

The Abbé Correia da Serra - on the Bicentennial of his Death*

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Abstract

The Abbé Correia (1750–1823) was a Portuguese intellectual, naturalist, diplomat, and politician. He lived in Washington between 1812 and 1820, the last four years as ambassador of the United Kingdom of Portugal and Brazil. He became a friend of Thomas Jefferson and other Founding Fathers of the American Republic. In 1993, Gávea-Brown published a book with his correspondence with his American friends.

Keywords

Founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, Abbé Correia da Serra, Monticello

Resumo

O Abade Correia (1750–1823) foi um intelectual português, naturalista, diplomata e político. Viveu em Washington entre 1812 e 1820, os últimos quatro anos como embaixador do Reino Unido de Portugal e Brasil. Tornou-se amigo de Thomas Jefferson e outros Pais Fundadores da República Americana. Em 1993, a Gávea-Brown publicou um livro com sua correspondência com seus amigos americanos.

Palavras-chave

Pais Fundadores, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, Abbé Correia da Serra, Monticello

* This text was presented at the roundtable, “A conversation around Abbé Correia da Serra,” held at the Cosmos Club, Washington, D.C. on May 23rd, 2024.

We are gathered here today to commemorate Abbé Correia da Serra in the bicentennial of his death. The Abbé was, with the Duke of Lafões, the founder of the Portuguese Academy of Sciences. I knew little else about him until I came to the United States more than half a century ago. One day, when I was a graduate student in Philosophy at Brown, I came across an issue of the journal *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, (a Society founded in 1743) with a long introductory study by Richard Beale Davies followed by a voluminous set of letters exchanged between Abbot Correia da Serra and the Founding Fathers of the American Republic: Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, James Monroe and others. I could not believe it. The Abbot had lived in the USA, exactly in Washington, and had been in frequent contact with the Founding Fathers of the American Republic, who held him in high regard. The letters themselves were an eloquent testimony to the Abbot's real and influential presence among the “fathers of the country” - who nicknamed him “our Socrates” and “the new Benjamin Franklin.” The aforementioned introduction was by Richard Beale Davis, a very respected American historian born in Virginia in 1907, who received his doctorate from the University of Virginia and built a brilliant career at several colleges before moving to the University of Tennessee in 1947, where he taught until 1977. He published a vast body of work that includes several volumes of critical editions of letters but also important studies such as *Intellectual Life in Jefferson's Virginia, 1790–1830* (1964), *Literature and Society in Early Virginia, 1608–1840* (1973), as well as *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South, 1585–1763* (1978).

With excitement, I wrote to Portuguese-American and Portuguese newspapers about my so-called discovery, if you allow me an exaggeration. In an article for *Diário de Notícias*, of Lisbon, I spoke of the Abbot's collaboration in the drafting of the American law on neutrality in foreign policy. Such collaboration was, arguably, an effect of the influence he enjoyed as Minister (Ambassador, in today's language) of King D. João VI, who was then running the Portuguese empire from Brazil, to where the crown had fled during the Napoleonic invasion of Portugal. The Portuguese king needed support in order to contain the expansion of Uruguay to Brazilian territory. It was important to prevent the USA from intervening and, above all, from doing so by supporting the Spanish. I was unaware at the time that Professor Leon Bourdon had already published in Paris, in 1975, a voluminous study on Correia da Serra's actions as Ambassador of the United Kingdom of Portugal and Brazil in Washington. In any event, Richard Beale Davis's careful editorial work had been published twenty years earlier and was known to Leon Bourdon himself.

Yet, the work of Richard Beale Davis on Correia da Serra had been published in a journal whose circulation was almost limited to academics; thus, it had been, for more than thirty years, buried on library shelves. For that reason, I thought of resurrecting it in book form in order to publicize the Abbot's figure, both for consumption by the North American public and the Portuguese-American community, which is always thirsty for heroes that may help raise its profile in the American soil. It also occurred to me to ask Professor Leon Bourdon to summarize his book in a short text so that it could be included in an appendix to this other volume.

For years, I continued to make the Abbé's figure known whenever I could, including when trying to call the attention of the Portuguese institutions to the story of the Abbé in America. FLAD, the Luso-American Foundation of Lisbon, became interested. Upon learning of the existence of a room in Thomas Jefferson's residence in Monticello, Virginia, where the Abbot used to stay (Jefferson had assured him that this would always be his room), FLAD contacted the management of the Monticello house. Once the information was obtained that the said room was closed and no one had any idea who the Abbé Correia da Serra was, FLAD decided to commit to supporting its renovation and its opening to the public. As for my idea of a book, José Blanco, a Gulbenkian Administrator and a great friend, understood the importance of publishing it and provided financial support. It also seemed important to obtain a preface from a renowned American historian. The choice seemed obvious to

me: Professor Gordon Wood, from the History Department at Brown, author of award-winning books on the American Revolution.

When talking to him about this possibility, Gordon Wood confessed that he had occasionally come across the name of Correia da Serra but did not know much about him, nor had he researched the subject. He was interested, though, and wanted to see the planned volume. It did not take long for him to inform me that he accepted my invitation (three days before he received a Pulitzer Prize for his book, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*). In 1993, the book on the Abbé was finally released by Gávea-Brown, a press associated with the Department of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies at Brown University.

