



Litfest International Fiction Book Club

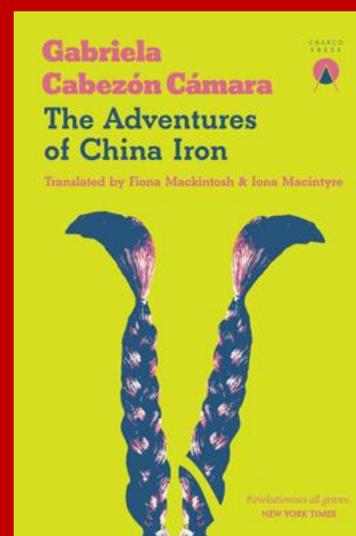
Gabriela Cabezón Cámara – *The Adventures of China Iron*
Monday 17 August 2020

The fifth meeting of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club was held by Zoom on Monday 17 August at 6.30pm.

We discussed *The Adventures of China Iron* by Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, translated from the Spanish by Fiona Mackintosh and Iona Macintyre, and published by Charco Press.

About the Book

Set in nineteenth-century Argentina, this riotous romp of a novel charts the adventures of Mrs China Iron, the abandoned wife of Martín Fierro (eponymous hero of the country's national epic), as she travels across the pampas to the indigenous regions with her new-found Scottish friend, soon to become lover, Liz. As the pair progress from the turbulent, macho frontier culture to the freer world of the Guaraní-speaking Indian peoples, Gabriela Cabezón Cámara offers a poetic vision of a life beyond the structures of conventional society.



We chose this book for its sense of mischievous vitality, its fresh take on macho Gaucho culture, its wry sideways glance at the British Empire and its ability to merge different forms, from the coming-of-age novel, through picaresque to the visionary. Being short-listed for the Booker International Prize for Fiction was also a strong recommendation. We were delighted that the two translators Fiona Mackintosh and Iona Macintyre could join us for a discussion about the book and the challenges of translating Spanish, Guaraní and English into English.

If you haven't read *The Adventures of China Iron* yet, we hope you will. An edited transcript of our discussion with the translators Fiona Mackintosh and Iona Macintyre follows.

Sam O'Donoghue Thank you Fiona and Iona for coming to speak to our book Club today. We are very excited to have not just the translators of this book but experts in Latin American literature, and hopefully you can fill us in on the background of this text because it's a text that engages quite substantially with the Argentinian canon, and specifically with the poem *Martín Fierro*, because here was an aspect of this specific text that perplexed some of us.

'We were able to do a lot of translating together in real time, which was a great luxury.'

We've each prepared a question and I thought, just to kick us off, I would ask how you work together as translators. Fiona, would you like to start and tell us how you worked together on this translation?

Fiona OK, Sure. I'd first like to say it's really nice to be here, and Iona and I are very excited about being part of this book club. As you know, we're both academics working in the same department at Edinburgh University, so actually we were very lucky to coincide getting research leave to work on this project at the same time. We essentially had the best part of the three months during which we could make this, and one other project, the focus of what we were doing. So we were able to be together and do a lot of translating together in real time, which was a great luxury. Although we did split up the work initially, doing alternate chapters or groups of three chapters, and then coming back and reading each other's drafts and swapping over and so on. To begin with there was a lot of being together and reading aloud as well. So it was really quite symbiotic work at the very beginning. I don't know if you want to add something to that, Iona?



Fiona Mackintosh (left) and Iona Macintyre

Iona Only to chip in and say thanks for the invitation, Bill, and nice to meet you, Sam and everybody. And perhaps a little bit of the story of our co-work is that our relationship is in a way structured out of having had a book club about ten years ago. So some of the format of the work we did together had the feeling of a book club, had the feeling of an extended, focused conversation.

Lisa Obviously you are experts in the field of Latin American literature and studies, but I was interested in how much support you needed with the specific vocabulary, particularly in the third part with the Guaraní language. Did you have to get extra support, or was it something you already knew?

