

ROY CAMPBELL (1901-1957): THE LIFE, TIMES  
AND OPINIONS OF A SOUTH AFRICAN 'COWBOER'<sup>1</sup>

*Maria do Rosário Lupi Bello*  
*Universidade Aberta*  
*CETAPS*

*Miguel Alarcão*  
*Universidade Nova de Lisboa*  
*CETAPS*

**PART I (Miguel Alarcão)**

Six years ago, I published an article on Roy Campbell entitled “O Hispanista Escocês da África Austral” (Alarcão 135-157). My purpose at the time, when choosing that title, was to present him as someone who was always “on the road”, moving from place to place (South Africa, Britain, France, Spain, NE Africa, and ultimately Portugal). There is indeed a distinctly modern ring in Campbell’s very active and eventful life, embodying (and perhaps engendering) a plural, fragmented or ‘decentered’ sense of cultural identity and belonging. Although this ‘Wandering Zulu’ never settled back in Africa on a permanent basis,<sup>2</sup> he would always retain, however, a love for big, wild and natural spaces and for physical life in the open air, as well as a great sensitivity

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<sup>1</sup> The authors hereby wish to acknowledge and thank the help generously provided in editing the original powerpoint by Daniela Cabral Morbey.

<sup>2</sup> During his 1924-6 stay, Roy Campbell launched and edited the first three issues of *Voorslag*, a literary, cultural and political review in which he criticized racial segregation (apartheid). Roy would later return to Africa during the Second World War (1943-4), doing military service as a volunteer in the Home Guard.

towards colours, sounds and smells which may account for the intensely sensorial flavour of his lyrical poetry. He also loved animals (particularly horses) and bullfights;<sup>3</sup> thus my title today, aware as I am he did not come from Wyoming or Texas...

As one of our former English language assistants used to say, "There are three things one should never discuss or talk about, least of all in public: sex, religion and politics." But then she always added, significantly: "What's left?" and this seems indeed to be an unavoidable trilogy when one comes to study Campbell and his life, times and opinions. I will start with the early 1920s, when he moved to London, falling in love with Mary Garman (1891-1979), whom he would marry in 1922, and gaining access, later in that decade, to the social and literary *milieu* of the Bloomsbury Group, associated, among many others, with Leonard (1880-1969) and Virginia Woolf (1882-1941).<sup>4</sup> Vita Sackville-West's love affair with Mary Campbell, infuriated Virginia, who felt 'dumped', whereas C. S. Lewis (1868-1963) is reputed to have said to Roy himself: "Fancy being cuckolded by a woman!" (*Apud* Simkin n.p.) Therefore, for those readers with an interest in Gender Studies and/or the morals and *mores* of the artistic upper-classes in the first decades of the twentieth century, particularly the period between both world wars (1918-39), there is ample scope for research into the context of Campbell's early married life and literary career.

Roy Campbell's first publication (*The Flaming Terrapin*, a poem published in Britain and the USA in 1924 and often compared with *The Waste Land*, 1922, by American-born T. S. Eliot, 1888-1965), was praised by Eliot himself; this and later poems would also be favourably reviewed by Edith Sitwell (1887-1964) and Dylan Thomas (1914-1953).<sup>5</sup> Campbell's reputation, however, has never seemed to match the great expectations these responses would seem to warrant, for reasons which have been scrutinized by some of his most renowned commentators, critics

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<sup>3</sup> "Criador e amestrador de cavalos em Toledo, ... entrava com frequência na arena para tourear. Morreu com o título de 'picador honorário'." (Neto n.p.) In a sweet recollection, reminiscent of one's own childhood memories, Francesca Cavero tenderly evokes thus his maternal grandfather: "Lembro-me de que me desenhava a vida selvagem africana toda, para eu colorir." (*Ibidem*)

<sup>4</sup> Vanessa (1879-1961) and Clive Bell (1881-1964), E. M. Forster (1879-1970), Lytton Strachey (1880-1932), John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946), Victoria (Vita) Sackville-West (1892-1962), Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), Laurens Van der Post (1906-1996), etc.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell's friends also included Percy Wyndham Lewis (1884-1957), J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973), Laurie Lee (1914-1997), etc.

