

The Portuguese sail the seas, or *The Lusíads* revisited

In 1952, a new translation by William C. Atkinson of Luis Vaz de Camoens¹ *The LUSIADS* appeared in the Penguin Classics Series. Atkinson was Professor of Hispanic Studies at the University of Glasgow from 1932 to 1972. For anybody who hasn't read Camoens' epic poem, this English version in prose is a must. The section of Atkinson's Introduction, titled *The Theme*, is a marvellous *mise-en-bouche*, as our gourmet friends would say, before going out to find your own copy in one of the many well-stocked, new or second-hand bookshops in Lisbon or Porto. The following is a word-for-word transcription of *The Theme*.

“Camoens' poem, the national epic of Portugal, is the story of a people – numbering then a million and a quarter – who in the space of a century and a quarter spread over the waters of the globe, carried their flag and their faith from Brazil to Japan and established not merely an empire but a new conception based on mastery of the ocean routes. “*God gave the Portuguese a small country as a cradle but all the world as their grave*” wrote Antonio Vieira in the 17th century.”

“If they temporarily exhausted themselves in the process, they left the world as seen from Europe a very different place, and the whole course of subsequent history bears the imprint. *The Lusíads* is more, however, than the mere narrative of that achievement : it is also an interpretation of the underlying greatness of those who achieved it, and as such the best possible introduction to Portugal and the Portuguese. Being conceived in essentially poetic terms, it may fittingly be prefaced by a brief account in prosaic chronological sequence of the more notable landmarks in the long heroic story.”

“It was an important differential factor in the Peninsula that, whereas Spain did not recover full possession of her territory from the Moslem invader until the fall of Granada in 1492, after struggle lasting close on eight hundred years, the Reconquest to Portugal was the preoccupation of less than two centuries and was completed by 1267. Portuguese prowess at sea had already won its spurs in the extension of the fighting in its closing stages to the waters of the Atlantic; and the fact that in succeeding centuries the fight for survival was to be against Spain did not obscure the persisting threat to the faith from across the Strait.”

“With the infidel so close at hand, the crusades to the Holy Land had not engaged Portugal directly. Indirectly she benefited on occasion by the touching at her ports of valiant knights-errant from north-western Europe on their way to Palestine by sea, and English Crusaders played a notable part in the taking of Lisbon from the Moslem in 1147. Some of these went no further: one, Gilbert of Hastings, became Bishop of Lisbon. Crusading in the Peninsula was recognised by Rome to be fully as meritorious as crusading elsewhere, and such had been the fervour Portugal engendered in the process that even after the expulsion of the infidel she remained persuaded of her mission to continue the challenge and, in the name of the Church Militant, to carry the war into Africa.”

“Here England comes into the picture once more. In 1385, 500 English archers in the pay of John of Gaunt did yeoman service on the field of Aljubarrota, which put an end to Spanish designs on Portugal for the next 200 years. In 1386, the Treaty of Windsor bound England to Portugal – which enjoys thereby the status of our oldest ally - “for ever”. And in 1387 Philippa of Lancaster, John of Gaunt's daughter, married Joao I, the first of the House of Aviz, to become by him the

¹ The spelling used by Atkinson

mother of the most famous royal family² in Portuguese history. It was this Anglo-Portuguese line of Aviz that formally launched Portugal on the high seas and blazed the trail of empire. All five sons took part, with their father, in the capture of Ceuta in 1415. This was the country's first overseas expedition, that Philippa had blessed from her death-bed, and in her third son, Henrique, known to English readers as Henry the Navigator, it stirred a vision which was never to forsake him thereafter.”

