

Alan Villiers: *The Quest of the Schooner Argus*

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Cod fishing voyages to the North West Atlantic are embedded in the folk memory of Southern Europe, which sent men and ships to the grand banks of Newfoundland since the beginning of the modern era. For these Portuguese, Basque, Breton and Normandy seamen, cod fishing was one of the most fortunate discoveries of their erratic navigations into the west. Although 'missing' the India, the captains of the Portuguese caravels discovered endless shoals of cod – rich in protein, easy to conserve, and capable of feeding the Kingdom. Widely promoted in commerce and through the Catholic Church, the Atlantic codfish quickly became an icon of the Mediterranean diet.

This extraordinary cultural irony gathered strength by means of systematic voyages that required men, ships, capital, and military protection against piracy. The Portuguese had fishermen and sailors, good salt, and some ports interested in fisheries 1.800 miles away. However, they lacked military power and public protection of private capital. A small kingdom at the end of Mediterranean Europe, Portugal was among the first pioneers of the 'great fishing expeditions', although never dominating them completely. Between the end of the sixteenth century and 1834 there is no record of any ship leaving Portuguese ports heading for Newfoundland waters. Well serviced by British merchants from Oporto and Lisbon, this long period of external dependency created an irreversible dietary habit and a serious problem for the state; how to protect the cod industry to contain imports and curb the commercial deficit. The 'cod problem' had interested illustrious elites since the late eighteenth century – the first economists, Navy officials, capitalists of the old ports, and stakeholders in the Central Power. But the Portuguese Liberal State (Monarchic from 1820 to 1910, Republican from 1910 to 1926) could never protect the ship-owners from the abyss of the import business.

Inspired by a fascist-corporatist model of economic policy, the New State dictatorship (1926-1974) reorganised the import trade of dry salted cod, restricting

the internal market for national production. Import substitution was fast and sustained. While Salazar led the Government, the margin of self-sufficiency of the Portuguese salted and dried market for cod was, on average, 60% of demand. Fleet renewal and social protection for fishermen gave the dictatorial regime tangible propaganda arguments: according to the ideology, only the New State could promote the 'revival' of a fleet of schooners and reunite the nation with the sea.

Alan Villiers, renowned maritime author and photographer, was the only foreign writer that was interested in these developments. On the invitation of the former Portuguese Ambassador in Washington, Pedro Teotónio Pereira, in 1951, the Australian Navy official boarded the *Argus*, a fine cod fishing four-masted schooner, owned by a fishing company whose property belonged to Azoreans capitalists of Jewish origin. In accordance with the Portuguese authorities' request, Villiers wrote in a pleasant literary style with a strong sense of documentation. Illustrated with beautiful photographs and complemented by a film – *The Bankers: The Voyage of The Schooner Argus*. The book set out to record the last commercial activity ever to make use of sails in ocean-crossings.

In North America and Europe, the book was a great success and was published in sixteen languages. It showed the world how the Portuguese fished cod in the seas of Newfoundland and Greenland with large schooners equipped with lonely dory-men fishing hand lines. The cruelty of the Portuguese fishermen's living conditions – they set out on six month campaigns and worked up to eighteen hours a day – was overshadowed by the beauty of the literary images of the 'White Fleet' and the dorymen. Due to the efforts of the Portuguese propaganda and the quality of the book, *The Quest of the Schooner Argus* became a famous 'postcard' of the Portuguese maritime tradition.

The Portuguese edition of Villiers' journey was published in 1951 a few months after the original English version. The book was awarded that year's Camões Prize, the highest honour that the SNI (the official propaganda body of Salazar's regime) attributed to foreign authors on 'Portuguese themes'. In the Anglo-American world, the critics' praise echoed the exaltation of the official Portuguese press. *The Quest of the Schooner Argus* made news on the BBC, in the principal London newspapers, the *National Geographic Magazine*, and the *New York Times*.

More than fifty years later, the re-editing this extraordinary book in Portuguese has been an important scientific and cultural project. The documental wealth of

Villiers' narrative makes it an indispensable source for the social history of the cod fisheries; the aesthetic and political constraints of the work makes it important in terms of political history and international relations. Finally, the social memory of the men, who built their lives on the Portuguese fishing fleet, deserves to be preserved by means of critical approaches that are neither epic nor dramatic.

Born as a museum project, the new Portuguese translation of *The Quest of the Schooner Argus* has resulted in a reconstructed memorial object. To fisheries historians, perhaps the hermeneutics of this classic confirm the advantages of a cultural approach of the phenomenon of fishing, and will show us how useful was the study of its memorial representations.

Alan Villiers: *The Quest of the Schooner Argus – A Voyage to the Banks and Greenland*, New York, Charles Scribner' 1951; *The Quest of the Schooner Argus – A Voyage to The Banks and Greenland*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1951 (first editions in English). Republished by the Maritime Museum of Ílhavo (Portugal) 2005.