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# Demystify Before Taking: A Conveniently De-Romanticized View of Andalusia in Chris Stewart's *Driving Over Lemons: An Optimist in Andalucia*

**Abstract**
Chris Stewart's account of his experiences after purchasing a farm in Andalusia, in an isolated farmhouse in the mountains adjacent to Granada, are far from the traditionally bucolic depictions of a pastoral landscape, in which the drawbacks of agricultural life become unquestionably compensated by the bliss of life in nature. Even though, as the title indicates, he seems to be a born romantic and optimist, undefeated by the inconveniences of a life without the everyday commodities of a First-World country in the twenty-first century, his memoir narrative is soon balanced by his own testimony, which provides a realistic counterbalance to Stewart's initial idealistic portrayal of life in rustic Alpujarras. Nonetheless, as this article intends to demonstrate, it is precisely this necessary demystification of the rural setting prevailing in certain areas in Andalusia that becomes crucial for the establishment of an essential complicity with the audience, thereby trained to appreciate—and even become enthralled by—the reality of the rural surroundings which the contemporary reader can no longer envision as merely a place of "vales and hills" softly covered by "a host of golden daffodils".

**Keywords**
Chris Stewart, *Driving Over Lemons*, Andalusia, de-romanticized, rural, optimist, demystification.

**Resumen**
El relato que lleva a cabo Chris Stewart acerca de sus experiencias tras adquirir una finca en Andalucía, en un lugar apartado de la sierra lindante con Granada, se aleja de las descripciones bucólicas de paisajes pastorales en los que las desventajas de la vida agrícola quedaban incuestionablemente compensadas por el gozo de la vida en mitad de la naturaleza. Incluso pese a que, tal y como el título de su novela indica, Chris Stewart parece ser un romántico y un optimista de nacimiento, que no se deja vencer por los inconvenientes de una vida sin las comodidades cotidianas de un país del primer mundo en el siglo xxi, su memoria-narrativa se ve inmediatamente equilibrada por su propio testimonio, que proporciona un contrapunto realista al idealizado retrato inicial de la vida en las rústicas Alpujarras. No obstante, como el presente artículo pretende demostrar, es precisamente esta necesaria

desmitificación del entorno rural de ciertas zonas de Andalucía lo que resulta crucial para poder establecer una esencial complicidad con el lector, que llega, de este modo, a valorar, e incluso, a sentirse fascinado, por la realidad del contexto agrario, el cual deja ya de percibir meramente como un lugar de «valles y colinas» delicadamente cubierto por «una cohorte de dorados narcisos».

**Palabrasclaves**
Chris Stewart, *Driving Over Lemons*, Andalucía, realista, rural, optimista, desmitificación.

For those intoxicated with the stress and the strife of the schedules, rush, and all sorts of imaginable inconveniences of the urban every day, the thought of leaving it all to start afresh in a natural setting surrounded by the breath-taking views of the Sierra Nevada mountain range in southern Spain, and a landscape presided over by a wood of fragrant eucalypts and orange trees, may seem like a shift from a hell of pollution and a mechanical existence to a paradise of vegetation and natural innocence. Furthermore, when one comes across a foreigner's account of such a move, as in Chris Stewart's trilogy of books *Driving Over Lemons*, one certainly expects to find such bucolic descriptions of the Alpujarras and the new life he and his wife Ana started there. This is so especially if we take into account this has been with considerable frequency the prevailing practice in traditional travel writing about Spain. As Gifra-Adoher remarks, these narratives have been dominated by a romantic representation of the country, which are, "however, hinged less on contemporary historical issues than on textualized versions of the past or pastoral representations of the present" (Gifra-Adoher, 2000, p. 29).

This type of expectation about the book is even more logical when we learn that Chris and Ana's move involved a drastic change in the case of this couple. Stewart was the original drummer of the famous rock band *Genesis*—he played on their first album—and had lived since then a life full of adventure, which included a tour of the Greek Isles on board of a yacht, an expedition to the Atlantic, his experiences as a pilot, and some years spent in China. Yet, at the moment he decided to make the big move and start a life on a farm in the Alpujarras, he was perfectly settled in England, living a comfortable life with his wife in the company of relatives and friends (Stewart, 2009).

