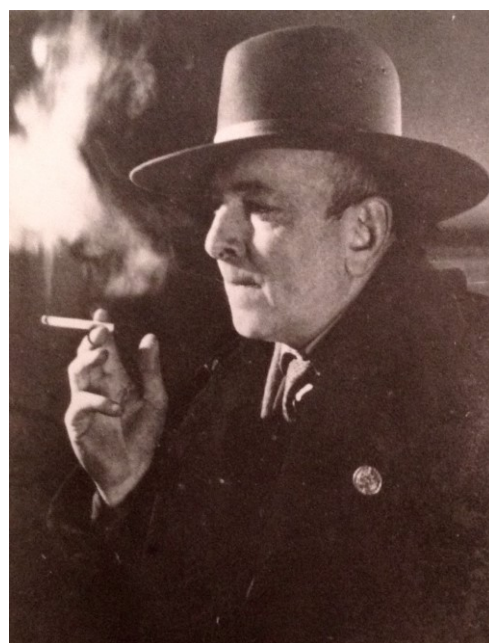


ROY CAMPBELL: HERO OR VILLAIN?



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When it comes to summing up a person in just one word, it seems to be a daring and risky task although you might be or have been highly familiar with that person and you have known him or her for ages. So, whatever you may think about Roy Campbell, it was quite hard to pigeonhole him.

If this is applied to him and his great diversity of jobs and roles throughout his life, there is no doubt that the challenge becomes even more complicated for an outsider, an external researcher who did not have the chance to get to know Campbell in the flesh but read and learnt about his professional and personal life through his two autobiographies; other writers' biographies and articles; handwritten letters or postcards, and encounters with people who knew him well or even shared some time of their lives with the Campbells. Besides, the task became more rewarding and effective after having listened to his two grandchildren's sincere words and childhood memoirs.

So, that is how we can attempt to portray him and reach some conclusions, which have undoubtedly led us to discover his human and more intimate side as well as his frequently rejected or denied value as one of the most important English-speaking poets of the 20th century.

Roy Campbell was essentially a rebel, reacting to what was before rather than pursuing a clear vision of his own initiative. For example, his arrival in Oxford in February 1919 entailed his strong determination to show that he was not impressed by the English or their cities and institutions. At least, he tried to do so although we know that he became amazed the very first time the *Inkonka* approached London

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Docks, not only at the harsh snowy winter but also when he tried to look for a means of transport that first took him from the Docklands to Euston Station.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, Oxford Colleges did not give him the chance to achieve a university degree but the possibility to meet William Walton and Tommy Earp who would teach and lead him into initially weird situations for a youngster from a British colony. The fact of leading his life towards the academic world had also been unexpected. Just by chance, or because the Great War had just finished before setting off for Britain in December 1918, his father changed his mind predicting that the military world would not be as tough as it had been in previous years. In this particular case, forthcoming war events would prove him wrong since his son would witness the Spanish Civil War and the II World War in the following decades.

On the other hand, both Walton and Earp were the key to open a lot of doors to enter the literary coteries of the 1920s. As their contacts used to play an important role among other writers and the publishers' world, new acquaintances started to arise around Roy Campbell. And this meant a chance for his poetry from a professional point of view, he had had that dream since he defiantly began writing poems in Mr. Langley's lessons at Durban High School or cheated him by handing in Shakespeare's poems as if they were his own homework.

Apart from his rebellious behaviour, Roy Campbell always had another trump card to defeat his rivals: poetry. His effective pen and occasionally irritating verses and satires were deadly weapons at the service of a master of words and rhythm and the impressive use of iambic couplets, which were able to drive opponents round the bend.

That innate rebellion of his being was not restricted to Britain. As a teenager, he had taken advantage of it at Durban High School or other events in which he ran a great risk despite the fact that his parents and elder siblings were always keeping an eye on him. Then, on returning to South Africa in May 1924, he found it backward after England and his experiences in the European continent. Then, he rebelled again. It was just a matter of time things would not happen as he might have expected as soon as he got in touch with William Plomer and Laurens van der Post. By backing African friends and parading the Zulus, with whom he had always lived in

harmony, he challenged the Establishment of his own country and dared to defy the discriminatory practices and laws imposed by the Colour Bar.

Some critics may refer to Campbell's approach to black people with malicious intent and see it as a pretending way of posing, full of deceit, posturing to project an air of empathy with those tribal people he had shared so many things since an early age. Campbell did not take those critics seriously but used them as a symbol of scorn for his land.

