

Esterino Adami

An e-interview with Gibraltar author M. G. Sanchez, followed by a review of M. G. Sanchez, *The Escape Artist. A Gibraltar Novel* (2013)

M. G. Sanchez is a prolific Gibraltar author, now based in the UK. He has published fiction and essays, in particular: *The Escape Artist. A Gibraltar Novel* (2013), *Diary of a Victorian Colonial* (2008), *Rock Babel. Ten Gibraltar Stories* (2008), *The Prostitutes of Serruya's Lanes and Other Hidden Gibraltar Histories* (2007). He has also edited *Georgian and Victorian Gibraltar. Incredible Eyewitness Accounts* (2012) and *Writing the Rock of Gibraltar. An Anthology of Literary Texts, 1720-1890* (2006). He was awarded a PhD from the University of Leeds in 2004. His social media contacts include: <https://www.facebook.com/mgsanchezgibraltar> and <http://www.mgsanchez.net/>

I would like to thank M. G. Sanchez for agreeing to participate in the interview which follows, conducted by mail in December 2013.

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E.A.: Very often, as readers of literatures from Anglophone contexts, we tend to forget or even ignore lesser-known areas such as Gibraltar. Could you tell us about the literary scene in and the literary tradition of Gibraltar?

M. G. S.: With the exception of one or two individuals, there hasn't really been that much of a literary tradition in Gibraltar. In the 1920s, for example, we had the novelist Hector Licudi, who wrote in Spanish, and in the 1960s and 1970s we had the dramatist Elio Cruz, who wrote a series of plays in the local patois 'llanito' (Spanish interspersed with occasional English words and phrases, as well as 'Spanglish' expressions of our own making). In the last few decades, however, we have produced a number of writers and they have chosen to express themselves primarily in English. I think that, in some ways, this is a reflection of our growing confidence as a people. In the 1930s and 1940s, you see, we were still very much caught up in a colonial mindset. We had British administrators holding all the top jobs in Gibraltar, with the local civilians doing all the menial jobs

under them. To keep things this way, British colonial administrators adopted a policy where they not only deliberately undereducated their subjects, but actively sought to inculcate within them an inferiority complex that would keep them politically pliable. In fact, it is no coincidence that when schooling in Gibraltar finally underwent its long overdue overhaul in the mid-1940s, the man responsible for this same programme of reform, an Englishman by the name of J. W. Cumming, noted that “by far the most important task in this respect is the elimination of the inferiority complex with which, unfortunately, the average Gibraltarian is afflicted, and which has its roots largely in the disability to express himself adequately in the English language.” Since then, however, things have dramatically changed. Starting in the late 1940s, the British administration very magnanimously began handing the reins of power over to the Gibraltarians. With growing power came growing confidence, which translated into more and more Gibraltarians studying in the UK and obtaining British university degrees. Before long the political scene in Gibraltar had evolved to such a degree that Gibraltarians were completely in control of their own governmental affairs. The recent upsurge in Gibraltarian writing, I believe, has to be seen primarily against this context.

E.A.: One of the keywords in your work is ‘identity’, namely the meaning of being Gibraltarian, a notion which encompasses a wealth of cultural and historical stratifications. For example, the protagonist of *The Escape Artist* often wonders about his own sense of identity, split between well-defined categories. In your opinion, would it be possible to affirm that Gibraltarian identity is the hybrid product of various historical, social and cultural processes? Could you illustrate this?

