

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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SILVA, L. A. Rebelo da (Lisboa, 1822 - Lisboa, 1871)

Rebelo da Silva was the author of an extensive body of work covering the fields of the novel, drama, literary theory and criticism as well as historical studies. Descended from a family of liberal jurists who had left their mark on Portuguese culture and politics, he was the son of Luís António Rebelo da Silva, a Court of Appeals judge, and Ana Joaquina da Conceição Lima. Little is known of his studies as a child but it is probable that they were carried out under the supervision of his uncle, Manuel Rebelo da Silva.

At the end of the 1830s, when he was only seventeen years old, he became an active participant in the Scholastic-Philomatic Society (*Sociedade Escolástica-Filomática*), a sort of formal *tertúlia* set up on the initiative of students of Lisbon's Higher Schools. Its statutory aims were to inspire through study and to spread knowledge about science, history, philosophy and literature. In order to achieve these aims it planned to organize lectures as well as to establish a library, a museum and a journal. The official publication of the Scholastic-Philomatic Society was called *O Cosmorama Literário*, a periodical in which Rebelo da Silva appeared for the first time as an author of historical novels. In it he published, albeit in an unfinished form, his narrative *Tomada de Ceuta* (The Taking of Ceuta). In the soirées organized by this literary group he had the chance to fraternize with Almeida Garrett, Andrade Corvo, Vieira de Castro, Tomás de Carvalho, António da Cunha Sotomaior and António Pedro Lopes de Mendonça. In the lectures he gave, he revealed his remarkable talent as an orator "although still somewhat hesitant" (Bulhão Pato, *Sob os Ciprestes*, 1986, p. 168). His oratory would come to be one of the distinctive hallmarks of his civic participation, political intervention and academic practice.

As both his father and his grandfather had been educated at university, it was considered perfectly normal that Rebelo da Silva would also go on to further studies in Coimbra. In order to comply with this assumption, he enrolled in the Faculty of Philosophy in 1840, but he later gave up without having passed in any subject. Bulhão Pato said that the academic rigour and the exact sciences did not capture the historian's attention and "having arrived in Coimbra he never went further than the Patio, or rather he did leave it, [...] chased by the pointed teeth of three implacable foxes." (*Sob os Ciprestes*, 1986, p. 168)

He returned to Lisbon and between 1842 and 1843 wrote every week for the *Revista Universal Lisbonense*, edited by António Feliciano Castilho, in which he published his novel *Rausso por Homízio*, a work that brought him to the attention of Lisbon society. In the same period he became friends with



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Alexandre Herculano, becoming a regular visitor to the Ajuda Library and collaborating on the review *O Panorama*. The renowned historian, who refined methodologically the critical documental approach and was averse to the mythical tradition, contributed hugely to the development of Rebelo da Silva's thought and historiographical practice. Herculano also represented a valuable source of legitimation, which his young disciple knew how to instrumentalize to assert himself in the scientific and institutional field. Out of loyalty, but above all out of conviction, he became involved in the controversy surrounding the omission of the "Miracle of Ourique" from the *História de Portugal* (History of Portugal). Entering the lists in defence of his friend and master, he published the *Cartas ao Sr. Ministro da Justiça, sobre o uso que faz do púlpito e da imprensa uma fracção do clero português* (Letters to the Minister of Justice on the use made by a section of the Portuguese clergy of the pulpit and the press) (1850) in which he criticized the manipulation of the masses as practised by some sectors of the Church who censored works which, allegedly, would offend religion.

From the 1850s on, Rebelo da Silva planned his first works of a historiographical nature. In this phase he preferred working in the area of literary and biographical history where he showed himself to be particularly mindful of how the context acted on individuals. (Jorge Borges de Macedo, *A «História de Portugal nos Séculos XVII e XVIII» e o seu Autor*, 1971, p.84.) His approach followed the principles of Sainte-Beuve's critical method which was based on the principle that an author's work was always the reflection of his life and could be explained through it. This was a method that was criticized by Marcel Proust (*Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Paris, 1965), among others. In 1850, probably through Alexandre Herculano's intervention, the Lisbon Royal Academy of Sciences charged him with the task of continuing publication of the *Quadro elementar das relações políticas e diplomáticas de Portugal* (Basic Framework of political and diplomatic relations of Portugal) which had been begun by the Viscount of Santarém, who had since died. This historian had already made a name for himself earlier through his efforts at objectivity, and preceded Herculano in the systematic publication of sources. The young historian, Rebelo da Silva, was praised by D. Pedro V for his success in completing the task he had been given.

