

Book launch: *Maria II, The extraordinary friendship of Maria and Victoria, two queens in a world of men*, by Isabel Stilwell

By Ninna Taylor

In she walks, her blond hair swinging, her eyes flashing a happy smile, the youthful grandmother of a large Anglo-Portuguese family: Isabel Stilwell. On the table sits her historical novel, *Maria II, The extraordinary friendship of Maria and Victoria, two queens in a world of men*, a 700 page-turner that has been translated into English by Martha Stilwell D'Andrade.

“A family endeavour”, as Isabel tells us, taking her role as a “memoirist” of Portuguese queens most seriously. These are “*all remarkable women*” as the cover flap of the English version says, but they “*are little known to the outside world*”. This is about to change because Isabel has now published in English three of her eight historical books.

How does she make her characters come to life in books that are both novels and biographies and something more? “I am first and foremost a journalist. I must get my facts right and I go to great pains to do so with a team that double-checks and proofreads all my output. And also”, she adds chuckling, “with the help of some of my readers who, like detectives, sometimes find a clue that they hasten to share with me: an anachronism, a *broa de milho* on a table at a time when that cereal had yet to reach the shores of Portugal!”



Isabel Stilwell

And if there is no hard evidence for her to sift through, we ask, such as in 1387, when Philippa of Lancaster married Joao I or in the 1650s, when Catherine of Braganza was consort in England? Few events in those distant times were recorded. “Well, I have to fill in the gaps with my female intuition, sharpened by years of keen observation, hours of reading documentation, books, diaries and letters. Only at her Jubilee did Queen Elizabeth II authorise the last of Queen Victoria's diaries pertaining to the period of Maria II's death to be put on-line. So I have to make educated guesses.”

For her latest book, Isabel went to Brazil in the footsteps of Maria II the child-queen, looking at the sights she would have looked at, smelling the tropical flowers that the little queen and her soon-to-die mother would have picked, drawing the birds and animals that were dear to the hearts of the Royal Family in Brazil and that were to become the hallmark of this rather troubled monarch and her own extended family when she finally set foot, still barely a teenager, in Portugal - the land that she was destined, almost from birth, to rule. At that time Portugal was a devastated little kingdom, experiencing fratricidal wars between two brothers, the Liberal D. Pedro IV, Maria II's father, and her uncle, D. Miguel, the man to whom she was betrothed. *Absolutist Miguelist* and *Liberal factions* were fighting both in Portugal and abroad. There were also battles between the revenge-seeking politicians and the money-grabbing courtiers.

Isabel Stilwell confesses that she often takes her grandchildren with her to do reconnaissance tours of historical buildings when preparing a new book. She asks them to look and feel and to write their impressions with their very own words, even asking them sometimes to role-play or imagine that they, themselves, are Royal Children that are about to come to life in one of their grandmother's historical stories.

“Don't tell us the end of the story that you are writing,” the children or grand-children beseech Isabel. Of course, the death of a king or a queen is much discussed in history books but Isabel is a writer of *fact-tion*; she knows her facts and enables us to learn from the historical characters that she describes “*I didn't know that so-and-so was so like ...*”, her readers often tell her when they meet her face-to-face, Isabel smiles.

But who is Maria II, the woman, and who is Maria II, the queen? The author uses a string of adjectives, such as “baroque pearls”. Maria II has a happy nature throughout her life despite witnessing her father's brutality to her mother and his unstable political behaviour. She is stubborn, always ready, even as a very young child, to tell people that she is the Queen; a woman of limited formal education who was sent to live in Vienna and ends up in England on her own at the age of nine. She is an attentive mother who spends hours watching her children play in the Estrela Gardens as would any commoner of the time. An authoritarian, she is very strict with the heir presumptive, Master Pedro. She is impetuous and gets carried away by her inner likes and dislikes.

