

Basque Refugee Children in Britain, 1937-1939: Personal memory and public history

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It is an honour to be invited to give this inaugural lecture. The subject of the Basque children in Britain is one that has long interested me, and was indeed the subject of my first published article in the late 1980s¹.

I thought that I should begin by paying tribute to the tremendous work of Natalia Benjamin and the Basque Children of '37 Association in recent years in terms of collecting source material, putting surviving children and their families in contact, organising commemorations, and publishing an excellent collection of Recuerdos (memoirs)². This has carried forward the work that was started by historians such as Jim Fyrth and Dorothy Legaretta in the 1980s. Jim Fyrth, in particular, was responsible for making sure that a great deal of important historical material on this subject was saved and made available for future historians. In all, the work of the Association represents a very impressive example of “public history”, by which I mean a history not just intended for a narrow circle of academic historians, but one which retrieves an episode from relative historical neglect and presents it to a far wider audience, using many different kinds of media.

The “story” of the Basque children is so well-known – at least to this audience – that I am sure that I do not have to dwell on it here. For those who would like a detailed and up to date account, we are fortunate now to have a second edition of Adrian Bell’s book Only for three months³. I imagine that the outlines of the “story” are unlikely to change greatly (in the sense that no major revelations are to be expected), although there are still some aspects which require further clarification. One of them would be a better understanding of the ambivalent role of the Catholic Church which, after all, looked after more than 1 in 4 of the children, but which also pressed for their rapid return to Spain. Another area that is under-explored is the role of the adults who came over with the children: with a few exceptions their voices do not seem to come across strongly either in the historical accounts or in memoir material.

But if the “story” of the Basque children is well-known, there still are challenges for historians. Typically, and my work in this field is no exception, this has been a story of diplomacy and statecraft, of an evacuation of refugees, of the organisation of charitable help in Britain, of the running and funding of homes, and of how the children impinged on British society and politics. What has, perhaps, been somewhat overlooked is the children themselves. Of course, the children are at the heart of the story: we see them in transit, in the homes, in concert parties, and occasionally behaving in a less orderly manner. But what is much more difficult is to gain a sense of, first, what the children made of this experience at the time and, secondly, how to weave the children’s perceptions into the larger narrative. This is an extremely

difficult task for historians. For instance, in a related field, Nicholas Stargardt, in his excellent recent book on children's lives under the Nazis, writes about working on a historical problem **“for which there were no models”**, and of how at the start he was not sure that the experiences of children even **“counted as ‘real’ history”**⁴.

This is why, as a historian, I think that the recently published Recuerdos is so significant, as it retrieves valuable historical material that would otherwise be lost: indeed, would probably not exist at all. Recuerdos offers us some of the raw material that will allow historians to fill this gap. At the same time, however, there are problems with using this kind of raw material, given that the Recuerdos present two voices to us at the same time – the insights of the child and the mature reflection of the adult – and care therefore has to be taken, as with any historical source, when assessing how much weight to place on these accounts. For instance, one reason that the book was so impressive was that these mature reflections were often surprising in their candour. In addition to comments that we might expect about the kindness of strangers and the gratitude felt by the children towards their helpers, we also encounter regret: at separation (pp.84, 130 and 126), at the interruption of education (p.126) and at the loss of identity (p.136) felt by children who were born in Spain but spent some of the most formative years of their lives in Britain. Childhood memories can be very powerful, but we also know that memory has a tremendous power to filter or to heighten sensations. We remember things as children that make a powerful impression on us – especially when in a different country - but a child's understanding is very different from that of the adult. For instance, in Recuerdos one woman writes vividly about her adoptive home: what lingers in her memory was the brass bell that she rang each morning to wake the other girls, the China mugs with pictures of the King and Queen on them, and the bread which was “very white and spongy” (p.78; my emphasis).

