

A BASQUE VOICE IN THE PROMISED LAND: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT LAXALT

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(Resumen)

En esta entrevista, Robert Laxalt, un vasco-americano de primera generación, habla de varios temas relacionados con su amplia producción literaria. Laxalt es escritor, académico y fundador-director de la University of Nevada Press. Los libros de Laxalt son conocidos internacionalmente y también han recibido varios premios. Los temas de la entrevista incluyen: la influencia de su niñez en su obra, la evolución de su interés en la cultura vasca, el éxito de *Sweet Promised Land* (un relato íntimo y personal de su padre, un pastor vasco en el oeste de los EE. UU.) y el futuro de la literatura vasca escrita por vasco-americanos.

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Robert Laxalt, a first-generation Basque-American, was born in Alturas, California, in 1923. He grew up in Carson City, Nevada, and graduated from the University of Nevada in 1947. The founder director of the University of Nevada Press, Laxalt has also been a United Press correspondent, a Fulbright research scholar, a consultant in Basque culture to the Library of Congress, and a writer-in-residence at the University of Nevada. He currently serves as a visiting professor at the Reynolds School of Journalism at the University of Nevada-Reno. Mr. Laxalt is the author of twelve books, both fiction and nonfiction, and numerous articles for *National Geographic* and other magazines. His books have won critical acclaim and awards throughout the world. Laxalt's *Sweet Promised Land* (1957) became the first selection of the National Book Society in England and an alternate of the Literary Guild in the United States. *A Man in the Wheatfield* (1964) was chosen as one of the most distinguished works of American fiction for that year by the American Library Association. *A Cup of Tea in Pamplona* (1985) earned him the *Tambor de Oro* prize in San Sebastián for his literary contributions to the Basque culture. *The Basque Hotel* (1989) was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in fiction.

D.R. Mr. Laxalt, could you start by describing your Basque roots and the early experience of your family in the United States?

R.L. Well, when I went with my father to the Basque Country, back in the 1950s, I was totally surprised, I didn't know anything about the Basque Country, nothing about its history or culture. However, my first language was Basque. My brother Paul and I spoke Basque while we lived in Basque ranches. But when we moved to Carson City and we went to school, none of the other children spoke Basque, so we've to leave it. And later it wasn't fashionable to be ethnic. Now it is, but then it wasn't. So, we forgot Basque as quickly as possible. . . . About my parents, well, Papa, even though

he had only six years of school, he was gifted for languages. So, his French was wonderful and his Basque, too. He never was in trouble with any of the Basque divisions. He even picked up some Spanish from the Pyrenees' borderland. And his English was wonderful, very rich, nearly poetic. He learned his English out on the ranches where cowboys and shearers met. I think my father's English influenced my writing because when he used a word, it was exactly the right word. My father even learnt some Italian when he had to deal with the Italian merchants in Dayton, near Carson. So . . . , Mama, her English was very good, too, though it wasn't poetic. She also got to understand Spanish and she could speak it, but not as well as Papa. She was mainly a businesswoman, the best businesswoman that Carson City ever saw, as they used to say. She really had an edge for business. Well, in the Basque Country women are good at business too, aren't they?

D.R. Which was the influence of this peculiar background on your childhood and youth? Did you feel at that time as an outsider because you were a descendant of immigrants?

R.L. Yes, just because we were foreigners and spoke another language in our homes we knew we were different, but we didn't know how we were different. I don't remember any violent discrimination at all, though there were some Anglo-Saxon people who were not nice.

D.R. A Southern writer, Robert Penn Warren, said once that "all vital images are the ones you get before you're seven, eight, nine years old." Do you agree with him?

R.L. Yes, I think that, regardless [if] you're a foreigner or not, the earliest experiences you never forget.

D.R. When did you start to explore your Basque roots?

R.L. When I went with Papa to the Basque Country I fell in love with the place. I couldn't imagine anybody leaving such a beautiful country. [It] didn't take any consideration at all because most of them were poor and they had no opportunities there. But I had been raised in the desert, so I was totally in [a] trance when I arrived there. I couldn't believe it. I've written about that in *A Time We Knew*. I was feeling that I had always been there. It was just somewhere in my folk memory. Besides, the people in the Basque Country were beautiful people. I never felt alienated there at all. They were my kind of people: they were strong and they were forthright. The second time we went there, I missed it so badly that, when we got to Garazi, I cried. I don't cry very easily. I just loved the country.

D.R. When and why did you think that the Basque Country and the experience of Basque immigrants in the United States could attract the interest of the American audience? In fact, your first book, *Violent Land: Tales the Old Timers Tell*, does not deal with this subject.

