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Rodolfo J. Walsh and the Power of Words: Michael McCaughan in Conversation with Juan José Delaney

by Juan José Delaney*
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Invited by the International Book Fair, Irish writer and journalist Michael McCaughan visited Buenos Aires one more time. His principal commitment was the presentation of the Spanish version of his biography published in London, in 2002, known as *True Crimes. Rodolfo Walsh. The life and times of a radical intellectual* (Latin America Bureau). Ediciones LOM, a Chilean publishing house, has just released *Rodolfo Walsh. Periodista, escritor y revolucionario. 1927-1977*, translated by Julia Benseñor, though it is not exactly a Spanish translation but a new account prepared by the writer for the Latin American audience.

McCaughan was a correspondent for the *The Irish Times* newspaper when he first learned about Rodolfo Walsh and his *Operación masacre* (1957). After reading the book, he went through the rest of Walsh's work and conceived the idea of writing a biography of such a gifted writer and controversial character.

We met in a bar, in Floresta, the *porteño* neighbourhood where Michael was staying. Spanish words appear threading through his Irish-English just as it would occur to an Irish-Porteño. It happens that he loves Latin America and, consequently, the Spanish language.

* Doctor en Lenguas Modernas y Profesor en Letras por la Universidad del Salvador (USAL). Docente titular del Seminario de Literatura Argentina del Siglo XX en la Escuela de Letras de la USAL. Miembro de la Comisión Académica Ejecutiva de la Cátedra Extracurricular de Estudios Irlandeses de la Escuela de Lenguas Modernas de la USAL. Narrador y ensayista. Correo electrónico: juan.delaney@gmail.com

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The first question, Michael, is how was it that you heard about the existence of Rodolfo Walsh.

Well, it was the year 1997, and I was working as a correspondent for *The Irish Times*, the newspaper based in Dublin, Ireland. I came to Argentina in April of that year, and was here for a couple of months writing stories. A friend gave me a present of a book and that book was *Operación masacre*. I took the book back to Ireland for a couple of months, so very far away from the atmosphere of Argentina. I read it and it seemed like a masterclass in journalism, how to put together a story, part investigation and also part of literary fiction, a beautiful mixture of language, investigation and crude reality, and that immediately made me want more of Rodolfo.

Would you consider *Operación masacre* a novel?

It is a journalistic investigation with a strong literary touch.

Certain critics relate this book to *In Cold Blood*, by Truman Capote...

That came out nine years after *Operación masacre*, but Truman Capote wrote in English and had that big audience, he wrote in another place, in another time... And Rodolfo, as he said, was a writer of stories for the poor, and he was kind of overlooked.

What is your opinion on the Irish stories?¹

The Irish stories are absolutely fascinating, and when I read those stories I go to the Fahy School and I see the beds, the shower, the isolation, the grounds, the patio where they played, and I get a sense of it, but Rodolfo was writing from his own experience of actually living in that time (he was ten years of age), and he manages to transmit that in the page and brings up a life, the experience of being Irish, being young, being somewhat of a *huérfano*, because his family had split up due to an economic crisis. And so you get those lovely short stories, directly fiction but with a *trasfondo* which sort of brings you a life that you have heard about but that you can't quite touch because it is gone.

1. «Los oficios terrestres», «Irlandeses detrás de un gato», «Un oscuro día de justicia» and «El 37».

A realm that your words were able to recover...

Another thing I would like to add is that there was another great surprise: the experience of Rodolfo in the school, in the Fahy, and with the teachers is something that is very familiar to Irish people of that generation, and it came to me as a great surprise that when you transplant the Irish people to Argentina and when you take the teachers to Argentina I thought it interesting that the same dynamic happens, that they beat the kids, that there is the same talk of heaven and hell... They couldn't escape that, and I was surprised that Argentina would replicate in that way the Irish experience, so directly.

Did these surprising facts move you to write the biography?

It began as an idea to do an anthology, with a brief introductory essay. I thought Rodolfo's work stood by itself and hadn't been translated into English, so I thought it would be more useful to present his work with a brief introduction than anything else. But the more I realized that the work and the life were "*fite fuaité*", as we say in Irish, "knitted together"... It seemed that the great act of justice to Rodolfo would be to recall his life and his work in the life, to show how both grew and where they went over the course of his life.

What about your method, the way you organized the project?

