

Portuguese and Brazilian Books in the John Carter Brown Library, 1537 to 1839

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Anthony Grafton, among others, has written about the phenomenon, and historians in general know it well, that as important as the books or documents sought (but not always found) in libraries and archives may be, so too is the experience itself of visiting such institutions: of making time to read and reflect, of contemplating the shelves and consulting catalogues, and of speaking with librarians and meeting other readers. Gradually, one no longer is a stranger but becomes a member of the club, an institution “groupie” well known and welcomed. The John Carter Brown Library (www.jcbl.org) is one of these special places, capable of providing experiences that go far beyond mere access to books, even if those books are almost always beautiful and rare.

Located in Providence in the state of Rhode Island, the John Carter Brown Library (or JCB) was founded in 1846 and has been located on the Brown University campus since 1901. It is an institution that is part of the same generation of various other independent research libraries that emerged in the U. S. between the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, including the Newberry Library (Chicago), the Huntington Library (San Marino, California), the Pierpont Morgan Library (New York), and the Folger Library (Washington, D. C.).

What distinguishes these institutions (and there are dozens of others in the U. S.) is that they are not only repositories of printed and manuscript treasures but also centers for advanced research, offering hundreds of residential fellowships to scholars from many countries, organizing conferences and seminars, and publishing books and catalogues related to their collections. As such centers, the digital revolution does not threaten their existence because not only are the *primary* sources to be found there upon which historical research rests, i.e., the concrete original objects descended from the past, but they are also beehives of scholarly activity where one wants to be along with other researchers in residence.

The majority of these private libraries were born of the will and money of men of industry, finance, and business whose collections naturally reflect their personal tastes, but these libraries also manifest the (many) opportunities afforded by the rare book market in the course of the past century. It is a familiar cultural phenomenon, although no longer as prevalent as it once was, that wealthy Americans could buy up tens of thousands of rare European imprints without much competition from the Continent itself.

It is therefore not surprising that works essential to the study of the history of Portuguese expansion are held in these temples, as is the case, for example, of the *Livro de Lisuarte de Abreu* (ca. 1558-1564), some leaves of which were first acquired by J. Pierpont Morgan as early as 1912. Even to this day, the economic power of the United States, plus its extraordinary tradition of private philanthropy, combined with the knowledge of its directors and librarians, allows such institutions as the James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota to have acquired in the past year rarities like a copy of Matteo Ricci’s magnificent world map (1602), for which it paid \$1 million.

Such is the universe of the John Carter Brown Library, which in December 2009 published an 800-page printed catalogue of a segment of its holdings, *Portuguese and Brazilian Books in the John Carter Brown Library, 1537 to 1839, with a Selection of Brazilianiana Printed in Countries Other Than Portugal and*

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Brazil, compiled and edited by Valeria Gauz (ISBN 0-916617-69-6). The work was many years in preparation and was funded in part by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the Luso-American Foundation in Portugal, as well as by the Vitae Foundation in Brazil and a number of individual, generous American patrons of the Library.

The book is a demonstration of what the collector with patience, persistence, and focus can achieve. John Carter Brown (1797-1874), the Library founder, set out in 1846 to acquire every book he could find printed before ca. 1800 that was either published in the Americas or that made any reference to America. It followed that immediately he bought French books, English books, Spanish books, Dutch books, and of course, Portuguese books that even in small part referred to Brazil or voyaging to the west. The result today is the largest collection of colonial Brazilian in North America, and perhaps in the Americas as a whole, rivaled only by the Biblioteca José Mindlin in São Paulo.

The John Carter Brown Library is unique in its sharp collecting focus, essentially unchanged since 1846—any printed work (books, maps, engravings, etc.) and some manuscripts, from the time of Columbus to ca. 1825, i.e., to the era when, one by one, the American colonies drove out the European colonizers. John Carter Brown, and later his son John Nicholas Brown (1861-1900), did not acquire old books as a type of intellectual mirror of a successful life of business dealings, a gentleman's luxurious ornament. Rather, they conceived of the library as a coherent research collection that would attract historians. And strangely, without deviating hardly an inch from the initial goal, the library has become evermore relevant as the vision of historians of the Americas has become increasingly hemispheric.

In 1900 or even in 1950, students of the colonial Americas happily worked more or less within national boundaries—one looked at the Dutch in Brazil or New York, or the French in Brazil or Canada, but rarely at both the Dutch and the French together in a comparative mode. Now the vogue of so-called “Atlantic History” pressures historians to peer over national fences and to take into account the history of all five of the major colonial powers in the Americas. As it turned out, the JCB finds itself today as the only library in the world that has acquired equally and systematically, without interruption for more than 150 years, the Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch, and English records of New World ventures and adventures. Everywhere one sees the commonalities of which Portuguese expansion was a part: imperial wars, African slave labor, exotic new flora and fauna, conflict with indigenous peoples, and so forth.

