

THE SOLITUDE OF SOLANELL*

W. GEORGE LOVELL

ABSTRACT. A visit to Solanell, a depopulated town near the Catalan city of La Seu d'Urgel, provides the inspiration to reflect on its demise. Based on the findings of the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere program, in which an interdisciplinary team conducted research on mountain ecosystems in the High Pyrenees, this article situates Solanell's experience in a regional context that is still marked by a clash between tradition and modernity. Today the power of decentralized authority, fueled by notions of Catalan autonomy in a New Spain and a New Europe, is a concrete political reality that is radically reshaping the conventions of culture and landscape. But so too are the impact and legacy of the Franco years, as well as age-old difficulties imposed by the physical environment. The fate of Solanell is considered an inevitable outcome of debilitating forces that the town became ill-equipped to confront. *Keywords: abandonment, Catalonia, depopulation, Pyrenees.*

If you start early from Urgel you will be at Castellbó well before noon, and the hospitality of the place is so great that you will wish to stay there. The mountains here are not very high, well wooded, and fairly inhabited.

—Hilaire Belloc, *The Pyrenees*, 1909

Nothing we were told in Urgel prepared us for what we found. Not even in Castellbó, itself long in decline but inhabited still, was our sense of anticipation properly kindled, for signs of life there were apparent, though hardly vibrant (Figure 1). What I knew of abandoned places had to do with mountain regions other than the Pyrenees: in Scotland, on the Isle of Skye, the mute stone ruins of Borerraig, one small community among hundreds gutted and burned to make way for English authority and flocks of sheep; in Guatemala, the militarized landscapes of Huehuetenango and El Quiché, entire areas emptied of people in the name of anticommunism. Where we were headed, the hand of force had not been heavy, but time and circumstance had wrought an equal measure of destruction.

We crossed a bridge at the edge of Castellbó and began to ascend. Ahead, the dirt road was potholed and rutted, a means of access initially hewn for feet and hooves, not rubber tires. Off to our right the ground fell away steeply. Water murmured far below. We continued upward until we reached a wide bend, beyond which the huddled shape of Solanell came partly into view. That first, magical glimpse was a rite of passage into a bygone era. I remember saying to my companion, "Let's park and

* The members of the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere program based in La Seu d'Urgel not only shared pertinent information but also extended the warm hospitality noted by Hilaire Belloc almost a century ago. Three researchers in particular—Albert Villaró, Montserrat Iniasta, and Ramón Ganyet—gave generously of their time and expertise. Mireya Folch-Serra journeyed to Solanell with me, and Brian Osborne was there in spirit. Angels Torrents, of the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, deserves special thanks for suggesting that answers to the questions most of concern to us would more profitably be sought in the High Urgel than in Val d'Aran, where we were originally headed. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada funded my research in Spain.

* Dr. Lovell is a professor of geography at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada K7L 3N6.



FIG. 1—View of Castellbó, July 1988. (Photograph by the author)

walk the rest of the way,” for to drive any farther seemed an unnecessary violation. A nearby clearing beckoned. We parked in the shade of a tree, scaled a slope, and made our way across a field, our approach allowing Solanell to rise like a lost kingdom before us. Its haunted air entered our consciousness slowly, structure by structure, bit by bit. On the outskirts of town a well, no longer cared for, leaked water onto the trail. Our path through the mud soon became a rocky, uneven street. Houses on either side, their windows shattered, their doors broken, their interiors vacant, led up toward the church. We saw no one but noticed that sheep roamed freely, moving in and out of dark rooms where once fires had been lit, meals cooked, families raised, lives lived.

Opposite the church, its Romanesque features not yet dilapidated beyond appreciation, we ate lunch in silence, our enjoyment of bread, wine, and sun mixed with contemplation of all that surrounded us. On that high-summer day in July, when the Pyrenees were full of people no longer there, the solitude of Solanell became a sadness my heart embraced, a story my curiosity compelled me to explore.

