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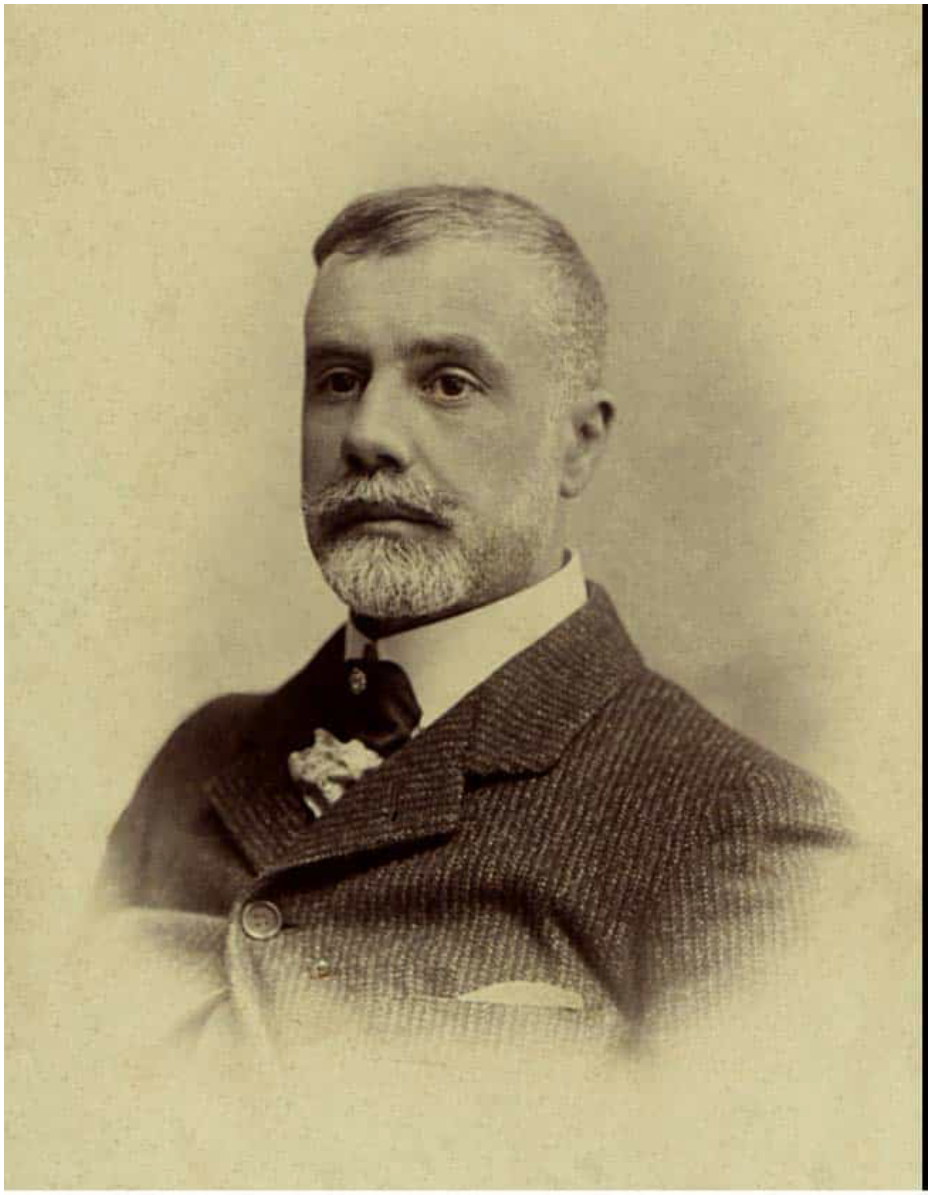
September 12, 2023

Manuel Teixeira Gomes – An Algarvian President of Portugal

After Portugal deposed its last monarch, D Manuel II, in 1910, the country became Europe's third republic (after Switzerland and France). Over the course of the 113 years since the Implantation of the Republic, 19 presidents have served the country, of which no fewer than three have come from the Algarve.



Manuel Teixeira Gomes in 1911

The first of the three was Manuel Teixeira Gomes (TG); José Mendes Cabeçadas was briefly president in 1926; and Aníbal Cavaco Silva served two terms from 2006-2016.

The lesson of TG's life is that unless representative democracy is defended by a majority, the narrow views of nationalists will triumph, leading to the imposition of an authoritarian regime, not subject to election or democratic will.

The New Portuguese Republic

The history of the new republic and its ephemeral governments is tangled and messy and, by 1923, out of the six presidents, only one served his full term of office. Conditions had not improved when TG allowed himself to be persuaded for the second time to stand for election to the presidency.

