

# *ANTONIO DA TRABA, Hero of Finisterre*

*by Peter Missler*

## Part 1<sup>1</sup>

At the westernmost corner of Spain stands Cape Finisterre, a rocky peninsula jutting out into the ocean like a giant turtle, petrified at the moment that the fangs of the mainland caught it by the tail. Aptly baptised, it is indeed a site worthy to be cast as the End of the Earth: a primeval mixture of rock, wind and water, where countless ships and sailors have met a tragic end.



*Cape Finisterre seen across the bay from the main land looking west*

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<sup>1</sup> This article first appeared as ‘Antonio da Traba: El Valiente de Finisterre’, by Juan Campos Calvo-Sotelo and Peter Missler, in the *George Borrow Bulletin* n° 20 (2000), p. 8-20. A somewhat shortened version was subsequently published in the *Nelson Despatch*, volume 7, part 12, October 2002, p. 840-845, under the title ‘A Spaniard at Nelson’s Death?’ Both versions consisted of two parts: the biography of Antonio da Traba, which is reproduced here; and an appraisal of the possibility of Traba having been present on the *Victory* during the Battle of Trafalgar. New discoveries over the past decade made a fresh treatment of Traba’s possible service in the English Navy necessary. The results of that new assessment will be found in the second part of the article, soon to be published on this same website.

It was here that George Borrow, on two occasions within a mere twenty months, escaped by a hairsbreadth with his life. The first time, in November 1836, he was delivered by Providence itself, which miraculously swept the rudderless ship on which he was sailing away from the treacherous rocks of the coastline shortly before foundering.<sup>2</sup> The second time was in early September 1837, when he was arrested for being a Carlist spy and nearly shot by firing squad in the village of Finisterre itself. On that occasion he was saved by the intervention of the spirited Antonio da Traba, alias ‘*El Valiente de Finisterre*’, the gigantic, musket-wielding, barefoot and boozing veteran of Trafalgar and the Peninsular War.<sup>3</sup>

Many readers of *The Bible in Spain* must have wondered how close to reality Borrow’s portrait of this genial giant really was. As luck had it, so did a young schoolteacher from the nearby town of Noia called Alvaro de las Casas in June 1934. De las Casas had been invited to deliver the opening address for the Noia school year in October, and having just read *The Bible in Spain* in Manuel Azaña’s 1921 translation, decided to go over to Finisterre and see what facts and anecdotes he might dig up about Antonio da Traba and Borrow’s brief visit.

We are lucky that he did so, for De las Casas not only consulted the surviving documents<sup>4</sup>, but also had the chance and the good sense to interrogate the town’s oldest inhabitants and Traba’s surviving descendants, especially his grand-daughter Francisca Traba Blanco, a seventy-one year old lady whom he described as still ‘strong as an oak’ and endowed with a formidable memory. The resulting article is a rare gem of Borrovian research, which shows that in real life Traba was exactly as Borrow painted him: a noble savage with a golden heart but shockingly little sophistication; a man devoid of a mean streak, but quick to use violence and slow to show pity<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> George Borrow, *The Bible in Spain*, first published in 1843, chapter 15. In the footnotes below, *The Bible in Spain* will be abbreviated to *BiS*.

<sup>3</sup> *BiS*, chapter 30

<sup>4</sup> The few that survived, that is. In September 2012 my co-author Juan Campos and myself were told by Don José Traba, a distant family member of *El Valiente*, the present mayor of Finisterre and a maritime historian in his own right, that all municipal documents older than 1870 are lost. Long ago, when the town hall moved, the old archive was stored in an empty salt factory on the edge of the harbour. Humidity and leftover salt ate the old papers away. Nothing from the time of Traba and Borrow remains.

<sup>5</sup> Alvaro de las Casas, ‘Mr. Borrow por Finisterre’, in *Memoria del curso académico de 1934-1935, leído (...) por Carlos Villar García*, Santiago 1935, 34-61. A copy of this rare article may be found in the Biblioteca Xeral of Santiago de Compostela.