“Withdrawing from the Court, Henrique established at Lagos on the south coast a centre for maritime research and exploration on an ever-increasing scale, drawing to his employ captains, pilots, cartographers and scientists and dispatching annual expeditions of discovery. The Mediterranean was known already, and the north coast of Africa. In addressing himself to the Atlantic and the west coast Henrique was guided by a variety of motives, scientific, religious, diplomatic, commercial. He sought communication and if possible an alliance with the mysterious Prester John, ruler of Christian Ethiopia; he sought new channels of trade for his country; he sought to discover, perhaps to annex and colonise, new lands; he sought to extend the Christian faith at the expense of Mohammedanism; and ultimate objective of all, he sought a sea route to India and the East. There too, as in Ethiopia, there existed the possibility of Christian allies, in the St Thomas' s Christians so-called of the Malabar coast, and this crusader's vision of a grand strategy that would take the Mohammedan world in the rear was given official recognition in Papal bulls.”

“The East also meant spices, the most-sought after commodity of the Middle Ages. It was their seasoning that made tolerable through the long winter months the salt-beef killed of necessity each autumn; they added flavour to a diet infinitely more restricted and monotonous at the best of times than that of today; in medical practice they were credited with many rare virtues and potencies. Pepper, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, aloes, ginger, camphor, incense and the various aromatic woods, these had been key to the wealth first of Constantinople, then Venice. Carried in Moslem vessels up the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea, by camel across Turkey and Egypt to Tripolis and Alexandria, to Italy in Venetian or Genoese galley, they were distributed then over Europe at a price commensurate with the journey. Untold riches awaited the European nation that could secure direct access to the sources of supply, a reward enhanced by the intense religious satisfaction to be derived from seeing the enemies of the faith lose control over so lucrative a traffic. It was not so much Venice which held the gorgeous East in fee as the Moslems the West.”

“By the time of Henrique's death in 1460, the West African mainland was known as far as Cape Palmas, where the coast turns due east to form the Gulf of Guinea, while Madeira, the Canary Islands and the Azores had all been colonised. His last expedition to Alcacer-Seguer, near Tangiers, in 1458, serves to underline the crusading zeal that was never absent from Portuguese expansion. Its success was to fire a succession of monarchs – Afonso V, Joao II, Manoel I – with the ambition to found an empire in Morocco, and, to that extent, it thwarted the progress of discovery to the south.”

“The next impetus came from a new direction. In 1487, Joao II fathered two very divergent undertakings with the same specific objectives of discovering Prester John and reaching India. The first was the mission of Pero da Corvilha to the East by way of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. At Aden, Corvilha took passage in a “Mecca ship” that deposited him, a month later -it

² The sons were known as “The Illustrious”.

was the summer now of 1488 – in Cananor. He had reached India, the first Portuguese to do so. From there, he visited Calicut, the great centre of Indian trade with the West, which he found to be largely in the hands of Moslems, and Goa, a mart for the supply chiefly of Arabian horses.”

“Returning by way of Ormuz, Corvilha now sailed down the east coast of Africa as far as Sofala, where again he found Arabs in possession of the trade in gold from the interior. In 1493, after several years of further journeying in Arabia and Persia, he set foot in Abyssinia and found Prester John, whose importance as an ally against the Moslem does not appear to have come up to expectations. Meanwhile he had duly reported to Lisbon on his earlier travels. Their importance lay, not in confirmation of the wealth of the East, but in the conviction his visit to Sofala had given him that the sea route from Lisbon was feasible.”

“The gap of knowledge still remaining was filled in most opportunely by the second enterprise aforementioned, that had been set on foot only a few months after that of Covilha. This was the memorable visit of Bartholomeu Dias, which gave at last the answer to the great query whether Africa could in fact be rounded to the south. Thanks to a store-ship, Dias's two small caravels were able to undertake a much longer voyage than any hitherto contemplated. Even so he had full measure, for once past the Congo strong winds drove him south for so long that when at length he was able to tack about he had already rounded the Cape without knowing it, and struck land at what is now known as Mossel Bay. Following the new and so exciting trend of coastline, he reached the Great Fish River. Another few days' sailing would have taken him to Sofala, over two years before Corvilha was to reach it, and between them they would have circumnavigated the continent; but his men had had enough, and compelled him to return home. The buffeting Dias received as he now rounded the Cape to the west led him to baptise it the Cape of Storms. King Joao, alive to the full significance of the achievement, renamed it the Cape of Good Hope. And now the stage was set for the greatest venture of all, that was to mark the culmination of a century of highly intelligent and infinitely courageous maritime endeavour.”

