

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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A Ton of Eyes

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Spain  
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:



The fighting bull on your left was drawn by John Fulton, an American bull-fighter living in Seville. It is said that a fighting bull is occasionally kind to humans; that one may even allow himself to be petted by his handler. This may be so but looking at the bull depicted here, with his head held high, his eye seeking a target, the hump of neck muscle raised and rigid, the tail sweeping the air

like a propeller, I can't imagine it. Fulton, who fights and kills such animals professionally, with much the same sense of familiarity I feel when I sit at my desk and pick up pencil and paper to prepare a newsletter, assures me that this is true. "But not in the plaza and not for the uninitiated."

At twenty-five Fulton is tall, spare and energetic. His face is squarish, curiously immobile, and punctuated by karat shaped brows over green eyes. His ears flare from his head with fox-like alertness. He looks very young and it is hard to believe that within the space of a few years he has learned to speak fluent Spanish, to dance flamenco, to paint and to fight and kill bulls. The last is his most important achievement as far as he is concerned and he is dedicated to the bullfight (corrida de toros) as was Cotton Mather to virtue and Tiberius to vice.

His profession is not an easy one. "Bullfighting is one of the dirtiest games in the world and God help the young ones who go into it." This was in Mexico seven years ago. Since then I have watched the outer and inner workings of the corrido de toros in half a dozen countries, and would find it difficult to disagree with this judgement.

Whatever else it is (and each commentator has his own interpretation) the corrido is an industry like movie making or car

manufacture. The highest rewards go to the man who has marketed his commodity -- himself, in the case of the bullfighter -- most effectively. Since a bullfighter (torero) may earn as much as \$10,000. (or as little as one) for a single fight the cities and towns of Spain and Latin America are crowded with would-be toreros. The situation thereby created is a fiercely competitive one, very little of which is regulated by the rules of fair play. A maxim among bullfighters is, "That torero's loss is my gain". The more cynical remark, "Friendships cease when three toreros step into the plaza together". The stakes are high enough for the corrida to be considered a major industry (see Appendix) in Spain.

To the public eye the apparent pivot around which the complicated structure of the corrida moves is the "matador de toros" (bull killer), generally young, usually dashing, always something of a prima donna. The most dramatic type of matador makes arrogant, eye catching entrances and exits both inside and outside the plaza, and even the mildest clearly considers himself a breed apart. Fulton who was once described as "the nicest kind of American boy" is not aggressive about his profession but it is easy to see that he takes a delight and pride in being able to say, "I fight bulls".

Sharing the intense central light with the matador are the professional men closest to him: his manager, his ring assistants (the "peones" who make up his "cuadrilla") and his sword handler and sometime secretary, the "mozo de estoques". Around these men, in ever diminishing circles of importance, are bull raisers, personal friends, fans, known hangers-on, unknown hangers-on, beggars, bums and bootblacks. It is a court and the matador is king. Fulton, who is not yet a full matador, wryly remarks that his "court", consisting of his manager and his chief peón, may be small but it is noisy.

Earlier I remarked that the fighter was the "apparent" focus of the corrida's activities. This because in practice he shares control with his manager and the impresario who finances fights and owns or manages a bull ring. The work which these men do is behind the scenes and rarely becomes public knowledge except in unreliable café gossip. But it is the life's blood of the court which each matador holds and no torero no matter how great can set foot in any plaza until this work has been accomplished. Without a manager he is like an eskimo without furs or an igloo: he would perish. Without the impresario he would be able to perform only in the privacy of his room; the public would never see him.

This is not to diminish the importance of the fighter who, after all, does one thing well and must give a good part of his time to being certain that he can do it again and again. He has to leave to others the marketing of the product. His contribution is himself, his skill, his bravery and, on the very

best days, his art. Whatever else happens to him, in the plaza he must be able to outwit a bull in a series of charges and to kill the animal while both protecting himself against contusions, concussions, horn wounds and death and doing this in such a way that the spectators approve and applaud.

If a person watches an exceptional torero at work in the plaza it all looks pat and he feels that even the bull has memorized the shooting script beforehand and is following it to the letter. He is made to forget that the same bull is a wild animal weighing around half a ton whose only intention is to drive one of his horns into any moving object which confronts him. He also forgets the performances of the young beginners (novilleros) who have much to learn and can learn that only in actual contact with a bull, who are caught and tossed time after time and who are often so clumsy and inept that they are helpless before the bull.

