

The Exiles of Eaton Hastings

Eaton Hastings is little more than a hamlet, situated south-west of Oxford on the upper reaches of the Thames. Motorists may be forgiven for not noticing that they have passed through it on the road between Faringdon and Lechlade, since it now consists only of a few cottages belonging to the Buscot Estate. Buscot Park and its 18th century mansion were acquired in 1889 by the Scottish financier and railway magnate Alexander Henderson, who in 1916 was ennobled as the first Baron Faringdon. His grandson Gavin, who succeeded to the title and estates in 1934, was a contemporary of Harold Acton at Christ Church, where he was one of the most flamboyant of the *jeunesse dorée*. (He has a walk-on part in *Decline and Fall* as Lord Parakeet.) In 1924 he emerged from Oxford with a fourth class in Schools and a reputation for frivolity, but by the time he inherited his grandfather's estate ten years later he had become a committed socialist and pacifist. On the outbreak of the Spanish civil war he joined a British field hospital in Aragón, and had his Rolls Royce adapted for use as an ambulance on the Teruel front. Back in England he was one of the founders of the National Joint Council for Spanish Relief.

On 20 May 1937, when the siege of Bilbao by Franco's Nationalists was drawing to a close, some four thousand Basque children were evacuated on an old cruise liner commissioned by this Council, which set up a committee to organise the exodus and its reception. The ship reached Southampton on 22 May 1937, and all the children were taken to a vast tented camp nearby. In spite of the efforts of the British volunteer care workers, the children were profoundly disorientated. When the news of the fall of Bilbao was broken to them without warning on 19 June there was a fearful eruption of grief. Some of the older boys broke out of the camp and headed for Southampton docks in the hope of finding a passage home, to join their families. Many of these so-called *niños* were in fact tough teenagers old beyond their years, who had shouldered adult responsibilities under bombardment. In England they found themselves treated as children and subjected to an institutional discipline which was alien to them. The authorities found them 'difficult'. Many – the sons of communists or anarchists – were highly politicised. A group of boys sent to Sheffield alarmed their hosts on their first drive through the city by cheering every time the traffic lights turned red.

Between June and September 1937 nearly all the children were settled in some seventy 'colonies' scattered throughout the United Kingdom. One of the heroines of this story, Poppy Vulliamy, took a group of 'difficult boys' under her wing, and found them a temporary home in a derelict rectory in Suffolk and later at Thame, where they spent a cold winter. Early in

1938 she approached Gavin Faringdon, telling him with characteristic forthrightness that as a Socialist he should be sharing his mansion with the homeless. He was not prepared to go that far, but he did make available a lodge at Eaton Hastings, and here the colony established itself before the end of March 1938. On 27 March one of the boys, José Sobrino, died at the Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford, and his death certificate gave his address as ‘Basque House, Eaton Hastings’. It was this event which inspired Luis Cernuda to write his ‘Elegía a un muchacho vasco muerto en Inglaterra’.

Cernuda had arrived in England in February with the intention of staying only for a month or two, to give some lectures which never materialised. Stanley Richardson, a well connected socialite, organised a reception for him attended by celebrities who included the Duchess of Atholl, the Dowager Marchioness of Reading, Gavin Faringdon, the Chinese ambassador, Rebecca West, and Rose Macaulay. Since Cernuda spoke no English he must have been a mute spectator. By then the worsening situation in Spain had made return inadvisable and so, with the best of intentions, Richardson suggested that Cernuda should join the colony at Eaton Hastings. The idea was doomed to fail. The job called for a cheerful extrovert, and Cernuda was certainly not that, nor was he psychologically prepared for rural isolation. If he did take up his appointment, his stay there was of the briefest.

The *Elegía* provides the only evidence which definitely links Cernuda with the colony. According to the story he told to Rafael Martínez Nadal, the boy, known to his friends as Iñaki, quickly mastered English and showed such promise that Lord Faringdon offered to send him to a private school at his expense – an offer that he firmly rejected: “My father worked in a blast furnace, and that’s where I’m going too”. Not long afterwards he was taken to the Radcliffe Infirmary at Oxford, in a critical condition. He refused the last sacraments, and rejected the crucifix held out to him by a priest. He wanted to see ‘Señor Cernuda’, however, and asked him to read a poem. “Please don’t go”, he said, when it was finished, “but I’m going to turn away so you won’t see me die”. Cernuda and the Spanish nurse who stood by the bedside thought this was a macabre joke. Seconds later the boy was dead.

