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Fragments of University  
Reminiscence  
(1932–1972)

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Edited and annotated by Ann L. Mackenzie

## *Fragments of University Reminiscence\**

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### Chapter 1

#### 1922–: Discovering the Spaniard

The year, 1922 [*sic* 1924]. I had come to spend a graduate session at the University of Madrid. Nothing serious: a thesis to be prepared for my own university on the side,<sup>1</sup> but here I was a *vagans* in the medieval tradition of the wandering scholar. Brief study at two French universities had left me curious to dip my toe in a different culture.<sup>2</sup> Africa, they said, began in the Pyrenees. Spanish girls, a friend had forewarned, fortifying me with a New Testament, carried a dagger in their garter. The other story I heard later, of the student approaching his finals only too conscious he was not in a state of grace. Calling on the professor, a box of cigars in one hand, a revolver in the other, ‘Professor’, he said, ‘I need to pass this exam. You will choose’. The professor chose. Like all good stories, this one had a happy ending. The student prospered, and in due course married the professor’s daughter.

First surprise at the University was the setting. Decades ahead a University City would sprout in the suburbs. Meantime the old faculty buildings in the Calle San Bernardo could suggest at first glance a run-down factory rising from the pavement. Within, the conditions our George Buchanan encountered in the Sorbonne of the early sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

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\* I thank Archive Services, Glasgow University, for supplying me with a copy of the typescript of *Fragments of University Reminiscence*. An allusion he makes in ‘A Rolling Stone Bows Out’ strengthens my impression that Atkinson wrote these memoirs, or most of them, between early 1971 and his retirement on 30 September 1972. In that article, Atkinson refers to a talk he had planned to give in Venezuela near the end of his final lecture tour of Latin America in 1971; the talk was titled ‘Reminiscences of a Septuagenarian’. See William C. Atkinson, ‘A Rolling Stone Bows Out’, *Glasgow University Gazette*, 67 (December 1971), 1–3 (p. 3); republished below (see its note 25),

1 A reference to his research thesis on ‘El maestro Fernán Pérez de Oliva’, for which he was awarded an MA degree by The Queen’s University of Belfast in 1925.

2 Atkinson did a BA Honours degree in Spanish and French, and graduated with First Class Honours in 1924. As an undergraduate, he had travelled widely in France and attended several university courses in that country.

3 The conditions George Buchanan had to suffer, when he ‘went in 1520 to Paris to study languages’, are briefly described in William C. Atkinson, ‘The Groves of Academe.

In compensation, no formalities, the only aspect of Spanish public life I was ever to know that was not swathed in redtapery. Try posting a parcel of books from the monumental G.P.O. [in Madrid]—Nuestra Señora de las Comunicaciones—to Barcelona (it never arrived). Many years later a graduate of my own came to [Madrid to] pursue a Spanish doctorate. The ensuing saga, centring on recognition of his Scottish degree, was to involve the heads of both universities, two embassies, and two Ministries of Education. It is pleasing to recall that we won.<sup>4</sup>

For me no one mentioned either credentials or fees. A word to the professor before class, and one went in. The reason, of course, being that I sought nothing beyond the privilege of attending, plus a seat if lucky. There were no girls to humanise that lively bunch: such a presence in the Madrid [University] of those days would have caused a sensation. And I had spent my two Honours years [at Belfast] the only male in a class of twenty, modern languages, necessary for ambassadors and the like, being still with us an unmanly pursuit. So I never got to verifying the matter of the dagger.

Classes in the Faculty began at 7, to end for the day at 11, an admirable arrangement for the spartan young, though Madrid in winter could be cold enough with the Guadarrama snows but an hour away. It was then one learnt to put the evening paper between one's sheets. Breakfast was a coffee and *churros* at a bar on the way.

Choice of subjects? Spanish literature an obvious first, Hurtado already more than a name as co-author of the standard history of the same. It had come out, I remembered, in two massive volumes, the second after a considerable interval, the first ending in the middle of a word.<sup>5</sup> Those were the cavalier days of Spanish publishing, when a brief errata list would carry the formula 'Other misprints are left to the reader's good sense'. I looked forward to the course. And what do I remember of it? An endless recitative of a text memorized almost verbally, each chunk ending in mid-theme or even in mid-sentence at the sounding of the bell. Madrid University, it seemed, had no need to invent the robot.

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Modern Languages in University Gardens', *The College Courant (The Journal of the Glasgow University Graduates Association)* (Whitsun, 1960), 125–29 (p. 125). For more information about Buchanan's studies at the Sorbonne, see P. Hume Brown, *George Buchanan, Humanist and Reformer: A Biography* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1890), Chapter II, 15–33 (esp. p. 30).

<sup>4</sup> I have been unable to identify the doctoral student of Atkinson's referred to here.

<sup>5</sup> A reference to Juan Hurtado y Jiménez de la Serna & Cándido Ángel González Palencia, *Historia de la literatura española* (Madrid: Tip. de la *Revista de Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos*, 1921; republished 1925, 1932 etc.). Atkinson was to review this work, with two other histories of Spanish literature, in a review-article for the *BSS* in 1938 (see William C. Atkinson, 'La Trahison des clercs: Notes on the Writing of Spanish Literary History', *BSS*, XV:57 [1938], 4–19).

