

Prince Henry 'the Navigator'. A Life

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Peter Russell's *Henry 'the Navigator'* is one of those rare books which has had classic, or rather legendary, status even before it was published. It was no secret that Russell was long at work on a full biography of a figure whom he had already drastically redrawn in his Canning House lecture forty years ago (*Prince Henry the Navigator*, Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Councils, 1960), and in subsequent lectures and articles. Even his first book, *The English intervention in Spain and Portugal in the time of Edward III and Richard II* (Oxford, 1955), pointed the way towards this interest in Henry, for both at the start and at the end of his new book Russell makes much of Henry's English ancestry, through his mother Philippa of Lancaster, and of his pride in his membership of the Order of the Garter; and in both books his fine mastery of the sources and his understanding of the Spanish as well as the Portuguese dimensions are plain to see.

Fortunately quite a few of Russell's earlier studies of Henry and his era were gathered together in a volume of the Variorum Collected Studies entitled *Portugal, Spain and the African Atlantic. Chivalry and crusade from John of Gaunt to Henry the Navigator* (Aldershot, 1995). Here already was a title that gave away a good deal about Russell's understanding of Henry; as he says in the last words of his new book:

The Gothic tomb he had designed, its representation of himself and everything else about it belonged wholly to the later Middle Ages. So, when all is said and done, did he and all his works. The Henrican discoveries, as well as the way the Prince explained and justified them, are seen to be an entirely medieval phenomenon in which, uniquely, the doctrines of the crusade and the ideology of chivalry came together to make possible, under Prince Henry's direction, a major scientific contribution to European man's knowledge of the wider world about him.

Naturally, the image he presented of Henry in 1960 was not to the taste of a Portuguese régime which sought to identify in the prince one of its greatest national heroes, the founder of Portugal's then still surviving empire, and a scholar who was (it was often suggested) for the art of navigation and the science of

geography what Leonardo was for the art of painting and the science of engineering. Indeed, even today the era of the discoveries remains the foundation on which most Portuguese believe their national history rests. Just as for the Catalans a slightly earlier period is seen as the greatest period of national glory, so for the Portuguese the end of the Middle Ages is a time both glorious and highly significant. It was also in this period, as the Portuguese insist with reasonable accuracy, that Portugal established its national boundaries, which have hardly changed since the late Middle Ages, unlike those of every other European state.

But those boundaries do not tell the whole story. Quite apart from the fact that they exclude the region of Galicia, where a language close to Portuguese is spoken, they also do not coincide with the boundaries which Henry conceived for Portuguese power and influence. To the continental lands of Portugal must be added the uninhabited Atlantic islands discovered by his sea captains, colonised by Portuguese and Italians, and made into major sources of wealth, particularly in the case of Madeira, and to some degree in the Azores as well; this was mainly as a result of the development of the Atlantic sugar industry. Henry, as Russell shows, was well aware of the financial advantages of sugar production, and he had an uncanny understanding of the fact that Italian merchants were keen, in the early to mid-fifteenth century, to lessen their dependence on eastern Mediterranean sugar and to exploit sources of sugar in western areas such as Granada. So when a group of Venetians, including Henry's eventual chronicler Alvise da Mosto (often wrongly called Cadamosto, by Russell as well as by others), called on the prince in the Algarve, Henry went out of his way to show them examples of Madeiran sugar. And, as Russell surmises, Henry wanted to attract foreign capital; after all, sugar production was a complex process, involving elaborate machinery and intensive labour. He did not close his Atlantic voyages to foreign navigators and merchants.

