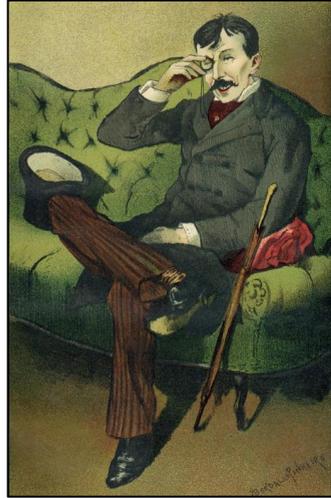


Eça de Queiroz and the English

By Andrew W. Shepherd

Introduction

José Maria de Eça de Queiroz (or Queirós), commonly known as Eça, is considered to have been Portugal's greatest 19th century writer, often compared to Dickens or Flaubert. Between the end of 1874 and 1888 he was posted to England by the Portuguese Foreign Ministry, first as consul in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and, from 1879, in Bristol. These years were his most productive as a novelist.



Eça de Queiroz, c. 1880

Apart from the rather lengthy novels he produced while in England, Eça also found time to send many letters back to Portugal and to Brazil. Some, to the Portuguese Foreign Minister, were required by virtue of his position as consul but others were to friends or as a form of freelance journalism for Lusophone newspapers. These included his *Cartas de Londres*, which were printed in the *Diário de Notícias* in Portugal and the *Gazeta de Notícias* in Brazil. They afterwards appeared in book form as *Cartas de Inglaterra* and were published in English in 1970 as *Letters from England*.¹ More recently, *Eça's English Letters* was published in 2000². This collection includes six of the *Cartas de Inglaterra*, letters to the Foreign Minister and letters to his wife ("My darling little Emília"). They provide some fascinating reflections by Eça on England and the English.

¹ Published in English in 1970 by The Bodley Head, with translation by Ann Stevens.

² *Eça's English Letters*. Translated by Alison Aiken and Ann Stevens with an Introduction by Jonathan Keates. Carcanet Press, Manchester, 2000.

Early life

Eça was born in Póvoa de Varzim, just north of Porto, in 1845. His birth certificate records him as being the son of an unknown mother. As was not uncommon at the time, his unmarried mother left home so that her son could be born away from social scandal. To protect the mother, his lawyer father assumed paternity and responsibility for his son. Eça's parents did marry when he was four years old, but he did not live with them, again in order to avoid scandal, staying with his paternal grandparents until he was ten. At the age 16 he began studies in law at the University of Coimbra.³

His first published work consisted of prose poems that appeared in the *GazetadePortugal* magazine. He then worked as a journalist in Évora. In 1869 and 1870, he travelled to Egypt as a journalist and was present at the opening of the Suez Canal, also taking the opportunity to visit Palestine.⁴ His first novel, *The Mystery of the Sintra Road* (*O Mistério da Estrada de Sintra*), which originally appeared as a serialisation in the *Diário de Notícias*, was co-written in 1870 with Ramalho Ortigão. While Eça was working in Leiria in 1871 and 1872 the two also briefly collaborated to produce a monthly magazine known as *As Farpas* (*The Barbs*), which, under Eça's influence, offered a caricature of modern Portuguese society. Eça's contributions to the magazine were published as two volumes in 1890, as *Uma Campanha Alegre*.⁵

Eça is considered to have belonged to the so-called "generation of 1870", a group of Portuguese intellectuals who were particularly active from the late-1870s to the beginning of the 20th century. Although such clusters of artists or writers are far from unknown (e.g., the Impressionists in Paris or the Bloomsbury Group in London), Oliveira Marques argues that the growth of Portuguese intellectuals at that time owed much to the country's openness, together with the improvement

