

The physical remnants of Portugal's empire are scattered across the globe, from the forsaken fortresses that dot Morocco's coastline to the whitewashed churches that punctuate the skylines of Goa and Salvador da Bahia. Other traces of Portugal's imperial past linger as well: Portuguese is the world's sixth-most commonly spoken language, with over 220 million native speakers, while the syncretic music emanating from the Lusophone world, blending rhythms from Iberia and Africa, has a global audience.

Tragedies of staggering magnitude are also part of Portugal's imperial legacy. Protracted wars of decolonization served as a prelude to even longer, more devastating civil wars in Angola and Mozambique, conflicts which smouldered through the 1990s. In Brazil, chattel slavery persisted until 1888, more than fifty years longer than in the British Empire. The inequalities it incubated helped to spawn the endemic violence and social stratification that continue to plague Brazil today.

Portugal's imperial history has tended to be ignored in the anglophone world. Portuguese historians have published many fine books, including several multi-volume studies of the subject, but only fragments of these have been translated. There are several excellent studies in English – by Charles Boxer, Kenneth Maxwell, A. J. R. Russell-Wood, Malyn Newitt and Francisco Bethencourt – but none of these offers a panorama of Portuguese overseas expansion from its inaugural stirrings in the fourteenth century until the disaggregation of much of the empire in the early nineteenth.

A. R. Disney's two-volume synthesis accomplishes this feat. *A History of Portugal and the Portuguese Empire* is a remarkable achievement, combining rigour with lucidity and offering expert guidance across a complex and varied historical terrain. He allots as much coverage to Portuguese expansion in South Asia and southern Africa as he does to Brazil, and the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries receive equal attention. He directs the reader's attention to longstanding academic controversies without focusing on them unduly. This is sophisticated narrative history at its finest.

The dispersed, decentralized character of the Portuguese Empire makes Disney's synthesis particularly impressive. From a small, struggling frontier kingdom on the periphery of Europe, Portugal metamorphosed into a vast maritime empire with multiple far-flung nodes – forts, port cities, strategically situated islands – of both formally administered and quasi-independent communities. It stretched, at its apogee, from Nagasaki to Colombo, and from Luanda to Recife. Often sitting on the peripheries of vast, land-based

Beyond the seas

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empires, Portugal's overseas colonies benefited from fluid, flexible structures of governance which could be reconfigured to meet evolving demands in the absence of swift communication with Lisbon.

The empire was not the product of a grand design. It developed in piecemeal fashion, through a spasmodic flurry of acquisitions followed by periods of stagnation and even contraction. In the fifteenth century, a bevy of trading fortresses, or *feitorias*, were constructed within a few decades in North Africa, only for the lion's share of them to be abandoned. In the sixteenth century, the Estado da India, based at Goa, was established quickly, its tentacles stretching across the ocean from Timor to Mozambique, with important hubs at Melaka, Cochin, Diu and Hormuz. Owing to the absence of troops and treasure, territorial empire was unimaginable. The Portuguese thus made a virtue out of necessity, contenting themselves with controlling sea lanes through strategic fortification and naval superiority. In the Indian Ocean, they set up a remarkably effective and durable system for collecting revenue. They required all ships to pay a fee for safe conduct and also controlled customs. Brazil, discovered in 1500, languished until setbacks in Asia, at the hands of Dutch and English challengers, made its settlement more attractive and its continued neglect less tenable.

The motives behind expansion were never purely mercantile, though the lure of plunder figured largely in drumming up interest in it. Disney points out that the conquest of Ceuta in 1415 was conceived as part of the reconquest of Iberia from the Muslim powers. Already in the fourteenth century, Portuguese kings had secured papal bulls authorizing crusades in Granada and North Africa. Divorced from purely economic considerations, the cost of such adventurism in the service of faith was high. More than 200 ships and 20,000 men took part in the conquest of

Ceuta, and the debts incurred to finance the expedition were still being repaid in the 1440s. King Sebastian's disastrous defeat at Al-Ksar Al-Kabir in 1578 resulted not only in the death of 15,000 of his troops, but also set in motion a chain of events that saw Portugal absorbed for sixty years into Habsburg Spain.

