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CHAPTER THREE

AT THE SPANISH FRONTIER

Peter Linehan

What with priests and mullahs on either side of it and men and even women crossing and recrossing more or less unhindered, it always was its own sort of frontier. It had been so almost since whenever it was within a few years of the ‘Arab’ (actually mostly Berber) invasion of 711 that the myth of the origins of the Spanish Reconquest had begun to take shape, with at its core the symbolic breaching by don Oppas of both the physical and the confessional lines which separated the peninsula’s new alien masters from the Christian remnants of the old order holed up in their cave at Covadonga. Oppas, the collaborationist bishop whose failed attempt to persuade don Pelayo and his band to surrender on terms to the invaders, as he himself and so many of the Visigothic old guard had done already, set the scene for the annihilation of 180,000 or so ‘Arabs’, was medieval Spain’s very first, and also perhaps its only wholly uncomplicated frontiersman (Gil Fernández et al. 1985: 126).

Don Pelayo, that Asturian hybrid of Moses and Asterix, and don Oppas, the hero and villain respectively of the dramatic encounter which stands at the beginning of the story of the history of medieval Spain, are inseparable from the scene of that encounter. For Spanish nationalists Covadonga is the cradle of the national epic. From here, high up in the mountains of the north, for them there began that fightback which would end in 1492 with the reconquest of Granada — or what nationalists of another allegiance prefer to call its conquest, or incorporation. Now provided with cafés, car parks, votive candles, just about adequate lavatories and all the other paraphernalia appropriate to such shrines, Covadonga is also the original location of a frontier, a frontier which, according to that same view of the Spanish Middle Ages, is as precisely definable as the process of reconquest itself, a frontier only a few feet wide in the mid-710s (if history is to be believed as well as the historians), but a frontier which for those for whom history is a black-and-white affair marked for almost eight hundred years a dividing line between Christian and Muslim Spain, and so between Christendom itself and Islam in the West.

Others, scholars in the United States in the main, have thought it helpful to subject the medieval Spanish peninsula to the analysis advanced by F. J. Turner in his celebrated paper on the role of the frontier in American society (‘doubtless the most influential paper ever presented before a congress of historians’), according to which
what had determined the course of the history of the United States until Turner set pen to paper was, first, the ‘safety valve’ provided by the availability of free land on the Western frontier, and then, when that supply was exhausted, the consequences for the hinterland of the removal of that mechanism (Turner 1921: 1–38; Lewis 1958: 475; Bishko 1963: 47–9). In fact, although for adventurers from northern Europe, for whom all the inhabitants they encountered (Christians, Jews and Muslims alike) were equally foreign, the Spanish frontier may indeed have borne some resemblance to Turner’s Wild West (Defourneaux 1949: 125–230; David 1936), for the inhabitants of its hinterland the unremitting tale of those almost eight sometimes hard-fought centuries was one of varying shades of grey. Where it bordered on Africa, Europe’s frontier was significantly different from its eastern counterpart. Here the ‘other’ was unnervingly close. Indeed, here the ‘other’ was both behind you and all around. There were D. Oppas look-alikes to be encountered (or suspected) at every village oven. There may even have been Moorish sympathisers in the recesses of the cave at Covadonga.

Unrecognisable as the precursor of Webb’s ‘sharp edge of sovereignty’ (Webb 1953: 2; cf. Truyol y Serra 1957; Bazzana 1997), therefore, medieval Spain’s frontier was probably permeable from the outset. It was certainly accustomed to two-way traffic forever after. In the 850s Alvarus, a Christian monk of Córdoba – a city which by then had been under Islamic domination for almost a century and a half – travelled north to Pamplona and in a library in the foothills of the Pyrenees ‘suddenly’ chanced on a highly tendentious potted history of the life of the Prophet. It was almost as if this was the first that he had ever heard of him (Gil 1973: ii.483). Then, in the 950s, the Christian king of León journeyed in the other direction. This was Sancho the Fat. So fat was he, this warrior king, that he could hardly walk, let alone ride. So, he sent to Córdoba for a cure and, having been rendered a mere shadow of his former self, surrendered various frontier fortresses as the price of his therapy.

Or such was the story related in the Leonese chronicle of Sampiro in the eleventh century and canonised in Spain’s first national history, Alfonso X’s Estoria de España, in the thirteenth (Pérez de Urbel 1952: 336; Menéndez Pidal 1977: 408). And it is all very much in accordance with the recent observation of a student of the period that ‘the Umayyads saw in the Christians on their borders and their struggles with them simply a protracted border problem, without any implicit religious or ideological content or promise for themselves’ (Wasserstein 1985: 22). From Arabic sources, however, we learn that in fact not only had Sancho travelled to Córdoba himself but he had gone there accompanied both by his uncle, the ruler of Navarre García Sánchez, and by his grandmother Queen Toda, and that on their arrival all of them did obeisance to the Caliph ‘Abd al-Rahmān III, who thereafter dispatched a Jewish physician and diplomat of noted prowess to minister to the corpulent monarch after he had taken refuge across a different frontier, in the Christian kingdom of Pamplona (García de Valdeavellano 1968: ii. 139; Rodríguez Fernández 1987: 31–7). In the guise of medicine man, Abū Yūsuf Ḥasdai ben Shaprūt represented the third active element within the medieval peninsula. The Jew as enemy of the Catholic cause and the Moors’ fifth-columnist in 711, was a later development. In that guise, the guise in which he was to have to endure a long and sombre future, it is not until the 1230s that we can say that the Jew-as-subversive was securely established (Linehan 1993: 75). But long before the 1230s, on the Spanish sector of the frontier
between Christianity and Islam the Jewish presence further complicated an already complex social situation – just as it does today for analogising prospectors operating in that area of the historical past.

And all the time there were manuscripts moving noiselessly to and fro – manuscripts of music and mathematics whose annotations and ultimate location bear witness to their having made the round trip between Catalonia and al-Andalus for correction and updating in ninth-century Europe’s intellectual capital. And then, later on, Europe’s most inquisitive scholars located the West’s intellectual frontier on the Ebro and the Tagus and made Toledo and other centres so many conduits for the transmission of ancient Greek learning to the medieval West (Díaz y Díaz 1969; d’Alverny 1982).