According to the baptismal record which De las Casas unearthed in the Finisterre parish [Casas, 51]<sup>6</sup>, Marcos Antonio de la Traba (or ‘Da Traba’ in Gallego) was born on 18 August 1791, son of Fernando da Traba ‘el mozo’ (junior) and Rosa Marcote Suarez, in a house on the corner of the *Rua do Campo* and the *Calle de la Oliva* near the arable fields above the village; from which location he derived his other nickname ‘*El Campón*’, i.e. from the *campo*, the *field* [Casas, 56].



*Remains of the birth house of Antonio da Traba*

Antonio was a prodigious boy from an early age on. When still very young, Doña Francisca told De las Casas, it so happened that a neighbour’s horse kept ravaging the vegetables in his father’s kitchen garden. This, of course, could not continue, so Antonio once day located the beast and with a big punch knocked its teeth out. Its owner, unwilling to maintain a useless horse, turned it out on to the mountain. This, however, was precisely the spot where young Antonio usually took the family sheep to graze, and one day the horse, recognising the boy who was the origin of his misfortune, savagely attacked him ‘with kicks of the hooves and butts of the head’. Little good did it do him: unperturbed, young Antonio tore a branch from a nearby tree and beat the animal to death with it<sup>7</sup>. [Casas, 55]

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<sup>6</sup> For sake of space and convenience, the frequent references to Alvaro de las Casas’ article will be indicated in the body text itself as ‘[Casas]’, followed by the page number.

<sup>7</sup> Note that in Spain, animals of all kind who in other countries would never dream of doing such aggressive things, frequently provoke innocent and gentle people to clobber, shoot or cut them to death. Indeed: *Spain Is Different...*

Shortly after this incident, Traba must have been hired or press-ganged into the Royal Navy, if his claim of fighting at Trafalgar be true.<sup>8</sup> He was, however, back on the Galician coast and living at Finisterre by mid March 1808, when we find him sailing on the small merchant vessel called the *San Buenaventura*, which traded with Oporto<sup>9</sup>; and this was to the immense misfortune of the invading French troops when the Peninsular War reached the Finisterre coast<sup>10</sup>. The one martial feat of which he personally told Borrow — killing three French soldiers on the slopes of the Monte San Guillermo above Finisterre town all by himself<sup>11</sup> — was not his only deed of valour. When hostilities began, seventeen-year-old Antonio gathered a score of young friends together and ran away from home to Vimianzo to fight the invader. The group could barely be called an patrol. Traba seems to have been the only one with a firearm — perhaps that same rusty old musket that was later aimed at Borrow — while the others only carried hatchets and pitchforks. But inadequate as this weaponry might be, they still returned home to the village with one Parisian prisoner and two splendid cavalry horses [Casas, 54].

Doña Francisca told De las Casas another war story. One day, hearing that French troops had been spotted near the river Xallas, Traba immediately set out to attack them. Joined by two or three other men, he rushed over to the village of Ponte Olveira, some twenty miles down the bay. It was the dead of night when they arrived. The troops were camping in the fields, while a group of officers was playing cards in the rectory of a local church. Ever more impulsive than prudent, Traba immediately attacked the building, ‘ready to beat in the brains of the first man who crossed his path’. He stormed in, but was hurled back down the staircase when someone quickly slammed the door in his face. Wounded and ‘bleeding like a Nazarene’, he rushed back up and took on the officers with an axe, killing two of them in an instant and scaring the others so much that they escaped through the windows.

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<sup>8</sup> As already noted above: the veracity of this claim will be treated in the second part of this article, soon to be posted on this website.

<sup>9</sup> See Campos Calvo-Sotelo, J., ‘*El Valiente de Finisterre* gets closer to H.M.S.*Victory*’, in: *GBB* 22 (2001), p. 74f, with a reference to Fortes, A., *Navegantes, Corsarios y Piratas*, (Pontevedra 2001).

