

There are some books you pick up whose production is so impressive you can only hope the words live up to its loving values. With the publication of the classic Spanish travel memoir, 'The Transcantabrian' by Juan Pedro Aparicio (translated by Michael Jacobs), you not only get the wonderful words but the lavish watercolours of Jose S-Carralero and Maribel Fraguas, especially commissioned for this edition. On every just off-white (almost cream) page, the reader is transferred to the north of Spain by the wonderful paintings and the words of a man who is interested in all that goes on around him.

Aparicio wrote the original version in 1982, bringing about a change in the name of the narrow-gauge train, which was originally just a coal train, El Hullero. The journey, through the provinces of Vizcaya, Santander, Burgos Palencia and Leon, goes through parts of northern Spain not as frequented by the tourists as the beaches of the Mediterranean and the cities of Madrid and Barcelona.

The book is published by Christie Books - owned by Stuart Christie, a man with a long association with Spain - and Rey Lear, a Madrid publisher. Surprisingly, this is the first time this classic of travel writing has appeared in English. It is long overdue.

Along this journey we meet not just the various drivers of the train, the conductors and other staff, but also those who use it. Aparicio's trip starts in Bilbao in a beautifully named station. "Concordia - what a wonderful name for a station, and in Bilbao of all places!..."

It is a chaotic train, shedding carriages along the way at various stations while taking on new locomotives as well as drivers. It goes through spectacular scenery, which, as happens with these things, no-one seems to have noticed until someone writes about it. The original publication triggered the government into making the line into a tourist train as the demand of commuters dwindled.

The route, renamed The Transcantabrian, starts (or finishes) in Santiago de Compostela (in Galicia) to León (Castile-León), travelling through what is called Green Spain, for eight days and seven nights. Why this has never before been available in English is a mystery.

But the wait has brought us wonderful words and the illustrations that make this book a real joy to pick up, even if you just flip through the paintings.

The Trancantabrian: A Journey on a Coal Train, by Juan Pedro Aparicio

Published by Christie Books/Rey Lear - £24.95

Reviewed by Barry Reynolds