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**SUSANNA ROOPE DOCKERY
PAINTER OF RURAL PORTUGAL**

Jonathan Rawes

An oxcart lumbers along a lane; vineyard workers sing and play the guitar as they tread the grapes in a *lagar*; a peasant girl fills her water pot from a fountain gushing from a stone wall; a gaily painted sardine boat rests on a sandy beach.

These were everyday sights in the rural setting of the Minho and the Alto Douro in the 1890s, and they caught the eye of Susanna Roope Dockery, a talented watercolour painter; they appealed to her feeling for colour, composition and picturesque subject matter, and also perhaps to an instinctive sense that they encapsulated a way of life that was passing. Her paintings achieved some popularity in her own day, but to us, in an age of mechanisation and motorways, they have the added attraction of being 'postcards from the past'.

Susanna Roope Dockery had an unusual, difficult and in many ways tragic life. She was born Susanna Roope in Oporto in 1856, the daughter of Cabel Roope and Elizabeth Whitaker; her father was managing partner in the well-known port firm of Hunt, Roope, Teage & Co., following in the footsteps of his father, also Cabel Roope, who as a teenager in the 1790s had left the family home of Greenway near Dartmouth to make his way in Oporto.

Susanna's eldest brother was yet another Cabel Roope, a bachelor who became a legend in late 19th century Oporto for his hospitality, bonhomie and capacity for champagne and port. Two of her sisters married into port-related families: Ellen married Arthur Standring and Kate married Arthur Dagge; and

after her death a stained glass window of St Eunice was placed in St James' church in Oporto in memory of Susanna Dockery, Ellen Standring and another sister Mary Morgan.

But Susanna - unwisely as it turned out - broke with convention and married an American, Victor Dockery, the US consul in Oporto from 1873 to 1876. After their wedding in St James' church in 1878 they lived in Leeds, where Victor was by now US consul (at that time several northern English cities had separate US consulates). Here their three children were born, including May who in 1913 married Prescott Rawes from the Oporto branch of the Rawes family.

Victor Dockery was from a prominent family in North Carolina; his father and grandfather were wealthy plantation owners and well-known politicians who served in the US Congress as well as the state legislature; but Victor grew up with the horrors of the Civil War, which left the southern states in need of reconstruction and the family fortunes much reduced. The Dockery allegiance to the Republican Party ensured a relatively smooth consular progress until 1885, when the Democrats recaptured the White House. Victor went back, alone, to the USA to try to salvage his career; for reasons which are unclear he never came back, and Susanna and the children did not join him in America.

So in September 1885 Susanna Roope Dockery was a 30-year old woman confronted with the collapse of her marriage, needing to bring up three young children with no apparent financial support from her husband; lacking any property of her own, or any professional qualification to make a living, she had to rely on her wider family. Yet within twelve years, in February 1897, an exhibition of '76 Watercolour Drawings of North Portugal by Mrs S. Roope Dockery' was being mounted

at Robert Dunthorne's The Rembrandt Head Gallery in Vigo Street, Mayfair, London.

How to explain this transformation from single mother to respected artist? Sadly we have no direct evidence - no letters, no diaries, no notebooks. We can only make guesses and draw conclusions from the few concrete facts we possess, but we can with confidence attribute to her three qualities which made her achievement possible. First she had undoubted talent, which shines through her work. Secondly an aptitude for hard work, which can be deduced from the sheer prolific scale of her output. Finally a determination to rise above her unpromising circumstances to achieve something in her own right, as well as being a good mother to her children.

She must have spent day after day in the open air with her easel and paints, capturing not just rural scenes but also landscapes, churches and other buildings, the port boats of the Douro, sardine boats on the beach - and peopling them with peasant figures in local costumes; she spent much of her time in a small cottage at Afife in the Minho, and many of her most characteristic works feature the stone cottages, churches, crosses and bridges - and native inhabitants - of the neighbourhood. Support came from her wider family as well as from friends such as the Yeatmans (of the Taylor's port firm); but even so she must have been single-minded and self-motivated in the extreme.

Her paintings touched a chord with the local British community, which began to acquire them and hang them on their walls, where some of them remain to this day. But her ambitions were wider, and at some point she became plugged into the English art scene sufficiently to have two paintings exhibited in 1894 at the Royal Institute for Painters in Watercolours, followed by the solo exhibition in Mayfair three years later.

