

Dom Pedro II — The Emperor Who Loved Books

Brazilian Academy of History and Literature

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Dom Pedro II was born on December 2, 1825, at the Palace of São Cristóvão, in Rio de Janeiro. The son of Dom Pedro I and the Empress Leopoldina, he grew up not only under the weight of the crown, but above all under the weight of books. Biographical records indicate that, while still young, he declared his wish to devote his life to culture and the sciences.

His childhood and adolescence were marked by solitude, rigorous study, and preparation to govern an enormous and unstable country. While other boys played, Pedro studied languages, history, philosophy, and the natural sciences. Before being an emperor, he was, above all, a permanent student.

The polyglot who translated the world

Few sovereigns came close to Dom Pedro II in intellectual erudition. Throughout his life he devoted himself passionately to the study of languages.

Historical sources indicate that he mastered several European languages — French, English, German, and Italian — and applied himself to classical and oriental languages such as Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, and Sanskrit. He also showed an interest in Old Tupi, revealing his attention to the Indigenous foundations of Brazilian culture.

But the emperor did not confine himself to learning languages: he put them to work as a translator. Imperial manuscripts record translations by Dom Pedro II of authors such as Dante Alighieri, Victor Hugo, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Alessandro Manzoni, as well as Jewish and Christian religious texts, passages from *One Thousand and One Nights*, from the epic poem *La Araucana*, and from the Indian *Hitopadeśa*.

Translating, for him, was not merely an intellectual exercise — it was a way of holding a conversation with the world, and of bringing that world closer to Brazil.

Libraries and science: the palace as a center of learning

By the end of his reign, Dom Pedro II kept extensive private libraries, gathering tens of thousands of volumes — approximately sixty thousand books on science, history, the arts, religion, literature, and philosophy.

The Palace of São Cristóvão worked as a true center of study, housing books, maps, scientific instruments, and equipment intended for research.

Dom Pedro II was also an enthusiast of photography, and acquired a daguerreotype apparatus as early as 1840, becoming one of the pioneers of the practice in Brazil.

A patron of Brazilian intelligence

In conducting the Empire, his cultural role was decisive. The emperor strengthened the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute; supported the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts; encouraged musical institutions; funded scientists, artists, and intellectuals; granted scholarships to young Brazilians in Europe, often from his own imperial allowance; and supported scientific research and naturalist expeditions.

Dom Pedro II was a patron in the fullest sense. He financed artists and intellectuals engaged in building the national memory, and helped to shape, through art and education, the image of an Empire turned toward progress.

An emperor among intellectuals and inventions

Dom Pedro II kept up an intellectual dialogue with central figures of the nineteenth century, among them Charles Darwin, Louis Pasteur, Richard Wagner, Louis Agassiz, and Alexander Graham Bell.

On his travels abroad he frequented universities, libraries, theaters, and scientific exhibitions. In 1876, in the United States, he saw the telephone presented by Graham Bell, and brought the new technology to Brazil shortly afterward.

Victor Hugo, receiving him in Paris, is said to have declared: "Sire, you are a great citizen; you are the grandson of Marcus Aurelius."

Dom Pedro II was also admitted to several international scientific societies, including the French Academy of Sciences — an honor rarely granted to a head of state.

Poetry, thought, and the man behind the crown

More than a reader, Dom Pedro II wrote verse, kept diaries, and produced philosophical and spiritual reflections. His notebooks reveal an introspective, sensitive temperament, deeply bound to intellectual life.

He once declared that, had he not been emperor, he would have liked to be a teacher, for he saw in education the noblest of missions.

Even while governing a country of continental size, Dom Pedro II chose to live soberly. He had no taste for ostentation or for the excesses of the court. He preferred a good book to a great banquet.

The coup and the exile

On November 15, 1889, the Brazilian monarchy was overthrown by a military coup. There was no popular consultation. The population was taken by surprise.

Dom Pedro II ordered no armed resistance. He left for exile with dignity.

In Europe he lived modestly. He went on reading, writing, and corresponding with scholars. He died in Paris on December 5, 1891.

He asked that a handful of Brazilian soil be placed in his coffin. His wish was granted.

After the exile, his personal collection was confiscated by the new regime and incorporated, piecemeal, into institutions such as the National Library, the National Museum, and the National Archives.

A legacy that endures

Dom Pedro II was not only an emperor. He was a translator, a reader, a patron, an intellectual, and an interlocutor of the great minds of his time.

He remains a symbol of a Brazil that believed in knowledge as a national project. To revisit him is to remember that we once had, at the head of the country, someone defined not by the power he held, but by the knowledge he sought. And perhaps that is his greatest legacy.

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