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David Birmingham

Excerpt

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## Introduction

Portugal is one of history's most successful survivors. It is but a small country whose population rose slowly from one million to nine million over eight hundred years. In that time it acquired a political and cultural autonomy within Europe. It also made its mark on every corner of the globe through colonisation, emigration and commerce. Unlike the more prosperous Catalonia it succeeded in escaping from Spanish captivity in the seventeenth century. Unlike the equally dynamic Scotland it was not politically absorbed by its English economic patron in the eighteenth century. Unlike the middle-ranking kingdoms of Naples or Bavaria it was not cannibalised in the unification of the great nineteenth-century land empires of Europe. Unlike Germany and Italy it did not lose its African colonies in either the First or the Second World War. And unlike other farming countries such as Ireland or Denmark it remained outside the European Economic Community until the 1980s.

But Portugal was more than a tenacious survivor in modern history. It was also a pioneer in many of the historical developments of the European world. Portuguese Christians of the middle ages, with a little help from English mercenaries, fought bloodily against Portuguese Muslims to dominate the western rim of Europe by the thirteenth century. The Portuguese created Europe's first 'modern' nation state whose frontiers have not changed since the fall of the old Muslim 'Kingdom of the West' in the Algarve. A century later they pioneered the concept of overseas colonisation on the islands of the Atlantic. By the sixteenth century they had found the sea lane

to Asia. Portugal's pepper empire may have been short-lived, but it opened the way for the great trading empires of The Netherlands and Britain which followed in its train. In America, Portugal's conquest of the Brazils outstripped in size the thirteen British colonies which were to become the United States of America. Moreover the flow of Portuguese gold from the Brazilian highlands was an important ingredient in fuelling the European industrial revolution which began in eighteenth-century Britain.

It was not only in its overseas enterprises that Portugal led the way. It was also a pioneer in the search for new forms of social organisation in Europe. Portuguese liberalism sought to free the country from excessive clericalism and pave the way for democracy and humanitarianism. Portugal was one of the first Old World nations to adopt a republican form of government in the French mode. At the same time Portugal had to struggle to dominate its less-than-bountiful environment. In the seventeenth century the exchequer was constantly stretched by the demands of naval warfare to protect Portuguese independence and recover the Atlantic colonies. In the eighteenth century monumental projects of public works were undertaken and prestigious royal palaces were built far in excess of the architectural expectations of a small agrarian country. In the nineteenth century the profits of the last phase of the African slave trade and the remittances of millions of migrants to the New World enabled Portugal to sustain a cultured middle class in elegant Victorian style. The historian is left with a rich harvest of questions as to how so small a nation achieved so much over so many centuries.

One constant refrain of modern Portuguese history is the search for economic modernisation. From the earliest days of Portuguese independence, when the rebellion against the Spanish captivity broke out in 1640, Portugal was economically linked to its naval protector, England. Not surprisingly it therefore aspired to emulate England in the growth and diversification of its economic activities. In particular Portugal sought to escape from the 'underdevelopment' trap which constantly drove it to supply raw materials and buy finished manufactures. The attempt to initiate an industrial revolution was undertaken four times, in four different centuries, with varying degrees of success. In the seventeenth century, when the wars of independence were over, the landowners and the burghers engaged in

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a fierce struggle over the development of a woollen textile industry. The landowners won, and the burghers' interests were diverted to the new-found opportunities of Brazil. Not until the Brazilian gold ran dry in the late eighteenth century did industrialisation again become a priority of the Portuguese government. But manufacturing could not compete with the quality wine trade as a source of foreign exchange and vines came to be almost the monoculture of Portugal after the decline of Brazilian mining. The third attempt at a manufacturing revolution, and the creation of import substitution industries, occurred in the late nineteenth century when the wine trade dipped and foreign competition stole a march on Portugal. The rise of mechanised industry was sufficiently important to create an urban proletariat which took a new role in the affairs of the country and helped to proclaim the republic in 1910. But the world recession of 1930, and a long backward-looking dictatorship which idealised peasant poverty and which protected a highly privileged oligarchy, brought a generation of stagnation. The fourth industrial leap only occurred in the 1960s when Portugal gained some benefit from the world division of labour as multinational companies sought out the most disciplined and underpaid labour markets as openings for the transfer of factories from high-cost, heavily unionised, areas of traditional industrial production. At the same period domestic industrial entrepreneurs began to make belated use of Portugal's African colonies, and of its close access to mainland Europe, to build up textiles, plastics, shipbuilding and light engineering. By 1986, when Portugal finally entered the European Community, the process of modernisation was well under way at the fourth attempt.

