

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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GENTIL, Georges Le (Fère-Champenoise, 1875 – Paris, 1953)

Georges Le Gentil was the only child of a justice of the peace and a dressmaker, both Catholics. He was born in the department of Marne, some two hundred kilometres east of Paris, at the beginning of the Third Republic. He completed his secondary education at the Lycée de Reims, in the capital of Champagne, and passed the competitive examination for the Agrégation de lettres, which in France gives access to the profession of secondary school teacher, in 1901. He then obtained a scholarship to study in Spain between 1901 and 1902. As an official in the Ministry of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, he was appointed professor of classical literature at various secondary schools throughout the country. He taught at the Lycée de Tourcoing (North) between 1902 and 1904, and then at secondary schools in Cahors, Montauban and Toulouse, in south-western France. He obtained a doctoral scholarship from the University of Toulouse (1907-1908), where he received his doctorate in literature in 1909. At that time, Georges Le Gentil was training as a specialist in Hispanic studies: his doctoral thesis dealt with literary journals in Spain in the first half of the 19th century and the poetic work of Manuel Bretón de los Herreros.

In 1914, he was called up to serve as a soldier in the First World War. For two years, he fought on the front line in Alsace, which had been annexed by the German Empire in 1870. Between July 1916 and March 1919, the French army entrusted him with the mission of recruiting labour in Portugal to compensate for the shortage of workers in French industry. This stay of almost three years in Portugal was the initiative of Mário Roques (1875-1961), a French university professor of Peruvian origin who taught at the Sorbonne. This can be considered the key moment in the conversion of the Hispanist Georges Le Gentil to Portuguese-language cultures and literature. However, it should be remembered that he had already published articles on Portuguese subjects on two occasions in the journal *Le Bulletin hispanique*. In 1912, he wrote a critical review of the work of Alexandre Herculano and his legacy in Portugal, in the context of the centenary of his birth. It is known that this long stay in Portugal allowed him to acquire a remarkable knowledge of both the Portuguese language and culture, whether from the elites he frequented at the time or from the more humble “people” with whom he lived during his military mission. As Marcel Bataillon, his student and author of the obituary published in the *Bulletin hispanique* in 1954, put it: “Le pays qu’il parcourut alors en tous sens, et dont il apprit à connaître les humbles, le passionna et le conquît” (Marcel Bataillon, “Nécrologie”. *Bulletin hispanique*,



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Paris, 1954, vol. LVI, no. 1-2, p. 6).

In early 1919, Georges Le Gentil, married with two children, settled in Paris after Ernest Martinenche, then professor of Spanish at the Sorbonne, asked him to teach a course in Portuguese language and literature, a novelty due to the initiative of the Portuguese government. In 1922, Georges Le Gentil also took on the first course in Brazilian literature, inaugurated one hundred years after the proclamation of independence by the Brazilian Empire. In 1931, the Junta de Educação Nacional [National Education Board], a Portuguese government body, also financed the creation of a “lectorat” to support Georges Le Gentil in his teaching work. It was at this time that the first nucleus of a library of Portuguese and Brazilian works was formed at the Sorbonne, whose collection was enriched by donations from the diplomat Marquês de Faria, in addition to books sent by the National Education Board, an institution that supported Portuguese studies in Paris. Orlando Ribeiro, who was recruited as a Portuguese “lecteur” before being appointed professor at the University of Lisbon, recalls the symbolic importance acquired by the Institute of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies at the Sorbonne, founded in 1935 and directed by Georges Le Gentil: “ With the bibliographic resources of the Portuguese Institute, the great libraries of Paris, his private library, and the assistance of readers from various specialities and backgrounds, the modest office attached to the room where he taught gradually became the first centre for Portuguese documentation in France...”. (“Preface”, *Mélanges d'études portugaises offerts à M. Georges Le Gentil*, 1949, p. 4)

