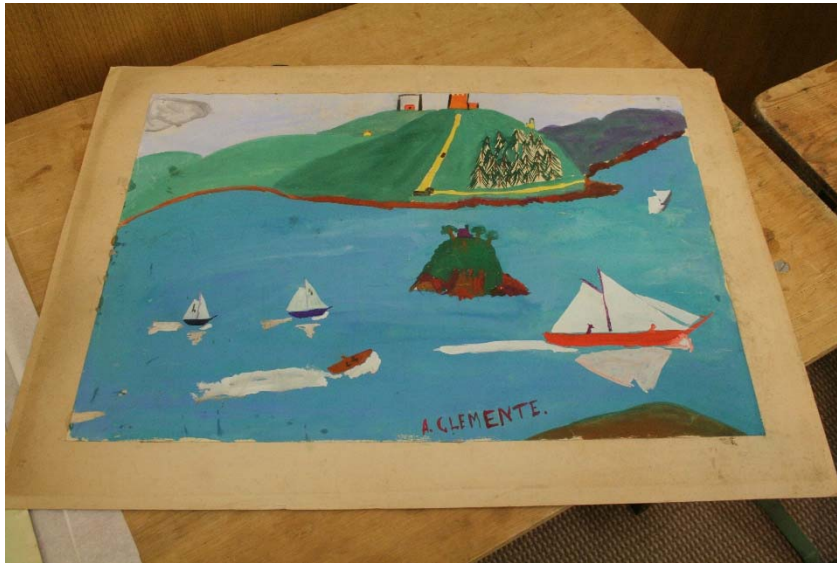


Winifred Nicholson and the Brampton Basque children's hostel

by Dr Rob David



Towards the end of 2024 descendants of the Cumberland artist Winifred Nicholson (1893-1981) deposited eight pictures at Carlisle Archive Centre which had been painted by the Basque child refugees at the Brampton hostel between 1937 and 1939 under her tutelage.¹ Jake Nicholson, Winifred's eldest son, kept these paintings because he knew how much teaching the Basque children had meant to his mother, and how she loved their use of bright colours.

These youngsters from the Basque region of Spain were amongst about 4000 refugee children from the Spanish Civil War who came to the United Kingdom. Over 100 of them were accommodated at the Brampton hostel and they were taught by two Spanish teachers who had accompanied them from Bilbao, along with a number of English and foreign teachers engaged by the Roberts family of Boothby.² Charles and Lady Cecilia Roberts were the driving force behind the establishment of the hostel, and Winifred Nicholson (née Roberts) who had a house at Bankshead, near Lanercost in Cumberland was one of their daughters and became one of Britain's most distinguished artists of the mid twentieth century.³ Wilfrid Roberts, the MP for North Cumberland and an avid supporter of the Spanish democratic government, was Winifred's brother.

Although it seems that Winifred was living outside Cumberland in Paris and Surrey between 1937 and 1939 she is thought to have spent her summers either at Bankshead or with her

¹ The eight paintings include three by Alfonso Clemente Pérez (aged 14 in 1937), one by his younger sister Ana Clemente Pérez (aged 9 in 1937), one initialled AR which is Alfonso Ruiz López (age 14 in 1937), one by Fernand V which may be by Fernando Villanueva Guerre (aged 13 in 1937). In addition there are two paintings which are unsigned.

² For a history of the Basque children at Brampton see: R. David, *'Happy and Safe': The Basque Child Refugees in Cumberland and Westmorland 1937-1939* (Carlisle, Fell Foot Press, 2023).

³ Winifred had married the artist Ben Nicholson but they separated in 1931. Between 1937 and 1939 Winifred was living near Brampton and among other activities, ran a small school at Banks Head. A useful short biography of Winifred can be found in: Crane Kalman Gallery, *The Nicholson Women* (London, 2204).

parents at Boothby. It was probably during the summers of 1937 and 1938 that she taught the Basque children at Brampton. She had an interest in education and apparently enjoyed teaching as at one time she ran a small school at Bankshead and possibly at Boothby too.

The eight paintings in this collection are characterised by the use of vivid colours. Winifred clearly invited the children to paint the landscapes that were familiar to them in Spain. The pictures reflect the bright light of the Basque region, and in the case of two paintings by Alfonso Clemente Pérez, the landscape he depicted can be identified as that around the bay of his home town, San Sebastian. It is possible that the painting depicting a battleship was the earlier of the two when the trauma of war remained uppermost in his mind. The other picture depicting well-known features of the town and bay with yachts perhaps came a little later by which time his memory of the war was fading.

Much later in life one of Winifred's pupils, Alfonso Ruiz López, described Winifred Nicholson as 'the most marvellous person...who began giving us water-colour classes and, as we progressed, introduced us to oils'. He went on to say that he 'enjoyed these classes as I was very keen and loved painting'.

In early 1938 or 1939 the Basque Children's Committee announced that it was mounting an exhibition of paintings by Basque children and those at Brampton were asked to take part. Alfonso tells us that 'Mrs Nicholson was very enthusiastic and set us to work tirelessly. Eighteen of my pictures went, and they were all sold in London, ending up in English homes as reminders of us. I received £38 from their sale, which was a small fortune for me, and I had already decided how to spend it. We weren't short of anything ourselves, so I would buy clothes for my siblings in Spain who didn't have any'.⁴

These paintings join the substantial archive relating to the Basque children in Cumbria deposited at Carlisle Archive Centre by various members of the Roberts family. This archive is now one of the most significant deposits for the study of these child refugees in the United Kingdom.⁵

All 8 paintings are available to view in our [Gallery here ...](#)

⁴ N. Benjamin (ed), *Recuerdos: Basque Children Refugees in Great Britain* (Oxford, Mousehold Press, 2007), 145-6.

⁵ I am grateful to Shirley Nicholson and Jovan Nicholson for additional information.