

## **An odd alliance: William Beresford and D. João VI, Prince and King of Portugal**

by

Fernando Dores Costa

(Department of History, Lisbon University Institute-ISCTE)

A remarkable example of an odd alliance is that of William Carr Beresford, a British officer who had a crucial role in the reorganization of Portuguese military forces after April 1809, receiving the highest position of command in that army, and the Prince and King D. João the 6<sup>th</sup> of Portugal, the ruler who left Lisbon in November 1807 and established a new court in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>1</sup>

D. João was the second male son of queen D. Maria (r. 1777-1792), born in 1767. The sudden death of his brother D. José (the prince that supposedly had been prepared to become the future king) and the insanity of his mother forced him to become the regent of the Portuguese crown since 1792, signing *A Rainha* ["The Queen"] until 1799. As the Napoleonic troops of general Junot approached the capital and knowing that the British wouldn't allow the French to take the Portuguese vessels, D. João's only option in November 1807 was to cross the ocean to Brazil, accompanied by his family and a few thousand nobles and royal functionaries and servants. A new court was established in Rio de Janeiro, the sole example of a political center originated by a European royal family in America. After the death of his mother, in Rio in 1816, he became the king and was crowned in America, following a long mourning period. He returned to Portugal after the liberal revolution of August and September 1820 and cooperated with the new liberal government during the period of 1820-1823 to the extent of even accepting to become the first Portuguese king to solemnly swear a Constitution. A few months later, a military *coup*

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an abridged version of a much wider piece of research on the subject of the unexpected confluence of the government of Prince and King D. João in Brazil with the activities of William Beresford in Portugal during the years 1814 to 1820. A preliminary version in Portuguese entitled 'Beresford e D. João VI: uma inesperada confluência' was presented at the congress 'Brasil: 200 anos de Estado', Rio de Janeiro, 12-14th November 2008.

made him again an “absolute” king, but he promised the commission of a Constitutional Chart (similar to the French Charter of 1814) that never came to light. He died in 1826.<sup>2</sup>

William Carr Beresford was born in 1768 in Ireland, an illegitimate son of the first marquis of Waterford. His family had originally been granted lands under the 1652 Act of Settlement and for many years had been the leading family of County Waterford. William went to school in England and for less than nine months attended the military academy of Strasbourg. In August 1785 Beresford was assigned to the 6<sup>th</sup> Foot regiment in Canada and returned to England in 1789.

He gathered a few overseas experiences: in India, Egypt and, even more relevant for his subsequent career, in the conquest of the Dutch colony of Cap Hope in South Africa (the Netherlands being then a French satellite State) and the ephemeral occupation of Buenos Aires a South American dependency of Spain, then a French ally, in 1806. As from 1809 Beresford was closely connected to Portugal. This state was the stronghold from which Wellington launched his military action against Napoleonic forces in the Peninsula. Beresford was the head of the disciplinary reshaping of Portuguese forces that became an important component of Wellington’s army until its victory in 1814.<sup>3</sup>

The most extraordinary events took place after 1815, which is to say in peace times. Beresford, remaining in Portugal, but claiming the wide authority exercised during wartime. This set him in open conflict with the governors of Portugal. Astonishingly, he was supported by D. João and his “American government”. Why would the Portuguese king make such unpopular decisions? How can we explain this odd alliance? D. João remained in Brazil even when peace in Europe was established. His foreign policy was guided not by European but by American goals, namely those concerning the control of the Rio de la Plata in the context of the decomposition of the Spanish empire. Beresford turnout to be an unexpected piece in this imperial project because he was seen as the man that could send European soldiers to Brazil while keeping Portugal defended from any potential Spanish retaliation in Europe.

---

<sup>2</sup> J. Pedreira e F. Dores Costa, *D. João VI*, (Lisboa, Círculo de Leitores, 2006), also published in Brazil as *D. João VI, um príncipe entre dois continentes* (São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Vichness, *Marshal of Portugal: the military career of William Carr Beresford, 1785-1814* (Florida State University, 1976); Malyn Dudley Dunn Newitt and Martin Robson (eds.) *Lord Beresford and British intervention in Portugal – 1807-1820* (Lisboa, ICS, 2004).

