

RECENSÕES CRÍTICAS

CAMÕES, Luís Vaz de (1997): *The Lusiads*; Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Landeg White. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press

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“Arms are my theme, and those matchless heroes
Who from Portugal’s far western shores
By oceans where none had ventured
Voyaged to Taprobana and beyond [...]” (CAMÕES 1997: 3)

This is how Landeg White starts the latest English translation of the Portuguese well-known poem *The Lusiads* (1572), the third line of which we chose to underline to focus the key word OCEANS, which was the leading theme of EXPO’98 - **The Oceans, a Heritage for the Future**.

Vasco da Gama, who in May 1498 for the first time arrived in India, was actually remembered in the last international exhibition of the century, held in Lisbon, just like in the 1570s epic poem Luís Vaz de Camões celebrated the voyage of the navigator around the Cape to India and the heroic deeds of the Portuguese people.

Thus it seems quite appropriate a book review on the recent work of Landeg White.¹ The book represents a major contribution to the English understanding on how to read a Portuguese classic in the present time, “an epic of European thought and action in the sixteenth century (CAMÕES 1997: ix), to use the author’s own words.

This is an Oxford paperback edition, published within the World’s Classics collection, which captivates the reader with a splendid cover illustration, showing special concern with subject

¹ All the references to the work of Camões are written by Landeg White as *The Lusiads*, probably to stress the same syllable as in the Portuguese form.

and age contextualization. Being so, from the beginning we feel compelled to open a volume which has the merit of fulfilling even the most demanding expectations and also stimulates a most enjoyable reading.

The work itself starts with an **Introduction** where artistic and cultural purposes are stated. It comprehends a biographical notice on Luís Vaz de Camões, where references to early biographers are included. Besides this relevant information the author adds details of historical background that allow the common reader to be enriched with suitable historical images. Landeg White benefits of specialised knowledge and personal experience due to a sixteen-year residence in the West Indies and Africa, being the author of several studies on the fields of African history and poetry.

Like his predecessors who before translated the Portuguese text, White comments on earlier translations. Even doing so he seems to have an extreme ability to be synthetic, so, in opposition to the works done before, he chose a paradigmatic example of two previous translators. On the one hand, Richard Fanshawe (1655), who rendered the first translation, considered faithful and poetical, respecting the cannon of *ottava rima*. On the other, William C. Atkinson (1952), the last to translate the Portuguese epic, this time into prose.

On the **Translator's Note** we can find references to five translators, Leonard Bacon, J. J. Aubertin and William Mickle, besides the two already mentioned. It is assumed by Landeg White that one of the major difficulties when translating *The Lusíads* was due to the form chosen by Camões. Therefore, he decided to respect "the eight-line units of the original text with its formal closes" (CAMÕES 1997: xxi). But, we must add, it is no longer the *ottava rima*, which all former translators except Mickle, Musgrave, Mitchell, Duff and Atkinson maintained.

Above all the difficulties he mentions the peculiarities of the languages: "For it is an illusion to believe that the verse form of Camões's epic can be replicated in English. Portuguese is an inflected language and its sentences are shaped differently" (CAMÕES 1997: xxi). However, the author was skilful enough to sort the best way out. He confesses "all translations include painful choices" (*ibidem*), which makes us recall Mickle who said "None but a Poet can translate a Poet" (MICKLE 1766: cl). In fact, White himself has published works of poetry before.

In a thematic **Selected Bibliography** the author includes fundamental studies apart from well-known biographies of

Camões. White did not seem to consider relevant to provide his readers with an exhaustive list of the complete and/or partial translations of *The Lusíads* in the English language, which can be found in the article “Traduções de *Os Lusíadas* em Inglaterra” (SOUSA 1992: 13-15). Besides the above mentioned version of Mickle, he omitted four out of the nine complete translations made since the sixteenth century. Therefore, those of Thomas Moore Musgrave (1826), Thomas Livingston Mitchell (1854), Richard Francis Burton (1880) and Richard Ffrench Duff (1880) are not taken into account, which may lead the reader to underestimate the importance of the way how Camões was made known in Britain during the Romantic Age and the whole nineteenth century.

After the bibliographical references the author provides the reader with a useful **Chronology of Luís Vaz de Camões**, where the most relevant aspects on the life and the work of the poet as well as particular developments of Portuguese History of the period are followed by two maps. These illustrate and help to locate the reader of the 20th century about places mentioned by Camões.

In a word, the author offers us a complete translation where concern with historical accuracy reflects his knowledge of history, which goes beyond the ten Cantos of *The Lusíads* and is found all over his entire study.

The best decision was made as far as poetic and aesthetic perspectives are concerned. If we have in mind the effect achieved by Fanshawe and Atkinson, to quote only the examples chosen by the author, the result of this new version of *The Lusíads* is a text which combines with a satisfactory balance the poetry and the clearness one would expect. It provides, by avoiding the complexity of the formal language used in Fanshawe, as well as the plainness found in Atkinson, an adequate, fluent, pleasant reading nowadays without missing the ‘flavour’ of the original.

The author applied his knowledge and historic background in the section **Explanatory Notes** at the end of the translation, obtaining a good solution for one of the most pragmatic difficulties when one thinks of translating a work like *The Lusíads*. Since the text was originally published more than four hundred years ago, historical, mythological and geographical names could not easily be identified by the modern reader with whom the author himself feels sympathetic with: “Few of us share the extent and depth of Camões’s knowledge of the classics [...]” (CAMÕES 1997: xiii). The footnotes ought to be avoided as

fortunately they were by Landeg White. Otherwise they would have been necessarily shortened, which would not benefit, in any sense, the unaware reader in search for specific information.

To conclude, it is our opinion that the remarkable work of Landeg White is an accomplished British translation of a challenging text which encourages a deep interest on Camões beyond Portuguese frontiers: “[...] Camões’s celebration of the newness of the world, was a theme that required, and requires, constant rediscovery” (CAMÕES 1997: xx).

We welcome the fine translation of Mr. White² which links the future to the past by setting a bridge through his new reading of the renowned Portuguese epic, and recommend its acquisition, not only by those whose field of interest is Portuguese literature and culture, for so many years forgotten or at least neglected, but also by readers in general. Camões has always been the exception, as we can see back in 1859, in *The Athenaeum*, where we can read an anonymous appreciation which, referring to Portugal as “the land of the *Lusiad*”, claims that “there was probably never an English library of any great extent which did not contain at least a Camoens” (ANON. 1859: 204). May this new version of *The Lusiams*, the first in almost fifty years, find its place in the libraries of the century to come.

References:

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- MICKLE, William Julius (1776): “Introduction” in *The Lusiad; or, The Discovery of India. An Epic Poem*. Oxford: Jackson and Lister.
- SOUSA, Maria Leonor Machado de (1992): *Camões em Inglaterra*. Lisboa: ICALP.

² Landeg White has recently received the Teixeira-Gomes Prize for this translation.