In my view, that is far from the truth and we can find some evidence in what regards the figure of Catherine Mgadi, his Zulu childminder, or those hundreds of native men and women who attended his father's funeral in spite of being aware of breaking one of the apartheid laws. Crossing the thin red line of courage for the sake of "their" doctor was a matter of honour and honour did run in the Campbells as far as we have known from his ancestors' deeds since the 19th century. Those are just some examples in which respect and mutual recognition were shown by both sides.

With regard to racism and joining people of other races, Franco M. Messina's "Scozzesi nella Giungla"² remembered Campbell's words in *Light on a Dark Horse*:

"Nel suo bel libro 'Luce su un cavallo non favorito' (1951) il poeta sudafricano di origine scozzese Roy Campbell scrive che i popoli celtici (Gallese, Scozzesi, Irlandesi) non sono mai stati razzisti e, come i popoli latini, (specie i Portoghesi), a differenza di quelli germanici, si sono sempre "mescolati" con etnie non-europee, dando origine ai Meticci".

These words as well as his relationship with the native South African can serve us to get rid of those weak accusations of racism.

Another example: *Voorslag*. This magazine had that purpose for which the South African trio (Campbell, Plomer and van der Post) had originally created it; that is to say, that kind of "whiplash" to whip local inhabitants into a state of contempt for their homeland by making them concerned about the situation their countrymen were facing regarding those racial differences.

² MESSINA, F. M. (2010). "Cozzes nella Giungla" in *The Wit*.

Regarding politics, back in England in May 1927, he found the most popular poets were marxists or communists and, in my opinion, they watched Campbell with envy after the previous publication and huge success of *The Flaming Terrapin* three years before. His powerful and vigorous work had contributed to the appearance of brand-new issues in English poetry. How could a young colonial poet have reached such a high level according to amazingly impressive reviews with just one work? That was the key question in the British literary circles.

From a political point of view, there is no evidence that Roy Campbell was veering to the right, as politics was never an issue of interest for him. Although it may sound incredible because of that unfairly repeated label of fascist, he never had any intention to join a political party despite the offers he would receive in the future from Sir Oswald Mosley through Wyndham Lewis. Then, why was he insistingly accused of being a fascist? Perhaps, because he made the "fatal mistake" of siding with the wrong group of thugs: he was a passionate supporter of Franco's deeds during the Spanish Civil War as they tried to preserve what Campbell had achieved after becoming a Catholic and feeling Spain as if it were his own nation, one he would be willing to die for.

In fact, the four Toledan sonnets included in *Mithraic Emblems* (1936) did not initially intend to put Campbell's political views into his poetry. However, the attitude of British intellectuals or his brothers-in-law during his hard five-month "exile" at the "Bolshevik Binsted" in Sussex after his Spanish escape, made him change his mind. If anyone can claim, as Stephen Spender would do in the 1980s, that the inexorable logic of the politics and the warlike nature of events of the time drove the poets of his generation into ideological positions, why should not the same hold true for Roy Campbell?

On the other hand, the fact that leftist writers got hold of the literary power could be understood as a fierce attack to the Zulu poet's poetic proposal since he did not follow the trends imposed by the Left and firmly stuck to his guns. Every major literary figure was on the Republican's side. Merely because of this, Campbell was wiped from the public consciousness, condemned to languish in the backs of college libraries. Similarly, some contemporary critics or professors have suffered the same consequences in our century. Certainly sad but true.

Some years before, with his crisply satirical *The Wayzgoose* (1928) and *The Georgiad* (1931) coming out in the end, Campbell's efforts seemed to give up that magical poetry which had captivated his contemporaries and the critic in 1924. The former had served him to mock the racism and bigotry of the South African governing class apart from creating a sudden discord in most Afrikaaners of his region. The latter, on the other hand, was his parody-like satire against Bloomsbury's literary elite where "...Hither flock all the crowds whom love has wrecked / Of intellectuals without intellect / And sexless folks whose sexes intersect...". As we can infer from these cruel verses, mercy was not in the game.

However the worst was yet to come, as Landeg White, an Anglo-Portuguese translator and poet, suggested to me after my conference at Lisbon's *Universidade Nova* in late January 2015. "The most appalling and ultimate humiliation for a macho poet was to discover his wife was having an openly lesbian affair with Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf's lover, what made him collapse and leave for France".