<sup>10</sup> In the absence of a truly good study of the Peninsular War in Galicia, the time frame is not easy to determine. French troops cannot have reached the western coast of Galicia until after the conquest of Coruña by Soult, roughly in mid January 1809. By July of the same year, the French had all been kicked out of the province by a most effective and militant populace. Between those two dates, they did wreck havoc. Both Cee and Corcubion were burned to the ground at the time.

<sup>11</sup> *BiS* chapter 30. ‘When the French came to Finisterre, and demolished the ford, three perished by my hand,’ he told Borrow. ‘I stood on the mountain, up where I saw you scrambling today. I continued firing at the enemy, until three detached themselves in pursuit of me. The fools! Two perished amongst the rocks by the fire of this musket, and as for the third, I beat his head to pieces with the stock. It is on that account that they call me the *valiente* of Finisterra.’

One Frenchman, however, had the unhappy idea of running into the kitchen and hiding himself up the ‘*lareira*’, the large inglenook fireplace. Traba saw him escape, followed, dragged him out by the feet, and — perhaps afraid that the man might surrender and rob him of a favourite pastime — shouted ‘Defend yourself, you drunk, so that I may wrench the head off your shoulders!’ The two of them fought like tigers until the Frenchman, strangled by our hero, rolled over dead. Then, not yet satisfied with the day’s work, Traba pillaged the general’s tent, seized his splendid horse, and returned on horseback to Finisterre<sup>12</sup>. Passing Corcubión, he was mistaken for a Frenchman, shot at and nearly killed; but both rider and horse reached Finisterre in safety. For many years afterwards, this horse was Traba’s most precious possession. It was in fact so dear to him, that when a French commissioner presented himself after the war to claim the horse for its legal owners, Traba, rather than give the animal up, preferred to cut its throat [Casas, 54f].

Although one cannot imagine Traba’s life ever passing quietly, there are no reported stories from the following twenty years. During this time he married and had children, those we know of being his son Manuel and his daughter Josefa. Then, the next event of consequence in his life was the arrival of George Borrow in Finisterre after the long and complicated journey described in chapters 29 and 30 of *The Bible in Spain*.

Borrow, ever the missionary romantic, had come to ‘carry the Gospel to the extreme point of the old world’<sup>13</sup> and to see the place ‘on whose rocky sides I so narrowly escaped being shipwrecked’ when sailing on the *Manchester* in November 1836. To modern ears this sounds like a perfectly valid reason for a long journey, but in the 1830s it was - to say the least – uncommon. Finisterre was a distant and outlandish spot, nearly impossible to reach overland, where barely a foreigner had set foot in decades. What is more, the time was not propitious for travelling, because all around the terrible Carlist Civil War was raging between the partisans of the child-queen Isabel and those of her uncle, the absolutist pretender Don Carlos.

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<sup>12</sup> This episode may possibly have taken place at the church of San Martin de Olveira, whose rectory, now in a most deteriorated condition, possessed the kind of ‘*lareira*’ which figures in the story (See Juan Campos Calvo-Sotelo, *Naufragos de Antaño*, Barcelona 2002, chapter 1). Alternatively this assault (or the earlier one towards Vimianzo described above) may correspond to an action at Ponte Olveira described in Pardo de Andrade, Manuel, *Los guerrilleros gallegos de 1809*, re-edition by Andres Martinez Salazar, Coruña 1892, t. 1, part II, p. 29, where a group of Frenchmen encountered a small column of so-called *Alarmas*, which on their own initiative took five French prisoner with their horses.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Brandram from Coruña, 15 September 1837, in T.H. Darlow, ed., *Letters of George Borrow to the British & Foreign Bible Society* (London, 1911), 249.



*The San Carlos Bulwark over the small eastern harbour of Finisterre town*

Yet none of this would stop our English adventurer, and having arrived in the village shortly before noon, he found lodging, had a meal, and then went to see the San Carlos battery at the bay like any common sightseer. Next he decided to climb to the top of the steep Monte San Guillermo, from where he studied the ocean and spotted Wild Whales carousing with a shoal of sardines in the brine. Back in the village, he decided to have a siesta, but his sleep was cruelly disturbed when a brutish figure poked a rusty musket in his ribs.

*I looked up in amazement and (...) beheld hanging over me a wild and uncouth figure; it was that of an elderly man, built as strong as a giant, with much beard and whisker, and huge bushy eyebrows, dressed in the habiliments of a fisherman; in his hand was a rusty musket.<sup>14</sup>*

This was Antonio da Traba — incidentally only forty-six years old at the time, so hardly an ‘elderly man’ - sent to arrest this suspicious foreigner whom the townsfolk took for ‘a *bribon* of a *faccioso*’ [a rogue of a rebel], an undercover Carlist come to spy on the strongholds of the town, or even — if we may believe Borrow’s wild story in *The Bible in Spain* — the pretender *Don Calros* himself, disguised and made taller by a magic waistcoat<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> *BiS*, chapter 30.

<sup>15</sup> Whenever Borrow makes the inhabitants of Finisterre say the name of the Carlist royal pretender in *BiS* chapter 30, he uses *Calros* instead of *Carlos* (a dozen times in some four pages). This hopscotching of consonants is almost certainly due to Borrow’s reading of an early Gallego text, the anonymous *La Tertulia de Picaños* (Imprenta de D.J.F. Campaña y Aguayo, Santiago, 31 Octubre 1836). There - and in no other contemporary source - the fictitious peasants also invariably pronounce the name this way. For details see: Missler, P. , *A Gallegan Source to the Bible in Spain*, on this website.

Unaware that this was the man who would make him immortal, Traba marched his prize from the *posada* (in reality a textile shop where seaman and travellers sometimes slept) of the Asturian merchant Joaquin Riestra in the *Calle de Arriba* [Casas, 49f] to the mayor's house in the same street. This *alcalde*, a 'surly ill-tempered-looking fellow of about thirty-five', was Don Juan de Lires, and in reality only twenty-five years old at the time, since he was born on 23 December 1812 [Casas, 44 & 52]. What happened next is best told by George Borrow himself:

We at last reached a house of rather larger size than the rest; my guide [Traba – PM] having led me into a long low room, placed me in the middle of the floor, and then hurrying to the door, he endeavoured to repulse the crowd who strove to enter with us. This he effected, though not without considerable difficulty, being once or twice compelled to have recourse to the butt of his musket, to drive back unauthorized intruders. I now looked round the room. It was rather scantily furnished: I could see nothing but some tubs and barrels, the mast of a boat, and a sail or two. Seated upon the tubs were three or four men coarsely dressed, like fishermen or shipwrights. The principal personage was a surly ill-tempered-looking fellow of about thirty-five, whom eventually I discovered to be the *alcalde* of Finisterra, and lord of the house in which we now were. In a corner I caught a glimpse of my guide [Sebastianillo], who was evidently in durance, two stout fishermen standing before him, one with a musket and the other with a boat-hook. After I had looked about me for a minute, the *alcalde*, giving his whiskers a twist, thus addressed me, -

"Who are you, where is your passport, and what brings you to Finisterra?"

*Myself*.- I am an Englishman. Here is my passport, and I came to see Finisterra.

This reply seemed to discomfit them for a moment. They looked at each other, then at my passport. At length the *alcalde*, striking it with his finger, bellowed forth,-

"This is no Spanish passport; it appears to be written in French."

*Myself*.- I have already told you that I am a foreigner. I of course carry a foreign passport.

*Alcalde*.- Then you mean to assert that you are not Calros Rey.

*Myself*.- I never heard before of such a king, nor indeed of such a name.

*Alcalde*.- Hark to the fellow: he has the audacity to say that he has never heard of Calros the pretender, who calls himself king.

*Myself*.- If you mean by Calros, the pretender Don Carlos, all I can reply is, that you can scarcely be serious. You might as well assert that yonder poor fellow, my guide, whom I see you have made prisoner, is his nephew, the infante Don Sebastian.<sup>16</sup>

*Alcalde*.- See, you have betrayed yourself; that is the very person we suppose him to be.

*Myself*.- It is true that they are both hunchbacks. But how can I be like Don Carlos? I have nothing the appearance of a Spaniard, and am nearly a foot taller than the pretender.

*Alcalde*.- That makes no difference; you of course carry many waistcoats about you, by means of which you disguise yourself, and appear tall or low according to your pleasure.

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<sup>16</sup> The Infante Sebastian Gabriel de Borbón y Braganza, son of Don Carlos's second wife, the Princess of Beira, from an earlier marriage. In the absence of a male heir to Don Carlos he was considered the "crown prince" of Carlism, and functioned as Commander-in-Chief of the Carlist armies. It was of course a most unfortunate coincidence – if such indeed it was! – that Borrow's guide, a 'poor broken mariner' from the village of Padrón, was likewise called Sebastian.

This last was so conclusive an argument that I had of course nothing to reply to it. The alcalde looked around him in triumph, as if he had made some notable discovery. "Yes, it is Calros; it is Calros," said the crowd at the door. "It will be as well to have these men shot instantly," continued the alcalde; "if they are not the two pretenders, they are at any rate two of the factious."

"I am by no means certain that they are either one or the other," said a gruff voice.

The justicia of Finisterra turned their eyes in the direction from which these words proceeded, and so did I. Our glances rested upon the figure who held watch at the door. He had planted the barrel of his musket on the floor, and was now leaning his chin against the butt.

"I am by no means certain that they are either one or the other," repeated he, advancing forward. "I have been examining this man," pointing to myself, "and listening whilst he spoke, and it appears to me that after all he may prove an Englishman; he has their very look and voice. Who knows the English better than Antonio de la Trava, and who has a better right? Has he not sailed in their ships; has he not eaten their biscuit; and did he not stand by Nelson when he was shot dead?"

Here the alcalde became violently incensed. "He is no more an Englishman than yourself," he exclaimed; "if he were an Englishman would he have come in this manner, skulking across the land? Not so I trow. He would have come in a ship, recommended to some of us, or to the Catalans. He would have come to trade, to buy; but nobody knows him in Finisterra, nor does he know anybody: and the first thing, moreover, that he does when he reaches this place is to inspect the fort, and to ascend the mountain where, no doubt, he has been marking out a camp. What brings him to Finisterra if he is neither Calros nor a bribon of a faccioso?"

I felt that there was a good deal of justice in some of these remarks, and I was aware, for the first time, that I had, indeed, committed a great imprudence in coming to this wild place, and among these barbarous people, without being able to assign any motive which could appear at all valid in their eyes. I endeavoured to convince the alcalde that I had come across the country for the purpose of making myself acquainted with the many remarkable objects which it contained, and of obtaining information respecting the character and condition of the inhabitants. He could understand no such motives. "What did you ascend the mountain for?" "To see prospects." "Disparate! I have lived at Finisterra forty years and never ascended that mountain. I would not do it in a day like this for two ounces of gold. You went to take altitudes, and to mark out a camp." I had, however, a staunch friend in old Antonio, who insisted, from his knowledge of the English, that all I had said might very possibly be true. "The English," said he, "have more money than they know what to do with, and on that account they wander all over the world, paying dearly for what no other people care a groat for." He then proceeded, notwithstanding the frowns of the alcalde, to examine me in the English language. His own entire knowledge of this tongue was confined to two words – *knife* and *fork*, which words I rendered into Spanish by their equivalents, and was forthwith pronounced an Englishman by the old fellow, who, brandishing his musket, exclaimed:-

"This man is not Calros; he is what he declares himself to be, an Englishman, and whosoever seeks to injure him, shall have to do with Antonio de la Trava *el valiente de Finisterra*." No person sought to impugn this verdict, and it was at length determined that I should be sent to Corcuvion, to be examined by the alcalde mayor of the district.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *BiS*, chapter 30. For the question if the natives really mistook George Borrow for *Don Calros*, see the postscript at the end of this article.

