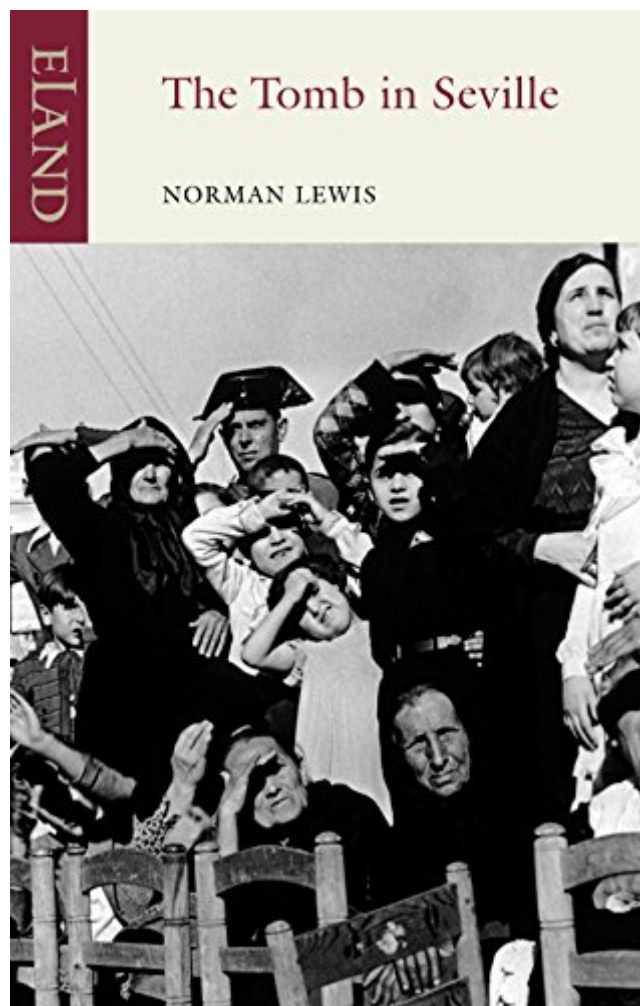


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The Tomb In Seville



Synopsis

In 1934, Norman Lewis and his brother-in-law Eugene Corvaja travelled across the breadth of Spain on what turned out to be the eve of the murderous civil war. Commissioned by his Sicilian father-in-law to locate the tomb of the last Spanish Corvaja in the cathedral of Seville, when public transport came to a standstill, the two walked more than a hundred miles to Madrid, and were then forced via Portugal to Seville. Lewis makes light of being caught in the crossfire of a fractious country, sometimes literally, and glories in the beauty of nature and the common humanity of the Spaniards he meets on the way. What is entirely in keeping with the mischievous character of Norman Lewis is that this, his very last book, is also his first. For the extraordinary set of misadventures distilled and honed by the nonagenarian writer in *The Tomb of Seville* were first described in Lewis's apprentice work, *Spanish Adventure*.

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Customer Reviews

I have heard Norman Lewis referred to as the first really modern travel writer, but I wonder if that is true. Whether or not he was the first, however, the sheer volume and quality of Lewis's work do

mark him out. The Tomb in Seville was his last book and was published posthumously in the autumn of 2003; he had died several months earlier at the age of 95. Lewis was born in 1908 - in London, but to Welsh parents. Both were ardent spiritualists, and his upbringing (described vividly in his first volume of autobiography, *Jackdaw Cake*, was strange. As a young man he pursued various ventures, including the motor trade and motor racing, and was married, quite young, to the daughter of a Sicilian of noble Spanish descent, Ernesto Corvaja. In September 1934, his father-in-law sent him on a mission to Seville in search of the Corvaja ancestral tomb, which Corvaja hoped would be found in the cathedral. His son, Eugene Corvaja, travelled with Lewis. The *Tomb in Seville* is the account of their journey. There are some very odd things about this book, not least that it appeared not just posthumously but nearly 70 years after the journey it described. At the time, at least one critic expressed wonder that Lewis should still be writing so well in his 90s, but one wonders if this book was actually written much earlier. It may be that Lewis intended it as part of *Jackdaw Cake*, published nearly 20 years before - but then held it back for some reason, so that it remained unfinished business for decades. Certainly it has the air of something written much sooner after the event than 70 years. Equally odd was the timing of their journey. Spain was politically very tense - so much so that October 1934 saw a brief civil war in Spain; it ended quickly, but was a savagely violent interlude, the precursor to the larger conflict that was to follow less than two years later. At one point, Lewis and the younger Corvaja have to secure a place on an armoured train that takes them to Madrid. Here they alight to find themselves in the middle of a firefight, and as they dodge bullets to leave the station, Lewis notices a poster that assures them, in English, that "Spain Attracts and Holds You. Under the Blue Skies of Spain Cares Are Forgotten." The book is packed with bizarre incident. As the fighting comes to an end, Lewis and Eugene Corvaja attend a bullfight, and see the *rejoneador* (a lead bullfighter who fights with a lance) apparently gored to death ("it was given out that he was dead". In fact he was not, although Lewis does not mention this). They then decide to investigate a reported mania amongst Madrileños for drinking animal blood. They visit a slaughterhouse, but are "deterred by a woman on her way out, made terrible by the smile painted by the blood on her lips." Later, on their way through Portugal, the pair hear of a witch-burning, no less, in a small village in Porto called Marco do Canavezes. They travel there to find that the story is substantially true. The book sometimes raises questions it does not answer. Why would Corvaja senior send his son and his son-in-law on a quixotic journey through Spain in a time of trouble? Did they really hear of a witch-burning in Portugal? (Marco do Canavezes - actually Canaveses - is real enough, and is, oddly, the birthplace of the singer Carmen Miranda; but I can find no mention of the witch-burning story although that does not make it false.) But does that