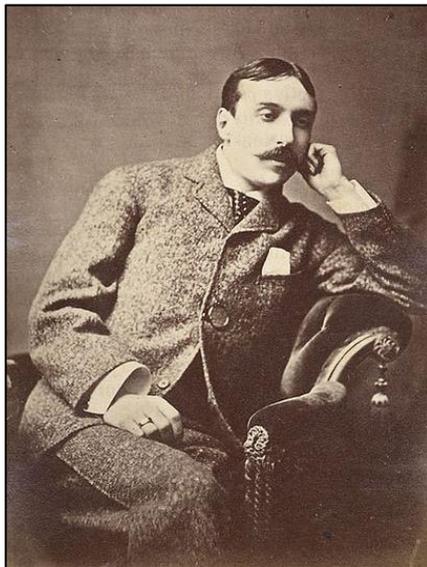
³ For a quick biography of Eça (in Portuguese), see Eça de Queirós in Luso Livros at <https://www.luso-livros.net/biografia/eca-de-queiros/>.

⁴ *Diário de Notícias*, *Eça de Queiroz – De Port Said a Suez*. 16 November 2019.

⁵ <http://www.dominiopublico.gov.br/download/texto/eq000007.pdf>. Not in English.

of communications and existence of a free press. He sees them as exponents of a new Portugal, open-minded and striving to rise from industrial, commercial and political underdevelopment. The generation of 1870 were “anticlerical, rationalist.... and generally anti-monarchist”.⁶

Eça was a Francophile and France, notably Paris, is often referenced in his letters from England. Writing of the English aristocracy he notes how winters are spent in the country before “a breather is taken in Paris, a large gulp of civilisation”.⁷ He sought the job of consul in Paris for a long time, which he was finally granted in 1888. Once there, however, he became rather disenchanted with the upper-class Parisian lifestyle and satirizes this in his novel *The*



Eça de Queiroz, c. 1882

*City and the Mountains*⁸ (*A Cidade e as Serras*).⁹ Even though several of his works were written while in England, the country inspired no similar novels. There were relatively few references to England in his books, although Carlos Maia, the hero of arguably his most famous and best novel, *Os Maias*, was sent to England for schooling. According to Jonathan Keates in his Introduction to *Eça's English Letters*, England

⁶ Oliveira Marques. 2018. *A very short history of Portugal*. Tinta da China Ltda. Lisbon

⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from Eça are from *Eça's English Letters*, op cit.

⁸ Published in English in 2008 by Dedalus (reprinted 2018), with translation by Margaret Jull Costa.

⁹ See article by Ninna Taylor in the BHSP Newsletter No. 3. [https://www.bhspportugal.org/library/articles/the-french-influence-on-eca-de-queiroz-views-of-late-19th-century-portugal-the-novel-a-cidade-e-as-serras-\(the-city-and-the-mountains\)](https://www.bhspportugal.org/library/articles/the-french-influence-on-eca-de-queiroz-views-of-late-19th-century-portugal-the-novel-a-cidade-e-as-serras-(the-city-and-the-mountains)).

gave Eça the “luxury of distance from his abiding fictional material”.¹⁰ One does not know whether to be disappointed that the country failed to inspire Eça to set one of his works there or to be relieved that the English were not subjected to his considerable wit and powers of observation in one of his novels. He surely made up for the latter omission in his letters.

Eça de Queiroz in England

After a brief two years in the consulate in Havana, which included a trip to the United States and Canada to review the conditions of Portuguese emigrants there, Eça arrived in Newcastle at the end of December 1874. His first impressions were not good. Writing to Ramalho Ortigão just a month after his arrival he commented on the constant “spleen”. Furthermore, “imagine a black brick city, half-drowned in mud, with a thick atmosphere of smoke, penetrated by a damp cold, inhabited by 150,000 disgruntled, poorly paid and sour workers and..... horribly rich employers.”¹¹ His letters to Ortigão suggest that he was rather lonely, with only one significant friend, the Swedish Consul.¹² In another letter, however, he noted the advantages of being in Newcastle: “it is an excellent place in which to study...there is nothing to distract me – neither nature, society, theatres, or women.”¹³

Eça was posted to England at a time when relations between Britain and Portugal were souring as a result of disputes over southern Africa as part of the so-called *Scramble for Africa*. Portugal wished to set up a colony stretching from Angola in the west to Mozambique in the east. The problems already faced by Portugal in creating hegemony over the area were compounded in 1884-85 when an international conference in Berlin, which became known as the Congo Conference, defined a new law by which colonial possession was nine tenths of the rule. Difficulties culminated in 1890 when Britain sent an ultimatum that threatened aggression against its colonies if Portugal did not

¹⁰ *Eça's English Letters* op cit.