M. G. S.: Yes, you are absolutely right. Gibraltarian identity is a hybrid of different influences. On the one hand, for example, we have been influenced by our proximity to Spain. We can see this Hispanic influence in our cuisine, in our sense of fashion, even in the Andalusian sound of our spoken Spanish. On the other hand we have been profoundly influenced by Britain too - in our schooling, our law courts, our way of conducting business. Generally speaking, you could say that we have been influenced by Spain on an emotional level and Britain on an intellectual level. The resulting fusion is a complex and challenging hybrid that is difficult to categorise. To the English eye, for example, we are probably too passionate and emotional to be properly considered English, whereas, conversely, to the Spanish eye we are too rigorous and methodical to be typically Spanish. But there are other influences apart from the usual Spanish/ British ones. Many of our forefathers, for example, came from Malta and Genoa and other parts of the Mediterranean. This has influenced the way we think about religion and the family and other interrelated areas. Last but not least, of

course, there is the matter of own unique idiosyncratic geography. We are hemmed in in a small peninsula, barely six square kilometres in size. Because of this, Gibraltar is a place where practically everybody knows each other. I think that this is something that makes us unique too. I have been to many different parts of the world, but I have never come across a place with such a close-knit community feel!

E.A.: Returning to the idea of identity, in your texts it is interesting to see how Gibraltarian identity is imagined, and how character react towards it, either by accepting or rejecting it. In your works, Gibraltarians are often mistaken for Spanish, or anyway considered ‘odd’ foreigners when in England, and those who temporarily settle in Britain like Brian Manrique, the main character of *The Escape Artist*, frequently have to cope with forms of xenophobia and racism, incidentally a recurrent theme in much post-colonial and diasporic literature. In particular, Brian highlights the fact that while he studies in Cambridge he was considered “as Spanish as paella or flamenco dancing” (p. 13), although from his own perspective people in Gibraltar “love Cornish pasties and Yorkshire pudding and Lucozade, that we all support English football teams like Arsenal or Liverpool or Manchester United” (p. 13). Thus Gibraltar seems to have a kind of double relation with the UK, on the one hand showing cultural symbols and on the other still being perceived as a remote, ‘other’ overseas territory. Would you further elaborate on this topic? What does having a Gibraltarian identity mean?

M.G.S.: One of the fundamental problems about being Gibraltarian, I feel, is that few people outside Gibraltar really understand us. If we find ourselves in the UK, people assume that we are half-Spanish Britons, dark-haired, sun-tanned Brits who speak with a slightly odd accent. In Spain, because of all the negative propaganda that the Spanish establishment is continually disseminating about us, they view us as either Andalusian apostates or blond-haired British settlers belligerently ensconced in their own little corner of the Iberian peninsula. But all these views are wrong. We are neither British nor Spanish. We are simply Gibraltarian, with our own way of thinking and doing things that has evolved over the last few centuries. I think, incidentally, that this is why I started to write about Gibraltar and what it means to be Gibraltarian. Again and again, you see, I kept picking up books about Gibraltar in which the Gibraltarians were either represented unfairly or were strangely absent from their pages. This is wrong, I thought. We are the people who live there. We need to have our own representative voice - and not just let ourselves be represented by outsiders. That is why, in a nutshell, I started writing. I wanted to create a Gibraltarian perspective that would counterbalance what others had been saying about us. I’m conscious, of course, that mine is just one

Gibraltarian voice among many and that some Gibraltarians might not necessarily like what I write about, but at least I am a born and bred Gibraltarian and that gives me a degree of credibility and authenticity, I feel, which non-Gibraltarians writing about Gibraltar don't always have.

E.A.: In your fiction, there are various references to Italy and Italian culture: the novella “Roman Ruins” (collected in *Diary of a Victorian Colonial and Other Tales*) is set in Rome, whilst the protagonist of your latest novel reads Italian language and literature at Cambridge University (you mention authors such as Dante, Cesare Pavese and Curzio Malaparte, amongst others), in the 1970s, supervised by Dr Franceschetti “a balding, grey-goateed Italian tutor from Turin” (p. 133). Moreover, the young man spends his year abroad in Venice, carrying on with his studies at Ca’ Foscari University. What is your relationship with Italy, and how does Italian culture appear in your writing?