THE SETTING

Solanell is one of twenty-eight towns in the mountains around the Catalan city of La Seu d’Urgel which, in the course of the last thirty to forty years, have suffered total depopulation. A dozen or so other towns in the Urgel hinterland are inhabited

only part of the year, are populated by newcomers fleeing the stress of contemporary urban life, or are occupied in such a precarious fashion that their existence in the year 2000 cannot be guaranteed (Figure 2). Some towns, like Sendes or Tost, lie in ruins. The state of decay elsewhere, as at Banyeres, Lletó, and Llirt, is less advanced, partly because their fields are still of some agricultural use, thus allowing passing workers an opportunity to stall the process of collapse (Figure 3). By the end of the century, however, one-third of present agricultural operations (250 out of 750) are likely to disappear, so material upkeep is bound to deteriorate.

Historically, the Catalan Pyrenees have been one of the most dutifully tended regions of Spain. People have lived and farmed there for a long, long time. Something of a population climax may be said to have occurred during the ninth and tenth centuries, when Arab control of the Iberian Peninsula meant that Muslim presence in the south exerted tremendous pressure on zones of Christian refuge in the north. This pressure was everywhere reflected in forest clearance, terrace cultivation, and village life at upper elevations turned to only in times of crisis. With the retreat of Muslim influence, pressure was relieved and population levels stabilized, to waver periodically, due mostly to pillage and sickness, until the nineteenth century, when another climax was reached. Around the year 1865, human numbers attained their maximum size. After that, decline set in, slowly until about 1950, then sharply from midcentury to the present. For two Urgel valleys, those of Cantó and Castellbó, Table I depicts the general downward spiral that for Solanell signaled extinction and that for all communities amounts to drastic attrition or worse.

One of fourteen towns scattered through the valley of Castellbó, Solanell lies in the *solana*, or sunny half of the valley, at an elevation of some 1,200 meters. Above it, to the north, rise peaks of more than 2,000 meters. Five kilometers to the south and some four hundred meters below Solanell, the town of Castellbó functions still, albeit in modest form, as the valley capital. Towns in the *umbria*, or shady half of the valley, are colder and more humid but are better endowed with level, cultivable land than are their solana counterparts.

Even to the eye, land in the solana appears less hospitable, more difficult to work (Figure 4). Soils are thin, rock outcrops common, water scarce. Natural vegetation consists of groves of oak (*Quercus ilex*) broken by extensive scrub in which juniper (*Juniperus communis*), wild rose (*Rosa canina*), and boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*) spring up at random. Species of introduced pine grow higher up. Along the banks of streams, alders (*Alnus glutinosa*), elms (*Ulmus minor*), poplars (*Populus alba*), and willows (*Salix alba*) do well. In the solana, only Albet and Seix, with fewer than twenty folk between them, are inhabited. Sallent and Sendes, like Solanell, are now deserted, left to rot after centuries of continuous occupation.

Solanell has the tragic distinction of being the largest abandoned town in the High Urgel. About thirty houses, together with associated barns, sheds, and threshing areas, constituted the settlement core (Figure 5). It was home to 180 people not much more than a century ago. Save for one or two exceptions, dwellings both for humans and for animals now reflect years of neglect. Roofs have caved in, walls have