The boy who wants to reach the upper rank of bull killers must go through a hard apprenticeship. Here the game is perhaps at its roughest and has a smell of cruelty to human beings about it which is sometimes nauseating. The essential point about a bull fighter's apprenticeship is that the practice which he must have requires him to place himself at the disposal of a living lethal weapon, the bull, with his skills and defences only partially perfected. There is no other way, and pain and death are common consequences. One of Fulton's photographs shows him lying on the ground, clinging desperately to the horns of a large bull so that he won't be gored until the peones reach him to take the bull away. He says that he could hardly raise his arms or walk the next day but at least he was still alive to try.

The event which started Fulton on the long road from Philadelphia to Seville and active participation in the corrida was a movie: the Tyrone Power-Rita Hayworth version of "Blood and Sand", based on Elasco-Ibañez' novel of a bull killer. Fulton says, "Man, that movie did it. I thought that bullfighting life was everything -- and still do."

(Alternatively he might have read Hemingway's Death in the Afternoon, still the most comprehensive appreciation of the corrida, as did James Conklyn, another American torero now in Spain. Both Fulton and Conklyn agree that either the movie or the book start most Americans thinking about becoming bullfighters.)

In spite of "Blood and Sand" Fulton might never have gone to the bulls if he hadn't met the Spanish barber. The latter, having emigrated to rainy, damp Philadelphia, could never forget the clear skies and warm sun of Spain and suffered that profound sadness of the exiled Spaniard who will rant and rave against Franco's government, swearing never to return to Spain, but in the next breath will talk about going home on the fastest ship.

He never does and goes on being sad. The barber had covered the walls of his shop with bullfight posters and talked bulls into the ears of his not always willing customers, mostly Latin Americans. "You saw that Litri cut two ears in the Maestranza. Now that is a plaza. Did you know that it has sand the color of egg yolks, a sand which will not travel? And that...." In this way Spain was recalled every day.

It was one of the posters which attracted Fulton's attention. He went into the shop and found the barber demonstrating cape passes. In a short time they became friends and the barber taught him the basic cape work and encouraged him to become a torero; his daughter showed Fulton how to dance flamenco. "Olés" and castanets resounded in the tiny outpost of Spain.

At the same time Fulton was enrolled in the Museum School of Painting and he won a scholarship to study art in Mexico. As a parting gift the Spanish barber gave him a fighting cape once used by Chicuelo, a Spanish torero of the 20's, and the daughter presented him with a pair of castanets. He still has both these gifts.

Mexico was confusion. Fulton continued to paint, began to learn Spanish beyond the elementary phrases he had gotten from the barber and tried to find his way in the dimly-lit, murky world of bullfighters' cafés and other haunts. It was not easy. There were language difficulties; there were too many Americans past and present who wanted to be toreros. No one was particularly helpful: "One more gringo with pretensions." But by doggedness he was able to establish himself, precariously to be sure, in this world where a few were successful while the majority were has-beens or would-bes. All the while the cape work, joined by practice with the red woolen cloth (muleta) used in the last part of a fight, went on. But what he needed most was to test himself before bulls, any kind, any size, any state.

One day he was approached by a man who offered to place him on a card with Carlos Arruza, one of Mexico's most famous matadors, if Fulton could put up the money to pay for the two bulls he would kill. A small portion of the gate receipts would cover Fulton's expenses. At first glance a reasonable offer but in the context of the corrida a specious one. The reason is that Fulton was a rank beginner and beginners simply do not figure on cards with high ranking matadors. He accepted, however, and managed to get the required money together. After he had turned it over he learned definitely that he was not to fight with Arruza; he was told that he was being "taken" but not how.

Finally he went to the police who listened politely and asked him to join them in a hunt for the erstwhile promoter. Fulton had no objections and one night, on a lonely road, the police intercepted a truck carrying two bulls and the promoter.

The bulls had been stolen from a nearby ranch. All the men involved were arrested, including Fulton, in spite of his having contacted the police first. As inexplicably as he had been jailed he was released, a bit wiser in the ways of the bullfight world but as determined as ever to stay in it.

