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**AN ANGLO-PORTUGUESE FREE TRADER:  
A Note on Benjamin Oliveira, Esq., M. P.**

by JOHN COBB

In Charles Sellers' *Oporto Old and New* (p. 167) we find the following entry: «Mr. John Gassiot, senior, . . . was Vice-President of the Royal Society, and in 1853 was asked by the late Mr. Benjamin d'Oliveira, M. P., to take part as one of the judges in studying the essays on Portugal submitted for the prize of fifty guineas offered by him.» Sellers tells us nothing more about Benjamin Oliveira (he seems not to have used the 'de' in England), but in the *Archives Historiques*, published in Paris in the middle of last century, he appears as:

*Benjamin de Oliveira, Membre du Parlement du Royaume Uni de la Grande Bretagne, pour le bourg de Pontefract (Yorkshire); Membre de la Société Royale de Londres; Vice-président de l'Association Archéologique de l'Angleterre; Membre de l'Institut Royal de la Grande Bretagne, du Conseil du Collège Royal de Chimie de Londres, de la Société Royal Zoologique, et d'Horticulture de Londres; Directeur de l'Institut Britannique des Beaux-arts, et des Peintres Anglais; Président du Star Club (association diplomatique); Membre de presque toutes les Sociétés Philanthropiques de Londres; Membre du Reform Club, Brooks's, et Union.*

It was in 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition in London, that this polymathic and public-spirited gentleman decided to offer his prize for the best essay on Portugal and its resources, his avowed aim being to stimulate the energies of its people and attract foreign capital to the country. The entries were to be submitted under a **nom de plume**, and assessed by an independent

jury. The winner was the «Chevalier Rose-Croix» who proved to be none other than James Joseph Forrester, Barão de Forrester in the peerage of Portugal, the distinguished viticulturalist and cartographer of the Port Wine district. Forrester's entry was far more of a treatise than an essay, and he eventually had it published in 1853. With its various appendices, which courteously included a memoir of the prize-giver, it makes a substantial volume.

Forrester's semi facetious preface, as the «Chevalier Rose-Croix», tells us that:

«The circular of Benjamin d'Oliveira, Esquire, . . . (a fellow-Fellow of some of our pet societies and institutions), at once resolved me to enter the lists, and not only to win his money, but also to afford him the opportunity of drawing sundry and divers corks of his far-famed **Tojal, Ribeiro Secco and Palhetinho**, on the occasion of the banquet that he doubtless would give to the Essayists, on the distribution of the premiums.» (Forrester: **The Oliveira Prize-Essay on Portugal**, London, 1853.)

So the two men were clearly well acquainted, and equally clearly shared political ideas. Both were liberals of the 19th-century school, and both ardent supporters of Free Trade.

The up-dated version of Benjamin Oliveira's entry in the *Archives Historiques*, as given by Forrester (op. cit., 280-4), tells us quite a lot about him, and more, perhaps, can be read between the lines than he intended. It is clear from the somewhat erratic and anglicized French that it was written either by himself or someone close to him.

The origins of the family are traced back to the reign of King Afonso II in the 13th century, during which several of its members were ennobled for their military exploits (Faria: **La Noblesse de Portugal**, Antwerp, 1750). Another ancestor was Dom Manuel Pires de Oliveira, Archbishop of Braga at the beginning of the 16th century, who together with his brother is mentioned in Villas Boas de Sampayo's, **Nobiliarchia Portuguesa**.

Benjamin Oliveira's branch of the family went to Madeira at the end of the 16th century, and it was in Madeira that his father and his uncles were born. One of the latter, João Francisco d'Oliveira, was personal physician to King João VI, and in 1822 was appointed His Most Faithful Majesty's Minister to the Court of St. James, and later to France. Another uncle, Joaquim, sailed with the Portuguese Court to Brazil at the time of the French invasion. He remained there with Dom Pedro after Brazil declared its independence, becoming a Marshal and a permanent member

of the Imperial Council. After his death, his widow returned to Europe and lived in Brussels where, we are told, she was «très estimée dans la haute société».

Benjamin seems rather less interested in his own father and mother than in these distinguished relatives. His father Domingos d'Oliveira was born Portuguese, but was naturalized English in 1811. He «faisait des affaires immenses» with Russia, Denmark, Hamburg, the United States and both the East and West Indies. In England he married «une dame anglaise nommée Jennings». That is all we are told about Benjamin's mother, except that all her children were born in England.

