

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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LOBATO, Alexandre Marques (Lourenço Marques, 1915 – Lisbon, 1985)

The life of Alexandre Lobato, both personally and as a historian, is closely linked to the history of the Portuguese empire. His life was a back and forth between Portugal and the colonies, particularly Mozambique, the country he comes from. However, he graduated in Portugal, and worked for the Ministry of Overseas Territories, wrote almost entirely about the empire— always strongly favourable to the "greater Portugal"— and he was also a teacher in Mozambique, where he lived through decolonisation and then returned to Portugal. This quick summary shows that— in order to study the historian Alexandre Lobato— we can't escape the problem of colonial domination that was carried out by the metropolis, which at the time was seen by most of the population as a natural and indisputable process.

Alexandre Lobato was born in 1915 in the former Lourenço Marques. He left us memories of this city in an essay called *A Cidade das Acácias vermelhas* [The City of Red Acacias] (*Quatro Estudos* [Four Studies], 1961), in which we get a glimpse of the life of the "white gentile" (*ibidem*, p. 151) in a "quiet provincial town thrown into that corner of Africa" (*ibidem*, p. 152). However, white Portuguese youth wanted to get their education in the capital. So, after a stay in Timor for his military service, Alexandre Lobato studied law in Coimbra until his third year and then decided to do his degree in Historical-Philosophical Studies at the city's Faculty of Letters, a course he finished in 1949. During his studies he began to write articles and books on history. By then he was older than other students.

After graduating, he spent many years working in administration but never stopped writing about history. Between 1946 and 1955 he was an editor at the CTT's Cultural Services and the National Information Secretariat and also a librarian at the Ministry of Overseas Territories. Taking on these roles, Alexandre Lobato showed he was not an opponent of the Estado Novo. He was actually a staunch supporter of the Estado Novo, especially when it came to the colonial Empire. He was part of a working group that travelled to Portugal's territories in India and took part in studies on the history of Portuguese India that attempted to provide Portuguese lawyers with a defence of the Portuguese character of Nagar-Aveli at the International Court in The Hague. This support given to the Estado Novo was then active and even partisan: he built a career in the Ministry of Overseas Territories from 1960 and was a member of parliament in the 8th Legislative Term from 1961 to 1965, before moving to Mozambique.

It was during this period in the 1950s and 1960s that he developed a very intense scientific activity, always on themes linked to the history of the Portuguese empire. We can't ignore the fact that Alexandre Lobato, as a historian, was always ideologically close to the regime and even supported and was subsidised by it. He worked for the Ministry of Overseas Territories and was a member of the *União Nacional*. His book *História do Presídio de Lourenço Marques* [History of the Lourenço Marques Prison], written in 1949, had a preface written by Marcelo Caetano. Many



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of his books were published by the *Agência Geral do Ultramar* [General Agency of the Overseas Territories], where we can read the following right after the title: "This publication was authorised by order of His Excellency the Minister". In the preface to one of these books, he even goes as far as thanking Sarmento Rodrigues, then Minister for Overseas Territories (*A Expansão portuguesa em Moçambique de 1498 a 1530* [Portuguese expansion in Mozambique from 1498 to 1530], Livro I, 1954, p. 13).

This sociability was administratively and ideologically linked to the Estado Novo and led him to write several works on Portugal's indissoluble bond with the colonies, which he fervently believed in. However, even in the books in which he defends the empire, he is aware that he is a partisan: he pointed out in the preface to his *Sociologia política da expansão e outros ensaios* [Political Sociology of Expansion and Other Essays], published in 1957: "Of course, the following pages reflect a purely personal point of view" (p. 7), but he considered "the current colonial phenomena demand of us Portuguese the obligation to defend, with truth and courage, the clearly healthy attitudes that Portugal has maintained, and maintains, in the Overseas Territories" (*ibidem* p. 7 and 8). Faced with all the changes of later Portuguese history in the context of decolonisation, Alexandre Lobato decided to assume a defence of Portugal. For him, the history of Portugal's colonisation was that of a Portuguese people that did not arrive as conquerors "unless there was a previous offence justifying the use of force, but with the cordiality required to establish friendly relations" (*ibid*, p. 14). As a result, the Portuguese "instilled in the black soul respect for certain European-style principles regarding individual freedoms, evangelisation rights, and faith in the fulfilment of contracts" (*ibidem*, p. 15). In various works, Alexandre Lobato developed a completely idealised image of the Portuguese. It was the other European peoples that had brought back the colonisation that had disappeared with the end of the Roman Empire, whereas the Portuguese were peaceful, integrated well, and only wanted to spread the Christian faith. In this, he was in tune with the lusotropicalist thesis of the Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre, who at the time visited the Portuguese colonial territories at the invitation of the regime. Following this logic, Alexandre Lobato did not believe that Portugal could exist without the colonies: "The creation of this small people that was generous, humble, stoic, and great: the Overseas Territories, from the Azores to Timor, is the guarantee that Portugal lives on" (*ibidem*, p. 23). The defence of the empire was then vital for Portugal.

