

***Spanish Crossings* by John Simmons (Urbane Publications, 2017)**

Eighty years since the bombing of Guernica and the subsequent dispersal of Basque refugee children across Europe, John Simmons has published a novel inspired by these events. Yet, despite the title, this is very much the author's homage to London. The bulk of the story takes place across the city's streets and green spaces, and traces the travails of Lorna, a young woman with left-wing leanings and a job in a law firm, who finds herself working for the Basque Children's Committee during the Spanish Civil War. The central story revolves around Lorna's relationship with two individuals: Harry, an International Brigadier, and Pepe, one of the four thousand Basque children who arrived in Britain in June 1937.

The novel's plot is provocative and will surely generate discussion among those with an interest in the history that inspired it. Readers are also required to accept that the setting is a fictionalised panorama of the 1930s and 1940s, with predominantly fictional characters. To drive the plot along, Simmons' version of events relies on artistic licence, which enables him, for instance, to place a British International Brigadier in the middle of the Guernica atrocity. Historians could certainly raise a number of objections to some of the novel's details. However, for those familiar with the history, it is interesting to experience well-known episodes through fresh and creative eyes, and I especially enjoyed the visit to the temporary Basque Children's Committee camp at North Stoneham in a series of early chapters. Another benefit of historical fiction is that it can inspire readers with no previous knowledge of the subject to find out more. Simmons certainly alludes to several positive and negative aspects of the real Basque children's experiences, and much of the detail here is based on his close reading of Adrian Bell's *Only For Three Months*.

*Spanish Crossings* does not end with Franco's victory in 1939 but continues into the Second World War and beyond. Pepe, his legal status uncertain, spends some time working on a farm in the West Country during the war. He spies a trainload of disembarking evacuees and is reminded of his own arrival in Britain several years previously. Later, he fights in France for the Allies and attempts to settle in post-war London, but is unable to shake a strong desire to return home despite the Franco regime. The gulf between his new and old lives, between sanctuary and Spain, becomes increasingly unbridgeable.

Pepe's search for identity, as a young refugee, is especially profound, but the novel is predominantly concerned with Lorna's personal and political journey, and the tension between her idealism and growing disillusionment in a time of ideological turmoil. Though Lorna greets Pepe for the first time at North Stoneham with a clenched fist salute, neither character is dominated by their politics and much of the story concerns their emotional responses to situations. They are therefore not always entirely consistent or sympathetic but, as a result, they do come across as more human. I found it harder to connect with Harry, the International Brigadier, as his character was given less attention despite his importance to Lorna's story.

Simmons' brisk and efficient prose makes this a genuine page-turner. His descriptions are often striking, especially of the London cityscape (the cover photograph, by the late Wolf Suschitzky, is entirely appropriate). *Spanish Crossings* is an interesting and valuable creative exploration of the unfortunately still-relevant question "what happens next?" after war and dislocation.

*Edward Packard*