

JOUHS Interview



Dr Maria João Branco.

On 27 November 2003, on behalf of *JOUHS*, Dr Nadia Pollini and Michael Burtscher met **Dr Maria João Branco**, Fellow in Medieval History at the Open University in Lisbon and Visiting Research Fellow at St John's College, Oxford, from 2001 to 2003. During her time in Oxford, she was entrusted with the setting up and direction of the new Instituto Camões Centre for Portuguese Language, in Littlegate House, St Ebbe's Street.¹

JOUHS: Tell us about the birth of the Centre for Portuguese Language and its relationship with the Portuguese government and the Instituto Camões.

DR BRANCO: The Centre was founded in October 2001, following a proposal from the Instituto Camões, an institution dependent on the Foreign Office whose function is the promotion of Portuguese language and culture abroad. The University of Oxford, through the Sub-Faculty of Portuguese, which is part of the Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages, made a successful bid for one of the Portuguese Language Centres which the Instituto Camões has set up all over the world (twenty-four at present). The Language Centres exist to promote the teaching of Portuguese language and literature, while the task of promoting Portuguese culture is more an attribute of the so called 'Cultural Centres of the Instituto Camões' (sixteen at present all over the world). But in the case of Oxford things were somehow different, because the needs were also different.

JOUHS: Where did the need for such a centre come from?

DR BRANCO: The Sub-Faculty considered that the Portuguese language and its literature were already well covered by the courses being taught, but realized that this was an opportunity to include the historical component which had hitherto been absent from courses taught at Oxford. Student feedback also indicated that they would welcome some more historical context to their studies. Considering the recommendations of the Humanities Division on how the Departments of History and Literature should work more closely together, this was felt to be the right moment to start the Centre, and to focus its main work on history.

JOUHS: What is then the difference between the Instituto Camões and the Centre for Brazilian Studies, which also teaches Portuguese and Portuguese culture?

DR BRANCO: There are many substantial differences. In fact, the Brazilian Centre does not teach any Portuguese culture or language, and their programme has traditionally been quite reduced in terms of the study of historical or literary subjects. The Centre for Brazilian Studies is also different from the Instituto Camões in that it is a much more research-based organization. It is true to say that in the last few years they have also started to be more involved in history; for instance, last year they hosted a meeting on the independence of Brazil in the 1820s, and in 2001 Professor Lesley Bethell collaborated in some of the seminars we ran in the Portuguese Centre. The Centre has also promoted a number of workshops and conferences on Brazilian literature. However, in general, being a research centre, which grants scholarships to economists, political scientists and sociologists, its activities are usually much more focused on a more sociological, economic, and political agenda, and current affairs.

The Centre for Portuguese Language is a 'joint venture' between the University of Oxford and the Instituto Camões. All the cultural activities of the Centre are sponsored by the Portuguese Government, which also supplied all the furniture, the IT equipment and the present library of the Centre (c. 2,000 volumes), as well as providing for the post of the director and one Portuguese language assistant, who are also both supposed to teach in their respective Departments. The University of Oxford made rooms available to the Centre (Littlegate House, suite 4) and provides the basic infrastructure for its functioning.

St John's College has also showed an interest in receiving the director as one of their visiting members, thereby allowing for a perfect integration of the Centre into two of Oxford's institutions.

The work and activities of the Portuguese Centre, as agreed in the protocol signed by both the Instituto Camões and the University of Oxford in October 2001, are therefore joint undertakings, agreed with Lisbon, but defined by the director, with the close collaboration of the Sub-Faculty of Portuguese Studies and St John's College and with the advice of the Advisory Committee.

***JOUHS:* Who are the Advisory Committee members of the Centre?**

DR BRANCO: The Committee is composed of five people, but they are supposed to change every two years, with each new director. Two of the members are supposed to come from the Faculty of Modern History (during my time Dr Frances Lannon and Dr Jean Dunbabin), and the remaining three come from the Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages (during the years 2001-3 Professor Martin MacLaughlin, Professor Tom Earle and Dr Stephen Parkinson). They were all really very helpful in advising me on what might or might not work in a place like Oxford, which does not function in the same way as other academic institutions.

Since the main goal of the Centre was to promote the study of Portuguese history (which is why the director is a historian), I arrived in Oxford with many ideas, not all of which were practical in the special circumstances of the university.