But on December 10, 1925, TG suddenly resigned as President of the Republic of Portugal. He served only two years of his four-year term and found that those friends who had encouraged him to stand for the presidency were too few when he needed more support. In his resignation letter, he maintained that his health was suffering and that he wanted to devote his life to literary pursuits.



Belmira das Neves

Early life

Manuel Teixeira Gomes (1860–1941) was born in Portimão and both sides of his family were long-time residents of the Algarve. Strong-minded, he early questioned the Christian religion and, at the age of 10, was sent to the Seminary at Coimbra and, at 15, he matriculated in medicine at Coimbra University. He wrote about his holidays in the Algarve in a memoir *Agosto Azul*, particularly about his first love affair with a girl from Ferragudo.

But university life bored him and, when he was 17, he left university to live the life of a bohemian in Lisbon, enjoying the friendship of writers, sculptors and painters. He was known, even at this age, as *republicano assanhado* (lustful republican). He spent time in both Lisbon and Porto, and wrote articles for cultural and republican magazines. He described, in some detail in his writings, the encounters he had with both girls and young women in various European cities.

Commercial traveller

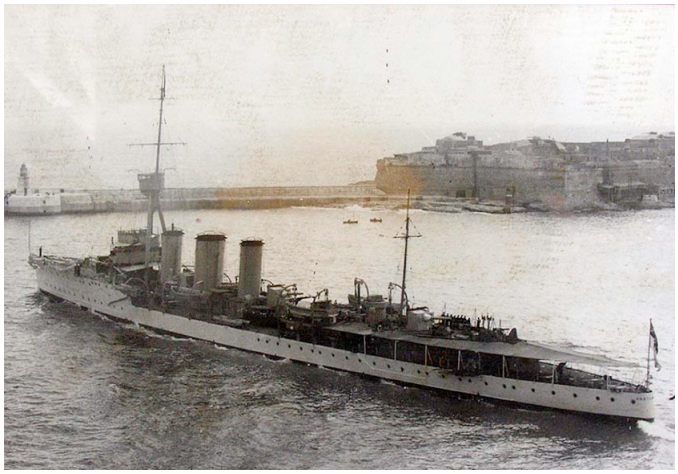
His long-suffering father continued to support him until 1890, when he became the commercial representative of the Sindicato de Exportadores de Figos do Algarve, which included his father's agricultural business.

Later, as a commercial traveller for his father only, during the winter he sold Algarvian dried fruit products (mainly almonds and figs) in Northern France, Benelux and the Near East.

He returned to the Algarve in the spring for the picking, drying and packing of the fruit, and spent the late summer and autumn touring cultural centres around the Mediterranean.

Business was good, and it required him to work for only two months of the year. By 1910, he had inherited the business, and already had enough wealth to make him a comfortable family man for the rest of his life.

In 1899, he set up house with Belmira das Neves, the 13-year-old illegitimate daughter of a local fisherman. They never married and their two daughters were born in 1906 and 1910.



HMS Carysfort

His life at a crossroad

At the Implantation of the Republic (October 5, 1910), the friendships TG had forged in Lisbon caused a major change in his career. A life-long republican, TG was selected by the Provisional Government in 1911 as Ambassador of Portugal in London. He was selected precisely because he was calm, civilised, rich and he spoke English.

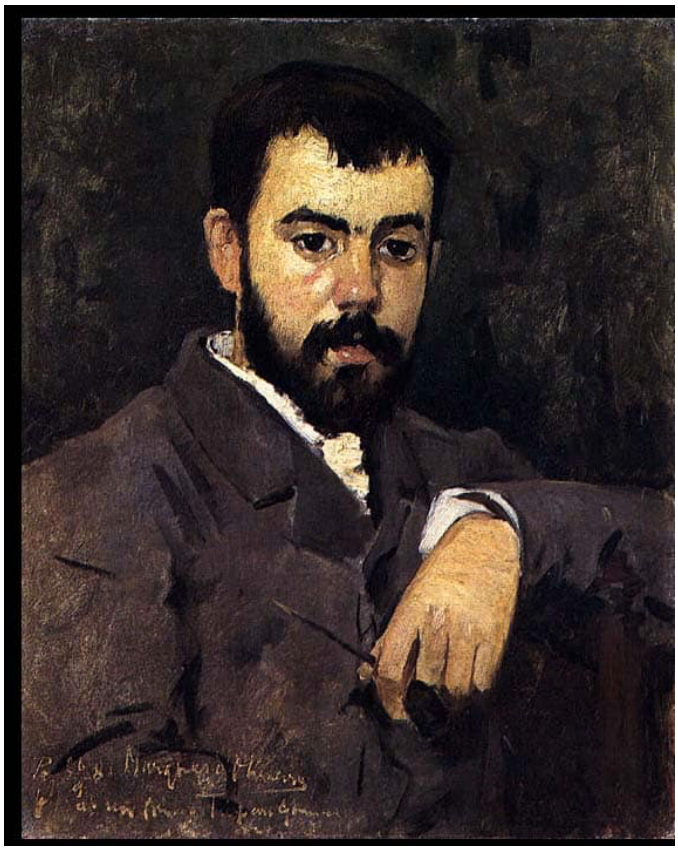
Initially hesitant, he wrote, “I was 50 years old, and my younger daughter was born just a few days previously. I let everything go and went to serve the Republic as Ambassador in London. It had never occurred to me that I should be sent there, and I had adamantly refused the position when they first proposed it.”