He took advantage of all the effort he had put into preparing the *Quadro elementar das relações políticas e diplomáticas de Portugal* to start drafting the *História de Portugal nos séculos XVII e XVIII* (History of Portugal in the 17th and 18th centuries) which would become his most ambitious and probably his most important work. The last thirteen years of his life were devoted to this project, which was subsidized as decreed by a government ordinance of 15 October 1858. Here it was stipulated that the work should be preceded by an introduction which referred to the events that "had led up to the intrusion of the Spanish sovereigns, and the causes which resulted in restoration of the independence of Portugal". Such a ruling, which reveals the underlying intention to provide the Portuguese people with facts about the "dangers" of a new Iberian union, can be considered nothing other than taking a position against those authors who advocated the fusion of Portugal and Spain along the lines suggested in Sinibaldo de Mas's thesis. On the very first page of the first volume of *História de Portugal nos séculos XVII e XVIII* there appeared a "warning"

in which the author explained the intention behind the work and the plan that had guided its execution. He undertook to narrate above all “the happenings and their causes; to consider in the light of truth both the people involved and the events; to reflect on the interpretation of the facts through the portrayal of institutions, customs and intellectual culture; [...] not only relating news of sieges and battles” but inquiring into the “meaning and the reasons behind the facts”. In this work he was able to make use of the full range of his literary resources, writing a fluent and captivating narrative. Although he did not lose sight of the precepts he advocated for constructing historical knowledge, he himself did not always use archival sources, a failing which he remedied by frequently citing very recent and up-to-date national and foreign studies and by the obvious effort he made to include a remarkable number of notes. Thus the great value of this work derives concomitantly from its accessible and captivating style, its methodological rigour and the breadth of the work undertaken. The work studies first the politics and then the institutions and spreads over five volumes. The first volumes follow a markedly chronological approach organized by reigns, which he perorates on systematically, from the infancy of D. Sebastião up until the Restoration and the first measures of governance taken by D. João IV. In the last two volumes he deals with some key topics and provides an analysis that is primarily economic and social. According to Borges de Macedo, this organization contributes to the fact that the work represents the first political history within Portuguese historiography that “organically includes an economic history defined as such” (Jorge Borges de Macedo, *A «História de Portugal nos Séculos XVII e XVIII» e o seu Autor*, 1971, p.100). Rebelo da Silva showed a similar concern when he wrote his *Memória sobre a População e a Agricultura de Portugal* (Memoir on the Population and the Agriculture of Portugal) in which he also integrated important details of economic and social history.

For most of the period when he was working on the *História de Portugal nos séculos XVII e XVIII*, he was at the same time teaching at the *Curso Superior de Letras* (Higher School of Letters) and we may assume that what he taught was closely aligned to the objectives and themes that he favoured in his own research. He was part of the teaching body (1859-1871) and as teacher of the *História Pátria e Universal* (History of Portugal and Universal History) course, he became the principal figure in the School where, in addition to carrying out his teaching duties, he also held the posts of Dean and Secretary. Adolfo Coelho considered that of all the School’s original teachers Rebelo da Silva was the one who most clearly embraced the scientific and pedagogic tendencies of his time (*Le Cours Supérieur de Lettres*, 1900, pp. 33-34). His lectures were improvised and he spoke vigorously and eloquently before a large audience using a discourse replete with images. The monarch himself used to assiduously attend his classes at times. The three course programmes we know of written by Rebelo da Silva for *História Pátria e Universal* (1860-1861, 1865-1866 and 1870-1871) show how he successively broadened the content. Although structurally nationalist, the programmes were presented as exercises in the history of civilisation, favouring on some occasions a general perspective of the historical evolution of Western Europe, while on others seeking to integrate the history of Portugal within the European whole (Sérgio Campos Matos, *Historiografia e memória nacional*, 1998, p. 178).



