

The seat of Camões

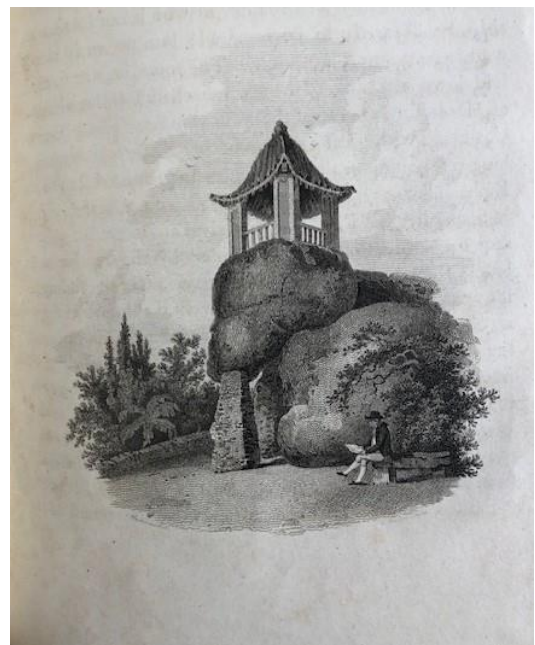
Luís Vaz de Camões (Camoens¹) in Macao

At the end of Johann Christian Hüttner's account of the Macartney Embassy to Peking (1792-1794), after returning from Peking to Canton by the inland route, mainly on the Grand Canal, he visits Macao, and records his observations and thoughts on the Portuguese epic poet Luis Vaz de Camões.²

The beautiful Portuguese poem, the Lusiades, which has lately become popular from Mickle's English translation, accompanied with extensive annotations, was written in Macao by Camoens. The place where the poet liked to sit is still known; he chose a hollow in a raised rock which was just enough to form a comfortable seat. The view from there covers various small islands which form a very picturesque grouping, at the rising and setting of the sun, when the sea is still. From here he could best observe the sea, when, lashed by the notorious typhoons, it rose in towering waves and broke on the shores with the roar of distant thunder. Here he had the whole Indian ocean before him, the scene of his nation's greatest victories, which he has immortalised. In short, the place does not fail to excite the imagination of a poet.

And not only Hüttner; Sir John Staunton, Macartney's second in command and charged with writing the official account of the Embassy, also recorded a visit to Camões' cave.³

Of rocks brought together probably in like manner, is a cave a little below the loftiest eminence in the ton, and called Camoen's cave, from a tradition current in the settlement, that the Portugueze poet of that name, who had certainly resided a considerable time at Macao, wrote his celebrated poem of the Lusiad in that spot, of which the opposite page exhibits an engraving. This interesting cave is now in the middle of a garden belonging to a house where the Ambassador and two of his suite resided at Macao, upon an invitation from one of the gentlemen of the factory, who dwelt in it when not called upon to be in Canton.



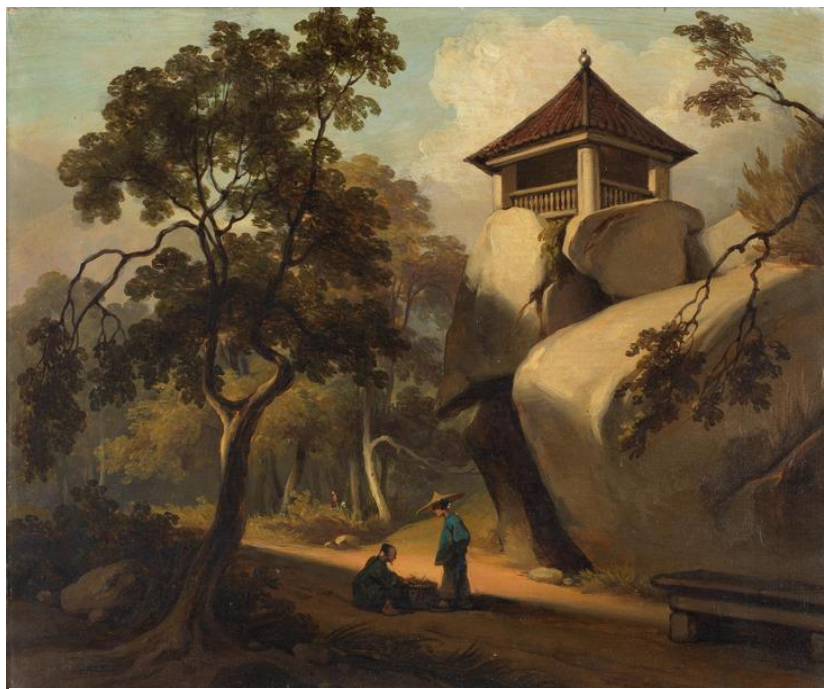
Staunton, 1797, Vol. 2, pp 589-591.