**‘So it was
WhatsApps to
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speaking
friend.’**

Iona Originally, we found that if we needed to research a particular word, like a particular structure on the fort in part 2, or something like that, there were resources we could use. But in part 3, the Guaraní language, which you’re pointing to specifically, we don’t have any special training. In my case, I don’t know about Fiona, I don’t even have any passive knowledge, except, perhaps, that I could attempt to recognise a place name that was derived from Guaraní. So, yes, we very much needed support, not so much with translation – because, as you saw, we did not actually translate many of these words – but we did need support in meaning. But I wonder whether Fiona could help with this bit.

Fiona Yes, it’s quite amusing actually. I have very good friend who is Paraguayan. You may or may not know this, but Paraguay is a bilingual country. The other official language as well as Spanish is Guaraní. So it was WhatsApps to my Guaraní-speaking friend saying OK we can see from an online Guaraní dictionary that the words are different kinds of fruit or different kinds of tree, could you give us the context for these words and how they would be used and so on? So we felt we weren’t just stabbing in the dark looking at a Guaraní to Spanish dictionary and hoping that was good enough. He actually reassured us about the ways we were couching these words. We kept them untranslated but we were putting them into our translation in the appropriate manner. So that was helpful. And I would also give a plug for the fact that you can learn Guaraní on Duolingo (<https://www.duolingo.com>). In fact, I’m doing it at the moment and trying to fill in that gap.

Sam What you’ve mentioned about Guaraní and the way that a Spanish-speaking reader might be lost in that final section in coming across a number of those terms. And it possibly also ties in quite nicely with how a Spanish-speaking reader might also be lost in parts 1 and 2 when you have quite lengthy dialogue and when Liz speaks everything she says in the original is in English. So the author does have a thing for including foreign languages in the text, and not providing translations or indicators of what those things mean. And this leads us on quite naturally to Stephen’s question.

Stephen Hi, there. I’m ashamed to say that I don’t really speak any Spanish, but I would be interested to know if you could say something about how different it would be reading the original Spanish with this additional language for part 3, and reading your translation in English.

Iona In some ways it’s probably quite difficult now to re-establish that free spontaneous initial contact with the novel in Spanish, because we’ve worked on it so closely, so perhaps that’s something I can’t exactly remember or access any more. Obviously, there’s all these different readers. There’s no reader, right? There’s just readers with preferences, aversions, backgrounds, cultural knowledge ...

But I think if we were trying to imagine an average monolingual Argentinian picking up the novel, I wouldn’t expect them to grasp much from the Guaraní at all, and perhaps Liz’s English at times is rudimentary enough that it might need just a bit of guess work if it was a reader who had some English, they might be able to grasp the meaning there. As translators, when we began the work we

set about it as translators. Our first inclination was to translate everything into English, establish meaning, make it sound natural and that was our first reaction. In the story as a whole, and as the months went on, we began to embrace the multi-lingual approach, so we switched some of the English into Spanish and that quite often was a straightforward switch. Not in every instance, but quite often.

Then we went with the multilingual approach, which is mainly Guaraní, but there is some Quechua and Mapundungun, other indigenous languages. So I think in terms of orientation, and grasping meaning and recreating the experience of reading the novel in Spanish for English reader, I think it's quite close what we've achieved, but I would say that, wouldn't I? (*Laughter*)

Fiona I would just add, to second what Iona said, that I think a lot of people who are native Spanish speakers in Argentina, but don't have a direct connection to the indigenous language would have the same sense of foreignness and exoticness in response to part 3 as a reader of our translation. They are obviously more likely than us to be exposed to Guaraní in their daily lives. But again a lot of the kinds of vocabulary being used here is not what you'd hear in a town. Someone in Buenos Aires who has heard Guaraní being spoken in certain contexts would be more likely to hear the words for 'bus' or 'station', rather than fruit or trees. In other words a more urban kind of vocabulary. So I think we can fairly safely say that for the native Spanish speaker it's going to have that sense of the exotic as well.