As if founding the Atlantic sugar industry was not enough, Henry can also be blamed for founding the Atlantic slave trade. In the early sixteenth century slaves and sugar would come together to form a tragic combination, and Russell is understandably prepared to allow his own very justifiable feelings to intrude here, when he describes the first public sale of African slaves at Lagos, on the Algarve, in 1444. This he judiciously balances with a survey of the longer history of slave trading in the Mediterranean, particularly in Genoese hands. The horrors of the sale at Lagos, as mother and child were separated while Henry, mounted on his horse looked on (and in due course claimed his royal fifth of the slaves) were not lost on the chronicler Zurara, even though Zurara did not falter in his admiration for Prince Henry. This of course takes us to the heart of Russell's assessment of Henry. He is not, one might say, a very nice man. He proves capable of abandoning his brother to a ghastly death in a Moroccan prison, because Prince Henry is not prepared to honour an agreement to return the city of Ceuta to the Muslims, following the failure of an expedition to Tangier for which he carries much of the responsibility. His refusal to listen to good advice, and his preference for the advice of those in his entourage, is a character flaw that leads on this occasion to disaster.

And yet Russell's Henry is a man with a plan, or rather several interlocking plans: the achievement of great victories against the infidel. Even the settlement of uninhabited Madeira was at one point proclaimed a victory over the unbeliever, though to say this was to lose a sense of reality. Broadly, Henry's schemes can be understood as four projects: one, to gain for himself the crown of Granada or at least a slice of Granadan territory, was completely at odds with Castilian interests, though maybe that was why it appealed to a prince who had an obsessive hatred of Castile. But even the parallel project of Portuguese expansion in Morocco was indirectly hostile to Castile, which had broadly agreed with the Catalans that Morocco should be within its sphere of influence, while the kings of Aragon pursued Catalan objectives in eastern Algeria and Tunisia. The Portuguese plan to attack Ceuta in 1415 had to be kept secret not just so that the Marinid rulers of Morocco would not hear about it; at the time, there were rumours that Portugal was fitting out a fleet to capture Málaga, the major port in Nasrid Granada, or Gibraltar, the other Pillar of Hercules facing Ceuta.

Moreover, as any reader of L.P. Harvey's authoritative history of *Later Islamic Spain, 1250-1500* (Chicago, 1991) will know, the delicate triangular relationship between Castile, Morocco and Granada was placed at risk by Portuguese intervention in Morocco. Ceuta was a prize that Muslim rulers of Spain had often sought to gain for themselves, just as the Moroccans had occasionally reached across to try to grab Algeciras or Gibraltar.

The security of the Straits was a longstanding matter of concern, since on it depended the free movement of Italian and Catalan shipping from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic; and, by this time, we can add as well the free movement of Portuguese, Galician and Basque shipping from the Atlantic into the Mediterranean (the first signs of Portuguese shipping in the Mediterranean, according to Heers [*Société et économie à Gênes*, London, 1979], date from the 1390s, while studies by Elisa Ferreira Priegue have much enlarged our understanding of links between Galicia and the Mediterranean: *Fuentes para la exportación gallega de la segunda mitad del s. XV*, Santiago, 1984, and *Galicia en el comercio marítimo medieval*, Santiago, 1988). And if the aim was to capture Ceuta's trade, including its gold trade, as some have argued, that was certainly not achieved: business henceforth by-passed Ceuta entirely, and it became the garrison city which it has remained ever since; for although Portugal lost Ceuta in 1580 it was lost to Spain, of which it remains a part, and not to the Moroccans. And even in the fifteenth century the running of Ceuta proved a massively expensive business; the main return was prestige, particularly for Henry, whose heroic role in the capture of the city was well known. Throughout Henry's career, Morocco continued to fascinate and attract Henry, who was present at the fall of Alcácer-Ceguer, a not very important fortress between Ceuta and Tangier) to the Portuguese in 1458, as he had been at the fall of Ceuta forty-three years earlier. Equally, antagonism to Morocco presented commercial difficulties: the Atlantic coast was an important source of grain (favoured by the Genoese), and Portugal too had need of food supplies; it also needed local Moroccan products for its trade further down the African coast. All this is extremely well explained by Russell.