And five hundred years after Eulogius’s journey, the Christian king of Navarre sought safe conducts from the Christian king of Aragón for a number of his subjects undertaking pilgrimage to the Holy Land. But not to Jerusalem. For these pilgrim subjects of Charles II of Navarre, who was a Frenchman, were Muslims bound for their Holy Land, for Mecca. ‘One cannot but be surprised to find Peter the Ceremonious – one of the victors, after all, of the battle of Rio Salado [1340] – granting a passport for the ḥajj’, Harvey remarks (Boswell 1977: 292, 446; Harvey 1990: 142). Indeed one cannot, and not least because the practice had been expressly forbidden by canon law since the General Council of Vienne in 1311–12 had directed Christian rulers ‘in no way to tolerate’ the passage of ‘Saracens’ to that ‘place where there was once buried a certain Saracen whom other Saracens hold to be a saint’ (Tanner 1990: 380).

Such casual disregard for the normal indecencies of Holy War certainly came as a surprise to crusaders arriving from parts of Europe where frontiers had something rather more hard and fast about them. The culture shock which Europeans experienced, both on the Spanish frontier and in the Latin kingdom, when they found the local Christians and Moors sipping what appeared to be, and indeed may have been, orange juice together, resounds down the centuries. The Saracens were the descendants of Hagar, Abraham’s concubine, Eusebius and Bede had concurred in asserting – though later students of the subject were not so sure. ‘Why, for example’, Southern inquires on their behalf, ‘were these people called Saracens if they were descended not from Sarah but from Hagar?’ ‘This is the kind of question that scholarly writers liked to investigate’ (Southern 1962: 17). But it was not one that preoccupied Pope Clement IV, for example, for all that he was scholarly. It was not with etymologies that he was concerned. What Clement IV was concerned with in 1265 was the marked reluctance of Christian kings to eliminate the spawn of that ‘menstruating woman’ for once and for all; that and reports of the debate which Jaume I of Aragón had recently staged between Christian and Jewish champions at Barcelona (Jordan 1893–1945: no. 15; Chazan 1992: 93): Spain’s failure, in short, to have done with the frontier forever.

Yet in 1234, as the Christian Castilians were gathering their forces, with a view indeed to having done with that frontier – and just two years after he had promulgated a code of canon law incorporating decrees designed to reduce the old enemy to submission – Pope Clement’s predecessor but three, Gregory IX, had licensed the archbishop of Toledo, no less, to establish commercial relations between his frontier strongholds and the Moors of Granada (Rodríguez Molina 1997: 264). There
had been no interruption of the age-old practice of trading across the line. Indeed there was still altogether too much of it. Pope Gregory had excluded only arms and horses from the terms of his permission to the archbishop. This was slack of him. Eleven years earlier his predecessor, Honorius III, had been horrified to learn that among the commodities being traded by the Christian noblemen of Aragón were their Christian noblewomen (Canellas López 1989: no. 918).

Little wonder then that two and three hundred years on, new generations of visitors from beyond the Pyrenees wondered whether there was a frontier there at all. ‘By their fruits ye shall know them’, the Dutchman Henry Cock observed in 1585 when, while travelling through parts of Aragón supposedly reconquered in the early twelfth century, in the up-country village of Asco he found both pork and wine proscribed (Morel Fatio and Rodríguez Villa 1876: 180). It was the old, old story. A century earlier, during the reign of Enrique IV, the Constable of Castile had been observed at early mass ‘all got up as a Moor, and very nice too’,3 while at his master’s court both French and Bohemian visitors had encountered the Christian monarch guarded by Moorish warriors from Granada (not to mention negroes), clothed and worshipping ‘in the heathen manner’, and seated on the ground with his queen to receive them (MacKay 1976: 29). In F. J. Turner’s terms, this was the equivalent of inhabited wigwams on nineteenth-century Fifth Avenue.

By 1585 almost ninety years had elapsed since the conquest of Granada and the supposed removal of the frontier between Christianity and Islam by which Spain had been polluted (Pope Clement’s word) since 711. But never mind the frontier. Was Christianity itself even engaged yet with Auden’s ‘fragment’

nipped off from hot
Africa, soldered so crudely to inventive Europe?

This was not a frontier between the Cross and the Crescent, it was a public bath. In the togetherness of various municipal bath houses across that sector of the peninsula which was under Christian domination, cleanliness and godliness continued (almost) to co-exist, with sexual segregation rigidly enforced, and Christians, Muslims and Jews bathing on different days, but with all of them sharing the same water. In 1292 (the year after the demise of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem), Sancho IV of Castile spent his Christmas in a Jewish household in Córdoba. Here at least (in the bathhouse, that is), ‘some degree of acculturation clearly took place’, it has reasonably been suggested (Powers 1979: 665; Gaibrois de Ballesteros 1922–8: ii. 189).

But not always. According to one account, after the Castilians had lost the critical battle of Sagrajas in 1086 King Alfonso VI was assured by his ‘wise men’ that the reason for this reverse was that his soldiers had been washing too often. ‘So the king had the baths of his kingdom destroyed and by various exertions made his soldiers sweat.’ Thus the thirteenth-century chronicler Bishop Lucas of Túy writing either at León or in that rainy corner of Galicia where the perennial problem has always been condensation and damp walls rather than sweaty bodies (Schottus 1608: 102; Linehan 2001).

For, then as now, Spain was a land of wildly varying climates. And climate matters. Presumably it mattered to the settlers from northern Europe who came in such considerable numbers before about 1200, when the area to be settled was the area
to the north of somewhere near Madrid, and to those who after about 1200, and especially after 1250, when Andalucia offered the over-populated north unrivalled opportunities, so singularly failed to follow in their predecessors’ footsteps.

Maybe it was the heat that deterred the thirteenth-century descendants of those northerners who had ploughed along the pilgrim road throughout the 1100s and then (allegedly) peeled off to man (and woman) the frontier. After his famous victory at Las Navas de Tolosa in July 1212, Alfonso VIII of Castile informed Pope Innocent III of the defection of the French before battle had been joined. The heat of the Spanish high summer, together with the sheer hard grind of it all, had proved too much for them. In short, the French were just not up to it (though the king left it to the pontiff to gather this for himself). There was an inwardness to this, of course, and the innate propensity of Castilians to denigrate the French to be allowed for (González 1960: iii. no. 568; Smith 1989: 14–25; Linehan 1993: 295–6) – though that was not all there was.

