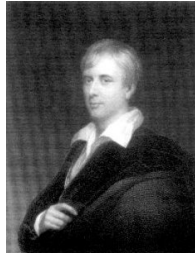


# *Lost in Lugo*

*By Peter Missler<sup>1</sup>*



## 1. A Room with a View

Things have changed in Lugo since Borrow's day, and not always for the better. Take my hotel. It is only a stone's throw away from where Borrow slept in early July 1837, but it is a far cry from his '*large posada without the wall of the town, built upon a steep bank, and commanding an extensive view of the country towards the east*'.<sup>2</sup>

My own hotel is neither so idyllic nor blessed with such a vista. Run by some impersonal, cold-hearted hotel chain, wedged in where there wasn't really room for it, the building stands out like a sore in suburbia: a high-rise tower of shameless concrete, dabbed with an occasion slab of bluish granite meant to lend it some lustre. The room is a 7<sup>th</sup> floor cubicle of 10 x 8 feet, whose ventilation system has been disabled 'in the interest of the environment', whose window does not open so as to discourage suicides, and whose view is not of any pristine landscape, but of a massive telecom antenna dressed up with countless satellite dishes. The contraption stands just seven yards away on the roof of the adjacent apartment block, and plays meeting point to a Hitchcockian number of sparrows and starlings, who seem to be unaware that each moment spent here in chatter and revelry brings their species so much closer to getting radiated out of the bird-guide.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was first published in the George Borrow Bulletin n° 38 of Spring 2009, p. 20-36.

<sup>2</sup> George Borrow, *The Bible in Spain* (henceforth *BiS*), chapter 25 and 26.

I do not know what is wrong with the noble trade of inn keeping these days, but I do know how it makes me feel: like a piglet in a factory farm, some passive item which only wants processing in frosty, handbook fashion to generate plentiful bottom-lines and generous dividends. Like fast food catering, inn keeping is now an applied science. My every possible need, want and desire has been minutely studied, stopwatched, measured, and assessed; and while we keep up a fake pretence to luxury, rations are being doled out in precise parsimonious portions, just enough to prevent displeasure and complaints, yet not a morsel more than strictly necessary, for costs must be curtailed and benefits maximized.

With every step he takes inside the building, the customer meets such hostile foresight. Keys may be lost and cost money to replace; so we hand out credit card plastic instead. To gain admission to your room you need to run this polyethylene Sesame through a magnetic stripe reader below the doorknob. The same plastic must be stuffed into a slot next to the entrance before you receive the blessings of light and current. Inside, one is welcomed by one baby candy on the pillow, a minibar with a price list out of Ionesco, and a hefty copy of today's ABC newspaper. A green fluorescent sticker has been plastered over Barak Obama's front page face to show that this broadsheet belongs to the *NN* Hotel (a roguish guest might resell it to the kiosk on the corner...). Towels must be tossed into the shower to be replaced, once again 'in the interest of the environment'. Warning notes summon you to remember the ecosystem before you let the tap run while brushing your teeth, and point out that leaving the TV on stand-by is bad for rare orchids in the rainforest and dear little Panda bears in China. Gone are yesteryear's lilliput bars of soap; instead we partake from push-down flasks of shampoo and conditioner, each of them secured to the bathroom wall by a padlocked harness of nickel-plated steel. And so forth... The whole place breaths 'malleable human needs', which should never cost a farthing more than the statistics tolerate.

It's a happy thing that the *Asociación de Escritores en Lingua Galega* (i.e. the 'Association of Authors in the Galician Language') – who have invited me to speak at their congress on, of all things, popular notions of the Devil – is picking up the tab for this box bed. I'd be loath to throw my own hard-earned cash at such hostelry, and it's bad enough that public funds will flow into the pockets of such inn-keeping Scrooges! The faster I can get out of here the better. So I drop my bag, grab my text, and hurry out to the *Palacio de la Diputación* where the congress is already in full swing.

## 2. The Meson de Aguiar

Isidro Novo, the afternoon's cordial, *bon-vivant* moderator, loses no time when he sees me. He has done his homework and studied my little bibliography in which the George Borrow Bulletin articles take pride of place. So he has barely got hold of my hand, when he exclaims:

‘Ah: Don *Jorgito el Ingles!* He used to run wild around this town, did you know? Quite a character. Did he drink wine?’

‘He swore he never touched the stuff and drank like a fish,’ I answer truthfully. ‘Some character indeed!’

‘Well, if he liked wine he must have gone to the bar where I’m taking you now. It has the best Amandi this side of the Minho. Of course, there’s no way of telling if the place existed at the time. But he did sleep in the *Meson de Aguiar*. At least, that’s what everybody always says.’

‘The *mason-the-what?*’ I ask dumbfounded. Much as I pride myself on being the alpha-male on Borrow in Galicia, this is one piece of news I’ve never ever heard.

‘The *Meson de Aguiar*. Also known as the *Taverna dos Toldanos*, over in the Barrio San Roque. Unfortunately it’s gone now. They knocked it down some years ago to build an apartment block. But if time allows I’ll take you over there and show you around.’