There is little discrepancy between this version of events and the one expressed in the elegy, especially the final stanzas:

De un solo trago largo consumiste
 La muerte tuya, la que le destinaban,
 Sin volver un instante la mirada
 Atrás, tal hace el hombre cuando lucha.
 Inmensa indiferencia te cubría
 Antes de que la tierra te cubriera [...]
 Volviste la cabeza contra el muro

Con el gesto de un niño que temiese
Mostrar fragilidad en su deseo.

(In one long draught you drank down your death – the one they had in store for you – without turning your gaze aside for a second, just like a wrestler. An immense indifference came over you before the earth could cover you... You turned your head to the wall with the gesture of a child afraid to betray frailty of purpose.)

‘After what I have seen and experienced’, Cernuda told Martínez Nadal, ‘I will never go back to a children’s home’. The second stage of his British exile, in Glasgow and Cambridge, lasted nine years. On the ship which eventually took him to America in 1947 he wrote:

Adios, al fin, tierra como tu gente fría,
Donde un error me trajo y otro error me lleva.
Gracias por todo y nada.

(Farewell at last cold country, cold as your people. I came, as I leave, by mistake. Thanks for everything, and nothing.)

Eleven years later, however, he looked back from Mexico rather differently: ‘My native south needed a north, to make me whole’. Few foreigners in England, he wrote, ‘do not to some extent feel humiliated by a sense of inferiority in the face of the Englishman’s mastery of himself and his surroundings. The refinement of his manners shows up, by contrast, the rudeness of our own’.

In the spring of 1939, Basque House (as it is still called) took in a new group of adult refugees, mainly Catalans, most of whom were in transit to Mexico. They included the poet Doménec Perramon, the journalists Eduardo de Ontañón and Fermí Vergés, and the Andalusian poet Pedro Garfias.

Perramon was the first of the exiles to find creative inspiration in the unlikely surroundings of Eaton Hastings. Born in 1906, he had lived all his life in Arenys del Munt, on the outskirts of Barcelona, earning his living as the technical director of a textile factory, and writing poetry in his spare time. Like his companions he was directed to Eaton Hastings by the Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, but unlike them did not go on to Mexico but remained in England, married an Englishwoman, and later worked as a translator and broadcaster for the BBC Spanish American service. His prolific output of features and dramatisations for radio – some eighty in number, including a Spanish version of *The Wind in the Willows* – has recently been rediscovered by Luis Monferrer. It was not until 1977, the year after his death in London, that a selection of his poems in Catalan was published in his homeland. Among them is the poem ‘La cavalcada de la mort’, which he wrote at Eaton Hastings on 30 March 1939, only a few weeks after his arrival. In its alien landscape, under a joyless sky

(*desheretat de minima riälla*), he hears the cries of dying comrades whose blood stains the road along which Death, the Great Devourer (*el Gran Voraç*) makes his terrifying way. Behind the heroes in the cavalcade come thousands of mothers searching for their children. They are not the only victims: the survivors also have to endure a kind of death, in exile.

Although Perramon went on to earn his living by translations into Spanish, he thought of himself as fundamentally a Catalan poet, and believed in the ultimate renaissance of Catalunya. Hence the prophecy – remarkable for its time: ‘One day our country will feel the pure breath of melting ice’ (*Algun demà sabrà el nostre país / el clar sospir d’una aigua que es desglança*).

Pedro Garfias, born in 1901, spent his childhood and youth in Andalusia. He discovered his vocation as a poet early in life, joined the Communist party, and came to prominence in the Civil War as the author of an award-winning collection of poems of combat, *Héroes del Sur*. Dismissal from the post of political and cultural commissar of the Villafranca battalion, on the Córdoba front, was a blow to his self-esteem from which he never recovered, and he became a full-time alcoholic. One of his many admirers, Francisco Giner de los Ríos, who came to know him later in Mexico, thought that drink brought out the best in him: ‘When he talked in a state of intoxication, he was the decent, honest man we would all like to have been’.

