

# MARGARET LAURENCE'S SOMALI TRANSLATIONS

*Donez Xiques*

I long for you, as one  
Whose dhow in summer winds  
Is blown adrift and lost,  
Longs for land, and finds —  
Again the compass tells —  
A grey and empty sea.

**T**HIS SIX-LINE POEM is one of Margaret Laurence's translations of Somali love lyrics, included in *A Tree for Poverty*, her first book.<sup>1</sup> This remarkable work excellently translates and paraphrases several Somali tales and poems which the young writer collected and edited while she and her husband, Jack, a civil engineer, were living in the British Somaliland Protectorate. Written when she was in her twenties, this important but little-known book was originally published in Africa in 1954. Today it is still considered a landmark by scholars of Somali life and literature. The distinguished linguist B. W. Andrzejewski provides a valuable summary of Laurence's contribution:

Her book publicized Somali poetry and showed through the excellence of her translations that it was not just anonymous folklore poetry but was a form of high art. She also gave the Somalis who could read English a sense of pride, in that the beauty of their poetry found outside recognition and was presented to the world at large.

(B. W. Andrzejewski, letter to Donez Xiques, 18 March 1989)

One of the first reviews of *A Tree for Poverty* appeared in *War Somali Sidihi*, a fortnightly news-sheet which was produced in the Information Department in Hargeisa. It states: "[Margaret Laurence] has written an introduction full of understanding and sympathy, and in her translation of the poems has shown 'a vision beyond her fellows' in capturing the imagery and imagination of the originals" (23 October 1954). Several months later *A Tree for Poverty* was reviewed by V. H. W. Dowson, an Englishman with an excellent command<sup>2</sup> of the Somali

language. He praised Laurence saying: “[She] is to be heartily congratulated not only for being the first to undertake the publication of so large a collection of translations from the Somali, but also for the felicity of her verse. . . . [She] has caught well the spirit of the original songs” (*The Somaliland Journal*, 1.1 [December 1954]: 52).<sup>3</sup> Encomia such as these rarely circulated outside Africa; and, with the exception of comments by the scholar Clara Thomas, Margaret Laurence’s first book has never been the subject of much critical scrutiny.<sup>4</sup>

I wish to look more closely at this work, believing that such scrutiny will help evaluate the corpus of Laurence’s work and help understand her development as a writer. An examination of *A Tree for Poverty*, its composition and achievement, reveals a good deal about Laurence as a young writer, her work habits and her concerns. It also raises questions: Why did Laurence devote so much time and energy to writing a book for which it would be difficult to find a publisher? How does this work fit in with her plans of becoming a writer? And why was it reprinted in 1970, sixteen years after the first edition, when Laurence was at the height of her literary career and well-known for her Manawaka novels? Whatever the answers, one thing is clear — Laurence took considerable care in writing *A Tree for Poverty* and she had a keen appreciation of Somali life and culture.<sup>5</sup>

ONE MUST UNDERSTAND that when Laurence undertook these translations in 1951-1952, there were overwhelming difficulties. Somali was an exclusively oral language. It had no orthography. In fact, no written Somali texts were available until the 1970s, more than twenty years after Laurence’s book.

Before examining the book itself, however, some background may be useful. When this young woman from the Manitoba prairies set sail from Europe in December 1950 for the Horn of Africa, she did not expect to find literary companions there.<sup>6</sup> She was astonished, consequently, when some weeks after her arrival in the Somaliland Protectorate she came to realize that she was living, as she remarked, in a very “nation of poets.”

In Somalia, Margaret Laurence found herself surrounded by a rich, complex, and ancient oral tradition in both poetry and prose, yet was barred from it by cultural and linguistic barriers. Undaunted and intrigued, Laurence nevertheless found a way to enter that world and to experience some of Somalia’s rich literary tradition; and she grew to love and respect the Somali people and their country. In their turn, “Somalis speak of her with admiration and affection and regard her as one of their great friends” (BWA, letter to DX, 18 March 1989).<sup>7</sup>

Although Laurence, while living in the Protectorate, undertook the study of Somali, she certainly was not fluent in it. As one of her contemporaries explained, “Somali is a difficult language for Europeans to tackle and it was especially so in

those days when there was no official version of its orthography and even educated Somalis when writing to one another were accustomed to using English or Arabic (or in Italian Somaliland, Italian; or, in French Somaliland, French)" (C. J. Martin, letter to DX, 22 April 1989). Laurence obtained from a young Polish scholar, B. W. Andrzejewski, who had recently arrived in the country to pursue linguistic research, and his Somali assistant, Musa Haji Ismail Galaal, literal translations of Somali poetry. And she used these to fashion her own English versions of the poems.<sup>8</sup> Laurence explains in the introduction that she eschewed literalness in order to "remain true to the thought and imagery of the original" (4).