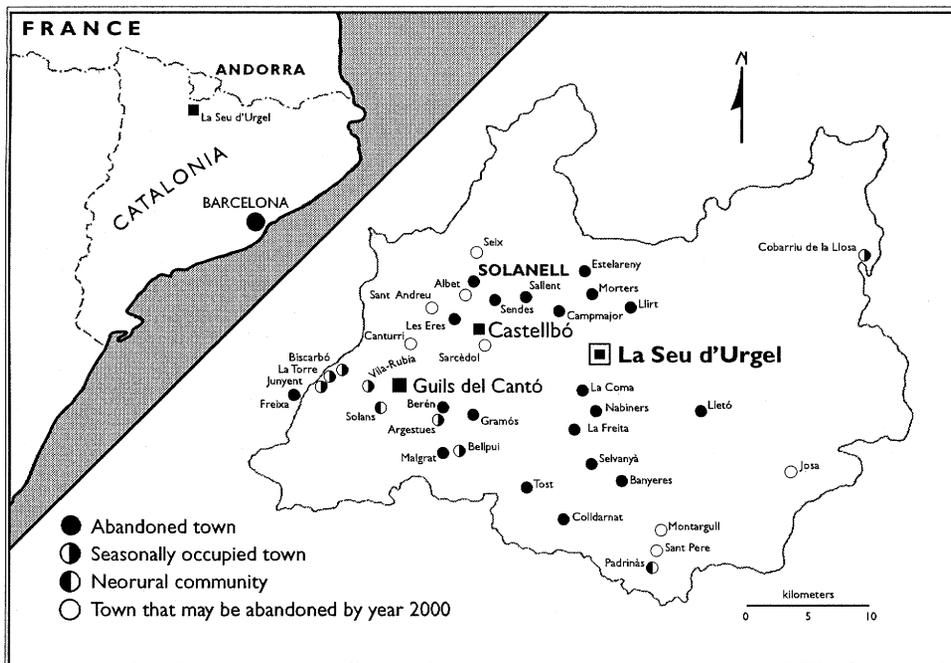


FIG. 2—Rural depopulation in the High Urgel, Catalonia.



FIG. 3—On the road through the Aragon Pyrenees, July 1988. (Photograph by the author)

TABLE I—POPULATION DECLINE IN THE CANTÓ AND CASTELLBÓ VALLEYS, CATALONIA, 1865–1986

TOWN	1865	1920	1950	1970	1986
Cantó Valley					
Avellanet	100	40	35	18	8
Canturri	32	20	15	6	2
Cassovall	80	55	47	26	11
Pallerols	225	97	68	34	20
Saulet	47	26	26	14	0
Castellás	143	88	56	18	5
Biscarbó	70	35	26	4	0
Junyent	122	82	50	25	0
La Torre	15	?	?	?	0
Guils	250	217	166	46	6
Solans	30	22	17	17	3
Vila-Rubla	131	49	36	25	0
TOTAL	1,255	731	542	233	55
Castellbó Valley					
Albet	40	69	63	31	12
Carmeniu	70	32	25	8	2
Castellbó	260	154	153	94	72
Castellnovet	10	?	?	?	?
Les Eres	25	14	14	4	0
Sallent	70	15	37	16	0
Sant Andreu	90	35	32	12	7
Santa Creu	100	39	30	27	19
Sarcédol	10	?	?	?	0
Seix	40	17	19	12	5
Sendes	140	43	32	7	0
Solanell	180	45	34	8	0
Turbiás	50	29	28	9	2
Vilamitjana	210	59	102	44	20
TOTAL	1,195	571	569	282	139

Source: Villaró and Campillo 1988, 14.

fallen down, whole units have become unsafe even to enter. A maze of narrow streets connects one scene of desolation with another. Watering troughs and fountains are no longer maintained. Part of the cemetery has subsided, and the church is beginning to show serious deterioration from the ravages of rain and snow. Resident priests disappeared during the Spanish Civil War, and no school was ever built. Modern conveniences such as piped water and telephones never arrived. What did arrive was an electricity line, in 1963, but years too late to stem the wave of departures.

When Solanell was alive, its inhabitants moved to a very different rhythm than any dictated by vehicular access and indoor plumbing. Like scores of other towns in the Pyrenees, Solanell is a casualty of modernity, a way of life swept aside by the values, demands, and priorities of the late twentieth century.