Garfias was granted temporary asylum in Britain at the beginning of March 1939, and stayed at Basque House from 8 March until 8 May. The very idea of Garfias in an English setting struck his Spanish friends as inherently comic. Though he spoke no English, he was invited to tea by Labour Party supporters in Faringdon and frequented the local pub in Eaton Hastings. This was almost certainly the Anchor Inn, a quiet anglers’ haunt opposite Kelmscott, on the banks of the Thames. The inn was burned down in 1980, but was known as a place that time had forgotten, with stuffed trout and perch in glass cases, a ticking clock, and the quiet talk of fishermen. Garfias’ relationship with the landlord of the inn became part of the legend he later elaborated in Mexico, where he led a nomadic life, going from city to city and bar to bar as a performance poet and story-teller. One of those who heard him was Pablo Neruda who in his *Memoirs* transferred the scene to a landscape more appropriate to Garfias’ character and (possibly) his own romantic preconceptions:

‘The Andalusian poet Pedro Garfias ended up in Scotland [*sic*] at the castle of a lord. The castle was always empty, and Garfias, a restless Andalusian, went to the local tavern every day. Speaking no English, only a gypsy Spanish that even I could not always understand, he drank his solitary beer in silence. This wordless customer attracted the innkeeper’s interest. One night, when all the

other drinkers had left, he asked Garfias to stay on, and they continued to drink in silence by the side of the fire, whose crackle did the talking for the two of them.

This invitation became a ritual. Little by little their tongues loosened up. Garfias talked about the Spanish war, with typically Andalusian ejaculations, oaths and curses, while the Scotsman listened in solemn silence, not understanding a word, of course. He, in turn, began to talk of his misfortunes, probably the story of the wife who had left him, or the exploits of his sons, whose photographs in military uniform adorned the mantelpiece. I say 'probably' because during the long months that these strange conversations lasted, Garfias too understood nothing....When he had to leave for Mexico, the two men drank and talked, embraced and wept, as they said goodbye to each other.

'Pedro', I often said to the poet, 'what do you think he was telling you?' 'I never understood a word, Pablo', he replied, 'but when I listened to him I always felt, I was always sure, that I knew what he meant'.

Out of this chaos came the long, carefully orchestrated pastoral elegy 'Spring in Eaton Hastings' (*Primavera en Eaton Hastings*): a bucolic poem with intervals of lamentation', which Dámaso Alonso was to describe as the finest work of poetry to emerge from the republican diaspora. The first edition, published in Mexico in 1941, bore the further sub-title 'Written in England during the months of April and May 1939, following the fall of Spain'. It consists of a cycle of twenty poems punctuated by two *intermedios*: 'Lamentation on an Island' and 'Night with Stars'.

The cycle opens in the classical idiom of Garcilaso de la Vega, with the poet alone in the idyllic surroundings of a *locus amoenus* – an English park in spring. The beloved whom he addresses is at the same time absent and present, sometimes glimpsed as a nymph, or metamorphosed into features of the landscape. This protean quality pervades the whole poem: images past and present continually dissolve and mutate into one another. At the end of the first poem there is a first, vivid premonition at sunset of what lies buried beneath the apparent tranquillity:

El cielo en plenitud abre sus venas
de calurosa y colorada sangre
y alza mi corazón su pesadumbre
como un nido de sombras un gigante.

(The vast sky opens its veins of warm red blood, and my heart releases its grief like a giant rising from a nest of shadows).

The artificial landscape of Buscot has no meaning for Garfias. Outwardly he sees its carefully tended, empty parkland : inwardly he sees a quite different stretch of country, scorched by blinding sunlight: 'Every day I pluck our clear sky from the mountain, plant our

golden threshing floor in the lake, and slowly empty the broad, fast-flowing river. Pine tree and elm, solid ilex and oak give way to the bright silver-leafed olive, and ears of corn triumph over the trim lawn'. What he sees is 'mi blanca Andalucía'.

As the cycle proceeds, melancholy and nostalgia give way to the anger hinted at earlier, culminating in the outburst:

Hombres de España muerta, hombres muertos de España,
Venid a hacerlos coros a estos pájaros!

(Men of dead Spain, dead men of Spain, come join your voices to this birdsong!).

Irritation at the unruffled complacency of the scene comes to the surface. England sleeps, sunk in routine, indifferent to the world beyond:

Solo en medio de un pueblo que forja su destino ...
que cuida con ternura franciscana sus flores
sus aves y sus peces y esclaviza a la India,
solo en medio de un pueblo que duerme en esta noche
yo he de gritar mi llanto.

(Alone in a country which imposes its destiny by force, which with Franciscan tenderness tends its flowers and birds and fish even as it enslaves India, I shout my grief tonight among a sleeping people.)

The very peacefulness of Buscot had an irritant rather than a pacifying effect on him. He was not to be seduced by it away from his memories of heat, dust, bloodshed and comradeship. It inspired him not for what it was, but for what it was not.

