

VALENTINE CUNNINGHAM AND THE POETRY OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

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There has recently been published an anthology of Spanish civil war poetry (Penguin, 1980): the first comprehensive collection so far made. Many of the poems have, of course, appeared previously: Stephen Spender and John Lehman edited *Poems For Spain* in 1939; Robin Skelton's useful *Poetry of the Thirties* (Penguin, 1964) included a section on Spain; and there have been separate collections of individual poets. This new anthology, however, includes much that has been out of print for many years, and it also contains a good deal of new material, the prison poems of Clive Branson being among the most notable.¹

The volume has been edited by Valentine Cunningham, Fellow and Tutor in English Literature at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. The introduction by Cunningham is a long essay of nearly seventy pages, the greater part of which is taken up with a discussion of certain aspects of the politics of the Spanish Civil War, with hardly any literary commentary on the poems themselves. This is rather odd since it might be thought that an editor of an anthology such as this would evaluate the literary worth of the poetry published, and would further try to answer some obvious questions: how did it come about, for example, that the Civil War in Spain evoked such passionate sympathy among many sections of the British people, or why in particular was there so much poetry written in response to the war? But except in peripheral ways these are not matters with which Cunningham is concerned. His essay, save for occasional remarks, is not a discussion of the impact of the war upon the consciousness, or the conscience, of the British people, or why, when the war broke out in mid-July 1936, it immediately brought together all the fears and the hopes of the anti-fascist movements throughout the world. Yet the reactions to Spain, the ways in which the war concentrated the hopes of millions of people and the literature it inspired, cannot be appreciated without a recognition of the growing threats of fascism and war and the impact upon world opinion which followed the coming to power of Hitler in the spring of 1933. The particular British response has the additional dimension of the struggle against appeasement and the bitter hostility of the majority of the Conservative Party to the legitimate government of Spain and the direct and indirect support of the British government for the fascist powers. As Harold Nicolson wrote in his diary for June 6, 1938:

People of the governing classes think only of their own fortunes, which means hatred of the Reds. This creates a perfectly artificial but at present most effective secret bond between ourselves and Hitler. Our class interests on both sides, cut across our national interests²

Moreover, the reactions of so many of the British people to the Spanish conflict have also to be understood in terms of the deep feelings of anger and frustration that contemporaries experienced at what they saw to be the unopposed aggression of the fascist states. There were many reasons for these frustrations, among them the weakness of the Parliamentary Labour Party, the initial acceptance of the Non-Intervention agreement, and the general failure of the labour and trade union leadership to conduct a national campaign on behalf of Republican Spain. When a socialist as constitutionalist as R.H. Tawney could advocate in the letter columns of the *Manchester Guardian* in March 1938 the temporary withdrawal from the House of Commons of the whole of the Parliamentary Labour Party in order to take the campaign against fascist appeasement to the country, it can be appreciated just how widespread, and deep, the anxieties and frustrations were.

A literary anthology of the present kind, therefore, demands a political as well as a literary evaluation. What we are given by Cunningham is almost no literary discussion but a markedly prejudiced, and very narrow, version of parts of the political history of the civil war years. It is, moreover, a version that reads as if it had been written thirty years ago within the context of the years of the Cold War. His preface is one more addition to *The God that Failed* literature, which ought not to be confused with Orwell's position. Orwell's writings at the time, and especially *Homage to Catalonia* did offer what to many contemporaries were unpalatable truths about the internal political divisions within Republican Spain, and they were derisively and abusively dismissed by communists and their supporters; but the immense scholarly work on Spain and the Civil War in the past quarter of a century has now taken our analysis and our understanding far beyond Orwell's interpretation, and it is inadequate and inaccurate to structure the discussion of the history of the civil war years in the terms in which they were discussed before 1950. This 'old-fashioned' Cold War approach that Cunningham uses must therefore be understood partly as an expression of his own inadequate scholarship, since it is clear that he has read almost nothing of the considerable output of research of these past two decades, but partly also of an ideological bias against communists in particular and the Left in general. The matter is further discussed below.

Cunningham is mostly concerned with the British Communist Party during the Civil War years and with the attitudes and behaviour of its members. His treatment of John Cornford and the Communist Party is typical of the

tendentious approach adopted throughout the introduction. Cornford's poetry, it must be said, he admires.

