

# DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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



**MARCHANT, Alexander Nelson de Armond**

(Rio de Janeiro, 1912 – Nashville, 1981)

Born in Rio de Janeiro to an American father and an English mother. Marchant completed his bachelor's degree at the National University in 1931, his master's degree at the American University in 1933, and his doctorate at Johns Hopkins University in 1941. He then worked at the State Department as an assistant researcher in Geography between 1940 and 1947. He also worked for the US embassy in Rio de Janeiro between 1945 and 1947. In 1948 he returned to the university as an associate professor of history at Vanderbilt University, where he spent his entire career focused on History, especially that of Brazil, and then retired as professor emeritus in 1978. He was one of the pioneers of Brazilian studies in the United States.

At the age of 30, he published his best-known work: *From Barter to Slavery: Economic Relations of Portuguese and Indians in the Settlement of Brazil, 1500-1580* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1944). The book was translated immediately into Portuguese and published in the prestigious *Coleção Brasiliana* of Companhia Editora Nacional in 1943 and reissued in the same collection in 1980. Shortly before, in 1938, he had published a bibliography on German colonisation in Brazil entitled "Writings in English, French, Italian and Portuguese Concerning the German Colonies in Southern Brazil" in the *Handbook of Latin American Studies* (1938). During his time at the State Department, he published a study on the borders between the American republics, entitled *Boundaries of the Latin American Republics* (1942 and 1944). During this period he also wrote three articles on Luso-Brazilian history: "Colonial Brazil as a Way Station for the Portuguese India Fleets" (*The Geographical Review*, 1941); "Tiradentes in the Conspiracy of Minas" (*The Hispanic American History Review*, 1941), and the important text "Feudal and Capitalistic Elements in the Portuguese Settlement of Brazil" (*The Hispanic American...*, 1942).

At Vanderbilt University he organised, in association with T. Lynn Smith, a significant collection of works on Brazil with the collaboration of Americans and Brazilians: *Brazil, Portrait of Half a Continent* (1951). He wrote the first chapter, "The Unity of Brazilian History". Shortly afterwards he also wrote the chapter "Colonial Brazil" for a work organised by Livermore—*Portugal and Brazil: An Introduction* (1953)—and edited the book *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Luso-Brazilian Studies* (1953), in which took part great historians such as Charles R. Boxer and Robert C. Smith. Finally, he collaborated on the work organised by

Arthur P. Whitaker, *Latin America and the Enlightenment* (1942) with a chapter on Brazil. In recognition of his work, he was awarded the Order of the Southern Cross by the Brazilian government in 1952.

Even though Marchant worked on various topics from the history of Brazil from the 16th to the 19th century, it's his work on the first century of Portuguese colonisation that stands out from his oeuvre as a whole. As is well known, the Portuguese Crown did not undertake any major action in the American lands in the decades following Cabral's voyage. The rivalry with the Spanish and French, however, forced the Crown to take a new approach given the risk of losing territory, since the priority at the time was the East. The solution found was to grant large swathes of land to vassals with experience in overseas activities. This was a recreation of the colonisation model based on the so-called hereditary captaincies, which had previously been applied to the Atlantic islands. However, the colonisation process undertaken by the grantees from the 1530s onwards was unable to overcome all the difficulties encountered, most of all the indigenous resistance—the central theme of Marchant's work—or achieve the objectives of guaranteeing the defence of the territory, thus forcing the Portuguese Crown to intervene with the creation of the General Government in 1548. The hereditary captaincies did not cease to exist, but from that moment on they lost importance and were gradually incorporated into the royal patrimony in an enduring process that only ended in the 18th century. In general terms, it's fair to say the captaincies failed or, in a more nuanced view, that—given the difficulties encountered—they ended up serving as a preliminary stage in the colonisation process, facilitating in some way the efforts made later under the aegis of the Crown. In any case, the initial choice of the hereditary captaincies system marked the process of colonisation in Brazil, especially until the mid-17th century, and consequently generated an immense historiographical debate, of which Marchant's work is a significant part.

This debate revolved around the problem of how to define the regime of the hereditary captaincies, especially in the initial period of occupation of the territory. The majority of 19th-century authors who dealt with the subject chose to emphasise the feudal aspects, and this interpretation ended up being questioned in the 20th century. The debate, which lasted for much of the century, involved historians and non-historians from the most diverse theoretical and political orientations but was nevertheless eminently theoretical and was studied by António Vasconcelos de Saldanha (2001). Schematically, we can say—based on a limited and largely published documentation—the various authors tried to define the characteristics of the period, framing it within the somewhat unclearly defined concepts of feudalism or capitalism, or even a combination of the characteristics of the two regimes.

Marchant took part in this debate with his article "Feudal and Capitalistic Elements..." (*The Hispanic American...*, 1942), in which he analysed the interpretation lines while also taking a stand, refuting the feudal character thesis and trying to put forth the interpretation that pointed to the capitalist elements of colonisation. He considered the fundamental issue was the combination of trade and colonisation, in which investment was aimed at profit and could therefore be characterised as capitalist. Marchant concluded by stating the grantees "were clearly capitalistic in the sense of investing money for profit." This debate, however, was defined by Francis Dutra as a "sterile controversy" (*A guide to the History of Brazil...*, 1980, p. 89). In this sense,

Alexander Marchant's greatest merit was to have taken a step forward in our knowledge of this period in his most important work.

