

[00:00:10.480] - Rod Mickleburgh

Welcome to another edition of On the Line, the podcast that delves into British Columbia's rich labour heritage. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. This time out, we wander a bit off topic to bring you a special episode about a remarkable Spanish fan that was recently donated to the Museum of Vancouver. The handheld fan is a moving artifact from the Spanish Civil War, the terrible conflict that pitted the democratically elected Republican government of Spain against Franco's invading army of fascists. The war lasted from 1936 to 1939. Thousands of workers and anti-fascists from around the world volunteered and went to Spain to try and stem the fascist tide. A number were from British Columbia, and on the struts of the backside of the fan are the names of some of those volunteers, signed during their time in Spain. The museum contacted the BC Labour Heritage Centre about the fan, and we brought it to the attention of retired labour lawyer and historian David Yorke, a walking encyclopedia about the Canadians who fought in Spain and the war itself. David did a deep dive to piece together the story of the fan and the individuals whose names are on the back.

[00:01:40.270] - Rod Mickleburgh

You will hear from David in a moment, but first, to get you in the mood, here is the most famous song of the anti-fascist fight, "Ay Carmela."

[00:02:55.740] - Rod Mickleburgh

In British Columbia, the decision to go to Spain arose out of the strong fight by the left on behalf of the thousands and thousands of workers who lost their jobs during the 10 lost years of the Depression. The Relief Camp Workers Union, the legendary On to Ottawa Trek that started in Vancouver, and the central role played by the expanding BC Communist Party are fairly well known. Less well known is how that led to continuing the fight in far-off Spain. In the prologue of his posthumous memoir relating his experience in Spain, Civil War veteran Ron Liversedge of BC gives us some of that background. He wrote: The few years prior to the war in Spain was a period of economic stagnation and depression throughout the capitalist world.— and politically it was a period of rising fascism on a world scale. Fascism was a political state in which the ruling monopolies, faced with a rebellious starving populace, throw off all pretenses of democracy, suspend parliaments and political parties, and with subsidized fascist stormtroopers, violently smash all opposition and institute the one-man military state. Our expert David Yorke, who also edited Liversedge's memoir, was interviewed about the Spanish Civil War and the fan by Patricia Wejr and Donna Sacuta, Executive Director of the BC Labour Heritage Centre.

[00:04:29.260] - Rod Mickleburgh

They began by asking him to give a brief account of the war.

[00:04:33.660] - David Yorke

Well, Spain was a very old country that for a very long time had been ruled by an oligarchy of the military and very rich landowners and the church. It was a classic country where there was wealth and poverty side by side. In 1936, there were elections and the left-wing had organized and won the election. It was a coalition of Republicans and Democrats, socialists, communists, anarchists. The entire group of people who represented the oppressed in Spain got together, formed the United Front, and won the election and formed a government democratically in 1936. But the oligarchy would not accept that, and led by General Francisco Franco, they staged a coup, attempted to militarily unseat the government. That didn't work. Some of the soldiers remained loyal to the Republic. Militias were formed from the trade unions to oppose it, and instead of a successful coup, what ended up happening was a civil war. It was— it's interesting, some of the veterans and some of the Spanish left-wingers actually refused to call it a civil war because it was in some ways more like an invasion, because the the right-wing fascist forces from Francisco Franco were very, very strongly aided both by Nazi Germany and by fascists of Mussolini's Italy.

[00:06:42.640] - David Yorke

In a sense, it was a coming together of the signal that fascism was on the rise, and the question was, what should be done about it? And so the Spanish Civil War broke out, but it wasn't just Spain. It was the world in a microcosm, because fascism and democracy were at issue.

[00:07:14.440] - Patricia Wejr

And so how did Canadians get involved?

[00:07:20.200] - David Yorke

Quite early on in the Civil War, it became apparent that with the assistance that Franco was getting from the Italians and the Germans, that the military situation of the Republic was dire. Quite early, in about October of 1936, there was a conference. It was actually a peace conference in which all kinds of left-wing parties got together in Brussels. And the people from Spain came and said, "We need help." And out of that came the proposal to form the International Brigades. The—and that was an initiative that would involve the left-wing parties in all the countries in the world who had networks, and it involved raising money and raising volunteers to go to Spain and fight on behalf of the democratic Republic. So about 40,000 people all from around the world formed the International Brigades, and a lot of them came from

Canada. In Canada, men started going to Spain towards the end of 1936, and many went in 1937. The Canadian presentation of that was that there was a special Canadian section of the International Brigades, and it was named the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion after the leaders of the 1837 democratic rebellion in Upper and Lower Canada.

