

SOME SPANISH IMPRESSIONS

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REPRINTED FROM THE AMPLEFORTH JOURNAL

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LEÓN

I FIRST saw León Cathedral from the front, on the right; the fierce midday sun was shining fully on to this corner, and the pale, yellow stone-work glittered like gold beneath it. It was majestic, soaring higher than any other Cathedral I had seen; this impression was, perhaps, owing to the light stone-work which seemed in the distant heights to blend with the pale blue Castilian heaven. I walked slowly past the front; flying buttresses shot sharply out at right angles, away from the nave, out to the protecting towers. The windows, whose stained glass is reputed to be the best in Europe, from the outside appeared to be rusted with age; the windows were old, and the stone-work was of an early Gothic, simple and as yet undeveloped, consisting largely of combinations of circles, barely adorned or sculptured.

I walked down a narrow side street, hoping eventually to be able to pass down towards the right, and so go round the Cathedral; it was a cul-de-sac, and I was obliged to return. By now I felt very tempted to try to draw part of this beautiful façade, simple, yet overpoweringly fine. I sat down at a small café, ordered myself some crisps and a cup of coffee—to satisfy the patron for the use of his chairs—and set to work drawing a small section of the rose window. There I remained for over an hour, knowing that the Cathedral would not be opening until four or five in the evening, true to Spanish tradition. When I had had enough of this part of the exterior, I walked round to the back of the Cathedral, this time passing along the right-hand side and seeing it in its entirety. The back was darker, and was surrounded by old, dilapidated houses; I was particularly interested by three large windows, one beside the other, each with a different type of tracery. This tracery was most un-English, and I seriously doubted whether it was Gothic at all; later I learnt that it was Gothic after all, with French, Latin, Byzantine and yet other influences whose names I have forgotten. To me it seemed oriental, possibly Byzantine, although it is true that I have never seen any real Byzantine architecture in real life. I sketched these on foot, as there was nowhere to sit, leaning lightly against a spider-infested piece of wall—as I later discovered to my absolute horror.

Towards five in the evening, I made for the Cathedral entrance. I passed the worn and rounded columns that surrounded the doorway, I passed the washed-out statues of forgotten saints, and entered the dim interior. I had left the brilliant sunlight outside; here there was none; all was absolute darkness to my unaccustomed eyes. I was momentarily stunned, almost lost, in this apparent darkness. Only after a minute or two had elapsed did my eyes begin to function once more; I looked at

once for light, and for the famous stained glass. Brilliant dark-blues, overwhelming purples, blood-reds came gliding down from the lofty windows set up on high ; I was delighted ; this was like a subterranean forest, an unknown world. All the stained windows were covered in flowers, plants, creepers, trees ; life-like, gigantic dark-green leaves, twining stalks, young shoots, blossoms, shot forth on every side. In harmony with these rose the graceful columns of the Cathedral, climbing upwards, effortlessly, ever up into the cavernous roof ; everything was highly ornate, richly decorated, beautifully carved ; in all the corners, at every turn, you were confronted with a group of statues, stonework depicting trees, fauns, nymphs, life in the primitive forests. The darkness helped to bring out the rich colours of the windows, but at the same time prevented one from obtaining any idea of the remainder of the Cathedral itself, and the detail which all too abundantly existed there. I obtained a pass and a ticket to visit the museum and the courtyard, through which a guide conducted us—for there was by now quite a group of people awaiting admittance. The museum was impressive, but compared with the Cathedral and the courtyard outside, it became a mere commonplace. The cloisters that bordered the courtyard were part Gothic, part Baroque ; on all sides rose spires, towers, windows, roofs : this was the heart of the building. Round the walls of the cloisters were tombs of ancient warriors, many of whom had spent their last fighting the Mohammedan Moors. The ceiling was very Baroque, although the actual vaulting was Gothic ; spiralling columns and miniature pinnacles jutted out on every side, upwards and down, tapering into fancy globes, circles, wreaths, all painted in dark red, blue, gold. This was the first Spanish Cathedral that I had seen, and although I was later to see some yet more wonderful, churches yet more richly decorated, coming as it did after the old and ruined abbeys of Northern England, of a very simple and austere Gothic design when contrasted with León, I was bewildered that such a profusion of art, architecture, sculpture, and pure beauty could ever have existed without my having heard mention of it. For me the ruined abbeys of England were now reduced to mere skeletons, devoid of more than the minimum in the way of beauty ; I began to doubt whether in England there had ever been such a thing as civilization ; my whole artistic world began to crumble before my eyes. Such a miracle as León Cathedral, set in a land of clay and rush houses, seemed incredible ; there must be a mistake somewhere. Moreover, León Cathedral is not, as are the abbeys of England, in ruins ; Masses are still celebrated every day ; people still pray there before the lighted candles of their cause. I went round the cloisters several times, and finally sat down to draw a vast stone tracery window, set high over the roofs of the Cathedral. Here I stayed for over an hour, struggling with delicate circles and loops, tantalized by the richness of my surroundings.