The third project concerned the Canary Islands. The Canaries were sometimes seen as a jumping off point for penetration into Africa; and one of Henry's great obsessions, Russell reveals, was the conquest of the Canary Islands. Russell deftly shows how the Canaries stand for many of Henry's faults and virtues. He displayed little understanding of the logistical problems involved in attacks on islands which, unlike Madeira and the Azores had substantial warlike populations, though it was a clever move to win over some Gomerans to the Portuguese side and to let them help in slave raiding on other islands than La Gomera. Still, the familiar priorities are there: an interest in the islands as a source of slaves; a wish, in conjunction with King Duarte, to convince the papal curia to uphold Portuguese claims in the face of existing grants of the islands to Castile; a wish to present the conquest of the islands as a crusade, while at the same time Henry was only too glad to entertain Gomeran princes in style, or even to use captive Canary islanders in a dance routine set up in order to impress visiting dignitaries. Russell offers a very clear and well balanced account of the lively debate which arose at the papal curia; the Portuguese sought to portray the Canary islanders as brute savages, ignorant of letters and of civilised manners. But this can be set alongside another tradition, going back to a Portuguese expedition to the islands as early as approximately 1341 and to a report on that expedition by Boccaccio, which portrays them as innocent beings living in a state of nature: knowledge of the 1341 expedition seems largely to have evaporated outside Italy by this time, though some Florentine humanists were still interested in it in the fifteenth century (see T.J. Cachey, *Le isole fortunate*, Rome, 1995, and J.K. Hyde, *Literacy and its uses. Studies on late medieval Italy*, ed. D. Waley, Manchester, 1993, pp. 199-202).

What all this points to, as Russell well knows, is that the west African expeditions which, in the very long term, launched Portugal on the route to the Indies and to empire were only one part, and not the major part, of the schemes of Prince Henry, the fourth of the four interlocking schemes outlined here. We see the traditional obsession with the need to find the sources of gold which were believed to fuel the military machine of Islam; this can be traced back to the visit of the king of Mali, Mansa Musa, to Cairo in the mid-

fourteenth century, during which he scattered so much gold in the streets that there was a bout of serious inflation. Moreover, as Russell is careful to observe (with the help of contemporary portolan charts) the search for the Rio de Oro had a long pedigree, with particular honour being accorded on the map legends to the Majorcan Jaume Ferrer in the 1340's. He reappears aboard his vessel with monotonous regularity on later illustrated charts, such as the mid-fifteenth-century Este world map in Modena.

When the attention switches to da Mosto's reports, and to the visual images that hung in da Mosto's memory such as hippos and giant palm trees, as well as the physical attributes of newly discovered peoples, we are also reminded that what was being discovered was a world altogether different from those, Christian and Islamic, with which medieval Iberians were familiar. But there were certainly periods when African exploration was a secondary concern of Prince Henry; and, more to the point, his interest in it was less obviously guided by the wish to convert the native peoples than he liked people in Portugal and western Europe to think. All this is demonstrated by Russell with enormous skill; and any summary does not do justice to the subtlety of his approach and the way he shows Henry's ideas developing and changing back and forth.

Russell is keen to disclaim any understanding of Henry's emotional life; the real man, he insists, is not easily accessible. Yet in fact he has done much to make him so by revealing the depth of his commitment to holy war against Islam, the callousness of his approach to the violent seizure of slaves on the African coast, the patronage he was keen to extend to his favourites, and his relationship to other members of the royal family such as his nephew and heir Fernando. On his own entourage there will be more to be said, particularly once Ivana Elbl of Trent University in Canada has completed her own study of Henry and his squires. For Russell is often briefer on the social, economic and institutional setting than the subject deserves. He has tried to concentrate as far as possible on Henry, though in the latter stages of the book we are treated to more discursive discussions of subjects such as slavery and what Alwise da Mosto saw on his journeys along the coasts of west Africa. It is a pity that the background in Portugal itself is dealt with so briefly. There are interesting and relevant questions about how the Portuguese navy emerged, and what the role of Italian businessmen was in the emergence of Lisbon as significant centre of trade; for some, such as Jacques Heers (*Gênes au XVe siècle*, Paris, 1961) the commercial ties between Italy and Portugal were weak, even though there was a significant community of Italians in Lisbon, quite well integrated into local business networks. Charles Verlinden, on the other hand, tended to see the Italians as a major source of inspiration for Portuguese, and later for Castilian, methods of colonial exploitation (*The Beginnings of Modern Colonization*, Ithaca, NY, 1970). Particularly helpful in setting out the antecedents is a small study by Bailey Diffie, *Prelude to Empire* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1960), which in fact Russell does not cite; Diffie insists on the importance of several centuries of Portuguese fishing and commerce in explaining the career of Henry the Navigator.