Let's first establish why Beresford was sent to Portugal in the first place. The experience of dealing with the Portuguese during the occupation of Madeira by British forces in December 1807 might provide a reason as to why he was appointed to lead the Portuguese forces in March 1809 with full powers conferred by the rank of marshal of the armies, later marshal general' (in Portuguese *marechal general*). He received the task of organizing and discipline the men that were to take part of the army ruled by Arthur Wellesley Portugal suffered then the second Napoleonic incursion in the Northern provinces. The army of Soult occupied the city of Porto, the second larger city of the kingdom. The optimistic climate that followed the defeat of the army of Junot in August 1808 and the French defeat in the battle of Bailén, in Spain, in July banished when Napoleon lead the conquest of Madrid in the early days of December and the army of John Moore found disaster in A Coruña.

The high position of Beresford was a new illustration of a diplomatic tradition that sought protection from the British, including the appointment of a foreign organizer and strategist, the answer to difficult times. Portugal was a periphery of the European military system and war was not frequent. In 1762, at the time of the Portuguese involvement in the Seven Years' War, the count of Schambourg-Lippe was chosen by the London government to lead the Portuguese and British forces men against the Spanish and French invaders of Portugal. During the new crisis that took shape in the last years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the rulers of Lisbon requested once more the help of London. What was new was the British reluctance to send effective resources.

Things were to change after Napoleon's invasion of Spain. At the beginning of April 1809 Castlereagh, British war minister, transmitted to Arthur Wellesley the king's permission to lead a new expedition to Portugal. He arrived in Lisbon in the 23rd and his main concern was the threat of a movement of the army of the French general Victor from the Spanish Extremadura in direction to Lisbon, in coordination with the army of Soult in Porto. Fortunately for Wellesley, Victor remained in Spain and he was free to use his army against Soult.

The role of Beresford was to create disciplined Portuguese men to be incorporated to the army of the future Duke of Wellington. That was the starting point of his reputation. In 1818, one of the governors of Portugal, Ricardo Raimundo Nogueira, while strongly opposed Beresford, wrote in his diary a characterization of the British officer that still emphasized his work in the organization of the army. Some Portuguese could be extremely tough in the evaluation of the

national rulers whom they believe unable to put order in the army ranks, in contrast with the crucial role played by foreign officers. This contrast between national and foreign officers ability to rule their forces is an insufficiently studied matter. Nogueira argued that Beresford as a foreigner was free to refuse officers and even decline recommendations to place men presented in the name of the Regent, but this seems an insufficient explanation for such a wide authority.

Beresford remained second only to Wellington during the operations of 1809 and 1810. After the triumph of Wellington's plan of immobilization and self-decomposition of the army lead by Masséna, during the third Napoleonic incursion in Portugal, and consequent return to Spain of his remaining French forces in March and April 1811, the military operations of the Peninsular War no longer took place in Portuguese soil. However the Portuguese soldiers remained in Wellington's army until the end of the war –as did British complaints against the Portuguese governors and civil officers.

Beresford didn't emerge from the battle of Albuera with the aura of a brilliant strategist. By 1811, his prestige was declining.<sup>4</sup> In his conflict with the Portuguese governors, he appealed for the first time to Prince D. João and his government in Rio de Janeiro and received a reinforcement of his own power in the recruitment procedures. The Royal Chart of November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1811 is a remarkable description of the traditional and endemic difficulties of rising men for the ranks.

The military authority was independent from the decisions of the council of governors. This was clear since 1809, when the government of the Prince in Rio de Janeiro had restricted the autonomy of the council in Lisbon and established the power of Beresford and Wellesley. The governors of Portugal remained constrained to report to the court in America on every issue, no matter how small, while, on the basis that military decisions had to be taken without delays, British officers were allowed to proceed without consultation'.