John Cornford, born in December **1915**, was the son of parents who were well-known in intellectual circles. His father was a classics don at Cambridge who in **1931** became Laurence Professor of Ancient Philosophy. His mother, Frances, was a poet. After a year at the LSE John Cornford read history at Trinity College, Cambridge, graduated with a starred First in the summer of **1936**, and was awarded a research scholarship. He was one of the first British to cross into Spain and be involved in the fighting. This was more than two months before the International Brigades were organised, and any foreigner volunteering to fight at this time had to be attached to one or other of the Spanish militia groups. In Cornford's case this happened to be a section of the militia dominated by POUM, a vigorously anti-Stalinist party. POUM was not strictly a Trotskyist party although some of its leaders, including Andrés Nin, the party secretary, had once been disciples of Trotsky; but the latter had had sharp differences with POUM before the war ~~started~~.³

Trotsky, and Trotskyism, were anathema to international communism before **1936**, but with the first of the great Moscow Trials in the late summer of **1936**, Trotskyism became a term of the most bitter abuse for the communist movement everywhere. POUM, which was outspoken in its general criticisms of the Soviet Union and of the Trials in particular came to be regarded by the end of **1936** as the equivalent of the class enemy by communists inside and outside Spain. This was not quite the situation when John Cornford made his first contact, since the propaganda machine about the first Moscow Trial was not yet fully working, but it was this early POUM connection that is seized upon by Cunningham, out of which he concocts a series of statements about Cornford and his relation to the British Communist Party that are all untrue, and for which the contrary evidence is easily available and indisputable. The Cunningham version is that the POUM connection encouraged an official communist suspicion of Cornford that was present throughout the months before his death, and which also influenced the way Cornford's death was treated by the CP. Here, below, is ~~the~~ documented story, discussed in the order in which the events are given in Cunningham, pp. **36-38**, although as with much of his writing in this Introduction, events and dates are often confusingly jumbled.

Cunningham begins with John Cornford being driven to the front by Franz Borkenau.⁴ This was at the end of the second week in August **1936**, and Cornford then joined 'the wild, ragged, but exhilarating POUM column led by the Asturian miner Grossi' (p. **36**). And it was with this group that he first saw action. He then returned to England in mid-September, 'with the stated intention of returning to the same POUM militia' (p. **37**). He left London on October 5, not aware of the beginnings

of the formation of the International Brigades, an initiative which followed Maurice Thorez's visit to Moscow in the second half of September. 'Cornford' writes Cunningham on p. 37 'had seen Harry Pollitt before he departed: it's not at all inconceivable that Pollitt was suspicious enough of this POUM militiaman not to have told him what was already afoot' i.e. concerning the formation of the International Brigade. Cunningham has a footnote to this 'not inconceivable' comment, that Stansky and Abrahams, in their *Journey to the Frontier* (1966) 'do not agree', although the reader is not informed why there is this disagreement, and why in particular Cunningham took the view he did.⁵

This, then, is Cunningham's main argument about Cornford: that because of the POUM connection the British CP were 'suspicious' of him, and that the suspicion of his political unreliability continued up to, and after, his death.

The main documentation relating to John Cornford in Spain are the following: (1) *John Cornford. A Memoir*, edited by Pat Sloan (1938); (2) Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *Journey to the Frontier* (1966), a large-scale study of Julian Bell and John Cornford, with especial emphasis upon their Spanish experiences; and (3) *Understand the Weapon, Understand the Wound. Selected Writings of John Cornford*, edited by J. Galassi (1976). Cunningham does not appear to know the Galassi volume. There were three periods in Cornford's short life in Spain: the first, from the time he joined the militia—around August 12 1936—to his return to England on September 16; second his activities in London until October 5 when he went back to Spain, via Paris; and third, his life in the International Brigade from mid-October to the time of his death in late December.

Cornford certainly did attach himself to a militia unit which turned out to be POUM dominated. It was chance, for by the law of averages it would have been more likely for him to join an anarchist unit. But in the area where he and Borkenau found themselves there were large POUM groups, and both Franz Borkenau as well as John Cornford were much impressed by Grossi, the leader of the POUM column and a former Asturian miner.

There was no doubt a degree of impulsiveness in John Cornford's enlistment in the militia, but his political sense, and his common sense, never deserted him, as his letters and diaries very clearly demonstrate. For his political attitudes during his first period in Spain (August–mid-September) there exists a great deal of personal documentation. In chronological order: first, a long letter to Margot Heinemann, dated 'Third Quarter of 1936', published first in the *Memoir* of 1938 and republished in Cunningham's *Anthology* pp. 117-128. (It is typical of Cunningham's slap-dash editing that he reprints this letter *after* two other letters to Margot Heinemann that were written later, during Cornford's second period in Spain when

he was part of the International Brigade. Many readers may well confuse the chronology of this correspondence); second, there are the diary entries, extracts from which were published and/or referred to, in Stansky and Abrahams; and third, and most important, there exists a Political Report on the situation in Spain which Cornford wrote soon after his return to England. The Report was based upon his diary entries as well as his memory.

