1982

The Salamanca of Richard Ford: Notes from the Margaret I. King Library

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol3/iss2/8

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On a Sunday morning, shortly before our sabbatical year in Salamanca came to an end, a drawing appeared in the local history section of our newspaper, *El Adelanto*. It was entitled “*La Salamanca de Richard Ford,*” and was accompanied by a brief account of Ford’s travels in Spain, 1830–1833. I clipped the sketch, and packed it to ship home with other mementos.

One rainy day six months later, I decided to satisfy my curiosity about Richard Ford. Who was he, and what was he doing in Salamanca? Starting with the *DNB*, and progressing through the various national library catalogs, I became fascinated, and craved more information. I approached the card catalog, thinking that perhaps one or two of the items I had listed might be there. To my surprise and delight, all of Ford’s major works, save one, were not only catalogued, but were actually on the shelves:


*Letters of Richard Ford (1797–1858)* Edited by Rowland E. Prothero. (London: John Murray, 1905) [Ford was actually born in 1796].

An unexpected bonus was two volumes whose spines proclaim them *Sundry Reviews*. A bygone Ford devotee had clipped Ford’s reviews from various journals in which they had appeared, inserted handwritten title pages, and had all bound. The binding and
bookplates are identical to that of the letters. According to Mrs. Carolyn Hammer, the university purchased these books in 1950 from Shelby Darbishire, of Boyle County, Kentucky. They formed a part of his large and varied collection, much of which is now in the Margaret I. King Library. By the time I had finished reading all the material available, I felt that I knew Richard Ford and that I had revisited Spain.

Ford was well-born, well-educated, and a man of parts. When he set out for Spain in 1830, with his wife and three children, he was beginning an adventure through which he would ultimately acquaint the English with a fascinating land which had hitherto been largely unknown. He and his family took up residence first in Sevilla, where Ford began learning Spanish, and afterwards in Granada, during which time they lived in a part of the Alhambra. Ford made a series of long journeys throughout Spain during his four years’ stay. As he went, he wrote journals on which he later drew for his publications about Spain.

Upon his return to England, he bought an Elizabethan country house at Heavitree, in East Devonshire. In renovating the house, he incorporated many Spanish architectural features. His design for its gardens showed a decidedly Moorish influence. In the gardens, he built a small cottage in which his extensive library was housed. Here Ford devoted himself to writing articles, largely for the Quarterly Review, though he also contributed to other journals of the day. An article on Velasquez, for example, which he wrote for the Penny Cyclopaedia, is credited with introducing that miraculous seventeenth-century painter to the English.

In 1840, the publisher John Murray III asked Ford to write a volume on Spain for his series of red handbooks for travelers. Murray’s father had published in 1820 what was doubtless one of the earliest travel guides of its kind, A Handbook for Travellers on the Continent, by Mrs. Mariana Starke. John Murray III had subsequently originated the idea of a series and had written a number of volumes himself. He gave the background of his guidebooks, when, in the November 1889 issue of Murray’s Magazine, he looked back on his guideless first tour of Europe, an experience sufficient to inspire him to provide for other travelers “all the facts, information, statistics, etc., which an English tourist would be likely to require.” The series was so well received by travelers of the day that Murray began asking others who had
detailed knowledge of various countries to compose handbooks. There had been considerable interest in Spain since the Duke of Wellington campaigned on the Peninsula during the Napoleonic Wars, but due to Spain's relative isolation from the rest of Europe, few Englishmen had visited it.