I do not have the time to present a comprehensive new account from the children's perspective here, but I would like to offer some reflections on these issues, which may be of interest and generate some discussion. These reflections were stimulated, in part, by a recent visit to mid-Wales when I found myself, almost by chance, in Brechfa. Brechfa, of course, has a particular role in the mythology of the Basque children as the scene of (according to one's perspective) a disturbance, youthful high spirits, or even a “riot” involving a group of older Basque boys. Brechfa today is a tranquil, isolated upland town, surrounded by thickly forested hills. The Forest Arms Hotel, the focal point of the village, is currently boarded up. In the 1930s there was a Ministry of Labour camp outside of the village where the unemployed were sent to be toughened up by manual labour. There is a wartime forest road above the village built by the unemployed and apparently known locally as “the Burma Road”. The camp was used to house a group of the older Basque boys and, for all of the natural beauty of the environment, this must have been a remote and – for the children - alien place for them to be sent to live. In July 1937, some of the boys got into a confrontation with a tourist from Yorkshire – it is said that they had been sitting in or on his car. Tempers flared, windows were broken in the Forest Arms, and the police were called. There was a flurry of hostile publicity in the press and questions were even raised in the House of Commons. But some of the boys were swiftly sent abroad, reputational damage was minimised and this unfortunate episode was not repeated. Should it, therefore, be seen as a storm in a teacup, irrelevant to the story of the Basque children,

or – by throwing certain relationships into a stark relief – can it tell us something about how the Basque children were received in Britain?

1) Contexts

The principal point that I would like to make here is the sharp contrast between an illiberal state and a thriving civil society (to use a term not in use at the time). By “illiberal” I am referring to the fact that levels of immigration were extremely low in the inter-war years, and that large flows of refugees (primarily from Nazi Germany) were unknown until the final years of the decade. For instance, Wilfrid Roberts, Liberal MP and a leading supporter of the Basque children wrote in November 1937: **“We are the first people since 1914 who have persuaded the British Government to allow the entry into this country of refugees (without private means)”**⁵.

At the same time we can observe many contradictions. In effect, during the Basque crisis this very illiberal state was forced to behave – however reluctantly – in a rather liberal manner, It was willing to allow the Basque children into Britain – albeit under extremely strict conditions, primarily that they would make no charge on the public purse. Thereby, the state was forced to tolerate an action which was clearly at odds with its own foreign policy, as the evacuation of the children to Britain was seen as hostile action by Franco’s side in the Civil War. In the words of the pro-Basque journalist George Steer: the evacuation was **“the British contribution to the defence of Bilbao”**⁶. In July 1937 a senior Foreign Office official could write that the Home Office and Ministry of Health **“will be only too glad to see the last of the Basque children...their speedy repatriation...is a clear British interest and one which would go far towards justifying our original action in the eyes of [Franco’s government in] Salamanca”**⁷.

Conversely, what we also see is a vibrant “civil society” – in terms not only of political parties, but of trade unions, churches, and other associations which were able to exploit these weaknesses and contradictions in state policy. There is something very British about the volunteering that took place in support of the Basque children – hence, Vincent Tewson, who represented the TUC on the Basque Children’s Committee, was keen for these committees to reach far beyond the labour movement. He referred to the success of his wife in organising a committee in Barnet that involved 40 organisations including **“three churches, each political party, the Odd Fellows, the British Legion and several others”**, each of whom had agreed to “adopt” children financially⁸. There were also some very determined individuals who were willing to put pressure on the British government – for instance, Leah Manning was aware that she was regarded as a **“busy body”** by the Foreign Office (and, indeed, other evidence suggests that she was very difficult to work with) but she absolutely refused to take no for an answer. Interestingly, in the case of the evacuation of the Basque children we see the “amateur” wing of British civil society winning out over the professionals in organisations such as Save the Children, who argued that evacuation was not in the children’s best interests.

The point to make here is that the evacuation of the Basque children and their care in Britain was sanctioned by rather than organised by the British state. The fact that this was done successfully is a tribute to British civil society: at the same time, these were quite unique conditions. Without the support of the state there was no guarantee of

care, or indeed of the standard of care; public opinion – upon which the children’s care and upkeep depended - could well be fickle, and the children inevitably became drawn into the politics of late 1930s Britain.

