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**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE APPOINTMENT OF JOHN  
ROBINSON AS CONSUL OF THE ENGLISH NATION IN  
PORTUGAL, 1650**

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One of the most curious events in the history of the English College in Lisbon was the appointment of Father John Robinson as Consul of the English Nation in Portugal by John IV on 13th July, 1650.<sup>1</sup> Father Robinson appears to have been a comparatively undistinguished member of the college. The annals<sup>2</sup> merely state that he was a Lancastrian who went to the college in 1635; was educated in the humanities and philosophy and became a priest in 1638. Between 1643 and 1650, he did missionary work in England and Holland. He was English consul in Lisbon for five years and then returned again to England. There is nothing in that very short resume of his career to explain why John IV thought him a suitable man to be consul.

Seventeenth century consuls were generally expected to have some knowledge of merchant affairs, and John IV's decree states that Robinson was experienced in commercial matters. As a priest, however, Robinson would not have been in a position to run a private merchant business. Any trade he might have engaged in would surely have been carried out for and on behalf of the English College. Given that the Jesuits and other priests frequently engaged in trade at that time, it is possible that the college

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1. *Collecção Chronologica da Legislação Portuguesa*, compiled and annotated by José Justino de Andrade e Silva, Vol. 1648 - 656, Lisbon, 1856, p.65.

2. The records of the English College are housed at Ushaw College, Co. Durham.

may also have done so. However, there is nothing in the college records to-day to confirm this. An examination of the few account books still extant among the college archives at Ushaw covering the second half of the seventeenth century give no indication that the college was engaged in trading. It would seem, therefore, that there are no extant records to link John Robinson to any commercial experience, before his appointment as consul.

John IV's decree also states that Robinson was nominated for the post of consul by the King of England. In 1650 there was no king in England. Charles II was living in exile in the Netherlands, and England and Portugal were at war. John IV had found it impossible to remain neutral in the English Civil War, as a result of the events which followed the welcome by Portugal at the end of 1649 of a fleet of Royalist ships under the command of Prince Rupert, Count Palatine of the Rhine, and the arrival of General-at-Sea, Robert Blake, with a Commonwealth fleet on 20th March, 1650. The king did not really have much choice, because only two members of his Council, the Conde de Odemira and José Pinto Pereira of the Conselho Ultramarino, wanted strict neutrality to be observed. Queen Luisa, Crown Prince Theodosio and all the clergy on the Council opposed this, arguing that to break with Charles II would be to attack royalty itself and repudiate legitimacy and order.<sup>3</sup> John IV laid his plans carefully and, without warning, on Sunday 12th June, 1650, at 10.a.m. all English ships and property in Portugal and the dominions were finally confiscated and the merchants and seamen imprisoned.<sup>4</sup> In issuing the order to do this, John IV was acting in direct contravention of Art-

3. Ajuda, 50 - V - 36, Documents 203, 204 and 205. Codex is entitled 'Movimentos do Orbe Lusitano. Vol. II'.

4. Collecção Chronologica da Legislação Portuguesa, op.cit. See also: - Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Bahia, Caixa V, pps. attached to Consulto Ultramarino of 21st January, 1651, and John IV, Cartas de El Rei D. João IV para Diversas Autoridades do Reino, ed. Laranjo Coelho, P.M., Lisbon, 1940, pp. 372 - 373, John IV to the governors of Madeira, Azores, Aveiro, Viana and Porto, Lisbon, 8th June, 1650.

icle 18 of the 1642 treaty between England and Portugal, which stipulated that if doubts should arise between Portugal and England which might give occasion to apprehend the interruption of commerce and correspondence between their subjects, public advice thereof should be given to the subjects of both countries, allowing two years on both sides to transport their merchandize and goods. In the meantime there was to be no injury or prejudice done to any persons or goods on either side.<sup>5</sup> There were perhaps 60 English merchantmen in Portuguese metropolitan ports at that time, and nine or more ships were with the Brazil fleet in Bahia. English merchants had property on Portuguese ships, too, as well as ashore.<sup>6</sup> In Lisbon itself, all but seven merchants, who had shown themselves to be violently Royalist in sympathy were arrested.<sup>7</sup> It was no secret in Portugal at the time that the confiscations were carried out for economic reasons, to enrich Portugal.<sup>8</sup> Thus, as all the English ships had been confiscated and their seamen imprisoned, and as only seven merchants remained out of prison, there was surely no real need to appoint a consul of the English nation. The only conceivable reason why John IV did appoint one must have been to please Charles II.

