AN AUSTRALIAN IN SPAIN

Reviewed by Steve Niblo


Lloyd Edmonds' visit to the old country developed in directions he never imagined as he sailed out of Melbourne for Britain in July, 1936. He became one of that small band of Australians who volunteered to join the International Brigades and fight in defence of the Spanish Republic during the Civil War.

Letters from Spain, by Lloyd Edmonds, is a compilation of the surviving correspondence from England and Spain back to his family in Australia. Amirah Inglis edited the collection and contributed an introduction and afterword to the volume.

Initially, the trip formed part of that tradition of Australians visiting Britain for reasons which related to curiosity about the family's origins and also as a part of the process of establishing a separate Australian identity. Edmonds' introduction to the rise of fascist intervention in Spain was particularly direct — as his ship sailed through the Mediterranean, he saw the military airlift of the Nationalist troops from Africa to Spain. However, his initial interest was in Britain.

The early section of the book is an interesting record of his reaction to daily life in Britain and the comparison of his experiences at work with conditions in Australia. Being an educated man, Edmonds enjoyed surveying the intellectual currents of the day, and it was that process which eventually led him to Spain. However, one of the most interesting aspects of the book is the way it shows how a man of peace eventually decided that events in Europe, associated with the rise of fascism and the expansion of Germany and Italy, were too great a threat to ignore.

In his delightfully understated correspondence, the process emerges by which his concerns grew and became a commitment to militant anti-fascism. Harold Laski, the political scientist at the London School of Economics, was quite influential in convincing Edmonds to take the bold step of volunteering to serve in the armed forces of Republican Spain against the generals' revolt.

As part of that tradition of internationalism by which attempts were made to bring mass pressure to bear upon the repressive forces of the day, Edmonds joined the 15th International Brigade. Since he knew how to drive, a somewhat rare skill in Spain in 1936, he was assigned to a transport unit. He was involved in keeping open a lifeline to Madrid and he also supplied republican troops at such important battles as Brunete, Albacete and, in the later stage of the war, on the front at Catalonia. (As Edmonds remarked, as soon as he started to learn Spanish, they changed languages on him.)

Vignettes abound in the study. Travel to and from Spain showed the poignant support for the volunteers which flew in the face of the official neutrality policies of the governments in Britain and France. It is fascinating to hear him talk about meeting such people as Hemingway, although some of these accounts will have to await the further book on the topic by Amirah Inglis.

The accounts of the hardship of battle and the trying features of military life form an important part of Edmonds' experience. Late in the war, he fell ill and did not return to Australia with the other Australian veterans to the chorus of congratulations he so deserved. Events quickly overwhelmed that experience. World War II and the cold war made his experience fade from view. For some decades his story was known only to friends in the labour movement. So it is of value to have this record preserved. His was a good struggle in a just war; this recognition is long overdue.

Steve Niblo teaches history at La Trobe University.