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Rebello da Silva's historiographical production was primarily marked by his dealing with extremely broad topics within which he defined and characterized extensive historical frameworks. Nevertheless, he still continued to write historiographical works in the field of biography. To this end, he published the work *Varões ilustres das três épocas constitucionais* (Illustrious men of the three constitutional periods) (1870) in which he collated in one volume with only a few alterations a series of studies he had published in the press. In his biographies he sought to define the contours of social pressure on the actions of the public man. However, he did not completely steer clear of a laudatory tone and the exaltation of the role heroes played in the course of history. The care he took and the colourful way in which he portrayed these people of note, which was marked by his use of skilful embellishment and the generous use of adjectives, benefitted greatly from his literary talent. Although the balance was always unstable, he constantly attempted to find an equilibrium but even so he slipped at times into the temptation of panegyric. However, the excesses that were the result of his admiration for some of the subjects of his biographies do not seem to have compromised his methodological seriousness or historical rigour.

In the field of the historical novel, he closely followed Herculano's narrative processes. Here, though, Rebello da Silva's extensive output innovates by the fact that he did not restrict himself to the medieval period, but claimed that more recent periods had the right to be used as the narrative's temporal scenario. Such is the case of *A última corrida de Touros de Salvaterra* (The Last Royal Bull-Fight at Salvaterra) (1848), one of the most important literary works of Portuguese romanticism, which is set in the 18th century. However, in this field his influence is not limited to the author of *Eurico, o Presbítero* (Eurico, the Presbyterian) (1848). In fact, in his treatment of characters, echoes can be found of the works of Garrett or Walter Scott. In the prologue to the first edition of his novel *A Mocidade de D. João V* (The Youth of D. João V), he states: "What the famous Scottish novelist managed to do with his heroes, this author has sought to imitate from afar with regard to the characters in this essay".

Rebello da Silva occupied numerous public posts. While still very young, at the age of only 22, and benefitting from being close to the greatest names of Portuguese romanticism (Garrett, Herculano and Castilho), he became part of the *Comissão Ortográfica* [Orthographic Committee] which was set up to organize publication of a dictionary to be published by the Imprensa Nacional. The purpose of this was to bring some order to the irregularities of Portuguese spelling of the time. A short while afterwards, in 1845, he was nominated to the Secretariat of the Council of State. Being an active supporter of constitutional monarchy, he was elected as a deputy for the first time in 1847 in the lists of the Chartist Party. He was then re-elected, but this time for the Historical Party, for the 1848-1851 mandate and then once again for the chambers that resulted from the 1852, 1857, 1858 and 1860 elections. One of his most notable interventions was during the debate which preceded the passing of the *Acto Adicional à Carta Constitucional* [Additional Act to the Constitutional Charter] in which he fought an oratorical duel with Almeida Garrett (at the time Minister of Foreign Affairs). Rebello da Silva argued for the defeated position, which was based on the premise that the Chamber had no powers to reform the provisions of the Constitutional Charter. He became



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a member of the Chamber of Peers by royal nomination in the year 1862, remaining there until 1871. He also accepted the post of Minister and Secretary of State for the Navy and Overseas Affairs as part of a government team led by the Duke of Loulé.

He was a very active participant in the periodical press and was either editor or a collaborator on titles as diverse as *O Cosmorama Literário* (1839), *Revista Universal Lisbonense* (1842-1843), *O Panorama*, *O Diário do Governo* (1845-1846), *A Carta* (1848), *Época* (1848), *A Imprensa* (1851), *A Imprensa e Lei*, *A Pátria* (1856) and *A discussão* (1860) among others. Being a commentator who was aware of the key issues of the time, his texts reveal concerns that are both doctrinaire and pedagogic. As Bulhão Pato once said of Rebelo da Silva, if “the sun of his talent broke through very early and very brilliantly” (*Sob os Ciprestes*, 1986, p. 168), like a flame, he was suddenly extinguished when he reached his maximum blaze. Prematurely taken by death, he died when he was only forty-nine.

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APOIOS:

