



## Oxford International Brigade Memorial Committee

### The Len Crome Lecture - Bristol - March 2018

The 17<sup>th</sup> Len Crome Memorial lecture was held, this year, in Bristol. It was a well-attended and magnificent occasion with two excellent speakers, a screening of the original 16mm format documentary *"The Defence of Madrid"*, three wonderful musical interludes, plenty of good socialist conversation, and books, merchandise and campaigning materials on sale. And, of course, Bristol's fantastic backdrop of industrial heritage, Georgian architecture and, spoilt for choice, with an abundance of coffee shops, cafes, restaurants and pubs.

The theme for the lectures was ***"Aid Spain – The mobilisation of support for the anti-fascist cause among the British people during the Spanish Civil War"***

The anti-fascist struggle in Spain has long been associated with the political "left," and that perception is not wrong, but it is not exclusive. The morning lecture was given by Dr Emily Mason from the University of East London whose talk explored the huge contribution to Aid Spain by faith groups, Anglican, Jewish, Quakers, Non-conformist and occasionally even Catholics. Emily reminded us that the political polarisation of the 1930s affected people with faith-based backgrounds just as it did trade unionists and people of the left. While the Catholic Church was portraying the Spanish conflict as a Holy War against communism the saner voices within religious communities were horrified by what they saw as fascist totalitarianism and "extreme capitalism," where there was no trace of Christian and other faith values of "brotherhood". The UK faith groups were particularly active in helping the Basque refugee children. The Basques were highly regarded in the UK as communities of devout Catholic values and also champions of democracy and social welfare within the Spanish Republic. Out of these UK faith groups came the Christian Socialist Movement. Emily illustrated her talk with slides of Aid Spain posters and propaganda demonstrating the often religious iconography and idioms of the messages and artwork.

Oxford University's Professor Tom Buchanan, no stranger to the IBMT chose for his lecture to discuss the background to Jim Fyrth's seminal book of 1986 *"The Signal Was Spain"*. Tom outlined the tensions that existed between Fyrth's desire to set out a historical narrative of the Aid Spain movement and the natural tendency for International Brigade veterans, and in particular their fierce and forthright battalion commander Bill Alexander, to want the book to express all the highest virtues of the Brigade and to brush over any of the inevitable mistakes and unfairnesses of the Brigade's operations. Tom showed examples of these, always comradely, tensions through letters between Fyrth and Alexander. It was fascinating to understand that such questions inevitably arise between historical truth and personal

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memory and, indeed, this is the subject of the film "*Soldiers of Salamis*" that our Oxford Committee will be screening on April 28<sup>th</sup>.

Music was provided by Ewan McLennan <http://www.ewanmclennan.co.uk/>, Amanda Boyd and David Nash, and the Bristol based Red Notes Choir. The screening of the film "The Defence of Madrid" was arranged and presented by the IBMT's media man Marshall Mateer.

Colin Carritt – March 2018

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