For northerners, whether we call them Christians or ‘Christians’, the frontier was the area to the south beyond which lay that part of the peninsula from which their ancestors had been forcibly ejected by gangs of trespassers. At the siege of Lisbon in 1147 the archbishop of Braga called up to the soldiery on the city’s ramparts to return to the patria Maurorum, ‘to the land of the Moors from whence you came’, and from which by his reckoning it was 358 years earlier that they had come. As it happens, his reckoning was faulty, just as was that of the king of Aragón, Pedro I, in 1096, according to whose calculation the Moors had been in the peninsula since the year 656 (Linehan 1982: 188–9). But that is not the point. It was not the arithmetic of it that mattered. What mattered, and what distinguished the frontier in the vicinity of which the archbishop of Braga and the king of Aragón were active from other frontiers elsewhere and in other ages, was the elementary consideration that the cause in which they were engaged was not an adventure into the unknown. It was, as the archbishop made plain in 1147, a process of expelling intruders from territory which had been theirs all along, a process not of conquest but of reconquest. (‘Incorporation’, 1998’s politically correct term for the reconquest of Seville in 1248, would not have cut much ice at Lisbon in 1147.) From the time of the ‘invention of the Reconquest’ in the ninth century until its completion in 1492, insistence on the historical continuum was an instinct deeply embedded in the collective consciousness, periodically activated by royal propaganda and social ritual (MacKay 1989: 232–41).

Here we are not concerned with the legitimacy of that conviction, with the Gothic myth which sustained it, or with the means by which successive generations were reminded of their historic mission (Maravall 1964: 249–337; Linehan 1993: 51–127), but rather with selected aspects of the social complex within which ultimately its realisation was in a certain sense achieved.

The earliest frontier between the Christian or ‘Christian’ area of the peninsula and the area that lay to the south of it was once believed to have been the deliberate creation of the middle years of the eighth century. A no-man’s-land, a cordon sanitaire, according to that tradition it was established by Alfonso I, the nomadic ruler of the Asturias, in order to concentrate the peninsula’s scarce human resources in the more readily defensible mountain region to the north of the Duero valley (Gil Fernández et al. 1985: 132, 133). Modern historians have long debated the credibility of that
tradition and the plausibility of the late Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz’s insistence that it was to the human desert thereby created that the proto-Castilian peasant proprietors who eventually moved into that area owed their uniquely free and unfettered condition and their natural resistance to feudal subjection (Sánchez-Albornoz 1966: 121–211). And the debate continues. W. P. Webb’s celebrated characterisation of America’s colonial frontier as ‘the fifth column of liberty’ (Webb 1953: 265) appears increasingly inappropriate to the Spanish case, whether in the ninth century or the thirteenth. Yet the fact remains, this at least remains unchallenged: from the very outset, one of the Spanish frontier’s salient features was its lack of manpower.

Another, related to this, was the ethnic and social untidiness of the confronting hinterlands, Muslim al-Andalus and Christian Spain (for the Christians had appropriated the name Hispania), with each harbouring a substantial population of co-religionists of the other persuasion between 711 and the arrival of large numbers of Islamic fundamentalists in the eleventh century, and with Christian Mozarabs such as Alvarus vocal in Córdoba and, in those parts of the peninsula north of the line of demarcation as that line moved (oh so slowly) southward, a substantial population of Mudéjars. Not until the unassimilated Moriscos were expelled in the years after 1608 was that problem (as by then it was viewed) eradicated. Be it noted, however, that the fears which occasioned the remedy of expulsion adopted in the years after Lepanto, fears that the Moriscos were in league with Turks and Protestants, were identical in nature to those involving conspiracy on a Mediterranean-wide scale that had been entertained and had inspired the furious anti-Jewish campaign of the 680s (Gil 1977). Conversely, the catastrophic consequences for the economy which that expulsion entailed, and which came to be appreciated almost before the last Morisco had left (Elliott 1977), serve to explain why it was that over the previous several centuries the Christian rulers of Spain had stopped short of depriving themselves of that labour force whose presence, as well as constituting so mortal a danger for them, had induced northerners to seek their fortunes on the frontier in the first place and had persuaded them to venture south from Aragón and Argyll. What, indeed, was the point of attacking the Saracens at all?, Humbert de Romanis, former Master General of the Dominican Order, asked in 1274, in his *Opusculum tripartitum*. ‘For when we take their lands from them none of our people come to settle them. Our people prefer to stay at home. What is the point therefore? What is the point, either spiritual, corporal or worldly, of all the effort?’ Was there any point to all the exertion? (Brown 1690: 196 [trans. Linehan]; Brett 1984: 176–94). For Humbert, of course, this was a question demanding the answer Yes, and his response to subversives who reasoned otherwise he designed to prove decisive. Not all his readers in Spain, however (if any there were), would necessarily have agreed.

Although victorious, the Christians in thirteenth-century Andalucía and the Levante were hopelessly outnumbered, and their military ascendancy was challenged by the presence of a sullen, defeated and often displaced majority. The case of the kingdom of Valencia has been minutely, and repeatedly, rehearsed by Fr R. I. Burns, most recently in respect of the surrender of Játiva to Jaume I of Aragón at the conclusion of the Christian siege of that place in 1244. With the Muslims left in charge of the larger of Játiva’s two fortresses, and secure in the enjoyment of their religion, their property and even the possession of their Christian captives, it appears almost a moot point who was surrendering to whom (Burns and Chevedden 1999a;
Burns and Chevedden (1999b). Balkan in character though the Játiva situation was, for the Christian conquerors the thoroughgoing measures adopted in the late 1990s were not an available option. In conducting their civil war, capitulation on generous terms was the only viable policy – just as it had been for the Islamic conquerors of the cities in that same region half a millennium earlier: the Christians’ dilemma in the 1240s was the mirror image of that of the ‘Arabs’ in the 710s. Then it had been the collaborating cousins of the (by the 1240s) reviled don Oppas who had benefited and been allowed to keep their mass (Collins 1989: 39–41). It had even been so in 1119 when, with crusading fervour in the West at its height, the Muslims of Tudela in Navarre had capitulated and those of them who were not of servile status had been allowed to retain both their landed property and their weapons (Verlinden 1955: 175–8). England’s vanquished Christians in 1066, vanquished by a Christian foe, would cheerfully have settled for less.