M. G. S.: I have always been fascinated by Italy and I always try to go there whenever I get the chance. I like the magnificence of Rome, the decaying splendour of Venice, the sun-kissed fertility of the Tuscan countryside. I think, in some ways, you know what, I see Italy as the kind of place *that I would have liked Spain to be*. Let me explain what I mean by this. Spain, no doubt, is a wonderful country, with a vibrant Latin culture of its own. It has great artists like Dali and El Greco and Picasso as well as masterly writers like Cervantes and Unamuno. But because successive Spanish governments have always been so doggedly anti-Gibraltarian in their outlook, I find it difficult to let go and immerse myself fully in Spanish culture. Maybe this is why I love Italy so much. It is the nearest approximation to what Spain would have been like had the thorny issue of Gibraltar’s sovereignty never clouded relations between us and the Spanish. I hope that this makes some kind of sense!

E.A.: The Italian connection may be also reminiscent of the broad ethnic composition of the population of Gibraltar, whose intertwined “mixed bloodlines” (p. 13) suggest memories of migration from Malta, from the Mediterranean, from Britain, from Morocco, from Spain. How do you deal with this particular aspect of Gibraltarian culture, both in your literary works and essays?

M. G. S.: I think that’s part of the beauty of being Gibraltarian - the fact that our bloodlines are so mixed. In the nineteenth century some British travel writers even came up with the term ‘rock

mongrels' to describe us as a collective. They meant this pejoratively, of course, and as something of an insult, but I've always believed in multiculturalism and pluralism and I think that our diverse ethnic composition is one of our greatest assets. In my case, for example, I have British, Spanish, Maltese and Portuguese ancestry - and this is only going back a few generations. This composite element in our hereditary make-up has made us very tolerant of other faiths and races. In Gibraltar, for example, we have Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Protestant and Catholics all living side by side, without any real problems. This is no accident. We have had years and years of practise living together like this!

E.A.: With regard to your non-fiction writing (you have edited *Victorian and Edwardian Gibraltar* and authored *The Prostitutes of Serruya's Lane and Other Hidden Gibraltarian Histories*), you have a strong interest in history, often in its apparently 'marginal' aspects and protagonists. Historical references also characterise some of your literary production: for instance the long story "Diary of a Victorian Colonial" takes place in 1888 Gibraltar and detailed historical elements are also evoked in the plot of *The Escape Artist*. What is your vision of history and its multiple ramifications, especially in your texts?

M. G. S.: Our history is important because it makes us who we are. Broadly speaking, I would say that there are two important historical discourses that have shaped us into the kind of community that we are nowadays. The first is the discourse of our gradual but steady accumulation of civil and political rights under British colonial rule. In many ways this is a discourse that parallels, and simultaneously reflects, the emancipation of the working classes in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Britain. In Britain there were landmark moments like the Reform act of 1832 or the regulation of child labour seen under the aegis of Lord Shaftesbury. In Gibraltar, too, we have our very own "discourse of emancipation." It is dotted with important historical moments like the establishment of the Exchange and Commercial Library in 1817 (which became a forum for Gibraltarian merchants to express themselves in) or the creation of the Gibraltar Legislative Council in 1950 (which, for the first time, gave us some control over our own affairs). We have had to go through all this to reach the position where we find ourselves today, where we are responsible for all of our affairs except for matters of defence, which are still under British control. The second major historical discourse that has impacted upon us has been our engagement with Spain. Before the Second World War, relations between Gibraltar and Spain were generally good. Gibraltarians and the citizens of La Linea (the Spanish town across the border) were closely bound together by

