

CASADO MEDINA, Carmelo. *Poetas ingleses del siglo XX*. Madrid: Síntesis, 2007. 335 pages. ISBN: 978-84-975647-0-0

The British, despite being characterised by their stiff upper lip in public, are one of the world's most (if not the most) productive source of written manifestations of their intimations and personal or collective cosmologies through their poetry. Indeed, the British are avid poetry readers and also great poetry writers. Poetry collections and anthologies sell well in their national markets (as well as internationally), in more than reasonable quantities. This is true to such an extent that it is not infrequent to find numerous examples of best-selling poetry books from the recent and not so recent British literary scene, as any good bookshop in Britain can prove. I am sure we can all think of popular and varied anthologies of twentieth century English poetry released by major literary publishers such as Faber & Faber, Penguin or Oxford, most of which have been through one or two editions and sometimes at least several reprints each. A rare anthology of poetry written in Spanish that comes to my mind as being something that resembles a commercial hit in the Spanish-speaking world is Bergua's *Las mil mejores poesías de la lengua castellana* (1984), which is now in its 31st edition.

The existence of the figure of the Poet Laureate, which dates back to the English Renaissance, is also evidence of the «official» support and political weight that poetry has always enjoyed in Britain. Only a few years ago it was possible to read selected English samples and extracts of the highest quality and of the most varied kind on the London underground trains, both by well known and virtually unknown poets. This original venture gave rise to the publication of the best-selling compi-

lation *Poems on the Underground* (1986) and its sequels, which became a great tool for making poetry accessible among all social strata of everyday commuters in the main British cities.

Indeed, the twentieth century has given rise to thousands of English-speaking poets in different English-speaking countries. In the United Kingdom the amount of poets who have published their poetry collections within the last hundred years is practically unending. This makes any book which attempts to cover them an inevitably mammoth task. Dr Carmelo Medina Casado (U. of Jaén) has tried to do so in *Poetas ingleses del siglo XX* (2008), a book that constitutes the result of many years of research and submersion in the realm of the Muses. One of the author's main merits is his titanic effort of synthesis employed throughout the book. Synthesis, as everybody knows, is no easy task. To be able to choose which representative poets to include, to digest them well enough so as to be able to introduce them in a comprehensible way to the Spanish professional reader or literary aficionado, to keep the informative level of the book high enough to be of use even to the specialist, to be able to choose whatever literary and biographical information of any given poet is relevant, to know what revealing anecdotes to mention and which to ignore, to recreate the appropriate historical backdrop for every poetic movement in the century (and there are many of them), to choose the right poems to quote from and to illustrate the main traits and characteristics of every poet's work, to translate the corresponding extracts/samples of every leading poet into poetic Spanish, etc, can well indeed be described as a Herculean task of synthesis.

Poetas ingleses del siglo XX consists of an Introduction, twenty chapters (an ap-

appropriate number of chapters for the twentieth century, a figure that also points directly to the large variety of poetic movements that have co-existed and succeeded one after the other in the British Isles), a glossary, a chronology and a bibliography. It offers an introductory panorama to the poetry produced in the British Isles during the twentieth century in such a way that cannot but resemble a culinary poetical feast consisting of twenty delicious titbits served to the reader who wishes to become familiar with a certain new cuisine in a single meal. In total, he analyses 161 poets. Not a small number for a single volume of 335 pages. It is impossible to know which of these 161 will remain in poetry handbooks in later decades of the twenty-first century, but this is not up to the author to decide. Time and the unpredictable and unpredictable whims of history will tell. By writing this book the author has fulfilled his role as literary chronicler: he has laid before our eyes the extensive poetic landscape of the British Isles in the controversial and kaleidoscopic twentieth century.