And more. Compare and contrast these two protests, uttered by respective spokesmen of the Christian Mozarabs living under Arab domination and by the unassimilated Mudejars subject to Christian rule six centuries later:

The Christians love to read the poems and romances of the Arabs... Where is the layman who now reads the Latin commentaries on the Holy Scriptures, or who studies the Gospels, Prophets or apostles? Alas! All talented young Christians read and study with enthusiasm the Arab books; ... they despise the Christian literature as unworthy of attention. They have forgotten their language.


One has to beware of the pervasive effect of their [the Christians’] way of life, their language, their dress, their objectionable habits, and influence on people living with them over long period of time, as has occurred in the case of the inhabitants of Abulla [Ávila?] and other places, for they have lost their Arabic, and when the Arabic language dies out, so does devotion in it, and there is consequential neglect of worship as expressed in words in all its richness and outstanding virtues.


The uncanny resemblance between the sentiments expressed by the biographer of Eulogius in ninth-century Córdoba and those of al-Wanshārīshī at the end of the fifteenth century provides yet another expression of the social reality common to the frontier and to the two variegated communities flanking it. The frontier in medieval Spain ran through every human community, through many families, even through many individual hearts and minds, the hearts and minds of Jews as well as Christians and Muslims, and created tensions which communities learnt to transform into convivencia (the co-existence of peoples of different faiths) by ritualising them. In 1300 Jaume II of Aragón warned the seniors of the University of Lleida not to dress up as Muslims and Jews in order to taunt the local minorities on the feast-days of St Nicholas and St Catherine. He was perfectly prepared to allow children to do so, however (Nirenberg 1996: 224).
Christian communities and their leaders engaged in these reassuring charades (which have survived to this day) (Albert-Llorca and Albert 1995) because they had to, and they had to because there was never enough manpower available to efface the effects of those frontiers. The reason why non-Christian communities persisted in Spain until 1492 and beyond was that on neither side of that infinity of divisions which is loosely termed ‘the frontier’ were there sufficient resources to dispose of them. To return to the valley of the Duero. If, as there certainly appears to be (Manzano 1991; Glick 1995: 113–14), there is reason for supposing that instead of moving north in the 750s its population stayed put, then the frontier does not disappear. Rather, it acquires new contours, castles in the air constructed from the debris of old easily dismantled certainties assisting the process, and generous applications of speculative glue serving to render it an area of social coagulation and social rejection, an area within which ‘Mudejars’ and ‘Mozarabs’ brushed against one another at the bakehouse and the village well, and that process of human layering got under way of which it is the historian’s job to attempt to make sense.

With a view to disturbing this unsatisfactory equilibrium, as between 1936 and 1939, so between 711 and 1492 the will to prevail led both sides to bring in reinforcements from beyond the peninsula. In the case of Christian Spain, the consequences are well enough known. In order to establish a human presence in the great exposed zone which ran from Lisbon on the Atlantic to Tortosa on the Mediterranean after the reconquest of Toledo in 1085 and the ensuing Almoravid seizure of control of Andalucía, the rulers of ‘Christian’ (or, arguably, by this date Christian) Spain enticed the riff-raff of the West to the frontier with al-Andalus. These were George Duby’s jeunes, Europe’s younger sons, the extruded elements of more rational systems of estate management combined with the consequences of the Gregorian papacy’s foreclosure of an easy abbacy or uneventful bishopric (Duby 1973). Students of modern empires and theories of imperialism may prefer to regard them as the beneficiaries of a ‘gigantic system of outdoor relief’ for the military aristocracy of Christian Europe, as the Milner’s young men of their generation (cf. Robinson and Gallagher 1961) – and they may well be right. The alternative frameworks of interpretation merely set the alternative historiographical traditions, the French and the English, in starker relief. They do not account for the Spanish moment.

The fuero which Alfonso VI granted to Sepúlveda (not far from Segovia) in 1076 – a code subsequently adopted as far afield as Morella in Aragón (1233) and Segura de León to the south of Badajoz (1274) – provided immunity for all-comers. In this recent haunt of bears and boars, as Alfonso VI described the area in 1107, once they had crossed the Duero even murderers were guaranteed refuge (Sáez 1953: 46; Sánchez-Albornoz 1966: 388). On his way to seek monastic sanctuary at Cluny ‘because there was nowhere for him to stay’ in Alfonso VII’s kingdoms (the usual problem in reverse), the treacherous count Gómez Núñez (Maya Sánchez 1990: 189) would have passed streams of aspiring frontiersmen travelling south for precisely the same reason.

Small wonder then that in about the year 1206 Sepúlveda witnessed the protest meeting of which so graphic an account has survived, the meeting summoned in order to plan the downfall of the bishop of Segovia for attempting to deprive the local clergy of their lady-friends. There was discussion of an appeal to the pope against this radical proposal, whereupon
almost all the clergy of Sepúlveda, of both the town and the villages, met in a church and, joining hands, swore to assist each another against the bishop, any one of them breaking the oath to be discommuned and fined fifty aurei. And they then summoned the officials to their chapter and made them swear to withhold the bishop’s procurations.

(Linehan 1981: 485)

The clergy of Sepúlveda drove the bishop mad... really unhinged him.  
(García y García 1977: 252–3).

In the period of little over a century (1085–1212) between the reconquest of Toledo and the decisive battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, Spain was a land without extradition treaties in which desperadoes were welcomed because everyone was needed. ‘You were employed with arms and the sword; you were committing acts of pillage and other misdeeds of soldiers, concerning which there is no need now to speak in detail’, the bishop of Porto reminded the Jerusalem-bound crusaders who stayed on to participate in the reconquest of Lisbon in 1147. Here is the authentic voice of twelfth-century Spain. ‘You are (still), as is apparent, bearing arms and the insignia of war’, the bishop continued, ‘but with a different object’. (That was perhaps wishful thinking.) In their dealings with their co-religionists, Duby’s celebrated not very gilded youth on the loose in the peninsula were hardly conspicuous for acts of selflessness (David 1936: 83; Duby 1973: 221). Indeed, those of them who stayed on to man Christendom’s frontier represented a greater danger to other Christians than they did to Christendom’s foe. The burning of churches full of their co-religionists was a not uncommon consequence of the generous terms of the local fueros whereby the arsonists had been brought in. ‘We are the kings’, declared Pedro Negro, leader of the concejo of Cordobilla in dispute with the monks of Aguilar de Campoo at about the time of the Sepúlveda affair (Pastor de Togneri 1980: 149; Linehan 1993: 264–5).