“This was reserved to Manoel “the Fortunate” who came to the throne in 1495. His choice for leader of the expedition fell on Vasco de Gama, a gentleman of the royal household possessed of some nautical experience, who, on 8 July 1497, weighed anchor with two square-rigged, shallow-draught three-masters of some hundred tons each by our reckoning, built under the supervision of Bartholomeu Dias, an older lateen-rigged caravel of half the size, and a store-ship of perhaps four hundred tons. For armament, they carried twenty guns, including breech-loaders. The officers wore armour and carried swords, the men leather jerkins and breast-plates, with crossbows, axes and pikes. They were 170 in all, among them some who had already sailed with Dias; a dozen convicts were at the Captain's disposal for an particularly dangerous undertaking. One in three of the crews was fated to fall victim of scurvy and never see Portugal again.”

“Fogs and storms, calms, currents and contrary winds were for long the mariners' portion. Standing out to sea after leaving the Cape Verdes, they did not sight land for ninety-six days, when they found themselves still some days' sail north of the Cape. This proved once more the Cape of Storms: not until four days after sighting it were they able to make their way beyond. Three days later, in Mossel Bay, they broke up the store-ship, and after another eight days passed Dias's farthest north, the Great Fish River. Natal they reached on Christmas Day, hence the name. Only in this region, as yet, were they strictly speaking explorers. From Sofala northward, for so long as they held to the coast, they would be treading in Corvilha's footsteps, in regions moreover where Arab traders, carrying with them something of Moslem civilisation had tempered the native savagery.”

“To da Gama this latter change was not for the better, since he had to contend henceforth with the treachery of enemies who were immediately alive to the threat to their interests. In Mozambique and again in Mombasa, he narrowly escaped destruction through their plottings. Malindi, further north, brought a kindlier reception though da Gama had now learnt his lesson and refused to go ashore. It brought too – his greatest need – a pilot who could guide him over the last and most hazardous lap of all, that Indian Ocean that no vessel from the West had ever sailed before. Twenty-three days after leaving the African coast the sailors had their first glimpse of India in the Ghats, and on 20 May 1498, they dropped anchor off Calicut. The voyage had lasted ten and a half months. And now East and West had met, without intermediary. A new era in history was about to begin.”

“Columbus' New World may have loomed larger to Europe since. At the turn of the 15th century, da Gama's discovery was held much greater, and with reason. For the spices and precious stones that he brought back from India symbolised not merely the ruin of Venice, the turning of the Mediterranean into a backwater, and the emergence of Portugal, a country insignificant in size and in population, as the richest nation in Europe. They held in kernel too the opening up of two unknown continents, Africa and Asia and the discovery of a third, Australia. They heralded, finally, the revolutionising of men's ideas of empire, the old basis of territorial conquest suffering eclipse with the development of trade and sea-power. On these were to soar to pinnacles of greatness till then undreamt-of first Portugal then Holland and lastly England, nations all three that otherwise might well have left but little mark on history. Manoel proclaimed himself grandiloquently ‘Lord of the Conquest, Navigation and Commerce of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia and India’.”

“There remained to the 16th century the task of exploitation and consolidation. Since trade, not territory, was the material objective, the fleets that followed in the wake of da Gama were concerned to establish, first friendly relations wherever possible with local potentates and peoples, and secondly, a chain of trading posts and fortresses for the better ordering of their maritime traffic and for defence against their Moslem rivals.”

“The next expedition, that of Pedro Alvares Cabral, left Lisbon six months to the day after da Gama's return. Sailing first to Brazil – tradition has long had it that the fleet, driven off its course by contrary winds, then first discovered this new land, though there are grounds for thinking that others of their nation may have been there before – Cabral took formal possession in his sovereign's name and continued on his way. Four of his thirteen vessels foundered in a storm near the Cape, Dias its discoverer being among the victims; only six were to reach their goal. In India Moslem hostility led this time to fighting, and Cabral's bombardment of Calicut forfeited to the Portuguese thereafter the friendship of its ruler or Samorin. In 1502, da Gama returned with fifteen vessels, and detailed a squadron to remain for the defence of the trading stations that had been set up at Cochin and Cananor. Duarte Pacheco, left on land with a small force in the following year, defeated the Samorin on the field seven times over, as well as destroying his fleet, and laid the foundations of Portuguese military and naval prestige in the East.”

