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Fragments of University Reminiscence

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Edited and annotated by Ann L Mackenzie

Chapter 3

1942–: One Man’s War

Another decade: 1942. Too young for the first war, too old to serve in the second, my niche was to be one of the team of regional specialists assembled in Oxford by Dr. Arnold Toynbee, of *A Study of History* fame,¹ for what was to become the Foreign Office Research Department.² Odd, I remember thinking, that the Foreign Office had muddled through for so long without one. Housed in Balliol, we covered the world, my slice of it Spain, Portugal and their overseas dependencies. Every morning at 11, meeting in the Senior Common Room, we reviewed the day’s events, the directions in which the war was heading, the shifting areas of research interest.

Our immediate material was the world’s press—my coverage some twenty Spanish, a dozen Portuguese, titles—which was read under a microscope and condensed into a weekly review for circulation to government departments. Soon one had at one’s fingertips, without benefit of computer, an infinitely detailed picture of every aspect of a nation’s life on which information could conceivably be requested. If anything was knowable we were assumed to know it, and our analyses took shape in a steady flow of research papers for the Foreign Office.³

1 Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889–1975), Professor of International History at the London School of Economics and the University of London, was a leading specialist on international affairs, widely read and influential in the 1940s and 1950s. As Atkinson indicates, Toynbee was best known for *A Study of History* (1934–1961), a universal history in twelve volumes, in which Toynbee traced the development and decay of nineteen world civilizations.

2 As he goes on to say, Atkinson spent four years at Oxford in that Department (then part of the Royal Institute of International Affairs). As the person responsible for Spain and Portugal and their dependencies, his main function was to research the contents of Spanish and Portuguese language newspapers for any information he judged useful to the UK government and its Foreign Office in the conduct of the war. As he also indicates, he was also sent by the government on several fact-finding missions to Spain and Portugal.

3 In his obituary on Atkinson, Giovanni Pontiero comments that ‘the years away from the then tranquil environment of academic life provided him with a broader perspective of the socio-political realities affecting the Iberian peninsula’ (Giovanni Pontiero, ‘Professor William Atkinson’, *The Independent*, 30 September 1992, p. 23).

Dunkirk and the onset of heavy bombing brought the war nearer. On dense raids the night sky would reflect the fires over London 56 miles away. Thursdays were spent at the Foreign Office, under instructions to collect one's papers and scuttle to the basement whenever sirens heralded the new, bolder raids by day, and week by week one noted the flattening of more familiar landmarks. Talk began of a further evacuation, this time from Britain, of children. From friends at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, a delightful campus I came to know well, a cable, 'Send us both children'. Children now three. A further cable, 'All three, and your wife'. That was the measure of American hospitality. A sizable contingent was organized, mainly the offspring of academics, and took ship from Liverpool. The vessel was torpedoed, and all perished. Our thankfulness at having resisted involvement rested too on the desire that, if we were to survive, it should be as a family close-knit in the common experience.

Late 1942, a dark December morning, and I took to the air at Bristol bound for Lisbon, the remit to spend five weeks roaming round Spain and Portugal with eyes and ears open. Hitler's troops stood behind the Pyrenees, the North African landings heralded a new phase in the war, the Peninsula's fortune was on the cards.

We flew first some 200 miles due west, to keep out of range of German fighters from the French coast. Midway a nervous passenger asked the pilot what happened if we came down. 'You get wet'. A fortnight after my return the same pilot and plane were shot down and all got wet, among them a colleague from Balliol and the actor Lesley Howard. Years later, in several countries of Latin America, where he had many admirers, I would be mistaken for him *redivivus*. Lisbon Airport surprised with the sight of German, Italian, American, British planes side by side and neither armed guards, gunposts nor barbed wire entanglements; merely the tacit understanding, 'Hands off, or ...'.

At the Legation a harassed Minister asked one morning, 'Do they not know in London there's a war on? Every time Hitler threatens to take Portugal by telephone we must destroy all records, and here they're demanding reports on political, economic and social developments over the year with nothing to base them on'. He had an idea. 'Don't you write this kind of thing in Oxford? Give me some titles'. He cabled for copies, to be refurbished and re-submitted, and in due course was thanked for their adequacy.

New Year's Day 1943 and I was driving with a friend from Madrid to Barcelona. Crossing the high wasteland of central Aragón we pulled in at lunch-time to a large hotel far from anywhere, to be greeted by a figure in R.A.F uniform. 'Sorry, chum, this isn't a hotel any more, but do come in'. It was in fact an internment camp for R.A.F. personnel who, bound for North Africa, had taken a chance over Spanish territory and been unlucky. We did get lunch, and a long afternoon of harrowing tales of war, with a plea as

we left for Spanish grammars; it could still be a long war. The grammars proved unneeded. Thanks to the efficiency of our Embassy's escape route to Gibraltar, they were all out, to fight again, before I had returned to Oxford.