The process of working on these translations is described in *The Prophet's Camel Bell*. Laurence refers to a "three-way process" in describing the method in which she, Musa Galaal, and Andrzejewski worked on the poems. Although Galaal was fluent in English, he would discuss subtler connotations of the words with Andrzejewski in Somali. Then Andrzejewski and Laurence would discuss the lines in English. Laurence explains: "I took notes on the literal meanings, the implications of words, the references to Somali traditions or customs. I would then be able to work on this material later, and attempt to put it into some form approximating a poem, while preserving as much as possible of the meaning and spirit of the original" (*PCB*, 100).

Additional details from Andrzejewski about Laurence's efforts as translator further clarify the process: "Musa was keen on improving his English and made rapid progress. Soon he was able to collaborate with Peggy without my assistance. What is more, Peggy learnt more and more about Somali culture and acquired the skill of collaborating with him. She then worked with him, without me. I never checked with her in detail the final versions of the poems translated in that way" (BWA, letter to DX, 24 November 1991).

Although today Margaret Laurence is remembered for her fiction, she also wrote poetry. In fact, when she was an undergraduate a number of her poems were published in the college literary magazine, and at graduation she received an award for poetry.<sup>9</sup> In her adult years she also wrote poems for friends and family members. Some of these she selected for inclusion in *Dance on the Earth*, her memoirs, which were published posthumously in 1989.

**A** TREE FOR POVERTY is one hundred and forty-six pages in length and contains three sections: a critical introduction of some thirty pages by Laurence herself, followed by separate sections containing translations of Somali poems and tales accompanied by extensive notes about Somali vocabulary and customs. Laurence comments on approximately ten different types of Somali poetry

and presents translations of thirty poems. She also includes paraphrases of thirty-six tales, which are either Somali or Arabic in origin.

In the introductory section Laurence explains that because Somali literature has not been committed to writing, she has undertaken these translations to ensure that the material not be lost and to encourage Somalis themselves to collect and transcribe more of their own literature (3-4).<sup>10</sup> In addition to offering this rationale for the book, Laurence provides an overview of the land, the people, and the culture of Somalia.

Here the reader finds evidence of Laurence's great respect for the Somali people. She describes the country as "a nation of poets" with highly developed literary tastes (p. 1, unnumbered). She praises their achievements and comments on the place of literature in Somali life.

In a country as barren as this, where the population is almost entirely nomadic and where the actual process of survival demands so much effort and tenacity from each tribesman, it seems remarkable that there should be such a large body of unwritten literature, containing such a high degree of dramatic sense, vivid imagination and wit. (30)

Laurence points out that, although the lives of the average Somali camel-herders are drab and harsh, in their poetry one finds "sensitivity, intelligence, earthy humour, and a delight in lovely clothes and lovely women" (2). Somali poetry and folk-tales are "always available," and are as free to the impoverished nomad as they are to the Sultan. Thus Somali literature, in its way, provides "a tree for poverty to shelter under" (2).<sup>11</sup>

After Somalia adopted a system of orthography in the early 1970s, studies of the literature increased markedly. In the 1950s, however, Laurence may not have fully understood that not only were poets important, but they occupied an *essential* and *unique* role in Somali society. Andrzejewski recently summarized the situation as follows:

[In Somalia poetry is the main art] providing entertainment and aesthetic pleasure, it is the vehicle of reflective thought and it is a storehouse of the communal memory of past events . . . poetry occupies an elevated position only surpassed by the supreme claims of Divine worship and the powerfully strong bonds of kinship. The prestige which the poets enjoy and the influence which they exert over their public would inspire the envy of their confrères in Western Europe and North America, whose work reaches only a fraction of their compatriots. In Somalia, poetry reaches the masses, and though much of it is high art, it is by no means an elitist pursuit. What is more, poets are commentators on current affairs and use their influence in situations of conflict, whether as an effective offensive weapon or as a means of bringing reconciliation and peace. (Andrzejewski, "Poetry and Camels," 157).