¹¹ <https://feq.pt/2018/02/01/eca-de-queiroz-consul-em-newcastle-on-tyne/>

¹² Público, 2001. <https://www.publico.pt/2001/06/16/jornal/o-spleen-de-eca-158858>.

¹³ Quoted by Mónica, Maria Filomena, 2005. *Eça de Queiroz*. Tamesis Books. p. 119

withdraw from the contested areas that eventually became Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.¹⁴ Eça had much to say on this when writing from Paris after the ultimatum had been issued.¹⁵

To modern eyes it may seem strange that Portugal should have had consulates in Newcastle and Bristol. Today it has just one outside London, in Manchester, together with four Honorary Consuls. But circumstances were rather different 150 years ago. Communications were much slower. A great deal of wealth had been generated in Newcastle by ship building and heavy engineering and its importance was perhaps relatively greater than it is now. For Eça, Newcastle must have seemed a very dynamic place compared with what he saw as the “sickness” of Portuguese society.¹⁶ Lacking significant supplies of its own, Portugal was a coal importer and much of its coal had been coming from Newcastle or from South Wales, which seems to have been the responsibility of the Bristol consulate. Indeed, the consular services raised revenues. In a letter to the Portuguese Foreign Minister in June 1877 regarding the miners’ strike in the Northumberland and Durham coalfields, Eça reports that the income of the consulate had dropped by 80%, as in six weeks only six ships had left for Portugal. In early January of the following year he notes that “ten or twelve days have gone by without any cargo being sent to Portuguese ports”.

During his time in Newcastle Eça wrote *O Primo Basílio* (*Cousin Bazilio*)¹⁷ and part of *The Tragedy of the Street of Flowers* (*A tragédia da rua das Flores*). The latter concerned the relationship between a young man and an older woman and was only published in Portuguese in 1980 when the copyright of the Queirós family ran out. The reasons why first he and then his family did not publish the book earlier are unclear but are likely to have much to do with the fact that the issues

¹⁴ Oliveira Marques. 2018 *op cit* pp 167-180

¹⁵ See Shepherd Andrew, Eça de Queiroz and the 1890 Ultimatum. BHSP Newsletter 3 https://www.bhspportugal.org/uploads/fotos_artigos/files/EcadeQueirosUltimatum.pdf

¹⁶ Freeland, Alan, 1986. Eça de Queirós: Consular Correspondence from Newcastle. Vol. 2 p 100. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41104815?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

¹⁷ Dedalus European Classics, 2016, with a translation by Margaret Jull Costa.

discussed were “too close to home”.¹⁸ He also worked on *O Conde d'Abranhos* (*The Count of Abranhos*), originally to be titled *A Catástrofe*, which was also only published posthumously.¹⁹ Another work published posthumously was *To the Capital* (*A Capital*), on which he also worked while in Newcastle.²⁰

With Letters of Recommendation from Lisbon, the Portuguese embassy in London suggested placing a plaque at 1 Eldon Square, address of the former consulate in Newcastle, which was apparently done.²¹ That building is long gone, replaced by a supermarket, and a commemorative blue plaque exists at 53 Grey Street where Eça lived, unveiled in 2002 by the Portuguese ambassador. In the 1870s, Grey Street was one of the most elegant in all of England.



Exactly when or why Eça moved to Bristol is unclear but it seems to have been during the second half of April 1879. A letter to the Foreign Minister on 15 April makes no reference to an imminent move. It is unlikely that he would have resisted the change of cities as Bristol is much closer to London, which Eça clearly enjoyed visiting.

