

THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME CASTELLA*

By Ian Bruce

During much of the nineteenth century and all the twentieth, anyone researching the discovery of St Helena will have read it was found by a Portuguese fleet of ships led by a gentleman by the name of João da Nova Castella. The first name varied – sometimes he also called John or Juan, but the last name of Castella was almost invariably the same.

Then, at the turn of the millennium Alexander Schulenburg and Trevor Hearl drew attention to the fact that none of the Portuguese accounts ever mentioned the Castella name. Indeed, neither had anybody in the English-speaking world, not until 1817 when it was cited on the second page of a guidebook, *A Tour Through the Island of St Helena*.

According to the most accurate account, this Island was first discovered by Juan de Nova Castella, a Portuguese navigator, on his return from India [..].¹

The author was John Barnes, a Captain in the St Helena Artillery Regiment who served as town major of Jamestown, responsible for the military administration and lodging of troops in the town. He was also employed by the East India Company as a civil and military surveyor, in which capacity he created a detailed map of St Helena.² He knew every corner of the island and was well qualified to write a guide that described the island's landscape, geology and natural history. Apart from the above extract about the discovery, book contains very little history other than an outline of how Napoleon's arrival in 1815 was impacting life on the island.

Little attention would probably have been paid to Barnes' reference to Castella, except Thomas Brooke also decided to quote the name when he published the second edition of his history of the island. In his first edition published in 1808 Brooke had merely named the discoverer as "John de Nova".³ When he came to publish his second edition in 1824, seven years after the Barnes' guidebook, Brooke decided to hedge his bets and give two names:

"[...] the more general opinion is, that it [St Helena] was first discovered by John de Nova, or Juan de Nova Castella, in the year 1502".⁴

Brooke's second edition was for many years regarded as St Helena's standard history. Authors first took their information from it and then, more promiscuously, from one another. Philip Gosse quoted Brooke extensively in the first sections of his equally influential 1938 book, devoting almost a whole page to describe in inventive detail all the exciting events he imagined occurred on the day admiral João da Nova Castella first sighted the island.⁵ The Castella myth was thereby many times regurgitated over a period of 180 years, the name only being questioned around the turn of the millennium.

Brooke and Barnes lived on the island at the same time and must have known one another sufficiently well to have a simple conversation. Why did Brooke not ask Barnes where he sourced the Castella name and why he used it in the guidebook? The answer comes down to timing. Records show *A Tour Through the Island of St Helena* was published in London on 31 March 1817. Sadly, they also show that John Barnes was buried a month later at St James Church on 2 May.⁶ Not even the speediest ship of the period could transport these books from London to St Helena in a single month. Barnes was not able to answer any questions by the time the guidebooks finally arrived at the island.

* This is an edited version of an article that appeared in Wirebird, Issue No 48, 2019.

That still leaves the question Brookes would have wanted to ask Barnes – why did he quote the Castella name? For some readers, the answer will be obvious – it was to indicate that João da Nova was Castilian by birth. Relatively little is known about his background, but the historians João da Barros and Damião de Góis both claimed João da Nova was born at Galicia, in the kingdom of Castile.⁷ What the English call Castile is Castela to the Portuguese, spelt with a single letter “L”. It is suggested that if Barnes sent a handwritten manuscript to the printers, the word Castela could easily have been misread as Castella when the book was typeset in London.



For many years thought authentic, the Castella seal went missing from the Castle before 2002. It is today suspected to have been made by Oswell Jones, who created many pictures and artefacts for tourists in the 1950s-60s

With his interest in natural history, Barnes may also have read a best-selling book by the German-born naturalist George Forster that described Captain Cook’s second expedition aboard *HMS Resolution*. Describing Cook’s visit to St Helena and Ascension in May 1775 during the home passage, he wrote about their discovery and gave João da Nova yet another suffix name:

This island [Ascension] was first discovered in 1501 by João da Nova Galego, a Portuguese navigator, who named it Ilha de Nossa Senhora de Conceição [Island of Our Lady of Conception]. The same admiral on his return to Portugal in 1502, discovered the island of St Helena, which obtained that name from the day of the discovery.⁸

