

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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Stephens, Henry Morse (Edinburgh, 1857 – Berkeley, 1919)

Henry Morse Stephens was born on October 3rd, 1857, in Edinburgh, Scotland. He was son of the Scottish doctor John Edward Morse Stephens. He began his education at Radley College (Oxfordshire), departing then to France, where he was educated by a private tutor. He later joined Haileybury College (Hertfordshire), remaining there for five years. In January 1877 he enrolled at Balliol College (Oxford), beginning his advanced studies. He graduated in 1882 and completed his master's degree at the same institution in 1887. He became a member of the Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn in November of 1881, and a librarian in the Leeds Library (Leeds) in November of 1887, remaining there until 1890.

Stephens began his career as a lecturer at the Oxford University Extension System, although he has collaborated with the institution for a short period. Between 1892 and 1894 he taught the discipline of History of India in Cambridge. By this time, he wrote for several British newspapers, such as *The Speaker*, *The Daily Chronicle*, and *The Academy*, being also a London correspondent for the Indian newspaper *The Statesman*. He emigrated to the United States of America in 1894, becoming a lecturer at Cornell University, in Ithaca. There he taught the subjects of History of Modern Europe and of English History, standing out as one of the most appreciated lecturers among the students: "Professor Stephens's friendship and hospitality is one of the happiest memories. He did not keep open house, and he did not condescend. He attracted about him a circle of friends. Undergraduates who were admitted to that circle found themselves, in his rooms at the southeast corner of Cascadilla Place, just as welcome as professors" (*Cornell Alumni News*, 24-4-1919, p. 342). The closeness that distinguished the relationship of Stephens with colleagues and students enabled him to establish the Kipling Club, promoting periodical meetings. Invited by Benjamin Ide Wheeler, then the director of the University of California and a former colleague of Stephens at Cornell University, the Scottish historian moved to California in 1902. There he became lecturer at the university and director of the University Extension in Berkeley – a position he held until 1909.

Although he has dedicated to teaching in the various institutions he belonged to, his practice was not limited to teaching. He was an active member of the American Historical Association (AHA), having held several positions over the years. Between 1895 and 1905 he was editor of *The American Historical Review*, AHA's



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journal, to which he has also contributed with multiple critical reviews and papers, such as “Recent Memoirs of the French Directory” (1896), “The Administrative History of the British Dependencies in the Further East” (1899), and “Nationality and History” (1916). In 1896 he joined the Committee of Seven (AHA), taking part in the elaboration and publishing of the report *The Study of History in Schools* (1898), whose aim was to provide a set of suggestions and recommendations to improve the teaching of History in American high schools. According to the authors of the report, the teaching of the subject should not consist of the presentation of the accumulated information. It should rather stimulate students to think about the research they would work on and provide “mental equipment” that would enable them to comprehend the social and political challenges they would face as citizens. They also considered History to be a humanity, although its methodology resembles that of the natural sciences, and that it should take a central role in the school programmes.

Years later, by the occasion of the earthquake that affected the city of San Francisco in 1906, Stephens was member of the History and Statistics Subcommittee of the Committee of Fifty (1908). As president of the AHA – position he held in 1915 –, he collaborated in the organization of the Panama-Pacific Historical Congress, which took place in San Francisco, Berkeley, and Palo Alto, the same year, and which was attended by historians such as Rafael Altamira and Herbert E. Bolton. At this congress, Stephens also contributed with a paper titled “The Conflict of European Nations in the Pacific Ocean”, in which he suggested that the history of the Pacific Ocean was defined in four distinct stages.

Although there is still no systematic study about the work of Henry Morse Stephens, or about his historiographical thought and practice, we think it is possible to place his first works in the 1880s. In 1885, he started collaborating on the *Dictionary of National Biography*, to which he wrote several entries, and published his first study dedicated to the history of Portugal in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (9th Ed.). Alongside other foreign historians of the nineteenth century, such as Heinrich Schaefer, Richard H. Major or Raymond Beazley, Stephens revealed a very particular interest in Portugal, dedicating it some of his works. Even though the study published in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* corresponds to a “historical synthesis”, we can find in it the central features of his reflection on the history of Portugal – features which he would later develop in *The Story of Portugal* (1891) and would address in a comparative perspective in “Modern Historians and Small Nationalities” (1887). For Stephens, the topic of greatest interest in the study of the nineteenth century Europe lies in the tenacity with which small nations fostered the national spirit and resisted the raising power of large states, such as Germany, France, and Great Britain. This affirmation of the small nations derived fundamentally from the work of the modern historians, who, using new premises on the historical research and on the writing of history, would have provided their respective nations with a history free of myths and of the glorification of legendary figures. According to the Scottish historian – although this reflection might be debatable (Sérgio Campos Matos, *Historiografia e Memória Nacional*, pp. 77-84) –, in no other nation the historiographical work has exerted greater influence on the process of national awareness than in Portugal (“Modern Historians”, 1887, p. 109). Furthermore, Stephens considered that “the only reason why it has retained its independence,



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while other medieval states of that peninsula have merged into the Kingdom of Spain, is to be found in its history” (“Portugal”, 1885, p. 539). Factors such as race, language, or geography – central in the view of other nineteenth-century historians –, appeared to him as insufficient to justify the independence of Portugal from Spain.

