

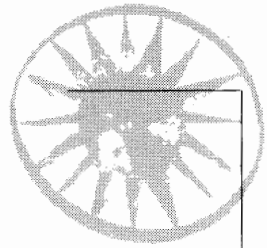
**Villagers of the Sierra  
de Gredos**  
**Transhumant Cattle-raisers in  
Central Spain**

**William Kavanagh**



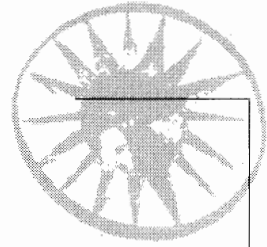
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# Preface



It is not my intention to pretend that the village I call La Nava de San Miguel is representative of all Castilian mountain villages or even of all villages in the Gredos Mountains. When I decided to do fieldwork in central Spain I was not looking for a 'typical community' – whatever that might be. But I was most certainly looking for some place that was still recognisable as a community. I thought that since the research could only be conducted at the weekends and during two or three months every summer, it might be wise to choose somewhere with not too large a population, so that I would be able to get to know the people and their way of life reasonably quickly. If now I realise the naïvety of that hope for rapid understanding, at least it set me looking for a small village not too far from Madrid, where I was to be based during most of the week. Unfortunately, many villages within an hour or so of Madrid are either inhabited mainly by old people or, in the mountains, are full of pseudo-Swiss chalets owned by outsiders.

For this reason, the first time I saw La Nava de San Miguel – in the summer of 1976 – what most struck me about the village was the enormous 'vitality' of the place compared with many other villages similar in size. There were, of course, old people, but there were also many young people and, most significantly, young couples with children. That such a tiny, apparently isolated community, which one would have thought should show the worst effects of the massive abandonment of the land which has been a constant in Spain for the past thirty years or more, should appear so full of life seemed to me sufficient reason for investigation. That the villagers had not emigrated to Switzerland, Germany, Madrid or Barcelona was clear. The question was: Why not?

In 1985, when most of the text of this book was written, the answer I gave to the question of why the people of La Nava de San Miguel had not abandoned the land was that they were 'rich'. I argued that common ownership of enormous summer pastures and annual transhumance to relatively nearby winter pastures allowed them to maintain a large herd of cattle, their main source of wealth. I went on to say that these two factors, combined with near self-subsistence, gave them a life which the villagers themselves were aware was not at all bad. I also said that the village ideals of co-operation and mutual assistance – embodied in such institutions as the Sierra de Socios, the transhumant groups and the vari-

ous activities ordered by the principle of the cyclical *torno* – were crucial to the community life of La Nava de San Miguel. I concluded by saying that an integral part of the villagers' positive valuation of themselves and of their life was their relationship with Extremadura, that land just over the mountains to the south of them which is, in so many important ways, the exact opposite of their world and yet, at one and the same time, so very much a part of it.

Today, seven years after writing the main text of this book and sixteen years after my first visit to the village, it would appear that what I witnessed then and attempted to record was the end of an era. The seemingly minor changes noted from the time of the first visit up until 1985 have in the past seven years become major changes which have put a serious question mark over the continuance of the way of life described in this book. It would thus seem no accident that the documentary film about the village made by Granada Television in 1989 with my collaboration should appear in a series called 'Disappearing World'.

When I came to prepare the present text for publication, my initial feeling was to rewrite it entirely, bringing everything up to date. Yet on reflection I realised that it would be much better to leave the main text in the 'ethnographic present' of 1985 and to write a new epilogue in which I both describe the changes the village has undergone in the past seven years and attempt to explain why the villagers have reacted to these changes in the ways they have. It is this that the reader will find.