On several occasions Laurence stated that living in Africa for seven years had a profound and positive impact on her.<sup>12</sup> In writing these translations, however, she

does not focus on herself. In *A Tree for Poverty* the voice of the introduction is that of both reporter and scholar. Laurence remains in the background and makes no direct statements about her life or personal experiences. The focus remains, appropriately, on Somali literature. A notable shift in Laurence's style does occur, however, when she actually describes that literature and in the notes which she wrote to accompany the translations. The tone then is much more animated than in the earlier pages of the introduction.

A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT FORMS of poetry are used in Somalia, each with its own style, metre, and rhythm, its own particular function. Because Somali poetry is a highly developed and complex art, poetical forms and rules of composition tend to be formal. In addition, as Said Samatar points out, "The language of Somali verse shows a strong prejudice towards beauty. Vividness, clarity and precision of thought are prized but they are regulated by rigid rules of alliteration" (60). A skilled poet, therefore, is one who can express his thoughts and feelings with originality and freshness of phrases, within the prescribed framework of the type of poem he has chosen to compose.

The second section of *A Tree for Poverty* contains Laurence's translations of Somali poetry. In some cases, she found it necessary to add words or phrases in order to make clear a concept contained within a single Somali word for which English has no exact equivalent. But Laurence also reiterates: "in no sense [have I] embroidered the original text or developed the thought of any poem" (4).

She distinguishes among poems that are recited, chanted, or sung to a tune and presents translations of two types of Somali poetry: the *belwo*, which is a short, lyrical popular song, usually a love song; and the *gabei*, a long, narrative poem.<sup>13</sup> Because the *gabei* is considered to be one of the most complicated and subtle types of Somali poetry, a man who is talented and accomplished in this form is very highly regarded.<sup>14</sup>

When one examines Laurence's translations of these poems, it becomes obvious that she worked diligently on her texts so that an English reader could experience some sense of the beauty of the Somali original.<sup>15</sup> The following examples illustrate her success in conveying two essential features of the *belwo*: the single image and a strong alliterative pattern.<sup>16</sup>

1. The curving of your breasts  
Like apples sweet and small,  
Tolmoon, I will know again  
When night turns dusk to dark.

(Laurence, TP, 34)

In the next *belwo*, the weaving of thought and image — the dhow adrift on the

sea — is further heightened by the sustained alliteration of “l” and by the presence of long, open vowels.

2. I long for you, as one  
 Whose dhow in summer winds  
 Is blown adrift and lost,  
 Longs for land, and finds —  
 Again the compass tells —  
 A grey and empty sea.

(Laurence, TP, 31)

For English readers to appreciate the formidable literary task which Laurence as translator set for herself, a comparison of her versions with translations published more than a decade later by the distinguished scholars B. W. Andrzejewski and I. M. Lewis is interesting. Undoubtedly, their command of the language, their understanding of Somali rhythmic patterns and knowledge of the scholarship of the previous decade are impressive. However, when Laurence’s 1954 version is compared with theirs, I believe English readers will find that Laurence has succeeded in producing translations which are themselves poems. Thus, for the non-specialist *A Tree for Poverty* offers a very helpful means of access to and appreciation of an unfamiliar country and culture.

- 3.a. When you die you will enter the earth  
 Let not the preacher then turn you from your love-song.

(Andrzejewski and Lewis, 146)<sup>17</sup>

- 3.b. Since, when you die, delight  
 By earth’s silence will be stilled,  
 Then let not now the priest  
 Drive you from your song.

(Laurence, TP, 31)

In Laurence’s version (3.b.), the careful alliteration of “d” and “s” is woven into the poem along with the antithetical notions of song and silence, creating a powerful impact on the reader. In the next *belwo* (4), Laurence combines attention to rhythmic effect with an interwoven pattern of assonance and alliteration to produce a translation which is more effective as a poem in English than Andrzejewski and Lewis’s version.

- 4.a. (It is because of) your fine mouth,  
 Its scent and sight,  
 That I postpone my journey, oh Flower!

(Andrzejewski and Lewis, 43)

- 4.b. Your bright mouth and its loveliness,  
 Your fragrance, the look of you —  
 Ubah, flower-named, for these  
 My journey is forgotten.

(Laurence, TP, 33)

AMONG HER THIRTY TRANSLATIONS of Somali poems Laurence also includes examples of the *gabei*. In contrast to the *belwo*, the *gabei* generally is a long, serious poem which has complex rules governing its content, vocabulary and style. The chant of the *gabei*, moreover, has a simple melody with great variations in the length of the notes: "The tempo of the chant is slow and majestic, seldom changing throughout the poem. All emotional appeal depends on the expressive power of the words, and the reciter does not especially modulate his voice or accentuate any words or lines, thus giving the impression of superb restraint and stylization (*Somali Poetry*, 47-48). The *gabei* is a form generally undertaken by the more accomplished senior poets, some of whom have been famous statesmen and warriors.