Portuguese and Brazilian Books in the JCB inventories more than 1,200 titles in the collection, beginning with an edition of *Tratado de sphera a Theorica do Sol e da Lua* (Lisboa, 1537), assembled by Pedro Nunes, which mentions Brazil in passing and was acquired by the library in 1936. The final work cited dates from 1839, Pero Lopes de Sousa, *Diario da navegação da armada que foi á terra do Brasil*, but the inclusion of that title is a bit misleading regarding the JCB's holdings of Portuguese and Brazilian books. The center of gravity of the collection is before 1826, and the few titles in the collection from the 1830s are there almost by accident. Of the approximately 1,200 titles described in *Portuguese and Brazilian Books*, 650 antedate 1800. From 1800 through 1822, another 500 titles are described in the catalogue, including 165 works printed in Brazil itself, beginning in 1808 when the Impressão Regia opened a branch in Rio de Janeiro and presses began operating in Bahia.

The JCB's zeal for building its Portuguese holdings has not in the least diminished in the past few decades. Only recently it bought at auction in London a work of both substantial content and legendary rarity, André João Antonil's *Cultura e opulencia do Brasil por suas drogas e minas* (Lisbon, 1711), for which it paid the highest price ever for an eighteenth-century Lisbon imprint. Just seven copies of the work are known to exist, all now in institutions, and it is unlikely that any will again come into the market. No other library in North America owns the book.

Portuguese and Brazilian Books is a work of extreme care, accomplished by the Brazilian librarian Valeria Gauz and by all those she acknowledges and thanks in her introduction to the volume. The book is dedicated to José Mindlin, mentioned earlier, the eminent Brazilian bibliophile and owner of what is, perhaps, the largest private library in Latin America, whom I had the privilege to meet in his beautiful home in São Paulo. It is a sad irony that Dr. Mindlin passed away early in

2010 before a copy of *Portuguese and Brazilian Books* could be placed in his hands, since he was to a large degree the inspiration for the volume. He had been a member of the Board of Governors of the JCB during the decades of the 1980s and 90s, and in 1996 Brown University, at the instigation of the John Carter Brown Library, awarded him an honorary degree.

But the inspiration went the other way, as well. When Dr. Mindlin came to know the JCB as an autonomous center for advanced research and a repository of rare books, it gave him the model he was looking for as a legacy for his own collection. Construction is already underway at the University of São Paulo for the new Biblioteca José Mindlin, which if Mindlin's dream is fulfilled will be a JCB in South America.

Like any other work, *Portuguese and Brazilian Books* has its problems and limitations. It excludes manuscripts and maps, and in fact it documents the Library's holdings of Luso-Braziliana only through June 2005. In other words, although works acquired since the summer of 2005 can be found in the Library's online catalogue, they are not recorded in this book. It is doubtful that a sequel on paper will ever be printed, which makes of this book a kind of monument not only to the Library's collecting from 1846 to 2005, but also to the era of *printed* library catalogues in general, of which we will not be seeing very many more.

The director emeritus of the JCB, Norman Fiering, in his preface to the volume makes a spirited defense of this 800-page printed catalogue, as representing a convenience for researchers that could never be matched on a computer screen. Those who turn to the volume for help will have to determine whether an online version, compiled at much less cost, would have served just as well, if not better. The items in *Portuguese and Brazilian Books* are presented in chronological order. If the reader does not know the date of publication, s/he must search the elaborate and painstakingly assembled author and title indexes, which certainly do the job. Yet a computerized list can simply be sorted at will by author, title, or date, with no indexing, as such.

By these comments I do not mean to suggest that the JCB is neglecting the creation of electronic resources of all kinds, including online exhibitions, such as, for example, "Portugal and Renaissance Europe," to which I contributed ([http://www.brown.edu/Facilities/John Carter Brown Library/Portugal/Index.html](http://www.brown.edu/Facilities/John_Carter_Brown_Library/Portugal/Index.html)).

It must be said that *Portuguese and Brazilian Books* possesses a personal or idiosyncratic quality for which printed books can be a marvelous vehicle. There are about fifty illustrations scattered throughout the work, chosen by Ms. Gauz primarily for their visual interest, and many entries have historical notes, some extensive, which are intended not only to inform the reader but also to intrigue him or her. There is also extensive bibliographical commentary, citing especially the great work of Rubens Borba de Moraes but many other classic guides as well. And Ms. Gauz has added a General Bibliography of works that relate to the history of books and printing in both Portugal and Brazil.

As is well known, for reasons that have never been fully explained, the advent of printing in Brazil was long retarded. Printing was introduced into Mexico, Peru, and the British colonies in North America, for example, only a few years after European settlement. For Brazil, it took 300 years for presses to begin operating. One consequence of that fact is that to study the history of colonial Brazil one must rely greatly on works printed not only in Portugal, of course, but in France, England, the Netherlands, Germany, and so forth. To call attention to this reality, Ms. Gauz added a short-title list of about sixty books relating to Brazil that were printed in places other than Portugal or Brazil. This list is a mere sampling of the JCB's riches of non-Lusophone Braziliana, but it is suggestive of what the visitor will find when s/he becomes a member of the club.