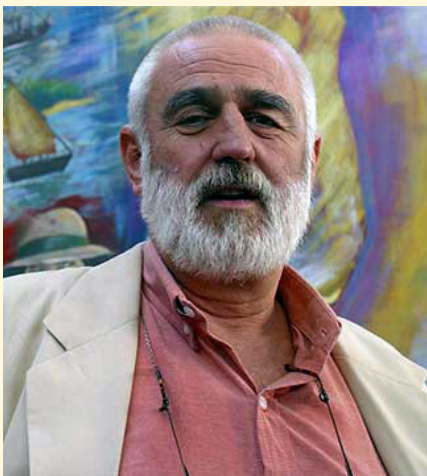


MAFALDA

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREW GRAHAM-YOOLL,
TRANSLATOR OF THE FAMOUS ARGENTINE COMIC STRIP
BY TONY BECKWITH



MAFALDA and QUINO



Andrew Graham-Yooll

Mafalda is an extraordinary phenomenon. Created by the Argentine cartoonist Joaquín Salvador Lavado—better known by his pen name, Quino—it first appeared in a Buenos Aires magazine in 1964. Mafalda, the eponymous main character of the strip, is a 6-year-old girl who, in brief conversations with her family and friends, provides wry commentary on the daily life of Argentina's struggling middle class (among other topics of varying depth). The strip became a huge success in Argentina and throughout the Spanish-speaking world, and Quino kept on producing it for the next ten years. It has been translated into over thirty languages¹ and, to this day, has devoted fans all over the world.

Andrew Graham-Yooll was born in Buenos Aires in 1944, of a Scottish father and an English mother. He is the author of about thirty books, in English and in Spanish, including the now-classic A State of Fear: Memories of Argentina's Nightmare (Eland, 1985). He joined the English-language newspaper The Buenos Aires Herald in 1966, but left ten years later when he had to go into exile during Argentina's military dictatorship, and settled in the UK. In Britain, he worked for The Daily Telegraph and The Guardian, and covered the Malvinas/Falkland Islands war in 1982. In 1989 he was appointed editor of Index on Censorship magazine (1989–1993). In 1994 he returned to Argentina and The Buenos Aires Herald, where he became editor and chairman of the board. He left the Herald in 2007 to become the Ombudsman at the Buenos Aires weekly Perfil, where he remained until 2013.

During his time in London he was also a Press Fellow at Wolfson College, University of Cambridge (1993–1994). In 2002, he was made a member of the Order of the British Empire (OBE). He has translated Argentine poetry and plays into English, and British and US poets and playwrights into Spanish.

Let's start with the fundamental question: What is humor?

It is the light relief essential to any language, resorted to for the possibility of reducing seriousness in any and every circumstance or, simply, a form of entertainment.

Do you believe each culture has its own kind of humor?

Each culture and every subculture therein has to have its own brand of humor because that helps to convey certain aspects of particular groups that are usually expressive of a way of life and, more often, a way of enduring and overcoming difficult circumstances.

Have you ever written humor, or used humor somehow in your work?

I've never intentionally written humor, but often there is humor in certain moments and the way they are reported. Humor can spring from the way in which something is presented or written.

Do you regularly read the comics in the paper?

No longer regularly. I used to start reading the paper from the back, so always got to the comics first. The Internet changed my reading habits, even after working in a newsroom most of my life.

Which are your favorites?

The Herald used to print *Mutt & Jeff* and *Peanuts* (US), and they were always my favorites until *Andy Capp* (UK) came along. All were reflections of society in some way or another. *Peanuts*, of course, was seen as intellectual food.

Have you always been a *Mafalda* fan?

Mafalda started in the early 1960s and ran and ran. I met its creator, Quino towards the end of that decade when I interviewed him, and we remained sort of friends. But well before that meeting my wife and I enjoyed *Mafalda* in the *El Mundo* newspaper and in one of the weekly magazines. *Mafalda*'s life was a running commentary on the world around us and, at that time, the Cold War. She had an extraordinary ability to see things as they really were. "Everybody" read her.

