

**SAMUEL ELIOT MORISON, LEONARD BACON,
AND "THE 'MYSTERY BOYS' IN PORTUGUESE HISTORY"**

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The principals in this epistolary exchange of four letters written in 1950 are Samuel Eliot Morison (1887-1976), the American scholar-professor-sailor famous for *The Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, a biography of Christopher Columbus, and Leonard Bacon (1887-1954), a poet-translator whose 1950 version of *Os Lusíadas* was the first (and to this day the only) American translation of that work to achieve print.

This exchange of letters between Morison and Bacon in 1950 was initiated when Bacon sent Morison a copy of his recently published translation of Camões' epic. The excerpts that follow are taken from this correspondence.

1. Bacon to Morison, 5 August 1950

Under separate cover, I am sending you a copy of my translation of *The Lusíads* of Camões, which I hope may interest you. I found "The Admiral of the Ocean Sea" very much to my purpose in some connections, and I regret to state that I ridiculously exaggerated in a note a point you made. It wasn't until the book reached me that I realized what a hyperbolic statement I had made with respect to the superiority of Portuguese navigators. If there is ever a second edition, which is extremely doubtful, those expressions will be softened.

[Bacon's note in his translation of *Os Lusíadas* reads: "The improved Mariner's Astrolabe had only been in use for about twenty years ([Jeremiah D. M.] Ford). One gathers that the region where they landed was St. Helena's Bay, about ninety miles

north of the Cape. The superiority of Portuguese navigation has been noticed by Professor [Samuel Eliot] Morison. Vasco da Gama went ashore so as to get a really accurate observation. He was incapable of the astounding blunders of Columbus" (*The Lusiads of Luiz de Camões*, trans. Leonard Bacon [New York: Hispanic Society of America, 1950], p. 204). The note glosses Canto V, 25, 7-8, of Camões's poem, which reads: "Pelo novo instrumento do Astrolabio, / Invenção do sutil juizo e sabio" in the original and "By the astrolabe, that novel instrument, / which skill and wisdom jointly could invent" in Bacon's translation (p. 181). Bacon's translation, reprinted several times, is still in print, but to the best of my knowledge there has never been a true second edition.]

2. Morison to Bacon, Seal Cove, Maine, 9 August 1950

Thank you so much for sending me your translation of the *Lusiads*. I am sorry to say that it will have come to my study in Cambridge [Massachusetts], and that I cannot read it in this appropriate setting; but I shall certainly look forward to it with great gusto.

The *Lusiads* is one of my favorite long poems, and I have even tried translating some of the more nautical passages myself.

You can hardly exaggerate the superiority of the Portuguese navigators in the period of Prince Henry and of Camoens, although in my opinion the small group of Andalusians that Columbus consorted with were just as good. After all, they were right over the border from Portugal.

3. Morison to Bacon, Boston, 7 October 1950

On returning home after a summer in Maine, I found your translation of the *Lusiads* and have been reading it with increasing delight in your poetry and respect for your scholarship. I am using some of the cantos of your translation to recite to my class in order to emphasize the essential difference between Portuguese colonization in the Far East and Spanish colonization in the New World.

Almost at the same time there has come to my hand a book by Fidelino de Figueiredo, *A Epica Portuguesa [sic] No Seculo XVI*, published by the University of São Paulo, Brazil, 1950. This author is one of those whom I call the "mystery boys" in Portuguese history, who maintain that the Portuguese made all manner of secret and mysterious voyages of which there is no record, before anyone else did. I have not had time to look into the book to see whether he is trying to drag Camoens into that too, but as he goes so far afield as to assert the influence of Camoens on the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, I shouldn't wonder.

If you would like to add this book to your Camoens collection, I shall be very glad to send it to you.

[Morison, who taught at Harvard University, refers to Fidelino de Figueiredo, *A Épica portuguesa do século XVI Subsídios documentares para uma theoria geral da epopêa* (*Boletins da Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras, CL Letras – no. 6*) (São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, 1950). Although Figueiredo writes some about the Lönnrot work, he makes no such claim for Camoens's influence on the *Kalevala*. Morison's view of "the 'mystery boys' of Portuguese history" is questioned by John Dos Passos, the American novelist, who writes: "Morison's *Portuguese Voyages to America*, though I think he is a little dogmatic in his refusal to admit any secret or unpublicized voyages prior to the official ones, is essential to the understanding of Atlantic exploration in the fifteenth century" (*The Portugal Story: Three Centuries of Exploration and Discovery* [Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969], p. 383)].

4. Bacon to Morison, Washington, D.C., 19 October 1950

Your letter of the 7th should have been answered a week ago, but it was bound to my soul.

I am down on the Luso-Brazilian business, and they have been awfully nice about the book.

I will write you more at length when I get on the ground, but meanwhile I'll be immensely grateful for Figueiredo's book on the epic.

Everything you say about the mystery boys coincides with my own experience. The Portuguese are delightful people, but there is an imaginative element in most of their scholarly work, which I feel must be deplored.

According to the English Lusophile and historian, Harold V. Livermore, who was present at the Luso-Brazilian Colloquium, held in Washington, D. C., October 18-21, 1950, Leonard Bacon was "the lion of the occasion" (*Atlante*, 2 [No. 3, 1954], 168).]