



THE TIMES

FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT

A scholar argues that Britain's love affair with Don Quixote and Sancho Panza is even more passionate than Spain's

Isambard Wilkinson

MADRID



The idea that the British have preserved Don Quixote while Spaniards have neglected it may be heretical, if not far-fetched (Isambard Wilkinson writes). But the claim made by contemporary Spanish writers is being strengthened.

The *Diccionario Cervantes* by the subject's pre-eminent scholar, the French biographer Jean Canavaggio, is a richly illustrated compendium of the writer's life and works.

Entries range from the cities he lived in to the art his novel has inspired. A recurring theme is how *los ingleses* have taken *Don Quixote* to heart and the role it has played in British cultural life.

This passion for the errant knight and Sancho Panza was highlighted before the 400th anniversary of the death of Cervantes in 2016 by writers such as Arturo Pérez-Reverte and Javier Marías. They said that the British above all others had cherished his work. While Spain honours him with an annual reading of his masterwork, a curriculum slot and many statues, its reverence is often fusty and aloof. His fans look on

with envy at Britain's full-blooded celebration of Shakespeare.

Canavaggio charts how Britons' zeal for wit and hearty tales placed them among Don Quixote's earliest enthusiasts. The first foreign translation of the first part was in English by Thomas Shelton in 1612, seven years after the original work was published in Spain. The first illustrated deluxe edition was in London in 1738. It featured the first biography of Cervantes and his first portrait — an imaginary drawing because no authentic image of him exists. In 1781 the Rev John Bowle published the first annotated edition.

The dictionary says, however, that some mysteries about Cervantes remain. Did Shakespeare know the Spaniard's work? Other playwrights at the time did but no firm evidence exists that he read *Don Quixote*. And what of his meeting Cervantes on a supposed 1605 diplomatic mission to Valladolid? The record is silent. By the mid-18th century, however, *Don Quixote* permeated the British literary psyche. Shadows of its hero appeared in the protagonist of Daniel Defoe's

Don Quixote and Sancho Panza seek another hopeless mission

Robinson Crusoe. Before Henry Fielding produced *Tom Jones* he wrote a play titled *Don Quixote*. Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* marked a shift from viewing the knight-errant as purely ridiculous to identifying with him as a questing soul.

By the advent of Charles Dickens, whose *The Pickwick Papers* shows the Spaniard's influence, most major British writers had fallen under the nobleman's spell. Sir Walter Scott and Samuel Coleridge professed their admiration for the work, as did Lord Byron, despite his line that Cervantes "smiled Spain's chivalry away".

Don Quixote has touched other British arts. William Hogarth's illustrations of scenes from the novel were coloured by his desire to relate the hero's stubbornness with the intransigence of Cromwell's Roundheads. Some of Henry Purcell's last works before he died in 1695 were for *The Comical History of Don Quixote*.

GK Chesterton, the British critic, proposed the theory in 1928 that *Don Quixote* was the first modern novel. More recently writers such as Salman Rushdie have amply acknowledged a debt to Cervantes. Others have been more reticent. Graham Greene was a late disciple. After several attempts to read the work

he finally succeeded but still found its interludes "very boring", as did many of Cervantes's critics. His novel *Monsignor Quixote* signalled a reconciliation.

Canavaggio's dictionary is about more than this British love affair with Cervantes. But it lends credence to the Spanish heresy forcefully expressed by the novelist Javier Cercas. "Let the English keep him," he said. "They will treat him better."

