

European Environmental Histories Beyond English: Continuing the Survey

Having showcased a few French and then Italian works of environmental history in previous Notepads, we now turn to Portugal. Cristina Joanaz De Melo, who is currently co-editing volumes of the 2014 World Congress of Environmental History held in Guimarães, provides synopses of four outstanding works in our field appearing in her country. For those of us less familiar with Portugal's language and landscape, one cannot help but appreciate the richness of historic sources and the complexity of questions present there. The hope is that some of the insights gained by Portuguese scholars may be transferred to histories being carried out elsewhere.

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Between Geography and Words: Portuguese Environmental History from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and Beyond

Probably the most important characteristic of Portugal's way of life is the adjustment to the local, *aided by nature itself*, which does not often match the development models of other places. Here, one combines desert Mediterranean cultures with water economies in rather different ways from those of modern industrial models of the North. Portugal's written tradition counts for much more than other ways of expression, such as drawings or paintings, for reproducing images of nature. This land has also witnessed an intermixing of cultures that is fundamental to understanding its human relationships with the environment.

In *Portugal, o Mediterrâneo e o Atlântico* [Portugal: either Mediterranean and/or Atlantic] (1945) the great geographer Orlando Ribeiro explores the consequences of Portugal lying at the crossroads between the Mediterranean and the wider Atlantic, manifested as a place with distinct cultural practices. According to Ribeiro, Portugal's position means that it is a patchwork of overlapping climatic and botanical zones, both heterogeneous and indigenous, showing similarities with continental Northern areas as well as Mediterranean ones. Its geography is reflected in ways local populations retained cultural practices brought in by various populations coming to occupy this corner of the Iberian Peninsula, from Celts to Syria's Muslims to Germanic peoples, with each group seeking to adjust to territories chosen for their resemblance to

places they had left behind while incorporating Mediterranean ways of living. These agricultural activities would in turn adjust to novel flora and fauna introduced from the distant Atlantic after the fifteenth century. Out of this diversity, the Portuguese learned to incorporate differences rather than merely force assimilation. Portugal's nineteenth-century countryside would in turn become an amalgamation of liberal economic manifestations overlaying a diverse cultural heritage. Writing in the 1940s, in a context of overseas imperial governance, Ribeiro suggests that Portugal's gaze has long faced both Mediterranean and Atlantic dimensions, with the former ushering in patchworks of food production, and the latter incorporating overseas novelty without the fear of losing local identity.

Marta Macedo's *Projecting and Building the Nation* [Projectar e Construir a Nação] (2012) illustrates the processes by which the Douro Valley in north-eastern Portugal became a monocultural landscape during the nineteenth century. Now deemed a 'patrimony of humanity', lying in the Province of Trás-os-Montes, this landscape was fashioned by government policies responding to the invisible hand of free-markets intent upon maximizing grape and wine production, all by utilising the most modern techniques of the time. The result would produce one-third of Portugal's agricultural export. Dams and other water works for taming the river, together with a sophisticated railroad network pushed into the margins of Portuguese territory, became a beacon of modernity and governmental pride, aiming to assert control over the land and its inhabitants. This massive development project was designed by urban technocrats and implemented by employees from central public institutions and government divisions. The resulting industrial agrarian development and public works of applied science and engineering were celebrated domestically and held up to the world as a jewel of Portugal's progress.

From a very different perspective, Paulo Guimarães' *Elites e Indústria no Alentejo, (1890-1960)* [Elites and Industry in the Alentejo] (2006) traces economic development in a region considered to be one of Portugal's poorest. Guimarães argues persuasively that elites around Portugal's southern arid region instilled pride in landowners and industry investors, resulting in outdoing their northern compatriots in the Douro Valley, while lobbying enormous fiscal support from private and public sources. In this case, economic development is shown to stem from initiatives put forward by enlightened individuals rather than by central government policies for encouraging small-scale mining and other cottage industries to such an extent as to lead to water degradation and other negative impacts. One of the strongest aspects of this book is to show how development can assume very different models from the one illustrated by Macedo's excellent study, and that even landscapes lacking much marketable wealth or plentiful water supplies can produce surprising prosperity.

Both the Douro and Alentejo studies help validate Ribeiro's claims that the Portuguese were skilful at adjusting their technologies and methods according

to the ecosystems they encountered. For example, they built water works according to ancient Muslim designs, such as dikes engineered to precise declines that minimised water consumption. These dikes were more efficient in areas that had little space for large structures or expensive machinery. Pipe irrigation with its heavy reliance on metals was appropriate for other locales.

Two other books illustrate the range of ways in which Portuguese scholars are exploring environmental change: through simple words and word paintings. In *Terras de Sofala: persistências e mudança. Contribuições para a história da Costa Sul-Oriental de África nos séculos XVI-XVIII* [Lands of Sofala: Persistence and change. Contributions to the history of Africa's south-east coast, sixteenth to eighteenth centuries] (2003), Ana Cristina Roque compiles early descriptions of what became Mozambique's coast, providing a poetic view of what it must have been like to sail along those shores. Drawing on diaries, ship logs, and other technical and descriptive sources written by high ranking naval officers, she demonstrates the precision and accuracy that these early chroniclers gave to geomorphology, hydrology, weather, botanical and faunal phenomena, as well as to cultural practices. But beyond simply recounting key facts and notable insights, her sources reproduce pictures of ship-board life and the high craft of sea voyages in early sailing vessels. Here is word art in high form, whereby passages become photographic narratives that translate images to prose. Unlike Spanish, and then British, French or Dutch fleets, the Portuguese seemed less inclined to bring on board painters and fine artists to chronicle their discoveries, relying instead on word paintings. If we consider the first descriptions of Brazil in the 1500s, along with other descriptions of Africa's coast over the following three centuries, one realises that the Portuguese preferred painting with words to capture distant images.

Continuing this art of word pictures, Ana Isabel Queiroz's *A Paisagem de Terras do Demo* [Landscape of Terras do Demo] (2009), which received the Gulbenkian Foundation Prize in 2010 in the field of environmental studies, analyses landscape design through scientific descriptions and exquisite detail, proving how our best writers produce literature through biological and geographical profiles that enchant us with science as well as art. Such passages describe landscapes and other phenomena with a precision that other sources have been unable to match, providing new insights about the Mediterranean and distant seas.

When considering Portugal's natural and cultural heritage as outlined above, realising that unexpected riches have been produced from the land, the major conclusion of historical analyses seems to have been to criticise the liberal sentiment of the day, while praising elite discourses about territorial planning – insights that geographers (and maybe biologists) understood earlier than historians. Biased by assumptions of development as well as by economic and political ideologies, historians took their time thinking about the territory as a starting point to view economic stages, and nature's role in

moulding human lifestyles. The crucial role played by the lie of continents and oceans and their resources is nonetheless reflected in early records of exploration, naturalist surveys and railway maps. One realises that the greatest gift of Portuguese environmental history may be to demonstrate that landscapes can be understood through written sources, which were crafted with an intimate concern for the workings of human and biological nature.

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