Ambassador in London

Cultured and well accepted in diplomatic circles in London, his new career suited him well. He soon made friends with King George V, and Dowager Queen Alexandra asked his help in decorating her offices in Buckingham Palace.

Winning the sympathy, friendship and trust of the British authorities, his main task was to ensure that Britain recognised the infant Republic, which he achieved on October 11, 1911.

TG served as Ambassador in London for seven years, later advocating Portugal’s participation in World War I on the side of the Allies.



Manuel Teixeira Gomes as bohemian at age 21

Recall

On January 7, 1918, the new President, the Germanophile Sidónio Pais, recalled TG and imprisoned him for a month – in the Avenida Palace Hotel in the centre of Lisbon. After TG had returned to the Algarve, Pais spitefully refused to return to him personal property he had left in the embassy in London.

Pais was assassinated in December 1918, and TG was sent first as Minister to Madrid, where Alfonso XIII appreciated his personality; then as delegate to the Peace Conference at Versailles; and finally, in May of 1919, he was sent back to his former position in London.

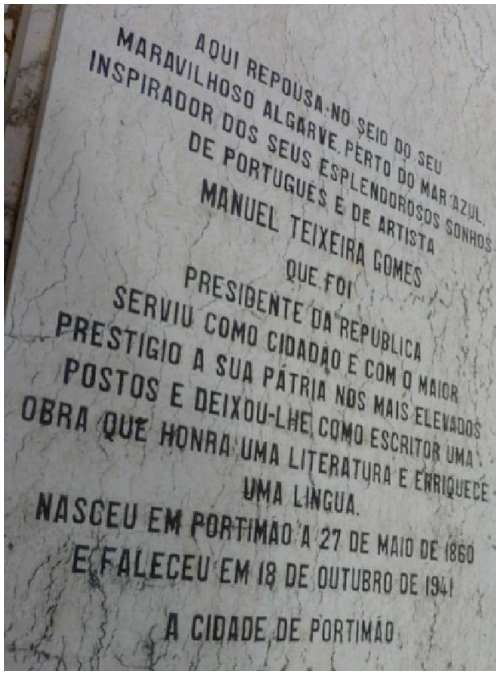
He was also elected one of the Vice-Presidents of the newly-formed League of Nations, and head of the Portuguese delegation to the International Economic Conference in Geneva, "that assembly of lavish politicians, sterile and ridiculous, just like the ones which preceded it," as he described it.

Presidential election

Against his better judgement, TG was persuaded by his friends to put his name forward for the presidency for a second time, and he was elected on August 6, 1923.

Although he had the support of the Democratic Party, his election was confirmed only after the third round of voting. Contrary to custom, the nationalists abstained at the third ballot, and so the legitimacy of his election was tarnished from the start.

TG left London at the beginning of October and arrived in Lisbon two days before his term of office began. As a mark of appreciation, His Majesty's Government in Britain lent him the cruiser HMS Carysfort for the journey.



Manuel Teixeira Gomes tombstone in Portimão Photo PETER BOOKER

President Teixeira Gomes

TG proposed a government of national unity, preferably under the leadership of the radical hero of the Implantation of the Republic, Afonso Costa. By making his choice, the new president had nailed his radical republican colours firmly to the mast. Since Costa was anathema to the nationalists and supporters of the church, he was unable to form a government.

The years on TG's presidency were characterised by strikes, attempted coups d'état and demonstrations, but most of all by a continuous economic crisis.

The army was becoming influential and the revolt on April 18, 1925, (known as the Generals' Coup) led TG to submit his resignation, but a political alliance (except for the nationalists) persuaded him to withdraw it.

All through this period of political instability, TG projected an air of calm and tranquillity, and he attended many cultural events, and relaxed by promenading along the streets of Lisbon.