Barcelona of many memories. I had been there, coming down from the monastery of Monserrat, on the day in September 1923 when Primo de Rivera chose the Catalan capital to launch Spain's first dictatorship. When in due course, that toppled, toppling the monarchy with it, he wrote from exile in Paris his apologia. Mistakes there had been, even failures, but one success history would not deny him: the Catalan problem was no more. Alas for history: 1931 and the Republic was born on a commitment to Catalan and Basque autonomy.⁴

I ate white rolls in Barcelona, the only time in Spain. And drank real coffee, long since become rare as any strategic metal. *Café* was any brown liquid, *café café* chicory. To the waiter in a Bilbao hotel offering coffee after dinner I said yes provided it was. 'No, señor', sadly; 'no es *café café café* pero es *café café*'. The real reason, rumour had it, why Hitler could not drag Spain into the war was a discreet British consignment of 2,000 tons of coffee beans to the Spanish General Staff. And what kept Portugal out? National sentiment, violently pro-British, for one thing. Perhaps the memory of having sided with us in the first war. And an Oxford degree for Dr. Salazar, conferred exceptionally in Lisbon on a convenient tercentenary, 1940, of Portugal's recovery of independence from Spain,⁵ could have weighed among the imponderables. The difference in outlook on both sides of the border could not have been stronger. Only as the balance tipped visibly against the Axis did Franco cease to proclaim Spain's place among the totalitarians and begin to talk of 'organic democracy'.

The BBC had been playing its part. My Sunday night talks from London commanded, it reckoned, an audience of some six and a half million. The concern was not to comment on the course of the war but to involve the Spanish people in the underlying issues and, generally, to needle a still hostile regime.⁶ Radio Falange's Monday *ripostes* from

4 Miguel Primo de Rivera (1870–1930). His dictatorship in Spain lasted from 1923–1930. King Alfonso XIII was forced into exile in 1931, and the Republic, as Atkinson says here, 'was born'. In an article he wrote in 1924, Atkinson records being in Barcelona in 1923, when Primo de Rivera took control of Spain (see 'September in Barcelona', *BSS*, I:4 [1924], 145–47 [pp. 146–47]). It is not surprising that Atkinson should include in his memoirs comments on events in contemporary Spanish history. He was a historian, after all, as well as a literary critic (see especially, William C. Atkinson, *A History of Spain and Portugal. The Peninsula and Its Peoples: The Pattern of Their Society and Civilization* [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960]).

5 A reference to 1640, when Portugal after a successful uprising, regained its independence, lost in 1580, from Spain; and the Duke of Braganza became King João IV of Portugal. 'Dr Salazar': meaning, of course, António de Oliveira Salazar (1889–1970), dictator, and Prime Minister of Portugal (1932–1968).

6 The typescripts of some of these regular war-time BBC talks by Atkinson have survived and are lodged in Glasgow University's Archives.

Madrid were the evidence that this was having its effect. One Sunday a recorded talk did not go out and I called at Bush House to enquire. The script was produced, written across it, in red, the word 'Dynamite'. One needed within reason. I was to learn much later, from recognition of my voice over dinner tables across the South Atlantic, that I had had a following there too.

But back to Oxford, with its now strong Catalan connexion, the pillar of this a surgeon, Josep Trueta, whose Civil War experience as head of the General Military Hospital in Barcelona was to revolutionize war surgery and save thousands of British lives.⁷ Arrived as an exile just as our war began, he ended as Oxford Professor of Surgery and an honoured figure the world over. Another memory of 1942, the arrival of our fourth child. Her godfathers, at the christening in Balliol College Chapel, Dr. Trueta and General Swinton, inventor of the tank.⁸

The story of how, from a desk in Oxford, Portugal's port wine industry was rescued from collapse is, I suspect, still covered by the Official Secrets Act. A grateful Portuguese Government made no mention when, long afterwards, it conferred a Commandership of the Order of Prince Henry the Navigator. I shall bequeath it—the story, not the insignia, now in the Hunterian Museum—⁹ to my grandchildren.

Two explanations of Oxford's immunity from air attack. One, that Ribbentrop, having when Ambassador to London been refused admission for his son to Eton, was determined he should, come the day, enter Balliol.¹⁰ The other that we were Hitler's secret weapon. I cannot vouch for either, but no bombs fell.

7 As a Catalan nationalist, Josep Trueta i Raspall (1897–1977) was forced into exile in England after the Spanish Civil War. Trueta belonged to a group of exiled Catalans who had denounced the treatment of Catalonia by the Franco regime. He wrote *The Spirit of Catalonia* (1946), to explain Catalan history to English-speaking society at large. During the Civil War Trueta had been Head of Trauma Services in Barcelona. His use of a new method for treating open wounds and fractures helped save many lives during several wars. In Oxford, he joined a team that developed penicillin. He became Professor of Orthopaedics at the University of Oxford and directed the Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre. After retirement in 1966, he returned to Catalonia.

8 Major-General Sir Ernest Dunlop Swinton, KBE, CB, DSO (1868–1951). William and Eve [Evelyn] Atkinson's fourth child was Elspeth Atkinson, now Horsman. She took her Honours degree (in French and Spanish) at St Andrew's University, and went on to an academic career in French Studies at Glasgow University.

9 A reference to the Hunterian Museum at the University of Glasgow.

10 Ulrich Friedrich Wilhelm Joachim von Ribbentrop (1893–1946), more commonly known as Joachim von Ribbentrop, was Foreign Minister of Nazi Germany from 1938 until 1945. He became a close confidant of Hitler, and was appointed Ambassador to the United Kingdom in 1936; he became Foreign Minister of Germany in February 1938. Before World War II, he played a key role in brokering the Pact of Steel (an alliance with Fascist Italy) and the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact (the Nazi–Soviet non-aggression pact); and he opposed the invasion of the Soviet Union. Arrested in 1945, Ribbentrop was convicted at the Nuremberg trials for his role in starting World War II and in the Holocaust; he was executed in 1946.

With the end of the war once in sight, the Research Department moved to London to be absorbed into the Foreign Office. Heads of sections were invited to stay on permanently. Some did; one or two achieved ambassadorships. I was glad to return to Glasgow and help the University prepare for the challenges of peace.

Now for a glass of port.