

A VERY LONG RELATIONSHIP: TRANSLATING AND PUBLISHING GALICIAN LITERATURE

by JONATHAN DUNNE

I still remember arriving in Galicia, an autonomous region in north-west Spain, for the first time. It was September 1990, and I had just graduated from university. Unlike my colleagues, I hadn't prepared myself for this moment. I felt like a baby that has been unceremoniously dumped out of the womb. My studies had concerned ancient languages, Ancient Greek and Latin, and suddenly I needed to fast-forward two thousand years. My solution? To go and teach English in a city in a part of Spain I had never heard of: Galicia.

Grabbed my suitcase and other belongings and flung them onto the platform. Jumped out just as the train doors were closing.

The train from Lugo to A Coruña snaked around a corner, quickly disappearing from view. The platform was deserted except for two shady characters, who eyed me up and evidently decided I wasn't worth the effort. A few minutes later, from out of the mist that characteristically shrouds this land, appeared a man in a Hawaiian short-sleeved shirt. It was Will, the academy director, whom I had met once previously at the job interview in a fancy hotel in London. He took me to the apartment on the Ronda da Muralla, the road around the wall, which I would share with

The train throbbed under my body, eager to continue its journey. I realised it had stopped in a station. What I didn't realise at the time was that this station was my destination, and I was still in my couchette. I had decided to take the train from London – via the Channel, Paris, and Irun – instead of a plane: forty-two hours instead of two. I wanted to get used to the change. I had always loved the ferry from England to France, those white swans that glide effortlessly across the water, the romance of uncertainty.

I stayed with a friend in Paris, slept on the wooden floor. Changed trains in Irun, where I had to speak to a nun in Latin in order to find out which platform my train was leaving from. And finally Lugo – a city with a Roman wall and lots of greenery, the director of the English academy had told me. The train was in Lugo right now. It was 7:42 in the morning (I still remember this detail thirty-two years later). I rushed to the door. Looked out. Glimpsed the sign that said 'Lugo'. Raced back to my compartment.

the two other teachers starting with me. That year, we would live epic adventures, learning Spanish in the street (Galician would come later – not in Galicia, but in Barcelona), staying up all hours, borrowing a jeep and travelling to the coast, the mountains (Os Ancares, O Courel), the neighbouring provinces of A Coruña and Pontevedra. A couple of years later, I would take a train in Santiago, travel east to the French border, and turn around to walk the Camino de Santiago (even though I'd been there to start with). Four weeks confirmed my initial impression. There is nowhere in northern Spain as beautiful as Lugo.

A year later, I moved to Barcelona and wept (again on a train) as the green of Galicia was replaced by brown. I had learned Spanish, but my Galician accent was so strong (it is sing-song) that people in Barcelona were convinced I was Galician and would ask which part I was from. I always replied proudly, 'Lugo!' I argued with the Spanish teacher at Barcelona University when she informed me about the present-perfect tense, which is not used in Galician (all actions in the past are in the past tense, there is no present perfect). And when the nostalgia (called *morriña* in Galician, 'homesickness') became too strong, I returned to the university to take the beginner and advanced courses in Galician language given by Camilo F. Valdehorras from the Department of Galician and Portuguese. Little

did I know it then, but this would be the start of a very long relationship ...

Thirty years later, and I have translated more than sixty books of Galician literature into English. I started by translating two books, *Galician Songs* and *New Leaves*, by the nineteenth-century poet Rosalía de Castro, one of the main figures (together with Eduardo Pondal and Manuel Curros Enríquez, who curiously are very little translated) of the Galician Renaissance, which followed the so-called 'Dark Centuries', when very little literature was written down in the Galician language, albeit there was a strong oral tradition during this time. When I was occupied with translating Rosalía's poetry, people would ask, 'Oh, where's Jonathan?' And someone would reply, 'He's with Rosalía.' I received a stipend for two years, but continued working another year for free. Although these translations would never see the light of day, they would help enormously when it came to editing and publishing new translations of these books by Canadian poet Erin Moure twenty years later, and it was really here where I cut my teeth as a translator of literature. The cadences I learned translating Rosalía de Castro's poetry have stayed with me to this day and still influence my translation.

My first contract was to translate a Galician bestseller, *The Carpenter's Pencil* by Manuel Rivas, for the Harvill Press in London. I still

remember receiving a typed, signed letter from the editor, Euan Cameron, at the offices of The Folio Society, where I was working as a picture editor. Rosalía and Rivas represent two pillars of Galician literature – the one because she kick-started the Galician Renaissance and the use of Galician as a literary language, for which she is still revered today; the other because he became the first really international Galician author. I was privileged to translate nine books by Manuel Rivas in the period 1999–2014 for the Harvill Press (later part of Penguin Random House), my favourite being his autobiographical novel, *The Low Voices*. Other standouts are *The Carpenter's Pencil* and *Books Burn Badly*, two novels set in the Spanish Civil War, the latter an astonishing feat of engineering it took me ten months to translate. His latest novel, *The Last Days of Terranova*, is published by Archipelago Books in Jacob Rogers' translation.