In assessing Laurence's work as a translator, it is important to examine her efforts with this difficult form.<sup>18</sup> *A Tree for Poverty* includes a few *gabei* translations, among them "Qaraami," a love *gabei* by the poet Elmii Bonderii.<sup>19</sup> It is somewhat difficult to assess Laurence's work with this form since, for the most part, only brief extracts from *gabei* are included in *A Tree for Poverty*. "To a Faithless Friend," for example, comprises only 9 lines there. However, her manuscript translation of the complete *gabei* (in the archives at York University) runs to over 130 lines. I also have discovered that the entire *gabei* was published in *The Somaliland Journal* (1956).<sup>20</sup> The typescript for this *gabei* accompanied by Laurence's notes, the Somali text, and the literal translation which had been given to her by Andrzejewski and Galaal are in the Laurence archives at York University.<sup>21</sup> These items offer a unique opportunity to observe Laurence the translator at work.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, since Andrzejewski and Lewis's rendition of this *gabei* is also included in *Somali Poetry*, a comparison of the two versions of "To a Faithless Friend" enables us to appreciate Laurence's work.<sup>23</sup> Her ability to convey the dramatic moment is everywhere apparent in her translation.

Because of the length of the *gabei* poems, a few examples must serve to illustrate this point. "To a Faithless Friend" deals with a situation in which a man finds himself deserted by a friend. Feeling bereft and angry, he appeals to his kinsmen. In reading Laurence's translation, I find echoes both of "Beowulf" and the biblical canticle of Deborah in *Judges*, ch. 5:<sup>24</sup>

*Version A*

(I sing of) the man on whose behalf I shouted for help until my  
lungs were dry,  
For whom I ran with shoulders bent until I was completely  
without breath,  
And for whom I anxiously raised the rallying cry "Habar  
Habuusheed" until people mistook me for a nightjar,

And on account of whom my skin itched from my rapid passage  
 through the "jillab" grass,  
 And as I made my way through the night I fell and tore  
 myself on "hagar" bushes.

Like the Ethiopians in attack, a mass of warriors,  
 Numerous as you know, I assembled for him . . .

(Andrzejewski and Lewis, "Ingratitude,"  
*Somali Poetry*, 120)<sup>25</sup>

*Version B*

Ye Tribesmen gathered here, my song is of sorrow,  
 And of that man, the faithless, for whose sake  
 My lungs were parched with a desperate call to war —  
 "Awake and arm, oh Habar Habuush men!

The spear of vengeance is thrust at your kinsmen's heart!" 5  
 So strongly pulsed my cry that warriors, waking,  
 Took it for the doom-knowing "huur," the fearful bird  
 Whose eyes alone may see the Angel of Death  
 Walking the earth in dark and terrible splendour.

If memory lives in you, recall the time. 10  
 Through the hostile night I journeyed for his sake —  
 The "jillab's" bitter branches lashed my skin  
 And stabbing thorns of "hagar" tore my flesh.

(Laurence, "To A Faithless Friend," 138)

Laurence's choice of "Ye Tribesmen" as the opening phrase immediately establishes the context. The sibilant "s" moves through lines 1 and 2, linking the sound of the words with the sense of sorrow. Then, in line 4, the strongly accented opening words "awake and arm" combine with the alliteration in each hemistich to effectively convey the speaker's sense of urgency. The adjective "hostile" (11) extends the warlike feeling of the previous lines and the "I" runs from "lives" to "hostile" to "jillib" and the vivid phrases which follow; while at the same time, the repetition of "s" (12-13) both echoes the poem's opening lines and moves forward into a new and more frightening context with the words "stabbing," "lashed" and "tore."

These translations show Laurence's appreciation of complex poetic techniques and an ability to employ her own considerable skill in producing a book of lasting value and significance.

**T**HE FINAL SECTION OF *A Tree for Poverty* deals with Somali prose and includes thirty-six tales which are either Somali or Arabic in origin. Margaret Laurence distinguishes between those which she has translated and others which she has paraphrased.<sup>26</sup> In discussing Laurence's efforts in this genre,



B. W. Andrzejewski clarifies several points. He states: "I never checked any of her prose narratives in detail and they are not translations but rather 'tales retold' where the principal fidelity applies only to themes but not to the actual wording" (BWA, letter to DX, 24 November 1991).

