

Frida Stewart and the Basque Children

Angela Jackson

'Have just come from seeing the children off – a terribly moving thing, leaving them at the frontier – first time I have ever heard them absolutely silent.'

Frida Stewart wrote these words on a postcard from Hendaye to her mother dated 20 December 1939. In her memoirs, she writes of how she took part in the sad task of repatriating a group of Basque children after having been involved with their care in Britain following their arrival in 1937. She recalled,

We unloaded our children at St Jean de Luz and took them to the bridge which leads over to Spain. I think there were thirty in my group to hug and kiss on both cheeks...I couldn't bear to look back at them; I'm sure we all felt secretly like traitors, but were thinking to console ourselves, 'it can't be for long.'

Along with so many people who had supported the Spanish Republic in the civil war, at that time, Frida was sure that an Allied victory in the Second World War would bring an end to Franco's dictatorship and a return of democracy in Spain. A tragic disillusionment was in store for them all.

It was not surprising that Frida had felt she must 'do something' to help the 4,000 children evacuated from the Basque Country to Britain after the bombing of Guernica. Her roots in the philanthropic traditions of the Cambridge intelligentsia and the involvement of her mother, Jesse, in many good causes, had already brought her into contact with exiles from Germany who were made welcome in the Stewart household. She knew the situation in Spain at first hand, having driven an ambulance to Murcia in 1937 for the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJC). Seeing the terrible conditions for the refugees who had fled there from Almería, she stayed to help Francesca Wilson set up a children's hospital. When an infected hand had prevented her from carrying out her work in the hospital, she went to Madrid where she helped in the Press Office and visited the trenches, firing a shot for freedom at the suggestion of a Republican soldier.

On her return from Spain, she found that the children brought to Britain were being cared for in a variety of 'colonies', run with funding raised by local groups and the NJC, without any government support. Frida describes in her memoirs how, partly because she spoke Spanish, the Committee gave her the dual task of visiting the children in the colonies to report on their welfare and needs, together with helping to raise funds by organising concerts at which the children themselves could perform. She threw herself into these tasks with gusto and travelled hundreds of miles all over the country during that autumn and winter in her 'valiant Baby Austin', visiting the children in the towns and countryside. An astonishing variety of groups of volunteers had taken responsibility for the children, 'from the Roman Catholic Church and the Salvation Army to the Labour Party and Trades Unions, Cooperatives and Communists...' Her reports make fascinating reading, describing everything from homes where the children wore 'perfect blue and pink pyjamas' and got into 'blue and pink blanketed beds', 'Quakerish' ones, and 'arty crafty ones' who lived in a cottage in a forest. Some of the children were included in local Labour party functions, others, particularly those run by the Catholics, 'kept themselves very much to themselves.' In an interview when she was in her eighties, she still found the distinctive characteristics of each home fascinating, saying,

'It made me understand how important environment is at a certain age for children – how these children fitted in to their different committees that looked after them.'



When it came to fundraising, Frida's love of music and previous experience of organising plays and concerts meant that she was in her element.

There was no difficulty at all in arranging concerts, for every home had its quota of star singers and dancers among the children, while practically all of them were able to join in a chorus, or a Basque *jota* or spinning dance.

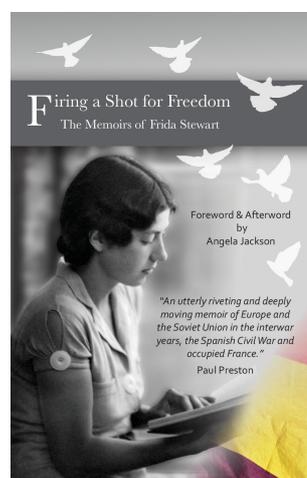
It was at this point that Frida was involved with the collection and editing of *Songs of the Basque Children*, published to raise funds for the Basque Children's Committee. The children sang and danced at many concerts, the highlight being a tour that Frida organised to Swiss hotels, the group being flown free of charge by Swiss Air and raising a total of £300.



Although most of the Basque children were repatriated at the end of the civil war, some of those who had been orphaned remained in this country. Frida stayed in contact with several of the Cambridge group throughout her life.

On the wall of what was the New Street Ragged School building, now the Anglia Ruskin University Jerome Booth Music Therapy Centre, there is a blue plaque for another Cambridge woman, Leah Manning. The plaque describes her as a campaigner for children's welfare and women's rights. Frida would probably have thought that the plaque should also have referred to Leah as the driving force behind the movement to bring the Basque children to Britain, despite all the obstacles put in her path. The work carried out by many women like Leah and Frida during the Spanish Civil War was largely been overlooked for many years. Frida's memoirs give wonderful insights into both the historical context of the times and her own memorable experiences of working with the Basque children.

Firing a Shot for Freedom: The Memoirs of Frida Stewart
with a Foreword and Afterword by Angela Jackson
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The 2020 revised edition of *British Women and the Spanish Civil War* (first published by Routledge 2002) will be available from The Clapton Press in September 2020