Camões also figured in the account of Cook's third and final voyage. After Cook's death, the two ships, *Resolution* and *Discovery*, under the command of Charles Clerke, sailed north again to search for the North-West passage. Clerke died and they continued under John Gore, eventually calling in at Macao on the return journey home. John Webber, the artist on Cook's third voyage, sketched the same site in Macao: *View in Macao including the Residence of Camoens where he wrote his Lusiad*.



There is another New Zealand connection in that the English artist Edward Ashworth (1814-1896) made some watercolours during a visit to Hong Kong and Macao in 1844 on the way back from New Zealand. He had previously sailed out to New Zealand in 1842 and made a number of watercolours and sketches there, including a fine watercolour of Auckland and the north Shore in 1843. One of the Macao paintings was of The T'ou T'ei Temple in Patane, Macau, situated near the Luís de Camões Garden⁴. This was supposedly the site of Camões' cave or seat and had been the site of the house of the Director of the East India Company in the early 19th C. A grotto was later built, then a bust, and there is one there still today.

Two other notable artists and engravers depicted Camões' cave, or grotto, or seat. One was the famous George Chinnery (1774-1852), who lived and painted in Macao from 1825 until his death in 1852.



George Chinnery, *The Grotto of Camões, in Macau*

The other was Thomas Allom, the English artist, illustrator and architect, who contributed to several books of sights and scenes both in Britain and in more exotic places. This included a two-volume work on China in 1843⁵, the book that was the touchstone for Victorian England's images of China. Allom, incidentally, also contributed lithographic plates for Charles Heaphy in London in the 1840s, and more notably, for Edward Jerningham Wakefield's *Illustrations to Adventure in New Zealand*, published in London in 1845.



The Grotto of Camoens, Macao. T. Allom. Vol.2 p. 42-44.

It was in Hüttner, however, that I first came across Camões. Probably like most English speakers with some pretence to literacy, I had never heard of Camões (1524-1580) or his poem. But then as we read, he emerges as the great national poet, providing an epic, published in 1572, *The Lusiads* (*Os Lusíadas*), which encapsulates the remarkable age, in the 15th and 16th centuries, of Portuguese exploration, voyaging and global adventure, a period of global hegemony hardly bettered until the Dutch Golden Age a hundred years or so later.

The poem is largely based on the Vasco de Gama's⁶ voyage to India, with more than 1000 stanzas in 10 cantos. Lusus, like Aeneas, is a founding mythical figure, son or friend of Bacchus, founding ancient Lusitania, the Lusitanians becoming the forefathers of the Portuguese. The *Lusiads*, the sons of Lusus, are the heroes. It opens with three preliminary parts, an Introduction, then prayer to the mythical Tagides, or water nymphs of the river Tagus, then a dedication to King Sebastian (1554-1578, and greatly revered), and then the narrative itself, starting part way in Canto I. The first few cantos particularly mingle myth and history, covering a narration by Vasco De Gama of Portugal's history, and then off he sails to India somewhere around Canto VI. There is much on India and exploration and then in Canto IX, de Gama escapes a Muslim trap in Calicut, fleeing, like Odysseus to an Island of love (although Odysseus was enticed), where the nymph, and de Gama's lover, Tethys

prophecies the future of Portugal, its glories in exploration and takes de Gama to a mountain top to instruct him on how the universe works, observing the *Máquina do Mundo*, the Ptolemaic universe, and seeing visions of Africa and Asia. It all ends with advice to King Sebastian. The mingling of myth, gods and nymphs, historical characters, the enchantment of voyaging and exploration, and the visions, all roll back to Homer and Virgil, and continue the line of the wanderer and explorer in myth, history and literature, the life-journey, and historical prophecy for a nation.