Maria II loved power and this is indeed a little-known fact about her. She upheld the Constitutional Charter signed by her father and by her uncle in 1822, which was refuted by the same uncle when he seized power. The Charter was several times secretly negated by the Queen herself: she was then forced to sign new documents as battles were waged, lost, and won in her homeland. Her Liberal statesmen and her husband, Fernando, wanted to pacify the country and to start modernising it and they demanded that she sign several amnesties and concessions, but Maria II was, when all is said and done, at heart, an *Absolutist*.



Necessidades Palace in Lisbon, home of Queen Maria II



Queen Maria II

She goes down in posterity as the “Educadora” or A “Boa Mae”. Isabel Stilwell agrees with this characterisation. “She was, with her husband, very intent on giving her own children a good education. Maria II was strict about the ‘Do’s and Don’ts’ related to life at Court; Fernando more keen on overseeing their schooling with his German tutor Dietz. A little-known fact is that they promoted the schooling of all children in Portugal – girls included – through the good works of Costal Cabral, the queen's somewhat dictatorial and greatly despised Prime Minister.”

And here the author starts to tell us about Maria II and Victoria as women. Isabel calls them “two queens in their roles as men”. Fernando was indeed happy to develop the cultural life in Lisbon, overseeing the programming of plays of the São Carlos theatre, building with his own money the Palácio da Pena, lending money to the State to refurbish

the Convento de Tomar or the Palácio das Necessidades, where the Royal Family lived. Fernando also paid for Portuguese musicians and painters to study abroad, was a great promoter of the Arts and was also a good opera singer. He was often left exasperated by the state of the country that he had grown to love, his wife's somewhat rash political decisions in view of the international crisis brewing in Europe, and her dangerous "whims" and "personal fancies."

In London, Albert was the mastermind behind the Great Exhibition in 1851, and imposed himself as advisor to his queen in matters pertaining to politics, social housing, health and safety. Many of his recommendations are only now coming to light as new archives are opened to scholars and the general public.

If the two consorts appeared to live "in their own worlds", in worlds where men dominated, this made their spouses' situations "an oddity" in the grand scheme of things. Hence the words of Isabel's subtitle, *two queens in a world of men*. The two queens appear as twins-in-spirit throughout the letters that they exchange (Maria II's letters were saved; Victoria's letters are still kept private) and in the diaries and journals of famous historical figures who talk of both sovereigns; as well as in the briefs written by both to their own courtiers, ambassadors and statesmen.

Maria II appears a resilient figure after a frightful childhood; Victoria, a formidable character after being brought up in near isolation by her own mother and John Conroy, her mother's spy, to become a queen that dominates an Empire where the sun never sets. Both share being the mothers of a vast family. Victoria, the future grandmother of all European monarchs; Maria II, the grandmother of kings, who will go on to suffer at the hands of anarchists and revolutionaries until the Republic is proclaimed in Portugal in 1910. Victoria is, because of her post-natal depression, "unhappily" pregnant time and time again. Maria II, who feels she has done her duty by producing numerous male heirs and spares is to die giving birth to her 11th child. Victoria's depression deepens after the death of her dear Albert and she becomes the lonely rotund figure veiled in black of her later years. Widowhood is not for Maria II, who leaves Fernando to bring up their children alone after her death at the early age of 34.

During the difficult times of her reign and despite ongoing advice from her cousin Victoria and English statesmen, including Palmerston, Maria II refused to take her husband's advice to board an English battleship stationed on the Tagus, in front of Lisbon, in order to leave Portugal. England was her home away from home where she was sent as a parentless child. She maintained throughout her life a love-hate relationship with England that could be said to still taint the relations of the two countries to this very day. In 1836 she told her husband, "If you Lord D. Fernando want to depart, please do so. The Queen of Portugal will die on the throne". As she did, in Lisbon, in 1853.

And we are left with Isabel Sitwell smiling enigmatically as we ask her the inevitable "end-of-an-interview" question. "Who will be the heroine of your next historical best-seller?". The answer, today, is anybody's guess.