Finding a suitable chronology into which to divide the modern history of Portugal presents a variety of options. The seventeenth century was essentially the age of nationalism. The escape from Spain began in 1640 and was finally acknowledged in 1668 after a generation of desultory warmongering on the fringes of the great wars of national identity in early modern Europe. But nationalism required recognition and protection from sympathetic allies, and these had to be paid for. One asset which Portugal had was a royal princess, Catherine of Braganza, who was sent to England with a huge dowry when a more prestigious French suitor could not be arranged. But a dynastic alliance was not sufficient to ensure national survival

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and the constant support of English naval power. In 1703 the Luso-Britannic alliance, which had its roots in the fourteenth-century exchange of wine for woollen cloth, was re-enforced by the famous, or some would say infamous, treaty signed by John Methuen. In some respects the Methuen Treaty made Portugal a 'neo-colonial' client of Britain, but the treaty was not quite as unequal as might appear and became a permanent factor in guaranteeing, albeit at a price, the nationalism which Portugal had won in the seventeenth century.

The history of the eighteenth century is dominated by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, probably the only episode of Portuguese history which has been etched on to the folk memory of European culture. Yet the eighteenth century was one of spectacular ostentation as the church, the crown and the nobility vied with one another in building chapels and palaces gilded with the gold of Brazil. The Braganzas were thought by contemporary opinion to be the wealthiest family in the world. One of the side chapels of the church of São Roque was built of precious marble in Rome, that it might be blessed by the Pope before being dismantled and reassembled piece by piece in Lisbon. The great palace-convent of Mafra was built in monumental Spanish style, and the Lisbon aqueduct brought water to the city on Roman-type stone columns nearly two hundred feet high. But the wealth faded after the earthquake, and Portugal entrusted its destiny to one of the great enlightened despots of the eighteenth century, the Marquis of Pombal. After serving a long diplomatic apprenticeship in London and Vienna he struggled to modernise the country, freeing the Jews from church persecution, abolishing slavery outside the colonies, curtailing the power of the nobility, encouraging the rise of the bourgeoisie, enhancing the profits of the British wine trade and reforming state methods of administration and finance.

The eighteenth century came to a close in two stages. In stage one Napoleon's armies invaded Portugal and the royal family with its thousands of retainers fled, as they had occasionally thought to do during previous crises, to their richer transatlantic dominions at Rio de Janeiro. The armies of Wellington promptly counter-invaded and delayed for ten years the Portuguese access to the new revolutionary ideas of the nineteenth century. The Portuguese Revolution did not therefore break out until 1820. It was no less vigorous for all that and, like the French Revolution before it, went through phases of

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constitutional radicalism, reactionary repression, civil war, popular uprising and urban terror. By 1851, when the revolution was over, Portugal had been significantly transformed. The old eighteenth-century bourgeoisie had turned itself into the new nobility. Its leaders had dissolved the monasteries, distributed the church lands, sold the crown estates, founded a string of new aristocratic titles and created a parliamentary system with a highly restricted property franchise for the 'commons' and a British-style second house of parliament for the lords. The new barons launched half a century of increasingly immobile political stability after thirty eventful years of evolution.

The Victorian age in Portugal was reigned over by the ubiquitous house of Saxe-Coburg. King-Consort Ferdinand and his sons were patrons of the arts. The Lisbon botanical gardens were admired by Baedeker as the finest in Europe. The beau monde went to the Maria II Opera House to see and be seen. Lisbon was linked to Paris in a fever of railway-age speculative investment. The city built a network of funiculars, tramways and public elevators with the engineering help of the famous Eiffel. The role of government was broadened by vigorous programmes of public works. The only hiccups occurred when the price of wine dipped, as in 1870 and in 1890. Portugal tried to counter these losses by a return to the imperial past. Efforts to build a third empire, this time not in Asia or America but in Africa, were temporarily thwarted by the cautious limitations of Portuguese speculative investors and by the ambitions of rival British imperialists in Central Africa. This was not, however, before the appetite of popular Portuguese nationalism for colonial ventures had been whetted. Colonial conquests created folk heroes and colonial failures helped to bring the long Victorian age of stability to an end.

The age of Victorian liberalism came to an end in three stages. In the first stage, in 1890, Portugal came into collision with Britain in Africa and had to withdraw its claims to the Zambezi heartlands in favour of Cecil Rhodes. The national loss of face discredited the government and brought the royal dynasty into disrepute. Within twenty years Portuguese republicans, both democrats and anarchists, had toppled the monarchy and declared a liberal republic in 1910. The republic was no more able to win wealth from the colonies, or to pursue a foreign policy independent of Great Britain,

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or to satisfy the legitimate demands of the rising proletariat and of the lower middle class, than had been the bourgeois monarchy. It too was toppled, but this time by right-wing Catholic rebels from the senior cadres of the army. The coup of 1926 ushered in a fourth and last stage of modern Portuguese history. After the national mercantilism of the seventeenth century, and absolutist imperialism of the eighteenth century and the liberal monarchy of the nineteenth century, the twentieth century became an era of authoritarian conservatism.