While in Bristol Eça wrote most of *Os Maias*, which took him eight years and would not be published until 1888. *The Mandarin*²² appeared in 1880. It had been written in a hurry while on holiday in France, as a favour to the editor of the *Diário de Portugal*, to whom he had promised the serialisation rights for the much-delayed *Os Maias*. Some say that his haste to complete *The Mandarin* led to plagiarism.

¹⁸ See Margaret Jull Costa's Introduction to the 2009 Dedalus European Classics version of the novel. Those who have yet to read the novel are advised to read the Introduction as an Afterword, as it rather gives the plot away.

¹⁹ Porto Editora 2015 and others. Not available in English.

²⁰ *To the Capital*, translated by John Vetch and published by Carcanet Press in 1995.

²¹ Público, *op cit*.

²² Published by Dedalus in 2009, with translation by Margaret Jull Costa.

In 1885 Eça became seriously ill and returned to Portugal to convalesce. During this time, he met Maria Emília de Castro, sister of his friend, the Count of Resende, with whom he had travelled to Suez. They married on 10 February 1886 at a small wedding. The lack of sizeable celebrations, which would normally be expected for people of their background, may have had something to do with his illegitimacy. After the wedding they travelled by train through Europe and arrived in Bristol in March 1886, eventually taking up residence at 38 Stoke Hill, in Stoke Bishop, not far from Clifton and the River Avon. It is a sizeable house and it is not clear why the couple felt that they needed such a large property, particularly given its distance from his office.²³

Maria Emília was unhappy there, partly because of its remoteness, and this led to the decision to seek accommodation in London, leaving Eça to commute to Bristol on the Great Western Railway. While he was looking for a suitable house, she and their first child stayed in Torquay. In London, they rented a property at 23 Ladbrooke Gardens in Notting Hill. While there he finished revising *Os Maias* and completing *A Relíquia (The Relic)*, which was first published in serial form in Brazil in 1887 by *Gazeta de Notícias*. Efforts to persuade English Heritage, which is responsible for the blue plaques affixed to buildings in London, to allocate one to him at this address have so far not borne fruit.²⁴ Some of his letters to his wife in Torquay record his London house-hunting efforts, commenting adversely on what was available. It is clear they were on a tight budget.

Comments made in his letters to Maria Emília and others indicate a dislike of English houses. He had a distaste for red brick houses, which all looked the same to him, unlike the whitewashed houses of Portugal. This enabled him to indulge in further (slight?) exaggeration; "...those long, monotonous lines of brick, when they all have the same black front door, the same lace curtain stretched across the same window, behind which is the same white pot with the same sad geranium."

²³ Mónica, *op cit.*

²⁴ Público, *op cit.*



The house of Eça and his wife in Bristol²⁵ The couple's London residence²⁶

In 1888, having learned that the consulate in Paris would become vacant, Eça wrote to his friend Oliveira Martins, an important politician, asking him to influence the decision in his favour. The couple left for Paris in the same year.²⁷ He died in France in August 1900 from unknown causes, by then the father of four children.

Eça's observations about the English

Work as consul does not appear to have been too demanding, although Eça did complain about the mundane nature of his duties.²⁸ As Jonathan Keates points out in his Introduction to *Eça's English Letters*, diplomatic postings can treat struggling authors very kindly. Keates cites Stendhal and Nathaniel Hawthorne among others who have so benefitted.²⁹

²⁵ Photo: 38 Stoke Hill, Stoke Bishop, Bristol. Courtesy of Joshua and Lucy Gilbert.

²⁶ Photo: 23 Ladbroke Gardens, Notting Hill. Courtesy of Stuart Buckman.

²⁷ Luso Livros, *op cit*.

²⁸ Mónica, p. 119.

²⁹ Introduction to *Eça's English Letters* *op cit*.

