

A WATERSPOUT OF 1497.

(contributed by C.E.Hounam)

"The Lusíads", the national epic of Portugal, was composed by Luis Vaz de Camoens; the work was commenced prior to 1561 and was published in 1572.

Camoens was born in 1524, the year in which Vasco da Gama died. Because of a distant relationship to da Gama by marriage he had grown up with an intense interest in the great discoveries of his own and the earlier generations of adventurous Portuguese. After 1546 he spent a good deal of his life in the Portuguese Empire in India, the Indies and as far east as China and experienced many of the hardships described in his poem.

The poem summarises the achievements under various Portuguese Kings leading up to the exploits of the great hero Vasco da Gama, who set sail on 8th July, 1497, not the first Portuguese to round the Cape of Good Hope, but the first to force a passage to India. The fleet comprised two shallow-draught three-mast ships of approximately 200 tons each and a store ship of 400 tons. Crews consisted of 170 men including 12 convicts for any particularly dangerous undertaking. Of these about 60 died of scurvy.

Fogs, storms, calms and contrary winds were experienced. After leaving Cape Verde, land was not sighted for 96 days but the fleet still had not rounded the Cape. Canto 5 of the poem describes the experiences during this period and the following extract is an account of a waterspout encountered before land was sighted. The description is ostensibly by da Gama (from the translation by J. J. Aubertin, 1878).

XVI To tell thee of the dangers of the sea
At length, which human understanding scare,
Tornádos sudden, dreadful in degree,
Lightnings which seem to set on fire the air,
Dark floods of rain, nights of obscurity,
Rollings of thunder which the world would tear,
Were not less labour than a great mistake
E'en had I voice of iron wherewith to speak.

XVII I saw the sights which a rude seaman's crew,
Who long experience as their guide revere,
Always account as positive and true
Judgings of things as only they appear;
But which by those who take a sounder view,
Who by pure genius and by science clear,
Behold creation's mysteries profound
And judged ill-understood and without ground.

XVIII I saw, and clearly saw, the living light
Which sailors everywhere as sacred hold
In time of storm and crossing winds that fight,
Of tempest dark and desperation cold,
Nor less it was to all a marvel quite
And matter surely to alarm the bold,
To observe the sea clouds with a tube immense
Suck water up from Ocean's deep expanse.

XIX I certainly beheld (nor do suppose
My sight deceived me aught) that in the air
A fume or vapour thin and subtle rose,
And by the wind began revolving there;
Thence to the topmost clouds a tube it throws
But of a substance so exceedingly rare
That scarce the naked eye its form could see,
It seemed as are the clouds composed to be.

XX Little by little it still larger grew,
Passing a large mast's thickness in degree;
Here narrowing, here enlarging, as it drew
Vast quantities of water from the sea;
E'en with the waves 'twas waving, to our view,
A'top, a dark thick cloud hung heavily,
Becoming yet more laden and enlarged
With the vast water's weight wherewith 'twas charged.

XXI E'en as we lee, the red leech that takes hold
Upon the cattle's lips (which heedlesswise
Have caught it, drinking in the fountain cold)
How with their blood its thirst it satisfies,
Still sucking, more and more its parts in fold,
And fill themselves to an enormous size;
In this great column, filling, substance gains,
And feeds the sable cloud which it sustains.

XXII But when it was quite gorged, it then withdrew
The foot that on the sea beneath had grown,
And o'er the heavens at last it raining flew,
The 'jacent waters watering with its own;
With waves it took the waves it doth review;
But the salt flavour has entirely flown;
Now let our scientific writers see
What mighty secrets these of nature be.

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