In 1934, Georges Le Gentil was awarded the title of “Doctor honoris causa” by the University of Coimbra, a year before becoming a full professor at the Sorbonne. He would later receive the title of Knight of the “Légion d'honneur” (1950). Fernando Romero highlights the French academic's great reputation in Portuguese academic circles in the mid-1930s: “His studies serve as a benchmark for us, due to their impartiality and critical serenity and the enormous amount of light they shed on some problems in our literary historiography.” (*Georges Le Gentil*, Oliveira Martins, 1935, p. 14) This praise, among many others, explains the international recognition that the French scholar achieved in the two main Portuguese-speaking countries: Georges Le Gentil was made an official of the National Order of the Southern Cross (Brazil) and a commander of the Order of Sant'Iago da Espada, the most important Portuguese honorary order. This recognition reflects his great efforts to promote Portuguese studies in France. Thus, in order to remedy the problem of the shortage of students at the Portuguese Institute he directed, which was mainly due to the absence of this language in secondary education, he obtained the introduction of a Portuguese test in the Spanish teaching qualification exam from 1938 onwards. Under the ministry of Jean Zay, Georges Le Gentil worked towards the opening of a Portuguese degree in French higher education, a reform that was delayed by the outbreak of the Second World War. In an article published in the journal *O Instituto de Coimbra* in 1928, Georges Le Gentil already inscribed his dedication to the promotion of Portuguese culture in a “tradition” of interest in Portugal in France, sketching a genealogy of the most notable Lusophiles in which he held a prominent place. In 1946, at the age of 71, he retired, but this did not mean any interruption in his work to promote Portuguese culture and history, until his death in 1953. It should be noted, however, that his departure from the direction of the Institute of



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

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<http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/>

Portuguese and Brazilian Studies contributed in part to the decline of the institution, which, moribund at the end of the 1960s, was absorbed by the Department of Iberian Studies at the Sorbonne Nouvelle, a university founded in 1971. It should be remembered that the Portuguese Language Teaching Qualification (Agregação de Português) was only introduced in 1973, three years after the creation of the CAPES competitive examination.

Georges Le Gentil forged close ties with Portuguese academic circles, both during the First Republic and later during the military dictatorship that followed the coup of 1926. His apparent political neutrality towards the emergence of Salazarism stemmed primarily from his constant support for the defence of Portuguese culture and language, which were a priority and a constant that always took precedence over political issues in his mind. Regarding the monumental History of Portugal published in seven volumes (1928-1937) to celebrate the eighth centenary of the foundation of "Portuguese nationality", Georges Le Gentil makes this confession, which reveals very clearly the spirit of the French scholar: "Mais ce qui nous importe, au fond, c'est de savoir dans quelle mesure les Portugais continuent de collaborer à l'avancement de la civilisation européenne ou mondiale." ("Le mouvement intellectuel au Portugal", 1940, p. 282) This stance in defence of the Portuguese contribution to the construction of "European civilisation" explains the patriotic dimension of his discourse on Portugal, which did not prevent Le Gentil from voicing criticism when scholars and historians attempted to isolate Portugal from the European and Atlantic context to which it belongs: for example, with regard to the work of historian Alfredo Pimenta, *História de Portugal* (1934), whose integralist convictions he condemns ("Le mouvement intellectuel au Portugal". *Bulletin Hispanique*, vol. 38, no. 2, 1936. pp. 208-225). In fact, Georges Le Gentil's focus on a connected or cosmopolitan dimension of Portuguese culture faced, from the 1930s onwards, the growth of a certain nationalist stance in Portuguese academic circles, within which the tendency towards so-called "methodical nationalism" was growing. His rejection of the isolation of Portuguese history can be explained by his desire to highlight the decisive contribution of this "small country" to world history. On the French side, the Sorbonne professor preferred to take on the role of principal mediator and populariser of Portuguese culture, which meant emphasising the greatness of its history and its autonomy from Spain. As early as 1920, he denounced the "chimeras of Iberian union" and defended the principle of autonomy claimed by the Portuguese historiographical tradition, devoting an article to the work of historian Fidelino de Figueiredo. ("Le mouvement intellectuel en Portugal. Une orientation nouvelle des études historiques au Portugal: M. Fidelino de Figueiredo". *Bulletin Hispanique*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1920. pp. 101-113).