matter? Why strain at a story of witch-burning in 1934, when a much larger outbreak of atavistic savagery was just beginning? For the most part, the narrative seems heartfelt; the journey clearly left an impression on Lewis and, like Laurie Lee a few months later, he was struck by the poverty (in Andalusia, they "pass through settlements of windowless huts consisting of no more than holes dug in the ground with branch and straw coverings ...to take the place of roofs"). The book is also alive with Lewis's descriptive genius. Thus he and Corvaja, stranded by the conflict, must walk from city to city through the countryside:...the rich gilding of summer returned to the Navarran landscape. ...We moved across boundless plains of billowing rock purged of all colour by the sun. ...Behind the mountains ahead symmetrical and luminous clouds were poised without shift of position as we trudged towards them for hours on end. At our approach an anomalous yellow bloom shook itself from a single tree, transformed into a flock of singing green finches. Lizards, basking in the dust, came suddenly to life and streaked away into the undergrowth. Therein lies this book's great strength. It is intensely vivid. To be sure, the book's genesis is odd, and the circumstances of the journey mysterious; but it doesn't matter, for this is one of the best travel books of all time. Beautifully observed and written, it is like a trip through a wormhole; an almost covert glimpse of a world that has been forgotten. It is not perfect. but it does not have to be, for it has the freshness and warmth of a diary entry.

Rather a strange book, published posthumously so, regretfully, the last book we shall be able to read and enjoy from this engaging author. It is not that the writing or prose is strange - just the perception of what the book means to the professional reviewers and blurbers. "Witty", they said and "A delightful cross between P.G. Wodehouse and Henry James". I found nothing humorous about the start of the Spanish Civil War or of the entrapment, delays, corruption and frustrations of the author and his brother-in-law trying to travel to Seville to pay respect to his father-in-law's family resting place. Perhaps, because of my own often equally frustrating trips in my international travels, I missed the jokes - empathy obscured them? I saw nothing witty in being shot at - despite holding up their hands - when trying to return to their hotel, or in the tearing of the author's legs on barbed wire or of seeing citizens gunned down into the gutters of Madrid. So, this reader at least found no Bertie Wooster moments and the author is, as always, far less boring than Henry James! Instead I found a lyrical treatise on a country he obviously fell in love with "at first sight" and a moving account of the peoples of an earlier Spain, about to tear each other asunder in blood, bone-crushing terror and war.

This is a wonderful, personal view of the beginnings of the Spanish Civil War. I read *_Voices of the Old Sea_* years before this. That is about Spain under Franco, this is about traveling with a friend & brother-in-law who forgot to tell him--before they set out--that he intended to join the Republicans. I think the books illuminate each other, but both books are great.

This is an historical novel which is interesting to a point. After a while it is repetitive and deals in some very minor details.

A good way to be exposed to the work of the now deceased Norman Lewis. While I question if the vivid quotes and descriptions could have been so readily and clearly called to mind by the author, even if aided by contemporaneous notes, over sixty years after the events, it is wonderful writing. "...we had come to the end of Portugal. Its colour, its mystery and its splendid wilderness were no more. Forests had become managed woodlands, rivers were bridged, villages were encircled by cabbage patches and advertisements for coffee were stenciled on walls."

It was alright. There was just too much detail that took away from the story.

SOME LOVELY DESCRIPTIVE WRITING ABOUT A PART OF SPAIN THAT I'M SURE IS NO LONGER THERE. ENDS RATHER ABRUPTLY, AS IF UNFINISHED BY THE AUTHOR

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