R.L. Oh, no, and it's the same with *A Lean Year and Other Stories*. Most of those aren't Basque, they are American. It wasn't until *Sweet Promised Land* that I started my Basque period, but it was difficult to convince publishers in New York that the Basques were something worthy to write about. Publishers only thought about money and market and there weren't many Basques around. So, I was discouraged. At first,

I couldn't understand why they weren't interested in Basque things. Then, however, as Bill Douglass pointed out, this worked to my advantage because *Sweet Promised Land* became an immigrant book. It was not particularly a Basque book because I didn't know so much about the Basques. But that book attracted so much attention that opened up a whole new field and other Basques began to write and other non-Basques began to write, too.

D.R. Do you think that the key factor for the success of *Sweet Promised Land* was the fact that it is not a novel, but a non-fiction story, told in an intimate, personal style?

R.L. I never analyzed why it was successful. It came as a shock to me. I tried for a year to start that book. Finally, when I started to write it, I was ready to give up. I couldn't write it as a novel because something was missing. I think that the poignancy of the trip to the Basque Country moved me very much. I guess that it was a story of discovery for me too, but I never went [i]n that direction because it was my father's story. Then I said I would try one more time and I took the paper and the typewriter. I wasn't even thinking and I wrote: "My father was a sheepherder and his home was the hills." Then when I wrote that one line and I did realize what I'd written, I knew that I got the book. I started from right there and I didn't stop to write an outline because I don't believe in outlines. When I had written four chapters on that book, I sent them to *The Saturday Evening Post* in New York and they said that there might be a book there. Then, they put me in touch with my literary agent, [who] is still my literary agent to this date, Curtis Brown. So, they liked it, they took me as a writer and they sent the manuscript to Harper's, to a wonderful woman, Elizabeth Lawrence. She fell in love with the book, by the way. So, Harper's bought the novel and me a contract. When I knew this, I went into a state of shock and I couldn't continue writing for a while. The next crisis came when I wrote about the moment of reunion between my father and my sisters. It was something tricky, that could be too emotional, oversentimental, and then I wrote this passage about him: "He was the youth who had gone out into the world in beggar's garb and come back in shining armor." And I said: "That's it!" Then, I was faced with a personal crisis at the end of the book. It was about whether to finish the book here or in the Basque Country. I had been fooling around with the idea, without writing it, that my father had to come home with his own family. Finally, I decided to show him coming down the Basque mountains and his relatives telling him: "Come back! Come back!" However, he answers them: "I can't go back. It ain't my country any more," and then I see the West spreading out. And that was it.

D.R. Which was the general reaction of the readers toward *Sweet Promised Land*? Can we talk about a more favorable response by the immigrant groups, particularly the Basque community in the United States?

R.L. Well, first, the critics. There was a massive amount of reviews. They came here from everywhere: *New York Times* and others. And then England picked it up. I never expected that. And it was the first choice of the National Book Society. And then, after that, I wrote for *National Geographic* "Basque Sheepherders of the American West," which was directly related to *Sweet Promised Land*. And then, from there, I

wrote about the Basque Country two or three times for *National Geographic*. . . . And about the reaction of the Basque-Americans, at first I was apprehensive, in the sense that they wouldn't like it, and mostly apprehensive about my father. But their response was amazing. Other immigrants also liked the book, but the Basque-Americans really loved it.

D.R. After *Sweet Promised Land*, in most of your books, fiction and non-fiction, it's possible to find references to the Basque Country or the Basque immigrants in the States. The only exception is a very successful novel, *A Man in the Wheatfield*. Why did you choose as a setting a town peopled by Italian immigrants instead of a Basque community?

R.L. To choose the nationality of the place where this story could happen I couldn't use Basque because they just don't show their emotions, they don't reveal their feelings. So, the only other group I knew was the Italians. I was always struck by their classic reactions (anger, passion. . .) and I was fascinated by the overtones of the Roman holidays. So, there was a Roman overall influence.

D.R. You said once: "It's a very difficult thing to write about the Basques or any other nationality unless you've seen them in their own land." Which was the influence of your different trips to the Basque Country on your work?

R.L. I knew the Basques here, but there was always something missing in the Basques that I knew in this country. The cycle wasn't complete. There was something in seeing them on their own land and with their own people, as I could observe in my two years over there. I saw their reactions and I saw how differently they reacted here. Here they always seem like other immigrants that react almost as if they didn't belong here. And when you think about it, they don't.

D.R. Most of your books show a positive image of the Basque Country, even an idyllic one, except perhaps *A Cup of Tea in Pamplona* and *Child of the Holy Ghost*? Do you agree with this?

R.L. Oh, I tried to be honest when writing about the Basque Country. Well, *Child of the Holy Ghost* was written because I was really triggered by what happened to my mother there. I genuinely felt it. I didn't try to portray the village as cruel. It was just the way things were. In a way that was good for me because it gave me objectivity. I could see that there could also be cruelty and then I remembered all those wonderful movies about incidents in England and Ireland and the cruelty of village life. So it worked. And *A Cup of Tea in Pamplona* was a real thing in the sense that I saw people there being denied an opportunity, poverty. . . . It's an honest view. I love the Basque Country and the Basque people, but that does not deny me the right to say when they're wrong. Otherwise, I couldn't be honest.