There are those who would embrace the likes of Pedro Negro as Turnerian frontiersmen avant la lettre, as the forebears of those ‘Castilians as plainsmen’, the pastoral inhabitants of the Guadiana basin whose activities were subjected to Bishko’s critical scrutiny all of thirty years ago, those precursors of ‘Pizarro, Valdivia, and thousands of others, whom the region early sent to the Indies and who there created New Extremaduras in Mexico and Chile’ (Bishko 1963: 64). But just as the transitional significance of the Canaries experience remains to be analysed, so too does it remain the case that it was not until the 1220s that Castilians coined a word to express the concept of a territorial ‘frontier’. ‘It is the duty of kings to defend their frontiers’, Fernando III declared in 1222 – frontarias constituted by series of fortresses or the course of rivers, that is (Gonzalez 1980–6: ii. nos. 154, 157; Gomes 1991: 370; Molénat 1996: 112–17).8 The suggestion of another American medievalist, A. R. Lewis, that by the 1220s the medieval frontier was on the point of closing altogether (Lewis 1958; Linehan 1993: 207–8, 292–5), must therefore have been greeted by him with blank incomprehension.

And more than that. Lewis’s suggestion would have shaken Fernando III (and with him the entire roll-call of thirteenth-century Spanish kings) to their foundations. For if the frontier was on the point of closing down, then where did that leave
them? After all, was it not precisely their unique status as Christendom’s frontiersmen *par excellence* that entitled them to hold to ransom both their own churches and the Roman Church itself (Linehan 1971)?

And more still. For Pedro Negro-types were by no means confined to the frontier which they patrolled, the frontier with Islam. They were as much in evidence on Christian Spain’s internal frontiers, that is to say on the frontiers which separated Christian kingdoms and even Christian dioceses. In 1245, for example, while Fernando III of Castile was mustering his forces for the final push towards Seville, in the neighbouring kingdom of Aragón the bishops of Zaragoza and Huesca were clashing croziers over the nice question of which of them was entitled to the tithe of lambs and other animals conceived in one diocese and born in the other (Canellas López 1972: no. 72). And the proctor who in the 1290s pleaded for an extension of credit at the papal court on the grounds that, being ‘on the frontier’, the church he was representing was in a bad way, was not referring to the frontier with Islam; Tudela was in the kingdom of Navarre (Linehan 1980: 500). Nor was the habit of untidy straying peculiar to the peninsula’s quadrupeds. Long before its constituent kingdoms established more or less permanent frontiers, Christian Spain was riven by frontier disputes, notably by inter-diocesan disputes concerning archdeaconries and parishes periodically reactivated by the failure of ancient ecclesiastical divisions to conform to more recent secular realities (e.g. Cañizares 1946; Duro Peña 1975). Indeed it was disputes of this nature (at every level of society) and the remedies sought for their resolution in documentary evidence and the crystal-clear memories of successive stage-armies of toothless centenarians, and the conventions adopted to mark their cessation – both physical (boundary marks protected by biblical taboo) and symbolic (crosses carved on tree or stone, libations of wine) – that prepared peninsular society for settlements such as the Treaty of Alcañices which in 1297 determined Portugal’s border with its eastern neighbour forever after (Ruiz 1997; Linehan 1993: 333; Gomes 1991: 367–70; Mattoso 1995: ii.193–6). Maps came later (Gomes 1991: 374–6).

As to such conflicts themselves, it is as difficult to attribute their prevalence to the influence of Frenchmen and other northern ruffians as it is to account in such terms for the urban *hermandad* which drove the local bishop from the northerly see of Lugo in 1159 or for the succession of urban rebellions which Alfonso VI of Castile’s death half a century earlier had unleashed along the whole length of the pilgrim road to Compostela (Gautier Dalché 1979: 211–30; Pastor de Togneri 1980: 147). It is also unnecessary. For not only had symptoms such as these been evident in Spain well before Islam had reached the peninsula. They would also long outlast its formal extinction.

The phenomenon of urban implosion on this scale finds no place in Lewis’s account of the ‘Closing of the Medieval Frontier’. That is understandable inasmuch as it occurred all of a century too soon for Lewis’s purposes. Not so that other element absent from his analysis, however, the fact that in the years after the decisive battle of Las Navas in 1212, just as the opportunities of Andalucia became available to the rulers of Castile, for some reason quite suddenly the human supply from north of the Pyrenees almost completely dried up – with far-reaching consequences. This deserves comment. After all, it was only recently that the confrontation with the Almohads had made Spain very much the focus of European attention
Had the pitilessly arid climate of northern Andalucia something to do with it? Was it the waterlessness of the region that deterred, just as six centuries later it would determine the course of the settlement of the American Mid-West (Webb 1931: 319–452)? May dietary fears have contributed, as in 1274 Humbert de Romanis suggested they did by deterring Westerners from travelling to the Holy Land (Brown 1690: 193)? The awesomeness for northerners of the prospect of eternal olive oil is not to be underestimated. It may well have been the effects of diarrhoea as much as the willingness of the Castilians to allow enemy strongholds to surrender on terms that caused the French contingents to defect in 1212 (Linehan 1997: 145–6). And it is certainly striking that, in selling Seville hard, Fernando III promoted the territory irrigated by the Guadalquivir as the last unspoiled preserve of fecund nature, fertile beyond all imagining. Appropriating to Seville and its environs the superlatives which in the seventh century Isidore of Seville had reserved for Spain itself, Fernando III reiterated the lavish account in the ninth-century ‘Chronicle of Alfonso III’ of Pelayo at Covadonga leading his people Moses-like through the Red Sea and into the Promised Land – though with the difference that in the years after 1212 it was a parched desert that barred the way (Vanderford 1984: 19–20; Linehan 1971: 106; Gil Fernández et al. 1985: 128–9).