Although the translated stories generally are brief, their subject matter is quite diverse. Among them, for example, are beast fables — "How the Meat was Divided"; moral tales — "Right and Wrong"; tales with fantastic elements — "The Strange and Terrible Camel"; stories which explain a proverb — "High or Low"; and humorous tales, often dealing with the cleverness of a character or the reversal of a situation — "The Man Who Had Four Wives" and "The Townsmen."

The paraphrased Arabic stories, by contrast, are quite different in content, style, and source from the translated ones. Laurence obtained paraphrased stories not from written sources but from oral ones. That is, they were conveyed to her, partly in Somali, but mainly in English, by Ahmed Nasir and Hersi Jama, who acted out the tales in a spirited fashion, with gestures and facial expressions. Their renditions gave Laurence a sense of the way in which the Somali people for centuries have orally delivered their stories.<sup>27</sup> Laurence states that her English versions are faithful as regards plot, but cautions the reader that their literary style should not be taken as pure Somali. She believes, however, that her paraphrases convey "a good deal of the tone and spirit of the original" (17).

This very point is also made by Andrzejewski: "What is astonishing is that in spite of the language barrier she developed such empathy with the Somalis that even though her translations are sometimes not very close to the original she conveyed their spirit and atmosphere with a high degree of accuracy" (BWA, letter to DX, 18 March 1989). *A Tree for Poverty* includes nine paraphrased tales which are Arabic in origin. They are longer than the translated stories and many have subplots, high suspense and a good deal of character development. "Ahmed the Woodseller" opens this section.<sup>28</sup>

Referring to Ahmed, Laurence writes: "Perhaps he appears in the stories of any race of people who live uncertain poverty-stricken lives. Ahmed is the 'little man' . . . he is both funny and sad" (18). The theme of paradox, which in subsequent years frequently appears in Laurence's own fiction, occupies a central position in this tale.<sup>29</sup> Laurence, pointing to the paradoxical personality of Ahmed Hatab states: "[He] is completely selfish, and yet is capable of generosity and affection. . . . He is good and bad, lovable and despicable. In fact, he sums up a good many of the contrasts which make the eastern mind difficult for Europeans to understand. It will be seen that just such a series of contrasts runs throughout the Somali folktales given here" (19).

Laurence also included this folktale (in a somewhat altered version) in *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, where it subsequently caught the attention of the librettist Ian Serrailier from whom it received another artistic translation. Serrailier ob-

tained Laurence's permission to use the tale and then collaborated with the English composer Gordon Crosse to produce a cantata for schools which was broadcast on BBC-TV twice weekly during the summer term 1965 (Ian Serrailier, letter to DX, 20 February 1990).

In the Somali tale, Ahmed is an intriguing character, an anti-hero. Squat and ugly with a shrunken and twisted body (59), Ahmed Hatab is physically repulsive. Although plagued by poverty and hunger, Ahmed does have his day-dreams. And by selling firewood he manages to eke out a living. His wife, however, is a shrew who nags him endlessly. At last, Ahmed decides to commit suicide. The story then cleverly unfolds around his decision. Laurence's narrative skill, apparent in many of her paraphrases of Somali and Arabic tales, is evident in the following passage from "Ahmed the Woodseller":

And with these words, the executioner, who was a stout strong man, brought the scimitar down on the scrawny neck of Ahmed Hatab. But then a wonderful thing happened. The blade of the scimitar, tempered steel as it was, shattered into a thousand pieces, and the neck of Ahmed Hatab remained unscathed. (65)

In this story and the three which follow it, the reader also is introduced to Nebii Hhudur, a holy man, whom Laurence describes in the following note for English readers:

[He] must wander over the earth, travelling as the wind travels, disappearing and appearing at will, sometimes being carried inside the "dust-devils," those columns of wind and sand so common in desert countries. He must never marry or settle down. The Somalis believe that Nebii Hhudur often comes to a place in the guise of a beggar. Hhudur prays for those who are kind to him, and they become wealthy. But those who are unkind to him are ruined. No one can tell where Hhudur may be or who he is. (71)

The stories connected with Nebii Hhudur, "the good prophet who travels the world disguised as a beggar" (61) are about sharing with and caring for the less fortunate.

