Selection of Poems by David McLoghlin Translated into Spanish

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Details into Light

It has been said of David McLoghlin’s first collection Waiting for Saint Brendan (Salmon Poetry, 2012) that “These are big, ambitious, sometimes sprawling poems, rich in narrative and in detail, an autobiography of sorts, where the voyaging soul is concerned to find home and meaning in a dialogue between self and other.” It has also been pointed out that McLoghlin “unites sharp ‘eye work’, in rich and telling detail, with what Rilke called ‘heart work’, in a series of clear and powerful images”. I found the book to be the work of a courageous poet, particularly in section two, where he confronts his own demons as Brendan confronted his.

But the common word in the above commentaries is “detail” and the poems under discussion now are from a forthcoming book, also from Salmon, called Santiago Sketches. For “sketches” we could read “details” because the poems are made from observations in little notebooks kept during a year in Santiago de Compostela and then transferred to bigger page-a-day diaries that the poet bought in those “great Spanish stationery shops”.

I remember watching the poet Desmond O’Grady jot down words on torn corners of newspaper pages and carefully fold the tiny pieces of writing and place them in his wallet. Also, I once came across a poem by Heaney on display in the British Library, written on the inside of a Kellogg’s cornflakes box. We all have our methods and anything will do really: beer mats, paper serviettes, cigarette boxes, even mobile phones; they all serve the poem, helping it along towards the printed page or to never see the light of day again. Thankfully, we have McLoghlin’s perseverance and “eye work” that has given us, in these poems, an outsider’s / insider’s view of the ordinary, day-to-day happenings in Santiago.

These are not “big, ambitious, sometimes sprawling poems” but rather ethereal, worked-on but not overworked, slightly-controlled reactions to what caught his eye. Instead of photographs, we have photowords. Glimpses, gleanings, scratches and scrapings of life as he experienced it during the course of a year (from 1993 to 94) in that great pilgrim City of Galicia. They are the poet’s own searchings on a voyage that would eventually take him to New York.

In a sense, these poems are a pilgrim’s store of experiences and longings brought to us by a keen-eyed poet: from “Café Derby” we read of the waiter who could have served Valle Inclán (how we wish for those tertulias again), the bikers in the Obradoiro (this barrio is where the poet mostly hangs out) and the zinc bar counter (not many left now). In “Lamed” we are treated to a wonderful juxtaposition of proud, Napoleonic-type stalkers and the medieval clerk wearing a one, four-inch orthopedic shoe and the presence of the Moors –
never too far from us in Spain. “Map” makes the connection with Ireland and West Clare cheekbones, “Agua De Colonia” “is the smell of Spain” (well, one of them) and “Civil Disagreement” is a snapshot of its political divide. We are back with McLoghlin’s penchant for saints in “All Saints” and the day, November 1, tastes of saint’s bones (a type of bun), its sound as old fingers rake the dominos (an exact image) and the poet’s imaginary escape from the spewing rain to the smells of late summer in Nerja, a thousand kilometers to the south, where the younger McLoghlin used to holiday with his parents.

From here we enter the terrain of people and place and the details that go into making up their lives. In “Pepe’s Wife” we can see into her sad apron eyes, the traditional pipers and their flaccid bagpipes like deserters from a forgotten peninsular war, the gong of the poet’s silence and the call to prayer (McLoghlin cannot avoid it!). “León with Regina” takes us on an excursion to High Castile and the presence of water where cypress trees grow, a walk past unofficial shebeen bars and the glassed-in balconies are sun traps (they also provide winter warmth). We are back in familiar territory with the seven year wait for a holy door to open as the poet pokes fun at the twelve apostles, while someone else has painted their lips with lipstick. Rain again, as Beckett said, while the priest ignores the beggar and life is a lottery ticket, a street sweeper, a junkie, the poet’s dead grandfather in a suburban fir tree in Dublin via Santiago, and the over-grown moss on the cathedral is a beard. Víctor Jara’s broken hands are recalled in “Antonio”, a poem about a busker, a second chance with Lucía (a girlfriend at the time), Basque rebels and the poet’s refusal to play the Irish card. This is followed by “Evening, Quintana” and its café life of dark-haired men, a medieval pilgrim from Dingle (one of the caminos and the place where the poet lived for a few years) writ in stone and gypsies jamming.

“The Book of Beginnings”, “First Night” and “Leaving” close the selection included in this issue of Estudios Irlandeses. Each poem is a return to the time when his Santiago experience began. They speak naturally, from hindsight, of sharing cigarettes with old female acquaintances, that Iberian confidence and penchant for profanities that would be shocking in more prudish societies, an epiphany in his old barrio and that predawn walk of loneliness and discovery.

