Facts of Life in the Peninsula

By Raymond Sokolov

By surviving until just before Thanksgiving in 1975, Francisco Franco managed to quarantine Spain from the 20th century until the 20th century was almost over. His fascist dictatorship caused the Spanish many problems, one of which was to reduce the interest of foreigners in Spanish culture and in Spain itself. Several decades of totalitarian administration also interrupted the course of the arts. Tourism, except to the coastal resorts, used to be a discouraging encounter with malnutrition, illlit museums and the omnipresent police.

For these reasons, it would have been madness for John Hooper, or his equivalent, to have set out to write "The Spaniards: A Portrait of the New Spain" (Penguin, 287 pages, $6.95) before now. Mr. Hooper is a British journalist with a gift for spinning a yarn and the patience to sift through a midden of facts and then make sense of the ones that count. He can write, and several years as a correspondent in Spain, starting just after Franco's death, gave him a fine perspective on the transition to democracy and its vital aftermath.

But even as late as 1982, what general reader would have eagerly reached for a literate book on Spain's recent history or an anatomy of Spanish society, from its economy to its sexual mores to its problems with linguistic minorities? Today, with Catalan-speaking Barcelona preparing to host the 1992 Olympics, with Spanish films at the front of the vanguard and the Spanish stock market leading the global bull market, "The Spaniards" hits the bookstore shelves at just the right time.

More and more people have been venturing into the interior of Spain and discovering that it is the most interesting country in Europe, mixing its old strengths—dramatic landscape and splendid historical culture—with all the excitement that an abrupt awakening into freedom can bring to 40 million. And so the outside world is ready for a rundown on Spain as it once was for Anthony Sampson's "Anatomy of Britain" or Luigi Barzini's "The Italians."

But in addition to the pop ethnography that these worthy predecessors so richly exploited, Mr. Hooper also has a crackerjack story to tell. It has all the elements of a fast-moving film—the old generalissimo bypassing the old never-crowned claimant to the throne for his young son; the old guard being outflanked by the new king; the new king revealing an unsuspected mastery of cutthroat politics and the cat's grace to restore democracy to a garrison state without provoking more than token resistance from the army.

How all this happened, who the players were, what the economic background of this political miracle was and how today's political consensus evolved—these are the ingredients of Mr. Hooper's opening two chapters, which are his best, despite his disclaimer in the beginning that he isn't writing a political book.

By then you will be hooked and want to read the chapter on Spain's appealing royal family. Unlike the British royals, they really do things and are not just pretty faces dutifully gracing public occasions. When the Waleses visited Spain last spring, Diana minced over the cobblestones of Toledo in fashion-plate stiletto heels, while Queen Sofia walked comfortably in hiking boots scuffed from serious participation in archeological digs. The Spanish royal family has a budget half the size of the British, and the king continues to be a significant force in his country's democratic experiment.

I say experiment because I have read Mr. Hooper's chapter on the Spanish army and now worry that it is a sleeping dragon that could still breathe fire. Mr. Hooper is also clear and useful on Spanish bureaucracy, welfare, health education, the media, the church and the courts. He raised my eyebrows when he stated that Spain has much less crime than Britain. According to whose figures, I wanted to know. On the other hand, his account of the sexual revolution, the so-called *desmadre sexual*, rings very true, from the visit to a sex club to the explanation for the apparently high rate of lesbianism (the "poverty of heterosexual relations under Franco").

Good as this book is, it could be improved in later editions by a section on people. Who are the leaders of the various elites? Which aristocrats and business leaders and priests and producers make Spanish life work? Why is there no mention of the current Spanish book publishing industry, with its curiously international makeup—major foreign investment inside Spain combined with the extraordinary influence of a single Barcelona agent on the South American fiction of *el boom*?

We do not learn who is the richest man in Spain, what is the biggest bank or which television programs have the most influence. But almost anyone will be able to learn something from the chapters on Spain's very important linguistic minorities, including the usually ignored Galicians—8.2% of the population and not "really" Portuguese, no matter what anyone tells you. They have their own Galician-language television channel, as do Catalans and Basques. But Mr. Hooper believes that their current political autonomy will not evolve into true political independence. In the past 25 years, Spaniards, even Basques, he believes, have acquired a "stock of shared memories and experiences that unites them as effectively as any constitutional arrangement ever could."

Bookshelf

"The Spaniards: A Portrait of the New Spain"

By John Hooper