

The Montrose colony

by Forbes Inglis

[This attached article first appeared in The Scots Magazine in 2007]



Photo by Forbes Inglis, taken at the unveiling of the blue plaque at Montrose showing (left) Jack Jones, the former general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, and Jack Edwards (both now deceased).

Seventy years ago this month a group of Basque children, refugees from the Spanish Civil War, came to stay in Montrose.

The Civil War had aroused considerable emotion in parts of Scotland and some 500 Scots, a quarter of what became known as the British Battalion, went to fight against the regime of the Fascist dictator General Franco.

By and large however, the Civil War had been of little or no concern to the general public until the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica by the Luftwaffe on the 26th April 1937, an event that changed the attitudes of large numbers of the British population.

After Guernica there was concern in many quarters about the safety of Spanish children, particularly those in the Basque region of the country.

The British Government of the time tried to remain aloof from the events unfolding in Spain by having a non-interventionist policy but, following the air raids, further

representations had been made by the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief to allow child refugees to come to this country to escape the horrors of the Civil War.

At that point the Government relented to a degree, eventually giving permission for the refugees to come to Britain while at the same time refusing to give any active assistance to the project.

Despite the lack of Government help a Basque Children's Committee was set up which, aided by a number of other organisations ranging from trade unions and the Co-op to Scouts and various religious groups, started to make provision for the young Basque refugees.

Nearly 4,000 children set sail from Bilbao in Northern Spain aboard the Habana, an elderly cruise liner designed to carry just 800 passengers, on the 21st May 1937 and two days later they docked at Southampton.

The Government had agreed that the Committee could hire tents from the War Office but, in keeping with its policy of non-cooperation, refused to provide any assistance to erect them. In the end the tents were erected by troops of local scouts.

Initially, the children were housed in the tents at a camp at Eastleigh near Southampton but over the summer months they were dispersed to children's homes throughout the United Kingdom.

It was hoped that other Scottish towns or cities might accommodate other young Spanish refugees but in the end Montrose was the only place to do so.

On the 17th September 1937 twenty-four children, ten boys and fourteen girls aged between five and fifteen, arrived at Montrose Station where they were greeted by officials from a number of the charities who were to be involved in caring for them.

The words '*Viva Espano Salud*' had been written in large white letters on the roadway outside the station but it is doubtful if the children even noticed the attempt to make feel them welcome.

Mall Park House in Montrose, a former mansion house standing in its own grounds, had been placed at the disposal of the Basque Children Committee of the Dundee Spanish Medical Aid Committee by its owners, the Dundee Free Breakfast Mission.

The younger children and items the refugees had brought with them such as cases and blankets were ferried to Mall Park House in cars and vans while the older members of the group marched to their new home.

After their Spartan existence living under canvas the children had to be convinced that they were to stay in such surroundings. They were so delighted that they hugged each other and threw their arms around their teacher, kissing her and thanking her for bringing them to Montrose.

They had been told that Scotland was a wet and miserable country where the sun rarely shone but their arrival had been greeted by warm sunshine and they were soon exploring the grounds and playing on the swings and other amusements they found there.

As they had embarked at Bilbao eleven of their number had been killed in an air raid but the children in Montrose appeared to have recovered from their ordeal. The noise of planes from the nearby training base at RAF Montrose gave the children no cause

for concern although on one occasion the sound of a bus backfiring made them leap for cover.

Not everyone was happy about the new arrivals. Sections of the right wing press, which at the time had some sympathy for Fascist regimes, had never been comfortable with the idea of accepting the children in the first place and there were regular campaigns to have them returned home. There were even allegations of increased crime in the areas where the children had been settled, allegations which had no basis in fact.

There were a couple of anti-refugee incidents in Montrose although the first, which occurred within a few days of the children's arrival, was put down to the actions of mischievous local children.

A number of concerns were raised about the care of the children, not all of them necessarily in the children's best interests.

Concerns were brought up about the children being educated in Mall Park House rather than attending one of the local schools. In fact, the children were only in the country on condition that they would not be a burden on National or local funds so that educating them in the Burgh schools was not a possibility.

They had lessons every day except Sundays, being instructed by a fully qualified Spanish teacher in all of the subjects that they would have been taught at home. It was reported that many of the children were from poor families so that it was believed that they were receiving a better education than they might have done at home.

In keeping with the conventions of the period the girls were taught cookery and what a contemporary account described as housewifery. The last two subjects were undoubtedly helpful to the girls, as all of the children were required to assist in the running of the House. For the boys this meant bringing in the coal and chopping wood.

Despite being educated separately they were not cut off from the local children and they had regular days when local children came to play. Many local families also invited the young Basques to visit and they were always allowed to go on such outings.

On at least two occasions the question of their religious beliefs was raised but the general view appeared to be that feeding, clothing and educating the children was more important than their religious affiliations.

It cost approximately £20 per week to keep the children and regular appeals had to be made for financial help as without Government assistance the lack of funds was a continual cause for concern. To help with fund raising, and no doubt also to draw attention to their circumstances, the children put on a number of concerts in venues throughout Scotland.

For these concerts the children often appeared dressed in their Basque costumes and performed Basque and Spanish dances and sang Spanish folk songs. The dresses and costumes all had to be specially made, an activity in which even the youngest of the girls took part. A press report of the time suggests that 'the preparations were almost as exciting as the concert itself'.

During one such concert at the Caird Hall in Dundee the thirty Basque children by then resident in Montrose entertained an audience of 3,000. The collection raised £35/14/0d.

Although the refugee campaign was never well-funded money continued to come in from a variety of sources. A group of Glasgow sympathisers donated £37/3/0d, the Montrose Co-operative Society Educational Committee organised a whist drive with the proceeds going to the Home and an old age pensioner gave 10/-, "for the Basque kiddies".

Many individuals made donations of jam, sweets and clothes while, in what sounds like a modern idea, interested groups or societies were invited to adopt a child by paying 10/- per week towards a child's upkeep. The Montrose Shop Assistants' Union agreed to 'adopt' a child by contributing 10/- per week for the maintenance of a boy in the House.

At the end of April 1938 nine children were returned to their parents in Bilbao but they were replaced by others who had either been orphaned or whose parents were themselves refugees.

In all, the Basque children stayed in Montrose for almost three years. Of those who came to this country a number were unable to return to their homeland as their relatives had all either died or could not be traced so they remained here. The writer understands that at least two of the Montrose children stayed on in Scotland to start new lives.

The welcome given to the children in Scotland was recalled in 1985 when eleven of their number, together with their husbands and wives, returned to Montrose.

Mrs Bene Gonzales, who had celebrated her 15th birthday on the day the Basque children arrived in Montrose, related how happy they had been there while another of the children, Mr Philip Bilbao, said he found Montrose "as beautiful now as in 1937".

At a civic reception the group presented a silver salver and silver plaque to the people of the Burgh in recognition of all the kindnesses they had been shown 48 years before. The town had been in their thoughts throughout the years. Now they had renewed old acquaintances and fulfilled a dream by returning to thank the people of Montrose.