All this material was available to Cunningham. The Political Report was first published in the *Memoir*, pp. 212-235, and again in Galassi, and it is in both the Diary entries and the Political Report that Cornford made abundantly clear his understanding and analysis of POUM. Since Cunningham's political assessment of Cornford rests entirely upon the supposed POUM-Cornford connection, a long extract from the Political Report is given below. The Political Report, in case the point has not been taken, was written for the British CP and was read, among others, by Harry Pollitt, its general secretary. The text below is taken from the *Memoir*, pp. 216-8:

POUM is a punishment for previous errors of the Communists and Socialists. The leaders are mostly Communist renegades (like Oranin) and ex-rrtskyists like Andrés Nin.. Before 19th July it was as strong as the Communist Party, and its Trade Unions were stronger than the reformist UGT. But the sweep of the workers into all revolutionary organisations has meant that hundreds of revolutionary workers have swept also into the ranks of POUM. For instance, Grossi, the leader of the second column of POUM, an Oviedo miner under sentence of death at the time of the elections, though he may be both reckless and theatrical, is without question a sincere and courageous revolutionary with a mass following. But in spite of divisions in the leadership, the dominant policy is provocative and utterly dangerous. It is a parody of the Bolshevist tactics of 1917...

Fortunately, their influence is not growing dangerously. Their trade unions, a few months ago stronger than the UGT, have now very little influence, while the UGT grows in a geometrical progression. Their militia is the worst organised on the Aragon front; even brave and intelligent leaders like Grossi are incapable of giving their troops proper political, military, or organisational training. Thus their splitting policy is no longer a serious danger. They have little left beyond their sectarian political leaders: a well-produced newspaper, *La Batalla*; and two to three thousand of the worst-organised militia; brave enough, but incapable of a real sustained offensive through sheer inefficiency.

Cornford, according to a diary entry of August 23, had already written to Harry Pollitt, and Pollitt certainly read the Political Report that Cornford prepared. Before Cornford returned to England he had already begun to consider the organisation of a British group of volunteers—the details are fully set out in Stansky and Abrahams, p. 354 ff. Cornford discussed the whole question with Pollitt at King St, and we have the evidence of Sam Russell who heard the arguments for foreign volunteers during a visit

to King St, and Russell actually followed Cornford to Paris, arriving there a week or so later. Cornford had originally a larger list of names, but in the end he took with him a group of six—five British and a German. This was done, let it be said again, with the agreement of the British CP who, according to Stansky and Abrahams, agreed to pay the costs of transportation.⁶ It would, of course, have been 'inconceivable' for Cornford to have acted without CP agreement. When Cornford got to Paris with his group, he reported to the address given him in London and he and his group were taken over by a newly formed Committee, sent to a hotel in the Belleville district, and told to await orders. The International Brigade was now in the process of formation, and the Cornford group became the nucleus of what by the end of the year expanded into the British battalion.

Now all these details were set down in the books referred to by Cunningham. He makes no reference at all to the volunteer group formed by Cornford, a matter of quite central importance in the matter of the relations between Cornford and the CP leadership; and Cunningham gives no quotations or references to the comments on POUM in either the diaries or the Political Report. There are various possibilities that suggest themselves. One is that Cunningham read the sources he cites so perfunctorily that he missed all this material; a second is that he did not actually read the sources he cites; and a third is that he suppressed the evidence. But whatever the reasons, it is clear beyond any doubt that the suspicions that Pollitt was alleged to have about this 'POUM militiaman'—Cunningham's phrase it will be remembered—were fabrications of Cunningham's imagination. But Cunningham was not yet finished with the implications of the POUM connection. He actually suggests that the British Communist Party played down Cornford's death because they were still suspicious of his political credibility. These are his words:

So perhaps it wasn't just because his **best** poems were yet unpublished that so little fuss was made over **Cornford** when he was killed. The Party rallied round later and got up a *Memoir*. But though Ralph Fox and **Cornford** had been killed in the same battle in late December 1936 it was the death of Fox that made all the running in the *Daily Worker* early in January 1937. Pages of tributes were published. But then he had worked on the paper and he could spot a 'Trotsky-Fascist' when he saw one. Precisely at the time **Cornford** was spiritedly collaborating with those Fascists in sheep's clothing. . .

