



‘King John of Portugal’ by Heinrich Abel Seiffert, 1802.

Rothschild, London NMR 186

Unmasking ‘King John of Portugal’

Fiona McGarel-Groves reveals how the rediscovery of a portrait led to a deeper understanding of the Rothschilds’ early global business activities.

In a small room in the third New Court where, until 2004, the London price of gold was set twice each business day by five representatives from The London Gold Market Fixing Ltd., hung a small series of early nineteenth-century portraits, known as the ‘Crowned Heads’. These heads of state represented five of the countries for which the Rothschild brothers provided government loans in the two decades after the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815).¹ The portraits are identified by small brass labels as the Empress Catherine of Russia, King William of the Netherlands, Emperor Francis of Austria, King Frederick William of Prussia, and King John of Portugal. They now hang together with two other ‘Crowned Heads’ of significance – William IX, the Elector of Hesse, and Andrew Jackson, President of the United States – in a prominent corridor in the present New Court.

The ‘Crowned Heads’ were labelled some time after they were acquired. They were probably presented to Nathan Mayer Rothschild at the times of the various loans, and a 1917 inventory indicates that several of them were hung in the corridor off the main entrance hall of the mansion at Nathan’s estate at Gunnersbury, West London. King John is not mentioned in that inventory and it is unclear where this picture was in 1917. One can only imagine that, after two generations, a member of the family decided to label the portraits so that their subjects would not be forgotten, and that some guesswork was involved. After most of the pictures were correctly identified, the last picture and the last name were put together – erroneously as we now know.

It was established some time ago that the sitter with northern European features, labelled King John of Portugal, was unlikely to be that particular monarch. Known portraits of Dom João VI, King of Portugal, Brazil, and the Algarves (1767–1826) show him to have been a dark man with coarse facial features, (even accounting for the flattering work of court painters) and to be rather stout. The Portuguese Embassy in London recently described him as an ugly man.²

The correct identification was made possible thanks to a gift to the Archive, made by Baron Nathaniel de Rothschild in 2012, of a collection of nineteenth-century civil decorations, which had no accompanying documentation but were believed to have been awarded to James de Rothschild (1792–1868), founder of the Paris Rothschild house. Research revealed that the orders came from a number of European countries, as well as Turkey and Russia. The decorations have broadly the same citation, being awarded in appreciation for services to the country of origin.

The decorations were examined to establish whether they could be connected with some of the early Rothschild loans. For example, the Prussian loan of five million pounds in 1818 could be related to the Prussian Order of the Red Eagle in the box. King Frederick William III (1770–1840) (one of the Crowned Heads) used this as his highest-ranking royal order, generally awarding it for outstanding service. It is not unreasonable to think that this distinguished order could well have been given to James – and indeed Nathan – for their part in the negotiations for the loan, and perhaps to acknowledge the part the brothers had played in financing Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo in 1815.



The Order of the Red Eagle.
RAL 000/2089



‘King John’ wears several Iron Cross decorations, known to be Prussian, on his coat. This medieval symbol of the Teutonic Knights was established as a largely, but not exclusively, military decoration by King Frederick William III in 1813 during the Napoleonic Wars. ‘King John’ wears the non-combatant version of the medal coupled with the prestigious Order of the Red Eagle, as does King Frederick William in our portrait, which suggested that this man could be a member of the Prussian Royal family, although no likeness could be found. However, he also wears the prestigious Order of the Red Eagle. A search for recipients of the Order of the Red Eagle, and a search of those names to find portraits, eventually revealed that this man was Karl August, Prince von Hardenberg (1750–1822), Prussian statesman and variously Frederick William’s Foreign Minister, Chancellor and plenipotentiary. Why was he sufficiently important to be included among the Crowned Heads?

Hardenberg was essentially a senior civil servant with considerable diplomatic skills and an interest in political reform. King Frederick William II of Prussia (1744–97) made him Cabinet Minister responsible for negotiating peace with France in 1795. On the strength on this, after Frederick William III’s accession in 1797, Hardenberg was appointed Foreign Minister, and then First Minister in 1804. France was then still at war in Europe, and Napoleon’s overwhelming triumph at the Battle of Austerlitz meant that Prussia was compelled into alliance with France in early 1806. Napoleon then insisted Hardenberg be dismissed, knowing him to be a major opponent of France with a considerable influence over the King.



Frederick William III, King of Prussia
by Heinrich Abel Seiffert, 1802. NMR 1406

In 1810 Hardenberg returned, as Prussian Chancellor. He and the Minister for Trade began a thorough programme of reform, in order to strengthen and modernise Prussia. They concentrated on radical social and political reorganisation: revising the military system, abolishing serfdom, developing municipal institutions and making the civil service and education available to all classes. By the time Napoleon had overreached himself with his 1812 Russian campaign, Hardenberg felt Prussia was ready for war with France.