One other quite amusing anecdote to do with all this translating of the different languages present in the text is that Gabi's English is slightly questionable at times. When she's supposed to be writing the voice of Liz, this native speaker of English from Scotland, and for those like Sam who have read the Spanish you'll know that the English is a little bit weird, you know it doesn't sound like a native speaker. We left Liz's speech in English, but we doctored slightly the English that Gabi had originally written, so that it sounded like it was from a native speaker of English and not an Argentinian writer trying to imitate a native speaker of English. So we were translating the English into different English as well.

Sam Thank you. Just before you joined us, I mentioned briefly my very limited knowledge, I have to admit, of this kind of ur-text, Hernandez's poem *The Gaucho Martín Fierro* and a bit about the significance of that text. I don't know if this would be a fair comparison to make, but it's almost Argentina's Shakespeare ... In your answer to Jo's question could you talk a bit about this and about how Cabezón Cámara's text engages with that canonical text.

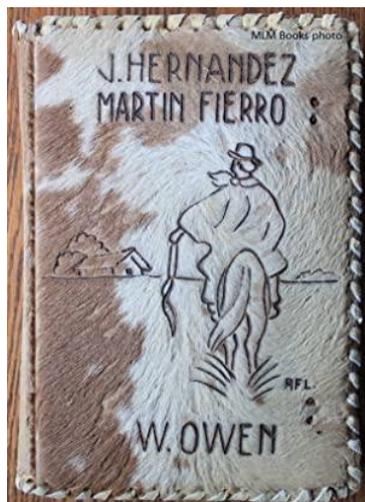
Jo Hello. Thank you for bringing us such an amazing book. I really enjoyed it. I was wondering, with the national hero, this macho gaucho, being dressed up in pink feathers in the end, how the book was received in Argentina, I mean whether it was well received or whether it was a bit of a shock?

‘Our first inclination was to translate everything into English.’

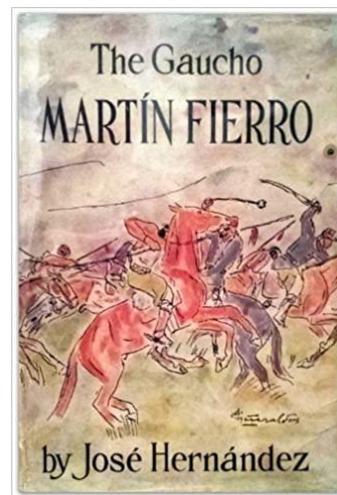
‘So we were translating the English into different English as well.’

Fiona I would say probably both. Going back to what Iona said earlier, there isn't just one reader, there are loads of different readers, similarly in Argentina there were people who would find it iconoclastic and others who would think it was fabulous that this very, as you say, macho epic story was being played with and having fun poked at it and being sexually turned on its head. Certainly there were a lot of rave reviews about it, but also people being a little 'Oohh' about it. It's our national poem and what are you going to do with the national hero if you're cover him with pink flamingo feathers. I think the general reaction has been very positive in a celebration of diversity and in rethinking these national myths and national stereotypes that, perhaps, don't suit the current times.

**Two editions of Walter Owen's English translation of
El Gaucho Martín Fierro by José Rafael Hernández Pueyrredón**



Farrar and Rinehart
New York, 1925



Editorial Pampas
Buenos Aires, 1960

Iona In terms of critical reception I think it got really good write-ups. Stylistically it had the accolades. I haven't been to Argentina since the book came out in Spanish so I couldn't really tell you from a very ground level, but I do know that when the book was long-listed for the Booker International, my friend, who I haven't spoken to for years, sent me an email from Buenos Aires saying, 'Oh my God, that's hilarious, you've translated this really controversial book' and she had read *The Adventures of China Iron* (in Spanish obviously) with her book club. She didn't go into many details but she used the expression 'mixed reviews'. So different people definitely had different feelings about it.

'A friend from Buenos Aires emailed: "Oh my God, that's hilarious, you've translated this really controversial book..."'

