

Three Classic Guidebooks to the Camino and Santiago de Compostela

“Every place needs to be explored before it can be loved; and the visitor to Compostela too often does not stay long enough. A city does not yield the secret of its treasures to those who approach it in the modern spirit of “hustle.” Hartley, Catherine Gasquoine. 1912. *The Story of Santiago de Compostela*, p. 209

Thus begins a chapter in a wonderful old guidebook for English and American visitors to Santiago de Compostela. Amazing that almost a century ago travel writers were already complaining about the hurry of visitors, the 17 countries in 15 days syndrome!



Colegiata de Santa Maria la Real de Sar,
Santiago de Compostela

Hartley’s guidebook, and the two others discussed here, are definitively not for those who visit Santiago on a day trip out of Madrid or Barcelona, flying in on the morning Iberia flight and returning to their big city hotel for the conveniently late Spanish dinner hour. They are unfortunately also not for us to carry on our walks because two of the three are long out of print, and the third, reprinted with translations into Castellano and Galego two decades ago, requires a little specialized knowledge of architecture if it is to be fully appreciated. That we cannot buy copies to carry is too bad, but larger libraries are likely to have copies, and these books are well worth the attention of pilgrims past and future.

The comparison of these three titles with modern guidebooks is not favorable to the latter. The older guides expect the visitor to Santiago to have a little advance knowledge of culture and history, and to consider

quite detailed descriptions of some of the sites worthy of their time. In comparison to Frommers and some of the other popular guide series now available, the older guidebooks assume an interest in more than the availability of a Hilton-Hyatt style hotel and the location of McDonald’s hamburger franchises in the city. The tourist for whom the current popular guides are prepared is apparently mostly concerned with creature comforts identical to those of home, while earlier travelers went to Places like Santiago in order to experience something different and to learn a little about the place, its history, and its atmosphere. They did not go to reproduce the “comforts” of home.

In her 332 page guide, Hartley devotes but eight pages at the very end of the book to accommodations, meals, and transportation matters. The remainder is a combination of descriptions of the sights of the city accompanied by digressions on history, on artistic

styles, and on similar subjects placing the site in a geographical, a cultural and an historical context. Some personal anecdotes and opinions make the descriptions lively. The writing is not dry and matter-of-fact in the manner of modern guidebooks and neither academic nor otherwise pedantic. Indeed, even in comparison to the better present day guidebooks like the Michelin series or the Blue Guides, the level of detail is quite astounding, and yet, unlike those books, *The Story of Santiago de Compostela* is one an armchair traveler could read and enjoy in the same way a novel or a history might be read.

One can make a similar comment about the three volume work (1,690 pages in total!) covering the entire Camino, from Somport, where she considered it to begin, to Santiago by an American art historian and long-time faculty member at Bryn Mawr College. Georgiana Goddard King was for many years the doyenne of Spanish art history studies in the United States, and she had an international reputation as a specialist on early Spanish art and architecture. Her book *The Way of St. James* is an utterly indispensable work for anyone interested in the art and architecture of the route as well as a lively description of her travels along it. As I am not a professional art or architectural historian, I do not know how much of her material has been superseded by the findings of more recent research. I do know that present day works in those fields are mostly couched in jargon impenetrable for the average reader, while King writes in a clear and comprehensible fashion, one that is often lively as well as informative.

After beginning with a short general history of the pilgrimage and its traditions, King takes the reader on a trip along the Camino beginning at Pau and Oleron in France. She spices her narrative with personal anecdotes about following the route of the Camino in whatever kinds of conveyance could be arranged. King and her traveling companion did not walk the route, something that may have been nearly impossible in any case. On their early 20th century trek they had considerable difficulty finding any kind of connections between some of the places along the Camino. At each place they stop, King looks not only at the art and architecture but also the history and topography with some digressions to look at local legends and customs. To give a little of the flavor of the guide let me quote part of a paragraph that has some professional resonance for me:

“When Sancho Ramírez was building the Pilgrim’s Road he determined that it should pass thereby and a town be established. The monks of San Juan de la Peña held a place less than a league off, Zarapur by name, and they wanted the road to go their way and bring traffic and custom of sorts. The story reads like the early history of railways, in the intrigues and pressures brought to bear. The king won, after a fashion, and the road passes through Estella...” (vol 1., p. 326)

King describes the entire route from Somport to Santiago, while Hartley mostly examines the city of Santiago de Compostela. The third book is specific to just one building, the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela itself: Kenneth John Conant. 1926. *The Early Architectural History of the Cathedral of Santiago-de-Compostela*. Unlike King and Hartley, Conant, a long time professor of architecture at Harvard and a world renowned expert on Romanesque and ecclesiastical architecture, was writing for a specialist audience, but his book has become a standard reference on the history of the Cathedral before the 19th century and especially for its earliest period as a purely Romanesque building. The 1983 reprinting (with translations of the text into Castellano and Gallego along with a facsimile of the English language original) by the Colexio

Oficial de Arquitectos de Galicia and financed by the Xunta de Galicia indicates the high regard Conant's study of the cathedral is still given. Despite its specialized nature, most readers with an interest in the cathedral, even those without training specific to architecture, will enjoy looking at the illustrations and reading the more generalized commentary of how the building expanded and changed over time.

Conant's work has become a standard reference for students of the architectural and artistic history of the cathedral, and its measured drawings and plans are still the standard for architectural discussions of the building. Indeed illustrations for all three of the books are quite outstanding. King's book contains a number of elegant photographs reproduced in sepia, while my favorite illustrations are the line drawings in Hartley's guide. My sentimentally favorite building in Santiago is the squat little Colegiata de Santa Maria la Real de Sar in the valley to the east of the RENFE station on what was as late as the 1970s the outskirts of the city. I have taken the liberty of reproducing the drawing (p. 239) to illustrate this essay.

References

Conant, Kenneth John. 1926. *The Early Architectural History of the Cathedral of Santiago-de- Compostela*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Reprinted 1983. *Arquitectura románica da Catedral de Santiago de Compostela*. Santiago: Colexio Oficial de Arquitectos de Galicia.

Hartley, Catherine Gasquoine (Mrs. Walter M. Gallichan). 1912. *The Story of Santiago de Compostela*. London: J. P. Dent & Sons, Ltd. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co.

King, Georgiana Goddard. 1920. *The Way of St. James*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons and the Hispanic Society of America. Hispanic Notes and Monographs, Peninsular Series I. 3 volumes.

All three authors wrote other works on the art, architecture and topography of Spain and France, and those works, although not specific to the Camino, are also recommended.

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