In *Driving Over Lemons*, Stewart describes his ecstatic feelings as he arrives in Spain and manages to purchase what he deems to be a paradise on earth, and for a much lower sum than he had first estimated. However, as his narration progresses, the reader discovers that life is in fact far from being paradisiacal. The account of his arrival at the farm, the vagaries of the previous owner, Pedro Romero, who repeatedly swindles them and refuses for a long time to leave the property, forcing the couple into a painful coexistence with him and his despotic and careless manners, or the massive hardships involved in a place where there is no electricity or running water, aside from other necessary infrastructural commodities is spiced up by the

irregularity of the natural surroundings, and plenty of scorpions, snakes, and other wild animals.

As has been pointed out, *Driving Over Lemons* is a far cry from the traditional romanticised views that have been called the Andalusian myth, which, as Rodríguez Martínez has noted, coincide in a paradisiacal conception of Andalusia which is as unreal and irrelevant as many of the contemporary perceptions foreigners have had of our country (Rodríguez Martínez, 1988, p. 34). No sooner has Chris arrived in El Valero and made the initial arrangements concerning the purchase of the property than reality strikes him—and us—with regard to the actual panorama he is about to face:

> "Are there scorpions?"
>
> "Of course. The place is crawling with scorpions." […] "You'll never be short of a scorpion at El Valero. Sometimes in the summer I've had to pour boiling water on the walls to get rid of them all. The walls are running with scorpions." He scrabbled his fingers graphically across the table-top.
>
> "And snakes", he continued happily. "Not too many up at the house, but the valley is alive with them. Thick as my thigh, some of them." […] Dark shadows clouded my dreams of the sunny farm bright with geraniums and orange blossom. A valley teeming with murderous snakes guarding the entrance to a place of stones and scorpions. Ana was going to love this. (Stewart, 1999, pp. 48–9)

This humour pervades Stewart's narrative and is probably one of the chief reasons why this work has become a bestseller both in Britain and Spain. Yet, it is probably the general tone of honesty pervading the book that turns out to be the key to the success not only of *Driving Over Lemons*, but also of the two sequels—*The Parrot in the Pepper Tree* and *The Almond Blossom Appreciation Society*—which complete the trilogy bearing the same name. Stewart describes in detail some of the difficulties implied by moving in and getting settled. He provides a full account of the painstaking task of canalizing running water into El Valero, his titanic efforts when building a bridge in order to connect the farm with the river and the villages nearby, or the terrifying experience of having the bridge destroyed by a storm and having to spend a few days isolated on the farm with his wife and baby daughter Chloe, all of this in the midst of a particularly harsh winter. This is accomplished without resorting to any sort of catastrophist dramatisation or without lingering on tragedy. On the contrary, the author pays tribute to his portrayal in the title as an optimist and surprises readers with his resourcefulness and his refusal to surrender to negativity. And neither does his wife, whose views we get to know through Chris. After her initial reluctance following her firts encounter with the bleak conditions on the farm and in the house her husband has just acquired, she—as well as the reader—becomes increasingly drawn in by Chris's enthusiasm. It is comforting for us the readers to learn about their celebration on their first evening at El Valero, which they decide to mark with a cup of tea, and their markedly rudimentary preparations for this ceremony:

> "Well, here we are. This is home. Here we lay our bones." We laughed and walked arm in arm up to the terrace where we sat dangling our legs over the drop below while the sun slipped down behind the hill. What we needed was a cup of tea […]. Nothing that we had brought with us up to the house was suitable for that purpose and I refused adamantly to unload and go back across the river to where we had left the trailer before I had drained the first cup. We eventually found a bent aluminium pot. The sort of pot you boil handkerchiefs in. it looked as if a mule had trodden on it. Then we built a fire of twigs, filled the pot with water from the pomegranate-dribbling hose, and suspended it over the flames with some bits of rusty wire. […] "Cups, cups, cups…what shall we do for cups?" But of course! There were some empty tuna-fish tins lying around here and there. I took a couple and went to scrub them in the water-butt. […] A scum of fish oil was floating on top of the tea. We sat back and sighed, gazing at the lovely view of rivers and mountains below us, while we sipped what must surely have been the most detestable beverage ever to pass the lips of man. (Stewart, 1999, pp. 63–4)

