
When asked by Susan Ballyn what Spanish word first comes to mind from the years he spent in New Norcia after being forcibly removed from his family in the early 1950s, Alf Taylor replies: *Merda*. It is very likely that Taylor would have heard it from a Catalan monk at New Norcia innumerable times, but the fact that his Spanish is immediately represented by the Catalan term for ‘shit’ makes for quite an amusing anecdote in the context of an interesting and meaningful interview.

There are not so many meaningful anecdotes or particularly interesting contributions in this collection of particularly uneven articles. The editors state that the purpose of the volume is to defeat ‘the tyranny of distance’. It is, however, unfortunate that in too many respects the book defeats itself. For the record: for the purposes of writing this review, I have only read the English half of this bilingual edition. Although I am of Spanish background, this review is based on the English text.

There are three main perspectives in the book: historical, contemporary and literary. Roy C. Boland Osegueda makes a very sketchy summary of the history of relations between Spain and Australia, consisting more of anecdotal evidence than actual reflections, while David Barry summarises the correspondence from Fr Espinosa and Rosendo Salvado’s brother Santos. The letters offer some insights into what life in New Norcia was like, but apart from some peculiar accounts, they appear to be of little interest for researchers of the comparatively sparse intercultural exchange that must have been taking place at the time.

Bouzón’s article glosses over the life of Rosendo Salvado in a very flattering light, yet it is a very poorly edited text, with significant typographical errors and errata. The poor editing does not help the Australian reader: for example, why does the term ‘bush’ need a footnote in the English version? Furthermore, it is written from an unabashedly biased point of view. It is rather questionable, for instance, that Mendizábal’s *desamortización* in the nineteenth century was the ‘fatal’ event Bouzón purports it to be. The Catholic Church’s unremitting presence in, and influence upon, Spanish public affairs since then to this day would seem to indicate otherwise; what’s more, the evangelising task Salvado and other Spanish missionaries set out to undertake should not have been clad in such sympathetic dress, as it neglects to make any mention of the enormous cultural damage it inflicted on the indigenous peoples of the area.

Rodríguez and Losada have gathered numerical data from various sources to give a broad picture of Galician immigration to Australia, yet it does not offer any meaningful insights. It also includes outdated data: they claim that the latest census data available showed a population of merely 17 million for Australia. Apart from this oversight, the article (or its translation into English) is also very poorly edited.

Susan Ballyn’s inspirational interview with Alf Taylor is particularly moving because of the deeply emotive issues they deal with. It serves as an enormously
meaningful contrast between Taylor’s recollections of the cruelty and mistreatment suffered during his years at New Norcia in the 1950s, and the excessively flattering recount of Rosendo Salvado’s efforts to build the mission in Western Australia.

The contemporary perspectives are also rather uneven. Olga Castro’s paper makes an attempt to relate postcolonial and feminist theories with both Galicia and Australia, yet her analysis comes across as rather superficial; its inclusion, given the wider scope of the volume, might have appeared justifiable in principle, but both the below-par quality of its English translation and the hit-and-miss approach to its subject cast serious doubts on its actual relevance within the volume. Peter Gerrand’s article will be of interest for anyone in Australia who is not familiar with the great efforts peripheral nationalities within the Spanish kingdom (Galicia, Catalonia and the Basque country in particular) have made to have their languages and cultures recognised abroad.

Elizabeth Woodward Smith’s contribution on ‘Mateship and Understanding Cultural Values’ fails to properly interrogate the misuse and/or appropriation of the concept of ‘mateship’ by Australian politicians, and feels rather limited in its scope.

The literary views constitute the final third section of the book. The conspicuous lack of any contributions dealing with Galician literature appears to indicate the rather familiar situation of English-language literatures flooding the global markets via translation, or the more than likely fact that Galician literature is simply not known by Australian readers and scholars. Be that as it may, the articles in this last section do not seem to have a common thread, and as the reader ploughs on, the book feels more imbalanced and appears to lose focus: thus, the argument for a meaningful contemporary connection between Galicia and Australia, which was more or less established in the opening section, seems at best to be overlaboured.

These literary analyses focus on various aspects, such as identity, place or migration, but they seem generally rather inconsistent. Cabarcos attempts to find a connection between Corunna and Australia through references to the Galician city in two Australian literary works; the connection appears to be fairly tenuous, merely anecdotal. Both Elisa Armellino’s brief analysis of the issue of home-finding in Malouf’s Fly Away Peter and David Clark’s insights into adolescence in M.J. Hyland’s novels may be somewhat significant, but they hardly fit in with the main theme of the volume. Cristina Fernandez’s paper points towards challenges to the more traditional narratives and perspectives on land and women in Murray Bail’s Eucalyptus, although it feels, given its brevity, a little underdeveloped, as is Lorenzo and Alonso’s piece on Carey’s Oscar and Lucinda. Suarez’s discerning paper on the poetry of Jennifer Strauss fittingly closes the volume.

Most of the contributors to the volume received assistance from a research network funded by the Galician autonomous government and the European Regional Development Fund. As a whole, the volume does bring certain aspects of Australian culture (mainly literary ones) a little closer to Galicia, but unfortunately, it fails to bring Galicia any closer to Australia. Distance appears to remain a tyrannical, unsurmountable obstacle that no amount of targeted funding can topple.

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