In his best-known work, *From Barter to Slavery...*, Marchant went beyond the theoretical debate and sought to analyse the actual process of colonisation based on the available sources. More specifically, he studied the central issue of the period: the relations between the Portuguese and the indigenous people, especially the forms of exploitation of indigenous labour.

From a chronological point of view, the first form of labour exploitation happened through the exchange or barter of European products, notably tools, with the Indians. This allowed the Portuguese to obtain labour, food, and other goods, including slaves. For example, the usage of brazilwood was made possible thanks to this arrangement, which was essential in the early days of the colony. The expansion of the Portuguese presence after the creation of the captaincies, with a growing need for labour—not only circumstantial but daily—meant that the Indians began to demand more valuable products, including weapons, or simply refused to serve the newcomers. This ended up making the arrangement unfeasible. This exhaustion of the possibilities of exchanging labour for goods varied from captaincy to captaincy according to the pace of development of productive activities, especially sugar production. Voluntary forms of labour were increasingly replaced by compulsory forms, including slavery, which in turn motivated a growing resistance from the indigenous population, leading to open and widespread conflict in the various captaincies in the 1540s. This culminated in the destruction of mills, farms, and even the captaincies of Bahia and São Tomé (today the northern region of the state of Rio de Janeiro).

In general terms, the inability to maintain the barter arrangement led the settlers to seek to enslave the indigenous people, which originated conflicts that jeopardised the process that was based exclusively on hereditary captaincies. In turn, this forced the Crown to intervene with the creation of the General Government in 1548 to avoid the complete destruction of the first colonial centres. In the last decades of the 16th century, however, the correlation of forces on the coast was inverted, and the Portuguese went on the offensive, consolidating their hold on the territory, enslaving the defeated Indians, and thus enabling a major growth of the sugar economy.

*From Barter to Slavery...* by Alexander Marchant was the first work to systematically study the central question of the relationship between the Portuguese and the indigenous people from an economic point of view, drawing extensively on the documentation available at the time. Sérgio Buarque de Holanda would call the work "an excellent and well-documented monograph" (*Manual Bibliográfico...* [Bibliographic Manual], 1950, p. 405) and Léon Helguera, in turn, would correctly define the work as "seminal" (*The Americas*, 1982, p. 403). More recently, both Stuart Schwartz (2003, p. 21 ff.) and John Monteiro (1994, pp. 32 and 231) have questioned Marchant's interpretation of the barter problem. Leaning on Schwartz, Monteiro stated that "Marchant placed the Indians in an erroneous theoretical context, assuming a Western-type behaviour from the natives, the apparently irrational Brazilian Indians, in the face of the objective conditions of the market," also disregarding the profound effects and impact that tools and weapons would have on indigenous

societies. In any case, *From Barter to Slavery...* is still an essential work for the study of this period. In fact, it may be considered a classic in the historiography of Colonial Brazil.

**Active bibliography:** “Writings in English, French, Italian and Portuguese Concerning the German Colonies in Southern Brazil”, *Handbook of Latin American Studies*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, v. 5, 1938, 418-431; “Colonial Brazil as a Way Station for the Portuguese India Fleets”. *The Geographical Review*, n.º31, 1941, 454-465; “Tiradentes in the Conspiracy of Minas”. *The Hispanic American History Review*, n.º21, 1941, 239-257; “Feudal and Capitalistic Elements in the Portuguese Settlement of Brazil”. *The Hispanic American History Review*, n.º 21, 1942, 493-512; *Boundaries of the Latin American Republics*, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942 e 1944; *Do Escambo à Escravidão, as relações econômicas de portugueses e índios na colonização do Brasil, 1500-1800*, São Paulo, Companhia Editora Nacional, 1943 (2.ª ed. 1980); *From Barter to Slavery: Economic Relations of Portuguese and Indians in the Settlement of Brazil, 1500-1580*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1944 (2.ª ed. 1966); \_\_\_\_\_ e SMITH, T Lynn, *Brazil, Portrait of Half a Continent*, New York, Dryden Press, 1951; “Colonial Brazil”. LIVERMORE, Harold, *Portugal and Brazil: as introduction*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1953, 283-301; *Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Luso-Brazilian Studies*, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 1953.

**Passive bibliography:** DUTRA, Francis, *A guide to the history of Brazil, 1500-1822*, Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 1980; HELGUERA, J. Léon, “Alexander Marchant (1912-1981)”, *The Americas*, n.º 38, 1982, pp. 403; HOLANDA, Sérgio Buarque de, *Manual Bibliográfico de Estudos Brasileiros*, Rio de Janeiro, Souza, 1950; MONTEIRO, John, *Negros da Terra*, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1994; RUSSEL-WOOD, A. J. R., “A contribuição Acadêmica Norte-americana à historiografia do Brasil Colonial”. *Varia História*. Belo Horizonte, n.º 22, 2000, pp. 7-41; SALDANHA, António Vasconcelos de, *As capitanias do Brasil*, Lisboa, CNCDP, 2001; SCHWARTZ, Stuart, *Da América Portuguesa ao Brasil*, Lisboa, Difel, 2003.

Rodrigo Ricupero

This work is financed by national funds through FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P, in the scope of the projects UIDB/04311/2020 and UIDP/04311/2020.