These sketches or searchings are better than any tourist guide. The information is precise, accurate and loyal to people and place. With a little imagination, the reader will relish the detail and if the urge is carried to its conclusion, you could do worse than go to Santiago with these poems in your pocket to guide you. They are the stuff of a poet’s pilgrimage, homages to a place that helped him to grow and to complete some of that dialogue with himself and the other. Is not this what the camino is all about.

Past the leaking umbrella bin of dark wood by the door, girl facing boy, four teenagers play seriously at adulthood. The boys’ hair is bullfighter-gelled, deeply engominado; French-style, each girl wears a pastel sweater around her shoulders, another at the waist. They are attended by a small bald waiter who might have served as apprentice at the tertulias of Valle Inclán. Hieratic, a slight limp, the collarless white coat buttoned to the neck, unhurrying he carries a tray to their table—the dark thick hot chocolate from the Americas, the infusiones in alchemical jars, unfurling.

Two biker pilgrims in muddy boots and PLO scarves, stubbled, stand beside elbow-high bikes with Madrid registrations—wheel rims choked with mud and dust—chatting to a suave traffic cop in the Obradoiro, square of the gold-workers, their bikes parked below the cathedral as if after some Paris-Dakar.

Among the proud walkers, each his own Napoleon—only briefly perturbed as a 6 foot 4 blond German passes in rope sandals—go the ones hobble-walking through the drizzle of medieval streets. And apart from a brief case and beige gabardine, the small man with the four-inch black orthopedic platform shoe could be medieval—that sense of the afflicted.

Swans asleep in the rain pattering on the art deco Moorish pool in the Alameda—the name of the park, it means grove of poplars.

Al cruzar el oscuro paraguero de madera, chorreando junto a la puerta, chica para chico, cuatro juvenzuelos galantean serios con la madurez. Los chicos y su cabello, fijado a lo torero, intensamente engominado; a la francesa, las chicas revisten sus hombros con jerséis pastel, y a la cintura otro. Los atiende un camarero, calvo y retaco, de menester quizá madurado desde mozo en las tertulias de Valle Inclán. Hierático, algo renco, viste una blanca chaquetilla sin cuello abotonada hasta la garganta, parsimonioso. Les lleva una bandeja a la mesa—denso, de las américas, caliente chocolate negro, infusiones en ánforas de alquimia, bullendo.

Dos motoristas peregrinos de botas lodosas, con palestinas y barba de tres días, están de pie junto a sus enormes motocicletas, las matrículas de Madrid—y las llantas bañadas en barro y polvo—conversando con un afable policía en el Obradoiro, la plaza de los orfebres, mientras que a los pies de la catedral descansan sus motocicletas, cual persiguiendo un París Dakar.

Dos ancianas, envueltas en abrigos de piel de búfalo—como los que los centuriones vestían en sus campañas—se acodan sobre la barra de zinc del varonil bar, conversando entre ellas: gesticulan al cielo, menudas. Los ancianos, ceñudos y en sus dominós, estampan las fichas.

Entre los viandantes orgullosos y napoleónicos—distráidos, quizás, por un alemán, rubio, metro noventa y tres—que pasea en sandalias de caña—renquean algunos bajo el sirimiri de callejas medievales. Maletín y gabardina beige; si no fuera por eso, el pequeño señor del zapato de plataform, ortopédico, negro, de diez centímetros, parecería del medioeval—esa aura de afligido.

Cisnes que dormitan bajo la lluvia y chapotean en la piscina art decó de estilo morisco de la Alameda—cuyo nombre significa bosquecillo de álamos.
Sky up through the narrow streets. 
Old men in berets and suits leaning on sticks 
talking outside Café das Crechas 
where copper coins glint between the stones 
near an Elizabethan map of Ireland. 
Dark, bearded young men, 
cheek wisps above the beard line. 
Strong, galego-speaking women 
with Al-Andalus eyes, smoking Ducados. 
One of them turns: West Clare 
in her cheekbones. Her hazel eyes, to me, 
have the intensity of someone young 
in an old photograph, taken in Quilty 
a summer day, through a long exposure. 

Under the moped fumes, torrefacto coffee, 
dark tobacco with no filter, straight aguardiente 
—throat rip of aniseed, no water no chaser— 
the public buildings that carry it 
even in their ammonia—is the smell of Spain: 
the agua de colonia they put on babies 
that sells in large bottles for almost nothing. 
Women cool their wrists with it, 
dab it behind the pierced ears 
of baby girls. Gold sleepers. 

