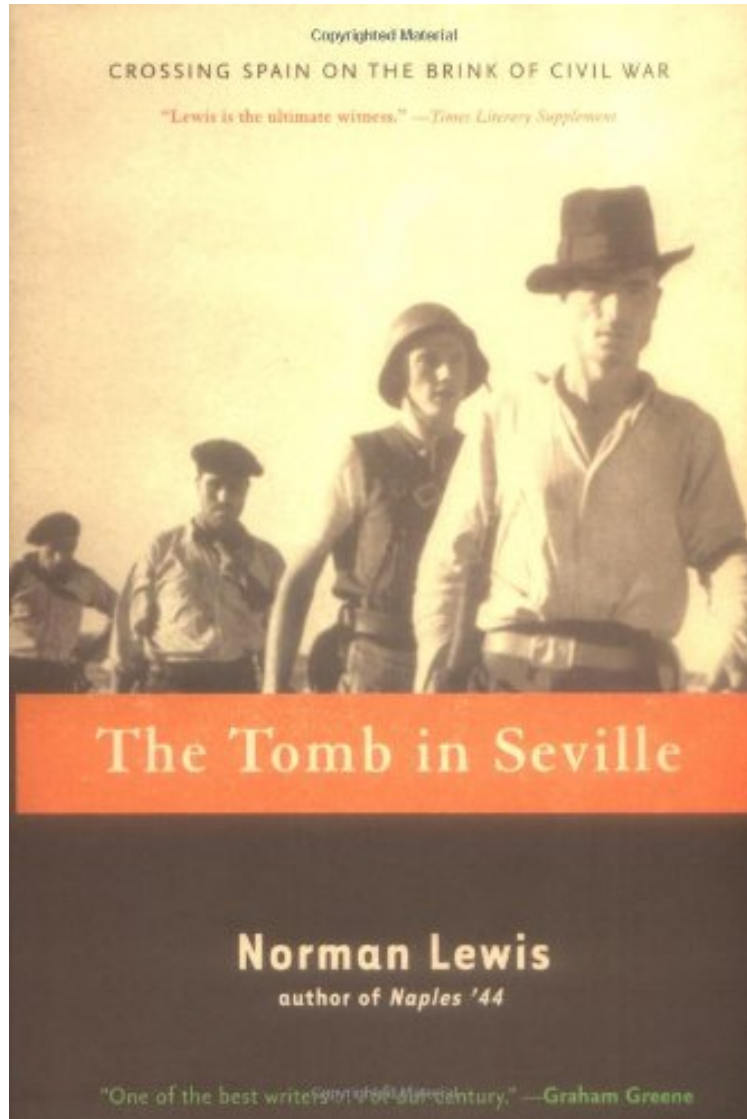


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The Tomb in Seville

Norman Lewis

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Norman Lewis : The Tomb in Seville before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Tomb in Seville:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Intensely vividBy Mike RobbinsI 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 fire, 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 incidents. 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 Canavezes - 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.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. The last one By John the Reader 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.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Norman Lewis was the greatest travel writer of the 20th Century By Sheila Michaels 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.

While the rumblings of oncoming war shook a divided Spain, Norman Lewis and his brother-in-law Eugene Corvaja traveled through the Spanish countryside to the family tomb in Seville. Nearly seventy years later, in prose that is

witty, understated, and poignant, Lewis describes the duo's travels first to Madrid, then through the bloody insurrection of October 34, and finally via the length of Portugal to Seville. Once there, they find the Corvaja tomb, but it is nothing like they expected. In this, his last book before his death in 2003, Lewis conjures up the country he returned to time and again in his writing and displays the spirit of pure fascination that has inspired generations of readers. He recalls covering a hundred miles on foot, sleeping in caves, dodging sniper fire, and attempting to dissuade the Communist-leaning Eugene from joining the Peoples Army. Yet Lewis's sweetly infectious enthusiasm for the sights and sounds of a country holding on to its glorious past in the face of a violent future never wanes. For the avid and the new Norman Lewis reader alike, *The Tomb in Seville* is a vibrantly fresh tale of a historic time and place.

From Publishers Weekly
Acclaimed travel writer Lewis (Naples '44; *Golden Earth*; etc.) died in 2003 at age 93; this is his final book. In it, he recounts traveling through Spain in 1934 with his brother-in-law Eugene Corvaja to find the Corvaja family tomb in Seville. Their plans for a straightforward north-to-south journey, beginning in San Sebastian, are altered by uprisings foretelling the impending Spanish Civil War. Lewis and Corvaja's ever-changing travel plans lead them on a circuitous route they wind up going through Portugal and shape the episodic tone of this memoir, in which each town and encounter provides its own story. Lewis eschews delving into the complex politics of 1930s Spain to focus instead on the social ramifications of the country's political situation. While Corvaja yearns to join the battle for Spain's future, Lewis remains an outsider, with his sharp eye set firmly on observing Spain's people and places. Whether he's capturing the comedy of trying to find a suitable cafe in Madrid while a street fight rages, depicting the isolated wildlife of the Sierra de Guadarrama mountains or commenting on the "cheap and cheerful" lives of the farmers' daughters he and Corvaja meet on a train, his well-crafted descriptions are honest and evocative. Lewis and Corvaja eventually find the tomb, but it's been destroyed, which is actually quite fitting, reminding readers that the journey is the story. (Mar. 1) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From *The New Yorker*
Lewis, who died in 2003, at the age of ninety-five, was often described as the finest travel writer of the last century. In his final book, he revisits the material of his first one, a journey through Spain with his brother-in-law in 1934. It is a tale of two Spains: in the harsh terrain of the countryside, the friends are continually amazed by the extreme poverty and primitive existence of the peasants, many of whom still live in caves. Meanwhile, in the cities, skirmishes between Fascists and Reds, which later erupted into civil war, are already under way. In Atocha, where the travellers narrowly escape being mown down by machine-gun fire, they find the main caf, amid the pandemonium, still open and busy. When their train pulls into Madrid, a gun battle is raging, and Lewis, taking cover, notes the words on a travel poster: "Under the Blue Skies of Spain Cares Are Forgotten." Copyright 2005 The New Yorker

From *Booklist*
This is famed British travel writer Lewis' last book, written before he died in 2003 at age 95. He and his brother-in-law first visited Spain in 1934, traveling to Madrid and then, by way of Portugal, to Seville. Lewis chronicled that trip in *Spanish Adventure* (1935), and this last book is a memory of that particular journey. Lewis remembers attending a Communist Party cell meeting, walking through a rain forest (they walked hundreds of miles), riding trains and trams, and finding his in-laws' family tomb in Seville. They witnessed the insurrection of October 1934, walked into a fight between the People's Army and government forces, and attended a bullfight that they found disgusting. Reading the author's account of his travels in a country on the brink of war is almost as satisfying as being there. George Cohen
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