After some more debate whether at least to shoot Borrow's half-witted guide before the door as a spy – a contingency only just avoided by Borrow's vehement protests - Lires thought it the safest course to send both spies, under Traba's escort, to the *alcalde* of Corcubión, a much higher authority. The three men set out immediately and after many miles and many stops in local taverns (one of which was Ramon de Noya's in San Martin de Duyo [Casas, 57]), they arrived at the house of the major of Corcubión, the 'Benthamite' Don Laureano Muñoz, at the *Plaza de Blanco Rajoy* nº 4, who set our traveller free on the spot, and even arranged proper room and board for him in the nearby *hostal* of Maria 'la Carreira', at nº 28 of the same Plaza [Casas, 59].<sup>18</sup> Here Borrow took leave of *El Campón*, with the theatrical gesture of solemnly handing the man the one Scio New Testament which he had carried to Finisterre.



*Café Tito, nº11 of the Plaza of Finisterre, the house where Traba died*

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<sup>18</sup> The house numbers here mentioned are the 1935 ones given by De las Casas. Since the houses and their numbers have changed too much in the meanwhile, it is now impossible to locate the Corcubión buildings in question. In itself, the place of residence of the Alcalde of the district is an eloquent statement on the local geography and the isolation of Finisterre village: Finisterre was by far the bigger community of the two, with 394 householders in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, against only 245 in Corcubion. (See Martinez de Padin, Leopoldo: *Historia política, religiosa y descriptiva de Galicia*, t. 1, Madrid, 1849, p. 101).

After meeting Borrow, Traba lived on another twenty-four years; and even when old and plagued by ailments, he lost nothing of his old bravura. One day in the 1850s when the lighthouse was being built on the tip of the cape, a brawl broke out between the construction workers and some locals in a *posada* run by a defenceless young woman. Traba immediately turned cavalier. He armed himself with a sturdy club and set out for the *posada*. His son-in-law Ventura Marcote, running along, asked what the plan was, to which Antonio answered: 'Look here: you kick them out into the street, for that I can no longer do. But from there you leave it to me, and I'll take care of smashing their brains in!' And so it was done, the old *Campón* wearing himself out beating up the troublemakers and leaving them a sorry lot in the middle of the street [Casas, 55].

This was to be his last legendary exploit. 'The fisherman Antonio Traba o Campón' — as the parish register records — died of a respiratory disease in his house at the present n° 11 on the Plaza towards midnight on 10 March 1861, and was buried in the cemetery of Santa Maria church [Casas, 53 & 56]. But men who perform momentous deeds rarely fade away completely after death. 'Even today,' De las Casas wrote in 1935, 'he is the most popular character of the village. Everybody speaks of him with that fervour and enthusiasm reserved for true liberators, describing him as being as tall and strong as a Saint Christopher, able to cross to the *El Pindo* mountain on foot, carrying the entire population of the neighbourhood on his back. He does not roam in legend yet, but surely his day will come' [Casas, 54]. It seems that that day never did arrive, for there are no legends or fables about any Antonio da Traba bogeyman or goliath in the local folklore. But perhaps that is simply George Borrow's fault, who may have denied Traba his place in fairy-tale when he turned him into a real-life, historical hero.<sup>19</sup>

For Traba is very much remembered today. He is remembered, first and foremost, by his own descendants who are still living in Finisterre. During various visits we made to the village over the last 15 years, Juan Campos and myself spoke to several of them: Tito Traba, grandson of Doña Francisca, who owns the Café Tito on the Plaza n° 11, where *El Campón* died; Manuel Traba, an older gentleman who wrote a vast history of the priests of Finisterre 'exclusively from memory'; Roberto Traba Velay, who runs the 'Galeria' bar in the *Calle Real*, the house where Antonio lived while married; and José Traba, today's mayor of Finisterre town.

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<sup>19</sup> But thanks to George Borrow, Traba has even found his niche in Spanish literature. Recently, the episode of Borrow's arrest and Traba's rescue figures in an excellent chapter called '*La noche de las falenas*' in Manuel Rivas's *Los Libros Arden Mal* (2006), where an aged Borrow, just two weeks before his death in 1881, remembers Finisterre and the how he gave to Antonio dela Trava a signed and dedicated copy of the Scio New Testament. Yes: 150 years after his death, Antonio da Traba is still running strong!