The remaining Arabic stories in this section of *A Tree for Poverty* focus on the adventures of Abana Wys. His life and values are the antithesis of those of Nebii Hhudur. Hhudur is a holy man: humble, poor, a prophet; whereas Abana Wys is a lusty, shrewd court jester. Through his antics and stories he must amuse the Sultan and thereby earn his own meagre livelihood. This sharpwitted man, who also appears in Sir Richard Burton's work, is frequently at great personal risk because although he is clever, Abana Wys is always at the mercy of the Sultan, the powerful Caliph of Baghdad.

The final section of *A Tree for Poverty* contains seventeen paraphrased Somali tales. The richness of that literature is obvious in these stories which vary in length and subject matter. Several deal with religious ancestors and/or explain tribal

heritage. These tales move swiftly with dialogue advancing the action and surprising conclusions in which there are role reversals (the clever outwit the bold), impossible challenges are overcome, and shrewd plans resolve insoluble dilemmas.

**A**LTHOUGH MARGARET LAURENCE could not have produced these translations and paraphrases of Somali literature without the assistance of B. W. Andrzejewski and Musa Galaal, as well as other Somalis whom she mentions in her acknowledgements, it remains true that in *A Tree for Poverty* Laurence's own work as translator is impressive. Here she hones her skill in narrative: in translating the tales into English, Laurence had to retain elements of suspense, create quick and varied action, and sustain the interest of "European" readers.

From a writer's point of view, the tales are rich in human interest. And many of them also reveal intriguing paradoxes — a point which Laurence herself often comments on in the introduction to *A Tree for Poverty*. Reading the tales, one is aware of her success in briefly rendering a memorable character. Like an artist who does a number of quick sketches or studies for a portrait, she penned paraphrases of these Somali tales which give westerners a genuine sense of the richness of an ancient mid-eastern culture and literature.

Her English versions of the Somali poems also reward close examination. They consistently reveal her careful attention not only to details of vocabulary, alliteration, and rhythm but also to the poem as a whole. Because Laurence was keenly interested in language, working on the Somali translations must have been both challenging and rewarding. Her success recalls Robert Frost's remark: "a poem, like a piece of ice on a hot stove, must ride on its own melting."<sup>30</sup>

Because her husband's work took him into the Haud (a plateau region of some 25,000 square miles, south of Hargeisa), Margaret Laurence accompanied him and had the opportunity, unusual for a woman, of living for an extended period of time among Somalis, devout Muslims, whose daily life was full of tales and songs. Though she was aware of how little she really knew of Somalia and of "how impossible it was to blow in from the sea and size up a land's centuries in a few months" (*PCB*, 225), the experience in the Haud deepened her understanding of the Somali way of life.<sup>31</sup>

In her notes to the poems and tales, as well as in her introduction to the book, Laurence endeavors to convey to English readers certain untranslatable features of Somali life and culture. These efforts she later referred to as "a labour of love" (*PCB*, 225).

The labour which Laurence undertook so that Somali oral literature "not be lost" surely enhanced her own literary skills. She had come to the Horn of Africa after working for some months as a journalist following graduation from

college. Her subsequent contact with the richly imaginative tales of the Somalis and with their poems of lyric beauty (*belwo*) and historic significance (*gabei*) must have quickened her own imaginative journeys into fiction; we know that soon after *A Tree for Poverty* she was hard at work on both short stories and a novel. If, however, we had nothing more, nothing further from Margaret Laurence than the translations and commentary in *A Tree for Poverty*, we still would have a remarkable book. It is an intriguing first publication, one which will yield yet more insights into the mature writer.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Margaret Laurence, *A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose*, 2nd edition. All subsequent quotations are from this work unless otherwise noted. The 1970 edition was the result of a collaboration between Margaret Laurence and William B. Ready, University Librarian and Professor of Bibliography at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. It was Ready who made all the arrangements for publication of *A Tree for Poverty* in an edition of 2000 copies by the Irish University Press, Dublin. See the William B. Ready papers at Mills Memorial Library, McMaster University. The 1970 edition contains a new preface by Laurence, but in other respects is a photolithographic facsimile of the first edition. (Both Trent University and McMaster University libraries have a copy of the rare first edition of *A Tree for Poverty*.) The original typescript copy of *A Tree for Poverty* was presented to the Somaliland Society by the Chief Secretary to the Government; see *The Somaliland Journal*, 1.1 (1954): 62. I am grateful to the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C., and to the Research Foundation of the City University of New York for grants which enabled me to pursue much of the research for this article.
- <sup>2</sup> C. J. Martin, personal interview, Bournemouth, 3 May 1990.
- <sup>3</sup> This was an occasional publication of the Somaliland Society, which was formed at a meeting in the Oriental Hotel, Hargeisa, on September 5, 1954.
- <sup>4</sup> Clara Thomas makes some cogent remarks about "possible connections" between Laurence's own fiction and these early translations: "Particularly interesting . . . are [Laurence's] introductory passages on the element of the grotesque in Somali characterization and on the strong sense of the dramatic which she found carried from the people themselves into their literature." *Margaret Laurence*, 22.
- <sup>5</sup> In our post-colonial era, it is important to recall that not all European travellers (Richard Burton, for example), saw the Somalis so positively.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (1963), Laurence's only travel book, published a decade after she had left Somalia, is an absorbing account of her experiences and impressions there. Under its American title *New Wind in a Dry Land*, it was issued by Alfred A. Knopf simultaneously with *The Stone Angel* and *The Tomorrow-Tamer* on June 15, 1964. Knopf's decision to issue three books by one writer on the same day was most unusual at the time and called more widespread attention in the United States to Margaret Laurence's work.
- <sup>7</sup> Their esteem for Laurence is also reflected in the fact that she was among a handful of Britishers who were invited back to Mogadishu as guests of the Somali government in July 1966 for the sixth anniversary celebration of independence.
- <sup>8</sup> Professor Andrzejewski notes that the only literary translations which preceded *A Tree for Poverty* were those given in *A Grammar of the Somali Language with*