Dr Medina addresses his book to both literature specialists and the general public and his style caters for both readerships. He offers chosen extracts with his own Spanish translations of these as well as of the titles of poems and poetry collections. However, even though the reader be a non-specialist and/or a Spanish reader who does not read English well enough, I still believe he should have included footnotes with the English originals so that a specialist or a Spanish reader familiar with the English language could have had access to the poet's original version. As regards the translation of samples quoted in the book, the author declares in his Introduction (14) to have aspired to the virtue of faithfulness to the poet's original

instead of including «rhetoric» concessions. His translations are good versions of the original verses, even if, alas, one may find some that may not be the best Spanish renderings. An index of authors would have also been most welcome for practical reasons. These are perhaps suggestions to take into account for when the second edition of the book sees the light.

In the Introduction the author states that one of his main purposes when writing this book was to combat F. R. Leavis's remark that poetry matters but little in the modern world (10). Needless to say, the twenty chapters deal with both the canonical figures and the lesser poets in the land. The author's extensive work on twentieth century English poetry is a good weapon with which to combat Leavis' somewhat pessimistic view. English literature in general and poetry in particular are widely recognised as playing an important role in the shaping of contemporary culture, and knowing how influential and widespread English literature is, the importance of poetry in the modern world is more than guaranteed.

The first chapter, «Los inicios de siglo», is exclusively centred on the main poets of the first decades of the century: Hardy, G. M. Hopkins and Bridges. The filter of time seems to have already achieved its inevitable task of simplification: only three poets seem to be considered worth studying. Hopkins' presence in the book is justified by the modernity of his poetry; he is more spiritually linked to the twentieth century than to the previous one. Chapter two, «La poesía de renombrados prosistas» (Kipling, Chesterton, Joyce, Lawrence and Huxley) very probably relies more on the literary weight of the writers analysed than on their specific worth as poets. With the exception of Kipling, an icon of his time, and

Lawrence, who penned an extensive poetic input of the highest quality, the writers of this chapter are analysed here more because of their capacity as relevant novelists than for their poetic merits.

«Poetas de la I Guerra Mundial» (Brooke, Owen, Sorley, Grenfell, Rosenberg, Sassoon and Gurney) is one of the star chapters of the book. Dr Medina makes the point of granting the same weight to the openly propagandistic pro-establishment poetry and the critical war poetry to which the Great War gave rise at the time. The atmosphere of initial collective enthusiasm that evolved into sheer disappointment as the cruel lists of increasing casualties reached the public opinion is perfectly depicted in a chapter where the reader cannot help reviving the tension of the age. The author chooses a generous number of poets to represent the movement, seven in total, but does not fail to remind us that there are many more, most of whom had their lives abruptly cut short.

The next two chapters, «William Butler Yeats y Thomas Sterns Eliot» and «Los años treinta. El Grupo de Oxford» (Auden, C. D. Lewis, MacNiece and Spender), are clear examples of the author's power to summarise. Each of these poets would require whole libraries on their own. Dr Medina offers the most thorough presentation of the aforementioned literary giants that one can read in the limited number of pages that publishers usually grant their authors, a meagre thirty pages in this case. (He has only recently contributed with two chapters on Yeats and Auden in Domingo Ródenas' edition *Cien escritores del siglo XX* (2008)). Nevertheless, the author does not fail to offer a clear and solid description of them all.

«La Guerra Civil española en la poesía inglesa» offers a long inventory of British

poets who enthusiastically and perhaps, from today's perspective, too candidly answered the call of the Spanish Republic against the threatening and firm advance of Fascism in the western world, and more marginally against the advancement of Communism on the continent, here Roy Campbell being the only figure worth mentioning. The poets of this period include John Conford, Ralph Fox, Charles Donnelly, Christopher Caudwell, Julian Bell, Margot Heinemann, Tom Wintringham, Miles Tomalin, David R. Marshall, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Nancy Cunard, Herbert Read, Ruthven Todd, Roy Campbell, Clive Branson, Ewart Milne and Sam Russell. In writing about the poetry produced by Anglophone poet-soldiers and political activists during the three worst years of Spain's recent history, Dr Medina sets a canonical example of what I would define as «passionate objectivity». He is indeed a recognised expert on the literature written both in Spanish and English during the Spanish war and he writes with the passion that characterises somebody who knows the subject well. But he also describes the literary phenomenon of this Spanish tragedy with overwhelming honesty and a sense of justice. He writes about the poetic merit of Campbell, the South African Francoist supporter and exceptional translator of Lorca's and St John of the Cross's poetry, with the same objectivity and passion as he does about Conford or Fox, English volunteers who fought and died for the Spanish Republic at the battle of Lopera (Jaén) while they were in the prime of their lives. Another asset to the chapter is his introduction of two formerly unknown or little known new British soldier-poets: Marshall, who died in 2005, having been the Secretary of the «British International Brigade» and whose poem «Retrospect» was published