“The changing situation was reflected in the dispatch in 1504 of Francisco de Almeida with a force of 2,500 men, of whom 1,500 were soldiers. Almeida was the first to rank as Viceroy and to set up a formal government, with seat at Cochin, for the bases the Portuguese now held. Before long the Sultan of Egypt was in a fray, not without incitement from Venice, and there ensued an encounter off Diu in 1508 which resulted in a resounding victory for the Portuguese and proclaimed them undisputed masters of the Indian Ocean.”

“Afonso de Albuquerque, Almeida's successor in 1509 and the greatest of Viceroy's, who had already conquered Ormuz and made the Persian Gulf another Portuguese preserve, cast the shadow of his might over the Red Sea too. It was he who in 1510 seized Goa, thereafter the centre of Portuguese dominion in the East, and sought to colonise it by encouraging his men to marry natives and settle permanently. Soon, as though India and the Indian Ocean were not enough, these mariners from the Tagus began prospecting across the Bay of Bengal and into the China Sea. Malacca, taken in 1511, not merely controlled all traffic with this new Farther East: it led directly to contact with Siam, Java, Cochin China and the Moluccas or Spice Islands, the first reports of whose wealth threatened to cast even da Gama's achievement into the shade and were the direct motive of Magalhaes's³ voyage of circumnavigation of the globe (1519-22) that gave the Philippine Islands to Spain. By then various Portuguese Embassies and trading missions had been in touch with China. In 1542 one such was caught in a typhoon and so battered that for fifteen days it drifted at the mercy of the winds, which carried it to Japan. This was their farthest north, Timor and New Guinea their farthest south; it is not impossible that some may have skirted the coast of Australia.”

“Other travellers, Jesuits for the most part, penetrated even more heroically into the unknown by land, and without the lure of material reward. One found his way to Tibet, another spent five years on an overland journey from India to China. All the world was their parish, and it was they and not the traders who turned the discovery of Japan to account in pursuit of that second but never merely secondary of the two objectives on which Portugal was now spending herself so recklessly. One exploit, this time to the west, deserves particular mention. In 1541 Ethiopia was delivered from her Moslem enemies, saved, as Gibbon placed on record, “by 450 Portuguese” and is still today a Christian country.”

“Joao de Castro, who reached Goa in 1545 was the last of the great Viceroy's. Where Albuquerque laid the foundations, he completed the edifice of the empire. In retrospect the year of his death, 1548, could be seen to mark the apogee of Portuguese greatness in the East. Camoens so saw it, and ended his account of his country's achievement in India with his name. Alike at home and in the East the new wealth was already taking its toll of the nation's stamina in lassitude and corruption. The fundamental weakness lay in the impossible drain of an enterprise so infinite in scale upon the country's severely limited resources in man-power. The yearly expeditions to the East were sapping its life-blood.”

“At length, in 1578, King Sebastiao administered the final blow with his ill-fated crusade to North Africa. Within two years Portugal and her empire had fallen into the lap of Spain, and disintegration set in straightway with the invitation to Spain's chief enemies, England and Holland, to attack that empire wherever on the broad seas opportunity offered. That Portugal did not recover all the recovery of independence in 1640 is not the wonder, but rather that she recovered so much. For even without the events of 1578,⁴ Portugal, so successful in warding off the Moslem powers of the East, could not have counted for much longer on passive acquiescence in her monopoly from the other Christian powers of the West. “I should very much like” remarked Francis I of France, *‘to see the clause in Adam's will that excludes me from a share of the world’.*”

³ Magellan

⁴ The King disappeared in battle, presumably killed.