‘In the distance a light?’
– Contemporary Spanish Civil War Writing in New Zealand

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Introduction

The following passage, originally written in Spanish, was published in May 1938 in New Zealand’s largest weekly paper:

Even in the morning light the bomb thrown from an aeroplane leaves behind a luminous, meteoric wake. The tuning-fork of space vibrates on being struck and it feels as if the very entrails were torn from one’s inside, as though one were being turned inside out.

The sickening sensation starts in the pit of the stomach, and the eardrums, too sensitive for the commotion, hurt as though pierced with a hot knife. That is all. Meanwhile, the silvery bird that laid the brilliant, fiery egg flashes away and soon is nothing more than a dot in the immensity of space . . .

Then the tragedy starts to dawn on those below. Where did that one fall? 2

The author of that extract, Manuel Chaves Nogales, was a Madrid-based journalist describing his experience of the aerial bombing of an urban civilian population, a form of warfare at that time almost unprecedented but one that would become routine within two years. The passage quoted forms part of a substantial body of writing by Nogales on the Spanish Civil War and its publication in New Zealand in 1938, during the course of the war itself, is significant for several reasons.

First, the material appeared in the Weekly News (formerly the Auckland Weekly News), at that time the largest circulation weekly in the country and a conservative periodical whose other coverage of the Civil War was notably more cautious and politically noncommittal than Nogales’ vivid and firmly pro-Republican testimonies. Second, the stories were published as serial fiction, and readers were given no indication as to their factual accuracy. Finally, Nogales’ work is not mentioned in any contemporary or subsequent New Zealand study I have found, whether on fiction published in our newspapers and magazines, or in the only comprehensive single-author
analysis of New Zealand’s response to the Civil War, a 1986 PhD thesis by Susan Skudder. These remarkable examples of politically engaged reportage based on eyewitness accounts are now acclaimed in Spain and elsewhere for their literary and historical worth, yet they appear to have left no trace on New Zealand’s cultural landscape. This paper examines the reasons for this.

New Zealand press coverage of the Spanish Civil War

It is scarcely surprising that in 1938 the mainstream New Zealand press coverage of the Civil War then ravaging Spain was neither broad nor deep. The two countries had no historical or political links and economic links were limited to importing a tiny amount of Spanish olive oil, sherry and oranges. New Zealand had recently elected its first-ever Labour government, and its supporters might have been expected to feel sympathy for the Republican government of Spain, overthrown by a military coup just months after that election. However it was evident that the incoming Labour government could or would do very little about the crisis in Spain, especially while domestic economic problems remained pressing. New Zealand’s foreign policy was still determined from Britain, which also bought the great majority of its exports, and Britain remained determinedly neutral throughout the conflict. All of these factors made the Spanish tragedy less significant than domestic or many other international issues to the average New Zealand newspaper reader.

Day-to-day horrors such as the aerial bombardment of Madrid were routinely covered by the country’s daily newspapers, but typically in a manner that distanced the conflict’s political and internal issues from the concerns of New Zealanders. Reports of the war, along with almost all other foreign news, were supplied by British and US press agencies and newspapers and reflected those countries’ studiedly neutral policies on Spain. As Susan Skudder has pointed out, most local newspapers portrayed world affairs, and New Zealand’s role within them, as determined by the interests of the British Empire. Although several New Zealand newspapers ventured a slight bias towards the Spanish Republic, their editorials offered little opinion on the larger moral or international issues raised by the far-off Civil War.

There were, however, important exceptions. Both pro-Republicans and pro-Francoists waged heated debates through the letters columns of newspapers, especially the Otago Daily Times and the Christchurch Press. During late 1936 and 1937 the Auckland Star and Dominion carried a column called ‘Behind the Cables’, an analysis of foreign news by the expatriate writer John Mulgan. He had been present at the League of Nations in September 1936 when Britain confirmed its policy of non-intervention in Spain, and
clearly believed that this policy would only advance the spread of fascism in Europe.