A punky young woman 
muffled in a PLO scarf, dark-eyed 
all determined, anarchism and the Basque mullet 
gets on the bus—an old, blue 1950s city bus— 
says to the driver in galego: 
“Praza Roxa, por favor.” Red Square. 
A man with a long black moustache 
grows in Castilian: 
“Plaza José Antonio Primo de Rivera!” 

Forearms in sugar dust, the baker 
relishes saying, “¡hoxe comemos 
osos do Santo!” On All Saints Day 

Hasta los codos de azúcar glas, el pastelero 
se deleita en decir: “Hoxe comemos 
osos de Santo!” ¡En el Día de Todos los Santos
we eat the saint’s bones!
Biting down, I get to the sweet
marrow of it.

* 

Old men’s caps and coats hang on hooks.
A cheesy, low-cut variety show on Tele Cinco
on mute. Oblivious, stony-faced,
they rake the dominoes, rake through bones.
At the next table, a card player flicks one down
onto once-plush baize, and turns away
with the contempt of the defeated.

* 

Under the spout drains in the Old Town
—mouths of monsters spewing rain—
I’m thinking of Nerja
a thousand kilometres to the south.
In November, the air in Andalusia
still holds the deje of summer:
faint bruise—a trace.
I love the way the winter air
has almonds, sea salt
faded jasmine in it,
like breathing nostalgia.

PEPE’S WIFE

When you go to pay,
she never accepts the money,
motioning you to him with her eyes
—eyes of flies in close-up,
crawling on tapas, eyes of hair
greasy from frying tortilla,
fat, sad apron eyes.

* 

Unshaven gaiteiros in traditional costume,
black waistcoats, white shirts, black breeches,
flaccid bagpipes over their shoulders,
talking among themselves in galego,
long bedraggled hair: like deserters
who’ve walked a long way.
White puttee bandages below their knees,
black knee-breeches—like the battles drummers
from a forgotten peninsular war
falling behind among the prostitutes
and their children, the stumbling camp followers.

3 a.m.: I walk home
mist through the old town.
—Gong!—Gong!
Rim of my silence.

LA MUJER DE PEPE

Cuando toque pagar,
nunca aceptará el dinero,
y con sus ojos a él te mandará
—Ojos de mosca en primer plano,
que se arrastran por las tapas, ojos de cabellos
aceitosos de freír tortilla,
ojos de delantal, orondos, mustios.

* 

Gaiteros sin afeitar en sus trajes regionales,
egriges el calzón y chaleco, blanca la camisa,
sobre sus hombros una gaita flácida,
en galego entablan sus conversaciones,
pelandreras largas y lardosas: como desertores
que han hecho un largo camino.
bajo sus rodillas, blancos vendajes
sobre calzones cortos negros—como un tamborilero
de un conflicto peninsular de antaño,
en la retaguardia junto a las prostitutas
y sus críos, a trompicones, siguiendo al ejército.

3 de la madrugada: camino a casa
la niebla devora el casco antiguo
—Gong!—Gong!
El filo de mi silencio.
Loud speakers on the minarets of the cathedral as if for some call to prayer.

Megáfonos en los minaretes de la catedral como para llamar a la oración.

LEÓN WITH REGINA

In High Castile, between cypress trees marking water, a transhumance of sheep washes across the road from white stubble fields.
—Shepherds in red wool jerseys waving us on.

En la Alta Castilla, entre cipreses que señalan el agua, una trashumancia de ovejas inunda la carretera desde campos de blanco rastrojo.
—Los pastores y sus jerséis rojos de lana nos dan paso.

Walking out of the city along Calle Pombal in the late afternoon, women lean in doorways. They don’t call to me, even tiredly. I glimpse empty beer crates in shebeen bars, bedrooms behind curtains at the back of them.

Cruzando calle Pombal para salir de la ciudad bien entrada la tarde, las mujeres se asoman a los portales. No me saludan, ni con desgana. Atisbo barriles de cerveza vacíos en cuchitriles, cuartos tras cortinas al fondo.

Glassed-in balconies are sun traps for women born before the civil war. White-panelled wood between the panes, grey-blue double doors, green tendrils trailing down the grey iron.
Faint wood-smoke over the old town.

Los balcones acristalados son trampas de sol para las mujeres nacidas antes de la Guerra Civil. Paneles de madera blanca unen los cristales, puertas dobles azules y grises, zarcillos verdes que descienden junto al hierro gris. El débil humo de las chimeneas cubre el casco antiguo.