His first published solo novel, *The Crime of Father Amaro*³⁰, written mostly while he was working in Leiria in 1871-2 and mainly set in Leiria, was published in 1875 after his arrival in Newcastle. The publication was controversial as he had sent a draft to friends in Lisbon to review and they immediately started to serialise it. The novel is described by the English translator as “an attack on provincialism, on the power of a Church that allies itself with the rich and powerful, tolerates superstition and supports a deeply unfair and un-Christian society, and, more particularly, it is an attack on the absurdity of imposing celibacy on young men with no real priestly vocation”.³¹ Eça’s attitude to the Church at that time is reflected in some of his letters back to Portugal from Newcastle and London, with English society giving him confirmation of his anti-clerical ideas. He admiringly reported on two young members of the nobility who dressed up as priests and visited all the taverns in the Strand, getting increasingly drunk and offensive. “Praise be to the two young lords who so cleverly invented this new revolutionary act!” he wrote, expressing surprise that “this way of discrediting the clergy had not yet occurred to the radicals”.

Just over a month later, at the beginning of July 1877, he directs his admiration at a new British publication that exposed the “old Catholic method of a priest’s domination in a family through his influence on the women”. He considers that “the Catholicism of the *Syllabus*³² has slowly begun to extend over England, trying to take control”. He notes that the “bare severity” of English Protestant churches is thought to be too cold, fearing that they will first start by “introducing flowers, music, hymns and trappings”, eventually leading to “secret confessions, penance, religious societies”. “Little by little”, he writes, “every Protestant church will become a Catholic church”.

³⁰ Published in English in 2018 by Dedalus, with translation by Margaret Jull Costa. He wrote *A Relíquia (The Relic)* earlier, drawing in part on his Palestine visit, but this was not published until 1887. Like *The Crime of Father Amaro*, it was extremely critical of the Church in Portugal.

³¹ Introduction to *The Crime of Father Amaro*, page 2.

³² Referring to the *Syllabus of Errors*, published in 1864 by Pope Pius IX, which was heavily criticised by Protestants.

Several of Eça's early letters from Newcastle discuss miners' strikes. The first Northumberland and Durham strike began on 29 May 1877 and Eça was perceptive enough to realise that the poverty of the miners and their lack of any savings meant that it could not last for long. His letters precede Emile Zola's *Germinal*, first serialized in 1884, which presented a realistic story of a coalminers' strike in northern France in the 1860s.³³ Eça saw justification for the owners' decision to reduce wages, pointing out that miners in the north were earning twice as much as those in Wales. Writing to the Foreign Minister he criticised the miners for failing to listen to their leaders, pointing out that the feeling of the miners seemed to be that "we shall die of hunger, but [the owners] will be bankrupt". He provided the Foreign Minister with vivid reports of one mass meeting, although it is unlikely that he attended it, embellishing newspaper reports instead.



Statue of Eça de Queiroz on Rua do Alecrim in Lisbon

³³ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jun/19/emile-zola-germinal-ruth-scurr>.

Eça considered that the union leaders should avoid mass meetings because “six thousand men who shout and become impulsive in one place together naturally believe that the world belongs to them”. He applauded the decision of the leaders to organise a ballot, which led to the miners agreeing to arbitration, as he believed that, away from mass meetings, the miners “would not dare to vote for strike action, with the ensuing misery for their wives and children, when faced in the cold light of day with their family responsibilities”. However, by the following January the miners were once again on strike. Here Eça is supportive of the miners’ cause, although not the strike action. The owners had arbitrarily reduced wages without going through the established arbitration process, a decision that was “unquestionably unjust”. In April 1879, the miners were back on strike, following another attempt by the owners to reduce their wages. In writing again to the Foreign Minister, Eça provides a detailed explanation of the reasons why wages had been falling, showing a good understanding of economic realities such as supply and demand and market competition. At the same time, he recognised that these had to be counterbalanced by social justice.³⁴ He shows in this final letter on the topic a growing sympathy with the miners, which can be seen as the “germ of a preoccupation with crisis implicit in some of his fiction, notably *Os Maias*.”³⁵

Eça’s non-official letters covered a wide range of topics that still sound relevant to this day. These were both serious and amusing, often in the same letter. For example, one written from London on 15 August 1877 discussed the willingness of the electorate to vote for complete fools, just because they were members of the nobility; the general incompetence of British police in dealing with sophisticated criminals; the fact that the Princess of Wales attended a performance at London’s Criterion Theatre while her son was ill with typhoid; a dispute between a journalist from *The Times* and the British Ambassador in

³⁴ *Mónica*, p. 123.

