

## Chapter 20

### *James Humble: The Civil War*

The war broke out on 18th July 1936 but the students, who were at Boecillo, know nothing of it until the following morning, a Sunday, when on their way to the river, they were greeted with upraised arms and shouts of "Arriba España." The previous evening, however, an attempt had been made to set fire to the church of San Esteban, next door to the college. Luciano Bastardo, who had been a servant in the college for nearly twenty years, ran and put out the blaze such as it was. When Humble went to remonstrate with the men, Luciano was there too, menacing them with a pistol and revolver. When the two were returning inside, shots were fired at them, but missed. Luciano spent the night on guard at the little circular window in the façade of the college church, which is just beside S. Esteban.<sup>1</sup>

The students remained at Boecillo, undisturbed and unmolested, but unable to bathe since, on one or two occasions, some bodies were seen floating in the river. The bishops in Scotland, however, were naturally worried about their safety. In August, Archbishop McDonald was suggesting that they ought to take joint action to have the students evacuated as soon as possible, but a letter from Humble to the secretary of the hierarchy allayed their fears for the time being.

"Dear Bishop Bennett,

Some days ago I sent you a telegram through the British Consul at Vigo to relieve anxiety and let you know that we are all well and quite safe at Valladolid. The students are in the country at Boecillo and quite out of all danger. I hope the telegram reached you, as communication of any kind is, for the present, extremely problematical. I now write with reference to the new colony, to say that I think that it would be more than imprudent for them to be sent out here until things are more settled. The possibility of their arrival is most uncertain; there is no communication through the French frontier ... therefore a delay of a month or so cannot make great difference."

(The letter goes on to criticise bitterly the biased manner in which the BBC was reporting events in Spain and to insist that the war would be over and the nationalists victorious in a matter of a month, or six weeks at the most. "Do not think me too optimistic; here, on the spot, we *know* what is taking place and has occurred.")

"Valladolid is quite quiet and almost normal, though like everywhere else we have had some wild times. The National Rising began on July 18th and during the two days there was much street fighting but by Tuesday 21st the city was mastered and there has been no interior trouble since. The majority of the "red" leaders were taken and shot, and any possible organised resistance made hopeless. This applies not only to the city but to the entire province. We have been bombed half a dozen times by aeroplanes but, though unfortunately there were some casualties, about 10 altogether, no great damage was done. No bombs fell anywhere near us. The general enthusiasm and patriotism is indescribable. The markets and general food supplies are as usual, there is no shortage of any kind, and prices are kept unaltered. Even fresh fish from Corunna and other fishing ports is abundant. There is the usual evening "*paseo*" in the Campo Grande with the military band

playing from 9 p. m. till 12. If it were not for the military precautions taken and the number of soldiers in the streets, it would be difficult to realise a state of war exists. The danger is not being *in* Valladolid but in getting to it . . .

“I am rather concerned about the financial side of things; we depend *absolutely* upon our monthly remittance from Madrid . . .

“Your Lordship may assure the other Bishops that there is no reason for alarm for the College or its inmates, unless the situation changes, which we have every motive for believing now almost an impossibility.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the war lasted a great deal longer than a month or six weeks and, in addition to the fact that, for its whole duration, the college received no remittance from Madrid, Humble could not even discover for many months whether the building had sustained any damage by shelling or air raids. At the outbreak of war, he had about £1,700 in a Valladolid bank and, by dint of careful economising, this was sufficient to support the community during the scholastic year, 1936-37. The seminary did not open that year and so all the teaching was done, in his room in the college, by the vice-rector. Fortunately, the six students were all theologians and it was possible to amalgamate them into the one class.

Food was plentiful enough but it was a bad year for crops in Boecillo and Canterac since, due to the demands of the war, there was a shortage of labour. Humble placed the houses at Canterac and Boecillo at the disposal of the military. The first was taken over as a barracks in March 1937 but the offer of Boecillo was declined since it was too far from the city and lacked running water and up-to-date sanitation. The cellars of the college in town were available to the public as shelters when enemy planes appeared overhead. There were, in fact, some air raids during 1936; with the new year, their frequency increased. Some bombs were dropped and there were casualties in the city. The rector, however, gave the community a lead in sang-froid for, although several of the raids occurred at lunch time, he “presided imperturbably and took his food without any discernible diminution of relish”.