and biographers, notably Peter Alexander and Joseph Pearce.<sup>6</sup> The explanations for this silence and/or '(con)damnation' surrounding Campbell's literary status usually dwell on his estrangement from the influential Bloomsbury circle,<sup>7</sup> but also on his political and ideological views, stances and statements. Indeed, Campbell is still often remembered as nothing (or very little) more than a deeply conservative, right-wing individual, with strong beliefs and opinions on politics and religion and a forceful (and often provocative) way of conveying them.<sup>8</sup> Among the labels and accusations recurrently held against him can be numbered those of being a violent man: and in fact, besides a few quarrels with fellow poets like Louis MacNeice (1907-1963) and Stephen Spender (1909-1995), Roy Campbell, in an episode narrated in his autobiography *Light on a Dark Horse* (1951), allegedly hung his wife out of a window one day, in order to teach her, as he put it, "wifely obedience" (but I wonder whether it did work, as she seems to have enjoyed the experience...).<sup>9</sup> On top of that, Campbell is also often evoked as a heavy drinker, an intolerant man (towards Jews, communists and homosexuals, for instance)<sup>10</sup> and, last but not least, a Fascist.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> "Why ... is he not as well-known today as many lesser poets? The answer lies in his robust defense of unfashionable causes, both religious and political, but also ... in his unfortunate predilection for making powerful enemies. Seldom has a life been more fiery, more controversial, and more full of friendship and enmity than that of this most mercurial of men." (Pearce n.p.)

<sup>7</sup> See *The Georgiad. A Satirical Fantasy in Verse* (1931), a poem whose title and tone recall Alexander Pope's (1688-1744), *The Dunciad* (1728-1743, 4 vols.).

<sup>8</sup> "... o facto é que a sua propensão para a criação de inimigos o levou, em vida, a uma permanente deriva - e, após a morte, a uma memória no mínimo desprovida de consensos." (Neto n.p.)

<sup>9</sup> "Though we were very happy, my wife and I had some quarrels since my ideas of marriage are old-fashioned about wifely obedience and ... she regarded me as a ... child because of being hardly out of my teens. But any marriage in which a woman wears the pants is an unseemly farce. To shake up her illusions I hung her out of the fourth-floor window of our room so that she could get some respect for me. This worked wonders for she gazed, head-downwards, up at the stars till the police from their HQ on the opposite side ... started yelling at me to pull her back. She had not uttered a single word and when I shouted out ... across the street: 'We are only practicing our act, aren't we, Kid?' she replied 'Yes', as calmly and happily as if we did every ten minutes. The police then left us alone, saying: 'Well, don't practise it so high over other people's heads, please.' My wife was very proud of me ... and boasted of it to her girl friends." (*Apud* Simkin n.p.)

<sup>10</sup> "O problema foi sempre aquela sua ligação ao franquismo - e tudo o que essa inclinação conservadora implicava. Tradutor apaixonado de Frederico [sic] Garcia Lorca, homossexual e comunista, Roy Campbell foi no entanto um feroz opositor tanto da homossexualidade como do comunismo." (Neto n.p.)

<sup>11</sup> In a letter to his brother, dated Dec. 1938, Campbell wrote: "I believe in family life and religion and tolerance: and I find more tolerance to Britain in Italy than I find tolerance of Fascism in England." (*Apud* Simkin n.p.) To Francesca Cavero, "Roy Campbell

As we move out from the roaring 20s into the depressed, tense and bellicose 30s, two facts seem to stand out in Roy Campbell's life: firstly, the Spanish Civil War (1936-9), in which, although not engaged in actual fighting, he sided with Franco's Nationalists against the 'Reds', as he termed them. In spite (or because) of ideological differences, this, of course, might invite a comparison with Ernest Hemingway (1898-1961) and/or George Orwell (1903-1950), who was actually himself related to Roy Campbell. During his time in Spain (Barcelona, Valencia, Altea and Toledo), one should also stress the Campbells' conversion to Catholicism (1935), a religious allegiance strengthened by the murder of bishops, priests, monks and nuns by the Republicans;<sup>12</sup> the couple seem to have been particularly close to the Carmelites of Toledo and harboured several clerics in their own house. Campbell's mystical vein at the time can best be traced and illustrated through the sonnets included in *Mithraic Emblems* (1936), attesting to what I would call, borrowing a hint from William Wordsworth (1770-1850)'s *The Prelude* (1850), the birth and growth of a religious mind.