³⁵ Freeland *op cit.* p.100. Freeland provides a detailed analysis of Eça’s letters to the Foreign Minister on the subject of the miners’ strikes.

Constantinople over the *Eastern Question*,³⁶ which resulted in the ambassador being dismissed; and a judgement by the Lord Chief Justice in which he implied that the criminal being sentenced had been too cowardly to commit suicide as an alternative to living in penal servitude in Australia for life. “If that is not chastising a defendant for failing to kill himself then I don’t know what is. I was astounded.”

In the same August 1877 letter Eça gives an update on “Mr Pongo”, a gorilla on display at the Royal Aquarium in Westminster. This was the only gorilla in Europe at that time, on loan from Berlin, about which he had written in a previous letter. After reporting that Mr Pongo had been joined by three chimpanzees, describing their antics in a very anthropomorphic fashion, Eça concludes that “Mr Pongo detests Darwin!” Apparently, Charles Darwin paid a visit but no sooner had Mr Pongo seen him than he “furrows his brow, grinds his teeth, stares at him and then turns his back on him”. Eça’s explanation is that the gorilla is disgusted by a theory of evolution that puts such a strange-looking man as Darwin as a gorilla’s direct descendant.³⁷ Sadly Mr Pongo was soon to die: “in the illustrious Pongo’s stomach they found nails, a small penknife, corks, a monocle, gloves.... and other curious objects.” In typical Eça fashion, he laments that the “godfather of the human race had no more discernment, no more dignity than any common or garden monkey in his choice of food. Such a disappointment!”

As we see with the story of Mr Pongo and Charles Darwin, Eça never held back from criticising or poking fun at those with a reputation. Visiting the 1877 Royal Academy exhibition at Burlington House on one of his frequent trips to London, he noted that it lacked a single work that “causes one to think”. He singled out for criticism Edmund

³⁶ The *Eastern Question* is referred to several times in Eça’s letters. It referred to the perceived political and economic instability in the Ottoman Empire, which was regarded as the “sick man of Europe”. He also talks about the enthusiasm in Britain for going to war against Russia when that country was at war with Turkey (1877-78).

³⁷ For more about Mr Pongo see <http://victoriancalendar.blogspot.com/2011/06/july-21-1877-pongo.html>.

Leighton and John Millais, “two great English artists”, for the paintings they respectively exhibited, of a girl looking at a mirror and of a veteran. “That’s what these two great artists have to say this year!”

Other observations about the English that raise a smile include his reaction to Christmas Pudding, “a heavy, indigestible concoction which everybody loves to see on the table, which no one touches and which grown-ups regard highly for the joy it gives to children.” Commenting on Tennyson’s method of avoiding tourists who were intent on meeting him on the Isle of Wight, by covering his face with a handkerchief, Eça notes that “An Englishman is always eccentric, even when he is sublime.” But it appears that Englishmen of a particular class are uniformly eccentric. Speaking through the character of a pug dog in the letter *England and France – An Englishman’s opinion*, Eça is of the view that “[Englishmen’s] whiskers are the same cut and colour, they wear exactly the same coats, and have the same flower in their buttonhole; their gloves are the same shade; they walk with just the same spring in their step; speak with the same tone of voice and greet each other in the same brusque manner.”

*O Primo Basílio (Cousin Bazilio)*³⁸ was published in 1878. Although most of his letters for publication were based on fact, while taking considerable dramatic licence, one published in 1878 may have been no more than a plug for the new book. In *Cousin Bazilio*, Luiza, a bored housewife,³⁹ has an affair with a cousin visiting from Brazil. Her maid finds compromising notes and blackmails her. Eça’s very strange letter of 26 January announces that “English maids have [started] stealing compromising letters from their mistresses and selling them later for a respectable price.” He goes on to discuss the sums required for the return of the letters, “a Platonic letter, £500; a letter talking of an assignation, £1000; allusions to the matter having been consummated, variable prices in response to the fortune of the fragile wife..... Love has become such an expensive thing.” This promotion

³⁸ Dedalus European Classics, 2016, with a translation by Margaret Jull Costa.

