

Review

London: Francis Boutle
Publishers. 2016. 570 pp.
ISBN 9780993534485

RODRÍGUEZ CASTELAO, Alfonso Daniel

Forever in Galicia. Translation by Craig Patterson

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Poet and translator
(Vigo, May 2019)

Are we dreaming perhaps of impossible ideals?

I am far away from my Homeland: in Badajoz. An immense blue lantern covers me. I find myself in the Espantaperros Tower and from here I can see the city's entangled streets. A lithe stork stands watch at the edge of its nest, and wild doves chirp in the air. In the distance I can make out Elvas, the Portuguese market town and occasional enemy of Badajoz. I am accompanied by a wandering dog who follows me everywhere; a grizzled and homesick dog who fixes his adorable eyes upon me; a dog grateful to the point of servility, who for the sake of a sugar cube, waits at the door of the café to keep me company on my walk every evening... (17)

It is worth quoting the opening of the Prologue to *Forever in Galicia* in full to remind ourselves that its author, Alfonso Daniel Rodríguez Castelao, was not only an essayist and politician, but also an 'artist, writer, cartoonist, caricaturist, novelist and playwright', as defined by Patterson (Castelao 2001: i). And no matter how exhaustive his detailing of the period's political intrigues, which shaped the social reality of Galicia today, his clear and direct prose constantly returns us to an impassioned Galicianist fighting for the cause of his Homeland.

We must also keep in mind that this is an epistolary text: 'I begin to write this second part of my book in New York, during the first days of 1940 when the sadness of winter invites us to fall into deep reflection' (147). And later, 'The light that now enters through the large, wide window of this apartment and that spills out upon my desk brings me a feeling of peace and well-being almost inconceivable in these barbaric times' (263). *Forever* is an extended, detailed, eloquent letter written to Galicians, Republicans

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across the globe and to the future generations we have become. It is a letter written in exile over eight years as Castelao moves from Badajoz to Valencia and Barcelona, through the Straits of Gibraltar aboard the *Campana*, skirting 'past the Canary Islands' (463) and by Dakar and eventually, 'onwards across the Atlantic Ocean' (455) to New York and Buenos Aires, which will become his final destination.

The translation of such a personal and idiosyncratic text is handled peerlessly by Craig Patterson, who was awarded the Ostana Prize for Translation and will be familiar to readers of Galician literature for his previous translations of Castelao (*Things*) and for the unenviable task of translating Blanco Amor's comi-tragic *A Esmorga (On a Bender)*. In a recent interview Patterson mentioned that he wanted 'to land a whale' of Galician Literature and thus undertook his thirteen year Herculean labour of bringing *Forever* to English readers. This he has done, and in this age of ecological awareness, let us celebrate that he has returned the whale to the ocean so that we, the reader, can now marvel at its progress. Accompanying his translation are over seventy pages of refined notes that contextualize Castelao's work for the English reader. It is to these notes, and to the translation itself, that we must and will be eternally grateful to Patterson.

In its progress from the original publication in 1944 to this English translation, the telling detail in the title is not so much *Galicia* but *Forever*. This is a book that proves yet again, should proof be needed, that a text reads its times. *Forever* in 1944 is a different read to *Forever* in 1959 when Eisenhower came to Spain. It is a wholly different read in 1975 on the death of Franco, and during the so-called Transition to democracy that followed it is an even more pertinent read. And here again we have *Forever* reading its times now in this era of the European Union, supranationalism, Brexit, the reappearance of right-wing extremism and the inexorable juggernaut of transnational corporations across the European Union and beyond. At each of these periods, *Forever* has had something to say to the times and will continue to do so until —and perhaps beyond— Castelao's dream-vision of a Federal Republic is established.

Essentially, that is what Castelao is arguing for: a Federal Republic. He participated in the formation of the Second Republic in Spain, or as he calls it 'Spania' [Hespaña]; it being an incomplete Republic until all three of the autonomous regions that at one point made up GALEUSCA (Galicia, Euskadi, Catalunya), can claim full autonomy within a Federal Republic.