The most politically committed of the New Zealand dailies was, unsurprisingly, the *Standard*, the organ of the Labour Party. For the first two years of the Civil War it ran regular stories and editorials in support of Spain's Republican government. Yet it was a cautious and qualified pro-Republicanism, conditional on retaining domestic political support. Less than a year after the outbreak of war the *Standard* stopped running letters on the subject in response to complaints from Catholic readers, who made up an important bloc of Labour voters. The following year the *Standard* toned down coverage of the war to maintain its distance from the Communist Party and the Soviet Union, in line with Labour Party policy. Susan Skudder notes that once the extent and implications of Russia's involvement in the conflict became undeniable, there was a 'sudden disappearance of any mention of Spain' from the *Standard*'s editorial columns.5

The vigorously leftwing fortnightly *Tomorrow* suffered fewer political constraints and, given its small circulation, provided an important outlet for pro-Republican views. Initially its stance was more politically nuanced than any of the other papers, and in March 1937 it published an examination of dissensions within the Republican ranks that criticized the role of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union. However, by late 1937 the Communist Party's position on Spain had become the only version acceptable in *Tomorrow*, which then ceased to publish other leftwing analyses that departed from the pro-Communist line.6

Outside the mainstream press, vehemently partisan and irreconcilably opposed pro-Republican and pro-Franco positions were represented by, respectively, the organ of New Zealand's tiny Communist Party, the *Workers Weekly* (later renamed the *People's Voice*), and the official publications of the Catholic Church. Their accounts of the Spanish Civil War were political mirror images – propagandist, strident and rarely reliable and authoritative.

The two Catholic papers, the *Tablet* and *Zealandia*, were the only New Zealand periodicals to present a resolutely pro-Franco line throughout the Civil War, which they interpreted purely as an attack upon the church by communists and anarchists. Their extensive coverage consisted mainly of reprinted articles from overseas Catholic publications, and favoured stories of Republican atrocities and miraculous divine interventions. *Zealandia*, for example, reprinted a French account of a Spanish Communist who cut his village's famous crucifix almost in two. The following day he was hit by a car and his body was picked up almost in two pieces.7

According to the historian of New Zealand Catholicism Nicholas Reid, between August 1936 and April 1937 the front page of every issue of
Zealandia ran a story on Spain, and unlike more mainstream publications, this coverage did not greatly diminish as the war moved into its final months. Reid describes the coverage by the Catholic press as, ‘completely one-sided, [it] offered no real social analysis of the causes of the war and did not choose to reveal, or was ignorant of, what was going on behind Franco’s lines. If it was accurate about large-scale Republican atrocities, it was, by omission, completely inaccurate about larger-scale Nationalist ones.’ When challenged over some of its wilder assertions, the Catholic press and its readers fell back on the consolations of their faith. ‘If a Catholic is to believe anyone,’ wrote one reader of the Tablet, ‘he should above all believe his own papers, which in a matter as serious as this would not deceive him.’

The Worker’s Weekly treated the Civil War with equal importance from a diametrically opposed point of view. It saw it as a struggle between democracy and fascism, taking place not just in Spain but internationally. ‘The fate of democracy in New Zealand and the whole world’, said the Workers’ Weekly in March 1937, ‘is being decided on the plains of Madrid’. However, like the Catholic papers, the Communist Weekly reported an ideologically blinkered, partisan and propagandistic version of events, selectively omitting inconvenient truths.

The Weekly News

The stories by Chaves Nogales published in New Zealand during 1938 constituted a distinguished exception to both the bland and detached reportage of the mainstream press and the improbable claims of the implacably partisan, and they were published in the unlikely vehicle of the Weekly News. This paper (known until 1934 as the Auckland Weekly News) was at that time the country’s bestselling weekly and a much-loved national institution. It had been launched in 1863 with the comprehensive subtitle, ‘A journal of commerce, agriculture, politics, literature, science and art’, and survived for a hundred years, outlasting all competitors in the weekly illustrated paper market. In 1902 the Cyclopedia of New Zealand described the magazine as ‘essentially a country settler’s paper. It . . . deals with every phase of farming life’ and even in the 1930s, when most sales were to towns and cities, it also functioned as a nationwide rural weekly, with devoted readers in the most isolated parts of the country. It was therefore a highly influential cultural force, its richly illustrated pages with their familiar pink covers serving as wallpaper as well as reading matter in dwellings and outhouses nationwide.

As a general-interest weekly, the Weekly News provided only a fraction of the coverage of international events appearing in the daily press. In the case of the Spanish Civil War, it often simply reproduced material from its
parent publication, the Auckland daily the *New Zealand Herald*. Of all the metropolitan dailies, the *Herald* took the most conservative position on the war in Spain, and by 1938 this had developed into a pro-Francoist view. Its editorials, which often reappeared in the *Weekly News*, offered an analysis of the war that, at times, paralleled the position taken by the Catholic press.