[00:09:22.400] - David Yorke

The truth of the matter is that for a long time it didn't actually exist. It was actually late in 1937 when the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion actually came into existence. But Canadians were there much earlier than that. And in a way, the term MacPaps, which was the nickname for the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, has come to actually represent not simply the people who were in that specific battalion, because many Canadians weren't. They were in all kinds of the other international brigades. But it has come to represent more or less the collection of Canadians that went to the assistance of democratic Spain.

[00:10:07.640] - Patricia Wejr

Here in BC, there were an inordinate number of trade unionists who ended up going. Could you comment on that?

[00:10:16.200] - David Yorke

Mm-hmm. In British Columbia, there had been a history really developing during the Depression, largely out of the unemployed movement. Where the left wing became quite strong and relationships started to form and networks were there. And as the Depression eased and people started to go back to work, that remained. And when the call came to help Spain, a lot of left-wingers in the trade union movement said, "Yes, I want to do that." There was a story of a quartet of loggers who were working halfway up the coast, and they all of a sudden just said, "No, we're going to go." They downed their tools and left the woods and went to Spain, and only one of them came back. But the trade union movement was very heavily influenced by the left at that point, and a lot of the volunteers that went to Spain had trade union history. A lot of the volunteers that went to Spain had significant trade union history when they came back, and with the lessons that they had learned there. A lot of them were also still in the throes of unemployment. There was a lot of the volunteers actually had come, had really not found work in the whole of the Depression.

[00:12:05.960] - David Yorke

The one that I'm most familiar with, Ron Liversedge, had not really had a job for the 12 years since he had come to Canada, but he went to Spain and became quite an active figure there.

But a lot of trade unionists from a whole range of unions, the woodworkers, the miners, some from the fishermen, the, and some of the trades as well.

[00:12:39.210] - Patricia Wejr

Well, that's a very interesting and good background for us because I want to fast forward now to present day and the discovery of these fans. Do you want to talk about your visit to the Vancouver Museum and seeing —when it's funny saying fans these days, especially in the middle of the World Cup. But it's a handheld fan to cool you off that we're talking about.

[00:13:07.880] - David Yorke

Yeah. In Spanish, it's called an abacino. And I have the same trouble saying fans. It sounds kind of trivial. I got a call from Donna saying that the Vancouver Museum had received this abacino and it had a lot of names on it and they wanted to see if we could find out more about it. So they sent some pictures of it and I immediately could see that it had a very, very strong connection to British Columbia. The names on the fan, many of them were known to me. And so, Donna and I and Natasha went to the Vancouver Museum and the curator there, Wendy Nichols, took us to the fan and we had a really good look at it and were able to really check out the exact names of about 35 volunteers, mostly from British Columbia, whose names appeared on the fan.

[00:14:25.400] - Rod Mickleburgh

The fan is actually called abanico, not to be confused with the sports fan known as fanático.

[00:14:33.400] - Patricia Wejr

Yeah, just to give our listeners a visual, the fan is typical of many that you saw that had beautiful illustrations on one side, and then it was the struts on the backside that the names were written on those, the little struts of part of the fan.

[00:14:53.860] - David Yorke

Yes, it's a sort of an index card of names from—but very, very interesting collection of people. It appears now, I didn't know this before, but it appears now that it was a not uncommon practice in Spain for groups of the International Brigade volunteers, when they were at rest or not on the battlefield, to get together and sign up these fans. I think essentially as souvenirs and mementos of what they had gone through together. In one case, I know that the personnel of a particular military unit all signed the fan and gave it to their commander in appreciation. So

actually, his name doesn't actually appear on the fan, but everybody else's does. But there are a number of instances that we know of now of the volunteers getting together and putting their names on this fan as a statement of them having gone through this struggle together.

[00:16:12.140] - Patricia Wejr

Yeah, because I was wondering when you were mentioning earlier about some of the people who basically had been—not had paid employment for so long, I was wondering if they were used in any way as fundraisers, because I know that there was a lot of fundraising that had to go on, because this wasn't like when you were in the Canadian Armed Forces and you actually got paid. There was no way of being paid for this work except through fundraising. Is that not the case?

[00:16:40.440] - David Yorke

Well, fundraising was very, very difficult, and that might have been that. We know that the donor of the fan was a woman named Mary Erickson, and she was one of the volunteers in the organizations in Canada called the Friends of the Mackenzie Papineau Battalion. They were getting together to raise money, also to send packages of comforts and socks and chocolates and cigarettes. They were quite fond of cigarettes in those days. She worked as a volunteer in the office. She did have that connection with that support. But I'm not sure that the fans were ever sold to raise money. I think they were more mementos and souvenirs for the people that were involved. In some cases, they would be given to their friends and so on. One of the other fans, not the Vancouver fan, but a fan that ended up in the War Museum in Ottawa. It ended up in the hands of a trade unionist named Mickey Beagle, who was—I guess you probably know the history of Mickey Beagle, who was a really wonderful organizer of the shore workers and the fishermen's union. We have no idea how she got it. But, uh, somehow it ended up with her.

