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HIS IS NOT a travel book. Grahame Harrison snapped the minute photographs of Spain that cover this book’s jacket in the 1950s. Inside is the memoir he waited half a century to write: about his experiences in Granada under franquismo, Franco’s version of fascism, and his earlier, intellectually formative years as a member of the Sydney Push. He brings to these recollections the deeper insights of an historian in love with his subject.

Conservative nostalgia for the Menzies era is a mystery to those of us who fled its narrow conformism for Europe in the 1950s and early 1960s. What helped to send Harrison off on the Oroantes in 1952 were Menzies’ attempts to outlaw the Communist Party and to introduce conscription in peacetime. A drop-out Arts student, he had little work experience (though he had proved a nimble conductor, swinging along the footboards of Sydney’s toast-rack trams), and just a few pounds in his pocket. Luckily, Darcy Waters owed him twenty pounds.

Harrison grew up in Newcastle during the Depression. Once at Sydney University, Grahame became a ‘libertarian’, one of the group gathered around the influential Scottish philosopher John Anderson. When Anderson’s anti-Communism turned him into a Cold War warrior, the Paddington Push, led by Darcy Waters, broke away. To them, libertarianism was about anti-authoritarianism and unwavering commitment to the spirit of free enquiry. Harrison’s political sympathies lay not with socialism, let alone totalitarian Communism, but with anarchism, especially the anarchosyndicalist movement of Republican Spain. The Push sang the songs of the Spanish Civil War; they read and discussed the books about Spanish history at Sydney University, returned to Spain a few years later on study leave. He and Ros stayed in Villajoyosa, across the road, he sees ‘the black-and-red flag of the CNT, the church a plaque listing the names of priests shot in 1936. Exploring, Harrison finds on the façade of the Balcon de la Virgen of Segovia. Moving slowly, he finds a balcony in the breeze from a dark-blue Mediterranean’. In the mateship of the Push, and then in the camaraderie of the tertulia, his circle of friends and acquaintances in Granada. All were poor. Among the students who were his fellow lodgers, Harrison learned to speak colloquial Spanish and to fathom the unspoken compromises of life under Franco.

All this is told in snatches, as one recollection triggers another. (George Munster tells a policeman: ‘I’m a logical positivist’. ‘Would you mind spelling that?’) But Harrison’s story takes us into the heart of Franco’s Spain. His closest friends were a family related to the poet Garcia Lorca, assassinated in 1936 and revered by the Push. He risks a visit to the cemetery wall against which Lorca and so many others were shot, near the Alhambra; it is still pitted from bullets. One of his students fearfully confides more of what happened in Granada in that terrible summer. Harrison begins to grasp its legacy, in a city of 150,000 people, where former enemies daily rub shoulders with one another.

Sometimes clinically depressed in Sydney, Harrison experiences happiness in traumatised Granada, where his libertarianism is totally at odds with the régime. He delights in learning Spanish (‘ah, those tables of irregular verbs’). One morning, out of the mist, an infantry officer, mounted on a white charger, materialises before him and asks for English lessons. He recalls with chagrin the young woman, one of his students, whom he nearly compromises, misunderstanding the significance for her and her family and friends of his overtures of friendship. When he marries, in 1959, it is to Ros, from Wales, whom he meets on leave in England.

Franco did not die until 1975. Harrison, by then teaching Spanish history at Sydney University, returned to Spain a few years later on study leave. He and Ros stayed in Villajoyosa, outside Segovia. Exploring, Harrison finds on the façade of the church a plaque listing the names of priests shot in 1936. Across the road, he sees ‘the black-and-red flag of the CNT, the anarchosyndicalist trade union … waving gently from a balcony in the breeze from a dark-blue Mediterranean’. In the union office, he explains his visit to a young man. Soon he is shaking hands with ‘a small, but very upright compañero’ who turns to the young man and says: ‘There, Pepe, it’s just as I told you. That lamp at our door doesn’t look very big, but its light goes out to the whole world, even as far as Sydney.’

Nostalgia for the 1950s is not the prerogative of conservatives. In Night Train to Granada, Harrison is mourning the international Left-wing solidarity that economic globalisation has all but extinguished.