On 21st April, however, a bomb exploded in the garden of the college a few yards from the kitchen and near where the garage now is.

“It made a hole in the ground 10 feet deep and about 25-30 feet in diameter. Fortunately the ground was fairly soft, and the full force of the explosion was to some extent smothered; still, the shock was terrific. Windows—frames and all—in that patio disappeared, doors were shattered, tiles and chimney pots blown off, and fragments of the bomb embedded in the walls all round. There were between 300 and 400 panes of glass destroyed . . .

“Our little experience, and the almost daily, and sometimes nightly, “alarms” began to have a bad effect, and a high state of nervous tension became noticeable in one or two of the students, and as panic is easily aroused, it was thought prudent that, on the termination of their studies, the students should pass the three months’ vacation in their homes—to return in September, or October, should circumstances permit. This, it was felt, would relieve the anxiety of parents and relatives for their boys, would be a needed relaxation for the students and would, no doubt, lessen for Your Lordships the feeling of responsibility. The Bishops acceded to the suggestion and the students left the College

for Scotland on May 31st 1937. Dr. Connolly and I remain here, as the interests and care of the College cannot be abandoned.”<sup>3</sup>

Once again Mgr. Humble’s hopes were far too optimistic and more than thirteen years were to pass before there were students in the college again. In that summer of 1937, the college in Valladolid entered another of those twilight periods of its existence, similar to that through which it had passed during the Peninsular War.

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Mgr. Humble and Dr. Connolly settled down to the quiet life of the college without students and to the anxiety of being completely out of contact with Madrid. The money which the college had had in its Valladolid account was used up before the students left and, for the following two years, the two men were dependent on the charity of the Scottish bishops. Each of the six sent something and, during the two years of war that followed the departure of the students, a total of £1,180 (or about 62,000 ptas. at the prevailing exchange rate of more than 50 to the pound sterling) was received. Expenditure in Valladolid during the same period amounted to about 36,000 ptas.<sup>4</sup> When remittances from Madrid were resumed in August 1939, the normal monthly sum sent was 5,000 ptas. but, in that first month, 20,000 was sent and several food and other bills, outstanding for anything up to sixteen months, were paid.<sup>5</sup>

During the civil war, the Madrid building had passed through its vicissitudes, its situation is not only a very central one in the city, but also exactly opposite the headquarters of the telephone company, with the result that it was hit by a total of fifteen shells. Fortunately, several of these failed to explode, but considerable damage was done by the others. As early as September 1936, the upper floors had to be evacuated and the tenants from there were accommodated, rent-free, in the Hotel Metropolitano (on the lower floors of the college building) which, due to the owner’s failure, was empty at the time.<sup>6</sup> The result was that the only appreciable income which the building produced for the three years was the rent from the shops, which remained open, though sandbagged, and which paid with regularity each month. Expenses, of course, were also reduced; for example, no coal for central heating was purchased. Don Rafael Muñoz y López, the administrator, was arrested and held in custody for a short while in January 1938 but the building itself was not seized or otherwise interfered with, since a Union Jack and a certificate of H. M. Consul, declaring its British ownership, were displayed. The balance of income over expenditure was used by the administrator to make repayments on the debt with the Banco Hipotecario. In March 1938, Sr. Muñoz was able to get in touch with Mgr. Humble by letter, sent via the British consul in Madrid and the British agent in Burgos, and give him the news of the property: the damage caused by the shells had been patched up, but proper repairs would be needed when conditions had returned to normal.<sup>7</sup>

The war ended in April 1939, repairs were quickly put in hand, and the whole building was fully occupied, with rent-paying tenants, by November of that year. The hotel was reopened under new management and with its name shortened from Metropolitano to Metropol. As has already been noted, regular monthly remittances to Valladolid had been resumed in August.