After reading his whole work, I tried to assemble a list of people still alive who would have something to say about Rodolfo. I wanted to find family, brothers and sisters if they were around, origins, where he was born... the early years were the hardest to recapture. Times are moving on, people are dying, etcetera, etcetera. After that, his intimate relationships, whether that was *del corazón* or just close friends. So that was my *modus operandi*, while looking for documents that might speak of Rodolfo, the influences that surrounded him.

Were you successful in meeting these people?

You know, I was very lucky because now, as I look back, some of the key people I interviewed are gone, for example two brothers, Carlos and Héctor. I had the good luck to meet them at a time when they were healthy, Carlos was nearly eighty, Héctor in his seventies (he was the youngest brother.) I met his first girlfriend, Nené, who was with him in 1946. She sat, drank whiskey, and told me about him; I met Pupeé, a huge influence who shared the time in Cuba, during 1958, 1963, and I met, of course, Lilia Ferreyra, the critical partner

of the last ten years when so much was unsaid and unwritten because of the time they lived in. And after that, Patricia, his daughter... María Victoria, his granddaughter, who obviously didn't know him but at the same time had something to say about her grandfather... And from there it moved outwards...

What about the nun?²

The nun had passed away just before I got to see her, so, again, it was that thing of hurry, hurry, hurry... get going... For example, there is in Ireland a writer called Liam O'Flaherty.³ I have my eye on him, he lived a long life, I think he died in 1984. His life is, in some way, as rich as Rodolfo's: he was in the First World War, he was a communist, a Marxist as well, and a great writer also. He passed through all these stages in his life, and he was also an Irish speaker, from the Aran Islands, an amazing person. But the numbers of people who knew him intimately are dying off rapidly, so if I don't do that soon, that's gone. That's an example of how a biography works.

Your biography *True Crimes* (2002), includes a subtitle: *The Life and Times of a Radical Intellectual*. What is the meaning of "Radical" in this context?

It is a good question. The search for a title was difficult because you don't want to close a book with a title, you want to open it up so the people will look at the title and think: this title expands on the person, it doesn't close them in. The key time that he was living and writing, let us say the fifties, the sixties, the seventies, was a time when the role the intellectuals in Latin America was a very much relevant question. At the same time, there had been intellectuals in France, so we had that idea that an intellectual might be somebody who would be in a saloon and talk and drink coffee, as we are thankfully doing now. You might have an intellectual who went off and threw everything in the air and abandoned literature for a weapon, for a cause, for an idea, so there was a tension going on between intellectuals at that time. There was a discussion at that time, they had *encuentros* in Europe and Cuba about what it meant to be an intellectual, so the subtitle alludes to Rodolfo's thinking on what was happening around him, especially about his role as a writer. Radical is telling the reader that he was an intellectual who was taking things further.

2. Catalina Walsh (Kitty), Walsh's only sister.

3. Author of the novel *The Informer* (1929). O'Flaherty's cousin, John Ford, made a film out of it in 1935.

You probably know that the Irish-Argentine community is a very conservative one and that Walsh wasn't accepted. Not many of their members read his Irish stories, but those who did created the legend that he was against the Irish-Porteños and the Catholic Church. Did you have the opportunity to prove this?

I didn't need to check it because as soon as anyone in the Irish community heard that I was working on Rodolfo Walsh and that that was part of my work here, they immediately came out on the offensive to tell me exactly what they thought, as if warning me "You know Rodolfo Walsh was a controversial figure, and you know the Irish didn't like him, and you know he was a communist," many generalizations... that he was a man of violence who betrayed his roots or whatever...

In your book you quote Michael Geraghty stating that it is thanks to Rodolfo Walsh that the Fahy School is known...

Like in Ireland: we enjoy having Seamus Heaney, we enjoy having U2, these are big ambassadors for the country, but it is different when people ask you in Ireland and they talk about Bobby Sands, a very uncomfortable figure for many of them because he was a man of violence who died on hunger strike, in circumstances which were very special... with Rodolfo it is the same, if you ask people for any Irish who is known they'll obviously mention Admiral William Brown and people like that but, really, in the last fifty years Rodolfo is the figure that stands out for good or for bad.

Your work refers to the Irish-Porteños and their language. What is your reaction when you listen to them speaking or trying to speak English?

It depends on the generation. Yesterday, for example, we were in Junín. There was a clear distinction between the older generation and the youngsters, clearly influenced by social media, by the TV and the films; because that is the world we're living in. And even in Ireland it happens that the youngsters are speaking with a North-American accent. It is US English. I like the English I hear here, it is soft English. It has echoes; I get that in your English. Argentinian-inflected English.