Although his account of the Portuguese historical experience follows a chronological organization essentially based on the succession of reigns, both in the text published on the Encyclopaedia Britannica and in *The Story of Portugal*, Henry Morse Stephens presented an interpretation that reveals knowledge of the most recent historiography about Portugal at the time. First, the idea that nations face stages of growing and decline («wax and wane»), which the historian advocated, guided to a certain extent his analysis of the Portuguese historical path. In his view, there will not have existed significant differences between the Portuguese and Spanish experiences until the end of the eleventh century. Only after the establishment of Portugal as an independent kingdom, with the acclamation of Afonso Henriques as its first king, it has begun the development of a distinct individuality and character. Like any independent kingdom, Portugal experienced a stage of growth and consolidation, followed by a period of apogee and prosperity, which, in turn, gave way to a stage of decline. In his view, fell to the first kings, until king Afonso III, the task of delimiting the border of the Portuguese territory, as well as constitutionally stabilizing the functioning of the kingdom. The kingdom of king Dinis deserved particular attention from the historian, who considered it of great importance because “it marks the development of the people into an independent nation” (*The Story of Portugal*, 1891, p. 85). Moreover, King Dinis is considered by Stephens the founder of the Portuguese literature, which is significant given the importance the historian attributed to literary manifestations as expression of the national spirit, especially during the golden age of the nations. Another moment of the Portuguese historical path that reveals some interest in his analysis is the reign of King Fernando, which, corresponding to a moment of crisis, it is considered a natural outcome of a long period of peace and prosperity. In his point of view, it was a moment of incompatibility between the people, who were already conscious of its nationality, and the court.

As with other reflections on the Portuguese experience, such as that of Oliveira Martins, the reign of João I emerges in Stephens’ analysis as the starting point of a new era in the history of Portugal, in which “a new spirit appeared alike among the kings, and the merchants, and the soldiers, which was to culminate in the glories of the heroic age” (*The Story of Portugal*, 1891, pp. 115-116). According to the historian, it was during the fifteenth century, with Prince Henry as the greater labourer of the discoveries and with a host of statesmen, navigators, and chroniclers, that Portugal became the greatest nation of Europe – even though it was only in the sixteenth century that it experienced its heroic period. The discovery of the maritime course to India in the end of the fifteenth century, the discovery of Brazil at the turn for the following century, and the building of a commercial and maritime empire in the Orient are the events that, for Stephens, were decisive in defining the golden age of Portugal’s history.



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Nevertheless, while Portugal claimed its space in the concert of nations, “the seeds of rapid decline” went sprouting. In his view, there are several factors behind this rapid decline: on the one hand, the tendency of the royal power towards absolutism and the consequent destruction of the feudal power, which weakened the nobility’s sense of patriotism and gradually alienated them from the people; on the other hand, the depopulation of the territory, encouraged by the departure of Portuguese people to the Atlantic islands, to Brazil and to the Orient; the corruption of the officials of the African and Oriental trading posts, which compromised the continuity of the Portuguese in these domains; and the Inquisition, installed in Portugal during the reign of King João III, as well as the Society of Jesus, were two crucial factors in Portugal’s decline. Stephens attributed special relevance to the Portuguese presence in the Orient, considering that it was there that the weakening of the country became more perceptible. The historian has even dedicated some attention to this topic, having published a study under the title *Albuquerque on the series Rulers of India* (1892). In addition, he pointed to the Iberian Union, which he called “the sixty years of captivity”, and the interference of England and Holland in the Orient as decisive conditions for the consummation of the Portuguese ruin.

Despite the despondency and apathy Stephens recognized in the Portugal of the Iberian Union, the recovery of the independence in 1640 presented itself to the historian as a proof of “how impossible it is to a nation which has once been great to acquiesce the loss of its independence” (*The Story of Portugal*, 1891, p. 324). In this regard, the unfavourable picture Stephens drew of King João IV reveals some interest. By portraying the monarch as a mediocre man, hesitant and indecisive by nature, whose strength derived mainly from the queen, the Scottish historian diminished to a certain extent his role in the restitution of the independency of Portugal, highlighting not only the queen’s relevance in that process but also the perseverance of the Portuguese nation, which never resigned itself to the loss of independence. The eighteenth century is for Henry Morse Stephens the period of the history of Portugal with less interest, much due to the alliance established with the English that made the country “a mere province of England” from a political point of view. It is curious, however, that the historian considered the Methuen Treaty – which was perhaps the greatest foundation of the Portuguese-British relations in eighteenth century – “of infinite advantage” for Portugal. In any case, it should be borne in mind that, in his view, the Portuguese political existence was largely due to the treaty it established with the English, since it was that strengthening of relations that guaranteed the British support in future disputes. Although Portugal has restored its independence from Spanish domination, it was no longer the nation that had experienced the glories of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It was now living in a state of stagnation, incapable of notorious achievements and with no heroic figures to elevate its name.