How she made this transition, how she developed and refined her painting technique, are largely mysterious. We know that she had some sort of base - possibly her widowed mother's house - in Surrey, first at Witley near Godalming and later just outside Guildford. Witley was the centre in the late 19th century for a group of artists, including Birkit Foster and Helen Allingham, who formed a somewhat idealised and romantic view of the countryside, and the joys of the (for others) simple rustic life, and specialised in painting watercolours of country cottages and rural scenes. We also know that she received some tuition from the artist Claude Hayes, and that he had a home near Witley at some stage; but whether her painting took her to Witley, or the painting came about because of Witley, is, frustratingly, not known.

The 1897 exhibition was not the culmination of her career, which flourished for another ten or so years; one painting was shown at the Royal Academy, others at the Dudley Gallery; and she had exhibitions in 1902 at the Graves Galleries in Pall Mall (visited by the future King George V) and in 1909 at the Clifford Galleries in Haymarket.

And in the latter year 21 of her watercolours were chosen to illustrate the book 'Portugal, its Land and People' by W.H.Koebel, the red spine of whose cover may still be detected on the bookshelves of Portugal aficionados. Neither a guide book nor travel writing, it is aimed at giving a general introduction to Portugal to readers unfamiliar with the country - 'a sketch of some of the more salient features of the land that is so rich in southern charm, and a description of some of its neighbourhoods that have as yet met with an unduly small share of attention'. There is no indication that Koebel was very familiar with Portugal; but he obviously travelled fairly widely and talked to local people, including various representatives of the British community in Portugal.

Nor was her following in Portugal confined to that community or to Oporto. In 1899 her watercolours of 'Costumes of Minho and Douro' were exhibited in Lisbon and, probably as a result of that exhibition, two of her paintings were purchased by the Queen of Portugal.

However, her personal circumstances eventually caught up with her and, starting in 1911, she was hit by a series of setbacks. Her brother Frederick died of cancer, followed closely by the death of brother Cabel; in 1912 her eldest son lost a long battle with tuberculosis and died in Torquay in his early 30s; ten years later came the death in mysterious circumstances of her other son, who had emigrated to Africa and taken up farming. To a woman already deprived of male support by the separation from her husband these must have been cruel blows. She was supported by her friends and by the family of her daughter May and son-in-law Prescott Rawes; they had four children, to whom she became a much-loved grandmother 'Vovo'. Eldest grandson Francis Rawes remembered her in his memoirs, published towards the end of his life:

'The cottage itself [at Afife] was fairly primitive - the loo was in the garden and sister Lavender maintains that after all these years she can still smell its odour - but it was a cosy home with an open stove warming the living room. No electricity, no telephone, candles and early to bed. There were lovely walks in the pine woods, where we could venture on our own, small streams to be crossed on stepping stones, and favourite picnic spots - a special one by a wayside shrine. Crosses were familiar landmarks in this staunchly Catholic country and were often the subject of Vovo's sketches. The lanes were busy with ox-carts, while friendly "peasants" would greet us with a smile and a word. We never followed a stream to the nearby coast, probably

because Vovo did not want us to risk paddling in the sea, where tides and currents could be treacherous. In the background was a line of hills, which even in those early days I longed to climb but never did. Frustrating, for I can picture them still.

The women worked in the fields (I never knew how the men spent the day!) and some were engaged by Vovo to bring her needlework and attractive linen articles for her to sell on: often they would come with small cakes or quince delicacies called “marmalada” for the children, but to this day I enjoy those quince squares, when and if they come my way. Vovo needed to sell country home-spun wares to supplement what she earned from the sale of her water-colours depicting peasant life and customs in the Minho landscape’.

Susanna Roope Dockery died in September 1927; a year later the Rawes family left Oporto. In 1935 her husband (they never divorced) Victor Dockery, probably suffering from dementia, died in a hospital in Raleigh, the state capital of North Carolina; after 1885 he had never again worked in the consular service, and probably never saw his wife or children again; he became a tax official in Raleigh, spending his spare time fishing and enjoying the natural world of his home state, unfulfilled and something of a recluse.

But his legacy is to have bequeathed his surname to an artist who, against the odds, painted charming and authentic images of North Portugal, capturing a way of life that has largely disappeared.

Footnote: In the absence of a contemporary physical exhibition of her work some three hundred of Susanna Roope Dockery’s paintings have been ‘collected’ online by my cousin Julian Rawes on a website www.srdockery.me.uk; anyone who is interested in her work, or is able to add to the store of our knowledge, is encouraged to contact me. I have also been researching her family background and the lifestyle of the British community in Oporto at the time, in an effort to construct a coherent picture of her life and work, and would appreciate any suggestions of source material, other than the standard published works.

Jonathan Rawes is a retired commercial lawyer based in London. His family lived in Oporto for three generations from c 1830-1930 and he is related to the Rawes family in Lisbon.



“Treading Grapes”
Susan Roope Dockery