What is the secret of *Mafalda*'s success, locally and throughout Latin America?

Mafalda's success, in the early days, was based on her ability to criticize just about everything that was part of our daily life without being branded a subversive by the military regimes of various different stripes that controlled the country in the 1960s. She had something for everybody in Latin America. And as the decades passed, we learned that she was timeless.

What comic strip would be *Mafalda*'s equivalent in the USA?

The character is reminiscent of the *Nancy* cartoon—if only because of the round mop of hair. The strip owes next to nothing to *Peanuts*, but many people in the English-speaking world see a similarity between *Mafalda* and the Lucy character. These opinions must therefore be taken into account, whether one agrees with the comparison or not.



How much of *Mafalda* is a product of Argentina, and specifically of Buenos Aires?

Mafalda's struggling middle-class family could be seen as a reflection of life in Buenos Aires in the 1960s: the man working his life away in an office to buy a Citroën 2CV, the jargon of the passers-by (mainly older men), and some specific political references. But the beauty of *Mafalda* was that she was born international or, at any rate, Latin American.

Did the strip continue to appear during the repressive years of the Argentine dictatorships? How did Quino handle that situation?

Quino went to live in Italy. He chose exile rather than the silent survival that so many other Latin Americans had to accept. He liked Milan. But by the 1976 dictatorship, which was the most brutal, he had stopped drawing the *Mafalda* strip. His other cartoons, the single panel variety,

contained far stronger political and social commentary. In any case, his fame was based on *Mafalda's* huge popularity, and the military disliked him for that (although many officers had actually been fed *Mafalda* in their teens and beyond).

A well-made comic strip is a work of art. It is not unreasonable to say that the military were oblivious to the fact that they were perceived throughout Latin America and elsewhere as being terrified of a good set of humorous drawings. If the military had understood quality art, then history might well have been different. The fact that a comic strip can be good art makes it a strong critical weapon.

Would you say that *Mafalda* is the voice of a fairly broad cross-section of the Argentine public? Or is it broader than that?

In its heyday the *Mafalda* strip had two million readers in Argentina, a swath of society that was considered to be the middle class. However, the little lady now represents all sorts and all classes. Some of the revolutionaries in those days may not have read the strip, but her image was often used on rebel posters and at demonstrations.

Politics can be very local, and yet *Mafalda's* appeal is virtually universal, especially in the Spanish-speaking world. How does Quino pull that off?

Quino is a man of his time, although shy and withdrawn. He had this idea, which began as an advertisement he was commissioned to design and then the commission was withdrawn. So the character was born into the consumer market, and it grew from there.

Now let's talk more specifically about the translation and your involvement in the project. How and when did it start? Who called you?

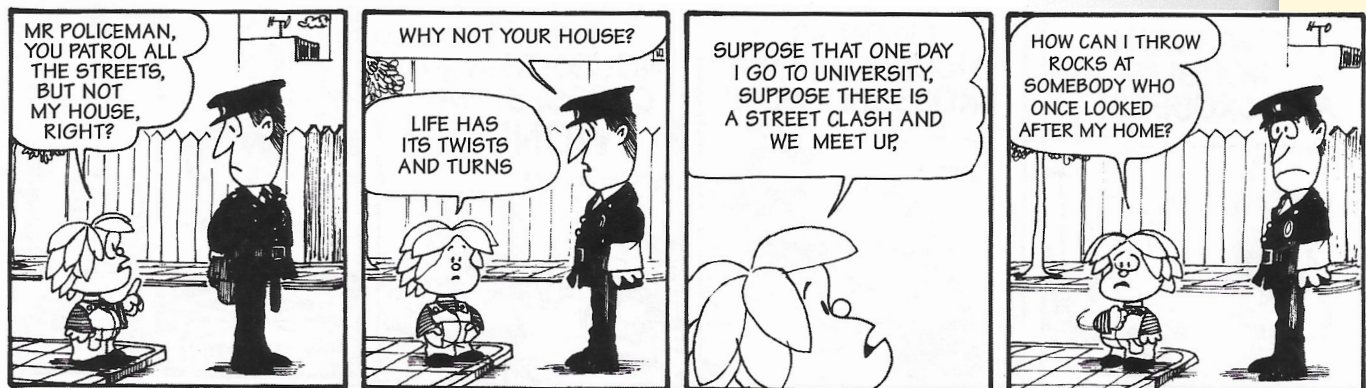
I am not a full-time translator, but I liked the challenge of *Mafalda*. However, I could not take it on at the time because I was too involved in running the newsroom at the Buenos Aires Herald. A polite refusal was all I could offer. Then Quino and his publisher, Daniel Divinsky, came

