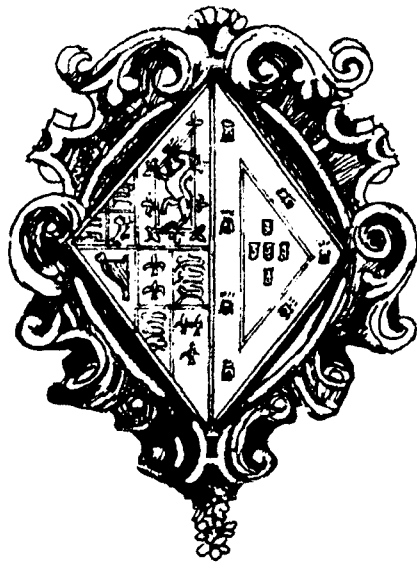


BOOK REVIEWS

PRINCE HENRY 'the Navigator' *A life*

By Peter Russell - Yale University Press, 2000

ISBN: 0 300 08233 9 -xvi + 448pp (one map; 33 illustrations)



Sir Peter Russell's biography of the half-English Portuguese prince, Knight of the Garter, and, as the author puts it "universally but somewhat misleadingly known to all as the "Navigator"" caused rather a furore in the review pages of the *Anglo-Portuguese News* last year. This is a book that has, by the author's own admission, been some five decades in the making. It is perhaps the culminating work of a distinguished Hispanic scholar, (the first undergraduate, incidentally, to read Portuguese at Oxford, where he later went on to be Professor of Spanish Studies and Director of Portuguese Studies) who has trained and encouraged a whole generation of British Hispanists by his impeccable scholarship.

This book – highly readable even to the general reader with an interest in Portuguese history – is above all else a balanced, scholarly re-interpretation of the Henrican myth. Among the *azulejos* that adorn the station of São Bento in Oporto (Henry's birthplace) is a splendid picture of the warrior prince at the taking of Ceuta in 1415, the same year his cousin, Henry V of England, won the battle of Agincourt. The defiant stance of the Infante, an embodiment of chivalry and crusading zeal symbolises an image of Henry that Peter Russell sets out, if not totally to destroy, seriously to undermine.

Henry became, though, as Sir Peter shows, already a semi-mythical figure in Portugal even when he was alive. The primary source for Henry's life is the glowingly flattering chronicle of Zurara; later, the image of the Prince was, as Sir Peter puts it, 'remodelled to serve the purposes of succeeding ruling élites in Portugal'.

Henry's career, traced deftly, sometimes humorously but with copious scholarly references, comes across as rather more complex. A 'navigator' who, passionately interested in the problems of oceanic navigation, in fact rarely made more than the odd voyage along the Portuguese coast and some forays across from the Algarve into Morocco.

In 1415, at the age of 21 Henry embarked on what can be interpreted as the beginning of the Portuguese adventure overseas, the taking of Ceuta. . The book traces in some detail the complex political background and in-fighting at court; 30 years after Aljubarrota a new generation of Portuguese nobility wish to win their spurs and send the clear message that Portugal is well in the vanguard of Catholic states against Islam.

Early after the capture Henry's unabashed zeal for crusading and evangelising activities was to lead him on to a series of expeditions, one of which was to end in tragedy. The balance of his achievements is well chronicled. It is to Henry that Portugal owes Madeira and settlement in the Azores.. The motives for this are seen by Peter Russell as being very much to do with extending his own authority and power. To Henry's initiative can also be credited the discovery of the Cape Verde islands, part of the Guinea monopoly which he had managed to secure from the Crown, and exploration off the coast of what we now know as Sierra Leone. Tragedy of course came in the ill-fated expedition to Tangier (143, resulting in the capture of the prince's brother, D. Fernando (the 'Infante Santo') who languished as a hostage in Morocco until his death.

It is Henry who also initiated the occupation of the Canaries, risking relations with Castile. Why? Was it indeed to create staging-posts to support southward exploration, beyond the dreaded Cape Bojador, long held to be an impassable barrier to navigation? An unsuccessful landing on Gran Canaria in 1424 was the beginning of what Russell calls a 'Henrican obsession' which was to end some twenty years after his death with the renunciation by Portugal of her

claims to the islands. Peter Russell also reassesses Henry's contribution to oceanic exploration: despite his many faults, his strong urge to expand his own power base in Portugal, Henry emerges as a strong enough character to be an effective catalyst or promoter of ventures which were to change not only Portugal but how Europe as a whole viewed the rest of the world.

That there was a profit motive in this, and that among the most profitable cargoes to be brought back from south of Cape Bojador were slaves, was a position that appears to have sat ill in the Henrican euphoria of 1460. In fact, the chapter dedicated to the issue is one of the best examples of how Peter Russell's encyclopædic knowledge of 15th century history and thought brings a balanced and contextualised perspective to a subject which was viewed by the men of the time in a way totally at variance with modern-day thinking.

In summary, a great work of scholarship, an imaginative fresh and balanced perspective on a figure that cannot fail to be of interest to the members of the Society. A 'must read'!!

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Colin O'Halloran

(Colin O'Halloran willingly acknowledges that he had the great fortune to study under Sir Peter Russell at Oxford)