Sadly, time never allows for that guided tour around the Barrio San Roque. The day simply runs away with us at breakneck speed. The Lugo academic community is quite an *earnest* community when it comes to anthropology and popular traditions; but that clearly does not stop them from enjoying life to the full between scholarly sessions. It is barely 1 p.m. when Isidro treats the whole active part of the *Xornada de Literatura Oral* to a most generous goblet of – indeed! - the best Amandi wine on this side of the river Minho. And then there is an excellent lunch in a shooting-alley of fried-squid restaurants lining the *Parque Rosalia*, amply sprinkled with more fermented grape-juice. And before you know it we must rush back to the *Diputación* to deliver our speeches and stage our round table conference, before double aperitifs are called for in a bar full of carousing Lugenses. And then the dinner table is waiting for us in a three-star restaurant... In short: the Barrio San Roque never returns to the agenda until I stagger back uncertainly to my hotel cell long after midnight.

Fortunately, the Internet nowadays helps out in such cases. Set on track by Isidro’s tip, I google my way around a few sites on Lugo history a few days later and hit the jackpot after only ten minutes: the digital republication of an article by Dr. Adolfo de Abel Vilela, called ‘History of a Lugo Building: the Meson of San Roque’, which was published in the bulletin of the Lugo Museum some 20 years ago<sup>3</sup>. It turns out to be one of those

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<sup>3</sup> Abel Vilela, Adolfo de, ‘Historia de un Edificio Lucense: El Meson de San Roque’, in: *Boletín do Museo Provincial de Lugo*, nº 4, Lugo 1988-1989, p. 121-152.

tremendously thorough investigations which one may only expect from staunchly dedicated laymen labouring for the glory of their native cities, the boundless work of love that knows no limits in time invested, costs of investigation or length of body-text. It starts, so to speak, in the stone age and works its way down to the days of Democracy, integrally reproducing every official document and each snippet of info ever found in years of research.



*The famous Roman walls of Lugo*

The *posada* which, according to that venerable tradition among the Lugo *literati*, once lodged George Borrow, was founded shortly before 1800 by an enterprising Catalan called José Soler y San Juan. The establishment was explicitly meant as a Diligence Inn, that is to say: the officially endorsed hotel where travellers arriving in the stage-coach could put up, and whose infrastructure provided the coaches with stabling, parking space and fresh horses. To this effect Soler constructed a large building and a spacious stable some 10 yards north of the chapel of San Roque, on the edge of the hottest spot in town: the *faubourg* market-grounds between the chapel and Lugo's ancient Roman Walls, less than 100 meters from the *Puerto de San Pedro* city gate, were the *Camino Real* or 'Royal Road' from Astorga entered the town. It was a big imposing building for its day, some 10 by 30 metres in size, consisting of two stories with outside staircases to the first floor and 'a grand balcony on granite columns occupying the central part' of the main façade. Soler was a savvy, robber-baron style businessman and consequently his new *parador* thrived, helped along no little by the fact that for the next two decades, it was the only true hotel in the area. Sources tell, for instance, that in one particular period of only 24 months, it doled out no fewer than 8,700 lodgings, i.e. an average of 12 a day!<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On Soler: Vilela, *op. cit.*, 123f. Soler's business style was sometimes fishy: he owned shops and billiard halls, ran the alcohol monopoly, dabbled in prohibited gambling and supplied meat to every foreign army which passed through Lugo during the Peninsular War. The description of the *Meson* comes from Vilela, 145, but note that no plans of the building survive and that this description was taken entirely from an anachronistic municipal report of 1895.

Soler died in November 1813, and from there on the Meson was rented out by a succession of his heirs to a mixed assortment of leaseholders, until in the late 1820s the business was first taken over and then bought by a Salamancan called Juan Perez Aguilar. He in his turn ran the inn until his death in 1846, after which it got known as the '*Meson de la Viuda de Aguilar*' ('The inn of the Widow Aguilar'), a name which street-talk soon corrupted to the '*Meson de Aguiar*', after a famous local nobleman who had absolutely no connection to the place. Misnomer as that might be, the name stuck until the late 1980s, when the hotel was finally closed and the building was pulled down during the unstoppable Spanish drive to replace all authentic historical architecture by splendid concrete high-rises of the East German School, which unfortunately still spell Progress in post-Franco Spain.

So might this fine *posada* have been Borrow's Lugo inn, and Juan Perez Aguilar the 'gouty personage [leaning] upon a stick' whom we meet as his host in chapter 25 of *The Bible in Spain*? I see no reason why not, but rather to my amazement, Abel Vilela comes out vehemently against that idea ('which we have often seen written') and even sacrifices the last three pages of his article to battle it, in a way which I fear I do not find *quite* convincing. I must resist the temptation to refute his reasoning at length. It simply isn't worth it. The arguments which Vilela brings to bear are something of a hotchpotch, meant to compensate by numbers for what they lack in strength, and mostly based on the shaky internal evidence of Borrow's own descriptions, as if *The Bible in Spain* were a forensic report drawn up while the author sat hooked up to a polygraph. There are objections based on faulty Spanish translations of *The Bible in Spain*; perceived discrepancies in architectural design which take their cues from a slapdash municipal report of 1895; there are suggestive rhetorical questions and - as usual in these speculative cases - an Indian file of arguments-from-silence ('Why does Borrow not mention Juan Perez's wife Maria Varela?', 'Why does he not describe the chapel of San Roque?' etc.)