And according to Fernando’s contemporary, Archbishop Rodrigo of Toledo, the ruse worked – or at least it had worked when the city of Córdoba had fallen in 1236. Such was the reputation of the place that was bruited abroad that settlers (habitatores) flocked there from all parts of Spain ‘as to a king’s wedding’, in such numbers
indeed that more came than there was room for (Fernández Valverde 1987: 299); similarly to Jaén ten years later, attracted thither by the king’s pobladores with their promises of ‘great liberties’ (González Jiménez 1994: 27). Yet from further afield still they did not come. En masse, Europe’s younger sons continued to spurn Europe’s frontier. Why this should have been so remains a mystery. There were, to all appearances, richer pickings to be had in Spain after 1212 than ever before. There were also (also more than ever before) men and families north of the Pyrenees with no means of supporting themselves. Yet demand and supply failed to make contact.

And soon the supply from south of the Pyrenees began to dry up too. As in the kingdom of Valencia as related by Father Burns, so also the 1260s and 1270s found the Christian frontier in Andalucia perilously undermanned, with many of its earliest settlers having returned home, the professional habitatores engaged in poaching settlers from already sparsely inhabited areas to the north, and its king seeking to make good the shortfall by conniving at clerical marriage and promoting new shrines in the south with a view to luring miracle-hungry pilgrims from Santiago where they served no practical purpose to areas where conceivably they might (González Jiménez 1988: 83–9; Linehan 1993: 510–16; Linehan 1997: 145; Linehan 1999: 676–8). In the fourteenth century such were the origins of the shrine of Guadalupe in the rocky wastes of strategically crucial Extremadura further west (Linehan 1985). And further west still, where in 1268 it was reported that ‘Extremadura’ was the kingdom of Portugal’s most populous region, Algarve-ward migration produced the same effect as in Castile, of exacerbating deep-rooted north–south tensions (Mattoso 1995: ii.15–28; Marques 1990: 520).

But the shortfall remained, and the consequences of it determined the history of the southern part of the peninsula from that day to this. The process of colonisation failed to exploit the advantages achieved by the passage of arms. The meagre resources of a single generation were not sufficient to secure both. In the terminology adopted by Jaume Vicens Vives (1967: 144), ‘la Reconquista militar’ (the military reconquest) was disappointed of that supplementary ‘verdadera Reconquista’, ‘la Reconquista lenta’ (the slow reconquest). ‘In a civil war’, General Franco reflected in 1937, ‘a systematic occupation of territory accompanied by the necessary purge (limpieza) is preferable to a rapid rout of the enemy armies which leaves the country still infested with enemies’ (Preston 1993: 222). But though, like Franco, Spain’s medieval rulers were prepared when necessary to make use of Moorish legionaries to advance their Christian cause, they shrank from the ghastly measures adopted by its twentieth-century caudillo. At least until the fifteenth century, ethnic cleansing was not part of their policy. And if the consequences of this were religious – to the extent that, as in the aftermath of Franco’s ‘crusade’, the real reconquest, the ‘reconquest of souls’ spoken of by Chaunu (1962: 137), was postponed sine die – a large part of the reason for it was what historians insist on compartmentalising body and soul would define as economic.

And another part of it, perhaps, was that those ‘great liberties’ which Fernando III had promised his subjects his son Alfonso X failed to deliver. After 1252 municipal government throughout Andalucia was brought increasingly under royal control, with its alcaldes the king’s alcaldes and no sign in sight of Webb’s famed ‘fifth column of liberty’ (González Jiménez 1993–4). The fifth column in the minds of the conquerors of Andalucia was one of an altogether more sinister nature. Comprising the
displaced population among whom they lived and moved, it bore all the characteristics of those Jews of Toledo who by now, according to the chronicler Lucas of Tuy, had opened the city gates to the invaders in 711 (Schottus 1608: 70). Eternal vigilance remained the rule, therefore, that vigilance in accordance with which the citizens of twelfth-century Plasencia were instructed that when there was a fire in the city their first duty was to man the city walls against invaders (Lourie 1966: 59). Reporting the return to Santiago de Compostela in the 1230s of the bells that had been carried off to Muslim Córdoba in 997, Robert Bartlett has remarked that the Galician shrine was ‘now buffered by miles of Christian territory’ (Bartlett 1994: 295). But oh, what folly! It was complacency of this order that undid the archbishop of Toledo, the Infante Sancho of Aragón in the 1270s. Because, as he fondly imagined, the pressure was off, because the Moors were now far away and the road north from Toledo was both safe and open, the Infante reduced the residence requirement of the canons of his church to just three months’ attendance per annum. But D. Sancho had made the same fatal mistake as Bartlett, and after defeat in battle with the Marinids in October 1275 he paid for it when his severed head and hand were sent back home in a casket (Linehan 1971: 179; González Jiménez 2000: 180–3).