Ford found adaptation to the guidebook format troublesome, since he was used to shorter forms, such as reviews and essays. He was reconstructing his Spanish travels from the numerous "pocketbooks," or journals, which he had kept during his years in Spain. The encyclopedic handbook took Ford five years to write. "Its only fault was that it gave too much for the convenience of the traveller, for the two stout volumes of over a thousand closely printed pages contained in the guise of a manual the matter of an encyclopedia."²

Despite this shortcoming, the Handbook was immensely popular and ultimately went through nine editions. Due to harsh criticism by friends who also knew Spain well and thought that some of Ford's comments were better left unsaid, Ford himself suppressed the first edition. A second edition, published in 1847, was a more manageable size. From the clippings emerged Gatherings from Spain, a wonderfully descriptive, if somewhat opinionated, outpouring of Ford's impressions of Spain and the Spaniards. This was published in 1847 in the United States by G. P. Putnam under the title, The Spaniards and Their Country, and was translated and published in Madrid in 1922 as Cosas de Espana. The Spanish translation of the Gatherings, "which has become extremely rare, was the first of Ford's works to appear in Spain."³ The larger, more complete format of the Handbook was resumed with the third edition of 1855, the last edition published while Ford was alive. In later editions "excisions and additions have mutilated his masterpiece."⁴ Ford's health was failing when he completed the revision of the third edition, and he died on 1 September 1858.

In 1905 Rowland E. Prothero edited a collection of letters from Ford to Henry Unwin Addington, who in 1830 was Great Britain's Envoy Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary at the Court of Madrid. Addington had preserved these letters, and had directed his widow to leave them to Richard Ford's widow. It was Mrs. Ford who asked Prothero to edit the letters, which he did in such a way that Ford's mind and feelings are revealed to their reader.⁵

In Ford's letters and in the writings he himself published, Ford
was able, through his artist’s eye and his powers of expression, to describe Spain in engaging detail. Whether due to the Spanish reluctance to change, or to the fact that he managed to capture the spirit of the land and its inhabitants accurately, much of what he recorded a hundred and fifty years ago remains useful today.

Ford described his plans for a visit to Spain to Addington in a letter of 15 September 1830 which begins: “Mr. Wetherell will take this to Madrid, on his way to Seville, where I am shortly bound myself on account of Mrs. Ford’s health. She is condemned to spend a winter or two in a warm climate, and we have decided on the south of Spain for this year.” Mrs. Ford was the former Harriet Capel, a daughter of the Earl of Essex, and a remarkably accomplished lady. Two of her architectural studies of the Alhambra appear in the Letters (opposite p. 40 and p. 82).

In May 1832 Ford began the journey which was to take him to Salamanca. He decided to follow the old Roman road on this journey, as far as Santiago de Compostela, in Galicia. In a letter of 12 May 1832 he wrote, “When I reach Salamanca, I shall settle my future plans. Much will depend on whether the cholera should take a fancy about that time to travel in Spain, in which case I shall get back here through Madrid as quickly as I can. . . .” From the Handbook one gets a lucid picture of Ford’s entry into Salamanca:

After leaving these plains [by way of Ciudad Rodrigo] and riding over a bleak, treeless, unenclosed country, cold in spring and winter, scorched and calcined in summer, we reach Salamanca, rising nobly, with dome and tower, on its hill crest over the Tormes, which is crossed by a long Roman bridge of 27 arches, one that becomes an ancient and wise university better than Folly Bridge becomes Oxford.

On 6 June 1832 Ford wrote to Addington from Salamanca:

Here I am in this venerable university, completing my education, and endeavouring to make amends for the sad waste of time during the years mis-spent at Oxford earning the honour of a M.A. This peaceful habitation of the Muses is disturbed by the piping of the fife and the beating of the “soul-stirring” drum. The empty colleges are filled with soldiers, who are inscribing on the walls carrajo. . . . The identical guide who was with Lord Wellington lives still at
Arapiles [the village of Arapiles was the Duke of Wellington’s position at the battle of Salamanca, 22 July 1812]. Would you believe it? Not a single Spaniard [of the present occupation forces], though they have been here two months, has ever been over to the scene of the battle. They, I suppose, know full well how very little they had to do with it.⁹

In the *Handbook*, Ford deplores the fact that Wellington has not been appreciated:

