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EDGAR PRESTAGE, 1943

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1869-1951

EDGAR PRESTAGE was the son of a lawyer practising in Manchester. He was born at High Wycombe on 20 July 1869 and educated at Radley and Balliol College, Oxford. His family had no connexion with Portugal, and he himself in late life could not recollect how he had become interested in Portuguese history and literature. He recalled, however, that while still at Radley he began to teach himself the language from a shilling grammar and an old Portuguese-Latin dictionary. He also learnt to read the *Lusiads* in Aubertin's version, which had the Portuguese text *en revers*. Domestic difficulties at home perhaps facilitated his conversion to Roman Catholicism at the age of sixteen, a step which was also taken by his mother. Be this as it may, he remained a devout Roman Catholic for the rest of his life.

He was an undergraduate at Oxford when he first visited Portugal in the summer of 1891, following Lord Salisbury's ultimatum over Portuguese colonial claims in Africa. At once captivated by the country and the people, he frequently returned for extensive visits during the next fifteen years. For most of these visits he was engaged on historical research in the archives of the National Library and of the Torre do Tombo at Lisbon, chiefly in connexion with the study of seventeenth-century Portuguese diplomatic activity at the principal European courts during the critical years when the House of Braganza was struggling to maintain the country's newly found independence against Spain (1640-68). He soon won the affectionate friendship of the foremost Portuguese scholars and men of letters, and he was elected to the Academy of Sciences at Lisbon in the nineties, some years before he had published any major work. His first publication was a translation of the *Lettres portugaises* (1893), which went into a third edition, after which Prestage refused to allow a reprint since he had come to disbelieve the traditional attribution of these famous love-letters to a seventeenth-century Portuguese nun.

His marriage in 1907 to Christina, only daughter of D. Maria Amália Vaz de Carvalho, widow of the Luso-Brazilian Parnasian poet Gonçalves Crespo, who presided over the last literary and social salon in Lisbon, gave Prestage a unique position in

the Lisbon society of the period. It also led to his making a home for some years in the Portuguese capital, where he acted as Press Attaché to the British Embassy during the last years of the First World War. He did not cultivate the friendship of the British colony in Lisbon, since (as he wrote in later years) he felt more at home among the Portuguese and found that religion was a closer bond than nationality. As a convinced monarchist, he deplored the advent of the Republic in 1910, and it was not until the establishment of the dictatorship of Dr. Salazar that he really became reconciled to the new régime in Portugal.

For more than half a century Prestage occupied a unique position in Lisbon society and intellectual circles. His deep and genuine passion for Portuguese history and literature retained him the friendship and respect of many Liberal leaders, writers, and scholars, who had no sympathy with his frankly reactionary outlook. His sojourn in Lisbon coincided with some of the most unhappy years in Portuguese history, when the country was repeatedly on the verge of bankruptcy and Portuguese internal politics touched the nadir of national humiliation. In these circumstances, the steady stream of scholarly works which flowed from his pen both in Portuguese and English gave him great renown among Portuguese of all political hues. In this way he did more to cement the prestige of his own country than could be done by the speeches of politicians or by the negotiations and social activities of diplomatists. When, in the late thirties, Hitler's agents began a campaign of 'cultural infiltration' into Portugal, the intellectual bonds established much earlier by Prestage proved too strong to be severed.

Prestage's first wife died in tragic circumstances in 1918, and five years later he married Victoria Cobb, whose father's family had been connected with Oporto for generations. In the year 1923 he also accepted the post of Camoens Professor at King's College, London University, a Chair which had been founded in 1919. He and his second wife settled in her charming little Queen Anne house in Holland Street, Kensington, but they continued to pay annual visits to Lisbon until the Second World War. The main work of the Chair consisted in public lectures on Portuguese literature and history, and in the publication of books and articles on those themes. During these years, Prestage became very friendly with the exiled King Dom Manuel, and helped to revise the proofs of the latter's massive three-volume work, *Early Portuguese Books, 1489-1600*. Prestage was without the slightest envy of other workers in the same field and invariably

gave a warm welcome to all newcomers. The present writer will always gratefully remember how Prestage, the uncontested doyen of Portuguese scholars in the English-speaking world in 1929, at once abandoned a projected edition of the *Commentaries of Ruy Freyre de Andrade* for the Hakluyt Society, on hearing that 2nd-Lieutenant Boxer of the Lincolnshire Regiment was anxious to do one for the Broadway Travellers series. All of us who work or have worked in the realm of Luso-Brazilian studies must acknowledge ourselves to be in Prestage's debt. These studies were hardly taken seriously in this country before the work done by Prestage and his friend, Aubrey Bell, in the first half of the present century.

Prestage was Norman McColl Lecturer at Cambridge University in 1933, when he delivered a course on 'Faith and Patriotism in the Portuguese Classics'. He remained in the Camoens Chair at King's College, London, for two years after passing the age-limit, finally retiring in 1936. He was always something of a hypochondriac, and this strain undoubtedly aggravated the ill health from which he suffered at the conclusion of the Second World War. He could not bring himself to visit Portugal again, even to receive the honorary degree which the University of Coimbra was anxious to bestow upon him. Despite devoted attention by his wife, who wrecked her own health in the process, he let his real and imagined bodily ills gain upon him until he became bed-ridden. Neither doctors nor priests could shake his conviction that death was close at hand, with the inevitable result that he eventually died on 10 March 1951.

Prestage's more important works include the publication of the registers of the Lisbon parishes of Santa Cruz do Castelo (1913), and of the Sé (1924-7), and two volumes of the diplomatic correspondence of Francisco de Sousa Coutinho, Portuguese envoy at The Hague, 1643-50. All these were published in collaboration with Pedro de Azevedo, but the third volume of Sousa Coutinho's correspondence only appeared in 1955, although it had been left ready in proof form by the editors long before the Second World War. Prestage's *magnum opus* was undoubtedly his definitive biography of Dom Francisco Manuel de Mello (1914), the seventeenth-century Portuguese soldier, writer, and diplomat, whose work and career always fascinated him. His *Diplomatic Relations of Portugal with France, England and Holland from 1640 to 1668* (1925), solidly based on a wealth of Portuguese archival sources, is also still the best work in this field, though it needs some correction from the voluminous Dutch

sources, as Prestage did not know that language. His last major work, *The Portuguese Pioneers* (1933), was likewise the most popular and perhaps deservedly so, though it, too, needs revision nowadays in the light of recent research.

An ardent monarchist and Roman Catholic, Prestage was conspicuously fair in his historical writing and seldom allowed his religious and political convictions to interfere with his objective analysis of the documents on which his best work was based. He was primarily a diplomatic historian, and his contributions to the history and criticism of Portuguese literature, though some of them were interesting enough, cannot be compared with those of Aubrey Bell. It was his work on Portuguese history which gained him admission to the British Academy, and it is as a great and exact expositor of Portuguese history that his memory will always be honoured.

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