

Did the non-Spanish population living in Spain leave a lasting impact on Spanish culture and more generally on *Spanishness* according to George Borrow's travel book *The Bible in Spain*?

Essay

In this essay, I intend to analyse, interpret and examine some passages from a travel book, written by the famous British writer and linguist George Borrow, called *The Bible in Spain*, especially the ways this travel novelist tackles the issue of “the Other”, the aesthetic accounts he gives in his magnum opus and the various cultural backgrounds he covers. I decided to center my essay around the work of this influential British author due to several reasons. The first reason is a fairly obvious one, I liked the style of this author, the themes he explores, the various narrative structures he employs, I could honestly admit that his book is a joy to read. The second reason for which I chose this particular book is the fact that I am interested in the history of Spain, in the Spanish culture, the Spanish way of life, etc. The third and final reason which enabled me to choose this magnificent piece of literature lies in the fact that this book features so many different opinions, viewpoints, so many cultural references, different characters who act differently, a plethora of interesting things that I think would be very suitable for such an analysis and interpretation. I deem this topic important in the context of travel literature because I think that it tackles very well the concept of “the Other” and here this concept is represented by the descendants of the Moors in Spain, the German colonists, the crypto-Jews, and especially the Gypsies which really fascinated the author of this travel book and also attracted his attention even after he left Spain. The question which I would like to propose is the following – Did the Moors leave a lasting impact on the Spanish lands and in the Spanish culture, and is Spain still a part of the Orient due to the Moorish influence, especially in regions such as Andalusia and Murcia?

George Borrow (1803-1881) was an English writer of novels and of travel books based on his own experiences in Europe.¹ He may almost be said to have concentrated into the seven years (1833–1840) that he was employed by the British and Foreign Bible Society in Russia, Portugal and Spain, a lifetime's energy and resource. He developed an astonishing aptitude for affairs, a

¹ John Sutherland, “*Borrow, George*”, *The Stanford Companion to Victorian Literature*, 1990, p. 77.

tireless energy, and a diplomatic resourcefulness that aroused silent wonder in those who had hitherto regarded him as a failure.² The British and Foreign Bible Society sent Borrow to Portugal and Spain (1835–40) to distribute the scriptures. In Spain, civil war made his expeditions risky, while the hostile attitude of the authorities, coupled with his own provocative approach, led twice to his imprisonment. He was still able to pursue his linguistic and translating interests... By the time his last Spanish tour began, it was clear that Borrow's future with the Bible Society was limited. Increasingly he concerned himself with his own affairs, completing the groundwork for a few books, and thinking up new territory to explore...³ His most famous book *The Bible in Spain* (full title: *The Bible in Spain: or the Journey, Adventures, and Imprisonment of an Englishman in an Attempt to Circulate the Scriptures in the Peninsula*) was published in London in 1843. It was a popular work when it appeared, running through several editions.⁴ In short, the book relates Borrow's travels through Spain while he was working as a Bible salesman between 1835 and 1838, at the time of the Carlist Civil War.⁵ His immediate approach made the book much more accessible to people from a variety of different classes and ethnicities, the style he employed was oriented to the existing reality. Borrow's writing followed a certain chronological order which made it even more believable and close to the reader. He mixed his descriptions of the places he visited with dialogue sequences (a strategy close to the *mise-en-abîme* technique used by P. B. Shelley to denote self-reflection in his sonnet *Ozymandias*) featuring the people the English traveller met while he was exploring Spain. *The Bible in Spain*, "a song of wild Spain", was based on journals and notes he kept at the time, upon which he also drew for his reports back to the Bible Society which were returned to him on his request when he was working on the book.⁶ Borrow wanted to print and distribute a Spanish translation of the New Testament and in this venture he had the support of the British ambassador George Villiers. Borrow went on to travel through northern Spain distributing copies of this work, and appointing local agents where possible. On returning

² Herbert Jenkins, *The Life of George Borrow, Compiled from Unpublished Official Documents, his Works, Correspondence, etc.*, Transcribed from the 1912 John Murray edition by David Price, <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3481/3481-h/3481-h.htm>>, Release Date: October 12, 2014 [eBook #3481], Preface.

³ Angus Fraser, *Borrow, George Henry*, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/2918>>, 2008.

⁴ Sarah Anderson, *Anderson's Travel Companion: A Guide to the Best Non-fiction and Fiction for Travelling*, Brookfield, Vt., 1995, p. 355.

⁵ Raymond Carr, *Spain 1808—1939*, Oxford University Press, 1966, pp. 46, 174.