alongside Spender, Lehmann, Lewis, Auden and MacNiece in the great classical anthology *Poems for Spain* (1939) and only recently republished alongside the rest of his literary production in *The Tilting Planet* (2005); and Russell, also known as Sam Lesser in his former journalist's days, but completely unknown up to now as a poet. Neither of these poets appears in Cunningham's editions of *The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse* (1980) or *The Spanish Front* (1986). The chapter «Poetas de la II Guerra Mundial y Neorrománticos» becomes another example of the role of war as a generator of poetic output. However, few poems written during WWII are thought to be in the same class as those written during WWI. The lives and works of lesser poets of the period are succinctly described, only followed by two giants of 20th century British literature, Dylan Thomas and Laurie Lee.

«Poetas sin adscripción» is one of the most controversial chapters, as it includes poets of difficult classification, having probably been «grouped» under this label because they are contemporary to each other in a postwar age, but seeming to have very little else in common amongst themselves. The poets labelled thus are the aristocratic siblings Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell (usually presented as an alternative clique to the Bloomsbury Group); Graves and his one-time partner Laura Riding, Betjeman, Lawrence Durrell, and Fuller, among others.

The author presents the following chapter, «Rebeldes y la poesía *underground*», in such a way that he cannot help leaving us readers pensive. It is open to discussion whether the skills demonstrated by the «rebellious» Hughes, Silkin, Sillitoe, Gunn, etc, as well as the *underground* poets such as Mitchell and the like re-

mained rebellious within the Establishment or remained without, unassimilated by social and literary conventionalism. The author allows his readers to come to their own conclusions.

The next four chapters, the last of the book, constitute an original quartet with two common traits. On the one hand, they are, in my opinion, the most innovative in the book, for little has been written up to now about them, and less in Spanish. On the other hand, the author's view of the poets described and analysed in them transpires a somewhat subtle sense of tentativeness: after all, their poetic careers are still open to development. Some (or indeed many) of these poets will inevitably have to go through the guillotine of time and may therefore disappear from the provisional Parnassus that Dr Medina has placed them in. But their presence in this chapter may mean for many the possibility of gaining a pinch of immortality.

In «Poesía escrita por mujeres en la segunda mitad del siglo XX», Dr Medina agrees with other academics who affirm that poetry written by women has often been undervalued. He is of the opinion that the twentieth century is the century of women's writing. By analysing the long list of women poets actively writing these days, he is genuinely granting them the relevant position they deserve in contemporary literature. The register of these poets that he analyses is the longest inventory of writers listed in any of the chapters. With the exception of Plath, none has so far had an especially relevant individual position in the most recent poetic production of the British Isles, but as a group, they constitute a major and influential literary and social force.

In «Poesías nacionales y de la periferia», the author insists on the many-faceted cultural and literary panorama of Britain, a

conglomerate of different Anglophone nations within a greater one. He divides the chapter into four sections: a) poetry written by the Welsh; b) poets from Northern Ireland (including Heaney —one of the giants of the century for obvious reasons and thus treated in the book); c) Scotland; and d) poets of the periphery (Leeds, Birmingham, Liverpool), though he concentrates mainly on the latter with the so called Liverpool poets, born under the cultural spirit of the Beatles and the pop age that developed throughout the 1960s and 70s with a clear vocation to reach a younger and dissident readership. These are Henri, McGough and Patten, of unprecedented popularity thanks to the publication of two selections of their poems under the titles of *The Mersey Sound* (1967, 1974 and 1983) and *New Volume* (1983 and 1985). The former has sold well over a quarter of a million copies since it was first published, a sales figure that would be unthinkable for a contemporary Spanish poet. Curiously enough, both Patten and Henri had a selection of their poetry translated into Spanish as early as 1975 and 1980 respectively.