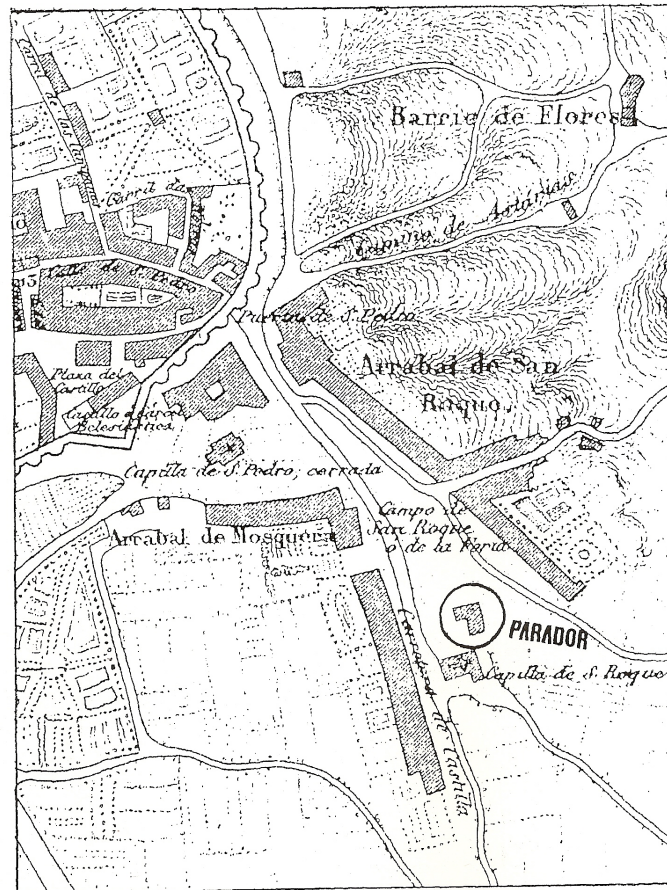
In this pile of pointlessness, Vilela offers only one halfway valid argument, namely that we have no hard, positive evidence at all that Borrow lodged in the *Meson de Aguiar*. It is therefore quite possible that he slept elsewhere, because there were plenty of other inns and taverns in the neighbourhood by the middle of 1837. This admittedly is true; and so, until new evidence be found, we cannot prove beyond all doubt that Borrow stayed in this particular *posada*. But of course that knife cuts the other way just as sharply, and since there is no proof that he stayed anywhere else either, we may still insist on the *likelihood* that our traveller took rooms in Lugo's most famous *Meson*.

Allow me to make the case. As we know from chapter 25 of *The Bible in Spain*: Borrow arrived in Lugo at 2 in the afternoon of Monday 10 July 1837, in the wake of the 'Grand Post' between Madrid and Coruña<sup>5</sup>. He had been riding all night through freezing wet

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<sup>5</sup> *BiS* chapter 25. The date is not altogether writ in granite. It may conceivably have been a day earlier, but not any sooner than the 9<sup>th</sup>, for the margins are very narrow here. Lack of space forbids a lengthy discussion of chronology, but let me merely mention that Borrow must have

weather; he was so tired he'd been dozing in the saddle for the last few hours; and he had been sick with fever ever since Leon. The *Meson de Aguiar* was the official Coach Inn, so – presumably – the Grand Post stopped right in front of it, for a break and a change of horses. Since Borrow felt so awful he would – presumably again – have taken the first feasible *posada* which offered itself, rather than to go looking around at random for a better deal.



*Abel Vilela's reconstruction of Meson's location (Vilela, op. cit., p. 130)*

And that is, of course, supposing that there *was* a better deal to be had anywhere, a *posada* which catered better to his wants and desires... I must honestly say that I doubt it. What other inn, tavern or public house had more to offer? The *Meson* was ready at hand while Borrow was in a hurry. It provided professional stabling for his weary horses (and had he not been through some goodly trouble to accommodate his animals in Galicia!?) It

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*left* Lugo early in the morning of Thursday 13 July 1837 with the escorted 'general post' (*BiS* chapter 26), which according to Emilio Gonzalez Lopez (*El Reinado de Isabel II en Galicia*, Coruña 1984, 382) was only inaugurated the previous June, and which set out from Lugo early on the Thursday to reach Coruña late the following Friday (with a stop for the night at Betanzos). Since Borrow himself mentions in his letter from Coruña of 20 July 1837 that he stayed only four days in Lugo (and not 'a week' as he says in *BiS* chapter 26), it is reasonable to assume he arrived in Lugo on the afternoon of the 9<sup>th</sup> or the 10<sup>th</sup>.

was close to the city gate, through which he'd have to haul the heavy load of his 30 New Testaments (a full 15 kilos worth). It cooked meals for its guests if so desired (a rare thing in Spain and even rarer in Galicia<sup>6</sup>). And last but not least: much as it was no longer the *only* inn in town, the *Meson* was still the very best. 'Coach Inns' invariably were – so much so that Richard Ford boldly suggested that it was redundant to ask for the *best* hotel in town; you merely asked if there was a Coach Inn, 'where the diligence put up', and the reply answered your query for quality<sup>7</sup>.