The superb Plaza Mayor, the largest square in Spain, was built by Andrés García de Quiñones in 1700-33. A collonaded arcade is carried on each side, underneath which are shops, the post-office, [etc.]. . . . The facades are adorned with busts of kings and worthies of Spain, and blank spaces have been left for future great men. No bust of Wellington decorates any yawning niche in these walls, which overlook those plains where he won back this city and Madrid; yet Argüelles, in his *Historia*, cites as proof of Spanish gratitude the paper decree of the Cortes, Aug. 17, 1813, to erect a memorial to the deliverer of Salamanca. . . . It has never been put up, or probably never will—*Cosas de España*.¹⁰

Ford comments, in the *Handbook*, on the decline of the university, which in the fifteenth century had been regarded as one of the four major universities in Europe:

Salamanca, which in the 14th century boasted of 17,000 students, had already, in the 16th, declined to 7,000, and it continued to languish until the French invasion: now it is so comparatively a desert, that when the Term, *el curso*, was opened, Oct. 1, 1846, by the rector, attended by military bands! only 30 doctors and 400 students appeared. . . .¹¹

The students resemble those of present-day Salamanca: “These students are or were among the boldest and most impertinent of the human race; full of tags and rags, fun, frolic, license, and guitars, as of reckless youth and insolence of health.”¹² Ford’s accounts of student life, of the university buildings, and of the historical and architectural detail of this ancient city are
Ford neglects to mention (or may not have realized) that Salamanca had the first university library in Europe. Julian Alvarez Villar states that “This library is the first university library in Europe, founded by Alfonso X in 1254, and the most eloquent testimony of what the University of Salamanca was during its most glorious epoch in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries.” Ford makes no mention of the very fine incunabula which are housed in the old library. Due to the unsettled times during which he visited, these may have been safely put away. Neither does he take note of the sign above the library entrance, which is doubtless one of the earliest examples of a security device—it threatens with excommunication any person who removes a book from the library. Ford gives us a polished description of the famous facade of the library:

Coming out of the schools, the grand facade of the university library is alone worth an architect’s visit to Salamanca: it is a triumph of the decorative and heraldic style, where the creamy stone has been as wax in the hands of the artist, and no Moor ever embroidered lacework, Cachemire lienzo, more delicately. It is of the richest period of Ferdinand and Isabella, whose medallions and badges are interworked with scrolls: the
inscription is in Greek—"the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom."\textsuperscript{15}

In his essay on Spanish architecture for the \textit{Quarterly Review} of March 1845, Ford mentions the facade again:

In pomp of armorial sculpture and heraldic emblazoning, Spain, the land of the Hidalgo, of pride and pretension, may challenge even Germany. The custom of carving shields and crests over the \textit{Casas solares}, or family manor-houses, tended to encourage this branch of art, which never was carried to such perfection as in the facade of the library at Salamanca. . . .\textsuperscript{16}

Looking closely at the details of Ford’s drawing of Salamanca from the hill across the Tormes, one is struck with how very nearly contemporary his sketch is. Here is Miguel de Unamuno’s beloved “high grove of towers,” almost as one might view it today.

Although Ford was undoubtedly a born traveler, adaptable and tolerant of most conditions, he makes an observation at the end of his letter of 6 June about the climate of Salamanca:

I have good accounts of my wife at Seville, who is broiling while I am shivering under the blasts of Castile, attended with cold and rain—worse weather than the most inclement June in England. Sad work for an artist, as the wind blows one’s paper to rags and the rain wets it through. . . .\textsuperscript{17}

In spite of these minor inconveniences, Richard Ford both enjoyed and appreciated the “monumental city.” He caught the spirit of Salamanca forever in his classic descriptions and in his sketches.

\textbf{NOTES}

\textsuperscript{1}Thomas Seccombe, “Murray, John,” \textit{DNB} (1908–09).

4Brinsley Ford, p. 83.

5This volume “has long been very difficult to obtain.” Brinsley Ford, p. 46.


7*Letters*, p. 89.


Reprints of Ford’s works still in print include:


9*Letters*, pp. 90–92.


16*Quarterly Review*, March 1845, p. 519.

17*Letters*, p. 93.