More than once I heard Irish visitors say that our English is a nineteenth century English, a language that is not spoken in Ireland any more. This sounds as if the Hiberno-Argentine community is a kind of linguistic Noah's Arch. What do you think?

I was in India four or five years ago and sometimes the English there made me laugh out loud because the educated Indian people speak an English with a strong British accent, and they use words that we consider archaic but quite charming. I didn't get that so much from the Irish community.

Going back to Rodolfo Walsh, I find echoes of the Irish language in his Spanish writing, especially in his elliptical speech; ellipsis is in the essence of the Irish language. The core questions in his stories are hidden, what we get are hints...

I agree with that. When he was interviewed by *Siete Días*, one of those popular magazines, he spoke about his condition of *ajedrecista* and also of being a kind of mathematician; in relation to this, he spoke of *rendimiento* and he related it to his stories. He talks about brevity and how the words count. The Irish were strong and silent, often melancholic types who wouldn't talk a lot... People in Junín referred to the old people's formality, having tea, but they don't remember them telling them many stories about the past, there was a kind of sadness there. And Rodolfo's writing reflects that, even unconsciously, it's something that is connected to his *raíz*.

But his literary program was optimistic in the sense that he believed that literature could modify aspects of reality.

He was kind of a utopian in that sense. He absolutely believed in the idea that words had the power to change people's ideas, to alter *las coyunturas*... And I believe that he was disappointed by what he saw. There are four epilogues in different editions of *Operación Masacre* (between 1957 and 1972) in which we find that he is becoming fed up with the system. A part of Rodolfo Walsh was optimistic and another part saw that nothing was really happening.

I know that you are working on the Irish language...

In the last six months I have learned the history of the Irish language and I saw that it was somehow hidden, not available, and it appeared to me that it isn't a language only with sound, but a language that *encierra* (I can't think of an English word for that) that 'encloses' (but that doesn't quite do it) something of the past, of their people and their history. Slowly, the Irish language has revealed itself to me, something unexpected, that the Irish language was in my house all along, in my heart (although I love the Spanish language as well.) I never really paid attention to this, like the lover

who finds that he is in love with the girl next door, although he travelled all over the world. So in that context the Irish language is having what we call 'a moment' which means it can go through a kind of *Renacimiento*. Irish people now are giving a new value to the Irish language. It's too early to say where that is going, but we are now recognizing that there is something in the Irish language that is relevant to our life but we didn't know it because we didn't speak it, we were taught the language at school, as a dead language like Latin. But we never learned to converse. My first conversation in Spanish was with a man in a bar, but in Irish I was only able to ask permission to go to the toilet... Now I'm discovering the Irish language. And the interesting thing about it is that when people listen to me they think I'm fluent. Even though my spoken Irish is barely competent, that alone put me in the top of the five percent of the Irish speakers in Ireland. So it was quite gratifying that in two years I was able to make that happen. If I can do it, anyone can do it. So I'm working on that, and the title of the book will be: *Coming Home. One Man's Return to the Irish Language*.⁴

The other night, after the presentation of your book, you said that there was a connection between the Irish language and the Easter Rising...

It is very interesting. There was a colonial power that recognized explicitly that in order to dominate people a hundred per cent they had to destroy the language. It is written black and white in the documents of the time. So systematically the language was removed, prohibited in the schools; and English became the language of the state, so everything legal was in English... to send your children to school, to buy land, anything to do with language had to be done through the English language. And Irish became associated with poverty. If you wanted an opportunity for your children, they had to speak English. If you emigrated to England, Australia, and the United States, and not so much to Argentina, you had to speak English.

But this is an anglophile country!

Yes, I know that... So when it comes to the Rising, 1916, we are looking at a country which had had a steady decline of the Irish language. We only had the Gaeltachts in the area of the west. But for the fifteen previous years we had a cultural revival, a nationalist movement that was interested in language. After the Rising, sixteen people were executed all together: twelve of them were Irish speakers, one of them had founded an Irish School, seven were

4. The book was published in March, 2017.

teachers and believed that the Irish language was central to their lives. That is a completely disproportionate number compared to the number of people in the whole country who spoke Irish. So there was something in learning Irish that took people to a more extreme path and inspired them to challenge the British Empire.

You have given an eloquent illustration of the deep link between words and what we call reality. Thank you for that, Michael.