strong ties of family and friendship. However, after the Second World War all this began to change. Sensing that Britain had been seriously weakened by the war effort, Franco went on an all-out campaign to coerce Gibraltar into becoming Spanish. First, he disrupted our telecommunications, then he cut the supply of oxygen to our hospitals, then he made it an offence for Spaniards to export any goods to Gibraltar and finally he tried to economically “garotte” us by closing the frontier. This was a very hard time for Gibraltarians. Families were divided and many Spanish workers who earned their living in Gibraltar had to give up their jobs and return home to Spain. I remember as a child going down to the border area and seeing families on either side of the fence trying to communicate across the 100 metre stretch dividing them. You could see people sobbing and crying and holding up new born babies to show to their relatives on the other side. It was all very emotional and traumatic. When Franco died and democracy returned to Spain, things slowly improved. In 1982 the border was partially opened and then, three years later in 1985, it was finally laid open to pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Things were going well at this point, and it genuinely seemed as if Gibraltar and La Linea could return to the levels of friendship and cooperation that had existed between the two towns before the Second World War. However, it was only a mirage. In the early 1990s Spain began to impose very strict controls on anyone trying to cross the frontier. I remember these days very clearly because I was in my early twenties. There were days when the line of traffic going into Spain encircled practically all of the Rock, and the Spanish border guards were also proving very awkward and uncooperative. You could be issued a hefty fine for the most trivial of reasons. If you wore glasses and didn’t have a spare pair with you in your car, for example. If an ‘essential item’ like a pair of scissors was missing from your first-aid kit. If you didn’t have a spare light bulb for your car’s headlights in your glove compartment. That kind of thing. I tried to capture the difficulties of this time in my book *Rock Black: Ten Gibraltarian Stories*. When the situation finally improved in the late 90s, I thought that things could never ever again get as bad as all that. But sadly in 2013 we are once again back in the same position. Once more there are very long queues at the border, with daily waiting times of up to five hours for vehicles and two hours for pedestrians. We are also getting pilloried every day in the Spanish press and media, with all sorts of accusations being levelled against us. I was in Gibraltar for a few days in August of 2013 and I was quite frankly appalled by the sort of anti-Gibraltarian invective that I was seeing on Spanish television channels like *Tele Cinco* or *Antena Tres*. People say that all this is happening because the ruling party in Spain, the centre-right *Partido Popular*, is trying to divert the Spanish electorate’s attention from the economic crisis and the allegations of large-scale governmental corruption hounding the Spanish Prime Minister. In other words, they want ordinary Spaniards to think about Gibraltar instead of the other more important problems affecting the

country. This may be so, but it seems to me that the whole border issue has now become a recurring, cyclical problem - which is a real, real shame.

E. A.: Let's focus on language now: in an introductory note in your collection *Rock Black. Ten Gibraltarian Stories* you remind the reader that the Spanish spoken in Gibraltar is a non-standard variety, and the same point is echoed in other works – in *The Escape Artist*, for instance, the protagonist underlines the fact that people around the Rock speak “a form of free-flowing ‘Spanglish’ that neither Spaniards nor Englishmen would ever be able to understand” (p. 13). From a stylistic point of view, you also employ the strategy of code-mixing with Spanish (and some other languages). What is the linguistic scenario of Gibraltar today? What is the relationship between, and perception of, English and Spanish?

M. G. S.: Language is a very important issue for me as a Gibraltarian writer. In an ideal world I would be writing in *llanito*, our own unique mixture of English and Spanish. But in practice, of course, this is difficult, if not downright impossible. First, *llanito* has not been standardised in the way that minority languages like Maltese or Faroese have been standardised. Second, if I were to write exclusively in *llanito* my readership would be reduced to a few hundred readers or even less than that. This would be disastrous for a writer. As a result, there has to be a certain amount of compromise in creating a “Gibraltarian” text. In my case what I do is I try to write my books in standard English, with a few touches of *llanito* thrown in here and there. Just enough, in other words, for the Gibraltarian reader to recognise the book as a Gibraltarian book, but not so many as to alienate a British reader. I suppose you could describe it almost as a balancing act. But it is a balancing act that is not so unusual either; this kind of thing happens all over the postcolonial world. Say, for example, that you are an aspiring Nigerian writer. Do you write your book in Yoruba or Igbo, thereby limiting your readership to people in specific parts of Nigeria, or do you write it in English, which would potentially open your book up to a readership of millions? Obviously, if you are really serious about expanding your readership, you will choose the latter. I suppose it is all about compromise, isn't it? In fact, sometimes you even have to compromise with the plot itself. Let me give you an example of what I mean. In 2008 I published a book called *Diary of a Victorian Colonial and other Tales*. The main tale in this collection was set in nineteenth-century Gibraltar. I wanted its protagonist to be a Gibraltarian living in one of Gibraltar's working-class districts. The problem that I faced, of course, was that most working-class Gibraltarians in 1888 wouldn't have spoken English with the degree of proficiency that I wanted my character to possess. To get around this problem, I had to create a character who had received a very good