back with the idea that I should be the “supervisor” until I was under less newsroom pressure. It was an opportunity that could not be ignored, especially since it came from the artist-author himself. The back-room work of supervising the English translation started in 2003, and I took over as translator in 2007.

You worked as a translator earlier in your career. Please tell us about your previous literary translation projects.

My feelings about translation are easily explained. I did not want to be full-time because I was afraid to make mistakes, because I had no training. I had my other job, in a newsroom, which I loved. So many people, at least in my part of the world, say they are translators and their offerings are atrocious. Translation quality is getting better, but still there is a lot of work that is quite poor, especially when government employees claim they can do the job. *Mafalda*, however, was a challenge that demanded one’s best effort.

Given my history as a copy-editor in the newsroom, whenever I look at an article I start thinking about how to improve the text, right or



wrong. Every writer contemplates changes in their copy, and translation involves rewriting other people's writings. Perhaps the exercise is best described as a transfer from one language to another, and that means changes. It became obvious to me that I should avoid translating. I did not even translate my own books, in either direction because I spent so much time wondering if the words were adequate, if they improved the text, or if the change was even necessary.

I translated five plays from the Theater for Identity series created by the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a protest group in Buenos Aires that works to learn the identities of children stolen from their captive mothers, many of whom were later murdered, by the military dictatorship in the 1970s. The English versions were published in Britain by Index on Censorship magazine, and then staged at a north-London theater. After completing the ten *Mafalda* books, I was asked to translate another comic strip—about a cat called *Gaturro*—by Nik (the Argentine artist Cristian Dzwonik), and am currently at Book 4.

I have translated two books of poetry by Argentine writers, and compiled two bilingual anthologies of Argentine poetry in English. I translated into Spanish a book of poems by the English playwright Harold Pinter. I have sometimes had to translate my own articles into Spanish or English, but I always seem to make a huge meal out of it. I want to rewrite it from scratch, which is time-consuming for me and, quite rightly, annoying to those who have approached me to get something translated. It just takes too much time, so these days I prefer to refuse.

When you translate, which is your preferred direction, from English to Spanish or vice versa?

I am one of those cross-cultural products of empire, an Anglo-Argentine. I am proud of my two cultures and enjoy using both. I therefore move easily from one language to the other. We should all have two languages, it is a genuine response to the way the world works. It makes us better able to communicate in our two tongues, which is a starting point for learning more.



Please tell us about your preparation and process for the *Mafalda* project. Did you have a sort of checklist of aspects that you considered as you absorbed the words and images and the “message” of the text? Did you have any sort of classifying system based on subject matter or environment? Did you have set priorities to regulate the selection of what might have to be left out?

I cannot think of *Mafalda* as a project. It started as a test, almost a game for me, and moved on from there. To be honest, it was something that happened rather than something that was planned. I am sure that what I translated some years back will soon be picked up by others and changed, improved, expanded. Language moves, and translations shift with social changes. The language—the bubble dialogue of the comic strip—will have to adjust to the times when each remark is expressed in another language, even if the original Spanish never changes.