The army rebels of 1926 at first had no success at all in advancing their partisan interests. Within two years they sold out to a staunch Catholic layman called Salazar, a homburg-hatted lecturer in economics at Coimbra university law faculty, who guaranteed to finance the well-being and social prestige of the armed forces in return for a dictatorial free hand in running the country. This unholy alliance, forged in the early years of European fascism, brought Portugal a period of stern economic recession, authoritarian police government and polarised social stratification. Only after forty years of bitter monetarist medicine did any economic liberalisation begin to take place in the 1960s. It was still another ten years before democracy was restored, after a brief revolutionary upheaval in 1974–5, and only after that was Portugal accepted into the institutions of the European Community.

In attempting an overview of the significance of Portuguese history it is difficult to decide whether the most distinctive feature is the isolated traditionalism of the countryside or the close integration of Lisbon city into world developments. Having once stood tall at the apex of the triangle linking Africa, Europe and Latin America, Portugal gained its autonomy by a series of dramatic breaks with its main correspondents. It broke with Spain in 1640, with Brazil in 1822, with Britain in 1890 and with Africa in 1974. The isolation of most of Portugal was striking and it was almost insulated from the French Revolution for a whole generation. Portugal also remained on the fringe of the industrial revolution despite the aspirations of its liberal élite. More strikingly still Portugal was insulated from the transformations of the Second World War: social values of almost Edwardian conservatism continued to prevail until the 1960s. Despite the country's political and social isolation, Lisbon

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and Oporto tried to follow developments in Europe and the ideologies of Spanish political change usually spread quite rapidly to the Portuguese capital. At the opposite end of Europe Portugal showed illuminating parallels with Scotland, a country of fishermen, shepherds and farmers which fell under the economic sway of England, and also with Ireland, a country of predominantly poor Catholic peasants. Both Celtic nations emulated Portugal in sending large communities of migrants to the Americas where all three left profound cultural imprints on the societies of the New World.

The cultural individuality of Portugal has attracted many excellent observers and scholars, both national and foreign. The observations of British visitors to Portugal over the centuries were collected by Rose Macaulay in a fascinating volume of wry perceptiveness. The historian of empire *par excellence* was Charles Boxer, whose books brought Portugal to world attention. His contemporary in the field of economic history was Magalhães Godinho whose great works were initially researched in exile in France. Another distinguished exile, Oliveira Marques, returned from the United States to pioneer a new vein of biographical studies before embarking on the large-scale entrepreneurial editing of volumes ranging from fifteenth-century Atlantic colonisation to the republican empire in twentieth-century Africa. After the revolution of 1974 Portuguese historians were able to catch up with new intellectual fashions, especially in social and industrial history. British traditions of scholarship influenced the works of José Cutileiro, Vasco Pulido Valente, Jill Dias and Jaime Reis. The role of empire was soberly reassessed by Joseph Miller in the United States and by Gervase Clarence-Smith in Britain. Meanwhile in Portugal the thirst for knowledge was partly satisfied by a richly illustrated six-volume serial history edited by José Hermano Saraiva.

Since the appearance of the first edition of this book a great deal of new work has been published in English, in Portuguese and in French and the book itself is now available in both Portuguese and Spanish. A selection of new books, together with a few lines of commentary on each, is appended to this second edition. More audaciously a few new pages have been devoted to Portugal since 1990 despite all warnings that historians should not press their noses too flat against the windowpane.

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Among the new works there are several massive, multi-volume compilations in which dozens of Portugal's best post-revolutionary historians have collaborated to produce not only new surveys of Portugal and of its empire but also revisionist interpretations of the past which are refreshingly radical. One of the innovations of the first edition of this concise history was an attempt to shed an unfashionably positive light on the social achievements of Portugal both during the nineteenth-century era of liberalism and during the first republic of the early twentieth century. This glimmer of new perception has since burst into life in the fifth volume of José Mattoso's *História de Portugal* which analyses the long era of academic denigration from which modern Portuguese history suffered throughout the dictatorship of 1926 to 1974, a denigration which rather surprisingly infected much foreign writing on Portugal.