So why not take it? Borrow had every reason to do so and no reason to refrain. After all: he always lodged in top locations if given half the chance, and did so in Diligence Inns on many occasions<sup>8</sup>. He could afford it, because he was most lavishly financed by the Bible Society. Granted: our humble Bible salesman did Spain '*on four dollars a day*'; but whereas that phrase today implies backpacking on a fare of bread and very suspect cheese, in Borrow's day four Spanish *dollars* were worth 80 *reales*, a small fortune, nearly a working man's *monthly* wage! And this he was allowed to spend *per day*!<sup>9</sup>

Let there be no mistake: I myself am by nature no less suspicious of hearsay and rumour as Don Abel Vilela. But in the present case I gladly toss in my lot with that old tradition of the Lugo *literati*, for the simple reason that there is good logic to it, and that I fail to see *why not*.

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<sup>6</sup> *BiS* chapter 25, where the host asks the former 'receiver-general of Granada' on arrival: 'Shall we make any preparations for the supper of your worship and family?' I do not think it is by coincidence (much as it was probably meant tongue-in-cheek) that Borrow puts into the mouth of the receiver-general the term 'this *Fonda*', which according to Richard Ford (*Hand-Book for Travellers in Spain*, Centaur Press re-print of the 1843 edition, London 1966, vol. 1, p. 36 and 38) was then the highest category of Spanish inns.

<sup>7</sup> Ford, *Hand-Book*, p. 52 (also chapter 6 of his *Gatherings from Spain*). Interestingly, the only inn which Ford mentions for Lugo (*Hand-Book*, 891 and 968) is 'a decent posada in the *Barrio de S<sup>ra</sup>. Roque*, before entering the town, on the road to Astorga', i.e. on today's *Rua de San Roque*. This description fits the *Meson de Aguiar* like a glove, and was probably obtained from Borrow himself, since while writing his great travel guide, Ford expressly asked Borrow for the names of inns, 'especially in the Lugo country' (letter from Ford to Borrow of 7 June 1841, quoted in William Knapps, *The Life, Writings & Correspondence of George Borrow* (London: John Murray, 1899, vol. II, 303f).

<sup>8</sup> So for instance in Cordoba (*BiS* chapter 16; *George Borrow Bulletin* 25, 71f); in Salamanca (*BiS* chapter 20; Ford, *Hand-Book*, 849); and in Valladolid (*BiS* chapter 21, but admittedly he quit this place a day later because it was so badly run).

<sup>9</sup> To be exact: in his expense account of 20 November 1837, Borrow claimed – and was given – a sum of 14,650 *reales* as 'expenses for self, servant and horses' during 195 days while he was on his 1837 Northern Journey. This comes to 75 *reales* a day. However, as I pointed out earlier (*George Borrow Bulletin* 29, p. 25) he was really only gone some 170 or 175 days (depending on the day of departure), which means that in the end he was granted some 85 *reales* daily. A Spanish worker in the 1830s received a daily salary of 4 *reales*. The difference is truly stunning. For the expense accounts, see Missler, P., *A Daring Game*, Norwich 2009, pp. 158-183.

### 3. Terminal Improvements

The Lugo academic community is a generous bunch of fellows. They take extremely good care of their guest speakers, with all the dire results for your health. The following morning, as I wake up in my stuffy, overheated cubicle of the would-be hotel piggy-farm, the whole gamut of their generosity is bouncing up and down inside my head like a rubber ball set with iron spikes. I have vague recollections of countless decilitres of excellent Albariño, which the waiter kept pouring into my glass at Isidro's prodding. As white wine goes, Albariño is of course a beautiful thing; but so was my countrywoman Mata Hari, and both proved equally treacherous in the end.



I also remember vaguely how, round about midnight, as yet another round of *chupitos* in yet another historical tavern got proposed, I managed to disentangle myself from their hospitality with the Borrovian excuse that 'I barely ever touch the stuff'; and how Antonio Reigosa, the gentle, fatherly cultural manager of the Lugo Museum, corrects my course as we emerge from one of Lugo's ten Roman gates, when instead of turning to the right, I thought I ought to take a left. 'These gates all look alike!' I exclaim in desperation. 'Oh, you couldn't really go wrong, you know?' Antonio assures me soothingly. 'You'd make it back to your hotel all right... But that would mean walking two kilometres the long way round the walls. In your state it's probably better to turn right here...' Ambulant historians of foreign extraction, I recognize in his tender voice, may be forgiven for not distinguishing the subtle differences between the *Puerta de Aguirre*, the *Puerta del Castillo* and the *Puerta Falsa*, particularly when under the sway of a swig of Albariño. I receive a pat on the shoulder for my contribution to the day; a push in the right direction between the shoulder blades; and somehow I make it back to the place I call Hotel.