When Cornford's death was eventually noticed by the paper (3 February 1937) he was described as 'typical of the finest of the intellectuals'. There was no mention of any writing. Ten days later the wounding of Wilfred Macartney was heralded under the banner 'Famous Author Wounded'. (p. 38).

Ralph Fox and John Cornford were certainly killed in the same battle; there were witnesses to the death of the first, but although a number of different stories exist as to the details of Cornford's death, no eye-witness account was published at the *time*,⁷ and his body was never recovered.

It is assumed that he was killed on December 28, 1936, the day after his twenty-first birthday. Now even Cunningham, whose knowledge of life, it may not be unreasonable to suggest, is perhaps somewhat limited—the transition from Keble College, Oxford where he read for his first degree, to Corpus Christi College, Oxford, where he became a tutor, must have been among the more tumultuous events of his life—even Cunningham must appreciate that if a man is lost after a battle, he might have been wounded and picked up by either side; or he might have been taken prisoner; or his body or some identification might have been found later by a raiding party or in a counter-attack; or there might be later reports by stragglers or survivors of the battle. It is prudence as well as humanity that delays notification of death when the body is not recovered, and it is therefore not at all surprising that notice of John Cornford's death was delayed for a few weeks. Cunningham comments that it was 'eventually noticed' on 3 February; but if he has been a little less hasty in his skimming through the *Daily Worker* he would have discovered (i) that on January 7 1937, more than a week after Cornford's death, there was published a photograph of him with the caption that he was serving with the International Legion (as the International Brigade was then called); (ii) on February 3 there was a page of tributes to a number of the International Brigade who had been killed, and the list included Cornford, with a statement from the Cambridge Communist Party that 'we have lost the finest student leader we ever had'; and (iii) on March 25 there was another page of tributes to members of the International Brigade who had been killed with a quotation from John Cornford's poem 'Full Moon at Tierz'. And finally, the obituary notice in the *Cambridge Review*, February 5 1937, and reprinted in the *Memoir*, pp. 250-2, specifically says Cornford was killed on December 28 and 'Confirmation of his death reached England one month later'.

As for the comparison between Fox and Cornford everyone in the communist movement, and well beyond, knew of Ralph Fox, a literary figure on the Left for many years. By contrast, Cornford, who went to Spain in his twenty-first year, was relatively unknown outside the student movement, and his best-known poems, and writings, were published after his death. Wilfred Macartney, the author of *Walls Have Mouths*, one of the most famous of all the early Left Book Club volumes, was certainly a well-known author. But the student movement knew John Cornford, and with his death, he became the best-known student of his own day and of later days. No name evoked more affection and respect than that of John Cornford, and to this day his memory has remained green.

Cunningham's wretched story continues, and he has not yet finished with Cornford, for nothing is too petty to be excluded. There is, on p. 34, a more than usually jumbled paragraph. Cunningham, it may be said in parenthesis, is an extraordinarily muddling sort of writer. The argument

and illustrations jump about, and he seems incapable of bringing his material together in logical sequence. But here, from the paragraph mentioned above, are two consecutive sentences referring to Cornford:

No doubt it was with equal mindfulness that Pat Sloan, the Communist editor of John Cornford: *A Memoir*, pointfully altered line 40 of Cornford's poem 'Full Moon at Tierz' from 'Now, with my party, I stand quite alone' to 'Now, with my Party. . .'. And one wonders whether it wasn't the presence in the poem of 'an Anarchist worker' that kept 'A Letter from Aragon' out of *Poems for Spain* (p. 34).

John Cornford's 'Full Moon at Tierz' is a highly political poem: perhaps the most political of all of Cornford's major poems. There are references to Dimitrov and Thorez, and the last two lines read:

Raise the red flag triumphantly
For Communism and for liberty.

It takes a Cunningham to extend his conspiracy theory to include a shift from lower case to superior (upper) case. It is quite clear that when Cornford refers to 'party' he means the Communist Party, whether spelt with a capital or not; and Cornford would have been as amazed as Cunningham's readers that such trivial comments are to be expected to be taken seriously. And as for the stupid innuendo that the CP would or could have issued instructions that 'A Letter from Aragon' should be excluded from any collection of poems, in this case edited by Spender and Lehman, what Cunningham omits to inform his readers in the text is that the poem in question had already been published twice: first in *Left Review* (November 1936) and then in the 1938 *Memoir*. To underline the gormless idiocy of Cunningham's 'wondering' about the political subversiveness of the 'an Anarchist worker' phrase, here is the verse in which it occurs:

But when I shook hands to leave, an Anarchist worker
Said: 'Tell the workers of England
This was a war not of our own making,
We did not seek it.
But if ever the Fascists again rule Barcelona
It will be as a heap of ruins with us workers beneath it.'

