Recent Publications and Book Reviews


The image of Malta has always been associated with the art of healing. In prehistoric times it was divination, prognostication and medication practised in the wonderful temples above and below ground that attracted worshippers from the Mediterranean littoral. During the long rule of the Knights Hospitallers, the hospitals of Malta acquired fame throughout Europe and the standard of sanitation in the Island was admired and followed by many countries. In recent times Malta has, on more than one occasion, served humanity in the field of medicine and hygiene; during the First World War, Malta earned the name of "Nurse of the Mediterranean". Today the medical services of the Island compare favourably with those of other nations.

Dr. Cassar covers all these centuries in his work and brings into perspective and relief the highlights of the progress made in the practice of medicine in our country. He deals with the major aspects of medical discipline: preventive, clinical and administrative, to each of which he imparts a lively meaning and a vivid expression. He demonstrates how every aspect of medical practice in Malta was the result of current circumstances, or of repercussions of foreign trends. For instance, the employment of nurses in hospitals was for a long time conditioned to the local preference for males, even Miss Florence Nightingale's advice for the employment of female nurses in Malta was briskly brushed aside; but the new conception regarding the nursing profession could not but extend its influence in Malta and today female nurses are not only fully established in hospitals, but there is a thriving school for their training, comparable to the ones attached to teaching hospitals in England.

About the middle of the eighteenth century the standard of medicine in Malta was in advance of many other countries; operative surgery practised at the 'Holy Infirmary' of Valletta was justly considered to have reached a high level of perfection. At that time there was a band of medical men, headed by Dr. M.A. Grima, who had dedicated themselves to the art of healing and who had acquired fame and admiration for their experience and ability. Some of the surgeons of the Infirmary were pioneers in operative technique; e.g., enterorrhaphy, lithotomy, trephining of the skull, amputations. All these operations are explained for the lay reader; indeed throughout the book the author eschews technical phraseology as much as possible and writes in an easy fluent style free from abstruse speculations and theoretical discussions. In this way the domestic affairs of the Infirmary and the doings of the consultants offer pleasant and entertaining reading.

Most of the doctors of the Infirmary had been to medical schools on the Continent. In the latter period of the Knights, Florence, Pisa and Montpellier seem to have been favourite schools for Maltese doctors, many of whom went there for specialized or postgraduate experience; they distinguished themselves and published works which made some impression on medical circles of the time. Dr. Josephus Demarco published his "Dissertatio Physiologica"
in Montpellier in 1744, and Dr. Joannes "Franciseus Maurin" published his "Dissertatio Chirurgica" also in Montpellier, one year later, in 1745.

The idea of proceeding abroad to widen their experience has prevailed up to this day amongst Maltese medical men; the contacts and friendships which they contracted abroad were maintained even after their return to their homeland. By such means Maltese doctors kept themselves abreast of the progress of medicine and were able to provide for the benefit of local patients new methods and new discoveries in medical practice. "Ether anaesthesia was introduced in Malta almost as early as in England", writes Dr. Cassar and he relates how that happened.

That system of training produced doctors who could hold their own amongst foreign colleagues. In fact on various occasions the advice tendered by Maltese doctors was upheld by high authorities abroad; e.g.: the report of the Royal Society of Medicine of Paris in 1781, endorsing the decision of the Medical College and Health Office of Malta regarding exhumation of corpses and burial in churches.

The author discusses some of the more common endemic diseases and gives an admirable picture of undulant fever, the study and investigations carried out in Malta and the important contribution made by our Sir Themistocles Zammit which lead to the eventual control of the disease. He also described the Influenza epidemic of 1918-1919; however he omits to mention the case of a prominent Maltese practitioner who lost his life in an effort to find a remedy for the disease, which was usually accompanied by hyperpyrexia; he thought of reducing the high temperature by cold immersion. He was conscientious enough to test the remedy on himself and he obtained the best proof of its failure.

There were two diseases, leprosy and venereal disease, which constituted a social problem during the rule of the Knights over Malta. Leprosy has been in existence since time immemorial; it is said that Santo Spirito Hospital, the oldest in the Island was originally a leprosarium in the fourteenth century, and eversince, drastic measures have been taken to contain the disease, and it was only in 1953 that segregation of patients was relinquished.

Venereal disease made its presence felt in Malta during the time of the Knights. Dr. Cassar evidently does not agree with the opinion expressed by the late Professors A.V. Bernard and P.P. Debono, i.e. that Venereal disease was introduced into the Island by the vast number of mercenaries and soldiers of fortune who came to the relief of Malta during the Great Siege of 1565. Regulations were enacted from time to time to control the spread of the infection and to curb the blandishment of gay ladies. Treatment was offered free but conditioned to restrictions some of which were most queer, e.g. husbands were refused treatment unless they submitted a certificate from the Episcopai Curia showing that they were keeping separate bed from their wives. As if any Curia were in a position to certify that much!