To tell the truth: this bad excuse for a guesthouse looks no better in the morning through bloated eyes than it did at midday through the lenses of stage fright. In the breakfast *salon* – yet another *claustrophobia* down in the cellar, where daylight never enters and oxygen is rare – the toaster oven, a *perpetuum mobile* vaguely reminiscent of an old record-player, turns on and on and on whether there is bread on the wire or not. Even at three yards distance, the heat from the grill scorches the side of my face, as the contraption also goes about its business of ‘saving the environment and the Panda bear’ at 2000 kilowatts an hour. The espresso is mud. The milk is freezing. The sight of the rolls and butter triggers a most peculiar feeling of abhorrence in a battered area of my oesophagus which I did not know I possessed. Breakfast is included in the price of the room – but for the sake of justice there really ought to be a discount for guest speakers to congresses of the Galician Author’s Association. These modest folk drink little and eat less in the early morning. Let us say that their mind is too engrossed by the historical discoveries which they still hope to make in the course of the day...



*The river Minho at Lugo*

That, at least, is my own excuse. I want to trace some of Borrow’s footsteps while I happen to be in Lugo, starting with the *Termas Romanas*: those ‘ruins of the ancient medicinal baths, built over warm springs which flow into the river,’ and set on the left bank of the Minho ‘which creeps through the valley beneath the town’,<sup>10</sup>. Beneath the town indeed! It turns out to be a sturdy march of a mile along a serpentine motorway which meanders down from the city walls to the riverbank at an incline of some 10 %. As I wind my way downhill with throbbing head and unshackled metabolism, I cannot help but wonder at the oddity of starting a facility for the ailing and infirm at such an inaccessible spot. Was it meant perhaps to discourage *Hoi Polloi* from flocking to Our Precious Spa? Or as an advertisement of the management’s confidence in the water’s

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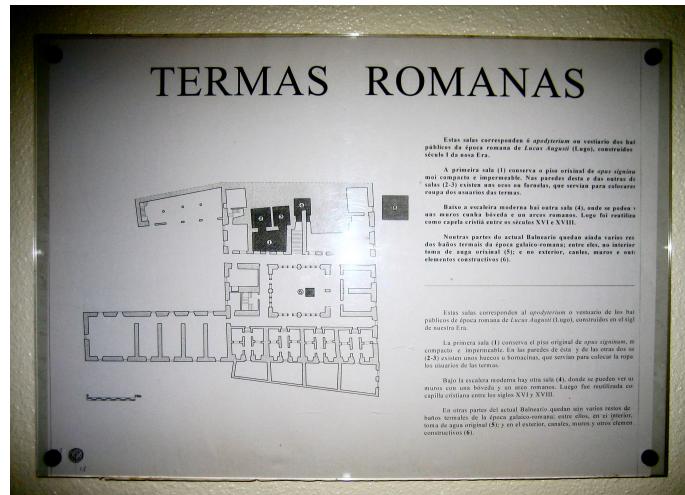
<sup>10</sup> *BiS* chapter 26.

curative powers? (The sick move downhill; those who must ascend the slope are invariably cured of their ailments!) But perhaps I'm only being dense. The Romans had no choice in the matter. They had to build their baths where the hot water gushed forth from the earth, and in Lugo that just happened to be at the river bank below. It turned out to be a good choice anyway; for – believe it or not – today, more than 1800 years after their founding, these Roman Baths are still in business and are flourishing like never before!

Of course, much has changed since that summer evening in July 1837 when Borrow came sightseeing here in the company of his Lugo bookseller. The site is no longer in the roofless, 'ruinous condition' which he describes, a mere open-air amalgam of truncated walls and loose stones that channelled the steaming waters from the hot spring to the river. That decayed complex has now been integrated in, and buried under, a modern Spa called by the lacklustre name of '*Hotel Balneario*' – an edifice uncomfortably trapped between the motorway and the riverbank, and, by the looks of it, first constructed around 1900 and then expanded towards the end of the last millennium. Its style is so very bland and indifferent, that coming near, I decide it would be a waste of pixels to make a picture. I myself will never wish to see it again; and even the *George Borrow Bulletin*, which is not really fastidious when it comes to illustrations, will surely forego the honour of reproducing something so extremely dull.