2) **The Basque children and ideas about childhood**

It is difficult to generalise about the children. They tended to be lumped together as “the Basque children” despite great disparities in their age, background and life experiences. Some travelled with brothers and sisters, others alone; some had come from helping to prepare the defences of Bilbao, others as young as five would have been far too young to have a formed view of the Civil War. Some had seen terrible things: Imanol Aguirre, a young boy from Guernica, for instance, had seen his uncle killed by German fighter planes. **“A plane swooped down and he fell sideways. ‘Ay, ay’, he called out, and we saw blood spurting from his head. We were frightened, so we left him”** (Manchester Guardian, 14 June 1937).

The comparison is often made with the situation of British child evacuees in World War Two, but in many respects their position was very different. After all, the Basque children were forced to go overseas (relatively few British evacuees were in this position and generally were sent to English-speaking countries) and were forced to leave their parents to the dire exigencies of war. Moreover, the fall of the Basque country shortly after their arrival in Britain transformed the situation: on the one hand making for greater anxiety about families, but also reinforcing those opponents who were campaigning for the children’s repatriation. And what were the children coming to? This was no mass evacuation organised by the state – but a private evacuation that often involved regularly moving from one home to another, and fund raising for their own upkeep. So anxiety and adventure went hand in hand for the Basque children – or one child’s anxiety may well have been another’s adventure.

One idea that is particularly worth exploring is to think about the story of the Basque children as a collision between two worlds – the children’s world and the adult world, whether represented sympathetically by the accompanying maestras and priests, and by the British hosts in the Basque Children’s Committee: or far more capriciously by journalists, politicians and local officialdom. When I say “collision” I do not mean a necessarily violent impact (although there were occasional cases of this – especially the notorious incident at Brechfa), but rather to emphasise that these were worlds that did not always intersect easily, and which both literally and metaphorically spoke a different language.

At one level one could point to the fascination with which the adult world observed the children. For instance, this report of a dance performed by the children during a political demonstration in Edinburgh is not sinister – indeed, it is well meaning - but it does suggest that they were under microscopic scrutiny:

“In appearance the children were very little different from Scottish boys and girls. Whatever terrifying experiences they may have come through in the past seemed to have been forgotten, and they sang and danced like normally happy children. There was a charming shyness among some of the smaller girls, who, as little performers often do, watched their neighbour to see that they themselves were keeping in step or acting their

part properly. It was evident that these Basque children derive as much pleasure from their performance as their audience... (The Scotsman, 25 April. 1938: my emphasis)⁹.

To follow another thread, one wonders whether some of those adults involved in the care of the children were able to see them simply as child evacuees rather than as the representatives of a cause. Again, the British hosts were almost without exception idealistic, warm-hearted people, but clearly many had high-minded, fixed ideals. I can offer some examples of the ways in which British supporters tried to make the experience of the children fit in with their own political preoccupations.

- George Lansbury, ex-leader of the Labour Party, after visiting the home at Theydon Bois, talked about children as international ambassadors for peace – **“I would like to see thousands of children going from country to country during the summer months, interchanging their nationality and learning from one another”** (The Scotsman, 10 Aug. 1937).
- John McNair on the closing of the ILP home at Street, Somerset, in 1939: he wrote that the home had revived the old socialist ideal of “merrie England”, **“when men and women would work cheerfully and happily because they were free, and when the children would dance over the flower starred meadows of our country”** (New Leader, 2 June 1939).
- At a garden party in aid of the children at Ashton-under-Lyne, Councillor James Watts made the following comments – surely over the heads of the children to an adult, English audience: **“We English have always been proud that our island has provided asylum for fugitives from other lands...By proving to the world that England is, even in these days of unrest, a welcoming and friendly country to whom the poor and the weak can turn, I am convinced that we shall have done good work towards the promotion of peace and goodwill among the nations of the world”** (Manchester Guardian, 26 July 1937).
- A staged photograph from August 1938 which shows **“members of a party of Basque refugee children placing a piece of Spanish iron ore in the Garden of the Good Neighbour during their visit to the [Glasgow] Empire Exhibition yesterday”** (The Scotsman, 11 Aug. 1938).

