

Sir Peter E. Russell
– the 20th Century in the Palm of His Hand

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In 1992, I was at the National Archives in Lisbon preparing my doctoral thesis on late medieval Portuguese military history, feeling more and more curious about the idea of clearing up a longstanding doubt: was Peter Russell, the author of the study *As fontes de Fernão Lopes*, published in Coimbra in 1941, still alive and was he still active academically? This was a book that I had used a great deal years before, in preparing myself for the examination I had to take in 1987 to prove my academic and teaching capabilities, at the Faculty of Letters at the University of Coimbra. The question made sense, not only because of the quality and profoundly innovative spirit of that study, but also because of the fairly prosaic fact that more than 50 years had elapsed since its publication.

But there was something more that drove me in the direction of Peter Russell. In fact, as I was consulting the background bibliography that was essential for the preparation of my thesis on military history, I kept coming across new studies written by the same Oxford don, all of them of great scholarly quality and revealing an extraordinary knowledge of the different archives: the English (*Public Record Office*), Aragonese (*Archivo de la Corona de Aragón*), Castilian (*Archivo General de Simancas*) and even the Portuguese (namely the National Archives of the *Torre do Tombo*). Recall his article on the presence of João Fernandes Andeiro at the court of the Duke of Lancaster (published as long ago as 1938, in the *Revista da Universidade de Coimbra* and which I consider to be indispensable for understanding one of the key figures of the Crisis of 1383-85); or his study on the Treaty of Santarém of 1373, which brought an end to Dom Fernando's first war against Castile (published in the *Revista Portuguesa de História* in 1951); or the work that he dedicated to the Portuguese galleys that were placed at the service of the unfortunate Richard II of England (published in the *Revista da Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa* in 1953); or even his remarkable work, *Os Ingleses em Aljubarrota: um problema resolvido através de documentos do Public Record Office, London* (included in the volume of the *Revista Portuguesa de História* dedicated, in 1962, to the memory of Damião Peres), which enabled me to form a very precise notion (unlike Fernão Lopes's minimalist version) of the volume, characteristics, origin, conditions of recruitment (including the officers and their respective names), and even of the transport of the 640 English mercenaries who landed in Portugal (Lisbon, Setúbal and Porto) on Easter 1385, in time to fight on the battlefield of São Jorge-Aljubarrota.

But these were merely the articles that were most relevant for me. Besides these, there was also a book published in 1955 in Oxford by Clarendon Press, which I had transformed into a genuine bedside book because of its great importance in improving my knowledge of the political, military and diplomatic history of the Iberian Peninsula during the 14th and 15th centuries: here I am referring to Peter Russell's Ph.D. thesis, entitled *The English Intervention in Spain and Portugal* e-JPH, Vol. 5, number 1, Summer 2007

in the time of Edward III and Richard II, which I consider to be one of the ten most exciting books that I have read over my entire career.

With all this in my mind, I really needed to know if this Oxford don, the author of such important works published in the 1930s, 40s, 50s and 60s, was still in the land of the living and whether he would be available to exchange ideas with a young Portuguese historian who had been following in his footsteps. And so I wrote to the University of Oxford in search of an answer to my tormenting doubt.

It is quite possible that in Portugal I would never have received an answer to my question, with each person working at the university believing that it was a matter to be dealt with by the colleague working at the next desk. Oxford, however, replied to me in no time at all. Although retired since 1981, Peter Russell continued to be highly active in his flat in Belsyre Court, on Woodstock Road, one of the best-known streets in the city. I wrote to him immediately and, to my great satisfaction, a week later I received an extremely cordial letter at my house from Peter Russell himself, with an invitation to visit him in Oxford that I could not refuse. It didn't take me long to accept his invitation and so, in October 1992, I met the man who, three years later, would be knighted by the Queen of England.

