

Book Reviews

Robert White. *A River in Spain: Discovering the Duero Valley in Old Castile*. I. B. Tauris Publishers, London and New York. 1998. 192 pp. \$18.95

A refreshingly unique travel guide, *A River in Spain: Discovering the Duero Valley in Old Castile*, invites us to think differently about the way we prepare for and conduct our activities as travelers. Spain's Duero River valley, mostly overlooked by travelers, is a region of magnificent visual beauty and significant historic interest.

The Duero's importance, from author Robert White's perspective, lies principally in the two hundred years that it was the contested frontiers between Christian and Muslim Spain. Originating in the central northern province of Soria, it traverses 855 kilometers (535 miles) westward through the Autonomous Region of Castile and Leon to the Portuguese border, where it continues to the Atlantic Ocean. This region is the location for many important historical events of the early medieval through renaissance periods as monarchies forged Spain into a national political entity. The monumental remains from these times are extensive throughout the valley. Once richly covered with forests, centuries of human habitation have turned the area into one of Spain's driest regions, known in recent centuries for its economic privation. Today, this sparsely populated area is noted for the scenic panoramas of the *mesetas* and valleys, vast croplands (principally barley and wheat), and the picturesque remains of fortifications and traditional villages and cities.

To prepare travelers well, the book opens with extensive background material in the first three chapters; they are followed by seven chapters detailing itineraries through this region. White states, "I have written the book for the traveler who wants to leave the main road and explore the countryside" (p. xiv). Chapter I, "The Setting," introduces us to the geography, both physical and human, with an eye to the traveler's visual experience. White is attentive to the historical influences that yield the practices of city planning and pastoral patterns we observe today.

Chapter II, "The Historical Background," is a very extensive survey of the political history of Spain beginning with the earliest Iberian settlers and ending with the contemporary period. Written for the non-specialist, White guides us through the complexities of the formation of the first Christian kingdoms; the expansion of the Islamic conquest into this area; the infighting among conquerors that allowed a Christian rebellion to begin; and the gradual reconquest, re-settlement, and nation building by Christian kings. The powerful influence of the Catholic Church, evolution of Spain into a modern state, and the Spanish Civil War are also discussed. Given the clarity of White's writing, this historical narrative truly prepares readers to appreciate the detailed

historical commentary that accompanies the descriptions of specific sites as the book progresses.

Chapter III, "Architectural Notes," guides readers through the salient features of architectural development from the Visigothic through the Baroque with attention to the impact of Muslim and other outside influences. Particularly noteworthy is the section on the Romanesque style upon which White focuses in great detail, providing excellent background for the quantity of historical buildings that date from the medieval period. At the end of the book, glossaries of both Spanish and English terms support this architectural discussion. It should be noted that the selected bibliography of works in both Spanish and English, also at the end of the book, includes some of the great classic works on Spanish history, architecture and art as well as works of recent scholarship.

For the main body of this book, White develops itineraries through provinces in or adjacent to the Duero Valley starting in Soria and ending in Salamanca. He always turns first to the local history and connects it with the events that happened in places to be visited: palaces, castles, churches, monasteries, city squares, and neighborhoods. Here the historical detail becomes rich as the traveler is invited to imagine major political events and intrigues. So, for example, while visiting Soria we can appreciate the enormous task undertaken by Alfonso I of Aragon, who in the 12th century oversaw the post-reconquest resettlement. Repopulation included *mudejares* (Muslims who stayed behind), *mozarabes* (Christians living under Muslim rule), immigrants relocating from southern Spain still under Muslim control, and a Jewish community to whom he gave protection. A visit to the University of Salamanca is cause for remembrances of the great Spanish intellectuals who taught there over the centuries and especially the militant confrontation between army generals and the rector, renowned philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39).

An intertwining of discussions of the architectural features of many sites along with the historical commentary guides the reader to a multi-dimensional appreciation of specific locations. Details of social history also emerge. We come to appreciate that the retrospective narrative we call "history" is constructed from the building blocks of individual events with both planned and accidental consequences. And as we read through these itineraries (ideally while visiting the places), we slowly see the interconnections between events in nearby places and across spans of time. The gradual opening of these experiences for the patient and persistent traveler is ultimately what is most rewarding in White's approach.

In his preface, White notes how much he relied on his conversations with local individuals to learn the intimacies of local history. In fact, there are many monuments which cannot be entered without seeking out the neighbor with a key. Lamentably, as his narrative progresses, we see no evidence of what must have been rich interactions with local people. The author loses an opportunity to add a dimension to his portraits of places

and also the opportunity to provide a model for how other travelers might have valuable encounters with local citizens.

White is passionate about history and this leads to another limitation of the book namely, the sparse commentary on the current economy or culture of the provinces visited. As admirable as the rich sense of history is, we are not drawn into its relationship with the contemporary world, not even to know how local people view their past or feel its influence today. The impact of Spain's entrance into the European Union and the elements of recent globalization that have intruded into the rural, small town, and urban environments are not examined. Serious travelers would welcome insights into the modern fortunes and misfortunes of this economically complex area.

In the commercially popular travel guides upon which we and our students tend to rely, authors prioritize for us the sites deemed most valuable to visit, reinforcing our tourist inclinations, especially the short cuts for time-pressed visitors who want to catch the highlights. Not this author. If one uses this guide in order to make decisions about what to visit or not to visit, one needs to read whole sections and then make decisions. Value judgments are present, but they are imbedded in dense historical and architectural discussions of sites.

This book should be an essential holding of the libraries of study abroad programs in Spain, and as such would serve as encouragement for students to explore thoughtfully this particular region or other fascinating but less commonly visited places. For professionals in the study abroad field, the book is an example of the ways we should be seeking to identify resource materials for ourselves, our faculty, and students that reach beneath the surface of the travel experience, stimulating the development of keen powers of observation, contemplation and reflection, and fostering an ethos of responsible exploration and continuous learning.

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