*Examples of Prose and Verse* by J. W. C. Kirk, Cambridge University Press, 1905. Kirk's translations were meant to illustrate points of grammar. He did not fully realize that when Somali oral poems are memorized there is "an unwritten copyright law according to which the name of the poet has to be stated before the recital." It is to Laurence's credit that she correctly observes this Somali literary custom. (BWA, letter to DX, 11 April 1989).

<sup>9</sup> *Dance on the Earth*, 96.

<sup>10</sup> These translations did not constitute Laurence's sole literary activity in Somalia. I have discovered in the archives at Princeton University correspondence between Margaret Laurence and Whit Burnett, editor of *Story* magazine, which clearly establish that Laurence had completed her first published African short story "Uncertain Flowering" at least as early as November 1951 [although it was not published until 1953] and that she is working on a novel set in Somaliland. See Xiques, "New Light on Margaret Laurence's First Short Story."

<sup>11</sup> This phrase is taken from a Somali *gabei*.

<sup>12</sup> See Thomas, *Margaret Laurence*, ch. 1-2, and Morley, 21.

<sup>13</sup> I retain Laurence's spelling of these words. After the introduction of orthography to Somalia in 1972, they appear as follows: *heello* and *gabay* (Andrzejewski, "Somali Literature," 337-38).

<sup>14</sup> According to information in the *Area Handbook for Somalia*, the composition and recitation of poetry is a national pastime. In Somalia, training in the art of expression begins early when young children are taught riddles and tongue twisters to improve their verbal skills. Somali poets compose and polish their poems in private until they are felt to be beyond criticism and ready for oral presentation, 131.

<sup>15</sup> According to Said Samatar, "Even the most elaborate poets and reciters are unable to clearly express the complex rules of Somali verse," as quoted by Mohamed Rirache in "Somali Poetry: The Case of the Miniature Genres," 16.

<sup>16</sup> "The rules of alliteration are very rigid in the sense that only identical initial consonants are regarded as alliterative (*higaadsan*) with one another and no substitution by similar sounds is admissible," *Somali Poetry* 42. Further details about the alliterative requirements of all Somali poetry are discussed in great detail in this book.

<sup>17</sup> B. W. Andrzejewski and I. M. Lewis, *Somali Poetry*. All poetry translations by Andrzejewski and Lewis are from this volume unless otherwise noted.

<sup>18</sup> The intent of this paper is not to critique the work of Andrzejewski, but to examine Laurence's efforts in rendering Somali tales and poems into English. In all fairness to Andrzejewski, who has made outstanding and unique contributions to an understanding of the literature and culture of Somalia, has written numerous articles and books on this subject, I want to make clear that at the time when Laurence first met him and his British wife in Sheik, the young Polish scholar probably was not familiar with features of Anglo-Saxon poetry which Laurence no doubt studied as an undergraduate: for example, "Beowulf" and perhaps "The Battle of Maldon."

<sup>19</sup> He appears again in *Heart of a Stranger* in the chapter "The Epic Love of Elmii Bonderii," which Laurence describes as "a retelling of the many tales about this poet I heard when I was working on translations of Somali poems and folk-tales" (HS 77).