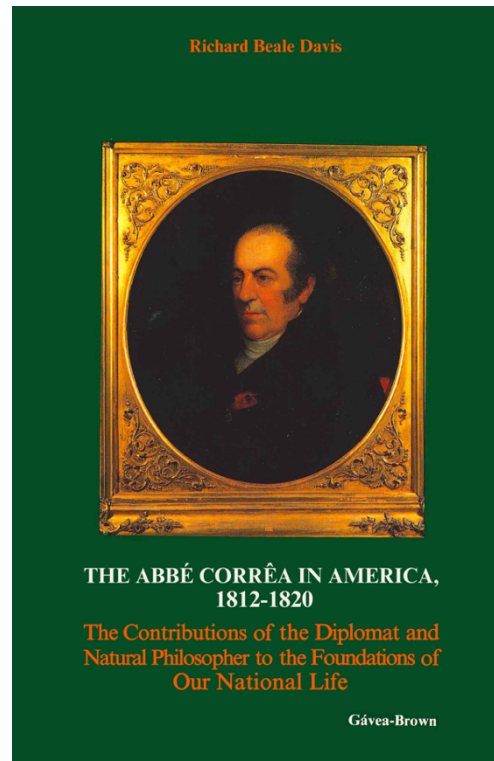


Figure 1 Cover of *The Abbé Corrêa in America, 1812–1820: The Contributions of the Diplomat and Natural Philosopher to the Foundations of our National Life*, edited by Richard Beale Davis (1993)

A Portuguese book edition was published in Lisbon in 2013, edited by Professor José Luís Cardoso.¹

The idea of organizing this event came from the dynamic Portuguese Ambassador Francisco Duarte Lopes. When he approached me about helping him, I immediately thought of inviting two individuals: precisely Gordon Wood, Emeritus Professor of History at Brown University, and Professor José Luís Cardoso, who is now the President of the Portuguese Academy of Sciences, an institution co-founded by Abbé Correia da Serra. Their involvement in this event underscores the institutional recognition of Abbé Correia da Serra's contributions and the importance of his legacy.

I will confine myself to the honor of introducing them both and moderating the session during the Q&A time. Before I do that, however, I would like to express my gratitude to the Cosmos Club for graciously opening its doors to us and allowing us to hold this event in such a distinguished setting.

¹ Lisboa: Imprensa das Ciências Sociais, 2013.

This venue befits the importance of the occasion and the significance of the figure we are honoring today, the Abbé Correia da Serra.

We will hear first from Professor José Luís Cardoso, who will provide us with a background on the personality we are honoring here today.

Before leading the Academy of Sciences, Professor José Luís Cardoso was a research professor at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa, where he served as Deputy Director (2010–2014) and Director (2014–2018). Until 2008, he was a full professor of economics and history of economic thought at ISEG, University of Lisbon. He collaborates with several foreign universities as a visiting professor. He is the author and editor of several books on the Portuguese history of economic thought from a comparative perspective, with special emphasis on the study of the processes of diffusion and assimilation of economic ideas. His historical essays combine multidisciplinary approaches with contributions from economics, sociology, and political science. His research interests also include economic history and methodology. Author of many books and an impressive number of scholarly articles, he is the general editor of the series *Classics of Portuguese Economic Thought* (20 titles in 30 volumes) and founding editor of the *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* and of the *e-journal of Portuguese history*. He was President of the European Society for the History of Economic Thought (ESHET) in 2014–2016.

Gordon S. Wood is an Alva O. Way University Professor and Professor of History Emeritus at Brown University. He received his B.A. degree from Tufts University and his Ph.D. from Harvard University. He taught at Harvard University and the University of Michigan before joining the faculty at Brown in 1969. He is the author of *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (1969), which won the Bancroft Prize and the John H. Dunning Prize in 1970, and *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1992), which won the Pulitzer Prize for History and the Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize in 1993. *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (2004) was awarded the Julia Ward Howe Prize by the Boston Authors Club in 2005. *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different* was published in 2006. *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* was published in 2008. His volume in the Oxford History of the United States, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815* (2009) was given the Association of American Publishers Award for History and Biography in 2009, the American History Book Prize by the New York Historical Society for 2010, and the Society of the Cincinnati History Prize in 2010. In 2011, he was awarded a National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama and the Churchill Bell by Colonial Williamsburg. In 2011, he also received the Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. Award from the Society of American Historians. In 2012, he received an award from the John Carter Brown Library and the John F. Kennedy Medal from the Massachusetts Historical Society. In 2015, he received the Centennial Medal from the Harvard Graduate School. In 2015, he edited two volumes, *The American Revolution: Writings from the Pamphlet Debate: 1764–1776*, for the Library of America. He reviews in *The New York Review of Books*. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society.

Thank you, Professor Gordon Wood, for not getting annoyed with my insistence on disturbing your deserved retirement and making you fly to Washington for the purpose of this event. I sincerely appreciate it immensely. Thank you, Professor José Luís Cardoso, for accepting our invitation. As President of the Portuguese Academy of Sciences, I am sure that it never crossed your mind not to accept this opportunity to celebrate the memory of the founder of the academy that you now preside over. Thank you for all your cooperation in making this event here in Washington, D.C., a reality.