

BOOKS

When three months became a lifetime

AS the Nationalist forces of General Franco, backed by Hitler's bombers, closed in on the Republican-held northern port of Bilbao in May 1937, nearly 4000 Spanish children between the ages of six and 16 were plucked from the siege, packed like sardines into an old liner called the Habana, and brought to safety in England.

In charge of them were 95 teachers, 120 señoritas (young women volunteer carers) and 15 priests.

The story behind this incredible rescue, which many of our older readers will recall — for some 80 of those children eventually found themselves in Faringdon and Aston, near Bampton — has now been told in a book called *Only for Three Months*.

The author is a Norwich historian, Adrian Bell, who interviewed more than 40 of the 'children' who never returned to Spain, and a dozen others now living in the warm south of their home country. The result is not only a very readable historical account but also a testimony to their character, talents and resilience.

For some of the little ones who bade tearful farewells to the parents they might never see again, it was a terrible wrench to leave their home land. For others, it was the beginning of a great adventure. For all of them it was: "Only for three months". Yet, a year after they had arrived, more than half of them were still in Britain. On the eve of World War II in 1939, there were still 1,150 and, five years later, 470. Today, around 170 remain.

After an exhausting journey through a stormy Bay of Biscay (escorted by ships of the Royal Navy), the children's first 'home' was an incredible camp of tents in a farmer's field near Eastleigh, just outside Southampton.

Seen as a political embarrassment by a British Tory Government which was supporting a non-intervention pact in Europe, the children were cared for by a committee of caring people, including MPs of all political shades, as well as hundreds of ordinary British people. Financially, they were supported by fundraising efforts, sponsorship and donations from bodies such as trades unions.

Gradually, the children were dispersed to dozens of 'colonies' all over the country, where conditions varied enormously from the warm and comfortable to the positively Dickensian.

Lord Faringdon lent two lodge houses on his Buscot estate for a group of 40 boys, and two rather chilly wooden dormitories were built for them through sponsorship. The lads were cared for by a German Jewis refugee called Walter Leonard, who later married Peggy Gibbins, a Birmingham girl whose family were involved with Basque children there, and who came to Faringdon as a cook. He is still alive and living in England. The boys later moved to a large house belonging to Alec



A group of the Basque lads pictured while out for a stroll at Buscot Park in 1937. (Picture taken from an album belonging to Poppy Vulliamy, a tireless worker for the Children's Committee, courtesy of author Adrian Bell)

Wainman, a wealthy sympathiser, at Shipton-under-Wychwood. At Aston, a group of 40 boys and girls lived at St Joseph's, a house which is now a nursery school. Here, the Early family of blanket-makers from Witney played a benevolent role.

As they reached working age, the older children were found jobs in factories or on the farm. While some of the younger ones were taken under the wing of families such as the Cadburys, and given private educations, others were taken into welcoming working class British homes. Yet others later benefited from an educational trust and gained a tertiary education — it was very much a matter of pot luck.

Repatriation began in November 1937 for children whose families were able to receive them. But whether they were able to return, or whether they decided — or were forced through circumstances — to stay in England, there were problems. Going back meant breaking ties of affection in England and remaking relationships in Spain, where poverty and political repression were rife. Children and parents had become strangers, and little ones who arrived at the age of six and went back perhaps ten years later had lost their 'mother' tongue.

Those who did not return found that while their heads were in England, their hearts were in Spain, so that they truly belonged in neither country — a dichotomy which has continued to trouble their self-perception to this day, however Anglicised they have become.

It is a heart-rending story which brings tears of both joy and sadness, and one in which I have a special interest, for one of the children from the Aston colony interviewed by Mr Bell is my own mother, at the age of 74 still living a very active life near Witney. — C.S.

Copies of *Only for Three Months* are available at £6.95 plus 55p p. and p. from Mousehold Press, Victoria Cottage, Constitution Opening, Norwich, NR3 4BD. The Folly would be interested to hear from any readers who have personal memories of the Basque children.

Art goes show The

ANOTHER 'Art' exhibition is being held at the delightful Lower Mill, in Kingston Wiltshire, Ashbury, from April 8.

The exhibition features paintings and other art from Cliff Dineen, Maryse Lawrie, Alan Richardson, Erset, Sue and David Viney, Noriko Yamamoto (ceramics) and David Viney (sculptor).

The gallery is open from 1pm to 5pm, and on 11am to 5pm including holiday. Entrance is free, and the restored mill may be seen working on the bank holiday.