Like many foreign travellers coming from (or going to) Spain, Roy Campbell would occasionally visit Portugal. In one of those trips, he had an accident with an ox, like the ones that can still be found ambling our country roads. The narration of this episode deserves to be quoted here:

Once while driving a car in the Alentejo we experienced the most determined and vicious charge from a domesticated bell-ox, or *cabestro* [sic], of this breed. It was in 1937, at night, before the road to Lagos from Setúbal was metalled: and we were going along slowly in the thick dust which we raised, which a following wind carried before us, and which seemed a wall of fog, scarcely penetrable by the headlight. We heard cattle-bells, and Dr. Pinto, the Municipal Health Officer of Lagoa, ... stopped the car, since, from the sound, a big herd was crossing ahead of us .... Suddenly we heard the clanging of one of the bells quite near us, and out of

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era um conservador, mas dava-se bem com toda a gente, ricos e pobres. A ... minha avó, Mary Margaret, fez em Espanha obras incríveis de beneficência. Em Portugal, angariava fundos para comprar medicamentos para pessoas carenciadas e recolhia das ruas mulheres vítimas de maus tratos. ... Naturalmente o facto de Roy Campbell ser de extrema-direita prejudica ainda hoje a sua memória. Mas ele nunca foi um fascista .... Apenas gostava de disciplina." (*Apud* Neto n.p.)

<sup>12</sup> According to Joseph Pearce, "By its end [The Civil War's], 12 bishops, 4,184 priests, 2,365 monks, and about 300 nuns had been murdered by the anti-Catholic Republican forces." (n.p.)

the fog broke a huge horned head followed by a great black body. There was a terrific crash and clang, as he hit the radiator. He withdrew a yard or two, paused, and charged again. This time he must have hurt himself, for he withdrew, shaking his head from side to side, as if stunned momentarily, but otherwise unhurt. He had turned one of the headlights completely upwards so that it shot a vertical beam to what seemed an extraordinary height, illuminating the clouds ... over the high plateau. With our combined strength the cowboy (who rode up on hearing the crash), the doctor, and myself ... could not bend the twisted iron one millimetre back towards its original position. This was during the Spanish War, when I was back with my family at Lagoa, on leave from the Madrid front; there had been unofficial air-raid alarms, because the Red Radios were threatening the Portuguese for aiding the Spaniards, as they did in the Peninsular War ....

When we drove through the gas-lit villages, with me in a Spanish uniform, and what seemed a searchlight pointing to the sky, we caused quite a lot of excitement, especially when we had to pass through Lagos ... on our way to Lagoa. The police kept stopping us to ask if an air-raid was expected. So that poor old bell-ox created a tremendous sensation .... (Campbell 106-107, *passim*)

After World War II (1939-45), in which Campbell took part as a volunteer against Nazi Germany, joining the King's African Rifles and working for the Home Guard in Nairobi, Kenya (1943-4), he returned to London. He found a job at the BBC as a literary journalist, becoming, as Joel Neto has put it, "... uma espécie de enclave militante do catolicismo num país sobretudo protestante." (n.p.)

In 1952, Roy, Mary and their two daughters (Teresa - or Tess -, b.1924, and Anna, b.1926) settled in Portugal, a country which Salazar (1889-1970), our Prime Minister for almost forty years (1932-68), had managed to keep outside the conflict and which may have appeared - if not appealed - to the Campbell clan as a "glorious Eden" of peace and tranquility. Appropriately enough, they chose the Sintra area (*Quinta dos Bochechos*, in Galamares), later moving to Linhó.