Fiona It is the kind of thing that's taught at school still in Argentina. Correct me if I'm wrong, Iona, the first part was published in 1872 and the second part in 1879. And it basically tells the story of this

gaucho who becomes an outlaw and goes and lives among the Indians, but it's quite a moral tale. In the second part, particularly, Martín Fierro is talking to his two sons, saying don't live your life as I lived my life – he's killed two men by the end of the poem –so it's got a kind of didactic twist at the end. But a lot of description is of the landscape and of the poverty and exploitation of the gauchos as well. Also, I think, it celebrates Martín Fierro as an isolated figure against the system, would you say, Iona?

Iona It's a glorification of people who are tough, live on their wits, have nothing and will do anything – and that kind of survival instinct is very much glorified. But it is macho like you say, absolutely macho. It's a reference point in Argentinian culture in that way that it becomes quite hard to describe, so you might have read it at school, but you might not have, you might have seen one of the films, but you might not have, there might have been a comic that depicted it, and so on. If you were Argentinian, you would have imbibed Martín Fierro one way or another.

Jo It sounds a bit like Robin Hood.

Iona You know, it's not as ideal as Robin Hood. Fierro's more like, you know, heroes that are kind of flawed and a bit dodgy, like Sherlock Holmes – he solves the crimes, which is amazing, but he does have major addiction issues... So he's that kind of flawed male hero.

Chris Thank you for joining us and for the work you've done to produce this book which I thoroughly enjoyed. I really liked your afterword which set the book in context and explained quite a lot of questions I had, but the main thing that occurred to me was the political context. The novel talks quite a lot about the British Empire and I wondered– the Falklands is still quite a hot issue in Argentina – if that had fed into the attitudes and writing of the book?

Iona I don't think it's there textually, and I don't think it was something that we had to translate or deal with as translators, but certainly to Argentinian readers the British Empire is very much linked to the Falklands-Malvinas, and that's unavoidable, absolutely unavoidable. I'm really curious – and I know it's not the function of Fiona and I tonight – but I was really curious did you think in any way the Falklands was involved in the novel?

Chris Not particularly, but I was wondering about the attitude of the writer to British political involvement in Argentina over the centuries in fact?

Iona Well, I think we can tell you, we can give it to you straight that she would regard British involvement in Argentina as exploitative and problematic, yes.



Gabriela Cabezón Cámara
Photo by Alejandra López (PRH Argentina)

Fiona But at the same time she does have a soft spot for Scotland, and therefore that's why she partly makes Liz the 'hot redhead' as she was described when we did the interview for the Edinburgh Book Festival the other day. She does have this soft spot – so it's not an entirely hostile relationship with Britain and Scotland. But there is an ambiguity you'll have noticed... We had this discussion about how to translate 'English', 'Scottish' and 'British', because they're used almost interchangeably in the Spanish original and yet people wouldn't ever say the 'English Empire' or the 'Scottish Empire' they would say the 'British Empire'. So there were times when we translated the word '*británico*' as 'Scottish' or the word '*escocés*' as 'British' depending on the context. The sensitivity to the different parts of the UK is much stronger here, obviously, than in Argentina where it's 'they're all over there, it's Europe'. So there's an undifferentiated sense of Britishness, which we had to treat a bit more carefully in our translation.

Jo My question, if I were to speak to the author, would be: Are there more historical texts she would have accessed with regards to maybe life at the Fort? Obviously there is a lot debauchery, alcohol-based, girl on girl, boy on boy, but I just wonder– I've not read the original epic poem – and China's only mentioned in one line and yet the author's written a whole story based around it, so would you know how much literature is available about the historical situation?

Fiona One thing that I would say about that is – and this is a plug – on Thursday, the author is being interviewed for the Edinburgh International Book Festival so if you want to watch it it's there on their website at: <https://www.edbookfest.co.uk/the-festival/whats-on/gabriela-cabazon-camara-the-female-gaicho/player>

[Ed. You can still access this discussion even though it actually took place on Thursday 20 August.] You can hear Gabi talking precisely about this question. She talks about Gauchesque literature, as it's known in Argentina, it's a sub-genre about the gaucho and the legends and the lore. And she was preparing a course on Gauchesque literature just before she wrote this novel so she was really steeped in all this poetry and prose describing the life and ways of the Gaucho, so yes, there is a rich mine of literature there that she was tapping into and drawing on when she was writing her novel.