The affair represented the decadence of the Bloomsbury Group, many of those who had championed and even compared Campbell with Eliot's "The Waste Land", as described by Dr. Scrutton:

Campbell began to see the three aspects of the new elite—sexual inversion, anti-patriotism, and progressive politics – as aspects of a single frame of mind. These three qualities amounted, for Campbell, to a refusal to grow up. The new elite, in Campbell's opinion, lived as bloodless parasites on their social inferiors and moral betters; they jettisoned real responsibilities in favor of utopian fantasies and flattered themselves that their precious sensibilities were signs of moral refinement, rather than the marks of a fastidious narcissism. The role of the poet is not to join their Peter Pan games but to look beneath such frolics for the source of spiritual renewal.³

³ Consulted on June 10, 2017 at: www.theimaginativeconservative.org/2011/11/roy-campbell-knight-errant-of-permanent.html

The beginning of Campbell's marginalization after his attack on the literary set would lead him to multiple exiles until he managed himself to settle down through conversion to Catholicism. His contempt for the Bloomsbury Group grew bigger and bigger and had no intention to hide it but, on the contrary, devoted himself to a hate campaign against those "piping Nancy-boys and crashing Bores" he loathed. Despite the obvious differences, the description of these events sounds quite familiar to our present world and society...

Fortunately, Campbell managed to find a way out for his temporary depression by escaping to France and, in the middle run, converting to Catholicism in Spain under his wife's persuasive strength, which made her take the family reins by becoming the cornerstone of the relationship and those decisions to be taken in the future. Surely, this was the result of a kind of tacit admission of guilt after their affairs by both partners in order to reach their domestic truce and, mostly, the benefit of their daughters, Anna and Tess.

Life in France had always been nice to Roy Campbell. From the very beginning and his first trips there in the early 1920s, the discovery of Modernism had had a great influence on his literary career as a writer and, afterwards, as the translator of Baudelaire or admirer of Verlaine or Rimbaud. In both the poetic and translating field, apart from many different others, he would be an important figure in the 20th century literature.

However, southern France, with places such as Provence, Camargue or Martigues, would definitely help him take up various activities, which, from a professional point of view, contributed to the welfare of his family's home survival but, on the other hand, reduced his time to create poetry. Not only did his undeniable versatility have to do with diverse types of work as a writer but also with manifold activities which would travel along with him during the also varied exiles: literary, spiritual or economic.

And as a result of a negative financial situation and avoiding imprisonment for debt, he had to leave France much to his spiritual regret. The whole family seemed to enjoy the rural areas they used to live in the south and this sort of life allowed them to be in contact with ordinary people, who loved life and those humble jobs and small possessions they had. Besides, the fact of living close to Augustus John or

Aldous Huxley let Campbell keep in touch with a lot of those literary figures or mentors he had known in previous stages of his nomadism in Britain, South Africa or other French areas he had lived in previously.

If he regretted leaving France for money and law matters, he would never regret to know Spain and its people and, as far as religion is concerned, to seal his absolute commitment toward Catholicism, the Campbells' main source of life, duty and responsibility after their conversion in Altea (Alicante) in June 1935.

France had given the poet a chance "to rub shoulders" with his peers, to foster his main policy; that of making friends and sharing life and pleasures, such as art, music, literature or just talking to increase his knowledge of all the new places he had to adapt to when going to and fro because of his nomadic wanderings. Luckily, he had taken advantage of former situations, events and activities turning him into an all-rounder for any kind of job and geographical site he settled down.

In my view, the process of his religious accomplishment had originally begun in France in the early 1930s after coming across Mithras and the connections with sun, light, blood and bulls, which would also cause Campbell to approach the subject of bullfighting and, why not, have an enthusiastic try in any job related to the taurine world.

Initially, that attraction arose from a living tradition close to the earth but gone missing in the modern world which he did not like at all. The discovery of some French shrines and the contact with the southern sun allowed him to understand the pagan metaphors of the solar cult and sacrificial Roman Mithraism, which would be transformed and preserved by Catholicism through its rites.

Therefore, it was not the Mediterranean Altea that triggered the family's conversion after the spring of 1934. This location and, especially, Father Gregorio invited the Campbells to clear their doubts up and take a decisive step forward in those harsh and strange days Spain started living before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Besides, both men got on well by sharing books and their poetic abilities, whose connections we were able to prove after Paca's and Mari Paqui's words, his gentle maid and the priest's niece, in an interview in his beloved Altea in May 2015. Both the small village and its inhabitants would play an important role in the family's future.