However, international and even national news formed only a small proportion of each bulky 100-plus-page issue of the 1938 *Weekly News*. Its rear section included half a dozen pages of light reading, both fiction and non-fiction, with occasional stories by local authors, some by such well-known names as Frank Sargeson. More common were serials and individual stories supplied by overseas syndication agencies, especially the English firm of Tillottson’s. These tended to the formulaic, in the genres of light romance, detective yarns and sensational adventure or ‘blood and thunder’ stories.

**Heroes and Beasts**

As they appeared in the *Weekly News*, Nogales’ ten stories from the Spanish Civil War, illustrated with bold and lurid drawings as well as photographs, most closely resembled the ‘blood and thunder’ genre. They were run under the collective title *Heroes and Beasts*, with the longer stories appearing in two parts so that the series ran in 19 consecutive issues between April and August 1938. They deal mainly with events from the first months of the conflict, from July to November 1936. A horrifying panoply of life during wartime is described - bombs falling on the breadlines in Madrid, mounted aristocrats hunting down peasantry in the Huesca countryside, thuggish deserters from the Republican ranks who preyed on both sides, fifth columnists, Foreign Legionnaires, anarchist militia and Moorish mercenaries. One group of participants who could be expected to appeal especially to readers outside Spain - the thousands of volunteers from many countries, including New Zealand, who went to the aid of the Republican army – is almost entirely absent. Nearly all of these foreign fighters reached the battlefront later than the period described and only two foreign volunteers appear, an English and a French airman, and both briefly.

The *Weekly News* introduced the series as fictional short stories, albeit ‘stark in their realism’. This, however, is misleading since the series straddles the genres of reportage and fiction and the incidents it describes are verifiable from historical sources. Renowned Civil War figures such as the anarchist leader Buenventura Durrutti, the French aviator and writer André Malraux and the fascist general Quiépo De Llano appear, although peripherally. Instead the action centres mainly on lower-level functionaries, predominantly Republican but also from the rebels. My favourite of these is the huge and shambling anarchist blacksmith nicknamed ‘Anvil’, who takes
part in the storming of the Montaña Barracks in Madrid in July 1936, a key incident in the first days of the Civil War.\textsuperscript{16}

What most distinguishes these stories from other fictionalized accounts of the Civil War is their political stance, avowedly pro-Republican but also frankly and sharply critical of the actions and motives of many in the Republican ranks. The opening story of the series refers to officers of the Republican airforce, ‘hitherto loyal, [who] had flown over to the rebels’, an undoubtedly true picture of the time but one that Republican apologists would surely have denied.\textsuperscript{17} The Republican militias, hastily formed from urban unionists and rural peasants, are depicted as courageous but often incompetent and easily routed by Franco’s professional troops. Nogales’ condemnation of the strategic and ethical failings on the Republican side is accentuated by his even-handedness towards their enemies. Franco’s Moroccan Moorish troops, whose brutality was notorious in Republican mythology, are portrayed with considerable sympathy and insight as deluded victims of their French colonial rulers.\textsuperscript{18}

The language of the stories is both controlled and impassioned. Chaves Nogales appears to report the war’s unbridgeable contradictions and moral ambiguities precisely as he saw them, with neither embellishment nor restraint. His tone is mordant and disillusioned yet filled with admiration for the nameless Spanish people, victims of sectarian savagery on both sides. At times his indictment of the war’s dehumanizing cruelty echoes Dickens’ revulsion at the excesses of the French revolution, but it is delivered with the immediacy and authority of an eyewitness.

\textbf{Life and work of Nogales}\textsuperscript{19}

The writer Manuel Chaves Nogales was born in Seville in 1897 into a family of noted journalists. At a young age he entered the same profession, omitting any preliminary university education. He first worked on the Seville newspaper \textit{El Liberal}, edited by his uncle, and in 1922 moved with his wife Pilar and their first child to Madrid. There he worked on another liberal daily, \textit{El Heraldo de Madrid}, and became its editor.