Discipline, of course, comes at the other end of the spectrum that I have been describing. Brechfa and another incident at Scarborough represent a real collision with the adult world of authority. At Brechfa, for instance we read that **“the police were summoned by telephone from the Camarthen and Llandilo divisions, and about ten officers hurried to the scene on motor-cycles”** (Manchester Guardian, 24 July 1937). At Scarborough, the children were incensed when the Town Council refused to allow them into the town and they had to travel to Whitby to swim. Returning late they were told that they could not have pudding and got into an altercation with the cook: he became so scared when the boys picked up knives that he had to be smuggled out “disguised as a sack of potatoes”. The National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief officer later denied that the boys were “extraordinarily young desperadoes” (Manchester Guardian, 22 July 1937).

These were extreme and isolated cases, but the question of discipline was very important because from the moment that the children arrived there was a battle for

public sympathy which followed the wider division of opinion within Britain over the Civil War. The Catholic press, which was firmly pro-Franco, was particularly outspoken in its criticisms of the children. However, there may well have been others who resented the children's presence in Britain. The famous concluding passage of George Orwell's Homage to Catalonia springs to mind, when he writes of returning from the Spanish Civil War to a country still **"sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England, from which I sometimes fear that we shall never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs"** (p.187). But there were many people for whom the presence of the children was an uncomfortable one precisely because they did not want to think about the threat of war. Moreover, while there was a preponderance of support for the Spanish Republic in Britain, the fact that the British state was neutral, and in practice arguing for the children's return, made the situation less predictable.

Therefore, although there was some elegant mockery of those hostile to the Basque children in the press (for instance, Kingsley Martin's spoof letters in the New Statesman from irate Blimpish villagers in "Spuffle" complaining about Red children taking all the blackberries¹⁰) there was, in fact, a great deal at stake. Not only the sustainability of the Basque children's colonies in Britain was in question, but also there was a fear that adverse perceptions of the Basque children would influence perceptions of the Spanish Republic itself. Comments in the Catholic press on the Brechfa and Scarborough incidents illustrate this point. According to the Catholic Universe : **"the lawlessness which has appeared is the direct outcome of the godlessness with which the children have been impregnated...an appalling aspect of the matter is that sensitive, well-bred children are mixed up, in camps throughout the country, with the rebel element..."** (30 July 1937). And the Catholic Times, 30 July 1937: **"The Basque children were introduced to this country as Catholics. As they prove to be divided between Catholics and hooligans, with the Catholics behaving themselves and the hooligans a danger to life and property, they furnish an apt picture in little of what is happening in Spain"**.

Therefore the question of discipline was immediately and inevitably elevated into a political issue, and there was little opportunity to say that these were simply children. For instance, in an account of Brechfa in the Manchester Guardian, (27 July 1937) we see Wilfrid Roberts shifting between a degree of license and accepting the need for harsh measures. On the one hand he said that **"I don't know anything about knife throwing, but they do produce knives occasionally. That is an old Spanish habit like English boys producing sticks, stones and catapults"**. On the other hand, Roberts also commented of the troublemakers that: **"They are not amenable: they are rather of the reformatory type of boy"**, and that 15 would be sent to a special home in Spain dedicated to dealing with **"difficult children"**. In the same article the Basque Children's Committee commented that it was **"alarmed at the bad name that such an occurrence gave the children. Out of 3826 children, only fifteen had turned out to be bad"**. This "good/bad" or "good/naughty" discourse was very common in the way in which the children were presented to the British public. Hence, Lansbury's comment that **"they seem too good...I like children to be naughty"** (Manchester Guardian, 28 August 1937), or Lady Cecilia Roberts' comment apropos the Brampton home: **"The children are good children: but I must be truthful, some of them are naughty"** (Scotsman, 31 July 1937). In one case, this distinction was inverted when it was reported that staff at the Hoxne camp near Diss had actually

asked for a “bad” boy to be sent to the camp precisely in order to help maintain discipline. The boy was elected “President” and allowed to impose minor punishments via a “police court”. Two boys accused of throwing bread at each other were apparently punished, one by being banned from bathing for three days, and the other banned from the cinema¹¹.