⁶ Edward Thomas, *George Borrow, The Man And His Books*, Read Books Limited, 1912, Chapter XX—The Bible in Spain.

to Madrid he opened a bookshop for sale of the work, but this was soon closed down by the authorities. During his Spanish travels he suffered from bouts of illness and twice returned to England, and in the end his activities were suppressed and he left Spain for Tangier, where the book closes.⁷ The work relates numerous personal encounters Borrow had with Spaniards, from the prime minister to beggars, including Gypsies and crypto-Jews.⁸ The book brought wealth and recognition for Borrow. It went into six editions in the first year, one of which sold 10,000 copies within four months. It also sold well in the United States, and was translated into French and German.⁹ The book's popularity in Protestant countries at the time was presumably due to its evangelical enthusiasm, as well as the romantic image of Spain; whereas its continuing interest at the present time arises more from its powerful portrayal of a diversity of people, places and incidents.¹⁰ The success of *The Bible in Spain* helped to promote public interest in Britain in the work of colporteurs, who distribute religious works, and this activity became a major focus for the Bible Society in the mid-19th century.¹¹

The chapters of this travel book which I would like to analyse are (parts of) chapters XV, XVI and XVII. To start off, I was quite surprised by the fact that in the first half of the 19th Century the Spanish population was not interested in books such as the New Testament of the Holy Bible and what is even more interesting is the fact that most of these people according to the accounts of George Borrow were illiterate. That was striking in my opinion because I know that the Spaniards are a religious nation, at least that is the common stereotype, and finding out that most of the people from their lower classes were not even able to read and write really showed me that the situation there was not that simple and straightforward as many people could think. It seems that even the presence of the Spanish Inquisition did not leave such a lasting impact on the commoners. Although the Church's legacy was of little importance to some of the Spanish people, the Inquisition was restored after the end of the Napoleonic occupation of the Iberian Peninsula and it continued to put allegedly guilty people on trial. Despite that fact, the influence of the Moorish rule in the southern parts of Spain, mainly in the provinces Andalusia and Murcia, was

⁷ G. Henderson, "Art. X.—*The Bible in Spain. By George Borrow*", *The Monthly Review*, 1842, pp. 104–115.

⁸ Thomas, 1912, Chapter XXI – *The Bible in Spain: Characters*.

⁹ Thomas, 1912, Chapter XXIII—*Between the Acts*.

¹⁰ Thomas, 1912, Chapter XX—*The Bible in Spain*.

¹¹ Stephen K. Batalden, Kathleen Cann and John Dean, *Sowing the Word: The Cultural Impact of the British and Foreign Bible Society, 1804-2004*, Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004, p.34.

still huge and most of the castles and places there retained their Moorish names. For instance, the castles Alcazar (meaning “the fort” or “the castle”) and Alhambra (meaning “red fortress”), and the river Guadalquivir or Oued al Kiber which translated from Arabic literally means “the great river”.¹² Borrow himself stated that “there is not much in the appearance of the Guadalquivir to interest the traveller [...], but it is impossible to move along this river without remembering that it has borne the Roman, the Vandal, and the Arab, and has been the witness of deeds which have resounded through the world and been the themes of immortal songs.”¹³ That passage is so significant because it shows to all the potential travellers what is really the essence of Spain, and that is its history, its heritage and the memory of the once great empires that conquered Spain and ruled it for centuries to come; in a way we can assume that the Spanish empire was a descendant to both the mighty Roman Empire and the Umayyad Caliphate. It is also worth mentioning that all of the edifices that made an impression to Borrow were built by the Arabs or as they are more frequently called – the Moors. He mentioned the La Giralda tower, the Alcazar castle of Seville, and even the magnificent Gothic style cathedral of Seville which was originally built as a mosque. From all the things mentioned above, we can safely conclude that the Moors left an unobliterable trace in the history and in the culture of Spain.

Another interesting observation that I found in Borrow’s description is the way in which the Roman history of the places which he observes intertwines with the present time political tensions caused by the Carlist Wars. At first, the traveller sees a place and instantly he presents his readers with some historical information about it and then he gives them some actual account of the current situation regarding the advancement of the Carlist forces and of the Liberal forces, their gains and losses, etc. It is really fascinating how Borrow is at once a philosophe-traveller, i.e. he is interested in the customs and habits of the population, the social and political conditions of the country he resides in, and an antiquarian-traveller, i.e. he is interested in the monuments, edifices, ancient works of art, libraries and archives of the particular place he is exploring. Furthermore, after his encounter with Baron Taylor, a friend of his, it is clearly stated that Spain is “a country of history,

¹² Rafael Valencia, “*Islamic Seville: Its Political, Social and Cultural History*”, in Salma Khadra Jayyusi; Manuela Marín (eds.), *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, Brill. 1992, p. 136.

¹³ George Borrow, *The Bible in Spain*, transcribed from the 1908 Cassell and Company edition by David Price, Release Date: March 1, 2011 [eBook #415], < <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/415/415-h/415-h.htm#citation171>>, Chapter XV.

a country full of art, great paintings and beautiful monuments.”¹⁴ On this occasion, I can only add that it is a picturesque location altogether, more than just beautiful, yet not sublime in its appearance. It is nothing less than worthy of being painted.