Hardenberg now had a role within the close and powerful Quadruple Alliance of Prussia, Russia, Austria and Britain at the Congress of Vienna in 1814–18, where he was Prussia’s chief representative. The Congress’s object was to establish long-term peace for Europe, mainly by resizing, and thereby balancing, the main powers. In 1814 the king honoured him with the rank of Prince, for his achievements. The new Kingdom of the Netherlands was represented, as was Portugal, among others at the Congress. Five of these countries are reflected by our Crowned Heads. By 1831 the Rothschilds had raised a Government loan for each of these countries, such was the parlous state of Europe’s finances after years of war, and in 1818 Hardenberg was the first statesman to sanction and negotiate a Government loan with the Rothschilds. He died four years later, in 1822.

Returning again to the mysterious ‘King John’, the Palacio Nacional da Ajuda in Lisbon kindly provided The Rothschild Archive with a digital image, which proves that Dom João looked nothing like the portrait with his name. J.A. Rogers (1883–1966), writer on matters of race, intimates that many of João’s family and ancestors were of African appearance. He attributes this to historic intermarriage during the medieval Moorish occupation of the Iberian Peninsula. He quotes the Duchess d’Abrantès, wife of the French Ambassador to Portugal at the time of João’s Regency, describing in her 1837 memoirs João’s ‘enormous head with its Negro hair, which moreover was quite in harmony with his thick lips, his African nose and the colour of his skin’.³

João was Prince Regent from 1799 to 1816 during his mother Queen Maria’s mental illness, and King for a further ten years until his death. In the year that João assumed the Regency, Napoleon attempted to force Portugal to break her alliance with Britain and submit to France, or be invaded. João refused, playing for time as he signed a secret treaty ensuring British help for his court to flee to Brazil. By November 1807 invasion was inevitable and the British navy transported the royal family and an enormous retinue to Brazil. The government was left with a Regency, and a population which could not believe that their ruler had abandoned them.

João was welcomed in his American colony, and quickly set the tone for his reign with an 1808 charter opening Brazil’s ports to trade with friendly nations on favourable terms. This was an important economic and political move as Brazil had previously only traded directly with Portugal. In return for its services to the Royal Family, Britain had negotiated an agreement to receive trade concessions from Brazil, in return for which Britain would endorse Brazilian independence. In fact it was a shoddy device which enabled Britain to manipulate Brazilian imports while paying almost half the duty charged to other countries, and inhibited Brazilian tobacco and sugar markets in competition with Britain’s nearby producers.

Nevertheless, João transformed his chosen capital, Rio de Janeiro, with new buildings, imported luxury goods, and new standards of etiquette and fashion. His enormous retinue of aristocrats, civil servants, professionals, military and religious officials and skilled artisans, underpinned a new national administration. At the same time he nurtured the Bank of Brazil and more than one university, public services and cultural activities, and a new economy, which became the basis for Brazil’s future independence. Brazil effectively ceased to be a colony and became a sovereign nation. Meanwhile, in post-occupation Portugal, the population

Dom João VI, King of the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and the Algarves.

By kind permission of the Palacio Nacional da Ajuda, Lisbon, Portugal.

Opposite and below
The Royal Order of the Tower and Sword.
RAL 000/2089



was starving and many emigrated. The country had effectively become a reluctant British protectorate, and in 1820 the population persuaded their king to return, but as a constitutional monarch. His son Pedro remained in Brazil to become the ruler in 1822.

Both Portugal and Brazil were clients of the London Rothschild house, receiving Government loans in 1823 and 1822 respectively. James’s box of decorations holds the ancient Portuguese Order of the Tower and Sword, an order of knighthood and the pinnacle of the Portuguese honours system. João VI used it to reward services to the Crown by foreigners who were ineligible for other Portuguese orders due to their religion. This is another decoration that could well have been awarded to James and his brothers in acknowledgement of their services in furnishing the government loans.

The search to unmask King John and then discover why Hardenberg was included among the Crowned Heads, leads to a further interesting story. It appears that Nathan was doing business with these countries some years earlier than the various government loans, and that business, which was immensely significant, may well have given those countries the confidence to deal with the Rothschilds in such enormous amounts of money later on.

Northern Europe was in the grip of the Napoleonic Wars in the early years of the century. France's Continental Blockade made the movement of commodities and money around the Continent almost impossible for those countries which were not under her control. Nathan, who was dealing in specie and bullion in London, had extended his activities into Europe by smuggling by sea where Napoleon had no control. He was moving larger and larger sums successfully and making handsome profits in the process. His youngest brother James was working with him in England and France and together they established an impressive network of agents, dealers and couriers across Europe and as far afield as South America.