There must be prettier sights to immortalise. So I enter the building to ask if may visit and shoot pictures of the famed *Termas Romanas*. I halfway expect to be rejected at the door. 'This is a *clinic*, sir. Not Disneyland. We cannot allow our patients to be disturbed by every other day-tripper with a camera. (Incidentally: is that stale Albariño I smell? Perhaps you would like to consult our acupuncturist? She does wonders with alcoholics, you know?)' But Lugo people, I discover once again, are easy-going folk. As, somewhat overwhelmed by the scent of rotting eggs and sweltering volcanic air inside the hallway, I gurgled my request to the young lady at the registration desk, she cuts me short before I can even mention *investigación histórico* and waves me on, with a rapid, sing-song: 'Down the stairs. To the right. You'll find the light-switch inside the doorway. Please turn off before you leave.'

As I descend the magnificent stairs, a blanket of steam and sulphuric draughts hits me smack in the face. Even in this modern setting, that old volcanic spring is still working overtime. To battle the effects I take the last steps with my eyes half-closed, and when I open them again at the bottom of the stairs, I find myself staring at what looks most like the peristyle court of a Roman villa, or an imitation monastery cloister, done up in fake marble, glass separation walls, stuccoed corridors and overhead neon lights. There are folks in pink bathrobes loitering about, and nurses in sensible shoes, so that the whole has a pronounced *One-Flew-Over-The-Cuckoo's-Nest* feel to it. And there isn't an old stone in sight. No Roman columns. No tympanum battle-scenes waiting for their Lord Elgin. Why, not even a half-eroded Roman mile-stone with its numerals erased! As reality trickles in, I am reluctantly beginning to harbour the darkest apprehensions.



With some difficulty, I locate what the Lugo Tourist Bureau proudly terms the *Termas Romanas*. As the receptionist explained: they are situated towards the right, hidden behind a sickly pale green wall in a remote section of the complex, more or less where you'd expect to find the utilities sheds or the garbage chute. Three dank, dark spaces, sunk a yard below floor-level, with a pair of spotlights dangling from their wires, and obviously spared from demolition because – as so often – they could be used for storage. Measuring 12 x 18 x 18 feet at best, the main part is only the butt-end of the so-called *apodyterium*, the vestibule where bathers undressed and flung their togas over a beam, before running off to the cold bath by one doorway or to the warmer baths by another. Two concrete catwalks lead into the tiny rooms behind, where stamped mud and eroding Roman brick may be admired for all three seconds that such admiration requires. Believe me: I am not a *demanding* devotee of ancient ruins; but these three charmless cubicles are of even less archaeological interest than the visible remains of the Colossus of Rhodes.



The other bit, a high-ceilinged cylinder with the feel of a chimney's innards, can be reached by an adjacent doorway. This one only survived because back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century it used to house the chapel, but it is now empty and chopped in half by that splendid marble staircase coming down the middle. And that is it. There is no more. Four tiny windowless dungeons of crumbling Roman brickwork, left as atonement to the National Heritage until such time that acid rain and pollution can erode them. I'd be lying if I said that it wasn't a tremendous disillusion. Borrow's shallow tubs, 'overhung with steam and reek', where he beheld 'the strange spectacle' of vast crowds of patients lying 'immersed in the tepid waters, wrapped in flannel gowns much resembling shrouds'<sup>11</sup>, have completely disappeared. They have been obliterated, razed for and replaced by fresh new contemporary installations, state-of-the-art, exploitable, manageable, *modern*. It is yet another case of Making Way For Progress. Richard Ford already observed this. 'The waters still exist because the work of nature,' he penned in 1845, 'but the *Thermae*, the work of men, have disappeared.'<sup>12</sup> So I admit that I did come forewarned; but I never suspected the destruction had been so utterly *complete*.

Not a little annoyed I skip out the back door, over the parking lot, past a heating system (A heating system? Over hot springs??) and hurry back up the hillside. Too late, as I'm already a quarter up the Himalaya, I remember I ought to have sipped some of that miracle water; for struggling up that slope, ailing from old Albariño, unaided, uncured, is no *sinecure*. *Via Crucis*... It occurs to me as I crawl along the pavement. *Ah: the things a roving Borrovian does to report upon irreplaceable loss... ! But noblesse oblige...* So I ban the disheartening thoughts from my head, and battling my smoker's cough, the hang-over intensified by volcanic reek and the sudden scorching heat of a splendid autumn sun, I somehow clamber back to the *Puerta de Santiago*. I have one more investigative stop to make before I may throw in the towel and slump down in a café chair with a cup of strong coffee and a *chupito* of *orujo* to chase that old dog's hair. *Noblesse Oblige...*



*An apodyterium at Pompeii*

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<sup>11</sup> *BiS* chapter 26. Ford, *Hand-Book*, 968, echoes Borrow's remarks and adds that 'the poor pay *dos cuartos* for the liberty of immersion, and there they lie like porpoises, or *immundae sues*, in the steaming waters among the loose stones.'

<sup>12</sup> Ford, *Hand-Book*, 968.

## 4. Plaza Mayor

Many things have changed in Lugo since Borrow's day; but not the *Plaza Mayor*. It is still, as the Bible salesman wrote, 'a light cheerful place, not surrounded by those heavy cumbrous buildings with which the Spaniards both in ancient and modern times have encircled their plazas'; and it still possesses part of the 'arcaded colonnade' which Richard Ford mentions in passing<sup>13</sup>.