In «Poesía multiétnica en el Reino Unido» the author describes the poetry written by those who were born in ex-British colonies but who have developed as poets in Britain. Dr Medina uses the expression «inverse colonization» (297) to refer to what Rushdie described as «The Empire writes back». Most of these representative examples of so called «black British poetry», the most famous of whom is the Caribbean Derek Walcott, Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992, address their darts to the British (=white native) economic and political establishment which has allowed ethnic marginality, exploitation and social inequality within the British borders. Most of these are never-

theless «successful» poets who have climbed the social ladder and have finally lived off the Establishment as university lecturers or in high posts in the British administration. «Hacia el nuevo siglo» introduces the future of British poetry. The social, religious, sexual, cultural and ideological plurality of British society is reflected in its poetry. The monopoly of the white native British identity in British poetry is on the verge of disappearing: the different national languages, women's voices, multi-ethnicity and postcolonial feelings have given rise to what constitutes the new British poetry, officially represented by Andrew Motion, the current Poet Laureate.

Dr Medina's vocation for research on Anglo-Spanish literary relations is evident in his recurrent and proven interest in linking the poetry written by Britons with their travels in Spain. The author brings to the foreground the fact that Spain and Spanish cities, landscape, population and joint historical and political events may have enjoyed much protagonism in contributing to the development of modern English poetry. This is the case of Bridges, Chesterton, Huxley, Graves, Lee, etc. They all published poems with Spain as their main topic as a result of their respective visits to the country, their prolonged stays as expatriates or their spiritual affinity with the *cosas de España*. Travelogue experts may contemplate the inclusion of the subgenre of «travel poetry» in their research, as this may constitute a virginal and off-the-beaten-track route amongst their literary travel analyses, where metaphor and Spanish reality seen through British eyes fuse in a loving and lyrical embrace.

Reading *Poetas ingleses del siglo XX* is an excellent opportunity for anyone interested in poetry to delve into the literary cosmology of the British nation through

her leading poets. Dr Medina's strenuous work has paid off well. Spanish-speaking poetry readers will be able to transport themselves to an Anglo-Saxon Parnassus, where human and heavenly things are seen and felt differently, thus opening their pores to different ways of sensing the universal issues which Man and Woman are so preoccupied about. But the Spanish literary expert in search of a generous panorama of the poetry and poets that the twentieth century has produced in the British Isles will not be left unsatisfied either. This is a book written by a Spanish scholar and poetic translator who explores the British mind and multi-faceted literary jungle from the perspective of a compulsive reader of Spanish poetry and a dedicated Spanish poetry expert. The book itself is a long travel poem on the *cosas de los ingleses*.

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JOSÉ RUIZ MAS
Universidad de Jaén

LOPE BLANCH, Juan M[iguel], *Cuestiones de filología española*, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2005

Simbolizamos en este volumen tres de las recopilaciones póstumas de artículos de este profesor hispano-mexicano que han aparecido en estos años últimos, editadas todas por la UNAM; las otras dos se hallan dedicadas a *Cuestiones de filología hispanoamericana* (2003) y a *Cuestiones de filología mexicana* (2004). No sabemos —no se nos dice— si los originales los dejó dispuestos ya el autor para la imprenta, o si han estado a cargo de personas cercanas; en todo caso estamos ante volúmenes de gran utilidad y que por desdicha apenas han llegado a la Península. Las líneas presentes no quieren sino llamar la atención sobre estas aportaciones de un estudioso de relieve.

Lope fue alumno directo de don Dámaso Alonso y de don Rafael Lapesa en la UCM, e indirecto de don Ramón Menéndez Pidal, al que pudo acercarse —él mismo lo ha relatado— por ser condiscípulo del nieto de don Ramón, el prof. asimismo desaparecido Diego Catalán. Trasladado pronto a México con una beca, allí ha desarrollado luego toda su labor durante unos cincuenta años, llegando a ser uno