Leaving Thomas’ flat into the Rúa do Vilar and then the cathedral—the Puerta Santa’s closed, won’t open for another seven years. Statues of apostles in relief around the door whisper against each other behind their hands, as if at shift’s end.
Someone’s painted their lips with lipstick.

Salir del piso de Thomas a la Rúa do Vilar y justo ahí la catedral—la Puerta Santa está cerrada, y no se abrirá hasta dentro de siete años. Las estatuas de los apóstoles cuidan la puerta, aliviados, cuchichean entre sí con las manos a la espalda, como al acabar sus turnos. Alguien les ha pintado los labios con pintalabios.

One stall left in the Rúa Nova. A woman walks past under an umbrella, her Siamese cat peeps over an upturned collar.

Solo queda un puesto en la Rúa Nova. Una mujer pasa de largo resguardada en un paraguas, y su gato siamés se asoma sobre el cuello de la camisa.

A small priest bent over in his cassock, passes beggars in the rain. I wonder where to go in the Quintana dos Mortos, in the city of time.

Un cura bajito, doblado en su sotana, deja atrás a los mendigos bajo la lluvia. Me pregunto a dónde ir en la Quintana dos Mortos, en la ciudad del tiempo.
No letters today. The ONCE lottery ticket seller
in the glass booth with venetian blinds
Braille-counting a roll of 5,000 pesetas notes.
My lungs’ harsh residue.

“¡Vamos, hombre!” an old man says
to the rheumatic Alsatian straying behind him
as if to a friend.

Three o’clock. White-jacketed waiters
in El Paradiso café serve tea to old women
in the in-between time.

Two female students link arms
under their umbrella.

A street sweeper in navy overalls,
luminous white stripes at her ankles and sleeves,
a witch’s broom sweeping long trajectories.

The junkies shelter under the arches
in the Toural square. Old men
stand beside the police.
The police ignore them, the old men
keep nodding as if they were included.

Smell of astringent pines by the Auditorio.
Mist drifting across the houses on the hill
like wood smoke. A smell of damp grass,
or the perennial berries
of suburban fir trees at the end of gardens
in Dublin. My dead grandfather.

Long, beard-moss on the cathedral.
An aged foreign couple, white-haired,
strolling. A cherub flying, all cheek.
Eroded lion faces watch them out of the stone.

ANTONIO

Most nights there was a busker
in the arch under Bishop Xelmirez’s palace
—the acoustics so good you heard him
long before you came up the stairs from the Obradoiro.
He sat because of the long hours, and when he stood
he walked as if his leg had been turned the wrong way.
I didn’t know his name.

10 years later, Lucía and I were walking down from Cervantes,

ANTONIO

10 años más tarde, descendíamos por Cervantes Lucía y yo,
Santiago starting again for me. He was playing “Te Recuerdo, Amanda” by Víctor Jara. “¡Claro!” he said to her, “you played at singer-songwriter nights at Modus Vivendi!” At midnight his girlfriend collected him with their Golden Retriever. She was a student, 10 years younger. As they walked away I thought of second chances, and Lucía’s student days when she said “every window was open playing Pablo Milanés, Mercedes Sosa, and Silvio,” Latin American hope songs. Behind the songs, compañeros, Víctor Jara—and me and her missing each other in every Old Town bar, me missing being in a different book.

Tarasca sometimes played the hope songs, more often rebel songs, flew the Basque Ikurrina beside the Cuban star. When I ordered in Spanish the bearded bartender looked at me askance under black-and-white photos of prisoners, friends of the axe and the asp—echoes of a mural iconography. He turned stony, I wouldn’t play the Irish card. Off my elbow, a local wore the balaclava and the armalite, foregrounded on the Tricolour: the easy t-shirt.

Víctor Jara was on the jukebox. “Try playing that on the guitar,” the soldiers mocked in the stadium in Santiago de Chile, after they broke his hands. Víctor Jara sang back at them from the ground.

—EVENING, QUINTANA—

A fiddler on the steps—tertulia in Café Literarios. The open door casts a yellow path on the flagstones: to warm voices, points closely-argued, dark-haired men standing, laughing

—and then 19th century beards, friends meeting daily at the coffee house mightn’t be that far.

I stop to listen, then go on. A man runs past, like a fugitive
the cathedral’s towers far above him. Sickle moon, Jewish star. Tower of contradictory heart.

Old ladies pant, linking arms climbing the hill of Costa Vella. A black cat sits watching almost in schadenfreude. In the Obradoiro

—NOCHE, QUINTANA—

Un violinista en el escalón—tertulia en el Café Literarios. La puerta abierta proyecta una senda amarilla sobre los adoquines: que te lleva a voces cálidas, a argumentos bien defendidos, a hombres morenos de pie, entre risas

—y entonces barbas decimonómicas; encontrarse amigos a diario en las cafeterías no puede quedar tan lejos.