We arrive at the beginning of the crucial period in our «odd alliance». The war is over and the soldiers went back home. The prestige of the national participation in the forces that were the best of Europe was frequently referred to and relying on that the returning Portuguese officers wanted to receive a special reward as members of the victorious army. However, their force had

---

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Vichness, *Marshal of Portugal....*; Mark Thompson, 'The battle of Albuera, 16 May 1811 – a case of altered perceptions', in Newitt and Robson (eds.) *Lord Beresford....*, pp. 67-88.

to be trimmed to the size capable to be sustained by the Portuguese state in peacetime. Particularly, as the British subsidy provided to fund the war was about to come to an end.

Backed by his prestige, Beresford threatened the governors to keep the *status quo*. They, in turn, insisted that the army had to be streamlined, although they acknowledged that Beresford was the best man for the job. They suggested that Beresford should leave the service of any foreign power (Britain of course) and that his authority should be limited to the laws and traditions of the realm – that is to say, placed under the orders of the government that represented the absent Portuguese prince. This was the logical return to the ante-bellum order.

All this was believed to be a short transition period. The timely arrival of the Prince D. João to Lisbon would bring forward some clarification. But D. João and his entourage had in Brazil another perspective. The Prince did not intend to leave Rio de Janeiro. The American – not the European – issues were his central concern.

The unexpected confluence between the stubbornness of Beresford in Portugal and the American military and diplomatic agenda of D. João in Brazil it is the main object here.

The governors of Lisbon had in 1814 a problem. Discharging officers (if at all possible) and lowering their pays were their goals, but they feared the natural backlash. The oversize army they inherited was the result of the British policy of recruiting supplementary forces in other countries, their own sources being exhausted. The governors tried in September 1814 a smooth change linking rewards not with ranks but with the effective exercise of commanding positions. The governor Principal Sousa explained in January 1815 that Beresford in his heart was unable to perceive that it was impossible to keep such an expensive military system. Every small issue was, in Sousa's opinion, an excuse to feed the conflict with D. Miguel Pereira Forjaz, the governor in charge of the military matters and the brightest man of the council. Some matters were of more importance, for instance the capacity of confirmation of the decisions of the regimental councils of war. During the war Beresford had that extraordinary authority, but in peace this had gone back to the War Council of Justice, a specific meeting of the Council of War (as supreme military court) for penal issues. Beresford claimed that authority back.

The regulation of the army organization signed by D. João on the 21st February 1816 was a major victory for Beresford. Portugal remained a military mobilized country. It is difficult to imagine that the ministers of D. João in Rio de Janeiro had any idea of the social and political

consequences of such absurd decision. The new law kept the objective of a professional army of 57 thousand men and the militias remained under the authority of Beresford. During 1817 his actions began to be seen more and more as the origin of an astonishing burden. Some reflections on the relation between military recruitment, agriculture and demographic movements were written during these few years of perplexity and have become classics.

Some were published after the first liberal revolution of 1820. Two examples: the anonymous *Discurso dirigido a El Rei no princípio de 1817 sobre os danos que sofre a agricultura pelo recrutamento* [Statement sent to the King in the beginning of 1817 about the harm done in agriculture by military recruitment] and Marino Miguel Franzini's *Reflexões sobre o actual regulamento do exército de Portugal* [Reflections about the present regulation of the army of Portugal], a original work about the relation between population structure and the army.

Raimundo Nogueira, one of the governors, wrote that this new law established a military government inside a monarchy and that the *marechal* had obtained the new regulation by irregular means and bad-faith as Portugal's government had not been consulted. The prince asked for the opinion of the governors about less important issues. Nogueira characterized sharply this government as a mixed sort of administration, a military government inside the monarchical traditional rule. However, this was not really an innovation. The government of Portugal since 1809 had two authorities side by side, the council of governors having no authority over military affairs. Conflicts were possible, as the famous one involving Principal Sousa and Wellington during the campaign of 1810 against the Napoleonic troops lead by Masséna. In 1810 Nogueira stood in opposition to his government colleagues, considering that the highest commander of an army should not be challenged in any way. "National survival" made such an exemption necessary. In 1817 Nogueira argued that the situation was completely different. Social unrest emerged from this attempt to maintain an extraordinary military authority during peace time. The personal ambitions of Beresford received the support of D. João. Men with different objectives were unexpected allies. Thus, D. João made a *coup d'état* in his European domains.