Navarro Tomás, patriarch of Spanish phoneticians, taught not dead authors but living sounds and how to produce them.<sup>6</sup> And how, I ventured to ask [him] after one lecture, does the foreigner tackle the multiple vibrant (no relation of the Scottish guttural)? He thought for a moment, then: ‘Contrive to be born again, and be born a Spaniard’. A second best was called for, and for weeks I would go early—Spanish has a good word for getting up early, *madrugar*, before dawn—and make my way to San Bernardo via the Retiro Park where, with none save the odd park ranger yet abroad, I would practise ad infinitum my *ferrocarril* and the trick sentence with the six examples that I still find myself repeating.

But none intrigued or stimulated like the professor of the Theory of Literature and the Fine Arts, who loved to dilate on the impracticality of his subject: *otium*, opposite of *negotium*. Don Andrés Ovejero was a rampaging anarchist: lecturing to us in the early morning, he would by night be down at the Casa del Pueblo tirading against the government, any government.<sup>7</sup> To us he was the aesthete, a marvellous companion round the Prado Museum or on excursions to El Escorial or Toledo. He had begun that first morning by wanting us to reveal on paper something of ourselves, through answers on this, that and the other. Your favourite poem? I recall my Yeats, ‘I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree’, and the hope his English would not rise to asking [me] why not.

No vow of poverty was required of the *vagantes*: they were born to poverty. I had set out for my chapter of experience on two degree prizes totalling £70.<sup>8</sup> Had I been richer, that experience would have been vastly the poorer. My *billete kilométrico*, purchased at the frontier, gave me cut-price travel 3<sup>rd</sup> class all over the country. Theatre-going involved knowing the bars where a peseta bought admission to the *claque*, forerunner of the studio audience that turns so many away from to-day’s television. Thanks to the *cla* I saw every play worth seeing. On Sundays I attended service at a tiny Protestant mission in a slum quarter—Madrid’s Gorbals, Tetuán de las Victorias—where an Englishman ministered in a Spanish fluent but phonetically rich and rare. Christmas, and I witnessed the draw at the Ministry of Finance for El Gordo, the multi-billion lottery on which the

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6 Tomás Navarro Tomás (1884–1979). See his *Manual de pronunciación española* (Madrid: n.p. 1918).

7 Andrés Ovejero Bustamante (1871–1954) was Catedrático de Teoría de la Literatura y de las Artes at the University of Madrid for many years. During the Civil War, like many left-wing intellectuals he was obliged to move to the provinces for his safety; having sworn allegiance to Franco’s Spain, he returned to Madrid and its University in 1939. He retired in 1941.

8 Atkinson had been awarded, for the best performance in the Final Degree BA examinations in English Language and Literature or Modern Languages, a Literary Scholarship, and also a Modern Languages Studentship, and decided to spend these awards in Spain, doing research in Madrid and getting to know the country (see his Application for the Stevenson Chair of Spanish, University of Glasgow, 1932 [reproduced below]).

entire nation annually pins its hopes. Christmases later the *Glasgow Herald* would publish under that title my only short story.<sup>9</sup>

As run-up to Easter, a month spent getting to know eastern and southern Spain. One's first bullfight had been an unsettling experience. Much more attractive, on the rolling plains of Andalusia, was the *tienta*, the try-out of young bulls to assess their fighting spirit. The trip was timed to bring me to Seville in Semana Santa, when I was at my most penniless and hotel and restaurant charges go through the roof. Three shillings for three days allowed 25 *céntimos*, coffee and a dry bun, for breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner. I did not sleep in hotels, but I saw Semana Santa.

Back to Madrid and my studies, the thesis involving the Biblioteca Nacional where I had not ceased to marvel at the ingenuity involved in creating impediments to research. Open four hours a day, two in the morning, two in the afternoon. No catalogue, only a priest at the counter who would go off to consult his trays of hand-written *fichas* and was quite capable—it happened to me—to report a book non-existent because he had looked it up under the author's Christian name. Only one work allowed at a time; if in several volumes, only two. *Mundo mundillo*, one muttered. What a world!

There was still the University, and Don Andrés, a law to himself in punctuality as in everything else. The morning came when we waited fifteen minutes, thirty, then—the janitor having no clue either—gave him up. I went to the [Biblioteca] Nacional where the official photographer was photocopying a manuscript for me. He too, oddly, hadn't turned up. It was a crisp spring morning, Madrid at its best, and I remembered that the Banda Municipal from Barcelona was giving an open-air concert in the Retiro. I found it playing a *sardana*, a Catalan round dance. A large circle held hands, coats, handbags, satchels in the centre: and there in the circle, footing it with the best, were Don Andrés and the photographer. They had the right idea.

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9 I have been unable to trace this short story, evidently titled *El Gordo*, which may have been published under a pseudonym.