Despite having dedicated a significant part of his studies to the history of Modern Europe, focusing mainly on the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, Henry Morse Stephens dealt little with the Portugal of the nineteenth century in his reflections on the Portuguese experience. However, two words must be said about its analysis. As it is well known, the first decades of the nineteenth century were marked by great



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instability, caused not only by the successive conflicts in Portuguese territory but also by the political vulnerability that culminated in the Civil War (1832-1834). Although Stephens have highlighted all these aspects, he emphasized above all what he considered to be the most remarkable Portuguese feature: “the singular tenacity with which the little country maintained its independence and its individuality” (The Story of Portugal, 1891, p. 409). As far as the nineteenth century is concerned, it is known that the Scottish historian found in the historians of the “new historical school” the main foundation of national cohesion, as well as the greatest opposition to the Iberian idea.

Although he is not reported to have ever been in Portugal, it seems clear that the historian knew relatively well the most recent historiography on Portugal, both Portuguese and foreign. Alexandre Herculano is, perhaps, the author whom Stephens highlighted the most, considering him the founder of a “new school of modern historians” in Portuguese territory, whose premises were based on careful research and critical analysis of documentation. Aside from Herculano, he also underlined the works of Rebelo da Silva, Latino Coelho, Pinheiro Chagas, Luciano Cordeiro, and Oliveira Martins. The latter, who may have been acquainted with the work during his staying in England in 1892, is the author of the preface to the first Portuguese edition of The Story of Portugal (translated by J. T. da Silva Bastos), published in 1893. In that text, in which he recognizes the credibility of Stephens’ narrative and its usefulness for historical vulgarisation, Oliveira Martins presented a critical analysis of great utility. Being guided by the chronological organisation of the narrative, the Portuguese historian listed and corrected multiple lapses and inaccuracies – such as incorrect dates or inaccurate interpretation of some facts – in Stephens’ text. Although he recognized that some of the inaccuracies were due to linguistic limitations, Oliveira Martins was particularly critical of his analysis of the Portuguese-British relations. He appreciated, on the other hand, the Scottish historian’s glorification of the Portuguese heroism.

The history of Portugal was, undoubtedly, one of the subjects that most stimulated Stephens as a historian. However, his historical research is by no means limited to that theme. Another subject that most motivated him was the French Revolution, to which he dedicated several studies, including A History of the French Revolution (3 vols.), published between 1886 and 1891, and Revolutionary Europe (1789-1815), which came out in 1893. Issues that are still at the heart of the historiographical debate, such as the question of nationalisms and nationhood, were also subject of his reflection and analysis. There is, however, a topic on which Stephens has spoken on several occasions that it is worth to develop.

His large experience as a lecturer and the labour he has done as a historian throughout the years enabled him to form a consolidated opinion on what should be the study of History and on what should be the demands of the historiographical work. Distancing himself from the philosophies of history, Stephens proved to be an advocate of the ideas of the “German Historical School”, established by Niebuhr and Ranke. In his point of view, the writing of history should be accurate and unbiased, favouring the search for the truth over the style of the narrative. To do this, the historian should first do patient and meticulous research and then critically



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analyse the documentation. Furthermore, he should prioritize sources contemporary to the period under study, using later works only as an introduction to the sources. A central topic in Henry Morse Stephens' thought regarding the writing of history is the question of the truth. In his view, "[the] truth should be the aim of the historian's quest" ("History", 1901, p. 52), the ultimate goal of all historiographical work. It should be noted though, that the Scottish historian acknowledged the impossibility of achieving the truth through research: on the one hand, the traces of past that have stood the test of time would never be enough to reconstruct past events in their entirety; on the other hand, the historian, as a human being, would always be subjected to natural limitations that would not allow him to do more than an approximation to the truth. In Stephens' words, "every historian is unconsciously biased by his education and surroundings and in his historical displays not only his interpretation of the past, but also the point of view of the period in which he lives" ("Nationality and History", 1916, pp. 225-226). But the historian went further: in his perspective, each generation of historians narrates its own interpretation of the past, and it is this permanent change of interpretation that allows "the perpetual re-writing of the long story of man" (Idem, p. 225). It is curious that, although his reflections reveal the influence of the intellectual and historiographical trends of his time, the Scottish historian has demonstrated a remarkable historical consciousness.

Henry Morse Stephens died on April 16th, 1919, in Berkeley (California), after many years devoted to research and teaching of History.

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