Had he taken account of all this, Lewis would doubtless have dutifully logged it as yet another symptom of the ‘Closing of the Medieval Frontier’. But he did not. Without the assistance of rear-view mirrors, on the Great Trek through History the field of vision from the covered wagon is inevitably restricted. According to Raymond Carr, ‘people who wear bow ties may have an ambiguous relationship with the establishment’. The same may be true of men with stetsons. ‘Students of costume’, Bishko has surmised (1952: 507), ‘could doubtless trace back to the twelfth century regional dress of the charros and serranos of Salamanca and southern Old Castile, the cradle of the ranch cattle industry, the cowboy costume that appears with many local variations in the Indies; the low-crowned, broad-brimmed hat, the bolero jacket, the sash and tight-fitting trousers, the spurred boots.’ Doubtless they could – though they had better mind their step with those spurs, for, as L. J. McCrank has counselled us (1983: 328), to ‘the Americanization of a medieval episode’ ‘some Europeans have objected’. In particular, the reservations as to the usefulness of Turnerian concepts which I had expressed in respect of the work of Father Burns, McCrank adjudges unduly narrow. ‘Linehan objects to the generalization about frontier mentalities, such as Burns's notion of the “religion of the frontier”,’ he writes. ‘Linehan’s points’, he continues, ‘seem not to extend to the large, beyond-Turner, interpretations of frontier phenomena, and if he finds these phenomena widespread, this could mean that much of Europe was a frontier in a developmental stage and ongoing expansion. Thus the counter-argument would be that we have just begun to discover how appropriate frontier concepts and approaches are for the interpretation of medieval European history’ (McCrank 1983: 329). If this and the counter-argument (if that is what it is) are indeed what I meant then I can only agree with Dr McCrank’s dogged exegesis of an obiter dictum on the subject of the proclivities of the clergy of Valencia and Segovia and of the clergy of Rouen and Lincoln contrasted (Linehan 1981: 501–2). For if all Europe was a frontier, where, one may ask, was the European hinterland or metropolis? Where was the other terminal of Webb’s fully charged battery but for which none of those enlivening sparks would ever have moved from one pole to the other? (Webb 1953: 8–13; Barraclough 1954).
Pace McCrank, it is not a question of seeking ‘to undermine the frontier interpretation of MacKay, Burns, Glick et al.’ It is rather a question of measure, of proportion. As Burns himself remarked in 1989, referring to the starting point of the whole self-regarding debate, when Turner was writing and rewriting his thesis his frontier of settlement had not disappeared after all. Nor has it yet. In 1988 Turner’s frontier of settlement still covered ‘45 percent of the land area of the United States’, Burns reported, quoting a recent report in the New York Times. With ‘fewer than six people . . . per square mile’, the 1988 frontier was ‘a region statistically more violent and dangerous than any urban ghetto’ (Burns 1989: 308). But by a similar reckoning, when in 1965 a 13 per cent turnout for mass was ‘more than usual’ in a semi-rural parish in the diocese of Seville (Lannon 1987: 10) the Spanish Reconquest may be adjudged still far from complete. Though the religious sociologists were not yet out in force to advise the Mozarabs of mid-ninth-century Córdoba, it was religious indifference of precisely this order that had so alarmed Eulogius and his embattled community.

If, as may be the case, Father Burns (or, as it may be, the New York Times correspondent) is right on this occasion, then the distinctly downbeat account of the 1987 Edinburgh conference at which Burns’s thoughts on the subject were first aired may be altogether more to the point than Dr McCrank. On that occasion, ‘terminological or definitional debate about the nature of the frontier did not take up much time. . . . Most contributors were happy to pursue empirical issues and allow the frontier element in their analysis to speak for itself’ (Bartlett and MacKay 1989: p. v).

As to Spain, the empirical approach is applicable even to McCrank’s own particular stamping ground. There the river Llobregat marked, or was thought by some to mark, a frontier of a sort between freedom and servitude (Freedman 1991a: 111; Freedman 1991b: 135–9). And whatever may have been the case in Catalonia, on the frontier further west Cistercian monasticism did not figure at all. Further west it was hard against the Atlantic that the cloistered Cistercians made their mark, infilling the Galician hinterland. In Castile they served a different function, not on the Christian frontier with Islam, but on Castile’s internal frontiers, its frontiers with its Christian neighbours. During the 1170s, at Alfonso VIII’s behest, the communities of Bujedo, Herrera, Rioseco and Benavides were all relocated in order to counter the Christian king of Navarre (Pallares Méndez and Portela Silva 1971; Alvarez Palenzuela 1978; Moxó 1979: 269–75). It was their uncloistered brethren, the members of the military order of Calatrava who featured on the frontier with Islam, combining that commitment to the chastity which the Rule prescribed with an equal zeal for the shedding of Saracen blood.

Yet even in this quintessentially Christian institution, in its earlier manifestation the Aragonese Confraternity of Belchite there are identifiable indications of acculturation, with the ribāṭ: Islam’s frontier outposts set against the other, the dār al-harb (Lourie 1982). And so it continued in Spain’s haven of convivencia. ‘It has been the fashion to regard the war of the Reconquest . . . as a war of religion’, Turner’s American contemporary, H. C. Lea, remarked in 1901. ‘In fact, however, the medieval history of Spain shows that in the long struggle there was little antagonism either of race or religion’ (Lea 1901: 1). That is a large generalisation, of course, and the agonising over the nature of Spain’s Spanishness in which Spaniards have indulged since 1898 necessitates all manner of qualifications. After all, the peninsula’s Christian
rulers were committed to the concept of ‘a tidy kingdom’ and were at pains to prevent apostates, renegades and tornizados from blurring ethnic and religious distinctions. Thus in 1276, after the suppression of the Muslim revolt in the kingdom of Valencia, Jaume I of Aragón decreed that those who had conveniently espoused Islam during the rebellion were either ‘to go to the country of the Moors’ or, if they chose to remain, ‘to remain Christian’, and in the Siete Partidas, the law-code superintended by Jaume’s contemporary Alfonso X of Castile, fearsome penalties were prescribed for apostates (Burns 1972: 347, 349; Real Academia de la Historia 1807: iii. 677–80). Yet in the very next law of the relevant title of the Seventh Partida the safe-conduct of envoys from the ‘tierra de moros’ was guaranteed, whether they be ‘Christian, Moor or Jew’ (Real Academia de la Historia 1807: iii. 680–1). (After all, Alfonso X numbered the Nasrid king of Granada among his vassals.)

An incident noted in Angus MacKay’s richly suggestive article demonstrates the extent of convivencia and collusion on either side of the frontier with the kingdom of Granada two hundred years later, at a time when within the Christian hinterland itself the cause of convivencia was already under serious strain. At the conclusion of one of those skirmishes across the lines which were so regular a feature of existence on that edge of mid-fifteenth-century Christian Europe, in this case involving the Christians of Jaén and the Moors of Colomera, on this occasion when the time came for the exchange of captives, a shepherd named Pedro made a nuisance of himself. Having converted to Islam, he now refused to return to the Christian fold. General consternation. He would not go home to mother. So his unwilling Moorish hosts found themselves constrained to ask the Christian authorities to arrange for mother to come for him and take him back, back over the frontier whose line on the map they could trace even if some historians of part of our period cannot, and haul him home to Colomera (MacKay 1976: 26; Carriazo 1971: i. 280). If only we had material of that calibre about the shepherd boys of Spain’s earlier centuries we should not be so much at the mercy of scholars who lay down the law about human affairs on the strength of their lucubrations over the remains of castles and bits of pots.