There are two other references to Cornford that must be remarked on. On p. 78 Cunningham explains to the reader that while, of course, there were some who went through the Spanish experience without becoming disillusioned—like Clive Branson for example—it was really all very difficult, and quite to be expected that politics would soon look rather different. This is how he expresses it, after noting the case of Clive Branson:

But for many others, what were often naive enthusiasms quickly gave way to something else. When even CP apparatchiks like John Cornford would be so naive as to look on the POUM as possible brothers it's scarcely surprising that somewhat less committed politicians . . . might have illusions to shatter (p. 78).

He scrapes up a half dozen or so examples but he has, of course, no serious evidence to offer. The overwhelming majority of the British volunteers were workers; and neither the International Brigade archive at the Marx House Memorial library, nor the extensive tape-recordings made at the 1976 Loughborough reunion lend any credence to his statement. As for the use of 'apparatchik' to describe Cornford it is, of course, quite inappropriate. In no sense was Cornford a man of the bureaucracy; and it may be remarked that Cunningham continues to commit himself to the wholly inaccurate argument about Cornford and POUM. The other matter concerning Cornford will be found on p. 63 of Cunningham's Introduction. He is discussing the difficulties that middle-class intellectuals had, or were supposed to have had, when they joined or allied themselves with the working-class movement: 'the insignia of class-names and accents in particular—marked the bourgeois, instantly singling him out as a mere slummer'. So among other things—and Cunningham gives a list of five individuals—they 'all changed or modified their names as part of their shedding of odious class attachments'. Cornford is one of the five listed and is included because he apparently 'shed' the Rupert in his forenames. He **was** christened Rupert John Cornford—named after Rupert Brooke, but as everyone knows, was always called John. On the first page of his contribution to the *Memoir*, John's father, Professor F.M. Cornford, explained:

In April 1915 Rupert Brooke had died. He was a friend whose loss we had felt keenly; and with some hope of pleasing his mother—though she was the least sentimental of ~~women~~—we called the child Rupert John. But the too romantic name was soon dropped.

In this account of John Cornford, Cunningham has consistently misinterpreted the policy and attitudes of the Communist Party and has traduced the memory of a young communist intellectual who gave his life for the cause he believed in: the struggle against fascism. Cunningham is entitled to take any view of Cornford that he wishes; but what he is not entitled to do is to falsify the evidence and present an account of Cornford that is at total variance with the established facts. Cunningham's wretched tarradiddle is politically nauseating; that presumably will not worry Cunningham; but the inadequate and incorrect reading of certain basic texts cannot be dismissed easily. Cunningham teaches English literature; he no doubt instructs his students in textual criticism, and it

would be helpful if he would instruct us, the contributors to his royalties, how he has arrived at this version of the story of John Cornford.

Cunningham's prejudiced and inaccurate presentation of John Cornford takes up a few pages only of his long introduction. A complete refutation of every factual error or smearing allegation would take an even longer reply, but there are a few other matters that are especially obnoxious and require comment. One is the treatment of Harry Pollitt, the general secretary of the British Communist Party, and in Pollitt's case, unlike that of Cornford, most of the allegations cannot be disproved by fact, but only in terms of context. Here first is what Cunningham has written:

And martyred writers gave the cause especial credit. The story of Harry Pollitt advising Spender that the best contribution he could make to the Party would be 'to go out and get killed, comrade, we need a Byron in the movement' may be apocryphal, and A.L. Rowse's insinuation that Ralph Fox's death was deliberately sought ('He was ordered to Spain by the Party, which wanted martyrs for the cause') may be unjust. Nevertheless, when Fox had been killed, Pollitt did speedily claim for him Byronic status in thus dying for liberty in a foreign cause. Fox was joining, chipped in John Strachey (*Daily Worker*, 5 January 1937, p. 1) 'the great tradition of English writers who have fought and died for the ideas of which they had written'. And when Kitty Wintringham went to Pollitt to try to get her husband, twice wounded and a typhoid victim, sent home, Pollitt is alleged to have replied: 'Tell him to get out of Barcelona, go up to the front line, get himself killed, and give us a headline'.

Dead or alive, but especially dead, the writers and artists were exultantly laid claim to by the *Daily Worker* (pp. 41-2).