The last of the exiles of Eaton Hastings, Arturo Barea, spent the last ten years of his life (1947-1957) at Middle Lodge, as Lord Faringdon's tenant. The two probably met through the Fabian Society, for which in 1945 Barea wrote a pamphlet on 'Spain in the post-war world'. He had arrived in England in 1939 with his wife Ilsa Kulcsar, an Austrian journalist whom he had met when they were both working for the government press office during the siege of Madrid. Soon after arrival Ilsa found work with the BBC Monitoring Service, based at Evesham in Worcestershire. She and Arturo settled in the village of Fladbury, near Evesham, where Arturo took to his new surroundings enthusiastically. Most of the Evesham expatriates - George Weidenfeld, Martin Esslin, Ernst Gombrich, Leonard Shapiro among others - were Middle European intellectuals more at home in the urban café than in the rural pub, but Arturo drank beer and chatted with locals. He never bothered to learn English systematically, but had an extensive vocabulary and, according to Gerald Brenan, spoke with a Worcestershire accent. Though rejected by the BBC Spanish service as being too compromised politically (though he was never a Communist), he did get a job in the Spanish

American service, for which he broadcast a weekly talk every week from 1940 until 1957, the year of his death. Under the pseudonym ‘Juan de Castilla’ he delivered eight hundred such fireside chats.

It was at Fladbury, during the war, that Barea wrote his masterpiece, the autobiographical novel first published by Faber in three successive parts between 1941 and 1946: *The Forge* (childhood and youth), *The Track* (his service in the Moroccan War), and *The Clash* (the Civil War and its prelude). The trilogy was published as a single volume, *The Forging of a Rebel*, in 1946. This English version, superbly translated by Ilsa from the Spanish original, was in its turn translated into nine European languages, and in the late 1940s and early 50s Barea was fifth in the list of the most translated Spanish writers, after Cervantes, Ortega y Gasset, Blasco Ibañez and Lorca. But he had written the work for his fellow-countrymen, Spaniards of his generation and class (*la gente de abajo*) – the people he had grown up with - and it is a tragedy that they did not have the opportunity to read it until it was too late. Though the first edition in the original Spanish was published in Buenos Aires in 1951, it did not appear in Spain until 1978. Nowadays, as Michael Eade has observed sadly, scarcely anyone in Spain reads Barea, though Eade himself, Nigel Townson and Gabriel Jackson have done much to rectify this neglect. Barea’s lack of recognition was due not just to ostracism by the Franco régime but also, in part, to his rejection by emigré intellectuals like Martínez Nadal, who regarded him with a disdain born of intellectual snobbery: ‘Self-educated as he was, Barea lacked even the most elementary cultural formation and suitable background reading’. Unpretentiousness was in fact Barea’s strength, as Emir Rodríguez Monegal observed in a review of the Spanish edition (published in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 2 May 1952) which remains the most perceptive evaluation of Barea’s work ever written. Barea was always a nonconformist, he wrote, and deliberately chose an unorthodox style, ‘rough and devoid of linguistic flourishes’, which displayed ‘the directness and effectiveness, the faultiness and force of popular speech’. His language was that of simple people: he described what he saw, smelled, touched and felt.

There were other reasons which may explain why the book had more appeal to English readers (its admirers included Orwell, T.S.Eliot and Cyril Connolly). Autobiography was still an unfamiliar genre in Spain, and critics may have had difficulty in coming to terms with the author’s interweaving of his own story with analysis of the deeper social, political and moral crisis of the nation. ‘I want to discover how and why I have come to be what I am’: he was writing not just an autobiographical novel, but a collective history of his generation. By exploring his roots, he aimed to discover the hidden causes of the events

leading up to the Civil War. Few Spanish writers had his breadth of experience. He had known what it was to be poor, and was immensely proud of his working class origins in Madrid, where his mother was a washerwoman. As a soldier he had witnessed the horrors and disasters of the colonial war in Morocco, and later he had a successful career as a businessman and broadcaster. Yet though his work is earthed in personal experience, Barea transcends mere realism. He also maintains a remarkable objectivity. In his description of Madrid under siege, for instance, he bears testimony not just to the heroism but also to the ‘blind, monstrous madness’ of its people.

