

Spanish Epiphanies

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Grahame Harrison

Night Train to Granada: From Sydney's Bohemia to Franco's Spain: An Off-beat Memoir
Pluto Press, \$29.95pb, 385pp, 1 86403 141 7

THIS 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 *Orontes* 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 foot-boards 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 anarchosindicalist movement of Republican Spain. The Push sang the songs of the Spanish Civil War; they read and discussed the books about Spain's Left-wing movements. Harrison writes of George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, Franz Borkenau's *The Spanish Cockpit*, Gerald Brenan's *The Spanish Labyrinth*, and Ramon Sender's novel *Seven Red Sundays* as seminal texts.

In 1952 Harrison's destination was England. En route, he travelled briefly to Spain. At the end of his first English winter, newly sacked from a factory job, he heard about the possibility of work as a teacher of English in Granada. He promptly borrowed ten pounds, packed *Teach Yourself Spanish*, William Blake and a sleeping bag into his rucksack, crossed the Channel, and caught the crowded night train to Granada. He expected to be there for good. As it turned out, he was to live and work under *franquismo* for nearly a decade. 'What ... was

a libertarian who felt constrained in the Australia of R.G. Menzies doing in the Spain of Francisco Franco?' Harrison asks. His answer — that he felt sympathy for the Spanish, and wanted 'to go through what they were going through' under Franco — begs the question.

The interleaved memories of his life in the Push and his life among the *granadinos* provide a more subtle and complex answer. The fellow-feeling he first sensed among the unemployed diggers camped near his home in Newcastle resonated 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 anarchosindicalist 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.