

**WRITERS OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR.  
THE TESTIMONY OF THEIR AUTO/BIOGRAPHIES**

Celia Wallhead, ed.

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At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the outbreak of the Peninsular War drew the attention not only of European political and military powers, but also of romantic writers like Irving, Ford, Borrow, or Gauthier among others, who travelled to Spain to find a nation full of contrasts and particularities. They found in Spain those values which they looked for in their respective countries without success, such as the sublime and the exotic. This explains why many of them included Spain in their itineraries instead of bypassing it as most European travellers had done in previous centuries. Writings such as Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812), George Borrow's *The Bible in Spain* (1843), or Richard Ford's *Handbook for Travellers in Spain* (1845), share a similar image of Spain: a land full of exoticism and adventures where time seemed to have been stopped. The romantic image of Spain would linger on until the 1920s, when foreign writers found in this country the ideal place to leave behind the trauma of the First World War or the rigid social conventions of the middle classes. Many of them travelled to Spain hoping to see the very same country as the one their predecessors had discovered. Nevertheless, the country had undergone some changes and political and economic circumstances were not the same as those existing a hundred years earlier. Obviously, this caused disappointment, and some of them even reacted against the outmoded romanticism, like Gerald Brenan, who did not see in the Alhambra the wonder described by Irving in his *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832).

However, the romantic writings about Spain still influenced authors like Brenan himself, whose criticism of places like the Alhambra did not curb his desire to discover the exoticism extolled by the romantic writers. The romantic imprint is also noticeable in the testimonies of writers like Orwell or Hemingway, for whom Spain “was the very best country of all [...] unspoiled and unbelievably tough and wonderful” (Baker 1985: 107), whereas the author of *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) still identified Spain with “girls in black mantillas, the wines of Málaga and Alicante, cathedrals, cardinals, bullfights, gypsies, serenades” (Orwell 2001: 145-146).

Brenan, Hemingway, and Orwell are some of the names that appear in *Writers of the Spanish Civil War*. This book is the latest volume in the series “Spanish Perspectives on English and American Literature, Communication, and Culture”, which provides a space for discussion for Spanish scholars in the field of English and American Studies, focusing on literature, drama, movies, theatre, and communication. This collective work, edited by Celia Wallhead, consists of six essays on some of the most outstanding and influential 20<sup>th</sup> century writers, who lived in or visited Spain and reflected in some of their works the tragedy of the Civil War. More specifically, the essays are on Gerald Brenan (Juan Antonio Díaz), Robert Graves (Margarita Carretero), Ernest Hemingway (Mauricio Aguilera), George Orwell (Rosemary Masters), Stephen Spender (Mary Gleeson), and Laurie Lee (Celia Wallhead). They are followed by an afterword where Michael Jacobs gives a concise overview of issues such as the main motives which brought British authors to Spain before and during the Civil War, their reaction against the image of the country left by their 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors, or the influence of their views on Spain after the conflict. The book is published on the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, however it is not the usual work about the conflict, devoted to the study of its historical dimension, but a book about Spain as a place which attracted the abovementioned authors during the war. Despite focusing on the different autobiographies and biographies of these authors, *Writers of the Spanish Civil War* is not another text about life-writing in the sense that it establishes an interesting and innovative relationship, namely the contrast between their autobiographies, or what they wrote about their experiences in Spain, and the biographies written on them, two aspects which have not been considered in tandem before. By putting together these autobiographies and biographies, the reader can obtain a clarifying view of their respective visions of Spain. This aspect situates the book in one of the newest fields of Comparative Literature, that of “imagology”; according to the definitions given by authors like Nora Moll (2002: 347) or Anthony Johnson (2005: 52), this discipline deals with the representation of Otherness within the framework of different artistic manifestations.

All the chapters have the same structure, and this helps the reader to grasp the essential ideas in the book. First, there is a brief biographical outline with the main personal and literary milestones of each author. Secondly, if the writer produced an autobiography, it is taken as a reference against which to compare the biographies. Next, a list of all or at least the most relevant biographies is given in order to offer an overview of the scope and variety of life-writing on the subject. Then, each essay focuses on one or two of the key biographies, and after that, it draws a conclusion and thus offers an accurate and updated image of authors whose experiences in Spain marked their lives and writings. In effect, through these biographies and autobiographies this book provides a major source of information. The reader can find useful and accurate references to autobiographical works in all chapters, excepting those devoted to Orwell and Hemingway, who never produced autobiographies. In Chapter 1, Juan Antonio Díaz López, who was the first biographer of Brennan, alludes to the three autobiographical works by the British writer: *South from Granada* (1957), *A Life of One's Own* (1962), and *Personal Records* (1974); the last of these books receives greatest attention, since it is the work where Brennan most clearly conveys his views on Spain. In the second chapter, Margarita Carretero González, who has been in touch with the Graves family, refers to *Good-bye to All That* (1929) as an autobiographical text by Graves, though she warns at the same time that it is not an autobiography in the strict sense of the word, since Graves does not always stick to facts, a strategy to make the book more attractive and sell better. In Chapter 5, Mary Gleeson, who came to know Spender and his wife on their visit to Granada, regards *World Within World* (1951) as the most interesting autobiographical writing by Spender—who was, above all, an autobiographer—on the grounds that it is a provocative and interesting source of information about the early and most attractive part of his life. Celia Wallhead opens the last chapter by underlining the particularly autobiographical tone of Lee's main works, like *My Many-Coated Man* (1955), *Cider with Rosie* (1959), or *Two Women* (1983). Lee would recollect his experiences in the Civil War in two books, *As I Walked Out* (1969) and *A Moment of War* (1991), about fifty years later, when some of his memories from that period were rather vague; as a result, he had to resort to literary and historical sources provided by authors who were also in Spain during the conflict—Orwell and Hemingway—and historians like Hugh Thomas, to make up for those memory lapses.

As regards the biographies, the contributors undertake a detailed and accurate review of the main biographical texts on the authors they deal with respectively. These reviews are clearly intended to provide the reader with enough information to get to know new facets of the authors, to see different approaches to some episodes of their lives, and to better understand the role Spain played in their lives and literary experiences. Chapters three and four, which are devoted to

Hemingway and Orwell respectively, exemplify this interesting aspect of the book. In the former, Mauricio Aguilera's close perusal of the different biographies on Hemingway results in a psychological and gender-based approach to the American writer, and interprets his relationship with Spain in the context of his response to life, instead of the folkloric image of Hemingway as a bullfighting aficionado and habitué of the best hotels and local taverns. Finally, Rosemary Masters manages to shed light on a complex and obscure personality, that of Orwell, by making use of a wide variety of resources; such an exhaustive and intense research assures a rigorous and appealing portrait of the British writer. To sum up, *Writers of the Spanish Civil War* is a book which students and scholars in the field of 20<sup>th</sup> century English and American Literature should consider, especially if they are interested in the influence of the conflict on the life and literary experiences of English and American writers.

## Works cited

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