³⁹ A topic Eça refers to several times in his letters.

campaign, if that is what it was, did Eça no harm. The novel's first print run of 3000 sold out immediately, due in no small part to the scenes of adulterous sex. The book prompted criticism, including from Eça's own father and from the Brazilian writer Machado de Assis, the latter writing of "the crude sensuality" of some of the descriptions.⁴⁰

The topic of adultery also crops up in other letters. Inspired by a newspaper announcement that Sir Charles Tempest was seeking a judicial separation from his wife, Eça launches into diatribe about the decline in British upper-class morals. Based on information from "well-informed journalists", he considers that there has been a transformation that has "quite destroyed English rectitude." He concludes that "adultery, running off with a lover, kidnapping, seduction, divorce and domestic crime have increased year on year, giving English high society the ever-putrid appearance of rotting fruit."

An early scene in *Cousin Bazilio* finds a bored Luiza thumbing through a much-worn copy of *The Lady of the Camellias* (also known as *Camille*) by Alexandre Dumas, *fils*. Eça seem to have a low regard for the "romantic" genre, which rather tied in with his then-radical view that women should be more active and not just housewives sitting at home reading indifferent works. In a letter from 1877 he discusses the explosion of romantic novels in England. "Dozens are printed weekly..... the style is usually as predictable and monotonous as warm water dripping from a tap." He read one of these novels and concludes: "there is such an extraordinary collection of slush, incongruity and idiotic nonsense" that it is almost worth reading it "as a study of a strange case of human imbecility."

The Lady of the Camellias gets another mention when Eça attacks the Lord Chamberlain, who at that time had the power to decide which plays would be granted a licence for performance, thereby effectively being able to exercise censorship. Eça does not appear to necessarily oppose the idea of censorship: it is the plays that are and are not

⁴⁰ See Margaret Jull Costa's Introduction to *Cousin Bazilio*.

censored that he finds confusing. Having visited the Alhambra theatre in London to see a play about adultery that he regards as “immoral... a brazen farce with its almost naked women”, he cannot understand why this has been approved but *The Lady of the Camellias* has not. For him, the Lord Chamberlain was an “eccentric and unpredictable old fool of a bygone age.” It would take another 90 years before the Lord Chamberlain finally lost his censorship role.

In a letter written to the journalist Mariano Pina in June 1885, after he had been in England for a decade, Eça defends it against criticism from the French that it is just a “commercial country”. He argues that its main export is ideas and “the great part of these are exported to France!” He cites Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Dickens, John Stuart Mill and George Eliot to justify his claim that England comes first “among thinking nations”. However, this argument seems to be forgotten in another letter he wrote while in Bristol when he complains: “Everything about this society is disagreeable to me – *from its limited ways of thinking* to its indecent manner of cooking vegetables.”⁴¹

His paradoxical relationship with England continues when the former Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, dies in April 1881. This prompted a long letter from Eça for newspaper publication, entitled *Lord Beaconsfield*. While acknowledging the eminence that Disraeli achieved, he struggles to understand why. “[He] cannot in any way be connected with any great progress in English society,” he asserts. He also does little to hide his lack of regard for Disraeli’s novels, although he does acknowledge that it was not particularly lucky of Disraeli to be published at the same time as Dickens, Thackeray and George Eliot. At the end the Francophile Eça asks whether Disraeli was happy, concluding that the answer was in the negative, because: “this triumphant man lived with a secret, a small, absurd disadvantage: his French was far from fluent!”⁴²

⁴¹ See Introduction to Eça’s English Letters by Jonathan Keates, and Eça de Queirós e a Inglaterra by Americo Guerreiro de Sousa.

⁴² According to Mónica, op cit, p 10, Eça claimed that the main reason for his acceptance to Coimbra University was that he spoke fluent French.