One apocryphal story, one insinuation that 'may be unjust', one allegation, one smear that the *Daily Worker* rejoiced exceedingly (the Concise Oxford's definition of 'exult') over the death of writers and artists because presumably it would give them a banner headline. A collection of smears that are all abundant evidence of communist amorality and the unscrupulous exploitation of misguided idealists. The question, however, is their truth or falsity. The *Daily Worker* accusation can be tested, of course, and by no stretch of the most prejudiced imagination can the word 'exultantly' be justified. Pollitt, however, is dead and beyond questioning and so are both the Wintringhams; but for all the many who are still living who knew Pollitt the attitude he is quoted as taking up is, to use one of Cunningham's words, 'inconceivable'. Pollitt was a tough-minded working-class militant with an engaging and warm personality. As the American journalist, John Gunther, wrote in *Inside Europe* (revised ed. 1936, p. 296): 'An unquenchable speaker, writer and propagandist, Pollitt is one of the ablest and most attractive public men in England.' But further to what we know of Pollitt's personality, there are political considerations involved. The Pollitt statements quoted above were allegedly made sometime during 1937 and 1938. By the early months of 1937 the British

volunteers had already suffered heavy casualties, including the deaths of some of its best-known intellectuals such as Ralph Fox. There were grim headlines enough as the war progressed and the figures of the British dead mounted towards the final total of over 500. It was not headlines that were wanted, but arms for the legitimate government, the ending of the infamous Non-Intervention agreement, medical supplies and food for the Spanish people. Pollitt took his political responsibilities as the British Communist leader with great seriousness and with a proper sense of his own important position in the labour movement; and it is not believable to this writer that he could have possibly uttered the shameful words ascribed to him.

The matter must be left there, but there is one other matter relating to Pollitt which further illuminates Cunningham's prejudices. Cunningham, on p. 32, was discussing, in his paranoid way, the attempts by the Communists to attach to themselves as much support as possible from writers, artists and intellectuals in **general.** But, he wrote, there were 'cautionary voices' within the Party. Cunningham continues: 'The disclaimers, though, sat ill on a Party which craved the respectability its middle-class "heroes" gave it. The slippery contradictions in Harry Pollitt's Introduction. . . to *David Guest: A Memoir* (1939) are pretty evident': [and there follows, as given below in full, the quotation from Pollitt.]

David Guest and men of similar type would not have us be unmindful of those hundreds of other young men, labourers, dockers, railwaymen, engineers, clerks, seamen, miners and textile workers who have also made the supreme sacrifice. Men whose family circumstances make it impossible for any special Memoirs to be published about them, but who were David's comrades in life, in arms and in death, and to whose immortal memory this volume is as great a tribute as it is to those from the public schools and universities. (p. 32).

David Guest, a Cambridge graduate and son of a Labour Party MP, had been one of the earliest communist students at his university. He was killed in Spain on the Ebro in July 1938. But does the passage quoted above read as a piece of jesuitry? What is 'slippery' about Pollitt's words? Are they not in fact a principled statement, a reminder to the movement he was addressing that it was the working-class volunteers who were the overwhelming part of the British volunteers, and that most of them would remain unknown and uncommemorated to later generations? And are not Pollitt's sentiments, soberly and carefully expressed, such as David Guest would have wholeheartedly accepted and wholeheartedly approved? Cunningham is a lecturer in English literature, in which it must be emphasised again the careful study of texts is an important part of English studies. Let him explain in as much detail as necessary the meaning of the term 'slippery' as applied to this quotation from Pollitt. We require to be so instructed, for once more Cunningham is traducing the personality

and the spirit of a communist militant whose enormous energies and devotion to the cause of Spain in these years were widely known and respected. Cunningham's essay in exegesis should be interesting.