Naturally, some improvements have been made since 1837. There are streetlights now, and a pavement fit for prams and wheel chairs, and a long row of ornamental cannon-balls which keep cars from parking where they shouldn't. In one corner, a life-size bronze statue-group of Lugo's Roman founder has been set up: Octavius in toga, Caesar Augustus in battle-dress, holding between the two of them (or should I say: the two of *him*?) the founding-papyrus of *Lucus Augusti*. Even poetry is present: at one of the long sides, some incorrigible optimist has sunk a row of marble busts of famous Galician authors into the stone wall at the eye-level of toddlers and within the action-range of hooligans and four-wheel-drives. You can guess the rest. Each bust – Rosalia, Castelao, Valle-Inclán – has its nose chopped off. So many sphinxes coming out of the balustrade...



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<sup>13</sup> *BiS* chapter 26; Ford, *Hand-Book*, 968.

The Plaza Mayor was home to the bookshop which distributed the Scio New Testament. Borrow himself gives no name, but all knowledgeable authors agree that it must have been the shop of Pedro Pujol Macia, the only bookseller of consequence in the 1830s<sup>14</sup>. Pujol's place has of course long since disappeared; so, just to get as close to Lugo bookselling as I can, I poise myself in front of the only remaining bookshop on the Plaza, an establishment called – with a wry wink at all those concrete high-rises that are wrecking Lugo's looks – “*O Progreso*”. The shop is closed this early in the morning, but through the shopwindow's grill I can just make out the titles that Lugo readers are being offered 170 years after Borrow's stay. There is lots of Mariology, catechisms, and luxury calendars of saint's days, but not a single vernacular Bible anywhere in sight. The only heresy here is supplied by Dan Brown and the Madonna Songbook.



*Lugo's Plaza Mayor*

When coming to town, Borrow carried a letter of introduction to Pujol, written by his Madrid printer Andres Borrego or his banker Henry O'Shea<sup>15</sup>. He was well received. Pujol showed him the city and the Roman baths, and 'willingly undertook the sale of my books'. Taking in hand all the copies remaining in Borrow's luggage, he proved himself an expert salesman, disposing of the lot in just a few hours. Borrow was understandably

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<sup>14</sup> So Fernandez de la Vega, Celestino, 'Dous escritores ingleses na Praza Maior de Lugo', in: *Galicia desde Londres*, Coruña 1994; also Odriazola, A., and Barreiro Fernández, X.R., *Historia de la Imprenta en Galicia*, Coruña 1992, 301ff. Abel Vilela, *op.cit.*, 139 mentions that the original owner was the Catalan printer and bookseller José Pujol y Bafler, who died on 14 December 1834, leaving the business to his sons Pedro and Manuel.

<sup>15</sup> *BiS* chapter 26; also Borrow's letter to Brandram from Madrid of 27 February 1837 (Darlow, T.H., *Letters of George Borrow to the British and Foreign Bible Society*, London, 1911, p. 201ff). O'Shea certainly gave him letters of recommendation to the Irish College in Salamanca (*BiS* chapter 20) and to business contacts in the country, like the merchant of Palencia (*BiS* chapter 22).

elated. 'The Lord deigned to favour my humble efforts at Lugo,' he wrote gleefully to his employers soon afterwards. 'I brought thither thirty Testaments, all of which were disposed of in one day, the Bishop of the place himself purchasing two copies, whilst several priests and friars, instead of following the example of their brethren at Leon by persecuting the work, spoke well of it, and recommended its perusal'.<sup>16</sup> Yes, so indeed they may have done... But *why*? What exactly were their motives? As I mentioned in another article: some 40 years later, the knowledgeable and staunchly Catholic author Antonio Balbin de Unquera, in an otherwise sympathetic review of *The Bible in Spain*, suggested that 'the good missionary obviously did not understand that many people bought these books in order to destroy them'.<sup>17</sup> And if that were true, we have quite a different explanation for the stimulating sales talk of the Lugo clergy, and their flock's uncommon keenness to acquire copies offered for sale.