In the next chapter of the book, Borrow makes other very interesting observations about the Moorish heritage and here he adds some information about what personally concerns me most: “the Other”. Here it is represented by some German colonists or people which I may describe as “reverse Gastarbeiters” or “counter-Gastarbeiters” because they did not go to work in Germany like the Gastarbeiters that went there from the 1950s onwards but did quite the opposite. I would like to present to you part of the description of these people, made by Borrow:

[...] But what struck me as most singular in connexion with these people, was the colour of their hair and complexion; the latter was fair and ruddy, and the former of a bright auburn, both in striking contrast to the black hair and swarthy visages which in general distinguish the natives of this province.¹⁵

It seems that the German colonists retained their German physical appearance and nothing more than that in terms of the traits inherited from their forefathers. From what George Borrow wrote about them, it is evident that the Germans became assimilated by the environment they lived in and by the people who surrounded them, none of the younger generations spoke German at all. Even their behaviour, not only the fact that they only spoke Andalusian but their way of interacting with the British traveller and his Genoese companion showed that they were now more Andalusian than German. Borrow himself manifested one of the commonplaces associated with the German people – their honesty.¹⁶ Unfortunately for him, that was just a common prejudice and after all they were not living in Germany anymore. It became clear that they had lost all their ties with their former homeland, except their physical characteristics. After their encounter with the German colonists, the traveller (Borrow) and his companion went to rest in a posada (an inn) in a city called Cordova. Without getting into much detail about their stay there, I would just like to point out what

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Borrow, *The Bible in Spain*, transcribed from the 1908 Cassell and Company edition by David Price, Chapter XVI.

¹⁶ Ibid.

the lesson from that stay was – “never tell your real opinion when it is not shared by the people under whose roof you stay in”.¹⁷

The next chapter starts with an account of the city of Cordova, its beauties and the places worth visiting there; again these places are edifices such as the mosque-cathedral of Cordova, built originally by the Moors and then converted to a cathedral by the Christians in their famous Gothic style. Borrow found the mixture of the Muslim and Christian styles bizarre but that did not stop him from claiming that “it still remains a magnificent and glorious edifice, and well calculated to excite feelings of awe and veneration within the bosoms of those who enter it.”¹⁸ In my opinion, this Englishman had a good taste and I tend to agree with his view on the beautiful and even sometimes picturesque heritage left by the Arabs. Perhaps even more interesting was Borrow’s account of the Moors’ descendants – the Moors of Barbary. According to his account, these people lost the pride of their ancestors, they were not huge admirers of the magnificent edifices built by their own people. Moreover, these Moors were not illiterate, they were educated hajis and talebs, people of letters, scholars who knew the language of their own forefathers but were not in any way exalted by it. It seems that they thought that what their progenitors made was long gone. They were only interested in the present, in the transient things. My explanation for that strange phenomenon is that sometimes the people of a certain nation underestimate their own nation’s achievements just because at the present moment their nation is not as great as it once used to be. I think nowadays that is the case with the British but they do not seem to have lost their pride or their dignity, even though their empire has collapsed and no longer exists. The details about the Inquisition, featured at the end of the chapter, are also of huge interest to me because they give accounts of the crimes which that institution considered punishable under its jurisdiction. The main threat according to one of the members of this Holy Office was caused by the crypto-Jews, he even divided them into two categories – black and white Jews, the former were described as followers of the ancient law of Moses and the latter of many different kinds of heresy such as freemasonry, Lutheranism and others...¹⁹ Even though there may have been such people, I do not find the methods in which the Inquisition extracted the truth from the accused people accurate and proving anything but these people’s wish to remain alive and to end the torture they were experiencing.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., Chapter XVII.

¹⁹ Ibid.

All things considered, I think that George Borrow's portrayal of 19th Century Spain was fairly accurate. I am of the opinion that Borrow was a highly intelligent traveller who was aware of the culture and the language of the country that he visited; he was in no way ignorant or condescending towards the Spanish people and their history. As for the initial question which I proposed, I assume that the Moors did leave an everlasting legacy and that could be felt even today. The Arab culture is an indispensable part of modern-day Spain and without that culture and that tradition, Spain would be an entirely different place. I could also compare Spain's case to Sicily. There, the Arab's influence could still be felt as is the case with Spain. Furthermore, I think that Spain is indeed a part of the Orient due to that influence, the East could still be discerned in one of the most western points of Europe. Finally, I would conclude that Spain like Germany and Italy is a multi-national country, a country of divisions and contrasts but also a country that is learning to be tolerant to the diverse religious practices and the diverging attitudes of the peoples inhabiting it.