During the war, of course, the Valladolid area was free of any fighting. However, in addition to the extensive but superficial damage sustained by the college when the bomb fell in the garden in April 1937, about a dozen bombs were dropped on the Canterac estate on 25th January 1938 and the

head worker there, D. Marcelo Lázaro, received serious injuries when two pieces of shrapnel penetrated his shoulder.

Humble had been anxious to retire since soon after the students left<sup>8</sup> but it was not until 23rd May 1940 that Dr. Connolly was appointed rector by General Franco, the head of state.<sup>9</sup> Part of the delay had been due to the Scottish hierarchy's having submitted only one name to the Spanish authorities instead of three.<sup>10</sup> Mgr. Humble, although he spoke of returning to the Archdiocese of Glasgow, continued to reside in the college until his death.

This occurred in the early summer of 1948. Though frail, he had been in fairly good health until he caught a chill which developed into pneumonia. About four o'clock in the afternoon of 9th June, he was found dead, lying on the floor of his bedroom and having apparently suffered a heart attack. The Requiem Mass took place the following morning in the reliquary of the college, in the presence of the priests and students of the English College, which had reopened the previous year; the few mourners at the graveside were also, most of them, from the same college, So ended the life of James Humble, far from home and with hardly a friend near.

His nature was that not unusual blend of severity and gentleness—stern, even harsh, with those over whom he ruled, kind and gracious with the rest.<sup>11</sup> He was a solitary person, unable to make friends easily; a man of simple tastes and few needs; with a high sense of honour and rectitude; methodical, meticulous, imperturbable in adversity; a martinet in the eyes of the students (who addressed him as "Sir"), a thorough gentleman for others.

To him had fallen the need to make great decisions, of vast importance for the future of the college. What to do with the compensation received for the old property in Madrid? Invest it in securities—or rebuild? It needed perspicacity and courage to commit the college to the latter course and to many years of debt. Whether to buy the estate of Canterac when already deep in debt? To have let the opportunity pass in silence would have been easier, would have avoided further anxieties and responsibilities. But James Humble, whatever else he may have been, was not the man to be daunted by the prospect of adversity.

The students knew little of the tenderness and sentimentality of a man who could write:—

"TO JOHNNIE  
(THE LOVED COMPANION OF SIXTEEN YEARS)

Poor faithful friend, thou'rt gone! before me lies  
Thy stiffening form, inert and lifeless now;  
Those pulseless limbs, those slowly glazing eyes  
What once thou wert, to my blurred vision show;  
What once thou wert!—nor e'er mayst be again,  
Loved sharer in thy master's joy, or pain.  
Goodbye! Goodbye old friend!! Thy service sped,  
Fear not its memory fade; and let there fall  
This silent tear upon thy faithful head  
And unashamed rest there—thy funeral pall!  
And those who smile?—give service where 'tis due

If but one part as loyal and true.”

(College archives 67/31.)

## ***Notes for Chapter 20***

1. Luciano Bastardo left the college in May 1938 and became a Benedictine lay brother. Until he died in Avila in 1968, he maintained an occasional correspondence with the rectors, recalling old days in the college and such contemporaries of his among the servants as Venancia (“*con bigotes*”) and Isabel (“whom the students called ‘Bella’”).

2. 24th August 1936. (Glasgow archives, loc. cit.)

3. College archives 48/28.

By this time the nationalists were in control of San Sebastián and Irún so that the railway from Valladolid to the frontier was again open. The money for the students’ fares was borrowed from the English College and paid into the latter’s account in Britain by the Scottish bishops.

4. Humble apparently was not in the habit, even before the war, of taking a salary; on the other hand, there were five Servants in the college until mid-1938, thereafter reduced to three.

5. College archives A/99.

6. During the twenty-eight months from March 1934 to June 1936, he had paid only twelve months’ rent.

7. 22nd March 1938. (Ibid., 55/17/8.)

8. Humble to Bishop Bennett, 6th February 1938. (Ibid., 67/27.)

9. Ibid., 67/33.

10. Humble to Bishop Bennett, 26th June 1940. (Glasgow archives, loc. cit.)

11. From time to time he composed poetry, which he described as the ‘passing thoughts’ of one who “knows his hours of serious thought, pensiveness, dejection and of frivolous levity”.