A dedicated scholar and teacher, Georges Le Gentil is the author of an important body of work, both in terms of the number of studies published and the renown of his work in Portuguese studies. Taking on the role of the first promoter of the Portuguese language and culture in France, he is the author of a work of remarkable thematic and historical breadth. A literary historian, literary critic, translator and renowned Lusophile, he applied a new scientific method to his historical and literary studies, inspired by the work of Gustave Lanson (1857-1934), professor of French literature at the Sorbonne and the École normale



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

<http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/>

supérieure. A student of Brunetière, Lanson left his mark on literary studies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when he rejected impressionist criticism and introduced rigour, method and erudition into the study of literary facts, through an unprecedented attention to the historical context of the production and dissemination of texts. (A. Vaillant, *L'Histoire littéraire*, 2012, pp. 77-98). There is a striking similarity between Lanson's work and that of Georges Le Gentil: both wrote critical editions of literary works, monographs on authors and compendiums of literary history. Perhaps it is his re-evaluation of the work of Fernão Mendes Pinto that best reflects Le Gentil's method, proposing an unprecedented analysis of the Portuguese author's work based on a dual literary and historical dimension. The first biographical part of the book is completed by a study of the literary value of Fernão Mendes Pinto's work, portrayed as a 'man of letters', a precursor of exoticism in the Portuguese literary tradition, after demonstrating the romantic (and not autobiographical) nature of the famous *Peregrinação* published in Lisbon in 1614 (Fernão Mendes Pinto. *Un précurseur de l'exotisme au XVIe siècle*, 1947). Another decisive aspect of this new method is the need to highlight the multiple connections and circulations that affirm the importance of Portugal, a small and peripheral country on the European continent. Thus, his study of Oliveira Martins' work allows him to emphasise the connected dimension of a political, historical and philosophical work that dialogues with the major currents of Western European thought in the second half of the 19th century.

In addition to the classes he taught at the Sorbonne for over 25 years and the numerous lectures he gave to disseminate Portuguese literature and history to a wider audience, much of his work was published in periodicals, including the *Revue latine*, the *Revue critique*, the *Revue de littérature comparée*, the *Revue de l'Amérique latine*, *O Instituto* and *Biblos*, both in Coimbra. However, it was in the columns of the *Bulletin hispanique*, a leading journal of Iberian studies in the French academic world, that he published most of his studies. Between 1899 and 1953, he wrote more than 80 reviews and articles on subjects related to Portugal and, to a lesser extent, Brazil. These works were primarily aimed at university teachers and students who were unfamiliar with Portugal. Georges Le Gentil thus took on the role of disseminating intellectual and editorial news from Portugal. In his articles, he drew numerous comparisons between Portugal and Spain in order to highlight, for a readership more familiar with Spanish affairs, the "obvious parallels" that often exist in the intellectual life of both countries, while never failing to acknowledge the autonomy of each. See the series of articles entitled "Le mouvement intellectuel au Portugal", published in the *Bulletin hispanique* between 1920 and 1944, in which he closely follows the renewal of the Portuguese historiographical tradition, welcoming, for example, the founding of the Portuguese Society for Historical Studies and its quarterly journal, *Revista de História* (1912-1928). He also praised the importation of a new historical trend that sought to react against the tradition of philology and positivism represented for many years by Teófilo Braga in Portugal. This current was embodied in the figure of the director of that Society, Fidelino de Figueiredo, a specialist in literary history whose works are praised by Georges Le Gentil: the reference to Figueiredo's efforts to modernise the theory and methodology of literary studies echoes Georges Le Gentil's own method, inspired by Lanson. In a review dedicated to the historian António Ferrão, whose work allows for a re-evaluation of the legacy of Pombalism,



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

<http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/>

he praises the use of a historical theory that is close to the current embodied in France by the *Revue de synthèse historique*, founded by Henri Berr in 1900, in rejecting excessive erudition and compartmentalisation of disciplines. Through these articles, Le Gentil offers a very broad overview of Portuguese historiography and highlights the country's intellectual greatness, without however renouncing scientific rigour and the art of criticism.