*José Traba, mayor of the town (r.), with the author Juan Campos Calvo-Sotelo  
In front of the entrance to Antonio da Traba's birth house.*

Roberto Traba writes columns for a Coruña newspaper, and being an investigator in his own right, told us he had tried to locate that New Testament Borrow presented to his illustrious ancestor on parting. It was, alas, to no avail. Although it is unlikely that Antonio read it to shreds on those stormy nights 'when the Northwest wind kept the *lanchas* moored', the one Gospel to reach the End of the Earth has unfortunately disappeared without a trace.

## Postscript: *Don Calros, I presume...?*

Did those naïf, barbaric, simpleton – and above all – trigger-happy locals of Finisterre really mistake George Borrow for the pretender Don Carlos in magic disguise? Well, that remains to be seen...

Although the prospect of an impromptu execution was certainly no empty threat in the callous days of the Carlist Civil War, the Hottenton credulity of the inhabitants of Finisterre is of course an embellishment of Borrow's own. There is no sign of them mistaking Borrow for a supernatural Don Carlos in the other, more reliable sources which describe the episode.



*Don Carlos (l) and George Borrow (r)  
The similarities between both men are of course truly stunning...*

In his letter to Andrew Brandram of 15 September 1837 (see footnote 13 above) he merely wrote: ‘Arrived at Finisterre we were seized as Carlist spies by the fishermen of the place, who determined at first on shooting us, but at last contented themselves with conducting us prisoners to Corcubion’.

And in a later letter to his Danish friend John Hasfeld of 20 November 1838 we find: ‘On my descent from the summit of the Cape I was seized by the fishermen of the village as a Carlist spy. These honest people dragged me and my guide into a wigwam, where after a consultation they came to a determination of shooting us before the door they were about to put their threat into execution, notwithstanding my protestations, when an old sailor by name Antoniou dela Trava who has served in the British Navy expressed his conviction of my being an Englishman, which his colleagues had disbelieved. As he was a man of some weight in the place, he saved both our lives.’<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> George Borrow, *Letters to John Hasfeld 1835-1839*, ed. Angus Fraser, Edinburgh 1982, p. 29. I maintained the spelling and punctuation as it is in the original.

So we may conclude that Borrow introduced this outlandish notion for dramatic effect and to stir up a small sensation. We even know more or less when he invented it, for the first time it is ever found is typically in an (anonymous) manuscript press release, written in the third person, which he penned in May 1838 while locked up in the prison of Madrid. This piece was meant to be distributed among the capital's foreign journalists, so that they could use it in their reporting and give the broadest possible publicity to Borrow's arrest. It is a most fantastic piece, full of sensational fiction and wild pretences, which features, for instance, that the Badajoz Gypsies crowned Borrow their king in a secret ceremony, and that the Alpujara Gypsies – in their turn - planned to place him on the throne of Spain after a coming rebellion!

And here then, in this trustworthy context, we find the wild tale for first time: 'Amongst [Mr Borrow's] other feats he explored every nook of the wild country of Galicia penetrating even to Cape Finisterre whose lofty brow he climbed (...) On his descent however he was nearly paying a heavy penalty for his love of adventure, being seized by the fishermen of the coast, who mistook him for Don Carlos himself. These honest people at first determined on shooting him, but on reflection conveyed him to a town up the country, where he was recognised and set at liberty.'<sup>21</sup>

In short: the 'honest people of Finisterre' weren't nearly as silly as Borrow made them out to be.



*Don Sebastian, the supposed look-alike of Borrow's guide Sebastianillo...*

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<sup>21</sup> Fraser, A., 'Sleeping under the Angel's Wings: George Borrow's Imprisonment in Madrid', in: *Proceedings of the 1991 George Borrow Conference*, Toronto 1992, Annex 3.