Finally, 1957, besides Queen Elizabeth II's state visit to Portugal, would witness both the publication of *Portugal* and Roy Campbell's untimely and tragic death, in a car accident near Setúbal, as he and his wife were returning from the Holy Week celebrations in Seville. By that time, Roy had already developed an evident empathy with our country and its people, customs and traditions, besides attaining a considerable grasp of Portuguese language and literature, which enabled him to

translate Camões (c.1524-1580), Bocage (1765-1805), Eça de Queirós (1845-1900) and fellow countryman Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), as well as some French and Spanish-speaking poets.<sup>13</sup> Roy Campbell's translations of Eça have been rightly criticized by Alison Aiken for their frequent editorial liberties and unfaithfulness, an accusation to which, true perhaps to his often trenchant temper and provocative manner, he is said to have answered: "Translations (like wives) are seldom faithful if they are in the least attractive." (*Apud* Dent n.p.) Anyway, this is something which should be further explored, considering Campbell's traditionally unfavourable, unfashionable and marginal(ized) image and reception, for reasons which, as I have tried to suggest, often seem to leave literature itself out of the literary equations and evaluations of his remarkable output.<sup>14</sup>

## **PART II (Maria do Rosário Lupi Bello)**

It was Roy Campbell's vivid imagination, backed by the depth of his literary knowledge, which led to his profound feelings for Portuguese literature, history and culture. Although Portugal's "Estado Novo" was not Fascist, his coming to live here after the War added to Campbell's already bad reputation among the British *intelligentsia*, who saw him as a dangerous right-wing intellectual. But the regime of António de Oliveira Salazar was indeed far more to Campbell's tastes than was Franco's. The first pages of his 1957 book *Portugal* comprise open and enthusiastic praise of the country where he saw the survival of the "human element", a nation almost untouched by the stereotyped dehumanization he believed was growing in the rest of Europe (with the exception of Spain), induced either by radical North American capitalism or by Soviet state capitalism, "both of which subordinate the human soul and body to abstract, academic considerations of economics, technology, and science" (Campbell viii). Campbell's non-conformist and rebellious nature led him to express very politically incorrect ideas. In his

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<sup>13</sup> St. John of the Cross (1542-1591), Francisco de Quevedo (1580-1645), Baudelaire (1821-1867), Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), Ruben Dario (1867-1916), Manuel Bandeira (1886-1968), Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936), etc.

<sup>14</sup> Joel Neto considers Roy Campbell "... talvez o maior poeta de língua inglesa do periodo Entre [sic] [as] Duas Guerras [sic] – e seguramente um dos mais importantes escritores e tradutores da Commonwealth no século XX." (n.p.)

opinion, Portugal survived bankruptcy and a serious socio-political crisis because of “the genius of a statesman of peasant stock” – Salazar – and because of Portuguese religious faith, particularly the devotion to Our Lady of Fátima. (Campbell viii).

It is of course true that some of his opinions might today be considered excessive or at least controversial, but it is also fair to point out that Roy Campbell displays an incredible amount of detailed information on a very wide range of subjects. These range from the early Roman, Celtic and Celtiberian origins of the Iberian Peninsula to the kind of agriculture in use there, with special emphasis on the “fresh super-orange of Vidigueira” (he actually says he “adheres to the ancient tradition that oranges are indigenous to this Peninsula” (Campbell 25), the importance and quality of the wine (particularly Port wine, of course), of cork and olive oil (“Portugal is the biggest producer of cork in the world, and the fifth largest producer of olive oil ... most of [it] used [in] the tinned fish industry” (Campbell 35), the submarine fishing practised in the Berlengas islands, Portuguese traditional bull fighting [*tourada*] and horsemanship, the melancholic beauty of the Portuguese national song Fado, together with other specific subjects of his own preference (as for instance his interest in natural medicine). All of these subjects are dealt with deep interest, accuracy, and minute intelligence. These qualities are not easy to find in the average traveller, who is usually more superficial, or, worse, more interested in confirming his already established prejudices and general ideas than in looking at what he sees with a fresh, sympathetic attitude – essential to a real, adequate knowledge of the “other”, of course.

Campbell got to know a large part of mainland Portuguese territory, and although based in Sintra, he comments on Lisbon’s architecture, on archaeology in Évora, Coimbra, Lagos and Tavira, on the beauty of a number of beaches (Estoril, Algarve), on the Ribatejo region (Vila Franca de Xira and Golegã) – the area inhabited by wild livestock – and, of course, on the Sintra landscape.

