
BACKGROUND BOOKS

PORTUGAL

"Let us hear no more then of Ulysses and Aeneas and their long journeyings, no more of Alexander and Trajan and their famous victories. My theme is the daring and renown of the Portuguese, to whom Neptune and Mars alike give homage."

So declared the 16th-century poet Luis Vaz de Camoens in *The Lusiads*, Portugal's national epic. The *Lusiads* are the sons of the country's mythical first settler, the Roman god Lusus. The poem, modeled on Virgil's *Aeneid*, is a paean to monarchs, mariners, and missionaries, built on the story of Vasco da Gama's 1497-98 voyage to India—which led to Portugal's rise to great wealth.

But first, the nation itself had to arise. As Harold Victor Livermore recounts in *Portugal* (Edinburgh, 1973), cave art shows that western Iberia was visited as early as 18,000 B.C. by the same hunters who roamed France and northern Spain after the Ice Age. The first settlers appear to have come from Andalusia after 4000 B.C.

Sailing west out of the Mediterranean, Phoenician traders set foot on Portugal's shores after 1000 B.C. Later, Celtic farmers and herders moved south from France to the green northwest. They turned some of the hilltop *castros* (forts) they built, or found, into walled cities.

When the Romans, having bested the Carthaginians in Africa and Spain, entered what they called Lusitania after 200 B.C., the natives were ready to resist. Julius Caesar himself, writes Livermore, put down a Lusitanian revolt in A.D. 60. "He operated from Lisbon, whose fidelity he rewarded with the title of Felicitas Julia. It was the only city in the area to enjoy Roman rights."

By the third century, when Emperor Constantine had given it his imprimatur, Christianity had spread to Iberia. After the Fall of Rome, the division of the peninsula that the Romans had called Hispania began.

Germanic barbarians swept down from the north—the Goths into Spain, the Swabians into Lusitania. They adopted not only the Roman administrative structure but also the Roman faith.

Still, Portugal remained remote. In *The Individuality of Portugal* (Univ. of Tex., 1959; Greenwood, 1969), Dan Stanislawski quotes a letter to Saint Fructuosus, in the Portuguese city of Braga, from a Spaniard. The writer tells the priest not to feel "worthy of scorn because you are relegated to the extremity of the west in an ignorant country, as you say, where naught is heard but the sound of tempests."

Eventually, the Swabians came under the sway of the Gothic kings in Toledo. But by the seventh century, the northerners had been pushed aside in most of Iberia by new invaders: Muslim Arabs and Berber tribesmen from North Africa called Moors. Portugal regained its independence in the 12th century, when the Christian Dom Afonso Henriques dislodged the Moors. He named himself Portugal's king in 1139, more than 200 years before a Christian Spain was restored under Ferdinand V and Isabella I.

The Portuguese Seaborne Empire: 1415-1825 (Knopf, 1969), by Charles Ralph Boxer, is a lively narrative of the country's overseas expansion. Lay readers will find William C. Atkinson's translation of *The Lusiads* (Penguin, 1952, paper; reprinted 1981) valuable, not only for illuminating the chauvin-

ism of Camoens's salute to those who advanced "the boundaries of faith and empire" but also for Atkinson's essay on the poet's era.

When *The Lusiads* appeared in 1572, the driving spirit that it celebrated was dying. Atkinson writes that when Camoens returned to Lisbon in 1570 from a journey to Portugal's Asian colony Macau, the city was "just emerging from a devastating visitation of the plague. He had the impression that his country had altered much, and for the worse. The native virtues of the race appeared to him to have wilted under prosperity, people at home not realizing at what cost of blood, sweat and tears their empire had been built." The "heroic temper," Atkinson notes, "was ebbing."

By the early 20th century, the nation that had so vastly expanded the "known" world wanted to shut it out. Portraits of António de Oliveira Salazar, who sought to seal his New State against the social and economic currents that swept through the West before and after World War II, range from Hugh Kay's even-handed **Salazar and Modern Portugal** (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1970) to the angry **Portugal: Fifty Years of Dictatorship** (Penguin, 1975, paper), by António de Figueiredo, a left-wing Salazar foe. What all chroniclers agree on is the dictator's long obsession with what Kay calls "the notion of the absolute." Said Salazar: "No one can rule in the name of doubt."

Among the useful journalistic accounts of Portugal's struggle to create a democracy after 1974 are **Insight on Portugal** (André Deutsch, 1975), a narrative of the revolution by a London *Sunday Times* team, and **Portugal: Birth of a Democracy**

(Macmillan, 1978), by Robert Harvey, an editor of the *Economist*. Thomas C. Bruneau's **Politics and Nationhood: Post-Revolutionary Portugal** (Praeger, 1984) is the most comprehensive of a short list of scholarly analyses.

With the passing of empire, the chief question raised by Portugal's history may not be how such a small nation did so much and has survived so long, but why its cultural legacy—beyond a language that is spoken by some 150 million people in Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, and other areas—has been so slight.

In **Iberia** (Random House, 1968, cloth; Fawcett, 1978, paper), author James A. Michener wonders that Portugal produced no "Velázquez, no Victoria, no García Lorca, no Santa Teresa, and of course no Seneca. The genius of the Iberian peninsula seemed to have resided in the [Spanish] regions."

Could Portugal's cultural poverty be linked with its tradition of recurrent and sometimes virulent insularity? From the mid-16th century into the 18th, for example, church-influenced censorship barred all books from abroad; the excitement stirred elsewhere in Europe before, during, and after the Protestant Reformation by the ideas and discoveries of Galileo, Bacon, Descartes, Newton, Hobbes, Leibnitz, and others never reached Portugal.

"No national culture," Boxer observes in his book, "can have a healthy and continuous growth, without being periodically fertilized by fresh inspiration and new ideas from abroad." For Portugal, it might be said, the real age of discovery may be only beginning.