

DONA MARIA II (1819-1853)

Born in Brazil, the first child of Dom Pedro IV and Maria Leopoldina of Austria, Infanta Maria da Glória came to the forefront of Portuguese political affairs at the age of 7 when her father abdicated the throne of Portugal in May 1826 in her favour. One of the conditions of his abdication (in order that he could remain Emperor of Brazil) was that Dona Maria would be affianced to her uncle Dom Miguel (who was Dom Pedro's younger brother). Dom Miguel would become regent when he reached the age of 25 in 1827, then marry Dona Maria when she became of age in 1833. At this point they would reign jointly as king-husband/queen-wife, and their children would inherit the throne.

These plans went awry when in 1828 Dom Miguel returned to Portugal and usurped the throne. In the ensuing War of the Two Brothers (1831-1834), Dom Miguel was defeated and forced into exile under the terms of the Concession of Évora Monte (May 1834). Dom Pedro became regent for Dona Maria, but because of ill health he had to resign this position on 18 September 1834 (he died 6 days later), and his daughter, age 15, was acclaimed queen that same day – Dona Maria II.

The queen's earlier betrothal to Dom Miguel was annulled by the Patriarch of Lisbon. The Cortes had already given its permission for her to marry a non-Portuguese, and on 1 December 1834 she was married by proxy to Prince Auguste Charles of Leuchtenberg (Dom Augusto). Her new husband arrived in Lisbon in January 1835 but died suddenly of a severe throat infection in March. Dona Maria was then married by proxy on 1 January 1836 to Ferdinand August de Saxe-Coburg-Gotha who reached Lisbon in April. After the birth of their first child in 1837, her husband, Dom Fernando II, ruled jointly with her.

Dona Maria had 11 children, of whom 7 survived (5 boys and 2 girls) but passed away in 1853 during the birth of the last (still-born) baby. During her married life she was pregnant approximately fifty percent of the time. Dom Fernando acted as regent for 2 years for their son, Dom Pedro V. Later he would be involved in a variety of cultural activities but is probably best known for the construction of Pena Palace outside Sintra, and of the Bragança mausoleum at São Vicente de Fora in Lisbon. In 1859 he married again, to a Swiss-American actress.

Throughout her reign (and co-reign with Dom Fernando) Dona Maria was active in the political affairs of Portugal. She proved herself a capable politician in her own right, changing ministries as necessitated by events. Some of her moves – e.g., the "Belenzada" of 1836 – failed and some – e.g., the "ambush of 6 October" (1846) in which she replaced Palmela with Saldanha – were successful. Her ideology was conservative, but faithful to the Charter written by her father, and she was neither absolutist nor inflexible. While active in choosing her ministers, she left most of the governing up to them; however, she was not above interfering, and has been criticised, especially when contrasted with British monarchs, for being too involved in the politics of the country. But her actions were well within the Portuguese constitutional system: the Constitutional Charter gave an active role to the monarch and Dona Maria played that role. The fault, if any, was with the constitution, not with her. Between her and her husband, Dom Fernando, they were able to build a role for the monarchy which was both active and also respectful of the people's wishes as represented by their leaders. Certainly she had more power than later constitutional monarchs elsewhere, and perhaps even more than her husband's cousin, Victoria of England, at the time.



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Queen, 1826-1828, 1834-1853

– portrait: L de Bernard, 1834

– Ron B. Thomson, D.Phil.(Oxon.)