The new historiography does more than merely challenge negative stereotypes of Portugal. It also sheds fresh light on the myths which long sustained, and in some cases still sustain, the self-image of Portugal's patriots and politicians. Throughout the Salazar dictatorship Prince Henry, who had previously acquired heroic status in Victorian England as the so-called 'navigator', was portrayed as the embodiment of Portuguese greatness and the impoverished post-war government of Salazar spent a small fortune on erecting a massive stone monument in his honour at the entrance to Lisbon harbour. Revisionists who tried to explore the realities beneath the spin were accused of 'regicide' but alternative interpretations of the age of exploration and exploitation gradually saw the light and culminated in Peter Russell's fine biography of the prince.

When in 2002 Portugal completed its entry into the European Union by adopting the European currency its politicians still needed patriotic heroes whom they could hero-worship to preserve a sense of national identity. They were particularly prone to admire Vasco da Gama after whom a new eight-kilometre bridge across the mighty Tagus was named five centuries after his tiny fleet had slipped downstream on the first European sea voyage to India. Such was the admiral's historical status that Portuguese statesmen were initially discomfited when an Indian economic historian, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, wondered aloud whether seamen from so remote and tiny a kingdom as Portugal could really have created economic waves



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among 300 million Asians or whether Vasco da Gama and his successors were little more than drops in the ocean. Open debate, however, had become respectable in the democratic Portugal now rising from the ashes of late European fascism. The new historians who revisited the middle ages, who brought Portugal's art and music into the light, who analysed the roots of their own recent revolution, were therefore bold enough to tackle the great themes of empire with vigorous brush strokes. Scholarship rode high in Portugal.

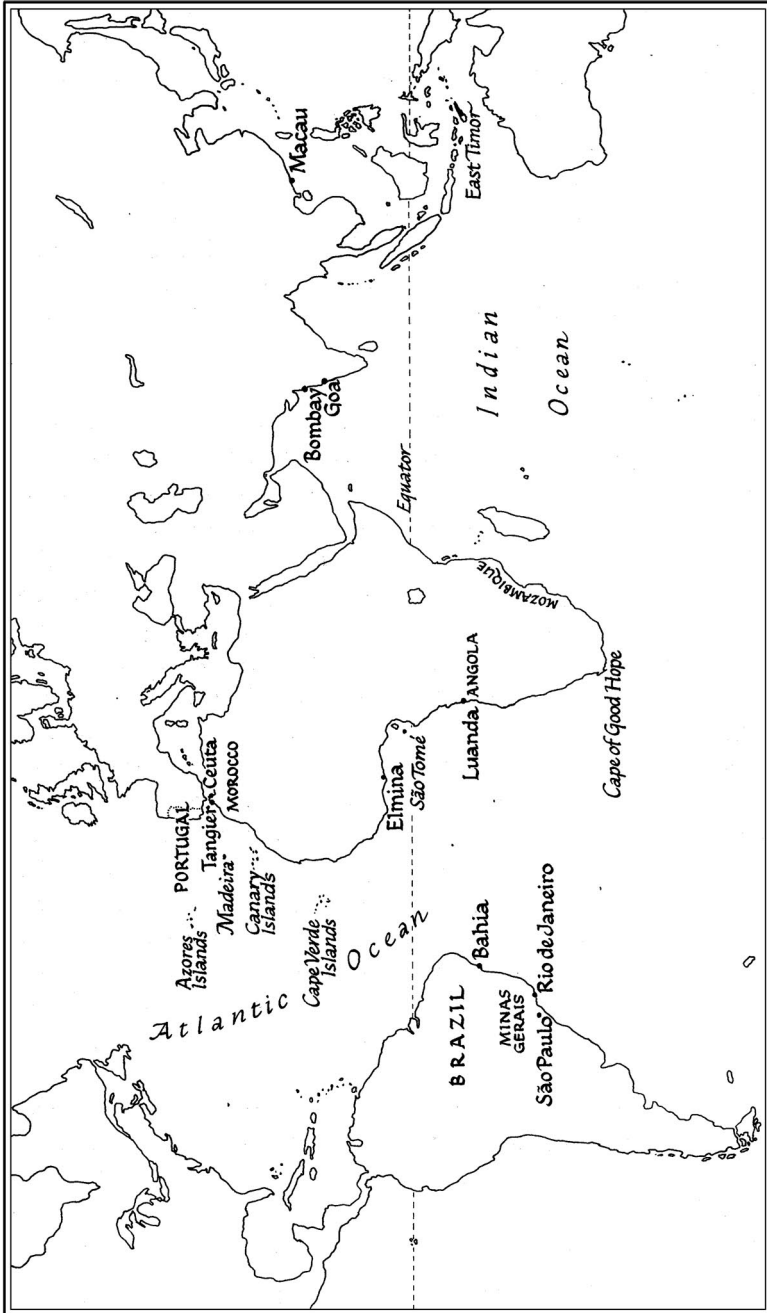
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Map 2 Portugal overseas