He shows how Galicia deserve autonomous status as much as Catalunya and Euskadi. He details with first-hand accounts how Galicia was denied this status: disproportionate historical readings of Galician status as opposed to Catalunya therefore calling into question its claim for autonomy, the absence of violence as compared to Euskadi, the dizzying Machiavellian manoeuvres of a Centralist Republican Government in both Galician politics and the Cortes in Madrid, a province-centred electoral system that favoured Galicia's infamous 'boss-rule' system while also concentrating local interests over nationwide interests and of course the military coup that resulted in Spain's Civil War. He even goes so far as to predict what would have happened had Galicia been granted, along with Catalunya and Euskadi, autonomous status and Spain been designated a Federal Republic. He shows, again quite convincingly, how this would have benefited a Republic of four nations, and the positive outlook it would have conferred upon the Republic. So, although Galicia was granted, by

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Jones (2019) argues that the most recent surveys from Spain's Centre for Sociological Research (CIS) clearly showed a Spanish population concerned with unemployment (61.8%), corruption and fraud (33.3%), with immigration a mere 8.9% and the question of Catalan independence just 11%.

an overwhelming majority, its statute of autonomy on 15th July 1936, it was simply too late, coming as it did just three days before the coup.

Essentially, Castelao is arguing that conferral of the statutes of autonomy will cure all Galicia's ills; that, and the creation of a Federal Republic. And while he shows that withholding the statutes of autonomy from Galicia is unjust, one feels that, unlike his fiction, painting and caricatures, he simply cannot acknowledge the reality of a conservative Galician society that did not give the Federalists the legitimacy they needed.

Castelao had claimed that 'I am a child of an unknown country because no one was able to give international respite and credibility to our patriotic grievances' (147). And while this is something that could have been claimed by many of the 'small' nations excluded from the high table at Versailles, he later concedes that 'we are at least at the beginning of a new phase in the struggle for freedom, and perhaps the old way of doing things needs to be cancelled' (148). And so as his exile extends and he sails further from his Homeland aboard the *Campana*, we notice a shift away from his narrow focus of Galician nationalism, albeit a nationalism within a Federal structure, and we come to *Forever's* reading of today.

Reading *Forever* both for the difficulties faced in forming the ideal Republic that Castelao 'obsessed over' and fought for not only situates us within the political and social landscape of early 20th Century Galicia, but more importantly, it demands of us a deeper questioning of what we want not just for Galicia today, but wherever this book will be read. While it is easy to parody Castelao's romantic visions that 'We Galicians are not logical men, perhaps because our eyes are steamed up by the mist of the Atlantic' (97) or that 'Galicianism is something more than a reality' (109), this book reminds us of what we may be losing in today's fractured and disappearing democracies. It is no coincidence, as John Fanning (2019) points out in a recent review, the reflection of this in some of the year's best-selling titles: *New Dark Age*, *How Democracy Ends*, *How Democracies Die*, *The People Vs. Democracy*, *The Fate of the West*, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*, *The Age of Anger*, *How Will Capitalism End?*, *PostCapitalism* and *Democracy on Trial*.

We are now just over one year since the Catalan Referendum, 100 years on since the first Dáil Eireann was convened —in very similar circumstances as the Catalan referendum. We are witnessing the surge of neo-fascism across Europe and the revelation of the racism behind much exclusivist nationalism. And yet, Spaniards turned out in record numbers this April and chose a centre-left 'stability' in the face of the extreme right.¹ While this has much to do with the cyclical movement of the economy and thus society from the end of the recession, it is encouraging to see voters across Europe chose a similar centre-left middle ground.

And yet what is it that we are voting for? And what is it that Castelao can teach us when we turn to the polls, or turn to our own Homelands, however temporarily we may inhabit them?

