

## Obituary: Sir Peter E. L. Russell Died 22 June 2006

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The death of Sir Peter Russell, who died on June 22 of this year aged 92, is a great loss to the world of Iberian letters and late medieval history in the United Kingdom. As King Alfonso XIII Professor of Spanish and Director of Portuguese Studies at Oxford University for nearly three decades, his name stood alongside the most illustrious in his chosen fields of research. The author of several monographs, Russell was perhaps best known as an essayist, where he unleashed extremely incisive and controversial opinions on questions he had studied from close quarters. It was only at the end of his life that arguably his greatest work, a 448 page biography of Prince Henry the Navigator, came to be published.

Russell was born in New Zealand in 1913, and came to this country with his mother and younger brother as a boy. With a sound education behind him, at Cheltenham College and Queen's College, Oxford, Russell travelled widely across Europe in the 1930s. From 1935, he was engaged by the British secret services in monitoring the international situation, particularly with regard to naval developments in Spain at the time of the civil war (1936-39). During the Second World War, Russell found himself serving in the Caribbean (to where he had to usher the Duke and Duchess of Windsor), West Africa and the Far East. It was in Ceylon that Russell faced perhaps his toughest trials at the end of the war: using local pawns to sabotage Japanese operations with disinformation, and interrogating captured Japanese officers.

Russell never, however abandoned his academic life. After graduating, he immediately began research on the intervention of the Black Prince in Spain and Portugal, which opened a new theatre of the Anglo-French war following the Treaty of Brétigny in 1360. The research resulted in Russell's first significant publication, *The English Intervention in Spain and Portugal in the Time of Edward II and Richard II*, which came out in 1955. He had been made college lecturer at St. John's, Oxford, in 1937 and at Queen's the year after, where he returned following demobilisation and where he remained for the rest of his career.

Scholars in Iberian Studies tend to be either partisans of the Spanish, or else the Portuguese world, and this can at times lead to tensions and even open conflict on university committees and in departmental politics. Sir Peter Russell was genuinely comfortable in both worlds. In this sense, he was a true historicist, in that - in accordance with the period he was interested in - he championed the medieval concept of Hesperia to refer equally to all the kingdoms of the Iberian peninsula.

Russell was also ambidextrous in bridging the worlds of literary and historical scholarship. While some of his finest work on Spanish themes focused on Fernando de Rojas's literary work, *La Celestina*, and resulted in a book on Cervantes in 1985, to Portuguese scholars Russell was primarily

a historian, and amongst the students he fostered in that department, A.J.R. Russell-Wood and A.C. Saunders, were also historians.

Russell had a knack for stirring up polemic. Some discussions, such as Cervantes's intent regarding the motto 'El Caballero de la Triste Figura' given to Sancho Panza, and whether it was better translated as 'Knight of the Sad Countenance' or 'Knight of the Ill-favoured Face', remained relatively innocuous. In 1951, however, Russell championed the audacious idea that the *Cantar de Mio Cid*, the oldest preserved Spanish *cantar de gesta*, was not, as generally believed, the work of an early 12th century minstrel, but of an anonymous learned poet with legal training writing a century later. Russell sent a similar shock-wave through academia when he claimed, in the Taylorian Special Lecture of 1960, that Prince Henry, christened 'the Navigator' by C.R. Beazley (in his book of 1895) was the subject of a massive personality cult. Despite being presented as a pious individual (as for example, in the celebrated mid-fifteenth century altarpiece from Lisbon known as the Veneration of St. Vincent), Henry was rather better late-in-life as an astute financier, selling offices and 'futures' on the seven islands he owned in the Azores. Despite having been called 'the Navigator', he only crossed the sea on short trips twice, on military expeditions to northern Morocco in 1419 and 1437. The far-sighted scientific 'school of Sagres' that Portuguese historians had long held up as a brainchild of Henry's vision was challenged by Russell. He drew attention to the strain of astrological speculation that surrounded Henry, as revealed in the chronicle of Azurara, where the prince was cast more into a cloud of hocus-pocus than as the champion of navigational science he was celebrated as on the occasion of the massive cycle of conferences promoted by the *Estado Novo* in Lisbon marking the quincentenary of his death in 1961. Russell's impact effectively shifted subsequent research on Portuguese science away from Henry on to overlooked characters such as the Jewish astronomer Abraham Zacuto and authors like Duarte Pacheco Pereira.

Russell's claims were understandably greeted with considerable hostility in Spain and Portugal. Russell went so far as to claim that the Portuguese Embassy in London 'tried to buy up for destruction' all printed copies of his lecture. Nevertheless - thanks in part to their meticulous factual backing - Russell's ideas gradually won acceptance. Russell was rewarded by the Spanish state with the title of Commander of the Spanish order of Isabel la Católica in 1989, and in Portugal with membership to the Order of Infante Dom Henrique in 1993. In the United Kingdom, Russell was made a Fellow of the British Academy in 1977 and awarded a knighthood in 1995.

Some of Russell's finest work took essay form. In 'White Kings on Black Kings: Rui de Pina and the Problem of Black African Sovereignty', scrupulous research of contemporary chronicles revealed the possible causes for the savage murder of the Wolof ruler, Bemoim, brought to the court at Lisbon in 1488 and the reasons why the perpetrators were never satisfactorily brought to justice.

There are problems, however, with Russell's reaction to the Venetian navigator Cadamosto's description of the Senegambian coast in the 1455 as expressed in his essay 'Veni, vidi, vici: some fifteenth-century eyewitness accounts of travel in the African Atlantic before 1492'. Cadamosto wrote: 'though I have sailed to many places in the Levant and in the West, I have never seen a more beautiful coast than this'. Russell found himself at odds with this statement on the basis that mangrove swamps could not be considered to have any aesthetic appeal. Although a fine linguist, Russell here seems to have ignored the nuances of the Italian language. When Cadamosto wrote of 'grandissimi alberi bellissimi', he was merely conforming to a rhetorical convention peculiar to the Italians, that nation - as Luis Díez del Corral has defined it - 'emphatically and wholly committed to aesthetic values'. When Italians go out into the world, there is a tendency to search for the 'bello', in much the same way as English travellers of the eighteenth century venturing

to India travelled in search of the 'picturesque', or contemporary American teenagers sally forth in search of the 'cool'.

Peter Russell was also widely acknowledged for his gifts as a loyal and giving teacher, and indeed would harry his students to discover their progress. One of his colleagues has suggested that for all his massive erudition, Russell never lost sight of scholarship as a civilising endeavour that had necessarily rather more to do with life than with the subject at hand. Russell's skills as a lecturer have been praised in other quarters, and he served on a number of important committees, such as the Parry Committee, established in 1962, which recommended ways by which graduate programmes in Latin American Studies in Britain could be expanded and funded.

Russell never married, and had no children, but left behind him a wide diaspora of his students in various distinguished academic and government posts.

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