Charles II's interest in Robinson was almost certainly due to the assistance which Robinson gave to the murderer of Isaac Dorislaus, the Commonwealth representative at The Hague in 1649.<sup>9</sup> At that time, this priest was living in the Portuguese embassy at The

5. Chalmers, G., A Collection of Treaties Between Great Britain and Other Powers, 2 vols., London, 1790, ii.266.

6. Boxer, C.R., 'Blake and the Brazil Fleet in 1650', vol.36, *Mariners' Mirror*, 1650, 212 - 228, at 220.

7. Calendar of State Papers, Portugal (S.P.89)/4, ff.83 - 92 and 100. Court of Admiralty Enquiry, 8th October, 1651.

8. Ajuda, 50 - V - 36, Document 203.

9. Dictionary of National Biography (Dorislaus).

Hague. Colonel Whitford, who murdered Dorislaus, was a Roman Catholic, and he went to see Robinson to be resolved in point of conscience beforehand as to whether or not he could lawfully kill Dorislaus. Robinson must have reassured him, for it is known that Robinson told the Portuguese ambassador what was intended and the latter ensured that the embassy doors were left open, so that Whitford was able to repair here for sanctuary, until he could make his escape to Brussels.<sup>10</sup>

If, in order to express his gratitude, Charles, had asked Robinson to name a favour, it is certain that the latter would have consulted the college before asking for the consulship. Robinson was not a free agent. It must, therefore, have been the college itself which wanted one of its members to be appointed consul. Charles would have been delighted, in this poverty-ridden state, to do a favour at so little cost to himself, for the consul's salary was paid by the merchants, and consisted of a percentage on the goods they handled.<sup>11</sup> The concept of an English catholic seminary taking over control of the consulship of a factory was not new at that time. It had happened at San Lucar de Barrameda at the end of the sixteenth century and had enabled exiled catholic priests to utilise consular fees to further their own work.<sup>12</sup> At San Lucar, war between England and Spain, together with religious difficulties caused by the Reformation, had led in 1591 to the factory (known in that town as the Brotherhood of St. George) turning over property, i.e. factory house and chapel, into a hospice or residency for the benefit of religious or other refugees from England or Ireland. The consul was no longer to be president of the community, but only a subordinate under a Preposito or President and one or

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10. Historical Manuscripts Commission, 29, Portland I, pp.599 - 200.

11. S.P.89/4, f. 161, Maynard's consular patent of 27th June, 1660, and S.P.89/5, f.155, Holbetch's patent of 27th March, 1668.

12. Fisher, Sir Godfrey, 'The Brotherhood of St. George at San Lucar de Barrameda', Vol.1, *Atlante*, 1953, 31 - 40.

more chaplains who controlled the hospice. In 1596 the patronage of the hospice was handed over by the Brotherhood to Cardinal Allen in Rome.<sup>13</sup> The arbitrary and illegal transformation of the consulate into a religious organisation does not seem to have represented the spontaneous desire of the British communities, for it was not endorsed by the large bodies of Irish in Seville or Scots in Cadiz. The change was chiefly due to the activities of Father Parsons, the well known Jesuit. On the death of Cardinal Allen, Parsons obtained an attestation from the Nuncio in Spain conferring on him, or more probably confirming, until the Holy See might dispose otherwise, jurisdiction over the English seminars at Lisbon and San Lucar.<sup>14</sup> In obtaining this, Parsons was clearly planning for the future, for of course there was no English college in Lisbon until 1629.