Military service interrupted his plans but before the Army took him from Mexico he had learned that the number of aspirants was great but the number of sponsors small. Of course there were those who were willing to get him on a card here or



John Fulton in  
costume, with

matador's  
dress cape

there -- for a price. There were others who offered to undertake his training and presentation -- at Fulton's expense. There were some who snickered over their tequila and said (in effect), "Come now, Yankee, go home"; others who encouraged but could give no practical help. And there were those beginners like himself who smiled when they shook hands and tore him to pieces later. The reality was far from the romantic world of "Blood and Sand" and had the healthy effect of dispelling some of Fulton's illusions. The net result was to give him a new estimate of what he was in for, which did not discourage him, and to confirm his belief that he had an overwhelming desire to be a matador. The Mexican experience was a necessary loss of innocence.

The Army gave Fulton a chance to get his second wind, and, even, as he was stationed in San Antonio, to participate in several corridas in which the bull was not killed. In the meantime he practiced with cape and muleta and came to a critical decision. Mexico seemed unlikely to help him much more; he could only go to Spain. Once discharged he soon put this plan into operation, and shortly arrived in Spain with several hundred dollars in his pocket and fresh enthusiasm in his eyes.

He went directly to Seville, one of the centers of bull-fighting activity and rich with the traditions of breeding the best bulls, the best bullfighters, the best spectators and the best "atmosphere". A friend in Mexico had given him a letter to Pepe-Illo, a one time torero turned manager. Pepe read the letter, looked at Fulton a long time and said, "All right, let's take you to a ranch and we'll see the worst you can do". Fulton went through his paces with a malicious cow and, he confesses, "was awful, man, awful. I looked like a character who'd never had a cape in his hands before." In spite of that he must have had something which caught Pepe-Illo's fancy for the ex-torero said, "So now we can get down to learning something about bull-fighting."

Fulton was astonished and overjoyed. Few beginners and one just arrived in Spain find a manager so quickly. And it is the latter who trains and finances a promising youngster; who is known and has influence among the impresarios; who handles the publicity which keeps his fighter in the public eye. His technique of handling his torero can make or break the fighter involved. For his services he takes between 15 and 30% of his fighter's income.

If Fulton had worked hard in Mexico on his own he worked infinitely harder under Pepe's tutelage. "Not only must you learn the fundamentals but you must also come to fight in the Spanish style." Most often training sessions took place in the railroad yards of Seville. There, on the uneven stubbled ground littered with sticks, stones, broken glass, paper, all the debris of a freight yard, Fulton, in bathing trunks, learned footwork, body carriage, cape handling, wrist or arm control, muleta passing, the technique of profiling with the heavy killing sword in the right hand and the muleta in the left, all under the sharp, expert eye and soft, ironic voice of his manager. Pepe-Illo set only one standard: perfection.

Pepe arranged that Fulton take part in economical corridas in small towns so that he could satisfy the most important requirement in learning his craft: that of working with live animals which gave little time for thought, no time for mistakes and demanded that the torero do his work automatically as if he had done nothing else before in his life. On these occasions Fulton fought well, and badly, was tossed and trampled, but added to his knowledge every time.

The economical corrida can be a brutal thing. Most often the bulls are ones not wanted in the big fights, either because they are lame, halt or blind, or are too big and too old or have been passed with cape or muleta before. In the first class corrida the animal must be physically perfect, not too large (averaging 1000 lbs.), with modest horn spread, not too old (around four years generally) and must be virgin, that is not exposed to cape and muleta before. The leading toreros refuse to fight under other conditions. So it comes about that the least prepared face the most exacting type of bull. Several novilleros die each year because of this (and because of inexperience) and others are gored or injured in some way. Those responsible for this state of affairs say that a man must go through this ugly phase in his career if he is to be a good fighter. Others disagree, pointing out that skill is just as easily acquired with a decent bull and that it is unfair to impose the heaviest penalties on the least equipped. As with almost every other aspect of the corrida the argument is strident, the situation static. Abuses apparently have a longer staying power than virtues. I asked a manager once why the littlest bulls went to the best known toreros. He replied, "Why think of the money X would lose if he were gored? He can't afford to be injured anymore: he's a big investment."

Fulton sees no other course but to accept this state of affairs. An unknown can hardly change what is standard practice. Moreover he has to fight bulls and therefore has to take on the bad ones if no others are available. "Besides," he says, "it must be a dream fighting the good ones after this experience."