Indeed, it is interesting to compare Russell's approach here with that of the author of another book on Henry, also published in 2000 (though the book in question is a shorter version of a work first published in 1994): Michel Vergé-Franceschi's *Un prince portugais* (Paris, 2000). Frankly, Vergé-Franceschi's work is very disappointing: it is extensively based on Zurara and da Mosto and it makes little attempt to challenge the classic view of Henry as a far-sighted patron of exploration and discovery; in fact, it repeats a number of now exploded errors such as the view that a converted member of the Jewish Cresques family of Majorca was the prince's cartographer. Its author does not even cite Russell's earlier work on Henry (though he does mention *The English Intervention*, mis-spelling Russell's name). The only reason for dwelling on the work is that Vergé-Franceschi devotes some space to the antecedents (such as the role of Portuguese fisheries in the development of the fleet) and to wider problems of navigation, issues which tend to be summarised rather briefly in Russell's book. The obvious explanation is that Russell did not want to make a long book even longer; on the other hand, there are certainly passages where cuts could have been made, because points are repeated within a page or two. Thus on pages 90 and 91 we are twice told that Zurara rejoices in the quantity of wood found on Madeira (whose name means just that: wood), so that it will be possible to take it back home and build houses several stories high back home in Portugal. Da Mosto's interest in dragon's blood (a

dye extracted from trees found in Madeira's neighbour Porto Santo, and in the Canaries) is also mentioned twice not many pages apart. Clearly a book so long in the making has gone through many recensions, and to some extent we can identify the different layers in the way the author returns to favourite themes and repeats what are rarely anything but fascinating points. In any case, some room could have been found for more material on the context. And, while Yale are to be congratulated on producing such a handsome volume at such a reasonable price, it is also a pity that there are so many misprints; the last chapter seems especially riddled with them, and they should be corrected before a paperback edition is issued, which will, it is to be hoped, also include the excellent colour illustrations. This problem, along with that of occasional repetition, suggests that Yale have not sustained the meticulous standard of copy editing characteristic of some other leading American university presses.

Vergé-Franceschi accepts that the famous panel of St Vincent in Lisbon attributed to the painter Nuno Gonçalves contains a portrait of Henry along with the rest of the court; and Yale have chosen this portrait for a very attractive book cover. Russell is somewhat sceptical about this identification. Quite helpful here is a book by Anne Francis, *Voyage of Re-discovery* (Hicksville, NY, 1979), which seeks to identify each of the figures in the painting without denying that there are infinite problems in so doing. But we can take this painting as an emblem of the Henry problem. Not merely his portrait but the so-called School of Navigators at Sagres (above all its 'wind rose', marked out on the ground in the Sagres complex) and James of Majorca go up in smoke. Yet, far from being left with charred remains, Russell provides us with a living portrait of the career and obsessions of a man who, unwittingly - and that is the point - opened the way to the Indies. The image favoured by modern Portuguese sculptors is of a far-sighted scientist gazing across the open Ocean at the unknown - or not so unknown, because of course he can sense Portugal's destiny out there in the Great Blue Sea. Now the hero's vision is narrowed. His human faults are identified. This is not merely henceforth the standard study of Henry; it is also a book with wide ramifications for the study of fifteenth-century Europe and for the study of the early phases of European expansion. And, on top of that, it is immensely enjoyable and readable, a model of scholarly history, well based in the sources, which is also accessible to a wider audience.

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