The good/naughty distinction suited the adult world as it allowed the minority of troubled teenage boys to be isolated and sent away. However, it is striking to read a throwaway comment at the end of the Manchester Guardian article about the “reformatory type”: **“Many of the children were still suffering from shell-shock, and were liable to become excited and take violent action”**. Surely today we would immediately focus on this aspect of the case, and cases of indiscipline would not be treated in such a draconian manner. Shell-shock was indeed advanced at the time in the debate over the children’s conduct – hence the Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson said in the Commons on 29 July 1937 about Brechfa that **“only a very small percentage of boys, some of them shell-shock cases, have proved difficult to control”**. But was this a real diagnosis? Had the committee assessed the degree of shell shock amongst the children on their arrival? Do we know how many of the children may have been affected by it, in the medical sense? Did the Brechfa and Scarborough boys really display evidence of shell shock – or were they, as Wilfrid Roberts’ comments suggested, Basque versions of Richmal Crompton’s William Brown? Certainly the Scarborough boys seem to have been more sensitively handled than those at Brechfa: Mr Thomson of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief defended them on the grounds that they had been provoked. Instead of sending them abroad he moved them to Carlisle and said that he had **“not had the least difficulty with them”** there. It should also be noted that a volunteer who met the expelled boys from Brechfa at Paddington *en route* to France noted their good behaviour, and said that their good manners were commented on at the station hotel (New Statesman, 21 Aug. 1937, pp.277/8).

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To conclude: I have used the term the “story” of the Basque children in my lecture, but do so as a convenient short-hand for what is a far more complex set of events. There is, of course, no single narrative of the Basque children’s experiences in Britain. Moreover – and this is has been my point of departure today – we need to be aware of the tensions between the certainties of a “public history” and the more subtle contours of memory, especially when the memories involved are those of children. My impression is that while the outlines of the “story” of the Basque children are clearly established there is still much for historians to do – the story needs to be far better contextualised in terms of the social history of Britain in the 1930s, the Catholic participation deserves closer investigation¹²: and above all the story now needs to be told not from the top down – as seen by the adult world – but from the perspective of the children¹³. Certainly, as one looks at the relationship between these different worlds one feels even greater respect for the way in which the children successfully negotiated a path through their sojourn in Britain.

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- ¹ Tom Buchanan, "The role of the British Labour movement in the origins and work of the Basque Children's Committee, 1937-1939", *European History Quarterly*, 18:2, April 1988.
- ² Natalia Benjamin (ed.), *Recuerdos: Basque children refugees in Great Britain*, (Mousehold Press, Norfolk, 2007).
- ³ Adrian Bell, *Only for Three Months: The Basque children in exile*, (Mousehold Press, 1996).
- ⁴ Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of war: Children's lives under the Nazis*, (Pimlico, 2006), pp. xii and xiv.
- ⁵ Modern Records Centre University of Warwick, Wilfrid Roberts papers, Roberts to Lord Allen, 3 Nov. 1937.
- ⁶ Tom Buchanan, *The Impact of the Spanish Civil War on Britain: War, Loss and Memory*, (Sussex Academic Press, 2007) p.40.
- ⁷ The National Archives, FO 371, 21372/3, Mounsey to Chilton, 5 July 1937.
- ⁸ Tom Buchanan, "The role of the Labour movement", p.163.
- ⁹ Although it was not only the adult world that gawped at the children. One local resident told a reporter that crowds of people, including many young boys and girls, were coming out from Hull to look at the children at the Sutton home: they **"stand at the entrance waiting for the Basque children to come into the grounds of the house where they are staying. Then they make a rush for a near view"**, disrupting the traffic (*Manchester Guardian*, 19 July, 1937).
- ¹⁰ *New Statesman*, 7 Aug. 1937 p.210; 11 Sept. 1937 p.369.
- ¹¹ *Daily Herald*, 9 August 1937, p. 6, **"Bad' boy keeps camp good"**.
- ¹² There is an excellent listing of Catholic archives and newspapers in England and Wales in Kester Aspden, *Fortress Church: The English Roman Catholic Bishops and Politics, 1903-63*, (Gracewing, 2002), pp.315-20.
- ¹³ To give an example of the kind of material that might be consulted, an essay by a Basque boy was published in the *Daily Herald*, (**"War...through the eyes of a child"**, *Daily Herald* 3 Nov. 1937).