Between these two pillars lies the twentieth century, interrupted somewhere along the line by the Spanish Civil War, which caused a certain break in transmission. Poetry and short stories (Castelao and Dieste at the beginning of the century) were followed by plays and novels – in particular, Álvaro Cunqueiro; check out his *Merlin and Company*, translated by Colin Smith.

With the return to democracy in 1975, we see a gradual increase in

the number of authors writing in Galician. During the 1990s, when I first got involved, the two leading figures – almost to the exclusion of all others – were Manuel Rivas and Suso de Toro, (though I prefer his younger brother, Xelís de Toro, a performance artist who lives in Brighton; check out his *Feral River* in John Rutherford's translation). But that relatively limited field exploded at the turn of the century, and now we have many excellent writers, in particular women: Leticia Costas (*An Animal Called Mist*, stories set in and around the Second World War – this author has a penchant for shocking the reader); Marilar Aleixandre (whose *Head of Medusa* about a school rape mirrors another of her works, *Head of Jupiter*, which is about cyberbullying); the poets Pilar Pallarés and Olga Novo, both of whom have won the Spanish National Book Award (four of the last eight awards in the categories of fiction and poetry have been won by Galician writers, a remarkable feat); and a personal favourite of mine, Rosa Aneiros (check out her *Resistance*, a book I admire for its unusual metaphors and because she writes not about Galician or Spanish political history, but about the Estado Novo in neighbouring Portugal). In the field of poetry, an unmissable name is Chus Pato (check out *m-Talá* in Erin Moure's translation. Moure has translated six books by Pato in the last fifteen years).

There are also some excellent crime writers. Domingo Villar is perhaps the best known, but see also *Without Mercy* by Pedro Feijoo (the literary equivalent of going for a joyride), *Night of the Crow* by Abel Tomé (this author has the ability to create new worlds, and myths and legends to go with them), and the forthcoming *Night of the Caiman* by Diego Ameixeiras, who wrote this book as a tribute to David Goodis.

Such a brief survey of Galician literature would not be complete without making special mention of Galician young people's literature, not only because of the exceptional, often poetic and humorous writing, but also the high-quality illustrations. I direct the biggest publisher of Galician literature in English, Small Stations Press. According to Chad W. Post writing for the *Three Percent* website, we're also the second-largest publisher in the US of books from Spain between 2008 and 2018, which I think just goes to show the investment in translators and interest generated by translations. (I think this has to do with listening to the voices of others; we'd much rather listen to ourselves.) Small Stations has a collection, Galician Wave, devoted exclusively to Galician young-adult fiction in English, and wherever we can, we include illustrations. One exceptional title is *Brother of the Wind* by Manuel Lourenzo González, the story of a village boy during the 2003

invasion of Iraq whose family is torn apart by the conflict and who has to undertake a daring mission.

If you're afraid that the water is cold, like the Atlantic Ocean on Galician beaches, and your idea is to dip in and out very quickly, then the three bestsellers of Galician literature are: *Memoirs of a Village Boy* by Xosé Neira Vilas, *Winter Letters* by Agustín Fernández Paz, and *The Carpenter's Pencil* by Manuel Rivas. You could do much worse than to read these three.

Given that Small Stations has published half of all Galician books in English, our website is a good place to start (www.smallstations.com). Check out also the *Portico of Galician Literature* (www.galician-literature.gal), which offers synopses and sample translations of contemporary Galician works. New projects include a series of online texts under the guidance of Kathleen March, *Seara*, to be housed by the Council for Galician Culture (www.consellodacultura.gal), an organisation that could do more to support translation, and *Galician Reader* (www.galicianreader.com), where you can read the opening chapters of works in both Galician and English.

It is ironic that I studied Classics at Oxford, Spanish in Galicia, Galician in Barcelona, and now I translate and publish Galician literature from Sofia, Bulgaria. I like the tension, yes. Bulgaria has been a revelation. But the fact is I could

never hope to live from literary translation in the UK, and this is a sad reflection on the low importance we accord cultures other than our own, which only leads to misunderstanding and, in the final instance, war. There has been a tendency in the last thirty years to reduce literary translation to an academic subject (thereby making more money), when it is not that, it is, rather, a spiritual exercise. It is, in fact, a metaphor for our role as human beings, for what is there in this life that begins or ends with us? Air, food, conversations we take

part in, the life we give our children – they all pass through us. Nothing begins or ends with us, which (like it or not) makes us translators. We take what is there and transform it, hopefully for the better. And just as the translator gives meaning by translating a text into a language the other can understand, so they themselves derive meaning from the experience. Meaning is a two-way process. It is what makes life worth living, but, like having children, you can't do it on your own.

Jonathan Dunne