The social conscience evidenced by his letters about the Newcastle miners is also seen when he turns his attention to Ireland. Writing about the Irish National Land League, which sought to abolish landlords in Ireland and enable tenant farmers to own the land they worked on, Eça notes that England, “rather than disturb the tyrannical interests of a thousand or so rich landlords, leaves four million men in misery……. The working class is dying of hunger, and the landlords grow indignant and call for the help of the English police when the workers demonstrate their absurd revolutionary desire – to eat!” At that time Ireland was not yet independent. Eça considered that the reformers confused the issues of independence with “the complaints of an oppressed proletariat” and felt sure that land reform would have been more acceptable if the English had not seen “wretched farmers” as being a threat to the Union.

On 23 January 1882, *The Times* published a report of a speech by the then Home Secretary, Sir William Harcourt. There was an ongoing dispute between the paper’s management and its compositors, one of whom, who was never identified, managed to insert the following line of text in the report at the last minute: *The speaker then said he felt inclined for a bit of f...ing*. The insertion was not spotted until the issue had been widely distributed and, according to Eça, it cost *The Times* a fortune to buy back unsold copies from the distributors as well as sold copies.⁴³ This gave Eça material for one of his *Cartas de Inglaterra*. He avoided using the ‘f word’, but employed considerable exaggeration (or “shamelessly embroidering” as Jonathan Keates puts it), translating the one line into several to put the following words into Harcourt’s mouth:

“I, for my part, am happy. I feel like going on a spree! Why should we not, indeed, have a real feast, with rivers of wine and willing women? Ah – lovely wenches! You ladies who are listening to me now, let down your hair and let’s have some merry-making, let’s have an orgy! Here’s to our debauch! Bring on the champagne! Here’s to love; let’s have some rapture!”⁴⁴

⁴³ “The Harcourt Interpolation”. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harcourt_interpolation.

⁴⁴ Introduction to Eça’s English Letters, p. xv.

The letter also gives Eça a chance to inform his readers of the role [then] played by *The Times* in English society. But the real humour comes from Eça's imaginings of the consternation the interpolation had caused when it reached "those reserved English homes." He speculates on the impact on an "old and devout duchess", a newlywed couple, and an 18-year-old girl reading out the lines to an old uncle.



The *Vencidos da Vida* group (Life's Losers), in 1888.

Left to right: sitting, Guerra Junqueiro, the Count of Sabugosa, Eça de Queirós, the Count of Arnoso; standing, the Marquis of Soveral⁴⁵, Ramalho Ortigão, Carlos Mayer, the Count of Ficalho; on the stairs, Carlos Lobo d'Ávila, and Oliveira Martins.

⁴⁵ He was First Secretary at the London Embassy in 1885 and Minister in London from 1891 to 1910. He is the subject of a biography by the late Chairman of the British Historical Society of Portugal, Paulo Lowndes Marques, entitled *O Marquês de Soveral, Seu Tempo e Seu Modo (The Marquis of Soveral: his time and his manner)*.

Conclusion

Eça's letters reveal an ambivalent relationship between him and England. To what extent this reflects his own confusion and to what extent he was just being contradictory for dramatic effect or through carelessness is unclear. It should be noted that his views of Portugal are at times similarly contradictory. He praised Britain as a powerful nation of strong character, but he had harsh and bitter words against what he saw as its treachery, especially in the field of foreign policy, where Portugal and Britain were, of course, at loggerheads. He lauded England for being the world's leading "thinking" country but did not hesitate to poke fun at some of those leading thinkers. With his highly developed sense of the ridiculous, he rightly poured scorn on all the flaws he witnessed in England, especially the ritualistic way in which the nobility conducted its life. Although his novels are often tagged with the labels of "realism" or "naturalism", in his letters he comes across more as a satirist who enjoys poking fun at easy targets and as a social commentator who seeks to highlight the numerous social problems facing both Victorian England and his own country.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ The author would like to thank Tariqua Woldetsadick and Mark Crathorne for their comments on earlier versions.