The first English translation was made by William Julius Mickle, and has been scorned and criticised, yet probably loved, ever since. Mickle (1734-1788) was an unremarkable man, a failed brewer who eventually worked for the Clarendon Press in Oxford, and then came to fame, and money, with his translation.⁷ This was published in 1776 and went through a number of editions. Mickle lacked the concerns of a pedantic scholar, and took some liberties with the text, even inserting some 300 lines of a naval engagement which were not in the original. Apparently, he also omitted text which was not favourable to Vasco de Gama, and you can see how the Portuguese might have warmed to him; he visited Portugal in 1777, and was well received. But it is the translation itself that grabs you, perhaps at first not quite as he imagined. It starts with a take on the Aeneid “*Arms and the heroes...*” and then greets you with exhilaration where Ceylon lifts her ‘*spicy breast and waves her woods above the wat’ry waste,...*’.



*Arms and the Heroes, who from Lisbon's shore,
Thro' seas where sail was never spread before,
Beyond where Ceylon lifts her spicy breast,
And waves her woods above the wat'ry waste,
With prowess more than human forc'd their way
To the fair kingdoms of the rising day:
What wars they wag'd, what seas, what dangers pass'd,
What glorious empire crown'd their toils at last,
Vent'rous I sing, on soaring pinions borne,
And all my country's wars the song adorn;
What kings, what heroes of my native land
Thunder'd on Asia's and on Afric's strand:
Illustrious shades, who levell'd in the dust
The idol-temples and the shrines of lust:
And where, erewhile, foul demons were rever'd,
To Holy Faith unnumber'd altars rear'd:
Illustrious names, with deathless laurels crown'd,
While time rolls on in every clime renown'd!*

It deserves reading out loud. Here is part of the famous Canto on de Gama’s flight to the island of love. It starts with pure Homer;

*Red rose the dawn; roll'd o'er the low'ring sky,
The scattering clouds of tawny purple fly.*

De Gama and his heroes are guided by the Queen of Love to the island of love with its eventually welcoming nymphs:

*Right to the isle which all my smiles inspire:
Soon shall my care that beauteous isle supply,
Where Zephyr, breathing love, on Flora's lap shall sigh.
There let the nymphs the gallant heroes meet,
And strew the pink and rose beneath their feet:
In crystal halls the feast divine prolong,
With wine nectareous and immortal song:
Let every nymph the snow-white bed prepare,
And, fairer far, resign her bosom there;
There, to the greedy riotous embrace
Resign each hidden charm with dearest grace.*

And later:

*The golden morn beheld the scenes of joy;
Nor, sultry noon, mayst thou the bowers annoy;
The sultry noon-beam shines the lover's aid,
And sends him glowing to the secret shade.
O'er ev'ry shade, and ev'ry nuptial bower
The love-sick strain the virgin turtles pour;
For nuptial faith and holy rites combin'd,
The Lusian heroes and the nymphs conjoin'd.*

The poem ends with an address to the young King Sebastián:

*Enough, my muse, thy wearied wing no more
Must to the seat of Jove triumphant soar.
Chill'd by my nation's cold neglect, thy fires
Glow bold no more, and all thy rage expires.
Yet thou, Sebastian, thou, my king, attend;
Behold what glories on thy throne descend!
Shall haughty Gaul or sterner Albion boast
That all the Lusian fame in thee is lost!
Oh, be it thine these glories to renew,
And John's bold path and Pedro's course pursue:
Snatch from the tyrant-noble's hand the sword,
And be the rights of humankind restor'd.*

.....
*"O let th' Iambic Muse revenge that wrong
Which cannot slumber in thy sheets of lead;
Let thy abused honour crie as long
As there be quills to write, or eyes to reade:
On his rank name let thine own votes be turn'd,
Oh may that man that hath the Muses scorn'd
Alive, nor dead, be ever of a Muse adorn'd."*