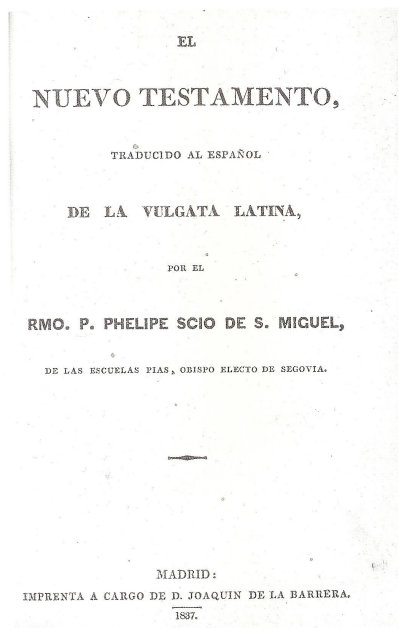
Was Balbin's notion mere guesswork? Or could it be that he had picked up some local lore which he here revealed to the world? It is impossible to tell. On the one hand, Balbin offers no evidence for the claim, nor any reason to think that this is anything more than conjecture. But on the other hand, it is a distinct possibility, for Lugo in the 1830s made quite a special socio-political case. The bishop whom Borrow mentions, Don Hipólito Sanchez Rangel, was indeed a man of enlightened principles. He was, in fact, the only Galician prelate of *Cristino* opinions and unshaken loyalty to the liberal regime in Madrid; while his second-in-command, the Episcopal governor Don José Maria Padilla y Aguila, who ran the diocese during his master's frequent absences as MP in Madrid, was possibly an even more active and outspoken supporter of the left-wing cause. But Lugo as a whole was a town of rather strong Carlist sympathies, and the common clergy was not at all enchanted with the new regime. Most of them were, in fact, so 'massively Carlist' and so notoriously averse to the liberal tendencies of their superiors that they famously refused to obey Padilla in just about anything he ordered.<sup>18</sup> Such men were surely as much opposed to translated Gospels as their colleagues in Leon; and hence it is far from impossible that they may have called upon their flock, not to 'peruse' translated scripture, but to perform an *Act of Faith*, and buy up the heretical books at break-neck speed so as to take them out of circulation.

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<sup>16</sup> *BiS* chapter 26; letter to Brandram from Coruña of 20 July 1837 (Darlow, *Letters*, 224ff)

<sup>17</sup> Balbin de Unquera, A., 'Juicio de un Misionero Protestante sobre Galicia y Asturias', in *La Ilustracion Gallega y Asturiana*, (vol. 1, nº 23, 20 August 1879, p. 274-279). See my translation and notes in 'A Partial Judgement', *George Borrow Bulletin* 30, p. 30-42 or on my website *George Borrow Studies*. An identical speculation is offered, incidentally, by J.M. Gomez Tabanera ('La Asturias que conoció George Borrow', in: *Archiveru* XXV, Oviedo 1975, 483) about no one less but the famous 'Ten Gentlemen in Cloaks' from Oviedo! (Personal communication from Ken Barrett, 2 March 2009.)

<sup>18</sup> See Barreiro Fernandez, X.R., *El Carlismo Gallego*, Santiago 1976, 128, 144 and 161f. Also Gonzalez Lopez, E., *El Reinado de Isabel II en Galicia*, Coruña 1984, 41 and 206.



Traducción de la Vulgata Latina

One thing which always makes me think so, is the extra-ordinary *density* of sales in Lugo. Between the bookseller, the bishop, the feigning friars and the pretending priests, no fewer than 64 copies of the book were sold here between Borrow's visit and the final prohibition in May 1838. This, on a total population of some 6,000 souls, results in the rather stunning average of one Scio New Testament to every 100 inhabitants, nearly twice as high as in many other, more promising cities, like Madrid and Santiago, and only equal – hold on there now! – to other *hostile* places like Leon and Valladolid... Such undeniable facts are food for gloomy thought, and an invitation to do some thorough research in the local archives some day in the future...<sup>19</sup>

The thought is almost enough to hurl me back into my darker mood. Yet the Hand of the Unseen interferes before gloominess can overtake me.... As I ponder the matter while studying the shopwindow

of Progress, I am approached by a dark-faced Gypsy lady clad from tip to toe in impeccable widow's black. She is begging for alms in mourning dress, the only speck of colour about her person being the bright blue plastic tea-cup which she stretches my way. I still have an old debt outstanding from my Paris youth, when multitudes of philanthropists showered coins on this starving Dutch busker. So I locate an Euro and drop it into her tea-cup with a nod of the head. In response, she gives me a resounding '*Que Dios le bendiga!*' ('May God bless you!'). Borrow said that he 'had found no trace of the Rommany-Chai in Galicia'<sup>20</sup>. But many things have changed in Lugo since his day; and where some things have been forever lost, others have obviously been added to the assets of this August town...

Such discoveries make the roving Borrovian feel better... They compensate for the gnawing sense of loss he has felt at the disappearance of the *Meson de Aguiar*, of the Roman *Termas*, and of Pujol's old bookshop. And so he turns around and sets off for the cheerful Saturday morning tea-room he has already spotted from the corner of his eye, where the armchair, the cup of espresso and the *chupito* are irresistibly beckoning. Two hours to kill before the bus will carry him back to his cottage near the Altamira castle. He has no doubt they will be mighty *pleasant* hours...

*Estrar, Brion: 17 October 2008.*

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<sup>19</sup> The 64 copies are mentioned in Borrow's letter to Brandram from Seville of 18 July 1839 (Darlow, *Letters*, p. 427). For more sales details see chapters II.2.2.v 'Lugo' and IV.3 'Bookseller Sales' of my study *A Daring Game: George Borrow's Sales of the Scio New Testament (Madrid 1837)*, Norwich 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Brandram of 1 November 1837 (Darlow, *Letters*, p. 261).