D.R. Your books do not offer to the reader a comprehensive view of the Basque Country. For instance, there are no references to urban life and just a few comments on fishing communities in *A Time We Knew*. Why do you deal only with the rural Basque Country?

R.L. Well, one, I couldn't write about the industrial Basque Country with authority. And two, they didn't interest me as much as the rural Basques. I like the rural

Basques and that's why I identify with them. I found the rural Basque Country more real than the city Basque. Although I didn't know many Basque cities over there, I didn't think they were as pure or bizarre as the rural areas. Even in America the industrial community bores me to tears. There's no magic there or romance.

D.R. In your books you often include comments on the general features of the Basques. For instance, you say: "The Basques are not impressed;" "The Basques are not much for words. Theirs is the language of the eyes;" "Reserve and restraint are qualities of the race;" "The Basques do not like the physical presence of others pressed too closely to them;" "Basques took insult from no man;" "Basques ignored what was not worth fighting about". . . Don't you think that by using these statements you sometimes run the risk of overgeneralizing the Basques?

R.L. Yes, but also if I wrote the other way, I'd run the risk of deluding what I feel. I think that all the statements that I wrote there are still true for me. I could say "on the one hand," "on the other hand," but I don't like to do that. I like to make a strong statement. I do acknowledge differences, but anytime I've drawn a character anywhere, I've tried to pick a dominant trait. I hate deluding characters.

D.R. Most of your works contain a few Basque words or expressions, for instance, "chahakoa" (goatskin wine pouch), "ergela" (crazy), "makila" (walking stick), "gaichoa" (poor), "nola zida" (How are you?) or "a la Jinkoa" (My God!). In some cases you give the English translation of these terms, but in other cases you omit it and you let the reader guess their meaning from the context. Do you have any special criteria on this point?

R.L. Well, these are the Basque words that I know at the very level I remember them. They are strong words and they are the words that I heard most. Also, when you are writing about foreign people, you must be very careful not to use too many foreign expressions because if you do so, you are going to lose your American readers. About translating them or not, I think there is instinct there. If the term appears obscure to me, I translate it. And if the reader does not have to work to find what it means, then I think it's all right.

D.R. I also have a question on your identity. I have found the following three quotations in some of your former interviews: "The chemistry of the land—Nevada—is in me;" "One needs only to be away for a year to realize how truly American he is;" and "I'm happy—no, that's too trite—I'm comfortable with being a Basque. I do like many of the traits of the race." Could you expand on the meaning of these three apparently contradicting statements?

R.L. I am all of those: I'm an American man, I'm Nevadan, I'm Basque. Nobody is one thing, so they are not exclusive at all. I can be all three very comfortably and I am.

D.R. May we say that there is in America a growing scholarly interest in the Basques? And if so, why?

R.L. Well, everybody now is writing about the Basque Country. And I'll tell you why: it's natural, it's a new country for American people. Very little has been written about it. So, it's a novelty and there is still an aura of romance about it. In fact, when I first

started writing, nobody had heard about the Basques. But curiously enough, those who had were mostly on the East Coast, I mean, reviewers, editors For them Basque was a romantic word: Basque parades, Basque language. . . . However, for ordinary people you were just one of the groups of foreigners. In fact, we were regarded pretty low, as one of the lowest class of immigrants. Now, however, they are accepting the fact of the Basques. They know more about these people because of all the writing that has been recently done about them, not only by me, but by many others.

D.R. What is the current attitude of the descendants of Basque immigrants toward their heritage?

R.L. I don't know. For example, my children are different. Monique is very Basque, in actions and reactions, and in what she writes about, too. Kristin is actually fifty-fifty, from her mother's side and my side. And Bruce is curious. He used to like to go to the Basque Country to retreat, all by himself. He has very good memories from there. . . . As you probably know, some races in America are very proud of their heritage and they display it. Well, the Basques no, not until the First Basque Festival in Reno-Sparks in 1959. It was really an emotional time to see these people that haven't seen each other since they came to America. 7,000 people embracing each other and, as one policeman told me, no[t] one fight. Well, the truth is that the Basque Festival in Reno-Sparks cannot take credit for the whole Basque identity revival because Idaho had old Basque festivals and in California they had little groups, festivals. . . . However, the Reno Basque Festival was the first one that cohered them.

D.R. What do you think about the future of literature about the Basques written by these new generations of Basque-Americans?

R.L. I can't really predict the future generations' attitude. More and more the youngest seem to be interested in their heritage. Monique, for example, has identity with the Basque people and the Basque Country, and she can write very well. And there are others who might do it for some old, romantic, exotic sense, but on the whole I can't tell. I can't predict because being in love with ancestors happens in some people and doesn't happen in others. But as long as you have writers like Monique—and she is an honest writer—I guess you can be optimistic about the future.