[00:18:26.500] - Rod Mickleburgh

As David mentioned, Mickey Beagle was a union organizer born in Vancouver in 1907. She and her husband lived in the States for many years before returning to BC in 1945. At some point, she joined the fishing industry and was the first woman elected to office in the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union. She was a mentor and inspiration to the women who followed her into leadership roles in the union. She died in 1999. Rather than fundraising, David felt the fan was more likely a souvenir or an appreciation for supporters of the cause. As he researched the fan, he found five examples of similar fans in other locations.

[00:19:13.840] - David Yorke

The first instance is simply a photograph, and it is a photograph that appeared in the archives of the Communist Party of Spain. It shows the commander of the 15th Brigade, a fellow named Copic. He is signing one of these fans in the hillsides with a number of other volunteers around, and they are signing fans too. I think that there are examples of this all over the world. The 4 examples that I've found, one is in Vancouver, which started this all off. The second is in Ottawa at the War Museum. The third is in Manchester, England, in the People's Museum in Manchester, England. The fourth is in a sort of a private foundation in Arizona and it is the one where it was given to the commander of the—who was a German-American, who after the Second World War went back to Germany with it. And then eventually, his descendants came back with it to the United States, and it ended up in the United States. But the interesting thing is that on all four of the fans, there are Canadians and a very heavy concentration of them of Canadians from British Columbia for some reason.

[00:20:54.070] - Patricia Wejr

And thinking about the one that you viewed at the museum, I just wanted to ask you about the issue of how many of British Columbians obviously died and you mentioned that there were about 35 names on the fan, and of those, 13 never returned, killed in action. Yes. And that seemed to me like a very high percentage. Could you comment on that? Is there some reason why the death rates were so high?

[00:21:24.940] - David Yorke

Well, the reason the death rates were so high was because of the terrible, terrible military disadvantage that the Spanish Republicans were at. When the Spanish Civil War broke out, the reaction of the international community in general was not to rush to the assistance of the democratically elected republic. It was to stay out of it. The reason they were staying out of it was absolutely tied to the central policy of appeasement of Nazism. They did not want to become involved in a war that would provoke Germany. Germany was involved in it, Italy was involved in it, but the British and the Americans and the French, even, who themselves had a Popular Front Socialist government, were not prepared to take on Hitler at that point. And that meant that the Spanish Republic was unable to get the kind of military equipment and ammunition and arms and support that it needed. And so they were tremendously out-powered by the combination of the troops in their tens of thousands that came from Italy, well-equipped, well-trained, well-armed. The German Luftwaffe was ferocious in the Spanish Civil War, and it was actually simply trying on all of the murderous techniques that it then employed in the Second World War.

[00:23:30.030] - David Yorke

The famous bombing of Guernica that was portrayed by Picasso's painting was them experimenting with carpet bombing and bombing civilian populations into oblivion. Overall, from the beginning to the end, there was a lack of arms and ammunition for the Spanish forces, whether the regular ones or the International Brigades. And that is going to lead to a terrible death rate. Hundreds of the Canadians that went to Spain, never returned. On the fan that we have in Vancouver, as you said, about 13 or 14 of the 35 names were killed and never returned to Canada. I added up all of the Canadians that were on the 4 fans that I found and it was the same percentage. It was exactly one-third of all of the people who signed these fans were killed. It was just such a terrible portrayal, I guess, of what kind of courage and bravery these guys had to go and do that, because they knew what they were getting into.

[00:25:11.570] - Patricia Wejr

It's such a poignant story, really, when you think about the beauty on one side of the fan and then adding your names and then being killed. Boy, history does repeat itself, doesn't it?

[00:25:28.130] - David Yorke

Some of the people who were killed, whose names appear on the fan, the stories of their deaths individually are just absolutely heartrending. One of them was a teacher who had come from Vancouver. His name was Clifford Buckwell, and he was employed—he served as a stretcher bearer. In the spring of 1938, there was this terrible offensive by the fascists that resulted in what are known as the retreats. It became very chaotic, and a huge loss of life during that. Buckwell was a stretcher bearer, and he was caught in one of these offensives by the fascist troops, and the partner on the other end of his stretcher fled and abandoned him. He would not leave the wounded patient that he was trying to help. The last that anybody saw of him was him with his stretcher with the wounded patient, holding on until the end. And he was never seen again. Other stories like that from just the people who were on the fan. Clifford Buckwell, Tiny Anderson was a logger, he was a Danish-Canadian logger, strapping young guy, by all accounts really a wonderful sort of young buck, and he died in the very final days of the Spanish Civil War in the Ebro offensive.