Barea loved England, and that sentimental affection was expressed in his broadcasts for the BBC. He saw it as his mission to interpret the British character and way of life to the Spanish American public. When he began his talks during World War II the BBC was concerned to counter German propaganda in the sub-continent, and after the war there was a continuing need to project a favourable image of Britain, particularly in Argentina, then under the régime of General Perón. What Barea did was to develop and perfect the technique which he had already made his own during the Civil War. As ‘La Voz de Madrid’, broadcasting to the outside world, he had deliberately avoided direct propaganda, preferring instead to tell stories of the individual courage of ordinary people, in snapshots from the street. Similarly, as ‘Juan de Castilla’, broadcasting to South America, he set out to convey the feel and flavour of English life by means of ‘stories from my village’ (*cuentecillos de mi pueblo*). (A selection of these talks, edited by Nigel Townson, was published in Madrid in 2000). He wrote for imaginary listeners ‘deep in the foothills of the Andes’, and his postbag proved that these really existed. Many of the talks were about issues of the day – the creation of the National Health Service, the Suez crisis of 1955, the debate about the abolition of capital punishment – but it was the stories about village life which were the more popular, because the more exotic. For a British reader they are a nostalgic record of rural life before the arrival of television, traffic and teenagers (a word that had not yet crossed the Atlantic). Barea describes the twice-weekly bus on cold winter evenings to the cinema in Faringdon – young people singing lustily and stamping out the rhythm on the top deck to the accompaniment of an accordion, while mothers and aunts got on with their knitting below. Listeners learned how English husbands helped their wives with the washing-up without losing their masculinity. They heard about hobbies and allotments and flower shows, about the advent of Rock and Roll, about Miss Brown of the travelling library (who had a firm way of dealing with young people who wanted to read books she considered unsuitable), about the District Nurse and the village schoolmaster. Barea was just in time to catch some features of the local

scene which would soon disappear: the last of the water gypsies, still carrying coal by river and canal in their painted barges; a tramp who survived the First World War and had taken to the road; a German prisoner of war who had married an English girl and settled down in the village. He even went so far as to attempt a defence of the English Sunday, and swallowed without question the statement by Lord Faringdon that workers in his improved estate cottages needed to be instructed in the proper use of the bath. A regular feature of the talks was 'la tabernita de Frank', a village pub where local wiseacres debated the issues of the day with that common sense, decency, tolerance, open-mindedness, sense of fair play and good humour which Barea liked to think were characteristically English. ('La tabernita' was a purely literary device, and 'Frank' did not change his name when the Bareas moved from Fladbury to Mapledurham, and from Mapledurham to Eaton Hastings.) Resolutely idealistic (though the idealism was widely shared in the Britain of the immediate post-war years), he was a fundamentally simple man, conscious of his debt to the country which had given him a home and where he spent the happiest and most productive years of his life. Unlike his fellow-exiles he involved himself in the social and political life of his adopted country, and took British citizenship in 1948.

In Spanish America Barea became a celebrity, and when he went there on a tour arranged by the BBC in 1956, the year before his death, he was mobbed by fans. Ten thousand copies of the Buenos Aires edition of *La forja de un rebelde* were sold within a few months of its publication in 1951. The Franco régime ran a not very successful counter-campaign to discredit him as a Communist ('no Barea, sino Beria') and as a renegade who had sold out for *oro inglés*.

Barea died on 24 December 1957, and his ashes were scattered in the garden of his home at Middle Lodge. Ilsa later returned to her native Vienna. Their friend and BBC colleague, Olive Renier, erected a monument to them in the cemetery at Faringdon, alongside the grave of Ilsa's parents (themselves Jewish refugees from Nazi persecution). 'I could find no words', she wrote later, 'to express my feelings for these four people, whose fate was symbolic of the giant lost causes of our generation'. Joan Gili, the Catalan publisher who settled in Oxford, wrote an obituary in *The Times* in which he paid tribute to Barea's intellectual honesty and passionate sincerity: 'His work will last for its high artistic quality and as a human document of our century'.

The reactions of these three writers to Britain and the British are comparable with the reactions of a much earlier group of Spanish liberals who took refuge in England in the 1820s. The *Cartas de Inglaterra*, for instance, written by Blanco White for Spanish American

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readers, paint as idealistic a picture as Barea's broadcasts were to do over a century later. But Blanco allowed some irony to creep into his picture, whereas irony was alien to Barea's nature. Like most of the 19th century emigrés before them, Cernuda and Garfias put down no roots in this country, yet each in his own way derived some benefit from the experience. Cernuda became a better poet, while Garfias found an empty canvas to fill with memories of battle in a sunnier landscape.

Martin Murphy