Personal Papers

Forty years back: a retrospective survey

A L COCHRANE

When Franco was finally allowed to die I felt vaguely that I should return and visit the hospitals where I had worked as a medical student during the Spanish Civil War in 1936-7. But my Spanish is now negligible and it all seemed too difficult, until by chance, at a party given by Professor Lester Breslow in Los Angeles, I met a young Spanish epidemiologist, Dr Xavier Bosch, a Catalan from Barcelona. I was fascinated by the fact that he knew the village of Grañén, where I had first worked as a student in 1936. I thought I amused him by my sudden memory of a song about Catalans in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*:

My nose is flat
My face is black
But yet I am a man.
Thank God I am a negro
and not a Catalan.

But the main reason, as I learned later, for his agreeing to take me to Grañén was the kindness of his Catalan heart.

Later we lost contact and a telegram went astray, but we finally met at Barcelona Airport, both rather nervous that we wouldn't recognise each other; but all went well. Xavier had organised everything. After a quiet and amusing dinner on Thursday night I slept in the new Hotel Colon. The old one in 1936 was the headquarters of the anarchists. On the Friday I gave a lecture on applied epidemiology (I think, for the first time in my life, my audience was more interested in me as a member of the International Brigade than as an epidemiologist). This was followed by a most amusing lunch with some young Catalan clinicians. Xavier then drove us, very carefully, the long, rather weary way up to Huesca through Lerida and Barbastro, where we spent the night.

The next day was to be the high point of the trip when we drove the few miles to Grañén, but there was an unfortunate anticlimax. I had been certain that I would recognise the old, large house of the fascist doctor, who had run away in 1936, but after motoring and walking round the small village I couldn't find it. My morale sank low. Xavier, as always, came to the rescue. He talked to the old men, who were gossiping in the sun in the small village square. Suddenly it became clear that everyone over 55 knew all about the "English" hospital. I was escorted there in style but, even when in front of it, I could not recognise it. There was some excuse. It had been bombed in 1938 and reconstructed partly as a cinema and partly as a bar.

I was enthusiastically welcomed by Antonio, the owner of the bar, and his family, who showed me around. The bar was unrecognisable, as was the restaurant behind. Permission to go upstairs was quickly granted, but the next storey had been subdivided to house many families after the bombing. I could

recognise nothing. I moved towards a window and suddenly found myself in our old so-called "operating suite." It was now a sitting room and two bedrooms, but it was unmistakable, and from this stable point I was able to recognise much else. Memories flooded back. The shock of the difference between University College Hospital and Grañén's windswept plain; the

The author with villagers at Grañén in 1936 and 1978.

satisfactory feeling of doing something anti-fascist, instead of talking about it; the feeling of playing a small part in something historically important. On the other hand, there were minor memories of the breakdown in morale when we hadn't enough to do, the awful enteritis (Grañén "gripes"), and the everlasting beans we had to eat.

I talked to many people in the following hours. It was clear

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that the hospital had had a much better reputation than my memories suggested. (Perhaps it improved after I left for Madrid in December 1936.) Nobody was remembered by name, but there was one English doctor whom everyone remembered. He bathed every day in the Rio Flumen, even when he had to break the ice—such is fame. Let this doctor stand up and be counted and join those distinguished people whose names are associated with Grañén. It really is distinguished for a village that had a population of under 2000 in 1936. In the first place, it housed the first international hospital to be established in the Spanish Civil War. It was, indirectly, made immortal by John Cornford's poem "The Last Mile to Huesca," which must have been written at or near Grañén. Tito of Yugoslavia had a house there in 1937, and General Walter—later Minister of Defence in Poland—lived in another house there in 1938. It was certainly visited in 1936 by Ludwig Renn, who wrote the famous novel *Der Krieg* after the first world war. Orwell too was probably there, and, at a lower level, Sefton Delmer of the *Daily Express* and Lord Churchill (of *All My Sins Remembered*) also visited.

