & Robles Reunion in Madrid” by Soledad Fox

In 2016, I had the pleasure of giving a paper at the Second Biennial John Dos Passos Society Conference in Madrid. The conference offered a unique opportunity for me to talk about some archival materials that I have had in my files for several years: correspondence between Dos Passos and his dear friend José Robles, the latter’s wife, Márgara, and their children, Miggie and Coco (Francisco) Robles. These letters are very moving, and I had been waiting for the chance to share them. I only had the Robles side of the correspondence, not Dos Passos’ replies, but from the Robles’ letters I had pieced together what a loyal and constant friend the American writer was to a family that had been shattered by the Spanish Civil War. My talk was called “Querido Dos” as most of the letters in the collection began with these words. I was very much looking forward to talking about this correspondence, and as I spoke I could not have imagined the surprise that awaited me in the audience. But first a bit of background: Several years ago, I published a biography of Constancia de la Mora, head of the Republican foreign press office during the Spanish Civil War. As always happens when I do research on interesting people in the 1930s and 1940s, many unexpected and fascinating characters spring up around them, and one is left
wanting to write about them all.

When I embarked on my biography, I knew nothing about the Johns Hopkins Professor José Robles, his role on the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War, his disappearance, or his longstanding friendship with Dos Passos; but early into my research I learned about this story because it was embedded within Constancia’s life for very specific reasons. She was close to Robles’s wife, Márjara, and to his two children, Miggie and Coco, who worked off and on at the Press office she directed in Valencia during the war.

When Robles vanished, Dos Passos went looking everywhere for his friend. Time passed and the disappearance remained a painful mystery. Márjara Robles could not even obtain the death certificate that would have enabled her to claim her late husband’s life insurance and get herself and her children out of Spain to safety.

It turned out that Robles was assassinated during the war. In March 1939, it was said that he was executed in February 1937 as a “traitor” to the Republican government in Valencia. There was never any proof that he was a traitor. Dos Passos never believed these accusations. The sinister and murky circumstances surrounding Robles’ disappearance and death have been explored in depth by the writers Ignacio Martínez de Pisón and Stephen Koch.

But I had never read a follow-up of what became of his widow and his children, and was glad to find these letters from the family to Dos Passos, which provided interesting clues. It became clear to me that for the three decades that followed the Spanish Civil War, Dos Passos never forgot his friends, and provided a lifeline for them. He was a constant source of support when Coco Robles was captured and sent to a rebel concentration camp in Zaragoza, and when Márjara and Miggie fled to Mexico.

Coco’s dream was to get out of Spain and go home to the United States and study at Johns Hopkins. Instead he had been sent to a concentration camp, and the Central Prison in Burgos, sentenced to 20 years. He was released on probation—libertad condicional—in April 16, 1944. Johns Hopkins admitted Coco to its College of Arts and Sciences with a full scholarship, but his probation made it impossible for him to get a passport. He was then forced to serve in the Spanish military, which made him ineligible for the scholarship at Johns Hopkins. He was also suspected of having been a Communist Party affiliate as a teenager, during the war, and this also hampered his efforts to leave for the United States.

Throughout these terrible years when Coco was alone in Spanish concentration camps and prisons—his father murdered, his sister and mother far away in Mexico, all of them far from the Baltimore where he had spent his childhood in peace before the Spanish Civil War destroyed their lives—Dos Passos was always there for his late friend’s widow and children, and they wrote to him as frequently as they could. Dos Passos became the living link to their father, to a happy past, and they hoped, to a better future. Dos Passos did everything he could for the Robles family, and even considered adopting Coco to help him get back to the United States.

When Coco was finally free from the camp, he joined his family in Mexico. Over the years, Miggie and Coco went to visit Dos Passos and his family in the United States, and seeing him always meant a great deal to them. From Márjara’s correspondence, their last visit seems to have been in 1968, just two years before Dos Passos’ death.