Stewart succeeds in escaping stereotyped attitudes when depicting his experiences in Granada. He also manages to avoid romanticising Andalusia and its people, even though he does not conceal his eagerness and undeterred desire to make progress and find his place at El Valero, nor does he fall into the cliched portrayal of the rustic people as primitive and uncivilised. It is true that he does not embellish their customs and attitudes. This is especially so in the case of Pedro Romero, the original owner of the farm, who appears as a patently narrow-minded countryman with a fixed set of habits, which brook no variation or argument, and with particularly sexist attitudes towards women, especially his wife and the newly arrived Ana. Nevertheless, we don't get the impression of being confronted with a narrative that systematically despises country people's views or traditions. As the Chris's story progresses, Pedro turns out to be a traitor, who has taken advantage of Chris's and Ana's trust and friendship in order to profit from their money and patience, by staying on the property long after they had moved in and ridiculing them to be neighbours. Yet, even here, we do not find the patronising, pejorative tone of certain travel narratives about rural Andalusia founded on stereotypes and the notion of the native as an Other. Stewart's narrative escapes the portrayal of these rural people from a coloniser point of view in the sense observed by Sara Mills, who envisions travel writing as "essentially an instrument within colonial expansion [which] served to reinforce colonial rule once in place" (Mills, 1991, p. 2). Here, the tone distils sincerity and an emotional touch which succeeds in creating an empathic link with the reader:

> Besides Ana, almost everyone I knew […] had hinted that I was being too trusting or indulgent towards Romero […]. Listening as one sorry tale followed another, I started to realize how alone I had been in my estimation of him.
>
> "But Ana, how could I have been such as lousy judge of character?" I groaned.
>
> "Because you don't much care to judge people's characters […]. It's a strength, you know, as well as a weakness."
>
> It was small consolation. (Stewart, 1999, pp. 89–90)

A shocking episode is the one where the author describes his early experiences at the traditional slaughter of a pig in winter. The depiction of a practice many people consider to be an exercise in brutality and primitivism is indeed shown in its full crudity, often becoming strikingly repellent. On this occasion, Stewart's inclination to seeing the bright side is patently proved—indeed it is welcome in the midst of his detailed portrayal of the awful scene:

> Blish! In goes the knife—a twist—and the blood gushes into the bucket, stirred by a stout woman to stop it clotting. The pig heaves and lashes out and whinnies, and the men who are leaning on the pig to persuade it to stay on the table look at one another with knowing looks as it goes limp and the life passes from the body. Then one of them gives it a slap to signal that the worst is over […]. It's a horrible business, and the very thought of that hook makes me shiver, but there's an undeniable fascination to the slaughter as well: that same mix of repulsion and excitement that you find at bullfights. (*Ibid.*, p. 105)

The realistic overtone in Stewart's chronicle is not incompatible with passages of true lyricism, which render evidence of the author's fascination with the landscape presiding over many of the locations mentioned in the book:

> In spring the blossoming of the orange trees takes you unawares. At first only a pale haze becomes apparent across the dark green of the leaves. This is the green of the flower-buds. Then all of a sudden the buds are transformed into exquisite white five-petalled stars, radiating from cream-yellow pistils and stamens. The scent is delicate and heady, and when each tree becomes a mass of white flowers an almost tangible mist of orange blossom hangs in the air […]. Then as the flowers wither a tiny green orange appears in the centre of each one, a perfect miniature replica of the fully formed fruit. Were each orangelet to grow its course, the average tree would be laden with from twenty to thirty tons of fruit, but the breezes, birds and the marvellous mechanisms of the tree itself do their bit to cull them. The ground beneath becomes a mosaic of flowers and orangelets. (*Ibid.*, pp. 109–10)

In this initial book of the trilogy, *Driving Over Lemons*, Stewart achieves a wonderfully balanced depiction of the reality of the Alpujarras and its locales, as he views it from the moment of his purchase of the farm El Valero. Escaping from the trend of romantic and unrealistically bucolic representations of Andalusia and its people, as has often tended to predominate in writings by travellers in Spain, his narrative manages to fit his disposition—as his title revealingly expresses it—towards optimism with the blunt portrayal of a place which cannot be described as a paradise, yet, we learn, when viewed with enthusiasm can be much closer to it.

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