

Exhibition and afternoon of talks at the University of Southampton June 2018

A report by Barbara Coombs and Simon Martinez



The exhibition: Claire Hignett and Simon Martinez



The speakers: Carmen Kilner, Ed Packard, Peter Anderson, Scott Soo

BCA'7 UK - The Association for the UK Basque Children, in partnership with the University of Southampton Special Collections, had great pleasure in presenting this event to mark the 81st anniversary of the arrival of the *Niños de la guerra / Niños vascos*, and a linked exhibition by Claire Hignett. Special thanks are owed to Dr Karen Robson and her staff, Dr Jaine Beswick, Claire Hignett, and all of the speakers: Dr Peter Anderson, Dr Ed Packard, Dr Scott Soo, and Carmen Kilner.

The archive of the Association is held for us by the Special Collections of the Library of the University of Southampton. On behalf of the BCA'37UK Simon Martínez presented Karen Robson with the following Collections: Eric Needham, Keighley Colony; Thornycroft Family, Worthing and Lancing Colonies; and Marina and Carito Perez Vega, two *niñas* associated with progressive education at the Langham Colony, Colchester and then at Dartington College. The Association is very grateful to the families who have donated these precious items.

In Search of the Basque Children

Claire Hignett

This exhibition by Claire Hignett was on display in the library at the University of Southampton. Using textiles, Claire Hignett tells the story of the group of children who came to Salford in 1937 after fleeing the Francoist bombardment of Guernica, Bilbao and other towns and villages in The Basque Country in Northern Spain.

Claire takes themes from photos and stories from old newspapers and local people to create an interactive exhibition that takes us with the children on their journey to safety, through partings, anticipation, anxiety, loss, the kindness of strangers, and the memory of home. Each child is represented by a textile doll, contained in a small bag like an item of treasured luggage brought from home. The bags are displayed in a corridor-like space, conveying an idea of transience

A moving and thoughtful exhibition adding another dimension to the afternoon of talks on the experience of the Basque Children of 1937.

The Spanish Civil War and the battle for the souls of the Basque Children

Dr Peter Anderson, University of Leeds

Dr Anderson described the efforts of Republican Spain before the Spanish Civil War to develop education through literacy, culture and democracy. The movement for education was designed to bring Spain into the 20th century, questioning the authority of the Catholic Church and the wealthy landowners.

The Rebel generals had the support of the Church and imagined they were on a moral crusade to save Spain and the souls of the children. The Francoist propaganda that made a great deal about caring for children was belied by the murderous activities of rebel army. In repeated reprisals, parents were killed or incarcerated and their children taken away and put in institutions to turn them into "good Christians". The civilian population was subjected to bombardment in cities, towns and countryside.

The Basque Children were accompanied by a group of *maestras* and *auxiliares* who believed in the republican ideal. Many of them were in danger of incarceration or death had they remained in Spain. They helped the Children through the traumas of loss and defeat, and kept the Basque culture alive in the new places where they found themselves whilst waiting to go home. Franco demanded that children who had fled the bombings and hunger be returned at the end of war. The victors put pressure on parents to allow the return of their children. Officials wrote letters asking for children to be returned, supposedly from parents who had in fact died or were imprisoned. However, the Basque Children's Committee, who had responsibility for them while in the UK, was very careful to verify each letter before letting a child go back to Spain.

Dr Anderson developed themes around concepts of childhood that evolved over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Children, he suggested, were thought to have souls as well as physical bodies, which could and should be nurtured by their parents. But he observed that during this period firstly the church and then the state through taking responsibility for the health and education of children challenged the right of parents to be the only protectors of these souls. And what was to happen when children were the victims of "Total War" and famine caused by state policy or civil war, or by the invasion of family life by ideology or social media? He outlined the development of the right to a childhood and the codifying of this in the UN Declarations.