***JOUHS:* What activities does the Centre organise?**

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DR BRANCO: In order to create regular habits of collaboration, contact and cultural interchange between Portuguese and British historians and scholars, and to promote the study of Portuguese history within the syllabus of the Faculty of Modern History (which I thought of as the most important part of the task I was given as first Director of the Centre), I decided to set up three sets of annual events whose regularity would hopefully create those habits. The first one would be under the aegis of the Faculty of Modern History, and would be a postgraduate seminar on comparative Portuguese and British history, in which Portuguese and British speakers would approach similar topics but in their own area and period. The ‘comparative’ approach would result from the comparison of their different experiences and their respective discussions. The second would be an annual conference on a Portuguese history topic, in which Portuguese historians could address a British audience in sessions moderated and chaired by British specialists on similar subjects, again with the aim of promoting discussion. And the third of these annual events would be a day-conference and gathering of British historians working on Portuguese subjects. The idea was to host a meeting in which it would be possible to include a graduate students’ conference and to discuss the problems felt by all of those working on Portuguese history.

***JOUHS:* Did you base the seminar that you organised in St John’s College on this model?**

DR BRANCO: Yes, the seminar I organised for the Portuguese Centre in Michaelmas term, 2002, held at St John’s under the theme ‘England, Portugal and the Wider World (11th- 14th centuries)’, followed precisely the model explained above. A weekly seminar on comparative history, looking at the specific cases of Portugal, England, Flanders and France, helped, I hope, to increase the interest of the study of the Portuguese case in a wider context, and in a comparative perspective.

St John’s College was also the venue for the two annual conferences which I was also able to host in July and September of 2002 and 2003, with a very satisfactory attendance by British historians from all over the UK.

As to the third project, we decided that it needn’t be more than a bi-annual meeting. If we were to promote the study of Portuguese history in Oxford, we needed to know from the people working in England how it should be done and what their difficulties were. The meeting, hosted in the Portuguese Centre, gathered a large number of academics and researchers from the United Kingdom. Four postgraduate and postdoctoral students presented the work they were doing about Portuguese history, music, and literature. We then had a round table to debate difficulties and suggest new ideas to pursue. Besides these three annual activities, we had many weekly lectures ranging from presentations on literary authors to talks given by the authors themselves. Two Portuguese poets and two fictional writers were invited.

***JOUHS:* Were the two conferences on the Middle Ages?**

DR BRANCO: The first meeting was on ‘Medieval Portugal’ but the second one was on ‘Seventeenth-Century Portugal – Kingdom and Empire’, a very

interesting period of Portuguese history in which modern Portuguese historians are showing an increasing interest. I assumed I had to promote other areas and fields apart from my own... It was very good to be able to show to the British public what is being done in Portugal, and how our historians are working. Hosting these conferences in English, which our scholars are now able to do, helped communication immensely. So it has become much easier to promote contacts and compare work and methodology.

JOUHS: Does the historical methodology used by Portuguese scholars differ from their British counterparts?

DR BRANCO: Yes and no. In our undergraduate studies, we are very influenced by both the French and the English traditions. Having no translations available, we invariably end up having to read the authors in their original language, but the influences are multiple, so I guess we deal with the same problems and approaches as the English, from the more pragmatic to the more theoretical ones. We are going also in the same way in terms of trends. For instance the promotion of prosopographical studies, very fashionable these days in Portugal, is broadly on the same lines as in other European countries.

One of our main advantages, although it sometimes appears to be a draw-back, is the fact that there is still much unpublished material to be studied. It is a big challenge and a stimulus for all of us who enjoy working in unexplored fields and with original documents. Still a lot of work waiting to be done!

One thing which is relatively new in our research habits is to work in teams, focused on a single project. For some topics, we have reached the point where working individually is not enough. Large amounts of sources require different methodological approaches, and only well co-ordinated teams of researchers with access to IT technology can handle certain questions. This is the case of the *Fasti Ecclesiae Portugaliae*. This project, in which I collaborate, gathers a team of fourteen Portuguese, a British consultant, Dianna Webb, and a French consultant, Helene Millet.

In these past two years it has become even more obvious to me that Portuguese history and medieval scholarship are going very much on the same paths as the rest of Europe. The same was true for medieval Portuguese people... and their medieval colleagues. A myth, created in twentieth-century Spain and Portugal, claimed that Iberian reality was different. In many ways, it was, as all realities are. But today, we are realizing more and more that the realities we can attest for Portugal are very much in line with those of most of the remaining western kingdoms. Everything is more or less under revision, and this makes it a very exciting field of research. I guess that joining the European Community helped us put all the stereotypes linked to it in perspective.

JOUHS: The European Union finances research teams for their project on the Origins of Modern Europe.² Are there such research projects going on in Portugal on integration in the European context?