It is perhaps amusing to note that despite his wide knowledge he was struck by the height and beauty of the “bridge” at Alcântara, the Aqueduto das Aguas Livres, which he thought was Roman (although it was in fact built much later, during the kingdom of D. João V, in the 18th century):

Some people consider the Alcantara bridge the finest Roman monument in the whole Peninsula, next to that half-mile or so of uncemented stone aquaduct at Segovia .... This Roman bridge of Alcantara is about ten yards wide, two hundred yards long, and

fifty high. It spans a low, rugged canyon with six beautiful arches. In the middle, surmounting the whole bridge, is a high lateral arch over the roadway, which may have served as a toll-gate. .... (Campbell 12-13)

Campbell's words on his beloved romantic Sintra (famous for Byron's and Beckford's remarks) are almost always connected with the beauty of the green and flowery landscape and with the specificities of its soil:

The whole of the rainy side of Sintra range is covered with masses of periwinkle, which flowers for most of the spring and summer and has a second flowering in the late autumn. It is a plant that loves water, and is very hard to find on the rainless side of the serra where I am building my house. But there happened to be a big clump of periwinkle (the only one for miles around), which saved me the expense of a water diviner. "Sink your well there", said Tio Domingos, a bewhiskered and gnarly neighbor of mine with a big black stocking cap sticking two feet upright on his brows. He pointed to the clump of periwinkles. I had not blasted three and a half metres deep when the water rushed in and flooded the whole – divined for me by a peasant and a periwinkle! (Campbell 32)

The above mentioned property he and his wife bought in Galamares, near Sintra, called the Quinta dos Bochechos, is still known today for its beauty and self-sustainability in water:

On my Quinta dos Bochechos, near Sintra, where we had an inexhaustible water-supply and could irrigate the whole farm in fifteen minutes, my wife and I had the delight of growing our own bread on ten acres of virgin soil which we cleared of scrub, so that the finest corn in the whole district, according to the Government threshers at Varzea, was grown by us. .... The name of our farm ... means "gurgle" or "gargle" farm; some say it is called that from the four gurgling naiads of silvery water that laughingly streak down to Beckford's beloved river, which runs through the farm, and is called the River of the Apples, because of all the fruit that is shed upon it by the overhanging fruit trees. (Campbell 39)

Campbell's remarks on each topic are often made with his proverbial irony and humour, sometimes accompanied by a pertinent cultural judgement. At one point he decides to discourse on the variety of fish and other sea animals existing in the coastal waters of the Berlengas Islands. This leads him to a



long historical comment on the symbolical meaning of morays, which during the Roman empire were considered an awesome trophy:

How much the Romans appreciated them not only as food, but as pets, can be seen by the frequency with which the human surname of Murena (always a rich man) crops up in Roman history and literature. ... A whole book could be written on the subject of the moray eel and its role in the decline of the Roman empire. ... Cassius the traitor had a huge one. (Campbell 60-61)

After narrating terrible stories about slaves who have been thrown into tanks with morays, he says: "Whenever an empire is on the wane, its decline is symptomized by an exaggerated love of animals", and concludes, with the uncontrolled and mixed feeling of the rebel son of the British empire he definitely was: "If a parachute army wanted to conquer modern Britain they would only have to land with poodles and pekes in their arms: and no one would fire a shot!" (Campbell 62).

Apart from fish and sailing, Roy Campbell was also a devoted admirer of everything related to horses, dedicating a whole chapter of *Portugal* (chapter V) to "Portuguese Horsemen and Horses", a subject on which his knowledge is really impressive. He explains how the technique of "Alta Escola" – "Haute École" was taken from Portugal to Spain and then to all Europe, as can be fully attested by the quantity of words of Portuguese and Spanish origin proving "the priority of Portugal and Spain in all things relating to equestrianism". As examples of this phenomenon he cites the Boer word "kraal" (meaning stable, corral) and coming from the Portuguese word "corral", adding other cases connected with the names of different instruments, types of music and other activities from Canada to Australia which have an Iberian etymological origin: "rodeo, lasso, buckaroo, stirrup, martingale, caracole, roan, bay, colorado, pinto, palomino, etc." (Campbell 76). His book displays a photo of the *campinos* leading the cows and bulls among the typical Portuguese cork trees of Alentejo.