Meanwhile, the British Government had committed to financial support of her allies against Napoleon; Austria, Prussia and Russia received regular grants, but the blockade made the acquisition and movement of money increasingly difficult. 'The war was provoked by Revolutionary France, and Napoleon prompted Britain and other powers in Europe to form coalitions to defend themselves, and it was not until 1813 that they were prepared to go on the offensive. This took enormous amounts of money.'⁴

In 1812 John Herries, Commissary-General to the British Army, responsible for funding both the allies and the Army, noted Nathan's international financial operations. General Wellesley (later Duke of Wellington) and his Army, were beleaguered in the Iberian peninsula in urgent need of money. In July 1812 Wellesley had written to Earl Bathurst (1762–1864) Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, suggesting he stop depending on the Bank of England for money and employ a private agent to collect and deliver it straight to him.⁵ Herries, with government approval, approached Nathan.

Nathan raised the money by his usual methods, and his agents delivered it to Wellesley. This successful operation gave the British Government confidence in Nathan, and Herries appointed him to raise the money for the allies' subsidies. Nathan again managed to deliver enormous amounts to assist the allies, some of whom were in desperate circumstances after twenty years of war. Financial transactions of this size could not go unnoticed, and Herbert Kaplan notes in *Nathan Mayer Rothschild and the Creation of a Dynasty*, that the British could only hope they would be interpreted as 'a private speculation.'⁶

Herries now recommended to the Prime Minister and Chancellor that the method of paying the allies be restructured and regularised. In addition, while Wellesley's army remained in France, 'a more regular and direct means of funding it' had to be found, together with 'a person confidentially entrusted with power to make arrangements to this effect ... the operations of an exchange agent of great power and extensive connexion, collecting funds regularly, and with constant regards to the interests of England through all the principal exchanges of Europe.'⁷ The model 'exchange agent' for the task was Nathan. The Prime Minister and Chancellor approved; the Chancellor wrote to the Foreign Secretary about Nathan '... I have not met with any[one] capable of executing any operation on such a scale except those to whom I have referred.'⁸

After Napoleon went into exile in 1814, Herries made even greater use of Nathan as facilitator and paymaster, including using his resources to fund the return of Louis XVIII to France. A year later, Napoleon escaped from prison and raised an army. 'The threat of a resumption of war against Napoleon meant that Britain and its allies would once again require enormous amounts of money to pay for it. And once again the skills of the Rothschilds would be mobilised.'⁹ The Chancellor wrote with satisfaction to the Foreign Secretary of 'Herries, who, with his Jew friends, will be our principal instruments in the management...' ¹⁰ Nathan's huge and complicated machinery again cranked into action as 'once again, Britain would pay dearly to defeat Napoleon, and, once again, the Rothschilds would become indispensable to the British Government, and even richer because of it.'¹¹ After Napoleon's defeat in 1815, the Congress

Opposite
Examples of the bullion specie assembled by Nathan and James Rothschild to provide the British Army and its allies with funds to continue war with Napoleon. Rothschild, London

of Vienna ordered France to pay the Quadruple Alliance 700 million francs in indemnities, to each of the allies in five annual instalments. The Rothschilds were commissioned to manage the transactions for Britain, Russia and Prussia. As with all their other dealings with the British Government and the allies, these transactions were subject to 'a suitable and sizeable commission.'¹²

Kaplan believes that 'the contributions the Rothschilds made to a victorious British policy on the Continent were, when examined closely, actually far greater than the myths grown up about them.'¹³ For a short while Nathan and his brothers stood at the centre of Europe's tumultuous events, with success or failure truly depending on them. It is notable that they confined their recompense to that 'suitable and sizeable commission' without request for personal gain, social realignment, or political favour apart from some petitioning to Hardenberg for Jewish rights in Frankfurt, when at the Council of Vienna in 1815.

The discovery of the identity of a portrait is a researcher's delight. For that subject to be unexpectedly distinguished, and for him to lead directly to the true breadth of Nathan's astonishing financial muscle in Europe at such a critical time, was an unlooked for and exciting ride. The story has added another dimension to the Rothschild Crowned Heads, helping us to a greater understanding of their importance to Rothschild history. This all begs the question: did Nathan Rothschild receive a portrait of King John? If he did, what became of it? Does it yet survive in a family collection somewhere? More research in the archives is in order.

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NOTES

- 1 www.rothschildarchive.org
- 2 Information communicated privately.
- 3 J.A. Rogers, *World's Great Men of Colour, vol.2* (New York: Touchstone, 1996, first published 1947), p.62.
- 4 Herbert H Kaplan, *Nathan Mayer Rothschild and the Creation of a Dynasty* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p.99.
- 5 Ibid., p.75.
- 6 Ibid., p.87.
- 7 Ibid., p.102.
- 8 Ibid., p.103.
- 9 Ibid., p.138.
- 10 Ibid., p.139.
- 11 Ibid., p.139.
- 12 Ibid., p.152.
- 13 Ibid., p.103.

