



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