

Sir Peter Russell and Portuguese History: The Story of a Great Passion

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Different chronological periods and subjects in Portuguese history have caught the attention of various foreign historians, who, either in the pursuit of their own research interests or for some other reason,¹ have ended up bringing a fresh approach to some important themes in our historical knowledge. In the case of Sir Peter Russell, who was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1913 and died in Oxford in June 2006, an immediate relationship must be established between his major academic interests and medieval Portuguese History. His interest in Portuguese History emerged from his desire to study Iberian political history between the late 14th century and the 15th century in greater depth, where he had begun his academic career.

Shortly after completing his first degree, Russell began his research into the *Black Prince's* behavior toward Spain and Portugal, studied within the context of a wider range of problems that included the Anglo-French war after the peace of 1360. As a result of his research, he published *The English Intervention in Spain and Portugal in the time of Edward III and Richard II* (1955).² In order to realize such an important work, Russell had to become acquainted with Iberian sources, which, as far as Portugal was concerned, led him to become engaged in the main Lisbon archives (*Torre do Tombo*), where he opened up several important discussions about the contribution that had been made to the theme by the chroniclers. Paying major attention to Fernão Lopes, Russell understood the message left by the 15th-century royal chronicler.³ But, in fact, this is not the only dimension to be stressed. This most interesting book analyses the western political history of the first period of the *Hundred Years War* as a whole, with special attention being paid to the internal hostilities in Iberia arising as a direct result of the British alliance that some of the kingdoms involved had tended to accept. In relation to this subject, I believe that the genealogies that Russell includes in this work are particularly important, especially because they give the reader an idea of the personal dimensions of the above-mentioned alliances.

¹ *História da História em Portugal, Sécs. XIX-XX* (1996), Lisbon: Círculo de Leitores, p. 353.

² Oxford University Press, with a Portuguese translation: *A Intervenção Inglesa na Península Ibérica durante a Guerra dos Cem Anos*, 2000, (translation by Maria Ramos; scientific revision João Gouveia Monteiro), Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional/Casa da Moeda.

³ *As fontes de Fernão Lopes*, (1941), Coimbra: Coimbra Editora, republished by Russell, Peter, *Portugal, Spain and the African Atlantic, 1343-1490*, (1995), Collected Studies Series, Aldershot: Variorum, pp. 1-30. See also an interesting point of view about Russell's research into Lopes in Ian MICHAEL, Sir Peter Russell (1913-2006), *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, vol. 83, 8, in particular, p. 1143.

Showing a particular concern for explaining not only the various ways in which Portuguese society had endured in order to perpetrate *the coup d'état in December 1383*, but also the activity that was to follow and would eventually place the Master of Avis on the throne, Peter Russell highlighted the debate on Pedro I's succession at the Cortes of Coimbra, a theme that Portuguese historians have always numbered amongst their immediate preoccupations.⁴

Besides, Russell's interest in this complex period of the late 14th century, both in Portugal and Spain, had already been underlined by the author himself, in at least four articles that we all had the opportunity to read during the course of our studies of *Medieval Portuguese History* at university.⁵ It is very clear in each of them that there is always a clear connection with British history during that same period, but they have all become absolutely indispensable for understanding some of the most important aspects of the English military and diplomatic contribution to the development of the Iberian Peninsula during the late 14th century.⁶

All these fields of research would in themselves be sufficient to establish the importance of his work for the study of Portuguese History, but, indeed, Sir Peter Russell ended up achieving a much wider project with the dedication of a great deal of his research to the life and work of Prince Henry the Navigator.

In fact, it was through his studies of the Portuguese Maritime Expansion that Russell was to achieve greatest popularity in our country, recently demonstrated by the enormous success of his book, *Prince Henry The Navigator. A life*.⁷

As the author said, his interest in the fifth son of João I and Philippa of Lancaster only arose from the fact that the theme was included in his university curriculum back in the 1930s. In an interesting interview⁸ given to the *National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries*, Peter Russell reminded us that his academic interest in Prince Henry's history and life was increased by all the voyages he was obliged to make during the Second World War, in particular along the west coast of Africa. In fact, this experience gave him much greater insight into all the problems related to the maritime expansion as a whole, and, therefore, into Prince Henry's own personal goals as part of this complex process.

His first study on the *Navigator* was published during an outstanding year of commemorations (1960), five centuries after Prince Henry's death on 13 November 1460. Well aware of the circumstances, the historian began his work by stating that he supposed: "*that no name from Portuguese history is so well-known in this country as that of Prince Henry the Navigator, unless it*

⁴ It is well worth reading the works of Arnaut, Salvador Dias, *A crise nacional de finais do século XIV. A sucessão de D. Fernando*, (1960), Coimbra: Faculdade de Letras; *Os Amores de Pedro e Inês: suas consequências políticas*, (1986), Coimbra, Coimbra Editora, among others.