He travelled as a foreign correspondent throughout Europe and especially to the new state of Soviet Russia, interviewing every social class from factory workers to the deposed aristocracy. His accounts of the new Russia, both admiring and critical, appeared in instalments in his newspaper and later in book form. In 1930 he published the book for which he became nationally famous, a biography of the bullfighter Juan Belmonte. Although Nogales himself disliked bullfighting, his is still regarded as one of the best books on the subject and one of the finest biographies written in Spanish, and it was translated into English and French.\textsuperscript{20}
In 1931 Nogales became the first editor of a new national daily newspaper, *Ahora* (Now), politically independent but ideologically aligned to Spain’s Second Republic and its President, Manuel Azaña. He set up a worldwide network of foreign correspondents but continued to travel extensively himself, reporting especially on the rise of anti-democratic movements across Europe. He interviewed Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda minister, finding him ‘absurd and vulgar’ and alerted his readers to the expansion of Nazi labour camps. He also produced two further books on the Russian revolution, *Lo que ha quedado del imperio de los zares* [What Remains of the Empire of the Tzars] (1931), and *El maestro Juan Martínez que estaba allí* [Juan Martínez who was there] (1934), the latter based on the recollections of a Spanish flamenco dancer who performed in cabarets across Europe and was trapped in Russia by the revolutionary turmoil of 1917. Martínez and his partner spent the following six years there and witnessed the Civil War between Bolsheviks and Tsarists, described by Nogales in terms that make clear his abhorrence of totalitarian rule of any political shade.

Following the 1936 coup by Spain’s military elite, Nogales immediately turned to the crisis in his own country. *Ahora* was at that time Spain’s largest pro-Republican daily and like many other large businesses in Madrid, was promptly taken over by a ‘workers’ council. Nogales appeared to have had no difficulty working under his new management and in a volley of editorials he called for the defence of Spain’s nascent and frail democracy. When, in November 1936, Madrid came under direct attack from rebel forces and the government transferred to Valencia, Nogales decided he could no longer usefully remain in the country and left for Paris with his wife, three children, his brother and several others.

To support this large household he began working for the powerful European agency Havas and for a press agency supplying articles to South American newspapers. From his apartment in the Paris suburb of Montrouge he also produced a Spanish-language newsletter for the *emigré* community, summarizing information brought to France by the latest exiles from Spain. In the same period, drawing on both those *emigré* sources and his recent direct experience, this exceptionally productive writer produced his testimony of the Civil War under the original title *A Sangre y Fuego* [Blood and Fire] and subtitled *Heroes, Martyrs and Beasts of Spain*. The first story, ‘In the distance, a light’, appeared in the Buenos Aires newspaper *Nación* just two months after its author arrived in Paris. The full collection appeared in book form in Chile later in 1937.

The Civil War then still tearing Spain asunder, and its prolonged aftermath, ensured that *A Sangre y Fuego* was not published in Nogales’ own country until 2001. However, the collection was soon translated into English by a London-based Spanish journalist and his companion, and appeared
in the London newspaper the *Evening Standard* from January 1938. One additional story, ‘A Refuge’, described the bombing of the northern city of Bilbao. This was probably written in late 1937, based on information Nogales received from exiles recently displaced by that bombing. From April 1938, as we have seen, the stories appeared in New Zealand in the *Weekly News* and in the same year in book form in the US, Britain and Canada. For those editions Nogales added a preface, described by the Spanish academic Dr María Cintas Guillén as ‘of manifest fairness and a lesson in wisdom’.21

Its author had little time to relish the international response to his work, since within two years he found himself witness to the collapse of another European democracy. Nogales’ many feature articles during the 1930s denouncing the rise of Nazism had ensured that his name appeared on a Gestapo blacklist, and as the German army approached Paris he was forced to emigrate for the second time. He escaped to London while his wife and children, now numbering four, returned to Spain where the Civil War had recently ended. For the next four years Nogales worked as a columnist for the *Evening Standard*, and for the Atlantic Pacific Press Agency and the BBC World Service. He continued to combine the roles of journalist and author and his final book, *The Agony of France*, was published in 1941. This unflinching essay on the downfall of Paris is still regarded as one of the most valuable accounts of the debacle. Nogales was never reunited with his wife and children. In 1944 he died in London of tuberculosis, aged 47.