His manager is not a wealthy man and he has been unable to contribute greatly to Fulton's maintenance. In the beginning Fulton got nothing for his part in the economical corridas. The last eight months have seen a series of outlays with little return. At one time he was so low on funds that he could not stand coffee treats in the cafés where bullfight people gathered. This lost him much face for it is a paradox in the thinking of the bullfight world that you must give some sign of prosperity even if you are poor, unshaven, have no overcoat for the winter, are sleeping on the floor, working with a stained, patched cape and barely eating. Fulton found that the nods grew more perfunctory in the fly filled, dingy cafés, their floors littered with sugar wrappers, cigarette and cigar butts, napkins and spittle, their tables sticky with spilled brandy, anis and coffee. He found that money was the magic talisman in this superstitious world: the sign that the torero was a man whose own good luck would breed luck for others. He believes that at this point he simply ceased to exist for some people.

In the last two months this situation has begun to

improve. For his last fight with a six year old bull ("He was enormous, man, enormous!") he received his expenses: food, lodging, transportation and incidentals for himself, Pepe and a peón. He has hopes that this will repeat itself.

As well Fulton has his painting but it has been difficult to find a market. Neither Spaniards nor foreigners were much interested in the works of an unknown American, especially when he was doing a series of paintings illustrating themes from García Lorca's poem "Lament for the Death of Ignacio Sánchez Mejías" (a torero gored to death in the plaza, of whom it is said he returned after retiring because his mistress, a famous Spanish dancer, demanded more more money that he could afford). Moreover on the part of the Americans there was a decided hostility and they seem to have looked with much suspicion on another "young bum" loose in Europe without much of a stake or a job and interested in becoming a bullfighter. An American told me that our colony in Seville gave Fulton a "pretty rough time".

Fulton finally put Lorca aside long enough to draw six sketches of the commonest passes used by a torero in fighting a bull. These caught the attention of several Sevillians and they encouraged him to have them reproduced and sell them to the tourist trade. Already a number of the sets with the title "La Fiesta Brava" have been sold and they promise to bring in enough money to finance Fulton's winter, during which he will practice at "tientas" (the testing of young cows for breeding purposes on the bull ranches), and perhaps a part of the season which opens in the Spring when he intends to fight his first corrida with picadors, a big step in the novillero's career.

There are at least three stages through which a beginner passes. In the first he works with cape and muleta but without animals; in the second he fights animals but without picadors, the men on horseback who drive a lance into a bull's neck muscle to cause him to lower his head; in the third he fights almost exclusively with picadors. The passage from the second to the third stage is important because it brings greater prestige and the novillero has to give finished performances. It is also said that he will be fighting bigger, stronger bulls and the danger is thereby increased but since in the second stage he is often confronted with six year old animals this is less true than is admitted. In any event if the novillero does well here he will almost inevitably become a full matador; if he does badly his reputation and his confidence will suffer accordingly. Fulton is preparing with great care for this step: he cannot stand the thought of failure.

Why is Fulton doing all this? He has a happy faculty of laughing at his problems which does not, however, conceal a deep sensitivity to slights, personal attacks or indifference. Yet his is in a highly vulnerable position on all sides. Among Spaniards he is an American torero and it is said no non-Latin



can ever be a great matador. Among Americans he is apparently shiftless and misguided, although many have found it hard to square this judgement with Fulton's obvious dedication and seriousness, including abstinence from smoking, drinking and late nights. The competitive nature of the corrida is in itself a challenge even to the thickest-skinned. What, then, drives him on?

He himself recognizes that it is something more than having watched the celluloid portrait of an arrogant, brave, world commanding bull killer, or having committed himself so deeply that to withdraw or fail now would be to lose face with his family, friends and well-wishers. The motive force lies elsewhere. He gave a clue to what this is when he said one day, "Sometimes I tighten up in the ring, not because I'm any more afraid than usual, but because I do something badly and then I feel the weight of all those eyes. Man, they weigh a ton."

For some toreros the act of fighting and killing a bull in the plaza is a private and personal act performed in public, an act which proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that they are men. For this kind of torero every fight is an affirmation and a proof that he is a man among men. In the corrida he finds his fulfilment. And when he makes a mistake or is afraid he is by so much less a man and the pressure of the spectator's eyes becomes intolerable, until they "weigh a ton".