DR BRANCO: Yes, there are, and they are showing a permeable, communicative world totally unsuspected some years ago. Certainly it looks as if the Portuguese of the Middle Ages were not all that different and all that distant from the rest of the Western World. On the contrary, people were travelling back and forth between the Portuguese and all the other European courts, as well as the Papal court. The similarities are somehow striking even in the case of issues such as royal legislation and parliamentary traditions. This implies a revision of the traditional view of looking at Portugal as a special ‘bubble’, promoted by the dictatorship under a nationalistic agenda.

***JOUHS:* You are a medievalist. Have you attempted to promote the Middle Ages in the Centre’s activities?**

DR BRANCO: The idea when the Centre was founded was that the director would always be a historian, but that every two years the director would change in order to encourage a wide range of subjects and areas of speciality.

I never intended to focus activities solely on the Middle Ages, although I agree that we are sometimes tempted to promote the area with which we are most familiar with. I was supposed to develop my academic activities in the area I specialize in, and that was exactly what I did. I was also involved in teaching. I offered tutorials, gave lectures at postgraduate seminars, and contributed to the questions asked in the Finals Honours examinations. This was done in order to show students that they could study Portuguese history, and be able to use this knowledge in their final exams.

But as director of the Centre, I was also supposed to gather the ‘living forces’ present at Oxford who related to Portuguese Studies, so that we could attempt to create a gregarious culture around the Centre.

***JOUHS:* Has it been possible to create this social environment in the two years that you spent in Oxford?**

DR BRANCO: I think so, thanks to the many activities promoted in the Centre. Besides the three above mentioned activities we also hosted exhibitions (one, sent from Lisbon to commemorate the independence of East Timor, and another by a Portuguese painter who lives in London), organised monthly conferences on literary, historical and current affairs, hosted book launches, showed Portuguese films (one cycle on Lisbon and another on Portuguese society), provided the venue for two of the ‘Workshops on Portuguese Politics and Society’ (organised by Dr David Goldey and Dr Herminio Martins), and organised several series of meetings with the Portuguese researchers doing their doctorates at Oxford.

There are about forty students, engaged mostly in sciences (biochemistry, astrophysics, medicine, etc.). Every month two or three of them would come and present aspects of their research to the Portuguese community in Oxford. These events gave a more modern and dynamic aspect to the workings of the centre, and were quite popular.

***JOUHS:* Does the Centre work like a Portuguese Society, in the same way as other Oxford societies?**

DR BRANCO: No. There is a Portuguese Society (OUPS) which is completely independent from the Centre. What we did was to get together with them and think of activities which might interest both the OUPS and the Portuguese Centre. The cycle on Portuguese cinema and the meetings with Portuguese researchers at Oxford were thus conceived. These events did not focus on historical issues but were about things happening now in Portugal.

Yet I think that from now on, for the Centre to fulfil its mission, we desperately need to start funding postgraduate students. In order to develop an area of research in a specific environment, you need to find students within the same country who are interested in studying the subject.

***JOUHS:* Would this potential programme of scholarships be similar to that of the Centre for Brazilian Studies, which enables students from abroad to come to Oxford?**

DR BRANCO: I would prefer to have students from English-speaking countries and universities studying Portuguese subjects. They would then go to their own British universities, and would surely want to continue their work on Portuguese subjects. They would create their own nuclei of research. Otherwise, if you 'import' Portuguese students, they will then return to Portugal and the lasting effect of their presence will be much more ephemeral and less noticeable. The difficulty, of course, remains the funding.

***JOUHS:* Funding is an issue for many societies, research centres and universities. How does it affect the Centre?**

DR BRANCO: The funding affects us as it does everyone else. Being sponsored by the Portuguese Government only, we cannot expect it to provide for everything... I expect we would have to try and fund these potential students through banking institutions, foundations, research institutes and the usual ways. They could sponsor postgraduate students as well as research projects.

Last year, the Leverhulme Fund agreed to fund a research project, based in the Centre, which I consider a very good example of the way forward. Proposed by Dr. S R. Parkinson, a medievalist from the Sub-Faculty of Portuguese, the project deals with the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, a corpus of miracles compiled by the scribes of Alfonso X of Castile, and written in Galician Portuguese. Since September 2003 and for the next two years, we will therefore have a researcher, Dr Deidre Jackson, working in the Centre's premises on a research project on a Portuguese topic, funded by a British institution. In the same manner as we secured the sponsorship from the Leverhulme Fund, we could find other sponsors to develop the Centre's programmes.