From where I sat, on a stone step, bathed in the evening sunlight, I could see the two towers, one Roman, simple, strong, square ; the other early Gothic, also simple, but bearing in every corner, on each stone, the signs of craftsmanship wrought there in detail many centuries ago. Besides these, there were yet more rose windows, windows large and small, buttresses, gargoyles, a Paradise unspoilt.

SIMANCAS

The Castle of Simancas is, on the whole, still in very good condition ; there is only one part of the battlements broken, and I was told that this was soon, '*mañana*', going to be repaired. The crest of the Castle consists of seven hands, bordering the sides, with a castle in the centre ; this once denoted terrific strength and excellent defence power. This Castle used formerly to mark the boundaries of León and Castile, belonging itself to the kingdom of León. When Ferdinand and Isabel, the *Reyes Católicos*, ascended the throne, Spain gradually became a united land, and the Castle passed into the hands of the *Almirante* of Castile, who enlarged the original castle on all sides ; it was then that it was turned to the purpose of preserving National Documents of importance. There are two very small rooms in the Castle ; the smallest of them was one of the first to be used for this purpose, and although tiny, it is really beautiful. The room is six-sided, and has two stories to it ; the walls are of wood, and consist of large panels that can all be slid open, revealing inside the most important State, Ecclesiastical and diplomatic documents in the Castle's possession. The wood is mainly pine, with nogal forming the centre of every panel. This wood dates back to the sixteenth century, and is damp with oil, as are the strong iron bolts that fasten the panels. This chamber is small and compact ; everything of value lies behind the walls, beautifully carved woodwork, while a barred window, high up the wall, overlooks the valley where the heart of Spain once beat. Another, slightly larger room, was the first where documents were housed in the Castle ; here also are the most important of the archives of State. The roof is of fine Renaissance stonework, with the coat of arms of the Spanish Empire in the centre.

Passing through a narrow corridor, I entered two large halls, one-storied, where the Castle archive-keepers are continuously at work, cataloguing all the documents and forming a vast index of everything within the Castle. I was told, rather gloomily, that this was an interminable job, and that the keepers would have to leave their sons at work there when eventually they all died. From these two work rooms, also lined and filled with documents, I passed into a vast, two-storied hall, where I learnt that the archives have at last been arranged in order, according to subject ; along the walls there are nothing but State Documents,

relating to peace treaties, war declarations, marriages of State, Vatican Bulls and ordinary State correspondence ; in the centre of the room, reaching up to the ceiling itself, are diplomatic notices, correspondence and, in brief, the accumulated works of five centuries. The bureaucratic side of the Spanish Empire is here absolutely revealed, in its every aspect—the details of its armies, navies, administration both at home and abroad, in Spain as in Spanish America, the Low Countries, Flanders, Italy. This room, as are all the rest that I was shown, is panelled with light coloured pine wood, and through the vertical wooden bars of each partition can be seen piles of neatly arranged and titled bundles of historic archives. There was one more room of importance that I saw ; here, behind glass cases, are examples of Vatican Bulls, richly decorated in gold and black, and examples of various types of documents which are usually kept stored away, or ready for research in other parts of the Castle, where experts spend their whole lifetime at work.