The Basque Children in Suffolk – a local study

Dr Ed Packard, University of Suffolk

Dr Packard presented his study into the one hundred or so children who were accommodated in the rural county of Suffolk. Case studies showed that the “colonies” to which they came were supported by locally affluent individuals who founded the one at Whersted Park, and the unstinting efforts of representatives of the Ipswich Cooperative Society who supported the children as they moved onto Wickham Market. The other group of children was in a “nomadic” group led by Poppy and Chloe Vulliamy.

The colonies were non partisan and were run by a locally constituted committee which recruited staff and volunteers to look after the children. The Spanish speaking teachers and auxiliaries accompanying the children included educational approaches that combined the thinking of AS Neill as well as progressive thinkers in Spain - an example of “transnational progressive education”.

“What were the views of the Children” asked Dr Packard? Their views have been recorded as they were interviewed in their old age in Oral History projects which have been published – *Only for three months, Los Niños – exiles from the Spanish Civil War*. But do these memories truly represent their thoughts and feelings as children? There has been some blurring of accounts one into another and so do these accounts represent a consensus of the life experienced by them?

The routes to exile – the Gurs camp – France and the Spanish Civil War refugees

Dr Scott Soo, University of Southampton

Dr Soo described how more than 100,000 men and women crossed the border in the Retirada following the fall of Barcelona. All refugees were arrested on entering France, and taken to a camp on the beach at Argelès-Sur-Mer. There were many more refugees than had been expected by the authorities at Argelès, and conditions were very poor, with inadequate food and shelter. Many died of hypothermia, malnutrition or disease. The commemorative monument on the beach reads:

To the memory of the 100,000 Spanish Republicans interned in the camp of Argelès, during the RETIRADA in February 1939. Their disgrace: having fought for defending Democracy and the Republic against fascism in Spain from 1936 to 1939. Free men, remember them.

The French government went on to found internment camps all along the foothills of the Pyrenees, including at Gurs. What began as internment camps often became centres of confinement and punishment under the Vichy regime. Some were later used to intern French people of Jewish origin and others destined for Hitler’s concentration camps and death camps.

Scott discussed the sometimes fierce debate over the description of these camps. Should they be remembered in history as camps, internment camps or concentration camps? We were left in no doubt that the true description would be concentration camps.

This talk links to the experiences of the Niños as some of the children had relatives who suffered the incarceration in the Concentration Camps by the French Authorities.

Teachers of the Second Republic

Carmen Kilner, BCA'37UK

The afternoon of talks had focussed on the international events of the 1930s, the Spanish Civil War, the evacuation of the Niños on the *SS Habana*, the colonies in Suffolk, the concentration camps in France, and finally we were led through what it was like for Carmen's parents to live through all of this and settle and make their lives in England.

Her mother had trained as a teacher following the introduction of new progressive educational policies by the Republican governments of 1931-34 and 1936-39. This was inclusive, secular, and compulsory. It included education for real life for the children and acknowledged that adults had been failed and could and should have the opportunity to be literate and numerate so teachers went out into the factories and workshops to give lunchtime lessons.

The new model teachers dressed in modern ways – below the knee skirts and hair worn in a short style - as did Carmen's mother. The teachers who accompanied the *niños* were largely not welcome back in Spain after the defeat of the Republic. Those that did return were treated badly and suffered overt and violent attacks, and prison. Sadly her mother's professional life as a teacher was cut short by the English authorities who told her 'her Spanish accent would not be understood' by her pupils. How cruel!

The role of the teachers and auxiliaries in the colonies was twofold. Firstly teaching, but as importantly caring for the children who had been traumatised by the war, their loss of mum's, dads, and siblings, and their extended family members. Teaching was in Spanish as the Basque Government insisted that the children should not lose their language and their chance to be employed and educated parents. The culture of the Basque Country through song and dance was taught. But none of this was possible without kind words, cuddles and love. And this was given by these brave, caring and compassionate women.

The afternoon of talks ended with discussion and questions and carried on with refreshments and viewings of Claire Hignett's exhibition. The Association renewed, and established new, friendships through our event at Southampton and we look forward to further events there.