

**THE BRITISH
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF PORTUGAL**

THIRTY FIRST ANNUAL REPORT
AND REVIEW 2004

Quinta Nova
Carcavelos
2777-601 PAREDE



Maria Isabel Witenhall van Zeller

Maria Isabel Witenhall van Zeller (1749-1819)

by Ana Maria Seabra van Zeller

Among the British Community in Oporto a curious and largely forgotten figure lived who strongly influenced public health in the north of Portugal and who became, in her lifetime, an important and much revered personality.

D. Maria Isabel Witenhall van Zeller was born in England on 6th of November 1749, daughter of Townsend Witenhall and D. Maria Carmer. She was baptized in the Church of Santa Marinha de Vila Nova de Gaia which naturally suggests she was a Catholic although she might have become a Catholic after her marriage.

She was married on May 4th 1767, that is aged 17, to Pedro van Zeller (1746-1802), Russian Consul in Oporto and a professed knight of the Order of Christ. They lived in the *Rua dos Ingleses* and at their *Quinta de Fiães* in Avintes. They had three boys.

In those days smallpox (“*variola*” in Portuguese) was a terrible public hazard. The illness killed many, rich and poor alike. It was a time of great controversy over the use of vaccination and the Portuguese Queen D. Maria I (1734-1816) refused to allow her son and heir the Infante D. José (1761-1788) to be inoculated, with the result that he caught the disease and died. The throne was eventually succeeded by his brother the Infante D. João who became Prince Regent and later King D. João VI (the King of the Peninsular War).

She, already a widow, became notable for propagating the smallpox vaccine which had been discovered by Jenner (1746-1823) in 1796 and timidly introduced into Portugal in 1799. She learnt how to vaccinate though the surgeon José da Cunha who, later on,

with Bernardino António Gomes, created the *Instituição Vacinica*. The vaccine was, however, much contested not only on religious grounds but also by the medical profession. At the time she was arrested as a *curandeira* a sort of witch. She appealed to the *Academia Real das Ciências* stating that she, personally, had inoculated over 13,400 persons. The Academy defended her and in 1814 presented her with a gold medal. Most of her patients were the poor round her *Quinta* and in Oporto.

Through the *Academia das Ciências* she contacted other enthusiasts of Jenner's discovery and we find her networking with a Dr. José Francisco de Carvalho, in Lagos, in the Algarve. In 1813, she vaccinated 284 patients in the month of April. In the South of Portugal we find a D. Angela Caetana Maria Tamagnini who also directly inoculated patients.

In June 26th 1813 John Croft¹ writes to her:

"My dearest Madam,

I enclose a Testimony offered, on thursday last, to superior and distinguished Virtue, at a full & public Meeting of the Governors of the Kingdom and principal persons at the Royal Academy.

The silent conscionsness of having done good is the purest gratification to a mind formed for Pious and benevolent persuits but the spontaneous general offering of Admiration which leaps from the heart at the simple respectful narrative of extraordinary Acts of Charity while it delights and powerfully incites to similar Actions will not, I trust offend the retiring ear of purest delicacy – the voice of chaste praise is ever consonant and congenial to those who alone can deserve it.

When we reflect upon the internal Reward of Virtue and active Charity, when we observe the general Tribute of Respect and Praise which the Publick seldom fails to pay to extraordinary Merit, when

¹ John Croft. A member of the Factory House in Oporto. He considered himself a wine merchant in York. He wrote in 1788 a Treatise on the Wines of Portugal, which was printed in York.

we see those entitled to lead the circles of polished Society actually guiding them (besides other causes of influence) by setting the fairest example of religions and true efficient benevolence, and maintaining the Standard of Order & Decorum we are apt to wonder why all do not devote themselves to the same advantageous why all do not seek the same Distinction; it is because few are formed so excellently. Few could ever attain the same elevation.

I was going to write to you that probably by next monday week (perhaps before) I shall be enabled to take my departure and I am most happy in this opportunity of repeating the assurance of the Esteem and attachment with which I am (with Kindlove) my dearest Madam.

*Yours very affectionate,
John Croft."*

As stated the *Academia das Ciências* created in 1812 the *Instituição Vaccinica* and made her a *correspondente* in 1815. They presented her in 1816 with thirty thousand *reis* worth of books! She, regularly, sent this Institute a tally of the number of those she had vaccinated. They complimented her for "*tem vencido a indocilidade do Pouvo portuense*".

In 1803 a Royal Jennerian Society had been create in London and we find that in 1831 (the Duke of Wellington being President) it resolved to elect Cristian Nicholas Kopke as an honorary member. It was said that it was he who first bought the vaccine to Portugal and "converted" D. Maria Isabel.

The great romantic Portugal writer Almeida Garrett (1799-1854) wrote a long poem (an *Epicedio*) exalting her virtues when she died and sent it to her son, Francisco van Zeller in February 1820. Apparently the family paid for the poem. Critics do not consider it very good and it was dropped from his completed works.

D. Maria Isabel van Zeller died in Oporto on November 1819 aged 70 years of age.