

The Literature of Georgia: A History. By DONALD RAYFIELD. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1994.

xvi + 360 pp. £35.00.

reviewed by: Kevin Tuite

I had been waiting for this book for quite some time. For too long the poetry and prose of the Georgian people of Transcaucasia has been a pleasure garden which few foreigners have explored. The author, Donald Rayfield, is eminently qualified to introduce the general English-reading public to Georgian literature. He has a solid knowledge of both Georgian and Russian, and an acquaintance with the primary and secondary literature which surpasses that of even some Georgian specialists. In commending The Literature of Georgia to the readership of this journal I want to emphasize that Rayfield's work will be of value not only to those who have no access to the vast Georgian-language critical and philological corpus, but likewise to those who do.

The book contains thirty-one chapters grouped into five parts, corresponding to major periods in Georgian literature: I. The Classical Age (5th — 11th centuries); II. The Golden Age and its aftermath (12th — 18th centuries); III. The Romantic Period (19th century); IV. Vazha-Pshavela and folk poetry (1880-1914); V. The Twentieth Century. The first three parts, touching on Old Georgian hagiography and hymns, the great courtly poets of the 12th and 13th centuries, and both major and minor figures from the periods leading up to the Soviet conquest of Georgia, provide an excellent orientation to both beginning readers and those already starting into the vast body of medieval Georgian writing. Part IV is the only one centered around an individual writer, and it is an appropriate choice: the mountaineer poet Vazha-Pshavela is indeed, as Rayfield writes, 'qualitatively of a greater magnitude than any other Georgian writer' (p 207). The discussion of Vazha's oeuvre is illustrated by numerous extracts rendered into English, many of them coming from Rayfield's fine blank-verse translations of three of Vazha's greatest long poems, published in Tbilisi [Vazha-Pshavela: Three Poems, Ganatleba Publishers, 1981].

Part V, dealing with the Soviet and post-Soviet periods (up to the restoration of Shevardnadze in 1992), will be of interest to novices and experts alike. Rayfield was one of the first researchers to

gain access to recently-declassified Soviet archives on the 1937 show trials of Georgian writers stage-managed by Beria. The analysis of the trials, and of how some writers — including the openly recalcitrant Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, father of the late Georgian president — survived the holocaust, is compelling reading, and in itself sufficient *raison d'être* for this book. Of the individual writers treated by Rayfield, I was especially pleased with the appreciation of Galaktion Tabidze, accompanied, as was that of Vazha-Pshavela, with copious and finely-done translations. On the other hand, I would hesitate to characterize the Futurist writer Simon Chikovani as 'the most original Georgian poet of the century' (p 292). Chikovani's use of nonsense-syllables and rich assonance, which reminded Rayfield of Khlebnikov, reminds me more of the charms recited by village healers to cure snake-bite or ward off the evil eye. No doubt Chikovani is highly original, but as is the case with many Georgian poets, from the immortal Rustaveli on down, one important source of inspiration has been the rich oral literature of the Caucasus [see Luigi Magarotto 'Avanguardia e folclore (Osservazioni sulla poesia di S. Čikovani)' Bedi Kartlisa, Revue de Kartvélogie, vol. XL, pp 344-352, 1982; and this reviewer's An Anthology of Georgian Folk Poetry, London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1994].

The final chapter discusses some writers of the 80's and 90's, concluding, curiously, with Jaba Ioseliani, who would take occasional breaks from thuggery and power-broking to write. 'The work has talent enough to give hope that Jaba Ioseliani will abandon his career as a war-lord and return to literature', writes Rayfield. Now that Ioseliani has been ousted from the Shevardnadze regime, he may well have no other choice.

To sum up, all sections of the book are thoroughly-researched, and composed in a witty, readable style all too rare in scholarly writing. Rayfield does not pull his punches, either: Some readers might wince at his reference to 'the vulgar, melodramatic prose of Aleksandre Qazbegi' (p 154), or his assertion that the 19th-century prose writer Grigol Rcheulishvili 'bequeathed to Georgian novelists a deplorable formula of carelessly researched history and meretricious romance ...' (p 166), but Rayfield seldom dispenses such comments without justification. The only lack worth remarking in The Literature of Georgia was of examples of Georgian poetry in the original,

especially in the case of poets noted for their musicality or linguistic pyrotechnics. One would have liked a transliterated illustration of the hypnotic rhyme schemes of the 12th-century court poet Grigol Chakhrukhadze, who sang of Queen Tamar ‘*xma-narnari, p’ir-mcinari // mze-mcinari, sačinari, c’q’ali mknari, momdinari ...*’ [of soothing voice, smiling face // smiling sun, visible to all, rushing water, flowing by ...], or of the heady, seductive verse of Besiki (*t’ano-t’at’ano, gulc’amt’ano, ucxod marebo! // zilpo, k’avebo, momk’lavebo, versak’arebo ...* [Meteor body, enthralling, strangely driving! // Forelocks, curls, killers, untouchable ...]).

And of course, the Georgians continue to write prose, and to compose and consume poetry, despite the poverty, instability and anomie that the post-Soviet period has brought them. While visiting Tbilisi this summer, I encountered several young writers, including a few who might well be included in the second edition of Rayfield’s book. The philologist Vakhushti Kotetishvili collected numerous poems from mountaineers who continue the oral literary forms of their ancestors [see his collection Leksis tkma mc’adis ertisa, Tbilisi: Nak’aduli, 1987], and the urban poet Kote Kubaneishvili comments in verse on the news of the day:

*ic’q’eba isev t’q’viebis cvena, // eterši rčeba rusuli ena,  
gadzvirebula kerī da kat’o, // gasašvebulad ver modis nat’o ...*  
Once again bullets begin to fall, // the Russian language remains on the air,  
Barley and bran have gone up in price, // NATO cannot come to liberate ...

Some final comments on packaging: The book is very attractively bound and typeset. The names of Georgian writers and the titles of their works are given in both transliteration and in Georgian script. Appended to the text is a bibliography of selected references to primary and secondary sources, and a thorough index of proper names.

Kevin Tuite  
Département d’anthropologie  
Université de Montréal