At the same time, he also received a series of anonymous, insulting letters which appeared to be an orchestrated campaign of defamation.

In July 1925, there was a new insurrection, and the naval corvette Vasco da Gama shelled the Presidential Palace. During that year, TG appointed three new prime ministers, none of whom lasted more than a few weeks.

Bound by the constitution of the republic, the president was powerless. On December 7, the Alves Reis banknote scandal erupted (the subject of my next Article).



Sidónio Pais

Four days later, under constant attack by nationalists and monarchists, TG had reached the end of his tether. He had become disgusted at the development of politics in Portugal and frustrated by his own lack of power.

He wrote: “Politics, far from offering me charms or compensations, became, for me, perhaps due to my exaggerated sensitivity, an inglorious sacrifice. Day after day, I see my political illusions stripped as from an imaginary crystal vase. I feel a need, perhaps physiological, to return to my preferences, my chairs and my books.”

He again submitted his resignation, which this time was accepted.

Exile and death

After disposing of the moveable assets from his house in Lisbon, on December 17, 1925, TG boarded the Dutch cargo ship ‘Zeus’, and sailed off to Oran in Algeria, to self-imposed exile.

He referred to “the serene and uninterrupted happiness that caressed me from the time I boarded that poor cargo steamer on which I left Lisbon … which restored my freedom … I left Portugal with no books, or papers, without notes of any sort … nothing which might remind me of the old political or literary career … I opened a completely blank page in my life.” He never returned to Portugal during his lifetime.

The ex-president spent six years touring the Mediterranean, mainly to France, Italy, Morocco and Tunisia. At the beginning of September 1931, he arrived at Bougie in French Algeria, and decided to spend the rest of his life there.

He continued to write and chose not to return to his homeland either for the marriages of his daughters or for the birth of his grandchildren.

His biographer Norberto Lopes visited Bougie in 1938, finding TG sad at his physical decline, bitter at the ingratitude of Portuguese politicians and at the lack of thanks for his many gifts to museums and libraries, and sad at the ignorance displayed by politicians during his presidency.

For the last 10 years of his life, TG lived at the Hôtel de L’Étoile in room nº13, where he died on October 18, 1941. He was buried temporarily at Bougie in the vault belonging to the owner of the hotel, and his family was permitted to repatriate his remains on October 18, 1950.

Sailors from the Portuguese navy escorted his cortege to the municipal cemetery in Portimão where he was re-interred in the presence of his two daughters, Ana Rosa and Maria Manuela.

At the funeral procession from the dockside to the municipal cemetery, the secret police were on hand to record the names of the mourners, because republican sympathisers of TG and his principles were no friends of Salazar and his Estado Novo.



Casa Manuel Teixeira Gomes in Portimão

Personal life

Belmira and their two daughters were left in Portimão when he was sent to England, and they did not form a part of his household in London, Lisbon, or Bougie. Belmira died in 1967, and Ana Rosa in 1997.

If he were alive today, Teixeira Gomes would undoubtedly interest the denizens of social media as well as the police. Some of his writing (such as *Agosto Azul* and *Novelas Eróticas*) glorifies his interest in young girls and he made no secret of his amatory encounters. His published works date from two periods, 1899-1909 and 1932-1938. It is sad to relate that on the 150th anniversary of his birth a group of young Portuguese in Portimão condemned him as a pederast.

The inscription on his gravestone in the cemetery in Portimão reads: *Here rests in the bosom of his marvellous Algarve, near the Mar Azul [which was the] magnificent inspiration of his Portuguese and artistic dreams MANUEL TEIXEIRA GOMES, who was President of the Republic. He served as citizen and later served his country in the highest posts and with the greatest prestige. As author, he left to his country works which honour literature and enrich the language. He was born in Portimão on 21 May 1860 and died on 18 October 1941.*

Postscript

Mário Soares, himself a later President of the Republic, paid this compliment: *An unusual outcome for this prestigious rich man, a knowledgeable connoisseur of art, elegant and aristocratic, even down to his dress and style of living, but a dyed-in-the-wool republican, an unpolluted democrat, loyal to his friends and to his principles, ferociously independent, who*

chose a solitary and voluntary exile in Bougie, to live out the last years of his long life, so that "he should save others from the sad spectacle of his physical decline."

Read more from **Peter Booker** about **Alves Reis and the Banknote Crisis of 1925** or **Hermínio da Palma Inácio (1922-2009) – an Algarvian opposing the dictatorship**.

Peter Booker

Peter Booker co-founded with his wife Lynne the Algarve History Association.
www.algarvehistoryassociation.com