

James Gow & Cathie Carmichael. *Slovenia and the Slovenes: A Small State in the New Europe.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000. xi + 234 pp., \$39.95 (cloth). ISBN: 0253336635.

A cartoon in *The New Yorker*: a cheapo tourist bus and the driver-cum-guide, instead of alerting the crowd to the Empire State Building and such, is pointing out highlights of his life, something like this: “Look, over there is where I went to grade school. Around the corner here, I broke my leg because Billy, the neighbor kid, tripped me. Etc.” The tourists, as if kidnapped, sit there cross-eyed and follow the spiel. If you will allow, let me for just the tiniest paragraph, introduce you in a similar way to our book.

The authors quote me four times. Three times incorrectly. In Seattle in 1997, I’m supposed to have explained why Slovenia did not get into NATO, quote “on to the dream piste of Europe” (8). Never in my life have I in an English sentence pronounced the word “piste.” I didn’t even know, ignorant as I am, that it was an English word until I just looked it up. I did however the other day on our very own Rožnik scream in my best Quebecois “Piisstte” at an idiot in my path. The authors clearly got lost in their jottings. They also say that in the same Seattle I said that a Kocbek poem that appeared in *The New York Review of Books* was badly translated (90). Nope! What I said was that the poem was bad in the original and thus equally bad in a perfect translation. “So what?” I hear the voice of my mother say. Well, I’ll tell you. I can either be a typical paranoid Slovenian and say they misquoted only me, on purpose, or I can become skeptical about the rest of the book. Oh yes, they also misquote a part of my translation of Kocbek’s “In the seminar.” I am said to have translated thusly: “We Slovenes would need to jump from such a height we would all be killed” (76). As I am allergic to *Slovene*, I, of course, wrote “We Slovenians.”

Speaking of *Slovene*—for the two of them even the adjective is *Slovene*, though not consistently. Their inconsistency is happy-making proof that the naturally lovely word *Slovenian* bursts into bloom to replace the monstrous *Slovene* as soon as the authors forget to remember. But fine, let’s play linguist. How do you get *Croats* out of *Croatia*? You take *Croatia*, chop the *-ia*, and add *s*. Let’s do the same for Slovenia, chopping the *-ia* and adding *s*. Oops, apparently that makes the people

Slovens. The *e* was tacked on out of charity. Relax, relax: you're in fact Slovenians.

Speaking of slovenliness. The scholars provide no bibliography, but of footnotes there is a sea. Let's look at the very first. Number one in the intro hovers behind some words of Vitomil Zupan's. But when one looks at the reference at the bottom of the page, the guy there is Jože Pirjevec. You say to yourself, Who can figure the ways of scholars? and forget about it. But when you start into the next chapter, there the first footnote is the same one that made no sense as the first note in the introduction. This time it makes sense. A simple undergraduate mistake is all it was. About sources, let me add just this. The authors, for example, say that after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the newspaper *Slovenec* "reportedly published the words to a song in which the call was to 'hang the Serbs from the trees'" (27). Why "reportedly"? Because for the authors the source of this is secondary, *La Slovénie*, by Castellan and Bernard. So why didn't they simply go check a few issues of *Slovenec*?

Then the names. We know who's hiding under the following, but what about the intended foreign reader? Thus: Leonid Pitamac, Franc Leskošec, Novi Kolektivizem, Plavo Garde, Belo Garde, Peter Kovočič Peršin, Jožef Skolc, Podoba Evropejska Naroda, Stanko Vraž, Žarja, Ivo Bižjak, Lojže Petrle. Typos? Yes and no. Because once they decide that, for instance Peterle is Lojže, they stick with it. Hey, Brits with their *s* where the *z* should be—*organise*, not *organize*—are nervous about the *z*. Imagine how the *z* spooks 'em. Still, let's not be too sensitive. Your Croats apparently have a bay of Quanero and, in August 1994, the Italians had a foreign minister named Beniamino Andreotta. "Hmm," I hmed at the latter and checked. The foreign minister in Berlusconi's government in August 1994 was Antonio Martino. So we ain't even just talking spelling here.

