



# Newsletter



## Basque Children of '37 Association UK

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### News

## Lecture by Tom Buchanan: 'Personal memory and public history' of the Basque children

by Nicholas Rankin

The inaugural lecture of the Association, titled "The Basque Refugee Children in Britain 1937-1939: Personal Memory and Public History", took place in London on Saturday 3 October 2009 at the Kensington and Chelsea Library meeting room.

Dr Tom Buchanan said he was honoured to give this first lecture because the Basque children had been the subject of his very first academic article in 1988. He paid tribute to the Basque Children of '37 Association UK which was carrying forward the earlier work by Jim Fyrth and Dorothy Legarreta in preserving memories and source materials for all future historians.

He stressed that this was public history that had to be retrieved from neglect and presented to ordinary people through a range of media including books, films and exhibitions. For those who did not know the history of the Basque children, Dr Buchanan recommended Adrian Bell's book "Only For Three Months" as a good reference point. The key areas that historians still needed to understand were the ambivalent role of the Roman Catholic church; more about the adults who accompanied the children on the *Habana*; the story of all the diplomacy and statecraft behind the evacuations; the range of charitable help in the running of the homes and how the Basque children themselves impinged on British society. Children were at the heart of the story, but



Tom Buchanan delivers the Association's inaugural annual lecture.



Association Secretary Natalia Benjamin opens the exhibition at Ormesby Hall on the nearby Basque children's colony. See below.

children were also a problem for documentary historians because they required a new angle of focus and human sensibility. The memorial anthology "Recuerdos" was both significant and valuable in supplying the personal and emotional experience of children, including their fears, regrets, loss of identity etc as well as vividly remembered odd details.

The Brechfa incident in July 1937 illuminated contemporary attitudes towards the Basques. This former Ministry of Labour camp in a bleak part of Wales was used to house older Basque boys who, after a confrontation with a Yorkshire tourist, broke some windows. According to your political attitude, this was either youthful high spirits or an appalling riot by unbridled foreign hooligans. Newspapers fanned the flames; there were questions in the House. Dr Buchanan explained this by saying that levels of immigration were low at the time and Britain was not at all a multi-cultural society, and rather resisted the flow of refugees.

The 1930s saw an illiberal state, always insisting there would be "no charge on the public purse", forced to behave liberally by public pressure from a thriving civil and civic society whose trade unions, associations and voluntary bodies could be mobilised for charitable ends. Behind it were different attitudes to the Spanish Civil War. On the left hand, taking in Basque refugees was "the British contribution to the defence of Bilbao" as the partisan journalist GL Steer put it, or on the right hand it was an unwarranted intervention in the civil war as the Foreign Office and General

Franco's supporters tended to think.

The 3,800 Basque boys and girls are lumped together, but cannot really be generalized about. They ranged in age from 5 to 15, and came from different backgrounds and had had different experiences. Some had seen the horrors of war, others not. For some the refugee process was all anxiety, for others, an adventure. Some Britons saw them as exotic, others just as ordinary children. They had the status of symbols, as "ambassadors of goodwill", and were always on parade.

Thus incidents of bad behaviour, as when a Basque boy at

Scarborough drew a knife on a cook who had refused him pudding, could be blown out of all proportion by a politicized press. In *The Universe* and the *Catholic Times* such "desperados" threatening life and property were presented as shocking emblems of Republicanism. But 15 out of 3,826 children misbehaving was not many. With hindsight, we are now able to see that these were also troubled or traumatised children who in the great majority managed successfully to negotiate their paths through life. Lively questions concluded an interesting talk, which was followed by tea.

## Hutton Hall exhibition

by Mark Whyman

In June, an exhibition at Ormesby Hall, near Middlesbrough, a National Trust property, rolled back 72 years almost to the month, when 20 Basque refugee children arrived at nearby Hutton Hall, escaping from the horrors of the Spanish Civil War. Their hostess, Ruth Pennyman, was well aware of their plight as earlier that year she had gone to Spain and seen at first hand the devastation in Barcelona.

Although as far as the general public was concerned, the Hutton Hall colony and the Basque children had largely been forgotten, the story was well known to enthusiasts, such as Peter O'Brien (author of a short book about the

## From the Editor

I am pleased to record that the inaugural lecture of the association on 3 October, a most thought-provoking talk given by Dr Tom Buchanan, attracted a large audience, and so we shall have to think of a larger venue as the Meeting Room in the Kensington and Chelsea Library was only just large enough to hold all who came. It seems a good time to have the lecture, as October is rather a fallow period. The only problem is that members receive the association's calendar of events the previous December and may forget about it!

What stands out for me during these past six months is the topic of Spanish nationality. On 10 June I was privileged to be invited to an event at the Spanish Embassy in London: the granting of Spanish citizenship to the surviving British veterans who joined the International Brigades. Seven members were there, the oldest being 101 and the youngest 94. In a very moving ceremony at which he presented the Brigaders with Spanish passports, Ambassador Carles Casajuana said that Spain wished to pay tribute to a group of outstanding men and women who 70 years ago had decided to give up their comfortable life and go to Spain to fight for democracy and freedom. It was a humbling experience to see these men and women in the twilight of their lives represent the 2,500 volunteers who went to Spain.