***JOUHS:* Does the Centre also teach Portuguese?**

DR BRANCO: Yes. Language courses for everyone have been organised in collaboration with the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education. And the Language Centre on Woodstock Road also provides Portuguese classes for those somehow related to the University. There are many ways for students to learn Portuguese, even if they are not enrolled in the Sub-Faculty of Portuguese. I have to say that I was very impressed with the level of Portuguese taught in the Portuguese Studies courses. I saw students who arrived with no knowledge of the language acquire good skills in only one year. After two years, their fluency was remarkable.

***JOUHS:* Has your successor as director of the Centre been chosen yet?**

DR BRANCO: Yes. After a year's vacancy (2003-4), the second director will be Professor Teresa Pinto Coelho, a specialist on Anglo-Portuguese relations in the nineteenth century.

***JOUHS:* Are the weekly seminars still running this year?**

DR BRANCO: Yes. This year it will be on 'Africa in the nineteenth century', and there will be contributors from several British and Portuguese Universities. There are perhaps few students in Portuguese history, but many students shift from their primary experience to the Portuguese reality. The University of Oxford is receptive to these fields of research which in the past were less familiar, and the Portuguese contribution is considered more and more interesting.

***JOUHS:* Do you think that an exchange programme for post-graduate students, whereby Portuguese students would visit Oxford and Oxford students could then visit their home universities, would be a good way to promote contacts between the two countries?**

DR BRANCO: This would be something that could really work very successfully. The basic conditions are already here. Although the Centre is small in size, we have an open-shelf library, which is well supplied in reference books, catalogues of libraries and archives and theses recently published not yet held in the Bodleian Library. The books are in the OLIS catalogue. Moreover, the website has links to most Portuguese archives and libraries where the students can find the information they need.

I have spoken of the unpublished sources in Portugal for the history of Portugal. But I have to say that the English sources about Portuguese history are also many and varied. If we just glance at the work of Sir Peter E. Russell³, who worked on the documentation kept in the Public Record Office, we can evaluate the quantity and quality of the sources available in this country. The Anglo-Portuguese alliances, from the late fourteenth century onwards, or the correspondence between Philippa of Lancaster and her family, require further study. The Bodleian Library also holds some precious documents for Portuguese history, like the oldest Latin Grammar written in Portuguese dating from 1340. There would be no problem in undertaking Anglo-Portuguese history here, combined with visits to Portugal. The collaboration set up between the University of Oxford and the Instituto Camões foresees some possible

collaborations between researchers from the two institutions who could act as supervisors.

JOUHS: You were a visiting fellow at St John's College, which has also started its own research centre.⁴ Did you collaborate with them?

DR BRANCO: St John's Centre opened one year after I arrived, which is why we never got the chance to work on that idea. Maybe the next director will be able to establish those links.

JOUHS: It seems that research centres have become very fashionable. Is this the way forward for research?

DR BRANCO: Of course. The time has come to promote research for itself. You cannot expect every researcher to find a post in a University, and it is about time we recognize research as a profession in itself. Research centres might be able to integrate people who are well trained and very skilled scholars who otherwise would be doomed to work in the banking system or for multinational companies, and to transform their abilities into sound good research. I am very much in favour of research centres.

JOUHS: It is, however, a financial strain to open and organise such research centres. Could departments not benefit from this money and fill in the research gaps?

DR BRANCO: Certainly, the financial side is important. But I think research should not be solely dependent on Departments, nor an exclusive activity of University teachers. Research is not a by-product of University teaching. University teaching and research should walk side by side, together as much as possible, but also in separate ways if necessary. Otherwise you risk dependencies and sacrificing one to the other, according to fashion.

As to the financial side of this, it can be arranged in ways which suit everyone.

Look at my case, in Oxford: during my two years at Oxford I tried to do as much teaching as possible. That was the best way I had to get to students and to fulfil my 'mission' here, and yet it reduced costs for the University. If the Centre works out, the University of Oxford will be able, for many years to come, to count on Portuguese historians without the burden of a full stipend.

The same goes for research projects funded by independent institutions, which would take place in the research centres. Besides, the way forward is to work in teams on collective projects. Certainly research centres are currently more capable of providing an appropriate environment.

NOTES:

¹ The website address for the Centre is <http://www.clpic.ox.ac.uk>.

² On this project see for instance the series published by Jean-Philippe Genet at <http://lamop.univ-paris1.fr/W3/lamop10.html>.

³ See S. R. Parkinson, *The English Intervention in Spain & Portugal in the Time of Edward III & Richard II*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955).

⁴ See the St John's Centre website at <http://info.sjc.ox.ac.uk/research/researchcentre.html>.