Now for the surprise: At the end of my talk, two audience members identified themselves: Mario Ortiz–Robles, the grandson of José Robles, and John Dos Passos Coggin, the grandson of John Dos Passos. Nearly 80 years after José Robles’ assassination, with wars, exile, an ocean in between, there were the two grandsons in Madrid listening to a talk about their grandfathers’ friendship. Not only was it incredible that descendants from both sides were present, and that I was able to meet them, but thanks to Mario Ortiz–Robles, we may be able to put the complete correspondence together one day, and tell the full story of this historical friendship. This may have been the only academic conference that has left me close to tears.
I arrived at the conference with the long awaited aim of meeting John Dos Passos Coggin in person. I had already seen him on screen in Sonia Tercero’s documentary film Robles: Duelo al Sol, a film that had affected me deeply when I first watched it in the fall of 2015. The film followed John in present day Madrid as he retraced the steps his grandfather John Dos Passos had taken when he traveled to Madrid in 1937 to participate in a film about republican Spain. When he arrived in Madrid, Dos Passos was surprised to discover that his good friend and translator, José Robles, my grandfather, had disappeared. As I was making my way to the conference to meet John in person for the first time I fantasized that meeting him would be like making good on a promise that circumstances had not allowe
d our grandfathers to keep in 1937. I was also curious to know if this ghostly séance would produce a lasting friendship of its own accord or prove to be a disappointment as so often happens with overdetermined moments such as this one. I was immediately relieved when I met John, who was both less ghostly in person than he was in my imagination and also more friendly and affable than I could have hoped for. Nothing prepared me, however, for what happened next. As John and I listened to Soledad Fox’s presentation, a paper on the letters my grandmother Márgara, my uncle Coco, and my mother, Miggie, had sent to John Dos Passos after my grandfather’s death, it was as though we were eavesdropping on a conversation among the dead. These resurrected letters, addressed to Dos, were both viscerally familiar (I recognized the voices!) and completely strange since I had never read them before. They talked to me without really talking to me but said what I had always wanted them to say to me. Talk about ghosts!


My 2014 trip to Madrid gave me a visceral sense of the stakes and consequences of the Spanish Civil War. I went to historic sites and envisioned the layout of the battlefields. I participated in a tertulia with writers and literary experts. I visited Fuentidueña de Tajo, where I gained a sense of my grandfather’s affinity for the Spanish village. I met contemporary Spanish authors who greatly admired my grandfather’s work.

But this was simply prelude to the emotionality of the 2016 conference. Two moments stand out. One was meeting Mario Ortiz–Robles. It was a very satisfying handshake, as it filled a gap in my family history. I knew I had met a lifelong friend. The second moment was hearing the letters between John Dos Passos and Coco Robles. When I heard that my grandfather had offered to adopt Coco, I couldn’t believe my ears. The depth of my grandfather’s loyalty to friends touched my heart. That realization reinforced my dedication to the Dos Passos legacy and raised my expectations for myself and my own conduct in friendship.

I’ll treasure these memories for the rest of my life. One days, perhaps, I’ll share them with my children.

I look forward to more correspondence and friendship with Mario Ortiz–Robles and his family. I know my grandfather would want the Dos Passos–Robles connection to be everlasting. He would want friendship to be a fixed star in the universe—warm, lustrous, and faithful.
Minutes of the Business Meeting  
June 4, 2016: Madrid, Spain

The 2016 business meeting was held on the last day of the Madrid conference, immediately following the final panel and concluding remarks.

After the usual formalities were attended to, John Dos Passos Coggin began by telling us about his interest in future film adaptations of his grandfather’s work. He informed everyone of his efforts so far and the possible leads it had generated, as well as asked those in attendance if they had any suggestions or ideas on this highly interesting matter. Then, discussion turned to the next biennial conference and the possibility of holding it in Lisbon, Portugal. Following that, we moved on to considering options for the American Literature Association and the South Atlantic Modern Language Association in 2017. In light of the quality of the papers we had just heard, we then explored the possibility to put together an edited collection based on the conference. The next item on the agenda was fundraising ideas for the Society, which led to the creation of the new Graduate Student Travel Grant fund.