IN THE TRADITION

For generation after generation, Solanell's ways were the ways of the land. Around and about, the land could be put to six different productive uses. First, in the imme-



FIG. 4—The rugged Pyrenees landscape, July 1988. (Photograph by the author)

diat vicinity of the townsite, families tilled their own agricultural plots, large household gardens rather than even modest-sized commercial fields. Second, below the town, along the banks of brooks and streams, were the best strips for pasture. Third, in closer proximity, livestock grazed on a more extensive tract of land, one of lower quality, where thorns and nettles invaded meadows of grass. Fourth, some distance from the town, a zone of upland terraces was devoted to cereal cultivation, rye growing better in this thrown mountain niche than barley or wheat. Fifth, scattered here and there were forests where wood was cut for construction, for domestic fuel, for making farm implements and household utensils, or for charcoal. And sixth, high above, lay mountain areas where stone was quarried, animals hunted, and berries, herbs, and wild mushrooms gathered. Everything won from the land was won with human labor or the help of draft animals. Few machines—certainly no tractors—were of use in such remote and rugged terrain.

In the unglamorous round of peasant subsistence, self-reliance was the goal. Few earned a wage. People worked for themselves, growing their own food and assuming responsibility to provide not just for their families but for their animals as well. Sheep were raised in flocks ranging from perhaps fifty to two hundred head. Donkeys, mules, and horses were far fewer in number. Each family fattened a pig or two for chorizo and other sausages and fed some rabbits and chickens. Milk cows came much later, in the 1950s, bringing with them the difficult challenge of producing something regularly for the world beyond Castellbó. People took part in a market economy



FIG. 5—View of Solanell, July 1988. (Photograph by the author)

only occasionally, dealing with the outside for certain specific transactions, seldom on a daily basis, frequently with barter or payment in kind as the operative means of exchange. Peddlers with miscellaneous wares passed through town from time to time, their mules as often as not laden with contraband goods from Andorra or France. No road, not even one of dirt, invaded Solanell's isolation until 1935, though a bridle path linked it to Castellbó and other towns in the valley (Figure 6). People lived much as their forbearers had, within the physical and mental confines of the place in which they were born. La Seu d'Urgel, where a doctor could be fetched, some grain sold, or a relative dispatched to work in a factory in Barcelona, was a different universe three to four hours' walk away.

ABANDONMENT AND DECLINE

Solanell's demise, like that of other dead or dying towns in the Urgel periphery, represents failure to adjust from one mode of being to another. Age-old ways of doing things could no longer be sustained when commercial agriculture penetrated peasant self-sufficiency in the 1950s. Town numbers had dwindled over the course of the previous century, but the lure of milk production accelerated the process of depopulation considerably. Many families simply were unable to accumulate enough resources to make the crossover from eclectic producers to specialized suppliers of milk. Other families did manage to marshal enough capital to become small-scale dairy farmers. The money they received in return, alas, fell



FIG. 6—The Pyrenees near the French border, at Val d'Aran, July 1988. (Photograph by the author)

short of the amount needed to secure goods and services they formerly furnished themselves but now had to pay for as part of a new economic order. Only a few savvy folk were able to adapt their land and their lives to the relentless advance of a cash mentality, a mentality insensitive to—and corrosive of—traditional mountain mores.

It would be naive, however, to lay all blame on the insidious forces of capitalism. Local, decidedly Pyrenean reasons for town abandonment and population decline must also be looked to. In Solanell's case, inhabitants had to cope with remoteness, inaccessibility, limited cultivable land, steepness of terrain, shortage of water, and harsh winters when heavy snowfall could result in days or even weeks of isolation. All of these factors took their toll. One former inhabitant declared that he and his fellow townsfolk "had to work hard to live poorly," commenting also that "Every activity took such an effort. That's why people left."

