

## Eça de Queirós and the 1890 Ultimatum

by

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The noted writer, José Maria de Eça de Queirós (or Eça de Queiroz as was used in his lifetime), was posted as a diplomat in England (1874-88) at a time when relations between Britain and Portugal were souring as a result of disputes over southern Africa, part of the so-called Scramble for Africa. His time in Britain made him well-qualified to comment on the repercussions of the January 1890 'British Ultimatum',<sup>1</sup> which he did in a lengthy letter for publication in Portugal.<sup>2</sup>

Portugal would have liked to establish a colony stretching from Angola in the west to Mozambique in the east. Starting in 1877, expeditions were mounted, beginning on both coasts, to identify connecting routes and establish claims to the land. However, the difficulties in doing this were compounded in 1884-85 when an international conference in Berlin, which became known as the Congo Conference, defined a new law by which possession was nine tenths of the law. Effective occupation replaced historical rights based on having been the first to visit an area or on treaties made with local tribes. This started a scramble to establish occupation, a struggle in which Portugal was hopelessly out of its depth. By 1890 Britain was sending an Ultimatum and threatening aggression against the island of Mozambique and other Portuguese colonies and even a blockade of Lisbon if Portugal did not withdraw from the contested areas that eventually became Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.<sup>3</sup> When Portugal acquiesced to British demands, it was considered as a national humiliation by republicans in Portugal, who denounced the government and the King as responsible, resulting in the fall of the government and, arguably, the eventual demise of the monarchy.

Eça's letter on the Ultimatum shows both his considerable gifts as a writer and his social and economic awareness, which are also revealed both in his novels and in some of his letters from England, such as those to the Portuguese Foreign Minister concerning the miners' strike in northeast England. While beginning the letter with the strong condemnation of the British that his audience would have expected, although perhaps with a hint of being slightly tongue in cheek in places, he gradually moves to pointing out the futility of the position adopted by many Portuguese, concluding that the proposals to exact revenge would achieve nothing and that the energy expended in hating the English would be better spent in developing Portugal.

The letter begins with some historical background and with Eça's explanation of the British plan for Africa, which involved imposing upon the continent "what the *Spectator* in its usual pompous way calls the 'tremendous majesty of British peace'". He indicates that Portuguese involvement in Africa could have caused Britain problems in achieving this, as the disputed regions of Mazona and Nyasa had been "crushed, explored and occupied" by Portugal over the previous 200 years. However, this now meant nothing because, presumably referring to the Congo Conference, "the science of international law has died out" and Portugal was weak, thus passing control to the British, "which traditionally leaps over foreign walls as long as there is not the barrel of a rifle waiting on the other side".

The dispute between Britain and Portugal was initially conducted in a very diplomatic fashion. Then, as described by Eça, an event took place that triggered the more aggressive stance of the British. An expedition led by Major Serpa Pinto encountered a "hostile group of natives" who had hoisted "English"<sup>4</sup> flags on the roofs of their huts and began to fire "with those five-shilling rifles the sale of

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1 For other BHSP articles on the Ultimatum see: *British and Portuguese Attitudes Towards the British Ultimatum of 1890*, Annual Report 1994 and *Lord Salisbury's Ultimatum*, Annual Report 1997

2 See *Eça's English Letters*, translated by Alison Aiken and Ann Stevens. Published in 2000 by Carcanet Press, pp155-169

3 *A Very Short History of Portugal* by A.H. Oliveira Marques. 2018, pp 167-180

4 Throughout, Eça uses "English" rather than "British". Given the long time he was in Britain this can be no accident and I assume that his readership did not differentiate between the two

which is one of the most lucrative commercial ventures in the African interior”. This resulted in the Portuguese troops killing around one hundred of the defenders. Eça excuses the event on the grounds that Stanley did much the same thing and that a flag only “gains its significance from the hand which is holding it”. Here the criticism of the British seems very much to be used to imply criticism of the Portuguese, particularly when he notes that Serpa Pinto’s troops had “behaved like all other colonising nations towards rebellious natives, in particular like the English, those masters of colonisation and crowned destroyers of the inferior races of the world”.

Sadly for Portugal, the attack by Serpa Pinto led to heavy criticism in the British Conservative press, “which for some time has been ridiculed and discredited under the nickname of *Jingo*”. The press “broke out in one of those habitual arrogant outbursts” with “drunken bravado usually expected from hooligans at the fairground.” According to Eça, the “Jingoistic press” is “always so lacking in good manners and good taste” (*plus ça change.....perhaps*). It was arguably pressure from the newspapers that led to the change in the British government’s approach. From “warm and friendly” negotiations Britain suddenly moved to presenting its “curt ultimatum.” The threat to take ports in Mozambique was, for Eça, the deciding factor as “England, as we know, would never then leave, just as it never quit Egypt”.