Castelao, I'm certain, would recognise the absentee landlordism that are the Cuckoo and Vulture Funds feeding on the carcasses of recession-driven European cities. And I believe he even predicted what Fanning (2019) has described as 'the massive rise in 'individualist, libertarian narrative' that has been dominant since the late 1970s [...] and the abandoning by the Western Left of 'the politics of solidarity and co-operation to pursue a politics of identity and personal liberation'. And so, he would today surely be acute enough to see that not only would a

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For more on Civic
Republicanism and in particular
the case of the Irish Republic, see
Dorgan (2014).

resurgence of Nationalism carve out, as it has done, a role for neo-fascism, but that in fact, what is needed —and in many ways this is being led by environmentalists on a (g)local scale— would be political scientist Yascha Mounk's suggestion that 'countries will have to do more to facilitate a real sense of community and inclusive patriotism among all citizens.' Not the nationalism that Castelao espoused, though yes, the Galicianism, although in a different guise. I believe Castelao would approve of the call for a 'civic republicanism', a return of much of the population to the political process.²

Which leads to the question as to what would Castelao, the painter, be painting today if he were at his canvas: the Galician landscape left smouldering from the eucalyptus fires?. The mass house evictions across his SPANIA (while mortgage evictions are down for the first time since the recession, these have simply shifted, and increased, across to rental evictions which are seeing a steady increase across the peninsula)?. Or would he paint, and it is as if he already did, the body of the young boy Alan Kurdi found washed up on a Turkish beach, with its uncanny resemblance to how he painted Alexandre Bóveda in 1945? One would hope, unforgiveable slumps into anti-Semitism and sexism aside, Castelao would have the vision today to realize that his National concerns are International and the bodies that died in the Ourense villages just two years ago (or the fires that engulfed his own Rianxo in April this year) and the bodies washed up on the shores of Mediterranean beaches need to be treated with the same humanity and concern and will perhaps be found to have the same source.

But let us think of Galicia as Castelao dreamed it: a Federal Republic. Taking Ireland as a possible example, a country repeatedly held up for Galicianists throughout the decades, a 'dictionary' Republic until 1949, according to Brown (cited in Dawe 2015: 79) this was how the newly independent Republic of Ireland was shaping up while Castelao was writing *Forever*:

an attitude of xenophobic suspicion often greeted any manifestation of what appeared to reflect cosmopolitan standards. An almost Stalinist antagonism to modernism, to surrealism, free verse, symbolism, and the modern cinema was combined with prudery (the 1930s saw opposition to paintings of nudes being exhibited in the National Gallery in Dublin), and a deep reverence for the Irish past. [...]

...to cultural and religious protectionism at their most draconian in the censorship policy was added the official encouragement of economic nationalism as a force sustaining the structure of an essentially rural society dominated by the social, cultural and political will of the farmers and their offspring.

And so, as in the case of Ireland, autonomy, or such Independence as the Irish Free State enjoyed, may not in fact have been the cure-all for Galicia's ills. It is still questionable whether Castelao's Galicia even exists beyond his vision, but he does at least ask the question: if it does, well then what is it? And more importantly, what do we want it to be? And he asks these questions from, as the contemporary term has it, the periphery. In this case, the periphery of the Spanish State. And as we have come to learn, writing from the periphery is both essential and hugely informative. And while writing from the periphery, in his nationalist terms, does highlight

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the failings of such discourse, it simultaneously highlights the stretch imposed on those pushed out to write from the edge and what may be seen from there. As the poet Pearse Hutchinson (2003: 16) wrote about his first encounter with Vigo back in 1950:

That night the upper deck was taken over by scores — it seemed hundreds — of Galician emigrants on their way to Buenos Aires or Montevideo. It was like an American wake. It *was* an American wake. And the music was definitely not flamenco. Some of it sounded almost Irish, some of it almost Breton. So I began to sense, dimly at first, that the Madrid/Castilian/centralist slogan, ‘España no es más que una’ (Spain is One and only One), mightn’t be altogether true.

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