Sam Iona, I don't know if you want to add anything here?

Iona I don't think I have much to add, but I understand – not directly from the writer, but second hand – that it was not a particularly research-based piece of fiction. It's a creative work that grew from her existing knowledge that she had of Gauchesque literature and *Martín Fierro* and I think that textually in nineteenth-century Argentinian fiction you do get snippets of text that hint at girl on girl, boy on boy, but it's a reading, it's a way of reading, it won't be a vision or interpretation shared by everyone. I think that's probably what she drew on most. It's a bit different for Fiona and I. We did probably draw on existing nineteenth-century sources a wee bit more than she did because we were looking for the way that translators had dealt with such texts and stories. But that's my understanding of her process.

'We would happily work again together but we don't have another project on the go at the moment.'

Bill We're coming to the end, but could I just ask, are you planning to translate again together and does Charco have plans to publish more of Gabriela's books?

Iona We haven't got anything in the pipeline. Gabriela is working on something at the moment, but we couldn't speak to the future inclinations of Charco Press or us as a team. But, touch wood, Fiona.

Fiona Yes, I would say the same that we would happily work again together but we don't have another project on the go at the moment. It's part and parcel of being academics and having a full day job as well, the translation has to be fitted in where we can and just at the moment having to adapt everything we do to on-line teaching is taking up a lot of brain space for both of us. So, ideally, next time we get an overlapping research leave we'll do another translation together but until that moment it's probably slightly on hold. Maybe on 26 August when something exciting might happen to this translation then things could be different, but we can't second-guess the International Booker.

Sam Thank you very much, Fiona and Iona, for coming along. It's really been wonderful to have an insight into the mechanics of working as a team on this translation, the different problems you've encountered and a bit about the history of this book and the historical context as well.

Iona Thank you so much and all the best.

Fiona Ditto from me. It's lovely to meet people who've read the book. It's really exciting. Thank you. Goodbye.

Other books and links mentioned in the discussion:

Edinburgh International Book festival discussion – 'Gabriela Cabezón Cámara: The Female Gaucho' – with Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, Fiona Mackintosh and Iona Macintyre, moderated by Mariana Enriquez can be found at:

<https://www.edbookfest.co.uk/the-festival/whats-on/gabriela-cabazon-camara-the-female-gaucho/player>

The standard translation of *El Gaucho Martín Fierro* by José Rafael Hernández Pueyrredón is still Walter Owen's 1925 version: *The Gaucho Martín Fierro*, adapted from the Spanish and rendered into English verse by Walter Owen (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1925; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1935). It has been reprinted many times since. The most recent edition we could find is published by the Instituto Cultural Walter Owen, Buenos Aires, 1967.

Fiona Mackintosh is a Senior Lecturer in Latin American Literature at the University of Edinburgh, with research interests in gender studies, comparative literature and literary translation.

Iona Macintyre is a Senior Lecturer in Hispanic Studies at the University of Edinburgh, whose teaching and research are focused on nineteenth-century Spanish American history and culture.

Sam O'Donoghue is Lecturer in Spanish in the Department of Languages and Cultures (DeLC) at Lancaster University and, with Litfest Trustee Bill Swainson, is convenor of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club.

Next Meeting

The next book to be discussed at the Litfest International Fiction Book Club on **Monday 21 September at 6.30pm** is our third Booker International short-listed novel. *The Memory Police* by Yoko Ogawa, translated from the Japanese by Stephen Snyder and published in hardback by Harvill-Secker and in paperback and eBook by Vintage

If you would like to register to join the Litfest International Fiction Book club, please email Bill Swainson at litfestbill@gmail.com