Undoubtedly, this was an act of bravery, like many others in Toledo in the very short run. Becoming a Catholic was parallel to run an unnecessary risk in an imminent war theatre, where one's religious beliefs were considered to be an unavoidable excuse to spark off the conflict or pull the trigger. The appalling atrocity in his sacred city of mind was a turning point, too. He rightly hated the perpetrators of his Carmelite friends' murders and the post-war rescue of the trunk with those works by St. John of the Cross entrusted to him to find a life's cause that transcended rebellion by publishing its contents through competent and expertly rhymed translations and reaching a strictly religious compromise with the Saint. What happened in Toledo was the sort of horror that leads to a lifetime's commitment or, at least, a whole decade of hard literary work. There could have been no going back. It was a matter of faith and another example of moving mountains in such social upheavals the Campbells had unfortunately witnessed since their arrival in Barcelona at the end of 1933.

This, though, obliged him to take sides in the Spanish national bloodshed and, at the same time, this rebellious support for Franco and those fair and traditional causes and values he stood for made his poetry decline after the publication of *Flowering Rifle* (1939). That peace of mind he had been offered by Catholicism seemed to be disturbed by blood, shotgun and, once again, his innate rebellion.

Regarding the lazy assumption, Roy Campbell was a fascist for backing Franco, it is far from the truth. He always denied having any connection with Fascism but to others, fighting or defending one's values against an external invasion is a symptom of being politically incorrect or, at least, not supporting your contemporaries' views as far as politics is concerned. It is a strange point of view of the consideration of democracy from the Left but it is not too far from what we can live or suffer nowadays. The same old song...

Politics was out of reach for Campbell. In other words, he did not even care for it and, in fact, he never had the intention to go in for a fascist or extreme right party although he did have some encounters with Sir Oswald Mosley, who wanted to count on the poet as a standard bearer of ideas, after his escape from Toledo in the summer of 1936.

Surprisingly enough for his detractors, the closest relationship of Campbell and politics can be found in his Oxford years when he used to go with the flow. Being a friend of Tommy Earp - at that time involved attending the political meetings in which Anarchism or Sinn Fein were the main issues to deal with - and no one would dare to say or claim they had any kind of connection with Fascism. And there he was, and he would proudly write an innocent letter to his mother in South Africa to tell her about his political meetings and "progress" in England.

And that is why he did not hesitate to travel to Madrid from Toledo and sign up for the II World War against that evil Fascism of which he had been continuously charged. Other right-wing Catholics, such as Evelyn Waugh, would do the same.

As for his supposedly prominent racism and anti-semitism, we have already put forward that they are just shallow accusations to undermine his poetic abilities, disrespect his human side and mislead the people who are not part of that "leftist universe" he never wanted to belong to. We can find some examples in South Africa, Spain or Kenya, where black, gypsy or Jewish people and soldiers were treated respectfully and with that kindness and tolerance his Zulu childminder had made use of during his first and innocent experiences in life. At that time, Catherine and his surroundings were as second nature to him.

Nowadays, Roy Campbell is virtually ignored in the Anglo-Saxon world although some American Departments of English Language and Literature include his poetry among that of British writers of the 1930s, mostly those courses looking at the poetry of the "Auden Generation" or responses to the Spanish Civil War, both left and conservative. Unfortunately, he remains a poet who ceased to be a poet when his spirit was fuelled by unfairness or rebellion and decided to run a legitimate risk by supporting Franco, Catholicism, Portuguese Oliveira Salazar, Virgin Mary or anti-apartheid.

The powerful pride and followers of the leftist Bloomsbury Group have undemocratically rejected those who mocked their pitiable literary figures, fought for the "wrong" side in the Spanish Civil War and became a Catholic.

Artists or writers bearing only one of these feelings of guilt have traditionally been supposed to be dismissed of the scholarly despotic trends and if we focus on Campbell's case, he has the dubious honour of joining all of them in just one person,

a real hero as a combative underdog in the world of poetry with enough strength to fight a hegemonic leftism that was using up the concept of life out of literature.

His triple heresy against the intellectual *mafiosi* was his irrevocable death penalty from a literary point of view. Besides, he was an undismayed fighter against the established powers and lack of all kinds of justice by holding and waving his powerful sword of poetry.

On a personal level, I have always had the impression of how difficult it is to be a poet, a writer or a translator but, on discovering Roy Campbell, I have managed to find someone who was able to do all those things and, though extremely difficult, he even did it in and from different languages. To make matters even worse, he had become a Catholic and did not mind bragging about such a daring decision in Britain.