Peter Russell was a charming man, who greatly impressed me from our first meeting. Very tall and well-built, he had a full head of wavy white hair, which the Spanish author Javier Marías compared to a *bavaroise*, and a syncopated and very distinctive laugh (*ta-ta-ta*). He spoke impeccable Portuguese and exuded the famous British politeness. Above all, his blue-grey eyes scrutinized me with a keenness that was simultaneously very tender and highly challenging. Besides this, he had a tremendous sense of humor, which immediately helped us to become close to one another.

And so this was how, on the very first visit I paid to Oxford, I learned the rather extraordinary tale of his work *As fontes de Fernão Lopes*. In 1939, Russell gave a lecture at King's College, London, centered on the subject of Fernão Lopes, during which he drew attention to the methodology used by the Portuguese chronicler, who – unlike other European chroniclers of the period – made widespread use in his narratives of valuable documentary sources, some of which have since disappeared. The lecture was a success and some of his audience suggested that he should further develop the theme – relatively unknown to English historians – in the form of a larger work. Peter Russell, then aged 26, accepted the challenge and began his work, for which he had already drawn up a first draft when the demands of the Second World War forced him to leave Oxford (Russell served in His Majesty's Intelligence Corps, rising to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel). Posted on military service to Lisbon (according to some with the mission of keeping a close watch on the movements of the Duke of Windsor), Russell walked one day into a bookshop and caught sight of a small book on display that appeared to him to be about the precise subject on which he had recently been working. He drew closer and, to his surprise, noticed that it was a booklet entitled *As fontes de Fernão Lopes*, published in Coimbra in 1941 and written by...Peter E. Russell! The metamorphosis – he later discovered – was due to the enthusiasm of Professor Gonçalves Rodrigues (his friend and mentor, and the first lecturer in Portuguese at the University of Oxford), who had decided to translate into Portuguese the draft that Peter Russell had prepared before setting off for war and who had also promoted the respective publication in book form (without the author's knowledge, of course).

It was also on my first visit to Belsyre Court that Peter told me of the impact that his Ph.D. thesis had had in Spain, in the middle of the century. In fact, for several decades during the period of Franco's dictatorship, the translation of this monumental work into Spanish was prohibited, amongst other reasons because it gave too much emphasis to the Aragonese role in the Iberian political scene, and also because it gave the impression that Castile had been a mere protectorate of France during the Hundred Years War! In Portugal the book did not meet with such disapproval, but unfortunately it was only in 2000 that it was finally translated. I am referring to Maria Ramos's beautiful translation, published by the Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda under the title *A Intervenção Inglesa na Península Ibérica durante a Guerra dos Cem Anos*.

Between October 1992 and 22 June 2006 (the date when Sir Peter passed away), I returned to Oxford on various occasions, and I also had the gratifying pleasure of receiving my friend on various occasions in Coimbra and of visiting him in Porto and Lisbon. In all honesty, I never again separated myself from his intellectual and human company. We talked frequently on the telephone and Russell never ceased to accompany my career. He was, in fact, present on the jury for my Ph.D. examination in 1997, and also followed my academic research very closely, particularly the work that I coordinated between 1995 and 2001 at the *Campo Militar de São Jorge*. It may even be said that, in a certain way, this work bears his stamp - not only because of the study that Peter Russell dedicated to the most famous battle in Portuguese History (and which he included in Chapter 16 of his Ph.D. thesis), but also for a private reason of which few people know. At the end of the 1950s, when the Military History Committee, which closely monitored the landscaping and gardening work that the *Mocidade Portuguesa* carried out at São Jorge, was alerted by the chance discovery of wolf dens and trenches that seemed to confirm the accounts of the French chronicler Jean Froissart about the Battle of Aljubarrota, and consequently requested the then Ministry of the Army to suspend all gardening work and mount a specialized investigation of these discoveries, it was precisely Peter Russell who was called in from Oxford to prepare a detailed written opinion upon the matter. This document, dated 15 June 1959, was decisive in saving the battlefield and created the conditions that were necessary for the development of a vast archaeological campaign led by Lieutenant-Colonel Afonso do Paço. This was to result in the discovery of some truly extraordinary data that could have turned São Jorge into one of the best medieval battlefields in the whole of Europe. It is a pity that in 1961 the same State that had called in Peter Russell authorized the building of the roadbed for the Estrada Nacional No. 1, which passed *through* the western end of the same battlefield, which was thus irretrievably amputated.

