

# Found in translation

## How Sanskrit version of Don Quixote was saved from obscurity

**Sam Jones**  
Madrid

There is an adjective that all too invitingly describes the wildly optimistic endeavours of the American book collector, the Hungarian-British explorer and the two Kashmiri pandits who, almost a century ago, took it upon themselves to translate Don Quixote into Sanskrit. Today, the word quixotic might equally be applied to the efforts of the Bulgarian-born Indologist and Tibetologist who has rescued their text from decades of oblivion.

In 1935, the wealthy American businessman and book collector Carl Tilden Keller - whose shelves already boasted Mongolian and Icelandic translations of Cervantes's masterpiece - embarked on a quest to have some of the book rendered into an Indian language. To do so, he enlisted the help of his friend Sir Marc Aurel Stein, an eminent archaeologist and explorer who knew India well.

"I am frank enough to admit that while I recognise the childishness of this desire of mine I am still extremely interested in having it carried out," Keller wrote to Stein in November 1935.

Dr Dragomir Dimitrov, the editor of a new dual English and Sanskrit edition that will be presented at the Instituto Cervantes in Delhi today, puts it a little more bluntly: "Keller was aware that it was quite crazy, but he was willing to get the strange translation."

The collector knew that the learned and well-connected Stein would know the right men for the job - and indeed he did. On Keller's behalf, he commissioned his friend the Kashmiri pandit - or Sanskrit scholar - Nityanand Shastri to undertake the translation.

Despite being paralysed by a stroke, Shastri agreed and recruited another pandit, Jagadhar Zadoo, to be his co-translator.

Having no Spanish, the two scholars worked from an 18th century English translation of Quixote by the Irish painter and translator Charles Jarvis.

Almost exactly two years after Keller first expressed his childish desire, the pandits' labours were complete and Keller had eight chapters of the first part of Don Quixote in what Dimitrov describes as a "sweet and very precise Sanskrit".

When Keller died in 1955, the Sanskrit Quixote joined the collector's many other treasures in a bequeathal to Harvard University. There it lay forgotten in the university library until 2012 when Dimitrov, spurred on by a 2002 article on the book written by Shastri's grandson, hunted it out and began thinking of identifying the English version used for the translation.

Then came plans for a bilingual, side-by-side edition of Sanskrit and 18th century English, accompanied by a Sanskrit audiobook and music.

The new version, which was published by Pune University's Indological Series, got a little lost when it emerged in 2019, not long before the Covid pandemic hit.



▲ The translation of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote into Sanskrit* sprung from a quest by book collector Carl Tilden Keller

**'What we have is the world's first modern novel rendered into one of the world's oldest languages'**

**Óscar Pujol**  
Instituto Cervantes

According to Óscar Pujol, the director of the Instituto Cervantes in Delhi, the idea of today's presentation is to give the feat of scholarship and love the attention it deserves.

"A manuscript is a very fragile thing, especially if no one knows that it exists," he says. "What we have here is the world's first modern novel - one of the most read and published books in the world - rendered into one of the oldest languages in the world. I can't explain what it means to have this translation."

For Dimitrov, assistant professor at the Philipps University of Marburg in Germany, the text is both a "fascinating and very high-



▲ Pandit Nityanand Shastri helped with the translation into Sanskrit

quality" piece of translation and "an inter-cultural project".

But the letters between Stein and Keller, which are also published in the book, speak eloquently of their passion for the project despite - or perhaps because of - the horrors that were approaching.

Dimitrov says: "You have the energy and the impetus and the goodwill to do this, but war was coming and Stein was travelling from Oxford via Germany and he saw what was coming; what the Nazis were already preparing.

"He was of Jewish origin and while he didn't suffer himself, his family did. He was quite aware of the bad times, but still they had this will to explore and to make all these intellectual efforts. I found that quite amazing."

Similarly thrilled is Shastri's grandson, Surindar Nath Pandita, whose article and family lore set Dimitrov off in search of the mad knight's Kashmiri wanderings.

"During the late 19th and the 20th century, there was a vibrant interface of scholarship between western scholars and Kashmiri Sanskrit scholars, when much of Kashmir's classical literature was treated by the western hand," says Pandita. "This was an exception because here the west wanted to embellish western literature by the treatment of Kashmiri hands."

For Pandita, the recovery of the "long-forgotten and forlorn manuscript" will also honour the friendships and intellects of the men who dreamed it into existence.

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