Mickle provides a life of Camoës, and a dissertation on the poem, with individual dissertations for the Cantos, and extensive notes. It is a serious read. Of course, while Mickle was the first to translate the work into English, he was not the only translator, and the most notable subsequent effort was by the unequalled Sir Richard Burton. Burton translated and published 6 volumes of Camões' poetry and life: the *Lusiads* are in volumes 3 and 4⁸, along with two volumes of his *Life and Commentary*, and two volumes of sonnets, canzons, odes and sextines.⁹ He has quite some enthusiasm for the poet and the work, along with a dedication to his good friend Algernon Swinburne; Burton's own life is not out of place beside that of the Portuguese adventurer.

There is no shortage of literature on the poetry and the man, most in Portuguese. A modern translation was published in 2001¹⁰. There is a recent very fine book on Camões and the contemporary archivist Damiano de Góis¹¹, an absorbing account of the life, the history and the literature. Mickle's translation of the *Lusiads* has also been digitised.¹²

And what of Camões himself? He was born in Lisbon in 1524, and served in Morocco for the Portuguese army, losing an eye, clearly depicted in images of him in later years. He travelled on as a soldier to India, Arabia and Africa, and eventually Macao, where he served as a warrant officer. One of his jobs was to oversee the property of Portuguese soldiers and sailors who had died, and he was accused of profiting from this, spending time in prison. He suffered being shipwrecked at the mouth of the Mekong River in Cambodia, reputedly holding his manuscript aloft as he swam to shore, and returned to Lisbon in 1570, presumably battle worn, and with a text in his arms.¹³ He presented his work to the King, still a teenager, who commanded it be published. He spent his last years living near the Convent of Santa Ana, and died of the plague on June 10, 1580, buried in a poor man's grave and his bones lost.



Portrait of Camões as in the frontispiece of Mickle's translation.



Portrait painted in Goa, 1581

¹ In most English translations and text, Camões is written Camoens, making explicit the implied 'n' in the Portuguese.

² Huttner, J.C., p. 188. https://www.hakluyt.com/downloadable_files/Journal/Huttner.pdf. See 'The Macartney Embassy to Peking' on this site.

³ Staunton, J. L. An authentic account of an embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China; London: W Bulmer and Co. MDCCXCVII [1797]. Vol.2, pp. 589-591.

⁴ <https://www.hordern.com/pages/books/4505127/edward-ashworth-english-architect/to-ti-kong-small-temple-nr-macao> Accessed 10 December 2022.

⁵ Allom, Thomas; Wright, George Newenham; Gutzlaff, Karl. China, in a series of views, displaying the scenery, architecture and social habits, of that ancient empire. London, Fisher, c.1843.

1 ed, 4 vols bound in 2, 124 engraved plates and 4 additional engraved titles.

⁶ Vasco de Gama (c1460s-1524) was the great Portuguese explorer, the first European to reach India by sea. His first voyage, opened up the sea route to the East and spanned 1496-98, De Gama arriving in Calicut in May, 1498.

⁷ **Cousin, J. W.**, "Mickle, William Julius". A Short Biographical Dictionary of English Literature. London: J. M. Dent & Sons. 1910.

⁸ **Burton, Sir Richard.**, Camoens. His Life and his Lusiads. London, Bernard Quaritch, 1881. 2 vols.

⁹ Burton's volumes, and various editions of Mickle, are still available on the rare book market.

¹⁰ Luís de Camões., The Lusiads. Oxford, Oxford university Press, 2001. Tr. Landeg White.

¹¹ **Wilson-Lee, E.**, A History of Water: Being an Account of a Murder, an Epic and Two Visions of Global History. London, Collins, 2022.

¹² <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/32528/32528-h/32528-h.htm>. Accessed 10 December 2022.

¹³ <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/take-a-tour-around-the-world-with-poet-lu%C3%ADs-vaz-de-cam%C3%B5es/0gWBv7WFae8KIQ?hl=en>. Accessed 10 December 2022.