For all of these reasons, I am indebted to Sir Peter Russell for a sizeable part of my academic career. He never asked for anything in exchange, beyond some small bibliographical suggestions, the odd contact and some occasional help in revising the translation of his works into Portuguese, the last of which was the book *Prince Henry 'the Navigator'. A Life*, an extremely interesting and innovative biography of our Infante Dom Henrique, published by Yale University Press in 2001 and which was a tremendous success in both the United States and England. Hopefully, the Portuguese version, recently published by Livros Horizonte, will enjoy the same success.

I cannot claim to have known Peter Russell profoundly. He didn't like to talk about his life and his past, from his childhood and the part of his youth spent in New Zealand (in Christchurch, where he was born in 1913) to his life as an Oxford don (divided between St. John's College, Queen's College and Exeter College), passing through what must have been his extraordinary

adventures during the Second World War (on the Iberian Peninsula, but also in the Caribbean, West Africa and the Far East) and even perhaps during the Spanish Civil War. A rumor from Oxford claimed that he had spent some time living in a tree in Java, equipped with a short-wave radio! On the last day that I was with him with my wife at Belsyre Court, after a dinner of roast chicken, prepared in the early evening at his flat, as was the custom, and washed down liberally with several glasses of wine, we asked him if he had any photographs from when he was young, for us to look at. Sir Peter frowned at us and, speaking quite seriously, said that he only kept two photographs of himself, one of which was intended to accompany his obituary in the press the day immediately after his death. Apart from this, he added, pointing to one of the cupboards in his living room, there was in there a great deal of material that he had accumulated over the years, but which was disorganized and uninteresting. His tone was so discouraging and the message so clear that we could do nothing more than sink even deeper into the sofa and quickly try to change the subject. The mysterious side of Peter Russell's biography, as well as the profoundly irreverent and innovative nature of his academic research, were clearly highlighted in the English press in the days that followed his death. For example, on 5 July 2006 *The Independent* presented a summary of his career in a special box under the title "Professor Sir Peter Russell. Iconoclastic Hispanist who was for 28 years King Alfonso XIII Professor of Spanish Studies at Oxford"; next to this was a large photograph (perhaps the one that had been deliberately kept safely stored away until his very last day) with the caption "Russell: an exciting and mysterious Second World War".

It is my opinion that Peter Russell, who was the highly respected Director of Portuguese Studies at the University of Oxford from 1953 until his retirement, left an immense academic legacy for Iberian culture. His vast body of work, begun at the end of the 1930s and continuing until practically the very day before his death, is not, as is sometimes thought, merely the product of a late medieval historian - far from it. The work of Sir Peter Russell, who was one of the first students of the team of Portuguese lecturers created at the University of Oxford in 1933, extends to countless other fields, covering a number of distinct aspects of Hispanic history and literature from the 13th to the 17th centuries, and benefiting from its author's exceptional longevity and academic capacities. He was one of the rare scholars to have achieved equal distinction in both his historical and literary studies. In this latter area, in many ways because of the iconoclastic style referred to by *The Independent*, his studies on the epic *Cantar de Mio Cid*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and *La Celestina* were to become particularly famous. Russell continued to work fairly intensely on this last theme in the last few years of his long life of 92 years.

His tireless work is, in fact, well known by the whole of the Oxford community. Already faced with a variety of health problems, Sir Peter, who lived alone, wore an intercom on his chest which, when pressed in the event of great discomfort, connected him to a local medical emergency service. When the alarm was raised, this service began by confirming the nature of the emergency, talking to the client through a device attached to one of Sir Peter's bedside tables. Thank God for this method of confirmation: distracted by his work, Russell would on many occasions activate the device without wishing to, so that one fine day he heard the voice of the medical emergency services resounding around his room and saying: "Carrying books again, hey, Sir Peter?!"