How can we explain this? An exhaustive research of the decision-making process in the Rio de Janeiro court concerning the Portuguese military issues during these years, from the end of the war in Europe (1814) to the liberal revolution in Portugal (1820), is of crucial importance.

Unfortunately we don't have it. However we can identify a probable "rational link" in these decisions of Dom João.

D. João stayed in Brazil and, as already referred, his foreign policy had mainly American goals. We must recall that the Spanish south and Central American colonies were starting the multifaceted process of political redefinition that led to their independence. The Portuguese crown had a long traditional dispute with Spain regarding the southern limits of Brazil and the control of the area surrounding the Spanish dependency of Buenos Aires, on the opposite margin of the Rio de la Plata.

The foundation of a royal court in Rio de Janeiro fed the imperialist dreams about a wider influence of the House of Bragança in America. The ambitions over Rio de la Plata were renewed in 1816. Troops sent from Portugal were the military instrument of that policy. In fact it was very difficult to raise and maintain troops in Brazil, even more than in Portugal. \* It was almost impossible to persuade men to accept the fate of soldiers, an underprivileged and dishonorable condition. This social limitation to army shaping could be found in England, Portugal and other European countries, but in Brazil was deeply rooted. European men were called to overcome this traditional trouble.

The ambition concerning Rio de la Plata could be seen as a minor, strictly regional, question. But it should not be so. It was a long-standing battle for the control of the Spanish silver mines, one of the richest in the world. The social and political disturbances inside the Spanish colonial provinces could be seen as an opportunity. D. João's policy in South America had the strong opposition of the British government. The ambassador in Rio was even forced to return to England and later replaced.

The American policy of the House of Bragança was made with European officers and soldiers. In 1817, the repression of the Pernambuco upheaval was made using men arriving from Portugal, Beresford claiming a crucial role in the successful transport of those troops. Meanwhile, news about the military operations regarding Rio de la Plata were received with anger in Madrid. Fernando VII became furious when he was told about the conquest of Montevideo by the Portuguese forces. War was possible between the former allies against Napoleon - but it was improbable, as both countries were exhausted. This was welcomed by Beresford, merely because he was justified in defending his authority. The governor Nogueira criticized in January 1817 the

possibility of beginning recruitment and other military preparations as they would be seen as offensive, increasing the danger of a confrontation and deviation from diplomatic negotiation. In a matter of weeks, the conflict between Beresford and the governors arrived to a critical point. The farmers from the lands of Alentejo sent a delegation of 16 men to Lisbon, complaining that military recruitment was resulting in the scarcity of workers'. Beresford considered it a "revolutionary" [it is his own word] petition. At the same time the head magistrate of police [*Intendente Geral de Policia*] reported growing hate against Beresford.

Beresford was at the center of the political and social conflicts behind the revolution of 1820. Its leaders' motivation, specially the military officers, was to abolish his authority. Beresford and other British officers were expelled from the Portuguese army's ranks, but the far-reaching purpose of the revolutionaries was to compel D. João to return to Lisbon.

D. João returned to Lisbon in 1821, but the political unity of Portugal and Brazil couldn't be reestablished in spite of the actions of the liberal members of the Cortes (the first liberal parliament) trying to implode Brazil as a political space ruled from Rio de Janeiro. Brazil becomes independent in 1822 and the elder son of D. João its first *Imperador* [Emperor].

The "rational" link behind the odd alliance between Beresford and D. João resided in the potential political consequences in South America of the actions of European professional troops located there. William Carr Beresford maintained his presence in Portuguese affairs during the decade of 1820, after the brief first constitutional government (1820-1823), plotting inside the "absolutist party" against D. João VI. The alliance was over.

*Ends*