The one depressing feature of the visit was evidence that the division among the political left, which was so fatal during the civil war, had continued. One man excused himself from arranging an introduction because of political differences (presumably socialist-communist). In a discussion I asked one of the elders if he thought the idea of the International Brigades a good one. After thought he answered (through Xavier as

interpreter) that it was, but that it wasn't enough. I found how right he was when I checked the figures in Hugh Thomas's book *The Spanish Civil War*. On Franco's side, in addition to the 75 000 Moors, there were 75 000 Italians and 17 000 Germans, while on the Republican side the International Brigade numbered only 2000 Russians and 10 000 others. This was certainly not enough.

There was also the farce of the "non-intervention committee." Hugh Thomas has some apt comments: "From the start the British and French Governments were occupied less with the end of intervention on all sides than with the appearance of such an end. . . . When it was clear that the intervention pact was being disregarded, it was cynical to insist on its maintenance. The cynicism brought the British Government as little credit as it did advantage."

The comparison with the Rhodesian oil sanctions is, I think, immediately obvious. How is it that we have so often elected the stupid and insincere to rule over us?

It was for me a most memorable weekend, and my thanks to Dr Xavier Bosch are great; but the word weekend reminds me of my welcome at University College Hospital after a year in the Spanish Civil War. I had left the hospital without permission. I came back a year later, very bronzed with a red beard. I did not know what would happen. To discover, I went on a ward round with the most conservative physician. He spotted me and said, "Ah, Cochrane, back again. Had an interesting weekend?"

Mole among the quacks

P V SCOTT

Things were bad at the Circus. Firstly, there had been the Permanent Secretary's fury at the latent revenue consequences of the Witchcraft project; the usual guff about closure of well-loved local hospitals. Then had come the awful kerfuffle over the leak of the secret annexe to Circular HN/74/H2S(ii)—Hospital Ancillary Staff (Laundry) (Up gradings) Regulations (1978). How on earth had NUPE got on to it? And now, to cap it all, the strange case of Gerald the Mole, that grubby agent of Roy Bland's who had failed to return from a low-level mission at BMA House. Really, it was too much. Into the subthalamic mess of George Smiley's mediaeval mind there crept a base suspicion: things were getting out—of Control.

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He sighed, a crumpled, forlorn figure. Alleline, it was rumoured, was doing something rather clever with the remnants of the Health Services Board but Smiley tried to distance himself from potential disasters. He wanted nothing to do with the darker side of his craft; it offended against his ideas on the fitness of things. Private practice was so—profitable. He blinked nervously when he realised he had spoken the word aloud, scuttled crabwise out of the lift, and flogged his sagging carcass towards the executive loo. Smiley always worked best alone, cut off from human contact and the clamorous world of failed family planning. He tore a page from a back number of *Health Trends*.

Suddenly, it came to him. It was something Bill Haydon had

said during that awful time when Ann had disappeared into the chloroformed limbo of the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson. What if he were to change the comfortable habits of a lifetime spent in an ungrateful country's Social Security Service? What if he were to . . . defect? After all, Bill had observed caustically, if you can't beat them. . . .

Join them? Dear God. If the friends. . . . It didn't bear thinking about. Treasury never forgot. Or forgave. Did he really want to end his career a statistic in one of Connie's grey, anonymous files? Join the opposition? Besides, doctors were so—difficult. "Big oafs from little icons grow." The quacks, he reflected sombrely, had minds of their own. They refused to see sense in other men's ideas. You were for ever blue-pencilling their self-serving memoranda about sick people (Smiley had a horror of sick people), or castigating one of their unworkable schemes which bore no relation to reality or to departmental norms or to the departmental view. And they were always asking for money. In a word, thought Smiley uncharitably, doctors were beastly.

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No, not defection. He stretched luxuriously and made his way past Toby's clicking abacus to a hidden door. Hanging his plastic mac on the chipped fibreglass statuary of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Services last but one, he approached Control with the grovelling deference of a Basque terrorist. For a moment he felt insecure. That bust, now. . . . Of course, Barbara. How well he remembered the last, fatal illness.

It had been a nightmare. Decisions, decisions, decisions. How he had tried, really he had tried, he and Peter Guillam, to foment the twin conceits of forward planning and consensus