**Responses to Nogales’ work**

Regrettably, it has not proved possible to determine what, if any, impact Nogales’ work made on New Zealand readers. The *Weekly News* did not print letters to the editor and few of the records of its owners, Wilson and Horton, have survived. There appear to be no New Zealand memoirs of this period that refer to the Nogales stories. Susan Skudder’s thesis mentions Spanish Civil War-themed short stories that appeared in the Catholic weekly the *Tablet*, but not those by Nogales. This may be because she searched the foreign news section of the *Weekly News* and not the fiction section at the end of each issue.

However, more than half a century after his work first appeared in print, Nogales has become widely acclaimed within and beyond Spain. One of the first books to call attention to his achievements was *Las armas y las letras, (Weapons and Letters)* by Andrés Trapiello, a study of the role of Spanish intellectuals during the Civil War, originally published in 1994 and reissued in 2010. According to Trapiello, ‘[o]f all the hundreds of stories and novels that have been written about the Civil War, perhaps none can compare to *Blood and Fire.*’22 He regards Nogales’ preface to the book as,
‘the most important account of the [civil] war written during that war’. It should, he maintains, ‘be included, in full, in all books of Spanish history, journalism and literature, as a model of probity and tact, especially since it was conceived in the midst of disaster, with no time to compose, correct or amend the draft.’ Another Spanish academic, the writer and translator Xavier Pericay, said in the introduction to a recent edition of The Agony of France that Nogales’ work deserves to stand beside that of George Orwell and Albert Camus.

The academic most closely associated with the revival of Nogales’ work and critical reputation is Professor María Isabel Cintas Guillén of the University of Seville. Her edited version of his complete narrative works was published in two volumes in 1993, and a further two volumes of journalism appeared in 2001. At the time of writing she was preparing a previously unpublished collection of essays on the Spanish Civil War for publication in late 2010.

The work of these and other scholars has led to a re-evaluation of Nogales as one of the most distinguished and farsighted contemporary writers on the Civil War, and a leading figure in twentieth-century Spanish literature. Thirty years before Truman Capote and Tom Wolfe applied the techniques of fiction to reportage and called the result New Journalism, Nogales was recording the crucial events of his time in a prose and format that saw them published in a mass-circulation weekly in far-distant and relatively indifferent New Zealand. His biography of the bullfighter Belmonte ‘reads like a novel,’ according to the renowned Spanish novelist Javier Marías, whose own three-volume magnum opus, Tu rostro mañana (Your Face Tomorrow), deals with a New Zealander’s participation in the Civil War in terms that similarly transgress the porous borders between fact and fiction.

Professor Cintas Guillén regards Nogales as a sui generis figure, who articulated a clear, forceful and prescient analysis of his age without recourse to theoretical positions but instead based firmly on his own observations. At a time when intellectual honesty and fidelity to principle often led to prison or the firing squad, he continued writing at white heat to denounce extremism of the right and left and uphold the values of liberal democracy. Spain was, arguably, the battlefield for the first great war of ideology, a confrontation calling for the annihilation not only of the enemy’s troops but of their ideas. In this maelstrom of fifth-columnists, revenge killings, rigid censorship and perversion of truth, Nogales remained keenly observant, immensely productive and unshakeably principled.

The lack of any evident response by Weekly News readers to the Nogales stories is therefore somewhat disappointing. However, it cannot be concluded that the Heroes and Beasts series left no impression at all in New Zealand – rather, that no written traces of the stories’ impact are discernable in the
present day. Their exceptional qualities were not fully appreciated until long after the author’s death and their early publication in the Weekly News therefore constitutes both a significant exception to the general pattern of contemporary Civil War reportage in this country and a testament to the Weekly News’s unique place in New Zealand popular culture.

1 The research and writing of this paper was made possible by the support of Spanish-speaking informants, in particular Diana Burns, Sebastian Faber, Daniel Gascón, Cristina Gómez de la Torre and Maríbel Guillén.
4 Skudder, pp.112-14.
5 Skudder, p.284.
7 Zealandia, 3 December 1936, p.1.
9 Tablet, 21 October 1936, p.3.
10 Workers Weekly, 19 March 1937.
12 See, for example, F. Sargeson, ‘In the department’, Weekly News, 9 June 1937.
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and the website maintained by María Isabel Cintas Guillén - http://manuelchavesnogales.info/.

20 The English edition was translated by Leslie Charteris, later the author of a series of lightweight detective novels featuring ‘The Saint’.


27 Email communication, María Isabel Cintas Guillén to Mark Derby, 18 May 2010.