<sup>20</sup> "To A Faithless Friend, a *gabei* by Salaan Arrabey, translated by Margaret Laurence." *The Somaliland Journal*, 1.3 (December 1956): 138-41.

<sup>21</sup> The rough literal translation of a shorter *gabei* by 'Abdillaahi Muuse, "Reproof from an Elder," as well as Laurence's notes and her translation of this poem, are

also in the archives at York University. Another translation of this *gabei* may be found in Andrzejewski and Lewis, 102-03.

<sup>22</sup> It is puzzling that a handwritten note by Margaret Laurence in the archives at York University states that these *gabei* translations "were never published." It seems unlikely that she was unaware of the publication of "To a Faithless Friend" since she is listed among the members of the Somaliland Society (*Somaliland Journal*, 1. 1 [December 1954]: 65) and presumably received a copy of their journal. Furthermore, a clipping of Dowson's review of *A Tree for Poverty* from *The Somaliland Journal* is also with these translations at York.

<sup>23</sup> By looking at the rough literal translation which Laurence worked from, one may see more clearly how she proceeded with her efforts at translation and paraphrase. Here a few examples must suffice: versions B.1 and C.1 were given to her; versions B.2 and C.2 are her published translations of the poem.

B.1. For him I gathered a host of men, numerous, as you  
remember, thronging like an Ethiopian horde in attack;  
(Rough typed translation given to Laurence by  
Andrzejewski and Musa Galaal)

B.2. Dare ye forget the multitude of men  
I summoned to his rescue on that night?  
Mighty of sinew and spirit, our warriors thronged  
Like an Ethiopian horde to the attack.  
(Laurence, "To a Faithless Friend," 138)

C.1. [No one can do anything alone, without help and I am now  
without anyone by my side, though you, my cousin, should  
have come to my aid]. Sailing ships do not sail in the  
windless season, just before the "karan" rains.  
(Rough typed translation given to Laurence by  
Andrzejewski and Musa Galaal)

C.2. Before the "karan" rains, when the wind is still,  
The wide-sailed dhows do not put out to sea  
A heavy log cannot be set ablaze  
Without the assisting fire of tinder straw:  
And no man lives who will not one day need  
His brother's help to lighten his distress.  
(Laurence, "To a Faithless Friend," 139)

<sup>24</sup> Laurence remarked to Donald Cameron: "I am particularly attached to the King James version of the Bible, because it *is* the poetry of it that really hits me." Interview with Donald Cameron, 112.

<sup>25</sup> "Ingratitude" and "To A Faithless Friend" are different titles for the same Somali poem.

<sup>26</sup> The translated stories were obtained from Musa Galaal and B. W. Andrzejewski. Laurence then put the stories "into English which would convey as much as possible of the dramatic effect of the original" (*A Tree for Poverty*, 16).

<sup>27</sup> See *A Tree for Poverty* (17) and *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, ch. 9.

<sup>28</sup> This tale appears in the section on Somali literature in *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (1963).

<sup>29</sup> "When I began to write," Laurence said in an interview with Donald Cameron (103), "I realized quite quickly that what really grabbed me the most, what I really would like to do the most in a novel, was to, as far as possible, present the living individual on the printed page, in all his paradox and all his craziness."

<sup>30</sup> Robert Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes" in *Selected Poems of Robert Frost*, 1-4.

<sup>31</sup> Laurence's appreciation of Somali culture and religion, so entirely different from what she had known growing up in Manitoba, was in sharp contrast to the negative attitudes toward Somalis and a strong sense of superiority which were common among many of the English in the protectorate. See *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, chapter 14 as well as pp. 16, 25, 88.

In *A Tree for Poverty* she provides a context for and an explanation of Somali customs and values. However, it is important to note as well that Laurence not only had English speakers in mind, but also educated Somalis since her remarks in some cases are germane only to them, eg., distinctions among various tribes, camels etc. In *A Tree for Poverty* Laurence frequently discusses various features of the Somali language. This concern with words, with making meaning, comes round full circle from *A Tree for Poverty* (1954) to Laurence's last novel *The Diviners* (1974) in which Morag's preoccupation with language is central to the book.

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## WINDOW DISPLAY

*J. D. Carpenter*

Bloodroot  
Mandrake

Manna  
Tansy

Cyani  
Plantain

Pennyroyal  
Peppermint

Coltsfoot  
Corn Silk

Cramp Bark  
Cranesbill

Haircap  
Bogbean