Difficulties related to the austere environment also affect what social services and infrastructure can reasonably be provided. Solanell, by any contemporary standard, may be said to have endured chronic insufficiency in this regard (Table II). The list of things lacking is seemingly endless, but the absence of a school is particularly noteworthy. Children from Solanell were schooled in Castellbó, an hour or so away on foot. Having children return home every day was advantageous, but more than two hours of potential labor was lost in their traveling back and forth. Other towns

TABLE II—SOCIAL SERVICES AND INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE CASTELLBÓ VALLEY, CATALONIA

TOWN	FIRST DIRT ROAD	FIRST PAVED ROAD	FIRST ELECTRICITY	FIRST TELEPHONE	RUNNING WATER	INDOOR PLUMBING	SCHOOL
Albet	1941	—	1963	1973	Yes	Yes	Closed 1972
Carmeniu	1941	—	1963	—	No	No	None
Castellbó	1934	1980	1963	1950	Yes	Yes	Closed 1978
Castellnovet	1941	—	1963	—	No	No	None
Les Eres	1941	—	1963	—	No	No	None
Sallent	1937	—	1963	—	No	No	None
Sant Andreu	1941	—	1963	1978	Yes	Yes	None
Santa Creu	1941	—	1963	1987	Yes	No	None
Sarcédol	1941	—	1963	—	No	No	None
Seix	1941	—	1963	—	Yes	No	None
Sendes	1938	—	1963	—	No	No	None
Solanell	1935	—	1963	—	No	No	None
Turbiás	1941	—	1963	—	Yes	No	None
Vilamitjana	1941	—	1963	1969	Yes	Yes	Closed 1967

Source: Villaró and Campillo 1988, 50.

in the region were even less fortunate, for greater distance between home and school meant that children were boarded, cutting them off from their families for most of the week. The effects of this removal meant systematic socialization to ways other than those of parents or grandparents. In school, bonds were formed and interests sparked that might later lead to marriage with a nonlocal partner or employment far from home. Towns like Solanell thus gradually became abodes of old people, places where younger folk were conspicuously few. The manner in which children were schooled, in essence, educated them to leave. Towns without children are destined to die, are half-dead already.

What happened to Solanell must also be placed in the context of economic and political trends affecting Spain and Spanish society as a whole. The development priorities of General Francisco Franco throughout the 1950s and 1960s favored investment in urban-industrial complexes at the expense of improving the lot of people in agricultural areas. Franco's policies in mountain communities like those of the High Urgel resulted at best in stagnation, at worst in escalating disintegration, as individuals and entire families left to seek work elsewhere in Catalonia or even farther afield in Zaragoza or Madrid. Central-government decisions to close schools in which fewer than twenty pupils remained in attendance are remembered by local inhabitants with a bitterness that time has yet to erase. Now, more than two decades after Franco's death, a radically altered political agenda and an unimagined range of political scenarios prevail. Yet moves to reopen schools where perhaps only five children will be enrolled, commendable though they may be, do little to reverse the drift from countryside to city. Catalonia today finds itself aspiring to greater autonomy in a Spain that can no longer be considered the poorest, most needy member of the European Union. But certain consequences of the Franco years continue to be felt, as the fate of Solanell in part attests.



FIG. 7—The church at Solanell, July 1988. (Photograph by the author)