Me paro a escuchar, y me marcho. Un hombre pasa corriendo, como un fugitivo,

las torres de la catedral lo vigilan desde lo alto. Luna de hoz, estrella judía. Torre de corazones contradictorios.

Jadean las ancianas, y unen sus brazos para subir la cuesta de Costa Vella. Sentado, un gato negro observa casi riéndose de los males ajenos. En el Obradoiro
the stone is still warm from the sun.

At the five star hotel, 
a waiter looks out, closes the door, 
making the quiet comes closer. 
To the west, a spectrum 
of blue-black, red-green, darker red, 
where the sun is going down.

A faint cross decipherable 
in sandstone. 
The full moon in a window 
in whose light sometimes I see 
writing on the stone: 
graffiti of an Irish pilgrim. They wrote
*El Dinguel de Santiago* 
in the book of arrivals, 
then he missed the boat back.

*The *gitanos* jamming in the Quintana:
the boy on the guitar, 
the older man’s voice starts up 
unsure, shivering—knife. 
Two teenaged girls —eyes of India. 
How long since you left home?

*The BOOK OF BEGINNINGS*

Women I knew, then, 
who smoked Ducados 
would pass me a drag 
from time to time 
in the Praza de Mazarelos — 
black tobacco, the gentle 
laceration—and me trying 
to find the page.

The old woman 
wearing her beauty 
like dried flowers. 
The Iberian confidence 
still fresh.

At the Platerías door of the cathedral 
old men sit, talking. 
¡Me cago en dios!—“I shit on God!”—one routinely punctuates.

The arcade arches
of Rúa Nova and do Vilar
sheltered them in the winter.

Now in late June, perverse,
they walk in the shade.

The cicadas make a deeper silence
as summer opens its distances.

FIRST NIGHT

After Café Derby, a single street led up, up
the incline. Now I know it is Preguntoiro:
I didn’t know it was the old town, didn’t know
anything. Displays of tetilla—tit cheese—
and flesh-tone girdles—but nothing open, the whole
city a brownish stone that glittered. Out of narrowness,
the Quintana suddenly opened. There was
no one—as if the world had retreated,
and it was given to me. Rain dripped from the arches,
from everything, but there was no rain falling.
I stood there a long time as it glistened.

LEAVING

“Owl singing in the quiet night
in the shadow of mingled boughs,
you turn these city trees
into an old wood where I always was…”
Uxío Noveneyra (Translated by Pearse Hutchinson)

Avenue of trees by Fonseca.
I stand looking at a fountain
at six in the morning
walking home in the cool June dawn,
the breeze-silence with cut-grass in it
or fresh wood smoke:
a first fire, or embers of the last.

PRIMERA NOCHE

Pasando el Café Derby, una sola calle sube y sube
la cuesta. Preguntoiro, ahora sí lo sé:
no sabía que era el casco antiguo, ignoraba
todo. Tetilla en los escaparates—queso de mama
y fajas reductoras—pero nada abierto, toda
la ciudad una reluciente piedra pardusca. Al principio estrecha,
la Quintana se abría de repente. Y luego
ni un alma—como si el mundo estuviese de retiro,
y me lo hubieran regalado. De los arcos goteaba la lluvia,
de todos sitios, pero no del cielo.
Esperé de pie mucho rato mientras brillaba.

MARCHÁNDOME

“Moucho que cantas pra noite queda
na sombra das flairas tecidas,
ti fais distas arbres de cidade
un bosque antigo no que eu estuven sempre…”
Uxío Noveneyra

Un bulevar junto a Fonseca.
A observar una fuente me detengo
a las seis de la mañana
de camino a casa en el fresco amanecer de Junio
bajo la sosegada brisa con aroma a césped cortado
o a humo de chimenea:
el primer fuego, o ascuas del último.

Notes
All the poems between asterisks are individual units, regardless of their having a title or not.

John Liddy was born and educated in Ireland but has lived in Madrid since 1982, where he worked both as a librarian and teacher at the British Council. He has published the following books of poetry: Boundaries (1974), The Angling Cot (1991), Song of the Empty Cage (1997), Wine and Hope (1999), Cast-a-Net (2003), The Well (2007), Gleanings (2010) and The Secret Heart of Things (2014). He is one of the founders of the journal The Stony Thursday Book.

German Asensio Peral obtained his bachelor's degree at the University of Almería (Spain) with an honorary distinction. He earned his Master's Degree in English
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