



Portuguese Literature

Aubrey F. G. Bell

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An excerpt from the INTRODUCTION:

PORTUGUESE literature may be said to belong largely to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Europe can boast of no fresher and more charming early lyrics than those which slept forgotten in the Vatican Library until the late Professor Ernesto Monaci published *Il Canzoniere Portoghese* in 1875. And, to take a few more instances out of many, the poems of King Alfonso X, of extraordinary interest alike to historian and literary critic, first appeared in 1889; the plays of Gil Vicente were almost unknown before the Hamburg (1834) edition, based on the Gottingen copy of that of 1562; Sá de Miranda only received a definitive edition in 1885; the *Cancioneiro Geral* became accessible in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the three volumes of the Stuttgart edition were published; the exquisite verses of Sá de Meneses, which haunted Portuguese poetry for a century, then sank into oblivion till they were discovered by Dr. Sousa Viterbo in the Torre do Tombo. The abundant literature of popular *quadras*, *fados*, *romances*, *contos* has only begun to be collected in the last fifty years.

In prose, the most important *Leal Conselheiro* of King Duarte was rediscovered in the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale and first printed in 1842, and Zurara's *Cronica da Guiné*, lost even in the days of Damião de Goes, similarly in 1841; Corrêa's *Lendas da India* remained in manuscript till 1858; so notable a book as King João I's *Livro da Montana* appears only in the twentieth century, in an edition by Dr. Esteves Pereira, and the first trustworthy text of a part of Fernam Lopez was published by Snr. Braamcamp Freire in 1915; D. Francisco Manuel de Mello, who at the end of his second *Epanaphora* wrote 'Se por Ventura tambem despois de meus dias acontece que algum vindouro honre ao meu nome quanto eu procuro eternizar a engrandecer dos passados', had to wait two and a half centuries before this debt was paid by Mr. Edgar Prestage. Even now no really complete history of Portuguese literature exists, but the first systematic work on the subject was written by Friedrich Bouterwek in 1804. Other histories have since appeared, and during the last half-century the perpetual, ingenious, and enthusiastic studies of Dr. Theophilo Braga have sifted Portuguese literature, chiefly the poetry, in all directions, and a flood of light has been thrown on it by the works of D. Carolina Michaelis de Vasconcellos. Perhaps, therefore, one may be forgiven for having been tempted to render some account of this 'new' literature which continues to be so strangely neglected in England and other countries. Yet a quarter of a century hence would perhaps offer better conditions, and a summary written at the present time cannot hope to be complete or definitive. Every year new studies and editions appear, new researches and alluring theories and discoveries are made. The Lisbon Academy of Sciences during its long and honourable history has rarely if ever rendered greater services — 'essential services' as Southey called them in 1803 — to Portuguese literature.

A short history of that literature must, apart from unavoidable errors and omissions, do less than justice to many writers. In appropriating the words of Damião de Goes, 'Haud ignari plurima esse a nobis omnia quibus Hispania ornatur et celebrari possit,' one may hope that Mr. Edgar Prestage, who has studied Portuguese literature for a quarter of a century, and whose ever-ready help and advice are here gratefully acknowledged, will eventually write a mellower history in several volumes and give their full due both to the classics and to contemporary authors and critics.

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