Finally, we turned to the election of officers for the next two-year period. For President of the Society, David Murad of Lakeland Community College was elected by unanimous vote. Fredrik Tydal, then at the University of Virginia, was re-elected as Vice-President. For Secretary–Treasurer, the members elected Philip Poulsen of the University of Southern Denmark. His predecessor in that position, Aaron Shaheen of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, was then elected as Conference Organizer, a duty he has since come to share with Márcio Avelar of the University of Lisbon.

Call for Contributions

Edited volume: John Dos Passos as Chronicler of the Twentieth Century

With the purpose of furthering knowledge and promoting research on John Dos Passos and his works, the Second John Dos Passos Society Biennial Conference participants are invited to submit revised/expanded versions of their work for publication in the form of scholarly articles. A committee will review and choose a selection of works to be published in a single volume. Completed articles, not longer than 9,000 words in English, are expected to be submitted by July 1, 2017. The manuscript volume is subject to approval by a publisher yet to be determined. For more information, please contact Aaron Shaheen at aaron-shaheen@utc.edu or Rosa Bautista at rosa@rosenvinge.org.

Mario Ortiz–Robles and John Dos Passos Coggin  
Madrid: June 1, 2017 (Photo: Jorge Rosenvinge)
While working in the early 1980s on my study of *U.S.A.*, I was struck by Dos Passos’s commitment in the trilogy to transforming the underlying aesthetic of a number of avant garde visual forms of the day into an experimental fictional stylistics. Since I knew that Dos Passos had painted many watercolors during the 1920s and 30s, I was also led to wonder if there was any relationship between the fiction he was attempting during those decades and his work in pictorial art. I therefore wrote his widow, Elizabeth Dos Passos, and asked if his paintings were in her possession and, if so, could I examine them. At her invitation, I visited her home in Westmoreland, on Virginia’s Northern Neck, and spent most of an afternoon looking at painting after painting as she presented them from their storage sites in various closets. I must confess that I was disappointed in what I saw. In my book on *U.S.A.* I was positing a significant cubistic element in Dos Passos’s fictional technique in the trilogy, but aside from a few paintings with a tendency toward geometric design, I saw nothing that resembled the startling distortion of the representational found in Picasso and Braque’s analytical cubism. Finding little grist for my mill, I dismissed from my critical thinking any connection between Dos Passos’s graphic and fictional expression and thus for a number of years gave little thought to his art work.

This frame of mind was rudely disturbed when I viewed the extraordinary 1999 University of South Carolina exhibit of Dos Passos paintings, a large show drawn from the holdings of Lucy Dos Passos Coggin, Dos Passos’s heir, and curated by Richard Layman. The paintings were superbly lighted and hung, with their relationship to Dos Passos’s life clarified by Layman’s excellent catalog. I now realized, more instinctively than fully expressible at this point, that they were powerful and suggestive works of art, and thus no doubt cast more light on his aesthetic ideals and practice than I had earlier believed. I resolved at that time to give more thought to them when I had a chance.

That opportunity did not occur until about five years ago when I began to consider preparing a collection of some of Dos Passos’s best and most distinctive paintings. I started by approaching Lucy Coggin, who heartily endorsed the project (and later aided it greatly), and soon afterwards enlisted Layman as a co-editor. He had done much of the foundation work for an understanding of Dos Passos’s career as an artist in his preparation for the 1999 show and in his compilation of an inventory of Lucy Coggin’s collection. His tasks were to aid in the preparation of the digital photographs of the art works we wished to include and to write an account of Dos Passos’s public career as an artist—that is, the public showings of his art work and their appearances in print. And not long afterwards I suggested to Lisa Nanney that she might wish to join the project as a third co-editor. We determined that I would write the lengthy introduction to the book; that she and I would select and annotate the paintings and drawings to be included; and that she would prepare an essay on the relationship of Dos Passos’s art work to his writing. Her perceptive
comments on this subject in her 1988 John Dos Passos Revisited had persuaded me that she was ideally suited for this task.