However, despite this vision that was completely in line with that of the Estado Novo, Alexandre Lobato should not be regarded only as a partisan historian that was a mere piece of the regime. In fact, he had a prominent role in the origin and development of Mozambican history. A large part of his work was dedicated to this former colony. Thus, he was one of those who— even with "a lack of working elements, because the Mozambican bibliography, besides being scarce, is not easy to find" (*História da Fundação de Lourenço Marques* [History of the Foundation of Lourenço Marques], 1948, p. VII)— tried to write the history of this land in various periods but limited himself to the period after the Portuguese arrived. Afterwards, he always defended himself against the attacks he received from those who accused him of not being a historian, especially from journalist Rodrigo Júnior: "My political nationalism has nothing to do with history, the truth is I don't twist documents, I don't take away the flavour of truth or lies they contain, and I have a habit of letting the men of each era tell the facts with the ideas they live by" (*Aspectos de Moçambique* [Aspects of Mozambique, 1953, p. 45). He took care to present his sources in all of his books, sometimes emphasising the difficulties he encountered and the gaps in certain archives. He kept in contact with other historians and exchanged letters with Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, who gave him some pointers in the third volume of *A Expansão portuguesa em Moçambique de 1498 a 1530* [Portuguese Expansion in Mozambique from



1498 to 1530], published in 1960 (p. 389). We should also note that this last book is a book of economic history in the style of the historians from the *Annales* school, a methodology that the regime's historians did not use often.

This extensive historical production was well received and allowed him to become a member of various institutions of the time: he was a member of the Academia das Ciências de Lisboa [Lisbon Academy of Sciences], the *Academia Portuguesa da História* [Portuguese Academy of History], and the *Academia da Marinha* [Navy Academy]. He was also honoured with several prizes and distinctions: the "João de Barros" history prize from the *Agência Geral do Ultramar* and literary prizes from the Lourenço Marques City Council and the city of Nampula, but also the decorations of Commander of the Military Order of Santiago da Espada in 1964 and the Gold Medal of the City of Lourenço Marques in 1972.

The transition between the 1960s and 1970s allowed Alexandre Lobato some teaching experience. He started out in his native city, Lourenço Marques, as an assistant professor from 1968 onwards. The subjects he taught reflected his vision of Portuguese history: "History of Portugal" and "History of the Portuguese Expansion in the World." After the 25 April Revolution, from 1974 to 1977, he taught "History of Colonial Mozambique" at the university that had been renamed as Eduardo Mondlane. At the same time, he was acting director of the Mozambique Historical Archives. In 1977 he decided to return to Portugal. In Lisbon he was a principal researcher at the *Junta de Investigações Científicas do Ultramar* [Overseas Scientific Research Board]. He also taught "History of the Portuguese Expansion in the World" at the *Faculdade de Letras* [Faculty of Arts and Humanities] of the University of Lisbon and this same subject at the *Universidade Livre* in 1980. He kept his scientific activities until he died in Lisbon in 1985. The career of Alexandre Lobato— a historian who only ever wrote about the Empire and was an incorruptible defender of its existence— could not resist the movement to "tidy up" history after the 25 April Revolution. The very place where he died reveals this fading history: the former capital of the now dead empire.

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