Apart from the fact that the concept of an English catholic seminary taking over control of the consulship of a factory was not new at the time, it is important to bear in mind that by tradition in Lisbon during the seventeenth century, the consul's house was the factory meeting place.<sup>15</sup> Thus, on Robinson's appointment, the college automatically became the factory's meeting place and, therefore, the centre of the English nation in Portugal. It was to remain so until 31st May/10th June, 1656, when the treaty between England and Portugal, which was signed on 10/20th July, 1654, was finally ratified.

The 1654 treaty was the result of John IV and his ministers being forced to realise that ideals regarding legitimacy and order had to give place to practical realities. The war with England begun in June, 1650, meant that Blake's fleet patrolled the coast of Portu-

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13. *Ibid.*, 34 - 35.

14. *Ibid.*, 37 - 38.

15. British Library Add.Ms. 34331, f.137, Maynard to Southwell, Lisbon, 28th May, 1670, N.S.

gal, causing food supplies in Lisbon to dwindle and prices to soar.<sup>16</sup> No ships could be freighted for Brazil.<sup>17</sup> Portugal could not sustain war with Spain; war with the Dutch in Brazil, África and the far east, as well as war with the English Commonwealth, which was growing rapidly in stature among the nations. It was essential for Portugal's survival as an independent nation that she should have an ally strong at sea. Accordingly, in December, 1650 John IV began to release English prisoners provided that they posted bond and did not leave the kingdom.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, he sent Dr. João de Guimarães to England to seek peace, but in June, 1651 he returned to Portugal, his mission having failed. In June, 1652, John IV began to return confiscated property, but there is no record of any ships having been returned.<sup>19</sup> In August, 1652 John IV sent his Chamberlain, D. João de Sá e Menezes, Conde de Penaguião to England as his ambassador and he finally completed the treaty negotiations on Portugal's behalf.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately for the English College, the confiscations and the war with England would have realised small consulage payments until 1652 when trade began to improve very slowly, but without the factory minute books, and without a full set of college books, it is impossible to make an accurate assessment of the extent to which the college profited from Robinson's consulship. Nonetheless, Robinson would have brought to the college perhaps what it

16. John IV, *op.cit.*, pp.382-383, 433-434, 436, 439, 445, John IV to various authorities between 24th June, 1650 and 28th March, 1651.

17. *Ibid.*, pp.380-381, John IV to various authorities, 20th June, 1650.

18. *Ibid.*, pp.430-432, John IV to various governors, Lisbon, 22nd November and 5th December, 1650. N.B. Few could afford the bond. Even established merchants had difficulty finding the money, vide S.P.89/4, ff. 88-95.

19. Ajuda 51-V-16, Document 16, copy of letter John IV to D. Roderigo de Menezes, Lisbon, 22nd June, 1652, and Lansdowne Ms. 190, f.78.

20. Prestage, E., *The Diplomatic Relations of Portugal with France, England and Holland from 1640 - 1668*, Watford, 1925, pp.118 - 132.

valued more highly than money, i.e., influence among the English nation in Portugal. It is not surprising, therefore, that William Mettam, Secretary Thurloe's intelligencer in Lisbon, reported in 1656 that much of the opposition to the ratification of the 1654 treaty was being stirred up by some English clergymen in Lisbon and others in the agent's office in London. These men were doing all they could to disparage the treaty, if not disadvantage it. More specially, he said that Richard Russell and John Robinson made use of all ridiculous fictions and stories to render Thurloe odious and to foster the political and religious factions among the merchants.<sup>21</sup> This was doubtless being done because, with the implementation of the treaty of 1654, Russell and Robinson knew that what had been accomplished for the college would be ruined, for there would in future be a protestant consul in Lisbon.

It seems clear, therefore, that Robinson's appointment as consul was not due to his own suitability for the post, but to the desire of the English College to be the controlling centre of the English community in Portugal.

21. Thurloe, J., *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe, Esc., Secretary, First, to the Council of State, and Afterwards to the Two Protectors, Oliver and Richard Cromwell*, Ed. T. Birch, 7 vols, London, 1742, vi.114, Mettam to Thurloe, Lisbon, 12/22nd June, 1656.