The fact of rescuing and rediscovering Roy Campbell with new views and opinions is also an invitation to discover his poetry and accept the challenge of the translation of most of his work. Obviously, a reassessment of his work is overdue in countries such as Spain or Portugal.

When Peter Alexander published his ground-breaking biography on Campbell in 1982, it proved to be a revelation even for most of his enemies. It was as if his ghost had appeared to claim his truth and S. Spender, who had formerly denounced Campbell as a fascist, implicitly withdrew the charge and admitted that he was, "as a man, courageous, generous, warm and open", and that he wrote "a number of resplendent poems unique in modern English verse". Needless to say that we must render unto Caesar what, is Caesar's.

Regarding rhyme and rhythm, Kathleen Raine pointed out in 1951, that "of all living poets, Roy Campbell was the most masterly in his use of rhyme; and he was able to use metre so as to convey a sense of intense passion". Perhaps, for that reason, Campbell's vigorous "Horses on the Camargue" used to be a benchmark for the study of the 20th century English poetry by A-level British students in their English Literature lessons.

Other critics, mostly those with little or no knowledge of Campbell's work, were also willing to give Campbell the benefit of the doubt after having categorized him as a second-rate versifier of dubious and incorrect political inclinations. Fortunately, they reluctantly suspected that his poetry might, in the long run, prove

to be more enduring than that of the highly acclaimed group of poets which Campbell had ironically nicknamed *MacSpaunday* (MacNeice, Spender, Auden, Day Lewis), all those poets of the "knife and fork brigade".

As for new fields of research, another step should even go further and we should be the first ones to enquire into the character of Mary Garman, Roy's wife, and find out how extremely vital her role was in the poet's life after becoming a fervent Catholic. Her great courage, determination and commitment are worth investigating and comparing with her past life and that of her sisters. How did an obstinate and precocious kind of hippy turn into a compulsive church-goer and become a Lay Carmelite? God moves in a mysterious way.

Some final thoughts. Had Campbell survived that fatal crash in Setúbal and been taken with his beloved Mary to the local hospital, would he have ended by turning to *The Flaming Terrapin* poetry once he eventually had found some stability and a house of his own? Would he have written on the Spanish Civil War on a third autobiography beginning right after the final events of *Light on a Dark Horse*? Would he have gained international prestige after his last Spanish or American tours and achievements in the 1950s? Would he finally have enjoyed that peaceful and retired life he deserved after so many hardships? Certainly, he would. But his poetry would not definitely have had the same respect or admiration as any other literary work by those who have chosen to write for or from the Left.

Undoubtedly, Campbell was by far a more complicated character than any of his enemies made him out to be. He was a poet, a soldier, a hunter, a fisherman, a bull-fighter, a horse-breeder. Physically, he was a tough man, a mixture of a South African, a Scot and a Latin into a huge frame. He liked singing and heavy-drinking. He loved talking, poetry reading or reciting, and he was one of the wildest but kindest beings alive. Despite all these conditions and circumstances, he was knifed by gypsies and hit by the *Guardias de Asalto* in Toledo, torpedoed and half-drowned in the II World War, savaged by beasts in South Africa, or tossed by bulls in southern France.

Roy Campbell loved Conservatism as he grew older. Furthermore, he was a devout Catholic after his conversion, anti-communist, anti-fascist, respectful of traditional moral and loyal to social values, distrustful of progress and what modern times were supposed to imply. He used to "go native" in any country he chose to live

in and he always got to become a heroic outdoorsman, whose example can serve us to undoubtedly prove how great literature has traditionally been defined by politics or its trends rather than by actual talent

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ABSTRACT

Roy Campbell was a South African poet whose literary production was mostly published between the First and the Second World Wars. According to T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas and Edith Sitwell, Campbell was one of the best British poets of the 20th century but his strong character, his original South-African condition and, above all, his Spanish Catholic conversion in 1935 and support to Nationalists' Spanish moral and values during the Spanish Civil War led him to collect a wide range of detractors and literary enemies in those countries he chose to live despite his efforts to get used to the local or national customs by going native. His poetic collections are a good example that can undoubtedly prove how literature can be defined by politics or religion rather than by any writer's praised talent. Roy Campbell did not write for or from the Left and, so, he was blacklisted from present anthologies in English. Though a physically tough man, he was one of the humblest and kindest literary figures who loved any artistic expression of his highly varied surroundings he always tried to portray through impressive and vigorous verses in a poetry full of prodigious images.

KEY WORDS

Roy Campbell; Poet; Catholic Convert