The Ultimatum caused numerous protests in Portugal. Eça notes this but is already steering his letter away from criticising the English to providing advice to his countrymen.

*It must surely be more important for Portugal to possess life, warmth, energy, an idea, a purpose, than to possess the land of Mazona as, if one does not have the means to rule them, there is no point in possessing dominions..... Lacking force, soul, will,..... Africa is as useless as were the beautiful African virgins brought by his servants to poor King Senaquerib, who was 110 years old..... ‘How can I reproduce life’ stuttered old Senaquerib ‘if I have no life in myself?’ Without life in ourselves, how could we possibly revive Africa?*

Eça considered the sentiment that inspired Portuguese protests to be “beautiful and noble” but lamented that its outward expression sometimes lacked both beauty and nobility. He fully supported men who handed back medals that had been awarded by Britain but mocked schoolmasters who demanded “as a form of national defence” that English be removed from the languages taught in schools, which was “not an act of patriotism but an act of ignorance.” Also ridiculous in his eyes were actresses who refused to perform when there were English people in the audience.

The mass protests against the British government were not “moving towards truly serious, useful, practical and patriotic ends”. He concluded that even after adequate time to reflect on what needed to be done, the plan was still to “punish England, to foment hatred against England, to boycott England by removing our custom”. His letter then proceeds to illustrate the pointlessness of such actions. “If we denounce and condemn every evil of England we shall be wasting our time in superfluously repeating everything which England’s own sons have already so eloquently and forcefully said.” He references Byron, Shelley, Dickens, Thackeray, Carlyle, Ruskin and Arnold. “And what does England do? England covers her accusers with laurels; when they die she gives them a glorious tomb in the pantheon of Westminster Abbey....”

Things would be different were Portugal stronger militarily. “If we should reasonably assume that there is a possibility that one day we should send an Ultimatum to England, backed up by squadrons, then yes, by all means hatred should be our inspiration.” But he echoes an unnamed English humourist to the effect that for such an event to happen would require that “the British Empire is reduced to the country of Middlesex”. Hatred is a “negative sentiment which creates nothing and sterilises everything”. However, Eça agrees that the Portuguese should detest England but that this must not distract from “the vast work which lies ahead”. This detestation should not “become so essential, supreme and all-absorbing that it remains the sole purpose of our lives and replaces the real work ahead”.

Eça then moves on to examine calls made in Portugal for economic sanctions against Britain. Here he can produce strong evidence for his views. He points out that a boycott of British products would “not make any difference to England while, on the other hand, we should suffer enormously”. This is because such a practice would mean identifying alternative supplies “which are not so good, are more expensive, and would double our cost of living”. Forbidding English ships from entering Portuguese ports, as some had suggested, would “destroy the great plan of recent times, which was to convert Portugal into a rich, powerful centre of commercial activity between the old world and the new”.

He then points out that if Portugal didn't allow purchases from England it could hardly expect to sell anything to England. Most of the country's port wine went to Britain, which was also a major market for minerals, salt, fruit and cork. Finally, Eça resorts to statistics. Portugal sold 30,000 contos worth of products to England in 1888 but total trade in the British Empire amounted to 4,920,750 contos. So what, Eça asks, would be achieved by a boycott. It would result in extreme suffering in a futile effort to kill the British lion. “Pull out a few hairs from its mane and these will very shortly grow back, stronger and harder.”

Finally, Eça turns to the real purpose of his letter. “Let's get down to the only really patriotic job, that of reconstructing the country..... More than anything we should create wealth, as without that even the strongest arm becomes weak.” Admitting that his ideas are “possibly excessive and erratic” he argues in favour of rural development and repopulating the countryside, improving agricultural practices, resolving land fragmentation problems, providing rural credit, improving irrigation, replanting woodlands, etc. In fact, he comes up with a set of prescriptions that, repopulating the countryside excepted, would not now look out of place for an agricultural development plan for the areas that were the cause of the Ultimatum 130 years ago. He also advocates a fairly socialist agenda for industrial development including nationalisation of “public transport so that it starts moving”. Once this has been achieved the military should be reorganised and education improved, with an emphasis on technical education. In conclusion, he repeats the main point of the letter, that the anger against Britain should be channelled into economic growth:

*...surely those who so ardently want to prepare for external defence will prove themselves no less ready to work for interior order. New fortifications on the outside serve little when there are old ruins within. A bronze breastplate serves no purpose for a sick chest!*