

CHRISTOPHER MACLEHOSE

The champion of translated fiction who struck it rich with Stieg Larsson
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As the young literary editor of *The Scotsman* in the mid-1960s, Christopher MacLehose proudly commissioned a series of two-page articles on the post-war novel in various countries. Germany, Italy, France, Japan and the Netherlands all received their due. Then one day his editor stopped him in the corridor. ‘Christopher,’ he said, ‘the North Vietnamese novel – more than half a page and you’re fired.’

Since his metamorphosis into a publisher, MacLehose has met many others baffled by his love of foreign literature. But as the man who discovered Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* – after fifteen British and American publishers had turned it down – he has had the last laugh. Several million copies of Larsson’s trilogy later, the MacLehose Press is in a position to publish what it chooses.

Not that you would guess this from visiting its headquarters – a terraced house in North London which doubles as the publisher’s home. Instead of PAs and marketing men, MacLehose is attended by his dog, a bouncy Hungarian Vizsla to whom he speaks in French. Our interview takes place in a small, elegant drawing-room with an upright piano, invigilated by wooden ducks.

Tall, angular and quietly spoken, MacLehose seems more relaxed with animals than with people. But if the grey eyes behind his spectacles do not readily make contact, he is not shy about voicing his opinions: he has, for example, lambasted the British for ‘a catastrophic want of curiosity’ about overseas writers.

Books are in his blood: the Glasgow-based MacLehose family were first booksellers, then publishers. As a student at Oxford, Christopher jeopardised his degree by arriving 29 minutes late for a final exam: he had been reading one of P.G. Wodehouse’s novels, ‘and I knew it would distract me terribly if I

didn't finish it.' A few years later he found himself publishing Wodehouse for the Cresset Press: 'It was a total delight.'

MacLehose went on to become editorial director of Chatto & Windus, then editor-in-chief of William Collins. But the mass market did not appeal to him: 'You were more or less required to publish Jackie Collins. Her books may be bestsellers, and she's a perfectly nice woman, but they are drivel.' In 1984 it was suggested that he take charge of the more recherché Harvill imprint, which he did with alacrity. Over the next dozen years he built up a formidable list, two-thirds of it translated, including classics other publishers had allowed to fall into abeyance: *Dr Zhivago*, *The Leopard*, *The Master and Margarita*, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. But the money men continued to torment him ('The last straw came when we were only allowed to reprint *Ivan Denisovich* because it was thin and inexpensive') and in 1995 he led a management buy-out of Harvill.

The following seven years were a golden time for MacLehose. With Richard Ford, Raymond Carver, W.G. Sebald, José Saramago, Georges Perec, Claudio Magris and P.O. Enquist among his authors, his credentials as a publisher were second to none. But then Harvill was taken over, and two years later MacLehose found himself out in the cold – until Quercus offered him his own imprint. MacLehose Press now publishes books in eighteen languages. 'It's madness, obviously,' he says: 'but it's blissful, and it works, even without the phenomenon that is Stieg Larsson. I think people in England have discovered of late that there's no reason to back off translations, though of course they're expensive and require much more attention to detail.'

How, though, does he find books in languages he does not speak? 'The chief secret is to have a wife who is French, with Greek as her first language, bilingual Italian, passable Spanish and rather good English.' Koukla MacLehose acts as a scout for eighteen publishers around the globe, recommending works for them to translate – and receiving their recommendations in return. 'So books come in from all over the world in little

droves,’ says her husband, ‘and you have to find readers and make up your mind. Many of the readers are translators, and it’s important that they know not just the language but the literature.’

He also listens to the opinions of his authors, who include Umberto Eco and Philippe Claudel: ‘If every publisher simply had a list reflecting his own taste, what a dull thing that would be!’

The next challenge is to choose the right translator: ‘It’s a matter of years to find the ones you really trust.’ The tale of *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow* is a cautionary one. The original translation from Danish was commissioned by an American publisher; when MacLehose bought the British rights, he sent it to the author, Peter Høeg, for comment. ‘Peter, who speaks very good English, wrote an entire new novel, writing between the lines and about three times round the edge of every single page. So I took a very deep breath and sent a photocopy to the translator, who went mad.’ Three months of discussion followed, resulting in what Høeg wanted – ‘a much more lively, visually exact text.’ As a result you can read two quite different versions of the novel, depending on whether you buy it in Britain or America.

Some are surprised that a man as high-minded as MacLehose takes a strong interest in crime novels. But, he says, ‘It’s a way into another culture. A crime series set in Vilnius can tell you much more than you would otherwise discover about what’s happening in that very interesting part of the world.’

Translating Stieg Larsson was another challenge. The first English version of his trilogy was produced in only eleven months, at the instigation of a film company who wanted it in a great hurry. MacLehose bought the books on the understanding that they could be edited without interference from the translator – who just happened to be married to the irate translator of *Miss Smilla* – and devoted months of his own time to polishing them. He would, he says, have loved to work with the author, but tragically Larsson was already dead. MacLehose’s one regret is having had to change Larsson’s original title,

Men Who Hate Women: ‘I was perfectly happy to use it, but the message came back from the bookshops, “Please don’t”.’

It is too soon to say whether *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* will permanently change British attitudes. MacLehose is still exercised by ‘the famous 3 per cent figure’ – the proportion of British-published books made up by translations. But there is another side of the coin: ‘Over the past year, translations have accounted for 40 per cent of titles on the bestseller lists. It gives inspiration – and, unquestionably, it gives hope.’