[00:27:39.660] - David Yorke

The story of his death has also become a legend. It is a terrible testimony to how savage the war was, but in turn, how responsible the democracies are for not having come to the assistance of a democratic government.

[00:28:20.730] - Music

[00:28:47.880] - Rod Mickleburgh

This refusal of non-fascist countries to come to the aid of Republican Spain sealed its fate, and the war was lost. Franco ruled Spain with an iron fist until his death in 1975. The International Brigades were disbanded and their troops sent home before the final surrender. I found it chilling and emotional to see the names of those long-gone volunteers on the back of the fan, put there when they were mostly young and imbued with the spirit of taking up arms on behalf of a nation more than an ocean away. I felt as if they were speaking to us from the battlefield. In addition to those singled out by David Yorke, I noticed a few other names. Ronald Liversedge is there, along with Wee McGregor. That could be James McGregor, whose grave in Mountainview cemetery some of us have visited to pay our respects on Remembrance Day. Jim Balderson was a miner at Britannia Beach before heading to Spain. He was killed during the bloody Battle of Teruel. Tony Costello was part of the On-to-Ottawa Trek. He fought in all of the Mac-Pap actions, from Fuentes to the Ebro offensive, and received a rare citation for valour.

[00:30:11.370] - Rod Mickleburgh

After his return to Canada, he lived quietly in Abbotsford until his death in 1988. A.E. Yorkie Burton, a miner, was captured and executed by the fascists at Teruel in January of 1938. David Yorke has compiled brief biographies of them all. Donna Sacuta asked David about how the returning soldiers were treated back in Canada.

[00:30:38.910] - David Yorke

First of all, the Canadian government made it very difficult for them to go in the first place. The government from the outset made it clear that they did not want Canadians to participate. Eventually they passed what was called the Foreign Enlistment Act and made it specifically applicable to the Civil War in Spain. Going to Spain itself involved a decision to simply take that on. I must say that there weren't many of the volunteers that I ever heard about who thought too much about that. They just said, "No, we're going to go," and they went. That was used against them when they came back. The government said, 'You know, you broke the law.' There were threatening manoeuvres about threats of prosecution, which actually never came to pass, because by the time they came back, at least some people in the Canadian government had started to see that, 'Well, maybe they were right.' Maybe, you know, they were—that you did have to stand up to the fascist threat. But certainly in the official circles in the RCMP, the RCMP hounded them, kept surveillance on them for years and years and years until they were dead. I

have asked for the RCMP file on Ron Liversedge, who is my sort of subject of most interest, and they haven't given me that.

[00:32:24.640] - David Yorke

They're still working on it after three-and-a-half years. So he must have a pretty big file. The other thing that then happened was that when the Cold War started to abate, people started to say, 'Well, look, let's step back and take a look at this in the context of history. These men that went to Spain were doing exactly what the Canadian Army was to do from 1939 to 1945. They were fighting the same enemy. They were fighting the Italian fascists, they were fighting the German Nazis, they were standing up for democracy. Should they not get recognition as veterans for Canada?' And for 20 years, the veterans and their friends and relatives petitioned the Canadian government for recognition as veterans and were stonewalled until all of them were dead. They had many, many people supporting them. One of the most articulate was Bob Rae, who was both the leader of the NDP in Ontario and a Liberal cabinet minister and Canada's ambassador to the UN, and he really eloquently made the case for recognizing the service that these guys had for standing up for Spain, but standing up for Canada too. It's, I think, a shameful part of Canada's history that they never did get official recognition.

[00:34:11.230] - Rod Mickleburgh

There has been some recognition. Monuments to those brave Canadians who volunteered to fight fascism in Spain have been erected in Ottawa, Toronto, and Victoria. In a shady grove just across the road from the Legislature, the plaque on the Victoria Memorial reads: In memory of those British Columbians who served in the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion of the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939. May we never forget them.

[00:34:46.810] - Music

Hold the fort, for we are coming!

[00:34:55.270] - Rod Mickleburgh

This has been a special edition of On the Line, telling the inspiring saga of Canadians who took up arms to fight fascism in Spain and the moving memento of their heroism, recently donated to the Museum of Vancouver. A big thanks to the museum for giving us the first chance to tell the story of the fan, and to the amazing David Yorke who did the research. Thanks as well to the other members of our podcast collective, Patricia Wejr and Donna Sacuta, who interviewed David Yorke, and to our production wizard, John Mabbott, who put it all together. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time On The Line. No pasaran!