I think that this joy of living and studying, allied with his remarkable physical complexion (despite the large number of cigarettes that he devoured regularly, even until quite late in his life), was one of the secrets of Peter Russell's longevity. The last time I spoke to him on the telephone, just a few weeks before his death, he told me that he had bought a new car and that he was once more driving

through the streets of Oxford and the surrounding countryside. This very fact was witnessed by our mutual friend A. J. R. Russell-Wood, a great researcher into the Portuguese presence in Africa, Asia and America from the 15th to the 19th centuries and one of Sir Peter's first students at Oxford. He told me that, very shortly before our friend's death, Sir Peter had taken him for a drive through the countryside around Oxford to enjoy a lunch of excellently cooked fish on the banks of the River Cherwell. Sir Peter enjoyed eating and had fond memories of his many extraordinary trips all around the world. Sometimes, in his memory, gastronomy became confused with politics and war. That was why he was overcome with emotion when, half a century later, he was taken by our friend and colleague Luís Miguel Duarte to the room in the Escondidinho Restaurant, in Porto, where he had previously been at the height of the Second World War, while being pursued by the Portuguese secret police, the PIDE.

For 15 very intense years, I had the privilege of spending a great deal of time in Peter Russell's company. Nothing of what I might say here will be enough to transmit the enormous pleasure that I had in knowing him and the immense influence that he had on my career. His great rigor, his spirit of observation, his irreverent creativity, and his readiness to position himself at an academic crossroads where history intersects and permanently flirts with literature, his fondness for biographies, his passion for foreign languages (he spoke many, and all of them well, from Spanish to German), his profound respect for classical culture, his capacity to combine the study of the more conventional archival material with a most diverse range of literary sources - all of this greatly impressed me and had a decisive and contagious effect upon me. With him, and through his influence, I traveled to unimagined territories, from Gil de Roma to Frei Alonso de San Cristóbal, from Cristina de Pisano to Honoré Bouvet. Today, when - with the invaluable help of José Eduardo Braga - I find myself putting the finishing touches to the Portuguese translation of Vegetius' *Epitoma Rei Militaris* (one of his ongoing passions, which even as late as 2001, placed him on the pages of our prestigious journal "EVPHROSINE"), I work with his Professor Michael Reeves's text (Cambridge: 2004), an edition of the *Oxford Classical Texts* that Sir Peter sent me by post as soon as it saw the light of day.

I believe that Peter Russell genuinely loved Portugal and the Portuguese. Naturally, he was much more important in my life than I was in his. Yet, even so, I hope to have shown him a little of that affection and intellectual complicity that he valued so highly. And I am sure that, one day, I shall meet again with that friend of mine, undoubtedly one of the men who did most for the improvement of Portuguese Studies in Europe during the 20th century. Until then, I shall spend my time remembering some of his best known facets, and also some of his most unexpected ones, through the books of Javier Marías, particularly in this Spanish writer's most recent trilogy, entitled *Tu rostro mañana*. In fact, Marías, who taught Spanish Literature at Oxford and therefore knew Peter Russell very well, chose him (and his mysterious biography) to be the central character in his new novels! Sir Peter ended up accepting the idea, and derived the same satisfaction from this that he took from his almost one hundred years of life. In the end, it will be, more than his countless and extremely valuable academic writings, Javier Marías's beautiful novels that end up guaranteeing the immortality of Sir Peter Edward Lionel Russell Wheeler in the eyes of the general public. Hence the dedication in the book that they both sent me from Belsyre Court in the summer of 2004, when the translated Brazilian edition of the first volume of Marías's new trilogy was published (*Febre e Lança*, published by Companhia das Letras). It read as follows: "Para el doctor João

Monteiro, este libro protagonizado por el fantasma verdadero de un amigo suyo. Saludos cordiales, Javier Marías”...

Always serious... and yet always in a playful, joking mood. That was how my friend Peter Russell was. If there is indeed a heaven for historians, he will certainly be up there at this very moment driving his new car and laughing at life, and at himself.