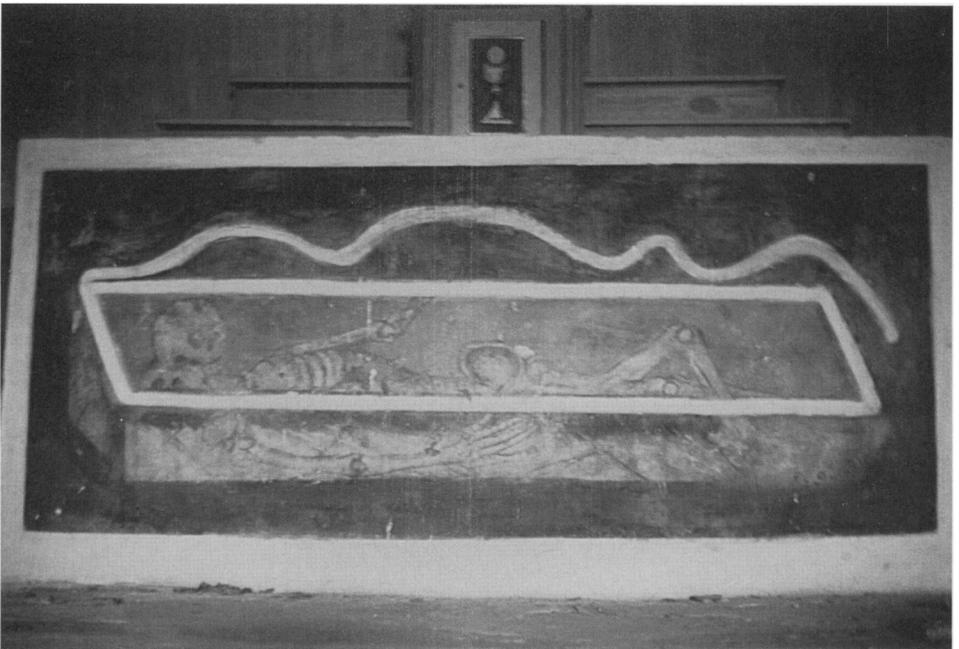


FIG. 8—The altar inside the church at Solanell, 1996. Against a pale blue background, the gray hues of the skeleton gave the painting a somber, valedictory feel. (Photograph by the author)

TAKING LEAVE

After lunch we walked around a little more. In the churchyard, amid a sea of blue and yellow wildflowers, a toppled tombstone carried the inscription "Pere Juliá Guirtart, 10-1-1963, als 45 anys." It struck me as symbolic that the only resident of Solanell I would know by name died the year electricity came to town. As we entered the church itself, it was impossible not to feel a need for some kind of prayer (Figure 7). Particles of dust hovered in a shaft of sunlight. Wooden pews lay pushed to the side. A panel on the altar, singular in the extreme, had been painted over with the figure of a skeleton, a perfect visual metaphor (Figure 8). We were there, I realized later, to mourn the loss not of one soul but of many, to acknowledge not the passing of life but the end of an era.

Outside, the sky echoed with the sounds of birds and crickets. The bells of wandering sheep clanged monotonously. On our way out of town, I noticed a fresh pile of dung on the trail, around which flies buzzed in frenetic, dizzying circles. Sheep indicated a human presence; a cow confirmed it. I suddenly felt that we, the observers, were ourselves being watched, that behind one of the houses we walked past someone was waiting for us to leave. Not until we were beyond the town perimeter did I hear a door slam and a dog bark. I looked back to see a man move up a street, then disappear into a barn. We learned the next day of an old farmer who returns each summer to pasture sheep and graze a cow. After our departure, the solitude of Solanell was again exclusively his.

FURTHER READING

- Belloc, H. 1909. *The Pyrenees*. London: Methuen.
- Berger, J. 1980. *Pig Earth*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Brenan, G. 1950. *The Face of Spain*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- . 1957. *South from Granada*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Cabré, A., and I. Pujades, eds. 1985. *Estudi demogràfic de la comarca de l'alt Urgel*. Barcelona: Departament de Política Territorial i Obres Públiques, Generalitat de Catalunya.
- Campillo, X., R. Ganyet, and X. Sanclimens. 1987. *La població: Evolució reciente, situació actual y prospectiva para el año 2000*. La Seu d'Urgel, Spain: MAB 6 Alt Pirineu.
- Cela, C. J. 1964. *Journey to the Alcarria: Travels through the Spanish Countryside*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Folch-Serra, M. 1990. *Voices of Place: Dialogical Landscapes in the Catalan Pyrenees*. Ph.D. diss., Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.
- Hooper, J. 1996. *The New Spaniards*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books.
- Ladurie, E. L. 1979. *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Reid, A. 1987. Notes from a Spanish Village. In *Whereabouts: Notes on Being a Foreigner*. San Francisco: North Point Press.
- Sahlins, P. 1989. *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Villaró, A., and X. Campillo. 1988. *Causas y consecuencias del despoblamiento*. La Seu d'Urgel, Spain: MAB 6 Alt Pirineu.
- Wright, J. K. 1947. *Terrae Incognitae: The Place of the Imagination in Geography*. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 37: 1-15.