

ARC O MÖNS—translation from Lorca

a selection of poems by Federico García Lorca, translated into Shetland dialect by Christie Williamson Hansel Cooperative Press, 2009 £6.00 www.hanselcooperativepress.co.uk Reviews by Anna Crowe, Lyn Moir and Helena Nelson

Anna Crowe: Arc O Möns is 'a selection o poems in Spanish bi Federico García Lorca translated into Shetland dialect'. Christie Williamson is a Yell man, a poet who wrote his first Shetlandic translations of Lorca's poetry for an original play, Lorca's Shadow, produced at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2006 to great acclaim. It would be hard to imagine two landscapes more different than Andalusia and Shetland, yet both are rural, both marginal, geographically, to the centre, and the culture of each is enriched by other, pre-mediaeval civilisations—Arab in the case of Andalusia, Viking in the case of Shetland. Lorca's poetry gives a voice to yet another marginalised people, the Romany or gitanos and, although later he came to repudiate the label foisted on him of 'gypsy poet'; his wonderful sequence, the Romancero gitano ('Gypsy ballads') endows the gitanos with tragic status. Perhaps Lorca's greatest contribution to European poetry, through his poems and his plays, was to revive the lyric tradition, which had been such a strong one in Spain in earlier centuries, galvanising it into new life, vibrant, and sometimes shocking in its open treatment of sexuality, forging powerful symbols in order to write about death and desire.

What impresses me most in these translations is the music of the poetry, the strong rhythms that match the power of the original, and the Shetlandic's long vowels contribute greatly to this. In 'Da Sang O Da Rider'; Williamson wisely reverses the order of the Spanish to put the short sound of 'wind' first and the longer 'plain'; at the end of the line, so extending it and supplying a near-rhyme for 'mön'; 'Trowe da wind, trowe da plain, Black horse, rid mön. Daeth is watchin mefae da tooers o Cordoba.

Although I wasn't too happy with Williamson's translation of 'el llanto/ de la guitarra' (the guitar's lament) as '[d]a tears o da geetar'—losing the aural quality of the image for a visual one—he so excels himself in portraying the sounds of the instrument, which 'greet, dreep, dreepin, / laek watter greets/laek da wind gowls abön da snaa'; that I am happy to forgive him the exchange. The Shetlandic word-hoard is such a rich one that it is a constant delight to come across word after amazing word. Here are the opening lines of the 'Ballad o da Black Döl', in which the beaks of the cocks peck, searching for dawn:

Da nebs o da cockrelshock for da dimriv, whin doon da daurk hillcomes Soledad Montoya.

The visceral splendour of these poems is dramatically underscored by the darkly subtle artwork of the Orcadian artist, Diana Leslie; there is also a helpful glossary at the back. Poet, artist and publisher Hansel have produced an elegant and linguistically satisfying little book, with the added possibility for the reader to learn some Shetlandic via Spanish—or vice-versa.

Lyn Moir: Over the years I as a Hispanist have read many translations of Lorca's poems, particularly of his ballads. It had never occurred to me that the best, the most near in spirit to the original, would be not into English, but Shetlandic. In a tall, narrow pamphlet with delicate illustrations, all printed on good quality paper, Christie Williamson's translations of eleven of Lorca's ballads stand face to face with the originals, allowing line by line comparison if one is so inclined. The translation is indeed meticulous, so in fact one need only read and enjoy the Shetlandic versions. Lorca was writing in a form traditional in Spain for centuries, that of the rustic ballad. Lorca himself was from the upper middle class, extremely well educated and very alive to the possibly dying traditions of his nation. He was an early collector of traditional lyrics, both spoken and sung. So there is an affinity here with Williamson's desire to put the possibly fading Shetlandic dialect onto a wider stage.

These translations have kept the spirit of the original in a remarkable way:

Las piquetas de los galloscavan buscando la aurora, cuando por el monte oscuro baja Soledad Montoya becomes

Da nebs o da cockrelshock for da dimriv, whin doon da daurk hillcomes Soledad Montoya

in a most natural manner, while

's du axin foraa de lane at dis oor?

is a beautifully natural translation of

¿por quién preguntassin compañía a estas horas?

Each of the ballads presented here is rendered with similar delicacy, keeping to the mood of each poem.

While I have delighted in the collection, I feel that the book may have a limited appeal to those with no knowledge of either Spanish or of Shetlandic. For anyone with a reasonable smattering of either, it's a must.

Helena Nelson: I neither speak Spanish nor Shetlandic Scots. What chance, then, this chapbook with me?

Well, it starts by looking and feeling really lovely, as we've come to expect from Hansel Press. It's A5 in height, but much narrower, nice to fit in the hand, with some beautiful monochromatic artwork from Diana Leslie. The poems sit side by side: Spanish on the left, Shetlandic translation on the right. You come to the poem through a sort of palimpsest, layers of meaning through which understanding gradually makes its way.

The first poem, for example—'La Soltera en Misa'. The Shetlandic version, 'Da Spinster at Mass', is clear enough, and there's a picture too of a sad-looking woman, with dark, soulful eyes. There are four two-line stanzas to the poem. Lots of space around them. Time enough to work out what's happening. The first stanza reads: 'Bajo el Moisés del incienso, adormecida'. I don't know what this means. But let's see. In Shetlandic: 'Anunder da Moses o da Incense, / neebin'. Sounds like under a

painting, or maybe a stained glass window. Moses with the tabernacle maybe, source of the Ten Commandments? But what's "neebin"? There's a glossary at the back. "Neebin" is dozing or sleeping, and now of course I see that "adormecida" has "dorm" in it, like "dormir" in French and dormitory where you go to sleep. So she's sleeping, that spinster of ours. And in the picture, her head is on her hand.

Second stanza: "Ojos de toro te miraban,/ Tu rosario llovía". I recognise the rosary there and even "Ojos de toro", the "Bull's eye" on the opposite page, which the spinster can just about see. What are they? I'm not sure. Maybe the rosary beads? Either way, I can see her, head on her hand, half asleep, with the rosary beads on the shelf before her. And the next stanza is dead easy in Shetlandic, provided you say it aloud:

In yon froak o deep sylk, du dusna möv, Virginia.

She's a spinster, a virgin called Virginia, dressed in silk, unmoving. How lovely it is that Shetlandic still has the intimate "du", the "thou" that got lost in English.

Then the final stanza:

Gie da black melons o dy breaststae da nönin o da mass

I had to look up "nönin" because I wasn't sure ("rumor de la misa" in Spanish).

"Humming softly" is what it means.

So she's a sleepy virgin. She's dozing during mass, in her black silk, with her ripe breasts (pechos, like "pecs")—given to no man—given to the soft sound of the incantation. It's like a painting, a picture of a woman. It's a slow picture, a gradual unravelling, while the mass intones in the background. It took me a little while to penetrate, but now that I'm there I'll remember this Lorca poem. It is lovely and the sound of it in Shetlandic is also lovely.

It takes time, of course, to work with this pamphlet and time might be what you haven't got much of. But poetry deserves time and Lorca is the real thing.

Besides some of the poems take much less time to penetrate. On page 15 "Da Sang O Da Rider" is instantly understandable. You don't have to look up a thing:

Daeth is watchin mefae da tooers o Cordoba.

Ah, foo lang da rodd is! Ah, mi brave horse! Ah, foo death waits for me afore I win tae Cordoba!

Cordoba. Faur awa an lanerly.