None of us had ever prepared an art book, and we soon discovered that a project of that kind is not for those unwilling to endure a long and rough voyage. (I now tell acquaintances that the principal lesson I learned from preparing an art book is that I should never do another.) An initial effort of considerable logistic complexity was required to gather and then share photos of every known Dos Passos painting. Another, which took a great deal of time and energy, was to select the 68 images that we would include in the book from Dos Passos’s approximately 350 extant paintings and drawings and to determine how we wished to present them. (We eventually adopted a dual structure—one section of selections arranged chronologically, the other by genre.) Since Dos Passos seldom dated or titled his paintings, much labor was also expended in determining approximate dates and appropriate titles. Our final task was to have the selected paintings digitally reproduced to the specifications requested by the publisher. Our greatest hurdle, however, was in finding a publisher. Art book publishers were not interested in the paintings of a writer who “dabbled” (not their term, but nevertheless one correctly mirroring their belief) in watercolor art, and academic presses shied away because of the great expense of producing 64 full-plate color reproductions. A number of presses suggested that we arrange for an exhibition at a major venue and then have a press publish the exhibition catalog as a book. But that idea failed to interest the various museums we approached. But after several years, a breakthrough. I had contributed a number of essays over the years to the South Carolina Review, published by Clemson University. When I happened to notice that Wayne Chapman, the editor of the Review, was also the director of the recently formed Clemson University Press, I successfully solicited his interest in the book. In preparing a contract, we had a number of “frank discussions” over such matters as page size and the number of color reproductions, but all areas of disagreement were eventually resolved, and some half-decade after inception of the idea for the book, we had one.

I trust that The Paintings and Drawings of John Dos Passos will play a role in the fuller realization of Dos Passos’s artistic genius. His paintings, as we seek to demonstrate, not only touch upon almost every vital early 20th century visual art movement, but are also, in their vibrant color and bold compositional strategies, a delight to behold. They are an apt complement to Dos Passos’s best fiction, and indeed also enhance our appreciation and understanding of the imaginative energy that characterizes his work as a whole.
American Literature Association Conference: May 25–28, 2017

At the annual meeting of the American Literature Association – this year held in Boston, Massachusetts – the Dos Passos Society will be represented by the roundtable “Dos Passos Today,” featuring five presentations:

1. “John Dos Passos and Cultural Keynesianism,” Matt Seybold, Elmira College

2. “Brazil on the Move? Dos Passos and Contemporary Brazilian Politics,” Lauro Iglesias Quadrado, Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), Brazil – University of Georgia

3. “Dos Passos’s Prosthetic Gods,” Aaron Shaheen, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

4. “Words and Corporeality in Dos Passos’s Writings on the Sacco–Vanzetti Case,” Keiko Misugi, Kobe College

5. “The National Review’s (Re)–Appropriation of Dos Passos during the 2016 Election Season,” Fredrik Tydal, Stockholm School of Economics

The Society’s annual business meeting will immediately follow the roundtable.

News

New Website and Facebook page

Thanks to the work of Rosa Bautista and Jorge Rosenvinge, the Society now has a brand–new website, featuring improved design and more user–friendly navigation. It can be accessed at http://johndospassossociety.org/. The Society extends its gratitude to Rosa and Jorge for their efforts.

Since last year, the Society also has a Facebook page: http://www.facebook.com/johndospassossociety/.

Recent Books of Interest


Note: McGrath Morris’s book will be reviewed in the next newsletter.

Announcement of 3rd Biennial Conference: Lisbon, 2018

Building on the successes of its 2014 conference in Chattanooga and its 2016 conference in Madrid, the John Dos Passos Society is in the early stages of planning its third biennial conference in Lisbon, Portugal. While the specific date has not yet been set, it will likely take place in early June 2018 at the beautiful and historic Lisbon Geographical Society. The call for papers will be released in the early fall of this year, and presentations on all aspects of Dos Passos’s life and writings will be welcome.
John Dos Passos Society Membership Form

Membership Fees: Faculty = $50, Adjunct/Student = $25

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