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THE CONCESSION OF ÉVORA MONTE

THE FAILURE OF LIBERALISM IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY PORTUGAL

by Ron B. Thomson

The government of Portugal throughout its history has centred on the crown. In the early nineteenth-century attempts were made to share that power more widely, which succeeded in the establishment of a constitutional system but not a liberal democracy. The urban liberals, despite periodic successes, were overwhelmed by the consistently conservative rural majority.

This book details the struggle among various members of the Bragança family to control the throne, and its struggle with liberal groups for the control of the government. In the end both the crown and the new political middle class failed to address the country's main weakness: an agrarian and fishing economy based on a rural society resisting change. The problems of the nineteenth-century Portugal carried over into the twentieth-century Republic, and the Salazar dictatorship which lasted until the Carnation Revolution of 1974.

"The Concession of Évora Monte is a well documented and rigorous analysis of a much troubled period of Portugal in the 19th century. I am deeply impressed by the graphic descriptions, which miss nothing about the protagonists, the causes that they stood for and the consequences of so much political and social unrest. The book is a remarkable *obra prima* of Portuguese history. The last chapter – the conclusion – corroborates what I have just said, in as much as it reflects a deep knowledge of Portugal. Congratulations for this outstanding study.

– António Meira Marques Henriques,
Museo de São Roque, Lisbon

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"This book is a very successful synthesis of a long period of Portuguese history, rich in domestic events and constant dramatic changes of fortune, in a country forced to fight for its survival throughout the European power struggle before, during, and after Napoleon.

After skimming over the Portuguese eighteenth-century period of enlightenment, Ron B. Thomson addresses the country's political struggle with two liberal projects, the revolutionary French approach and the British liberal parliamentary approach, and the violent struggle between two royal figures and brothers, embodying the romantic desire of political and social change, and the popular resistance to end the long-prevailing 'Ancient Regime.' Thomson concludes that the social and economic characteristics in the making of Portuguese society of the time explain the dramatic shortfalls in the development of a truly liberal society in Portugal, in contrast to the more advanced economic societal models already existent in Northern Europe.

The work is rational and synthetic, written in a very clear style, with a concentration on key events, pragmatic and scrupulously fair in its analysis; it is a welcome, fresh work that will enrich Portuguese historiography, so often ideologically biased."

—PEDRO DE AVILLEZ, historian and publisher

In a period when the monarch was the key figure in the Portuguese government, the struggle for the throne among members of the royal family was of crucial significance. Against a backdrop of new liberal ideas, economic conservatism, and modernization, Dom Pedro challenged his brother, Dom Miguel (the Usurper), on behalf of his young daughter (Maria II) for the throne. But this struggle for the throne, and for a workable constitution, did little to change the fundamentally agrarian economy, so that in the end neither the monarch nor the liberal ideals of the urban elite, nor foreign pressures, had any fundamental effect on society as a whole.

The Concession of Évora Monte describes the economic and political problems unleashed by the Peninsular War and the evacuation of the court to Brazil; the 1820 revolution, the first Portuguese constitution, and the counter-revolution; the attempt by Dom Pedro when he became king (while also emperor of Brazil) to introduce the new Constitutional Charter and pass the throne on to his young daughter; the usurpation of the throne by his brother, Dom Miguel; and the War of the Two Brothers, in which Dom Pedro defeated Dom Miguel and forced him into exile. The signing of the Concession in 1834 marked the end of the civil war, but it did not bring peace and stability. The changes introduced by the victorious Dom Pedro did not solve the basic issues of Portuguese society, nor did the efforts of his daughter, Maria II, during the 1830s and the 1840s. Several attempts were made to impose a new liberal constitution on the country, but in the end, it was the formation after 1850 of new political parties sharing the governing that brought stability. The country remained conservative despite the modernization that came to the cities and penetrated the countryside only to a minor degree.

This book argues that liberalism in Portugal was an urban phenomenon involving a very small minority of the people, and points to a variety of reasons for this outcome. Portugal remained a rural, conservative society into the twentieth century and throughout the Salazar regimes until, perhaps, the Carnation Revolution in 1974.

RON B. THOMSON is a retired fellow of the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto.



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