In addition to his articles, the books he published were commissioned by publishers interested in disseminating his knowledge and work to a wider audience, such as Armand Colin and Larousse. In fact, his most famous work, recognised for its synthesis and erudition, is the compendium *La Littérature portugaise*, published in 1935. In 1949, Orlando Ribeiro said of this work: "Documented in every detail with the utmost rigour, revealing a perfect command of the bibliography and direct knowledge of the authors, served by a highly refined aesthetic criterion, this small manual is a valuable introduction to the study of the periods and trends of Portuguese literature, often enhanced by the author's original readings and reflections." Fernando Romero sees in the compendium "a perfect synthesis of our literature, with its own colour and offering a rare and felicitous perspective on our greatest writers, characterising them with an aptitude that we rarely see in foreign authors." (*Georges Le Gentil*, Oliveira Martins..., p. 15). Such praise also reflects the objectives of this compendium, which aims to demonstrate that "Portuguese literature is not a branch of Hispanic literature, but the expression of an independent nationality that has retained its intellectual autonomy even during sixty years of foreign occupation." (*Georges Le Gentil, La Littérature portugaise*, 1935, p. 3). Updated by Robert Bréchon, an eminent specialist in the work of Pessoa and author of the five chapters on Portuguese literature written between 1934 and 1995, *La Littérature portugaise* remains a very useful work for students of Portuguese in France.

Georges Le Gentil also contributed to Camões studies and to the popularisation of Camões' work in France. As early as 1926, in the context of the tercentenary of Camões' death, he devoted an article in the *Bulletin hispanique* to the revival of Camões studies in both Portugal and Brazil. In his compendium, he emphasises the 'genius' of the author of *Os Lusíadas*, who embodied all the greatness of the 'Portuguese Renaissance'. In another later text, he conceived Camões' work as the symbol of a new "stage of civilisation, precisely that in which Portugal is at the forefront of progress". (*Camões. L'oeuvre épique et lyrique*, 1995, p. 279). This quote is taken from the biography of Camões and the literary analysis of his work, published posthumously in 1954. Translated and published in Portugal in 1969 by José Terra, this "essay" aimed to promote Camões' work, which was still little known and recognised in France at the time. It is worth remembering that in 1939 Georges Le Gentil had already written a brief biography of Camões in the volume entitled *Les grandes figures*, published by Larousse, in which the Portuguese epic poet is counted among the 50 most important personalities in world history, from Moses to Pasteur, alongside such famous writers as Virgil, Dante, Montaigne, Voltaire, Goethe, Balzac and Victor Hugo.

This interest in Camões' work unfolded in his studies on the literature and history of 16th-century Portugal. In addition to the volume devoted to the work and life of Fernão Mendes Pinto, Georges Le Gentil published



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

<http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/>

several books on topics related to the Discoveries and the literary works of that century. In 1939, he translated and edited a selection of shipwreck stories entitled *Histoires tragico-comiques*, republished by Chandeigne a few years ago. In a review published in 1939, he recalled the importance of Francisco de Paula Leite Pinto's lectures on the discoveries given at the Sorbonne in 1930 and 1931, published in Coimbra in 1936. His posthumous work entitled *La Découverte du monde* (1954) is intended to be a compendium of the history of discoveries from Antiquity to the 20th century, his last opportunity to highlight the role of the Portuguese and Spanish in the modern era.

In the first half of the 20th century, the name of Georges Le Gentil was indispensable in Iberian-American studies in France. His fame in academic circles crossed national borders to reach Portugal and Brazil. As Julien recalled in 1954, "The prestige of G. Le Gentil was considerable, not only in France but also in Portugal. Particularly moving tributes were paid to him by Portuguese scholars, who published a collection of studies in 1949 in honour of a man ' , whose erudition honoured both France and Portugal'. ('Préface', *Découverte du monde*, 1954, p. VII). Although the passage of time has contributed to the partial oblivion of his work, some of his studies are still cited in compendiums and books on history and literature in Portugal. For example, his study on Fernão Mendes Pinto is considered a "fundamental work" by the editors of *História de Portugal*, published in the late 1970s. (Joaquim Veríssimo Serrão, *História de Portugal*, vol. III, 1978, p. 199). In fact, the study devoted to the work of Oliveira Martins is still recognised today as pioneering and considered a fundamental essay for a better understanding of the role and place of Portuguese intellectuals in Portugal and Europe. The publisher Chandeigne, in Paris, has been reissuing Georges Le Gentil's main works since the 1990s, with updates and accompanying commentary.

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DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

<http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/>

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