The Portuguese word Galego translates to English as Galician. George Forster simply defined João da Nova’s origin as a Galician by adding the suffix Galego. There are many other examples where this form of nomenclature has been used. For example, Mary Magdalen is thought to have come from the town of *Magdala* on the shore of the Sea of Galilee whilst Judas Iscariot may have been a man (*Ish*) from the town of *Kerioth* in southern Judea.⁹

It is suggested John Barnes simply followed the same nomenclature as George Forster. Whilst Barnes cited the kingdom, Forster more precisely named a region within that kingdom. That it took almost two centuries to correct the “Castella” error may be considered the comedic result that comes when authors repeatedly copy the mistakes of others. However, it is less funny

to discover just how many books and papers published in the last few years have perpetuated the myth that St Helena was discovered by one “João da Nova Castella”.¹⁰

All internet references were accessed in August 2017. URLs are quoted below in condensed tinyurl format.

¹ John Barnes, *A Tour Through the Island of St. Helena (Reprint of 1817 Edition)* (Western Cape, South Africa: Fish Hoek Printing, Castell Collection, 2007), 2.

² A high-resolution image of Captain John Barnes' map can be viewed on <http://tinyurl.com/yhck5ev>.

³ Thomas H. Brooke, *A History of the Island of St Helena: From Its Discovery by the Portuguese to the Year 1806* (Black, Parry and Kingsbury, 1808), 35.

⁴ T. H. Brooke, *History of the Island of St Helena, from Its Discovery by the Portuguese to the Year 1823.*, 2nd ed.. (London: Kingsbury, Parbury, and Allen, 1824), 46.

⁵ Philip Gosse, *St Helena 1502-1938* (Oswestry: Anthony Nelson, 1938), 2–3.

⁶ A newspaper advertisement announced the book would be published on 31 March 1817: ‘Advertisements & Notices’, *Morning Chronicle*, 27 March 1817, 2. John Barnes burial, 2 May 1817: University of Witwatersrand, St James Church Burials 1808-1819, p46, URL: <http://tinyurl.com/yvq5znk>.

⁷ João de Barros, Manoel Severim de Faria, and João Baptista Lavanha, *Da Asia de João de Barros e de Diogo de Couto*, vol. I, book V, chapter X (Lisbon: Regia Officina Typografica, 1777), 463, <https://tinyurl.com/y3vpvown>; Eduardo Rey Tristán, ‘Participación gallega en los inicios de la expansión portuguesa en el Índico: João da Nova’, 3 May 2012, 85–114, <http://tinyurl.com/yqcematu>; Damião de Góis, *Chronica do serenissimo senhor rei D. Manoel* (Lisbon: Na officina de M. Manescal da Costa, 1749), 83, <https://tinyurl.com/y8qprof4>.

⁸ George Forster, *Voyage Round the World in His Britannic Majesty's Sloop Resolution Commanded by Capt. James Cook during the Years 1772, 3, 4 and 5*, vol. II (London: B. White, 1777), 571, <http://tinyurl.com/lguplnn>.

⁹ Jean-Pierre Isbouts, *Young Jesus: Restoring The 'lost Years' of a Social Activist and Religious Dissident* (London: Sterling, 2008), 226, 253.

¹⁰ Examples of recently published books and papers that have persisted in quoting the name “da Nova Castella”: John Everett-Heath, *The Concise Dictionary of World Place-Names* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); H. Morse Stephens, *A Short History of Portugal* (San Diego: Didactic Press, 2017); J. Denis Derbyshire and Ian Derbyshire, *Encyclopedia of World Political Systems* (London: Routledge, 2016), 684; Pearson, *Distant Freedom*, 13; Hoare, *The Resolution Journal of Johann Reinhold Forster, 1772–1775*, 200, Note 2; Whitehead, *The Emperor's Shadow*, 65; Neufeldt, *The Works of Patrick Brannwell Brontë, 1827-1833*, 1:239, Note 15; The Statistics Office, ‘St Helena in Figures, 2012/13’; Murdoch, *Four Years on St Helena*, 60; J. Thomas Hindmarsh, *The Death of Napoleon*, 11.