upbringing and also spent many years living in England. That way I could ‘justify’ the standard of his written English, so to speak.

E. A.: Class consciousness and belonging is a significant element in the textual architecture of your new novel, with the antagonism of Brian Manrique and Henry Portas, but it seems to me that different kinds of social forms of oppositions surface in your previous works too, for example Giulietta and Zoran in “Roman Ruins”, as well as some of the characters of your short stories. How do you represent and construct the contradictions and tensions of modern society?

M. G. S.: Yes, I must admit that I do like to explore the contradictions and tensions inherent in modern society. I think this probably stems from the fact that I come from a place which means so many different things to so many different people. I think that it is the job of the modern Gibraltar writer to cut through these contradictions and show the reader what it is really like to live and work as a modern-day Gibraltar.

E. A.: You have travelled or lived in various parts of the world (New Zealand, India), and you are now based in the UK, but you constantly concentrate on Gibraltar, a ‘tiny’ territory from a mere geographical perspective. Are your experiences of life as an expat mirrored in your writing, or in a broader frame do they affect your feelings towards Gibraltar as your homeland?

M. G. S.: Yes, almost certainly so. You only have to take a brief look at my books to realise that most of my protagonists are rootless, directionless individuals, struggling to make sense of their position in an often alien and hostile world. This interest in the “diasporic” partly comes from my own situation as a voluntary exile, but it also stems from the fact that, away from Gibraltar itself, the Gibraltar is something of an unknown entity, subject to all kinds of misunderstandings. My hope is that by writing about the Rock I am helping non-Gibraltarians readers learn more about us and simultaneously gain an insight into the workings of the Gibraltar mind.

E. A.: By way of conclusion: we have heard that you are currently working on a new novel, whose protagonist is Maltese (and again we have a Gibraltar link given the relations between the Rock and Malta); could you anticipate something about this new book?

M. G. S.: I’ll do something better than that. I’ll let you have a sneaky peak at the new book’s blurb!

“Meet Dr John Seracino, predatory ladies man and born misanthrope. His ambition is simple: he wants to find himself a property of his own where he won’t be surrounded by any pesky neighbours. But Seracino has a problem: he lives in Gibraltar, where almost everybody lives in flats and where detached properties come at a premium. For the last few years he has been attending property auctions in the hope of bagging himself one of the old colonial bungalows that intermittently come up for sale. But so far he keeps on getting outbid by lawyers and financiers, men for whom the annual £140,000 pounds that Seracino earns as a GP are no more than small change. Then one day Seracino’s luck changes and he manages to land himself an old colonial property in the Upper Rock area, the aptly named Solitude House. For a while the misanthropic doctor revels in his new-found isolation, content to be able to sit every evening on his splendidly balustered veranda, with his feet propped up and a glass of Laphroaig whisky in hand, watching through his binoculars the oil tankers and the fishing boats endlessly drifting through the Straits of Gibraltar. But just when he is at his happiest, something happens that will not only change the way the Maltese-born doctor views his prized Edwardian bungalow, but will also threaten his very mental and physical stability.... In this wickedly irreverent novel, Gibraltarian writer M. G. Sanchez explores the idea of self-imposed solitude in a narrative tinged with both supernatural elements and the Gibraltarian themes that have traditionally underpinned his writing.”