⁵ João Fernandes Andeiro na corte do duque de Lencastre, (1938), *Revista da Universidade de Coimbra*, 14, pp. 1-15; O Tratado de Santarém de 1373, (1951) *Revista Portuguesa de História*, 5, pp. 455-473; Galés portuguesas ao serviço de Ricardo II de Inglaterra (1385 -1389), (1953), *Revista da Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa*, 2ª série, 18, pp. 1-17 All these works were republished in 1995: *Spain and the African Atlantic, 1343-1490*, Collected Studies Series, Aldershot: Variorum.

⁶ See also, Macedo Jorge Borges de, *A historiografia britânica sobre Portugal: a propósito do centenário da aliança luso-britânica* (1973), Lisbon: *Palestra*, 42.

⁷ Yale University Press, (2001), republished in Portuguese: *Henrique o Navegador*, (2004), Lisbon: Livros Horizonte.

⁸ Almeida, Cristina Ferreira de, Glória e História: o combate de Peter Russell, (1994), *Oceanos*, 17, Lisbon: Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimientos Portugueses, pp. 82-85.

be that of Vasco da Gama,”⁹ and he does not hide the fact that this medieval personality was the subject of “some of the most important scholarly works [...] written by Englishmen.”¹⁰

Reading the whole article, I am inclined to say that these two sentences may arouse some hostility from Portuguese readers, especially from experts on the theme. And if we take time to read some of the obituaries published recently (shortly after Russell’s death) we can easily find comments such as this: “A lecture given in 1960 questioned the reputation of a Portuguese culture hero, Prince Henry the Navigator - questioned it so thoroughly that the Portuguese Embassy leant hard on the lecture’s sponsors to prevent publication (they failed).”¹¹

What Russell really wanted to stress with that lecture is nowadays perfectly understood and accepted by Portuguese experts. As his very own work continued to prove, Prince Henry, his real aims and achievements, are still open questions in Portuguese historiography. That is perhaps why he kept insisting on the importance of the theme and published a major study on this Prince (*Prince Henry “the Navigator”: A Life*)¹², a book he didn’t like to consider as a biography, perhaps because it is very hard to establish parameters for defining exactly what a biography should be. Nevertheless, the book is, in fact, much more than this: according to my conception of a biography, it is an excellent one, and it also constitutes an extremely well-organized guide for understanding some of the main directions followed by Portuguese history during those times, which are sometimes neglected in other works.

Just to give a brief example, Russell’s characterization of Prince Henry as the perfect image of a late medieval *Infante* is quite understandable in the sense that it is easier to explain Henry’s actions in the light of the Portuguese monarchy’s intentions, leaving to one side the individual protagonists and reinforcing the idea of a dynastic quest, in this case that of the Avis Dynasty. Nowadays, after the works of Isabel Morgado Silva¹³ on the Order of Christ (which Henry governed from 1420 until 1460), it is easier to fill in the gaps in our information about this Prince, namely one based solely on direct sources, just as Peter Russell had already pointed out in his earlier works about the Navigator.

Nevertheless, the study of the government of this important military order can be seen to lend support to many of Sir Peter’s ideas, especially those relating to our understanding of the expansionist project as part of a much wider set of aims, which, in this particular case, is clearly exemplified by Prince Henry’s appointment to the order that his father, João I, had intentionally requested from the Pope. Being well aware of the problems that the Portuguese crown continued to experience in relation to Castile during the 15th century, Peter Russell always based his appreciation of Henry’s actions upon this reality, since this was clearly the only way to understand all the characteristics of that period.

In discussing the contribution of such a complete historian, it is to be hoped that his recent death will increase interest in the various questions that he drew our attention to, and that we can

⁹ Russell, Peter, (1995), “Prince Henry the Navigator, Portugal”, *Spain and the African Atlantic, 1343-1490...*, XI, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 3.

¹¹ Deyermund, Alan, Professor Sir Peter Russell, *The Independent*, 5 July, 2006.

¹² New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, (2000), with a Portuguese translation, *Henrique o Navegador*, (2004), Lisbon: Livros Horizonte.

¹³ Besides her major work on the Order of Christ (*A Ordem de Cristo (1417-1520)*, (2002), *Militarium Ordinum Analecta*, 6, Porto: Fundação Engº António de Almeida, 5-503.), she also wrote a book review on Peter Russell’s *Prince Henry the Navigator* (*Journal of World History*, (2003), Honolulu-Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 14, no. 3, pp. 411-415).

all strive to be worthy of the work of Sir Peter Russell and of his dedication and passion for Portuguese History.