But it is when speaking about the Portuguese Discoveries and about Portugal's Literature that the South African poet shows most enthusiasm and greater knowledge, sometimes with a capacity for judgement that goes beyond that of many reputed scholars and historians.

On the first subject, the Portuguese Discoveries, he underlines the ever unexplained disproportion between Portugal's meagre resources and its great accomplishments during the

XIVth, XVth and XVIth centuries: “As to Portuguese naval valour, the vast empire conquered by a country which numbered less than a million and a half inhabitants at the time, is a testimony in itself” (Monteiro 126). This he attributes to the fact that not only commercial and political reasons but also religious ones led the Portuguese to make such long and risky voyages, at the same time being able to maintain those territories for longer than other richer and more powerful nations: “The Portuguese empire has survived the British and the French empires because it was founded on a spiritual not a commercial basis” (Monteiro 124).

On the other hand, he was, as we have seen, a man with a deep sense of adventure, travel and taste for beauty, qualities he shared with the great Portuguese poet of *Quinhentos*, Luís Vaz de Camões, the author of the famous epic poem on the Portuguese discoveries, *Os Lusíadas* (*The Lusíads*). This natural identification of character and taste led to Campbell’s knowledge and admiration of Camões’s art, to such an extent that Jorge de Sena, one of Portugal’s writers of the XXth century, stated that [*“poucas vezes se terá sintetizado, com tamanho brilho e profundidade, a essência do espírito camoniano”* (Gomes 68)] – “very seldom has there been such a brilliant and profound synthesis of the essence of Camonian spirit”. In fact, Camões remained a central figure in Campbell’s personal canon throughout his lifetime, along with other poets such as Gil Vicente and Fernando Pessoa. Underlining the essentially lyrical quality of Portuguese literature – the only country in the world that chose a poet’s birthday for its national day – he argues:

Portugal differed from the other races of Europe in that the first poetry to appear in her own tongue was not a primitive epic like the *Poem of the Cid*, *Beowulf*, the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Nibelungenlied*, or the sagas with which the literatures of the Spaniards, the English, the Germans, and the Scandinavians began. Most of these literatures started with an epic river-spate of song: and many of them, to judge by much modern verse, are threatening to peter out in inert, stagnant puddles of obscurity and ambiguity. Portuguese poetry, on the contrary, began like the noble rivers on whose banks it was written, the Mondego, the Douro, the Tagus and the Minho, as a pure and crystalline source of refreshing, shining and musical lyricism – as unliterary and seemingly effortless as the song of birds or cicadas. Like the Tagus, it has continued to grow deeper and wider, and after forming one big lake in Camões and Gil Vicente, in the golden age, as the Tagus does at Vila Franca, continues to flow with strength and

abundance in the modern verse of Pessoa, Teixeira de Pascoaes, José Régio, and the rest of the modern pleiad. (Campbell 121)

And when concluding his book on Portugal he says:

I have not tried to write a travel-book, or a guide-book, or a text-book about Portugal. This is a personal book, about a country which I love and admire and about a people among whom I can number countless friends in all walks of life. ... It is an intensely poetic country, and it is the country of *saudade*, that mysterious melancholy which sighs at the back of every joy, delight, and pleasure like the wind in the pines. (Campbell ix-x)

Unfortunately, Roy Campbell suddenly died shortly after writing these lines, in a car crash in Setúbal, in 1957, in this country he considered his own. Apart from political considerations or aesthetic comments about his work as poet, translator and passionate lover of Lusitanian history and culture, he was undoubtedly a man of energy, creativity and taste for life, treasuring his own personal freedom above all and always eager to know and love everything and everyone he met. Of him we could say more or less the same as what he said to sum up his love for Portugal:

Portugal's [or Campbell's] great and special gift to the world is an intense, heroic and enduring humanity. It is this survival of the human element, quite as much as any attractions of climate, scenery, and architecture, that brings so many foreign residents and tourists to Portugal (Campbell ix).

We hope and believe these characteristics can still be found here, and that those visiting Portugal can meet them during their stay.

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