

The poet who saved a Saint's priceless letters

It was March 1936. A series of anti-clerical riots swept through Toledo. Churches were burned and priests and monks were attacked in the streets. During these disturbances several Carmelite monks, disguised in lay clothes, sought shelter in the home of the South African poet, Roy Campbell, who had moved to the city with his wife, Mary, and their two young daughters in the previous year. Four months later, on July 21, republican forces advanced on the city. Under cover of darkness, the Carmelite monks once again called on the Campbells. This time, however, they were not seeking refuge for themselves but for their priceless archives, which included the personal papers of St John of the Cross. Campbell agreed to take possession of these precious archives and that night a heavy trunk of ancient documents was delivered secretly from the Carmelite library to the hallway of the Campbells' house.

During the following day republican forces advanced through the city, forcing the defenders to fall back towards the Alcazar. Without the soldiers of the garrison to defend them, the priests, monks and nuns fell prey to the republican militiamen. The 17 monks from the Carmelite monastery were rounded up, herded into the street and shot. In the square outside Toledo's town hall the Madrid militia lit huge bonfires which were fuelled with crucifixes, vestments, missals and any other religious items discovered in looted churches and houses. From their home, the South African poet and his family watched in horror as they saw the Carmelite library set ablaze.

Several days later the Campbells were visited by a search party of militiamen. Expecting such an intrusion, Roy and Mary had already taken the precaution of removing all crucifixes and religious pictures from the walls. Their main fear was that the trunk containing the Carmelite archives, including the personal letters of St John of the Cross, would be

discovered. The search, however, was not particularly thorough. At one stage some of the militiamen even leaned their rifles on the trunk without thinking of opening it.

During this search of his home, as he revealed in a radio interview several years later, Campbell had prayed to St John of the Cross, making a vow that he would translate the saint's poems into English if his family's lives were spared. Campbell fulfilled his obligation to St John, translating the poems to great critical acclaim. The poet and critic Kathleen Raine, writing in the *New Statesman*, encapsulated the critical consensus that Campbell's translations represented a superlative achievement in English verse: "Of all living English poets Roy Campbell is the most masterly in his use of rhyme, and he is able to use metre so as to convey a sense of intense passion. He has reproduced the Spanish rhymes and metres as closely as possible, and yet his English versions have the freshness of original poems."

In a broadcast talk on St John of the Cross for the BBC in 1952 Campbell stated that the success of the poems was due more to the grace obtained by the saint's supernatural intervention than by any innate ability of his own. "Were I superstitious I should say that St John brought me luck," he said. "Not being superstitious, I say that he wrought a miracle."

In similar vein, after Campbell had just finished delivering a lecture at the Ateneo in Madrid in 1954, he was asked by a priest in the audience to what he attributed the extraordinary success of his verse translations of St John of the Cross. "But the good saint helped me, father," Campbell replied. "You see, when I got tired, or my spirit flagged, or I got stuck, I would just look over my shoulder and there St John would be, sitting against the sky, smiling down at me. He would call out *Arre burrito!* And I just went on trotting..." This charming mixture of mischievous humour and mystical humility

delighted his Spanish audience, who erupted in spontaneous laughter and applause.

Yet how did a South African poet end up in Toledo at the outbreak of the civil war? What attracted Campbell and his family to Spain?

They had initially arrived in Barcelona in the autumn of 1933, having lived for several years in Provence. Their arrival coincided with the anarchist strikes that had followed the Right-wing victory in the recent elections. "For the Catalonians, as with the Irish, politics is a national industry," Campbell wrote to a friend. In spite of the turbulence of the times, the Campbells fell in love with Spain and Spanish culture. Mary's enduring love for the figure of St Teresa of Avila had fired her imagination for Spain since her youth, and she had evidently passed this imaginative fire infectiously to her husband, as is evidenced by the poetry about Spain that he wrote after his arrival in the country.

"My parents were romantics," stated Anna, the younger of Campbell's daughters. "They saw life, they saw Spain, through a romance. They saw it through a cloud, a sort of imaginary Spain." Campbell wrote: "From the very beginning my wife and I understood the real issues in Spain. There could be no compromise... between the east and the west, between credulity and faith, between irresponsible innovation... and tradition, between the emotions (disguised as reason) and the intelligence."

Tired of the brief interlude of urban life, the Campbells moved to the village of Altea, near Alicante, in May 1934. It was here that the whole family was received into the Catholic Church. "I don't think that my family and I were converted by any event at any given moment," Campbell wrote later. "We lived for a time on a small farm in the sierras at Altea where the working people were mostly good Catholics, and there was such a fragrance and freshness in their life, in their bravery, in their

reverence, that it took hold of us all imperceptibly."

Fr Gregorio, the village priest, was delighted that a whole family of "English" was being won over to the Church. Two years later, the priest would be murdered by militiamen sent from Valencia. By this time, as we have seen, the Campbells had moved to Toledo, which Campbell eulogised in one of his poems as a "sacred city of the mind".

In April 1957, Roy and Mary set off in their tiny Fiat 600 from their home in Portugal, destined for the Holy Week celebrations in Seville. En route they stopped off for several days in Toledo, "this heavenly place which means more than all the world to me", as Campbell described it in a postcard sent to a friend. Throughout the week of processions in Seville, Mary noticed that her husband was unusually quiet and particularly serious in his devotions.

On April 23 they set off back to Portugal, crossing the border in the early afternoon. A front tyre burst, and the car swerved out of control and hit a tree. Mary survived but Roy died at the scene of the crash. Thus ended, at the age of 55, the life of one of the finest and most controversial poets of the 20th century, a poet who counted George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, T S Eliot, Evelyn Waugh, J R R Tolkien and C S Lewis among his friends.

As regards his friendship with Tolkien, it is one of Campbell's intriguing claims to fame that he was part of the inspiration for the character of Aragorn, who was played by Viggo Mortenson in the movie version of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien first encountered Campbell as a mysterious stranger in a pub in Oxford in 1944 who was listening intently to the conversation of C S Lewis. As Campbell peered intently at Lewis from under a wide-brimmed hat, he reminded Tolkien of Aragorn, the mysterious stranger who eavesdropped on the conversation of the hobbits in the *Prancing Pony*, the pub in

the story in which the hobbits first meet Aragorn. Since Tolkien was in the midst of writing *The Lord of the Rings* at the time, and was deeply impressed by the adventurous life that Campbell had lived in Spain and elsewhere, it seems likely that Campbell helped to shape Aragorn's character in Tolkien's imagination.

As for the story of the man who saved the original letters of St John of the Cross, it could be said that Spain and the Catholic Church are indebted to him for his role in preserving a priceless part of their inheritance. As for Campbell, he was equally indebted to Spain, describing it as "a country to which I owe everything, as having saved my soul".

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