One of the many unpleasant things about this essay by Cunningham, as must indeed be evident from the direct quotations already given, is the tone and phrasing of his language. It is part, it would seem, of his generally crass attitude to the Spanish Civil War, but it may be that he always writes in ways that reflect the flaccidity of his thinking. 'The pressure to "take sides" in the 1930s was evidently terrific' he wrote recently as the opening sentence of another essay on Spain in Groversmith's symposium⁹ and the mixture of schoolboy essay writing and general nastiness is common enough in the Introduction at present under review. So people are 'busily scurrying about the country' (p. 44) by which he refers to the round of meetings and demonstrations in support of Spanish aid; Strachey 'chips in'; 'And Benny Goodman played his clarinet at a Spain benefit, and Shirley Temple did her bit, and Professor J.B.S. Haldane would drop in on the trenches during university vacations' (p. 47); and 'Clive Branson jeered later on from India. . . at "those insane fools who look upon war as a sport, good fun, etc."' (p. 91): 'jeered'? Cunningham can be relied upon either to sum up matters wrongly, or to arrive at something approximating to a reasonable conclusion after a great deal of confused bumbling. He is quite wrong, for example, in his long discussion of the attitudes to war in general in the 1930s (pp. 87-92), for his historical knowledge and understanding are too meagre for any serious analysis of this complicated question;¹⁰ and while in the end (p. 33) he recognises that from the British side (or any side) the Civil War was neither an intellectuals' nor a poets' war, his discussion of these common myths is confused and confusing. There is not, it will be clear, much light relief in this Introduction, but there is one matter worth a small horse-laugh. From Stanley Weintraub's book, *The Last Great Cause: The Intellectuals and the Spanish Civil War* (1968)—an inadequate text upon which Cunningham relies a good deal, more, indeed than his footnotes would suggest—Cunningham quotes the story of the Jarama song. His attitude in this is part of the no-nonsense, they-can't-fool-me-with-their-Stalinist-politicking stance that Cunningham endeavours to project as he slops his way through his text. And for Cunningham the Jarama story is worth three or four pages to illustrate once more that one just can't be too careful. An International Brigade volunteer called McDade—later killed in July 1938—wrote some verses that were put to the tune of 'Red River Valley' and it became known as the Jarama song. Cunningham talks of these 'wryly discontented lines'. After quoting the original poem, Cunningham continues (p. 76):

The authorities naturally didn't take to the words but, with slight variations, the song became very popular and was, according to Jason Gurney, 'particularly favoured to bait Political Commissars with'.¹¹

Now, as Cunningham himself notes, the original words were reprinted in 1938 in *The Book of the XV Brigade*, published in Madrid, but he forgot to inform his readers that the same version was also reprinted in London in 1939 by William Rust (himself a former Political Commissar) in *Britons in Spain* (pp. 59-60). Weintraub, copied faithfully by Cunningham, discovered that at a later political rally, the words of the song were altered, so that, to quote Cunningham:

an ironic, extremely authentic-sounding trench grumble has been transformed by Party hacks into a slogan-laden celebration.

The conspiracy theory has proved its point once again? Poor Cunningham! No doubt it must be difficult, peering through those sheltered cloisters, to understand what life is like outside. But the news must be broken to him, gently of course, that while the original verses of the Jarama song were no doubt enjoyable to sing, their words would not worry anyone, anywhere, at any time. Soldiers' songs, if one can take those of the Second World War as evidence, are bawdy, often filthy, contain rude words like 'fuck' and 'shit' and 'balls' and other unmentionables, and are full of references to the military incompetence, and more often the sexual prowess or impotence—often quite indiscriminately—of those above them; to describe the Jarama song, which came out of a political army, it must be remembered, as an 'extremely authentic-sounding trench grumble' could properly be answered only in soldiers' language. The two versions—the second, readers may be reminded, was for a mass rally in London, are printed at the end of this review article, and it will be appreciated what a trivial business it all is, or should be.

But we cannot ignore the larger issues involved in this discussion. Cunningham's version of the Civil War in Spain denigrates the memory of those who fought on the side of the Republic ('many volunteers did have fairly muddy motivations' he writes on p. 39); and it encompasses, as in the important case-history of John Cornford, a whole series of inaccurate and false statements that are demonstrably untrue by evidence available to anyone. Moreover, the ways in which Cunningham presents his material reduces the passionate commitment of large numbers of the British people in the last years of the thirties to the level of political manipulation; it discredits a moment of history when hundreds of millions of people throughout the world were at one in the struggle against the fascist barbarians. The generations who lived through the experience of Spain into the post-war decades have had to come to terms with the historical processes of de-stalinisation and the re-assessment and revaluation of the history of the international communist movement. In the case of Spain there is a very large literature: it includes the writings of Preston, and Southworth, and Carr, and Cattel, and Jackson, and Claudin, and

Semprun, and from within the present Spanish CP, Santiago Carrillo;¹² a select list only, but none mentioned by Cunningham. In the past quarter of a century we have begun to set the agonies of the war, its nobility, its lies, its betrayals, into a more truthful historical perspective. The adjustments have been painful and often very difficult to absorb and appreciate, but if we now see the Civil War in Spain in its international perspectives with clearer eyes, nothing has taken away from the people of the Republic the heroism of their struggle against Franco, and nothing has diminished the bravery and commitment of those who went to Spain to assist in that struggle. If Manchuria in 1931 was the first shot in the Second World War, Spain was its first major battle; and the six years of war against international fascism that followed, with its heroism, cruelties, betrzyals and tragedies, all on a vastly **greater** scale than in Spain, culminated in a major victory for the peoples of the world: a victory within which there remained fundamental contradictions and future conflicts. There has been no peace in the post-war world, but many Last Great Causes, contrary to the title of Weintraub's book. Vietnam yesterday and El Salvador today are two examples of many that bear witness to our epoch of bloody reactions and revolutionary upheavals. Spain was but a moment in the history of human emancipation, and the bitter struggles of the Spanish Republicans against their militarists and landlords, lay and clerical, have become part of the larger struggles that are yet to come. These are not, of course, the political perspectives that Cunningham understands, let alone appreciates; his essay, an unedifying exhibition of inaccurate scholarship, misleadingly and inexpertly arranged, is a disgrace to his publishers.

