

BOOK REVIEW

**ROY CAMPBELL.
POEMAS ESCOGIDOS.
ESTUDIO PRELIMINAR,
TRADUCCIÓN Y NOTAS
DE JESÚS ISAÍAS GÓMEZ
LÓPEZ. ALMERÍA:
EDITORIAL
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*Betsabé Navarro Romero
Universidad de Santiago de Compostela*

Who was Roy Campbell? The figure of this controversial poet appears as a small entry in the manuals of English literature: born in South Africa in 1901, he settled in Europe in 1918, was acquainted with the members of the Bloomsbury Group, (he would later write a scathing satire on them), visited Spain on the brink of the Civil War and sided with the Nationalist forces of General Franco, published a number of pro-Fascist poems which caused his isolation from the mainstream publishing world, and died in a car accident in Portugal in 1957. It is little known, however, that he also published a relevant study of Federico García Lorca and translated many of his poems into English, or that he enlisted in the British Army in the Second World War with the firm conviction that as a British subject it was his duty to do so. Contradiction, then, was at the core of his personality or, put in other words, he was very much his own man. As he confessed to the poet Rob Lyle in 1948:

I don't believe in anything. At heart I'm a complete anarchist. I fought in the Spanish War because I was disgusted with the crimes of the Reds and the humbug of the liberals. I joined the British Army in 1939 because I couldn't sit at home while my comrades went out to fight. I didn't believe in democracy or in any of the 'causes' for which we were supposed to be fighting: but I believe in

comradeship and in standing shoulder to shoulder with my fellow-men. (in Alexander 1982:213)

The edition of this volume of Campbell's selected verse by J. Isaías Gómez López, lecturer in English literature at the University of Almería, may contribute to expose the opposing forces at work in the creative mind of this very much unknown poet so that his literary merits can be assessed by the modern reader.

Prof. Gómez López does certainly provide all the necessary props for a scholarly and objective study of Roy Campbell's work. This carefully edited bilingual edition benefits from a painstaking research on the poet's life and from the consultation with experts on his literary production. One of them, in fact, is the author of the prologue for the book. Terry Risk, owner of the independent imprint Typographeum and editor of Campbell's verse, explains how he, quite by chance, came across a book of miscellaneous pieces, *Hommage à Roy Campbell* (1958), and how this fortuitous discovery meant the beginning of a long process of discovery. Risk mentions appraisingly the assistance that he found in Australian editor Alister Kershaw, personal friend of the poet, who introduced him to his life and work. Anna Campbell, the poet's daughter, also contributed to subsequent editions of his father's verse, and Risk includes in his text revealing childhood memories of hers which makes his prologue an appropriate starting point for an immersion into Campbell's poems.

The preliminary study that follows enhances the academic nature of the present edition. It consists of two parts, a long and detailed account of the poet's life and a detailed analysis of his poetry. In both sections Gómez López seems to share the complex responses that his personality provoked in a number of scholars, like John Povey, from the University of California at Los Angeles, when he wrote:

Campbell is not an easy poet to read, just as he was not the easiest man to know. There is so much deplorable posing, such frustrating pretensions, so many unbecoming petulances, and yet there is also supreme poetry [...] there are few modern poets who can lay claim to so many undeniable masterpieces. Campbell has achieved this with an apparently casual air that masks intense technical skill. (Povey 1977: 7-8)

Gómez López goes step by step through Campbell's main episodes of his life, beginning with his childhood in South Africa and the editor relates how his experiences there contributed to his Romantic and rebellious character. His parents sent him to Oxford University but his bohemian inclinations took him away from academia and made him seek the company of poets and artists. His marriage to Mary Garman and his disquieting contact with the Bloomsbury Group were previous episodes to his itinerant life in France, Spain and Portugal. Lack of money and a moderate success as a publishing poet were two constant features of

Campbell's life in the 1930s. He and his family (they had two daughters by this time) lived in different parts of Spain before the outbreak of the Civil War, being witness to riots and urban warfare in Barcelona and repression and sectarian murders in Toledo. They managed to flee from a country which was splitting apart and, back in London, Campbell worked for the BBC before enlisting in the Army Intelligence Corps when the war against Germany erupted. In the postwar years he renewed his work as a journalist and in the mid-1950s the family moved back to the Iberian peninsula, settling near Setubal, in Portugal, where he died in 1957.

A similar systematic approach can be found in Gomez Lopez's revision of Campbell's poetic production in the second part of his preliminary study: at the beginning of his literary career the young author was very much influenced by the poetry of T.S. Eliot. He embraced with enthusiasm the radical spirit of the emerging poetry represented by the Anglo-American poet, as Campbell wrote in an early review of *The Waste Land*: "To read Mr. Eliot's poems is to realise the necessity for new values in modern life. There must be a great destruction in the human consciousness [...] we have plenty of muck to clear out of the way before we can start the great work of reconstruction" (in Smith 1972: 40-41). His first book of poems, *The Flaming Terrapin* (1924) is clearly informed by a learned approach to his subject matter, the redemption of human beings after the destructive conflict of war, with noticeable influences by Milton, Dryden or Pope.

The Wayzgoose (1928) was his second volume of poetry, and this time the poet embarked on a satiric critique at the provincial and unadventurous attitudes of the cultural establishment at his native country, South Africa. *Adamastor* (1930), his next book, contains perhaps some of the most powerful poems that Campbell ever wrote, including the Byronic "Tristan da Cunha", where the solitary island in the middle of the Atlantic serves as a metaphor for the poet's surly and arrogant personality. This volume, together with *Mithraic Emblems* (1936), represents perhaps the best qualities of Campbell's poetry: ritual, myth and the confrontation of man with the sacred are interspersed with poignant reflections of a personal nature that reflect the poet's anxiety.

In his introduction Gómez López does not avoid the discussion of lesser collections of poems: *The Georgiad* (1931), for instance, was an angry attack on the sexual politics of the Bloomsbury Group. *Flowering Rifle* (1939) is qualified the editor of this bilingual anthology as having a poor literary quality, being hastily written and exposing a completely wrong and biased vision of the Spanish conflict (75-76). Gómez López equally examines with a sharp critical eye Campbell's other books of poems, like *Talking Bronco* (1946), exposing the personal circumstances that surrounded the composition of each book.

The bulk of the present edition is made obviously the poems themselves, presented in English and Spanish in a careful translation. Most of the titles are taken from Campbell's most gifted and successful books, *Adamastor* and *Mithraic Emblems*, but there is a reasonable representation from the lesser known collections. The impulse and inspirational tension, fraught with a sort of daring quality, perhaps one of the most noticeable features of Campbell's poetry, ARE perfectly rendered in Gómez López's version. He also accompanies every cultural reference with its corresponding explanatory note at the end of the book.

A few inconsistent details somehow threaten to mar the present edition: a number of titles of books should be written in italics, some expressions in the translated prologue by Terry Risk (happily not in the translation of the poems) should have been better polished and refined, but the final result turns these inconsistencies into anecdotes that can be easily corrected in subsequent editions. All in all, the interested reader will find in *Roy Campbell. Poemas escogidos* a scholarly work in which a representative selection of poems are properly contextualized and effectively translated.

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Author's contact: betsabenr@yahoo.es

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