I have been told by the Spanish Consulate that some eight children

and another eight grandchildren have already successfully applied for Spanish citizenship. But remember that this opportunity is only available until December 2010, so if you are intending to apply, don't leave it too long as you will certainly have to provide copies of key documents which you may not have, and it takes time to obtain these from Spain.

Lately I seem to have been travelling quite a lot, in England and in Spain, giving talks to local societies or participating in conferences. I see these activities as a means of propagating the story of the Basque children, so that people should be made aware of the tremendous sacrifices made by families when they agreed to send their children out of the danger zone "only for three months". Sometimes after I have spoken, people come up to me and tell me how their (English) families were involved in helping with the *niños* and this adds an extra dimension to their story.

Very soon, the 75th anniversary will be upon us. Planning takes a long time. We can't possibly hope to emulate the Southampton 2007 event, but we must recognise the anniversary somehow. If you have any ideas please do get in touch.

Agur,

Natalia Benjamin

Natalia Benjamin

► Hutton Hall colony), Liz Hayward (Education Officer, National Trust) and Mark Whyman (editor of "The Basque Refugee Children" in "The Last Pennymans of Ormesby: The Lives of Jim and Ruth Pennyman", 2008). The three put together the exhibition, with considerable help from Natalia Benjamin. She opened the exhibition with a general talk on the Basque children refugees coming to Great Britain, followed by a shorter presentation by Peter O'Brien just on the Hutton Hall colony and its links with Ormesby Hall, placing it within the context of the other colonies throughout the country.

The exhibition was made up of display boards, photographs and a number of artefacts from the archive of the Association, including a replica of the costume used by the *niños* for concerts held to raise much needed funds.

The opening was attended by descendants of the late Fermín Magdelana, one of the *niños* from Hutton Hall and in its seven-week run was attended by some 400 people. Among the comments in the visitors' book, one could read "very interesting and moving – I didn't know anything of this", "I enjoyed the lay out of this exhibition", "a revelation", "it's sad that not many local people know this fantastic part of their local history."

## Aniversario: Save the Children

por Herminio Martínez

A mediados de junio se me invitó a asistir como uno de los *niños de la guerra*, a la

conmemoración, en Madrid, del 90 aniversario de la fundación de Save the Children – España.

Antes de aceptar, quise hacer algunas indagaciones sobre Save the Children. En su libro "Only For Three Months", Adrian Bell cuenta que cuando se estaban haciendo las gestiones para que viniéramos a Inglaterra en mayo de 1937, el gobierno británico consultó con Save the Children, y que según Mr Golden, entonces secretario de esta organización, no debiéramos venir: no convenía separarnos de nuestras familias y sería preferible dejarnos morir con nuestros padres, etc.etc. No obstante, Save the Children sí nos ayudó por medio de los Cuáqueros. Me enteré de que Save the Children hoy día hace una buena labor prestando ayuda a los niños en todas partes del mundo.

Esta organización la fundó Eglantyne Jebb en 1920 y los derechos de los niños, por los que ella abogaba, formaron la base de la declaración de las Naciones Unidas en 1989 como los "Derechos del Niño" de la Convención de la ONU.

Llegué a Madrid el martes por la tarde. En seguida comenzaron entrevistas para la radio, la prensa y la televisión. Fuimos invitados cuatro personas, de distintos países y con distintas experiencias en nuestra niñez: un señor mayor, judío alemán, que ahora vive en Israel, una joven de Bosnia, un joven negro del África y yo. El miércoles por la mañana, hubo un acto en el centro de prensa y televisión al que asistió la vice presidenta del gobierno, María Teresa Fernández de la Vega.

Por la tarde, nos llevaron al museo Reina Sofía y nos ofrecieron una visita a la sala

donde está el "Guernica" de Picasso. Luego, en el auditorio del museo, cada uno de nosotros tuvo que dar un pequeño discurso. Mi tema fue lo esencial que era seguir haciendo esfuerzos para educar a los niños víctimas marginadas, pero que no bastaba con esto, sino que es esencial evitar que ocurran barbaridades como en Palestina, El Congo, Darfur etc. Hay que hacer presión sobre nuestros gobiernos para que la ONU sea más decisiva con estos problemas.

## Jubilee Gardens memorial day for the volunteers

by Cliff Kirkpatrick

The annual IBMT ceremony at Jubilee Gardens was held this year on 4 July. It was a specially extended meeting with tributes paid to Jack Jones who died on 21 April and also marked the 70th anniversary of the end of the Spanish Civil War. Not surprisingly, attendance was exceptionally high.

Various speakers, including the Spanish Ambassador, Carles Casajuana, spoke of our debt to the brave volunteers who went to Spain. Wreaths were laid honouring the International Brigaders whose numbers are rapidly declining and who were represented at the gathering by Sam Lesser, Jack Edwards and Lou Kenton. These three, together with Bob Doyle and Jack Jones, had been at last year's ceremony but sadly, Bob and Jack both died earlier this year.

The tribute to Jack Jones given by Sam Lesser was particularly moving. Sam was