In preparation for translating *Mafalda* I researched several books, including Lawrence Venuti’s *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (Routledge, 1995) and Giovanni Pontiero’s *The Translator’s Dialogue*, edited by Pilar Orero & Juan C. Sager (Benjamins, 1997). But

none of them had what I was looking for, which was advice on how to translate humor. The subject was mentioned a few times, but never in any depth.

The “message” of *Mafalda*, I think, is to entertain readers in a contemporary context. Words are chosen and put on a shelf, and from there each statement, each remark is shaped, as the translator and then the reader select what shape they want to give the dialogue.

Not much was left out because most of it could be adapted. There were only one or two strips that I found politically “incorrect” and out of step with the kind of changes that happen in every language.

Who else was involved in the process?

The first five books were translated by Terry Cullen, a very able translator. I took over later, after the early “supervision” stage, at the request of the author and the publisher.

Did you have someone to bounce things off?

No, but comments did flood in after the first and second books. This was good, because it meant that a large number of anonymous readers were out there watching, and they were not inclined to be courteous in their comments.

Some Argentine Spanish is very autonomous. Did you have trouble finding universal ways in which to express certain very local expressions?

This is where language becomes a living, free body. It is possible to dig up words with wide-ranging usage and meanings, but they must accurately reflect the original. It was great fun to search for just the right words, though some readers may feel I did not dig deeply enough. In some cases (fiction, poetry, humor, etc.), translation is a stiff and incomplete word; I prefer the idea of a language transfer.

Were some of the challenges of this project reminiscent of translating poetry? The brevity of the text, for example?

The brevity of the bubble text might be the only part that compares to a line of poetry. Otherwise, I prefer to think that each goes its own way. The comparison might appear to be in the use of encompassing words, which is so beautiful when done well in poetry, but I prefer to think of the comic strip as something different.

The translation of that bubble text sometimes sounds British. Was that a conscious marketing choice, or does it sound that way because that's the English you naturally speak?

The translation sounds British at times because that was what the author wanted and what I have always used. I think what we sought to create was a kind of mid-Atlantic style which I agree does not always work.

You also had to deal with the historical time factor. *Mafalda* first appeared in 1964; much has changed since then, adding another layer to what a translator has to deal with.

There were numerous "dated" words that clearly belonged in another age. For example, references to computers, PCs, notebooks, etc. In those days in Argentina, IBM was the only computer manufacturer, and everybody referred to computers as "la IBM". Keep in mind, too, that the strips were published during the Vietnam War, U Thant was the UN Secretary General, and so on. In each case the language and names had to be brought up to date or silenced in some way.

What was the hardest part about the *Mafalda* project?

Parting with the copy. At times I drove the publisher daft trying to explain that I absolutely needed to rethink one word on page 52 or wherever. That is not acceptable in commercial publishing. So they would send someone on a bike to fetch the copy, and I kept whinging about being unsure until the package had left my hands.

What was the greatest reward?

As always, seeing the product in print.

Is Quino still producing comic strips?

Quino no longer produces *Mafalda* or any other comic strip. He is like many of us oldies who wonder about the continuing success of *Mafalda*. It is still in bookstores and on newsstands.

One final question: do you think you can be objective enough to say whether *Mafalda* is as funny in English as it is in Spanish?

I can't be objective. People express their own opinions and may be credible, but are not necessarily objective. I think *Mafalda* in Spanish is seriously funny, which explains the strip's original appeal. I would not argue that my translation is as good as Quino's original simply because it is not the original. Quino is the inventor, I cannot improve on his work; hence *Mafalda* is funnier in Spanish. Humor is partly a product of its background. When transferred to another environment it might not be so funny. So, it is reasonable to say that a translation can work but not have the same impact as the original.

NOTES

- ¹ The English version appeared as a series of books, *Mafalda & Friends*, published by Ediciones de la Flor in Buenos Aires.