Besides the Vatican documents, so richly ornate, there were letters written long ago by the Kings and Queens of Spain ; reports of the battle of Lepanto ; an inventory of the ill-fated vessels of the great armada ; the marriage contract of the Princess of Aragon to Henry VIII of England, still referred to as the Prince of Wales. My guide proudly pointed out that she was the only wife whom he did not have executed. In this room I saw the signatures of Queen Isabel and King Ferdinand, '*Yo la Reina*', '*Yo el Rey*'; the vast scrawl of Henry VIII's large signature, the neat handwriting of Cecil, Queen Elisabeth I's minister of State. I saw the nearly illegible writing of the great generals of sixteenth and seventeenth century Spain. Later, in the centre of the room, the guide uncovered a stand with a dozen revolving plaques. Here I was shown the neat and well-formed handwriting of Cervantes, author of Spain's most famous novel : the writing of Luis de León, poet and, nearly, mystic : an example of the writings of Góngora, the famous Golden Age poet who invented his own kind of poetry ; an example of Quevedo, Spain's most bitter, biting, satiric, sarcastic poet and novelist ; a page of Herrera, and one of the more recent, Moratín. There were texts in Japanese, with translations affixed, directed to the King, and asking for some more missionaries, please. There were copies of invitations to the State Banquets of Spain's most glorious era, primitive pictures of Cuba, essays and reports by Christopher Columbus to the monarchs of the glorious Spanish Empire of the day.

This Castle contains unknown masses of documents, all of historical importance ; the archive-keepers know the contents of a few, whilst others are still being examined, and yet others have not been opened since the time they were written and sealed for future reference. Here lie the paper work and signatures, the writings, proclamations and declarations of centuries. One might spend fifty years here, and still not

know a fraction of what occurred in the years of Spain's glory. I spent an hour and a half, with a guide all to myself; we roamed through musty passages, newly decorated halls, renovated corridors lined with more recent manuscripts; every now and again he would unlock the forbidden door, draw aside a dusty, red satin curtain, revealing ever more of the wonders of the Castle, more of the secrets of this maze of still unexplored letters written more than four hundred years ago. I gave him a handsome tip, as the only fee of entrance was one peseta, which was meant to cover the stamps of the document I myself had to sign before leaving, showing my nationality and innocence. I walked slowly out through the heavy metal-studded gateway, over the draw-bridge and moat, through the remainder of the ancient village, and out into the country beyond.

THE ESCORIAL

The Monastery of the Escorial is very symmetrical, vast, calm and impassive, surrounded on every side by a row of old, grey, four-storied flats built originally to house the workers of the Palace and the rest of the staff. I made first of all for the famous church.

It is quite incomparable with any other Spanish cathedral I have seen, for instance with my favourite one, that of León. To start with, the former is a study in Classical, Graeco-Roman architecture, whereas León Cathedral is pure early Gothic, of French origins. León is slender, light and airy with its stained glass and delicate pillars, appealing to an entirely different sense of beauty and majesty than does the Escorial. They both succeeded overpoweringly in conveying a sense of the divine, a feeling of the presence of God. When I entered the Escorial, which was at midday, there was no contrasting shock between lightness and darkness which I had so vividly experienced at León. Here everything was perfectly light, though far from bright; one could see all the details with ease. In the Escorial there are no stained glass windows, no statues, no decorations; everything is tremendously simple, of magnificent proportions. The pillars, of solid grey granite—as is the whole of the Escorial—rise proudly and impressively upwards; they are so massive and strong, that one has the impression that they bear on their capitals the weight of the entire world above. There are four of these vast, central columns, the thickest in the world, set at the corners of a Greek-shaped cross, and the church is almost square.