The employment by both the Christian and the Moorish municipalities in the Jaén region of rastreros, officials whose task it was to collaborate in the settlement of trans-frontier incidents, and of alfaqueques responsible for organising the return of captives and ‘missing persons’, amply demonstrates ‘that frontier authorities were fully aware of the escalating problems caused by reprisal warfare and attempted to eliminate it’ (MacKay 1976: 23–5). Alfaqueques worked on a commission basis, even speculating in futures. This was big business: not quite such big business, admittedly, as the ransoming of French and English captives during the course of the Hundred Years War, but in its essentials governed by the same considerations, and by the same considerations that had applied in 1147 when the Jerusalem-bound crusaders from northern Europe had sold their services to the king of Portugal at the siege of Lisbon. Accordingly, the alfaqueques were firmly committed to the maintenance of understandings and arrangements with their opposite numbers across the line (López de Coca Castañer 1989; David 1936: 110). Such measures testify, we might say, to a shared desire to preserve (for example) the ‘no-animal’s land’ in which Muslim and Christian flocks were pastured together, by taking the steam out of the situation (Rodríguez Molina 1997: 260–2, 272–4; Carmona Ruiz 1998: 262–5). (For the average peninsular sheep, life on the frontier with Islamic Granada...
in the 1470s was distinctly less fraught than it had been two hundred and more years earlier on the paternity-suits-ridden diocesan boundaries of Christian Aragón; p. 42, this volume.)

And yet, for all that, and scalded by that steam as they sometimes were while monitoring the press of human traffic in the direction of San Ginés de la Jara (the shrine to the Virgin near Cartagena which Alfonso X promoted in order to attract Christian settlers to the south west and to which Muslims flocked too on account of its associations with a relative of the Prophet (Linehan 1993: 513–14; MacKay 1976: 23–4)), at the time, to the proprietors of those ecumenical ruminants the proposition that actually there was no situation – that, despite the severed heads sent home in caskets, ‘all this evidence suggests the possibility of such a degree of cultural confusion, in the broadest sense of the term, that it is almost as if a frontier, as it is normally envisaged, hardly existed’ (MacKay 1989: 222; López de Coca Castañer 1989: 149) – must surely have come as a surprise.

As a surprise. But perhaps not as very much more than that. For the frontier was as much part of everyday life as the parish. Like the parish, the frontier was an institution available to be appealed to when needs must. In fact, by the 1480s the parish was no more than a venerable fiction. (It had been so ever since the years of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa when Rome had first let the friars loose to undermine its foundations.) In theory, of course, this was untidy, just as, in theory, so were both the Crusade against Islam and the jihād untidy, equally and absolutely though they constituted the most sacred of obligations (Linehan 1997; Urvoy 1973).

In theory, the very idea of frontier convivencia is inconceivable. Crusade and co-existence comprise a confessional oxymoron if ever there was one. But in fact people aren’t like that. ‘In fact’, as has been well observed, what ‘appears increasingly strange [is] that historians [should ever] have insisted on an either/or approach towards the two modes of frontier behaviour.’ ‘In doing so’ – the author of these remarks continues – ‘they have demanded of late medieval society a degree of homogeneity they would not expect to be present in other periods. Perhaps, seeing the high premium which was placed on uniformity in the Middle Ages, they have assumed that it corresponded to reality. But in practice the inconsistencies of human behaviour and belief were probably as deep as in any age’ (Housley 1996: 115).

Just so. At the Spanish frontier it was precisely those ‘inconsistencies of human behaviour’ that made the world go round. Despite the (intermittent) inspections of the place by ‘inventive Europe’, there, in Auden’s fragment of hot Africa, only rarely did theory and practice, whether Islamic or Christian, ever precisely coincide, or even get on. There, all that there was to be got on with was life itself.

NOTES

1 I am indebted to María Antonia Carmona Ruiz, David Nirenberg and Margarita Torres Sevilla for their critical reading of an earlier version of this chapter.
2 Whose Turnerian characteristics were long ago stressed by the American historian of medieval Germany, J. W. Thompson (Thompson 1928: 522–4).
3 ‘Tocado todo morisco e bien fecho’ (Carriazo 1940: 52).
4 Dillard 1984, esp. chap. 1. By contrast, women were excluded from participation in the military jihād, at least in theory: Khadduri 1955: 85.
5 For the view that ‘of course the free proprietor was dominant in Castile in the eighth to tenth centuries; he was everywhere!’ and that in the case of Castile . . . a more fuller [sic] feudalisation of such territories was delayed’, see Glick 1995: 102.

6 And for its latest stages Glick is useful, despite factual inaccuracy (for example, it was not Alfonso II but Alfonso I who, according to Sánchez-Albornoz, took ‘the remaining population northwards and made the entire valley an empty buffer zone between the opposing blocs’: Glick 1995: 113).

7 As, for example, in the fanciful description of the present writer as ‘a partisan of the institutional school’ (Glick 1995: 94).

8 The words ‘frontera’, ‘frontaria’ first occur in the chronicle and chancery products of Bishop Juan de Soria (or de Aza), chancellor of Castile (post-early 1220s), and (post-1236) chronicler (Linehan 1993: 263). (The question of his authorship of the later part of the Crónica latina has been raised by Charlo Brea 1993.) In 1239 a papal penance prescribed military service ‘in frontaria regni Portugalie’ (Costa 1963: 266); cf. Gomes 1991: 359.


10 For a rather more nuanced treatment of McCrank’s theme, viewed from a wider perspective, see Pérez-Embíd Wamba 1994.

11 It is to be noted that it was not, as McCrank states, ‘[Burns’s] “The Religion of the Frontier in Medieval Spain”, Proceedings of the Second International Colloquium in Ecclesiastical History (Oxford 1974) which provoked Linehan’s rebuttal’. The author of ‘The Religion of the Frontier in Medieval Spain’ was not Burns but Linehan and, so far as the latter is aware, no rebuttal has yet been issued, not even by himself – principally because, despite the bibliographical particulars helpfully provided by McCrank, the Proceedings of the Colloquium in question have never in fact been published.

REFERENCES


— Peter Linehan —