In a piece designed to explain something of the fighter's feelings when he confronts a bull Fulton wrote "[The corrida] gives a man the opportunity to prove his physical courage". The shy, timid, awkward boy raised in a conservative Philadelphia household becomes something quite different in the torero who steps into the plaza and gracefully, knowledgeably and bravely fights and kills a dangerous wild animal in the presence of a critical audience. This metamorphosis is perhaps the explanation of why Fulton is in Seville today. He described what happens to him in the ring in this way: "When you're doing it well you feel like a big balloon ready to shoot up into the sky; when it goes wrong you're like that balloon with the air let out; there's nothing worse in the world than that feeling."

Fulton's is not a boy-made-good story yet. As he points out he still has a long way to go, but the future is encouraging. This summer he had the good fortune to attract the eye of Juan Belmonte, one of the great retired matadors. This short, anvil jawed man who "revolutionized" the corrida in the twenties often puts on tientas for important visitors. He invites novilleros to work with the cows. Fulton has been asked to Belmonte's ranch several times, and the latter has commented that he thinks Fulton to be one of the outstanding novilleros in his experience. His opinion is worth a great deal to Fulton's pride and also enhances his reputation among bullfighting people.

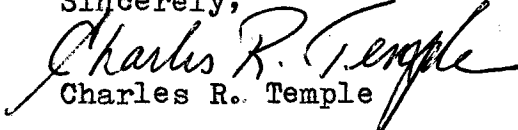
Fulton's adventures and misadventures are representative of what the beginners of all nationalities must experience -- unless they have money or monied backers -- to become full matadors. Although the way is hard and few are chosen many come.

They are to be met with all over Spain: living from hand to mouth, in run-down pensions, in dark, airless, heatless rooms, on the charity of friends or their own small stakes, practicing long hours, killing bulls when they can, trying to meet and influence the "right people" and dreaming of the day of triumph. They are a group as assorted in type as the motives which bring them to the corrida but they all have one thing in common: a passion for the bulls.

This passion or "afición", which "settles like a microbe in the brain", as one critic put it, is the heart of the corrida's long life and "only the good ones have it". It seems to transcend all other motives and remains mysterious in origin, intractable to analysis. The afición has been compared to a disease which can be treated, if never cured, only by going into a plaza with a bull. Fulton has it badly.

One evening in Seville Fulton and I stood before La Maestranza, the city's famous bull ring. In the blue-black sky a single sparkling star hung ready to drop into the golden cup of a crescent moon. The waters of the Guadalquivir were silvered as they ran smoothly to the sea. Before us the pink walls of the plaza glowed warmly in the dusk. Fulton gestured toward the main entrance and said, "Man, those are the gates they'll carry me through, on their shoulders...someday."

Sincerely,

  
Charles R. Temple

APPENDIX

Some measure of the economic robustness of the corrida can be seen in the cost schedule with which the promoter of a first class corrida is faced. For one fight in Madrid this season, featuring two leading matadors, the expenses broke down in this way:

Six bulls -- not too big, not too black, not too brave since fighters can be cautious -- \$6000. From their ranch to Madrid by truck cost \$225. but their guardians had to be attended to also so a lunch was given for the rancher, the bull handlers and the fighters' managers for about \$125. (Managers in particular are said to eat heartily.) Not to be left out the experts who certified the bulls' fitness, the plaza employees, the ticket sellers and the guards consumed yet another \$125. The truckmen received \$45. and the ranch foreman and his helpers took away \$100. Everybody got into the act when \$12. was distributed among various critics for announcing the day's card.

Horses were rented from a contractor for \$350. and wages, including social security, to the plaza employees were \$1000., considerably less than the six bulls but human labor is cheap in Spain. The least well paid participants were the mules which dragged out the dead bulls from the ring: \$20. Posters (glowing), leaflets (exalted), tickets (tacky), mounting and distribution of same \$135. Pictures of the bulls for advertising purposes, electricity and the hire of a sprinkler truck to wet down the sand \$50.

Then came the taxes. A spectacle tax (15% of the gross receipts) \$7500.; a levy for the "protection of minors" came to \$1750.; the Bullfighters' Benefit Association got \$50. and the municipality \$440. As a kind of afterthought \$15. was sent to the Society of Authors.

The plaza management took a rent of \$10,000. The matadors' salaries nearly equaled all previous expenses at \$20,000. for two toreros and a substitute (he got \$50. of the total sum).

The promoter laid out nearly \$48,000. and his gate was \$54,000. No one has reported that he went home depressed. Everyone agrees this is big business in a country where a laborer's wages may average \$65. a month.