



# CARMEN

Cuesta

## Carmen Cuesta del Muro

*The first woman PhD in Law in Spain*

**Palencia, 1890 - Madrid, 1968**

Carmen Cuesta del Muro, the first woman PhD in our country, is a historical figure who was as interesting as she is obscure. She read her doctoral thesis entitled *La sociedad de ganancias* on 7 December 1928 at the Universidad Central de Madrid, currently the Universidad Complutense, the only place in the entire country where she was able to, and earned 'outstanding' marks. She had previously earned her Law degree at the Universidad de Valladolid, my university, on 25 February 1926.

I have been able to see her academic record in Law in the university's historical archive: she earned impressive marks, almost all outstanding, as well as distinctions. Back in the nineteenth century, there had certainly been several dozen women who had graduated from university and even five PhDs, including her fellow Palencia native Trinidad Arroyo (in ophthalmology), but they were almost all in Medicine or the Humanities.

The progressive revolution of 1868 tentatively opened universities' doors to women, although they needed special permission given 'men's superiority', which was permanently abolished in 1910. From then on, women stormed into an arena that until then had been off-limits to them because the prevailing culture (or lack thereof) relegated them to the household and caregiving, instead of exercising a profession.

In order to understand Carmen Cuesta del Muro as a pioneering woman in the conquest of the right for equality with men, we must not only acknowledge her impressive intelligence but also situate her within her particular context as a leader of Catholic feminism in that period, as the subtitle of the wonderful book on her by Miguel de Santiago states. Indeed, she was one of the first and main collaborators of an extraordinary reformer of Spanish pedagogy with a Catholic approach, Pedro Poveda, the founder of the Institución Teresiana,

who disputed the values of the Institución Libre de Enseñanza while also sharing many of them and advocated the intellectual and professional promotion of women.

Carmen Cuesta del Muro was a teacher and headmistress of schools and 'ladies' residences' (similar to the Institución Libre), an educational administrator (in Spain and many Latin American countries), a Catholic orator and activist, a feminist and a brilliant jurist. She defended the female vote, women's participation in politics, women's access to the university and all professions and the reform of the Civil Code so that women could truly be the subjects of law and not merely dependent on their fathers or husbands.

She advocated women's civil rights in her doctoral thesis and in front of the institution of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship which resembled a parliament. Her words in a speech at the Seminary of Palencia on 1 July 1918 are unforgettable: 'There still exists in Spain the belief that by force a woman who delivers speeches... is a strange bird, an overly masculine woman... But as far as I'm concerned, nothing could be further from the truth. I support a kind of feminism (...) that only energetically raises its voice to protest abandonment and injustice, as I believe, gentlemen, that we all have the right to life'.

*Fernando Rey Martínez*  
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