On entering, I walked slowly towards the high altar; near it there was a guide, busy explaining to a group of Anglo-French tourists some of the more startling facts relating to the Cathedral. The Escorial had been built for one reason only; not in order to offer thanksgiving after the Spanish victory of St Quentin, nor as a token of reparation for the

destruction by the Spaniards in that battle of a strategically placed church ; it had been built as a token and symbol of the Counter-Reformation. Here there were no statues of Our Lady or the saints, in order that men of all creeds might be united in the presence of one tabernacle and one God : here there was no excuse for difference of religious opinions ; all were meant to unite in a common prayer to the one God. The guide went on to show that this was the most typically Spanish building in Spain, because those of Seville and Granada, though more ornate and beautiful, were thin and meaningless, built entirely of bricks and plaster. This was a monument, made to last, made to symbolize the unmovable and unchangeable faith and religion of God, that unchangeable and unshakeable faith of the Castilian Spaniard.

The granite of this church was dragged block by block from the Sierra Guadarrama ; it is the next largest edifice in granite to the Pyramids, yet it was built in its entirety within twenty-one years, and so, under the supervision of one king, one architect, one creed. It was Philip II who provided the formidable stimulus to have this enormous cathedral built in the short time it took to make ; it was Philip II who helped to design it, who decided that it was to remain bare and magnificent, that it was to provide the nucleus of Counter-Reformation teachings and approach to religion. Philip II was a controversial King ; many disagreed with his religious policies, but he survived, and triumphed over the bigotry of his time. The high altar contains the only statues in the church. They are all of bronze, and rise in five tiers, one statue at either end of the reredos, with two at the centre as well when finally the fifth and highest tier is reached. Thus there are twelve statues in all ; the largest, two metres in height, being at the top, and the smallest at the bottom, giving an impression of uniform structure. The columns here are all of marble, of Doric design. The dying King could look directly on to the high altar from where he lay in bed, behind a glass partition ; there he could hear Mass at his pleasure. At the foot of the altar are two magnificent but simple pulpits, both of them gifts of Ferdinand VII. These are also of marble, with amber, precious stones, bronze, and gold inlaid. Like the Escorial itself, they are exquisite for their simplicity of design and the pure beauty of the bare materials, unobscured by countless decorations and ornaments.

Leaving the high altar, I walked slowly round the church, listening to various guides speaking on different details of the architecture. There are four large organs, all of them belonging to the sixteenth century. The dome of the cathedral, which makes no pretence at great height, because of its massive proportions, is a third the height of St Peter's in Rome, while the solid, dark, iron, sixteenth century gates of the interior of the church weigh a ton apiece, yet can be moved with one hand, so well made are the pivots. In the Escorial, between twenty-five and

thirty masses are said daily, all of them in the morning, within the space of three hours. The one and only memorial in the church is to Antonio de Rivera ; it is a plain stone set at ground level in front of the high altar, with his name engraved upon it, and nothing else. Even the Kings are not commemorated here, as they have a special room to themselves elsewhere. José de Rivera was the right-wing political leader in Spain at the time of the Civil War : he was the first leader and founder of the Falange, now the Caudillo's political party. When Rivera was murdered by the Republic, his body was brought on foot more than four hundred and fifty kilometres by members of the Falange, so that to him might be attributed the honour of a martyr's burial. His is the only tomb in the Escorial : what glorious honour !

The Escorial fascinated me : it is the only classical building that I have ever liked, and I like it as much, though for entirely different reasons, as that of León Cathedral. They are two wholly different structures, yet they both have that power of expression, beauty and divinity. Here I was struck by the immense grandeur and dignity, not one of rich stones and decorations, but of one overwhelming unity of design ; here I was struck by the sombre, terrible masses of grey granite stone, by the appearance of a monument bare of all superfluous, non-religious details, all on its own, steeped in its own greatness. León rejoices in the richness of its decorations, in its stained glass and its carvings ; the Escorial in its austerity and the power of its bare classical splendour.

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