As to the English: used to American grammatical precision, one understands, reading this English book, why Sir Trevor McDonald, a man of the colonies, started his Better English campaign. "We have become careless about our language," quoth Sir Trevor, "while the whole world is rushing to learn it." Their real challenge is the dangling modifier. Look at this classic: "As a country already trading heavily with EU members, accession offered major opportunities, but it also held challenges" (209). Sorry, "accession" cannot be a "country." Only Slovenia can be that in the sentence. Fine, so let's say that finding even

dozens of these is just nit-picking. But what of the sentence that I already partly quoted: “Such is this commitment to Slovene literature and poetry that the remark of one commentator that, for Slovenes, the reason ‘Slovenia didn’t get into NATO, on to the dream piste of Europe’ was because those making decisions in NATO ‘didn’t know this stuff’—i.e. Slovenian poetry has to be seen as only ironic” (8). Sic. What does that mean? Half of my department has read it and we haven’t a clue. The context, by the way, does not help.

All this slovenliness is too bad, because the book has potential. Let me present but a few of their genial moves towards introducing Slovenia. Yes, indeed, Jurij Dalmatin’s bible did for Slovenian in the sixteenth century what the King James did for English in the seventeenth (63). And precisely, Plečnik in Ljubljana is like Gaudi in Barcelona or Wright in Oak Park or Mackintosh in Glasgow (69). They explain Cankar’s Jernej beautifully and use him nicely as a symbol of all Slovenians (72–73). Next time they should add Krpan. And not only do they precisely describe *Mladina* as an “amalgam of *The Economist*, *Newsweek*, *Private Eye*, the *National Enquirer*, and *Time Out*” (95), but they also say, with clear admiration, that *Mladina* at its best had “cultural salience of which the others could not dream” (96). And this; how dangerous was it in Slovenia during the other Yugoslav wars? The Slovenians, our authors say to an ignorant world with obvious relish, were safer than the inhabitants of London (121).

I especially like them when they are telling Slovenians off. For instance on the subject of the excuses for why Slovenia did not get into NATO, or on the subject of Slovenian badmouthing of Yugoslavia and hosannaing Europe. I know they couch it carefully in the third person, but I can just imagine how much they longed to spit this out directly at someone:

If the tenets of communism regarding the status and preservation of ethnic communities in Yugoslavia could not satisfy the Slovenes, then they were unlikely to find their experience in the wider world more reassuring. Both ideologically and practically, communist Yugoslavia was a greenhouse for Slovenia and the Slovenes. Inside an integrating Europe, they will have to battle far harder than they did in Yugoslavia to ensure ‘national survival’ in traditional terms (217).

In moments such as these, the book comes to life, agree or not. They know Slovenians so well, they've clearly had it up to here.

And clearly they also like Slovenia and Slovenians. The concluding sentence is downright moving: "The challenge is to make cosmopolitan openness a part of *Slovenstvo* and so preserve it" (219). Honorary Slovenians, they've even started to write in the lingo. But there are even clearer signs of their Slovenianness. They say that, as a result of history, the typical Slovenian believes he is ruled by inexorable outside sources. And it is this quality they seemingly share with Slovenians. For—while the theme from *The Twilight Zone* doubtless plays in the background—they devote a whole substantial footnote to the "curious" fact that Slovenians seem to have been exclusively ruled by people with names beginning with K: Kardelj, Kidrič, Kavčič, Kraigher, Kučan (51). The occasion for the footnote was, of course, Korošec. Unfortunately they have forgotten about Kristus and the last Emperor, Karl; they have ignored the fact that Drnovšek's name ends with K, that Tito was born in Kumrovec, and that, if Cathie were Slovenian, she would be Katica. In short, they know Slovenia so well, they've caught a touch of Slovenianness.

But, finally, the book is so unfinished. I know why my students use crutches such as "as will be shown below" and "as was seen earlier," but surely profs can do better. What's the hurry anyway. Can't authors take the time to turn interesting notes into an organic whole? Slovenia will still be here for a few years, won't it? I know all about the pressure of "publish or perish," but still. Listen, this would have been a good book had the authors taken another six months and found themselves a good editor. In the sea of thanks at the start, there seems to be everybody but an editor. I mean, it's nice that they like Slovenia and that they know the people all too well, but did Slovenia really deserve this slovenliness? Did it?

Unfortunately, yes! Because how many English-speakers are queuing to write a book about the Slovenians? Competition is a guarantee of quality in "writing" too. Let a truer Slovenian write a more grateful review. Me, I'm waiting for Erica Johnson's *Tujka* to appear in its original American.

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