In 1826, at the age of twenty, Benjamin Oliveira was sent to Brazil on urgent business, presumably on behalf of his father, and during his stay there he helped his uncle, the Marshal, in drafting rules and regulations for the Brazilian navy, and other «ouvrages utiles et à l'avantage de ce pays nouveau». He later wrote a book about this journey: **Travels in Brazil, Portugal, Spain, the Canary Islands and Madeira, 1826-30.**

One of Benjamin Oliveira's cousins, João d'Oliveira (1789-1852) son of the Royal physician, became member of the Cortes for Madeira in 1832, and was subsequently to play an important part in a number of ministries during the turbulent reign of Queen Maria II. He was ennobled first as Baron and then as Count of Tojal. The title was taken from the property João d'Oliveira had bought outside Lisbon which had belonged to the Dominican monks of Abelheira Tojal since the 12th century. It was here that the «far-famed Tojal wines», referred to by Forrester, were produced (1).

Benjamin acted as agent for Tojal in London, and not only for his wines — «Il a souvent réglé des affaires financières pour le gouvernement...»; and in 1846 he was deputed to negotiate the terms on which Dom Miguel would renounce his claim to the Portuguese throne in return for an annuity from the British Government. In 1850, having «considerable possessions» in the island, he was asked to raise a loan for the improvement of the roads in Madeira and to help develop its natural resources. And a year later he went to Madrid to negotiate with Bravo Murillo's ministry on behalf of the holders of Spanish Government Bonds. This he seems to have carried through to the satisfaction of both parties:

(1) Tojal set up the paper-mill at Abelheira. After his death the property was managed by his son-in-law, an Englishman, Major Smith. Henry Vizetelly, visiting the Bucellas area in 1877, wrote: «After passing the highly-cultivated farm and paper-mills of Major Smith, an English settler in these parts, we come upon the first vineyards of the Bucellas district, with most of its vines exposed to a favourable southern aspect.» (**Facts About Port and Madeira: 1880.**)

«M. de Oliveira a reçu à cette occasion des remerciements publics mentionnés dans les journaux.»

Apart from these financial negotiations, Benjamin Oliveira, a true child of his time, took a keen interest in the building of railways both at home and abroad. He was chairman of a company which had the concession to build the line between Bordeaux and Cette, and raised the capital for Guizot's government to build the **ceinture de Paris**. In England he was a director of the Oxford, Worcester & Wolverhampton Railway.

However, in Portugal, where he should have had strings to pull, Oliveira's railway projects seem to have had little success, despite the «great efforts» he made in 1846, 1850 and 1852. He raised the capital to build a line between Lisbon and Alcácer do Sal, but the Conde de Tomar's government refused the 6% guarantee demanded, and the project was still-born — «faute commise qu'on a regretté sans cesse». In 1852, Oliveira, together with Messrs. Locke, Peto, Jackson, Brassey et al, put in a bid for building the line between Lisbon and Santarém (the first in Portugal). They were, however, undercut by rival contractors.

In England, Benjamin Oliveira started his political career in 1835 in what must have been the hard way by standing as a «free trader» against the redoubtable Sir Robert Peel. When later elected as Liberal Member for Pontefract, he devoted his attentions first and foremost to the reduction of duties on foreign wines — not, perhaps, without his cousin Tojal's interests in view. His mastery of the statistical and economic aspects of the wine-trade, as well as the emphasis he laid on the benefits both physical and moral («resultats morales et hygiéniques») of wine-drinking, commended his arguments to the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Gladstone — or so it is claimed. Oliveira's other hobby-horse in the Commons was the embellishment of the monuments, buildings and bridges of London. Here again he may not have been altogether disinterested since among his various directorships was one of a company managing «un des grands ponts qui traversent la Tamise, à Londres». He also devoted much time to charitable institutions, hospitals, and to the improvement of the working-class through education.

Oliveira was on the Crystal Palace Committee which organized the Great Exhibition of 1851. Later he chaired another committee which sought to keep the building on its original site in Hyde Park. The idea of this 19th-century colossus in such close competition with that curiosity of our own day, the new Knightsbridge Barracks, almost makes one regret that the Committee did not get its way.

But the House of Commons, board meetings at home and abroad, and public committees failed to exhaust the energies of this remarkable Victorian. Apart from his account of his voyage to Brazil, Oliveira published another travelogue in 1836. This took in Egypt, Constantinople, Asia Minor, the Ionian Islands and Greece. And in 1847 came **Reminiscences of Travels** which dealt with the natural resources, government, public institutions, monuments and pictures of Central Europe, including Germany, and of Italy and France. He also published an English translation of Anacreon's **Odes**, some sections of Voltaire's **Henriade** and of Montesquieu's **L'Esprit des Lois**, not to mention Latin versions of Alexander Pope's **Messiah** and **Windsor Forest**.

It is not altogether surprising to find that, though Benjamin Oliveira was twice offered the position of Sheriff of London and Middlesex, he felt obliged to decline the honour on account of his other public duties.

Oliveira was twice married; first in 1838 to Philadelphia-Mary Ede, daughter of John Ede, a London merchant, by whom he had three children; and again in 1849 to Mrs. Emma H. Hunt — «dans laquelle finit une famille très ancienne du comté de Derby».

I have not been able to discover the date or place of his death.