To readers familiar with the European empires of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Disney's depiction of Portugal's early modern expansion may seem surprising because of the Crown's unmistakably secondary role. Much of the impetus behind Portuguese expansion came from non-state actors. Missionaries, mercenaries, private merchants and exiled convicts played leading parts, often without government supervision. Disney estimates that 90 per cent of the merchandise shipped between Asia and Portugal in the first half of the seventeenth century passed through private hands. The unwieldy nature of the empire resulted from interactions at a turbulent and ever-fluctuating frontier, the consequence of encounters between largely independently operating Portuguese and non-European peoples. The result, particularly in southern Africa and South Asia, were hybrid communities of go-betweens, people who inhabited two cultural worlds and made the intercourse, commercial, spiritual and otherwise, between Portugal and non-European societies possible.

Disney's book highlights the interconnected nature of the Portuguese Empire. Undoubtedly, there was a centrifugal quality to its overseas expansion, as many Portuguese who ventured abroad maintained tenuous links with Portugal, if they remained connected at all. Yet it is the creation of robust relations between heterogeneous, distant territories that stands out as a central theme of Disney's account. Slavery was the institution that did the most to bring the continents together and to make their economies interdependent. In the seventeenth century, 10,000 slaves were brought from Angola to the New World per year, a figure that jumped to 20,000 in the eighteenth century. About 50 per cent of the African slaves brought to Brazil were purchased with Brazilian products, with *cachaça* (sugar cane brandy) accounting for half of that figure. It was Portuguese imperial activity that set this macabre supply chain in motion.

One of the admirable qualities of Disney's book is his eschewal of facile nationalist historiography in favour of locating Portuguese history in a broader international context. The role of foreigners is emphasized: during

Afonso Henriques's legendary siege of Lisbon in 1147, German and English fighters, en route to the Second Crusade, paused long enough to help carry the day for the Christian army. An English priest, Gilbert of Hastings was named Bishop of reoccupied Lisbon. Much of the Christian reconquest of Muslim Portugal – Gharb al-Andalus – was conducted by international military orders, the Hospitalers and the Templars, the latter of whom endowed Portugal with one of its architectural treasures, the Convento de Cristo in Tomar. The fragility of Portugal's status as an independent kingdom is another recurring theme in Disney's narrative. Had the Battle of Aljubarrota in 1385 gone the other way, Portugal would probably have been subsumed into Castile. The navigational feats of Dias, de Gama and Cabral, whose voyages were undertaken in the service of the Portuguese Crown, may never have been attempted.

A few weaknesses in *A History of Portugal and the Portuguese Empire* should be mentioned. First, this is primarily a work of political and economic history. Those interested in the history of the arts, religion and political ideas are advised to look elsewhere, perhaps to A. J. R. Russell-Wood's *A World on the Move* (1992) or *Portuguese Oceanic Expansion 1400–1800* (2007), edited by Francisco Bethencourt and Diogo Curto. Second, while Disney has written two very valuable books, his decision to keep separate the histories of Portugal and its empire is questionable. Particularly after 1500, it is hard to disentangle the histories of metropolitan Portugal and its overseas possessions. By 1519, as Disney himself points out, 68 per cent of the Crown's total receipts came from overseas trade, while the return on Asian pepper and spices alone exceeded all internal Portuguese revenues. What Disney's volumes reveal is the need to commingle the histories of empire and nation more thoroughly. Third, Disney ends his story rather abruptly in 1807, the year that Napoleon's invasion of Portugal necessitated the transfer of the seat of the monarchy from Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro. This was no doubt a pivotal event, which culminated in Brazil's independence from Portugal. Yet Disney's account fails to probe the underlying causes of this momentous dismemberment of empire, leaving the reader with the discomfiting sense that a final, explanatory chapter was mistakenly excised from the book.

This is nevertheless an important study, the result of a heroic scholarly undertaking. Disney's volumes deserve a place on the shelves of anyone who has ever wondered why and how such a small country could have had such a decisive impact on world history.