The Jarama Song

The Original Version

There's a valley in Spain called Jarama,
That's a place that we all know so well,
For 'tis here **that we** wasted our manhood,
And most of our old age as well.

From this valley they tell us we're leaving,
But don't hasten to bid us adieu,
For e'en though we make our departure,
We'll be back in an hour or two.

Oh we're proud of our Lincoln Battalion,
And the marathon record it's made,
Please do us this little favour,
And take this last word to Brigade.

You'll never be happy with strangers,
They would not understand you as we,
So remember the Jararna Valley,
And the old men who wait patiently.

The Later Version

There's a valley in Spain called Jarama,
It's a place that we all know so well,
For **'twas** here that we gave our manhood,
And most of our brave comrades fell.

We are proud of our British Battalion,
And the stand for Madrid that they made.
For they fought like true sons of the people,
As part of the 15th Brigade.

With the rest of the international column,
In the fight for the freedom of Spain,
They swore in the Valley of Jarama
That fascism never would reign.

We have left that dark valley for ever (sic),
But its memory we ne'er shall forget,
So before we continue this meeting
Let us stand for our glorious dead.

NOTES

1. *The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse* (ed.) Valentine Cunningham, Penguin, **1980**. All the page references in the text which follows, unless otherwise ascribed, are to Cunningham's Introduction.
2. H. Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters, 1931-9*, (ed.) N. Nicolson, p. **346**.
3. For a brief discussion of POUM, see B. Bolloten 'The Parties of the Left and the Civil War' in *The Republic and the Civil War in Spain*, (ed.) Raymond Carr, **1971**, pp. **129-158**.
4. F. Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit*, **1937**, republ. **1963**, pp. **69-70**.
5. See P. Stansky and W. Abrahams, *Journey to the Frontier*, **1966**, p. **354 ff.** for the story of Cornford and the British CP and Comford's idea of a British volunteer group.
6. *Ibid.*, p. **361**.
7. Margot Heinemann informs me that in **1979** there was published an eye-witness account, by Walter Greenhalgh, in Judith Cook, *Apprentices of Freedom*, **1979**; but the statement in the text above, that no eye-witness accounts were published at the time, is correct.
8. A.L. Rowse, *A Cornishman at Oxford*, **1965**, p. **57**.
9. 'Neutral? **1930s** Writers and Taking Sides' in F. Gloversmith, (ed.), *Class, Culture and Social Change., A New View of the 1930s*, **1980**, p. **45**.
10. The literature is voluminous: see for a sample of interpretations, Corelli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*, **1972**, p. **424 ff**; J.F. Naylor, *Labour's International Policy. The Labour Party in the 1930s*, **1969**; John Saville, 'May Day **1937**' in *Essays in Labour History, 1918-1939*, (eds.) Asa Briggs and John Saville, **1977**, p. **248 ff**; M. Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914-1945*, Oxford, **1980**, with an excellent bibliography.
11. Quoted by Cunningham from Jason Gurney, *Crusade in Spain*, **1974**, p. **150**.
12. P. Preston, 'The Origins of the Socialist Schism in Spain, **1917-1931**', *Journal of Contemporary History*, **1977**; H. Southworth, *Antifalange*, Paris, **1967**; idem, *La destruction de Guernica*, Paris, **1975**; R. Carr, *Spain, 1808-1939*, Oxford, **1966**; D. Cattell, *Communism and the Spanish Civil War*, Berkeley, **1955**; G. Jackson, *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War, 1931-1936*, Princeton, **1965**; idem, *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War*, New York, **1974**; F. Claudin, *The Communist Movement. From Comintern to Cominform*, **1975**; J. Semprun, *Communism in Spain in the Franco Era. The Autobiography of Federico Sanchez*, **1979**; S. Carillo, *Dialogue on Spain, 1977*. There is a good select bibliography in R. Fraser, *Blood of Spain. The Experience of Civil War, 1936-1939*, **1979**.