The people of Malta are in a sense fortunate because for more than four centuries, since the rule of the Knights, they have enjoyed and benefited by a high standard of medical service. Even before the idea of social welfare gained ground in countries of Europe, in Malta provisions were in existence
for child welfare in 1570, for the care for the aged and infirm in 1729, and for some sort of district medical service as far back as 1492. A regular domiciliary medical service was available about the middle of the eighteenth century; some of the doctors engaged in that service were prominent in their profession. Dr. G. Locano in one of the books written by him describes himself "Medicus Pauperum". The hospitals of Malta were famous throughout Europe for the medical care and attent, and for the comfort and amenities available therein, whilst the Quarantine services of the Island were far in advance of those of many other countries and served as a model institution of their kind.

The author has divided his material in groups or parts each of which is subdivided into chapters which are interrelated, a useful plan of correcting his various items and presenting them in a broad panorama of medical history. Most of the chapters constitute a treatise on the subject matter they deal with, so exhaustive and informative are they. The author enters deeply into the matter and expands on details, but is not dry or ponderous in his style; on the contrary he writes in a clear, easy, fluent and pleasant manner that keeps the reader interested and absorbed. He is very meticulous regarding sources of information and authorities for his statements; it is evident that he was very much concerned with producing a work both authoritative and informative, which he succeeded to accomplish.

The book is attractive, artistic and imposing, its publication is of a high standard. It is one of the best books ever published by a Maltese author.

Professor JOSEPH GALEA.


The culture of the Maltese Islands is the end-product of a long historical process of change going on under the influence of all the powers that have successively enjoyed a hegemony — cultural, military and naval — over the Central Mediterranean during the last thousand years. The Maltese countryside and language still testify to the abiding strength of Moorish influences; the traditional farm-houses, customs, proverbs and folk-tales of the Maltese farmer also point in the same direction. But in the course of the last eight centuries Catholicism must have greatly helped in largely eroding this original Semitic stratum, and, undoubtedly, from the Norman Conquest onwards until 1800 the dominant foreign influence reached Malta by way of Sicily and South Italy, so that inevitably a good deal of cultural assimilation has taken place with those countries. The Italian language, in particular, gradually became the normal language of administration, the courts, the notarial archives and, to a large extent, the Church as well. The towns and villages built or rebuilt during the administration of the Order owed much to Italian planning and architecture; church building followed Italian examples rather closely, both externally and internally, and Maltese painters, catering principally for the Church and the tastes of the upper and middle classes, also received their training in Italy.

All this and much more is made abundantly clear with a wealth of detail by Prof. Joseph Peretti in his recent book. His extensive chapters on the Italianity of Maltese Literature, art (architecture, painting, sculpture and
music) and folk-lore are preceded by a good summary of Maltese history, an
analysis of the influence of Italian on “the Maltese dialect”, and the inevitable
chapter on the language question. As befits a doctoral thesis for the University
of Paris it is rigged out with all the usual paraphernalia of scholarship —
footnotes at the end of each chapter, bibliography, etc., but it is at the same
time just the type of work to invite criticism from all those who cannot see
eye-to-eye with the author on the old vexed question of Italianity versus
Anglicisation in Malta. Occasionally, it must be admitted, Peretti’s work
exemplifies the limited point of view of those — conscientious scholars though
they may be — who stick too closely to their brief. He is, for example, under-
standably but unjustifiably, inclined to minimise the influence of English
thought, language and custom on our population even during the last fifty
years, that is, during the time of mass emigration to Anglo-Saxon countries
like Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. For him A.V.
Laferré is merely an archaeologist and folklorist, and his books on British Malta
do not appear in the bibliography at all. But even the most rabid critic would
have to admit that Peretti’s book would be found to be a most valuable work
of reference — almost an encyclopaedia, in fact — on all cultural aspects of
the Maltese people, thus partially filling a long-felt want of the student of
local affairs.

GODFREY WETTINGER.

CANON VINCENT BORG, D.D., H.E.D., Arch. Ch.L. — The Seminary
of Malta and the Ecclesiastical Benefices of the Maltese Islands, Malta, 1905.

The Protestant historian R.V. Lawrence rightly remarked that the practical
reform in the Tridentine Council which was most far-reaching was probably
the establishment of Seminaries. And he was right, because the chief factor
for the Catholic Restoration which followed that Council was the institution
of Seminaries for the education, both spiritual and cultural, of young men
who aspired to the priesthood. Catholic Bishops were charged with the duty of
opening seminaries in their respective dioceses and were authorized to levy a
general tax on all ecclesiastical institutions and to incorporate some benefices
to the Seminary for their upkeep. This decree was complied with also in Malta.

In the above-mentioned publication, Canon Borg speaks of the steps taken
in Malta in that direction, especially after Mgr. Duzina’s Apostolic Visitation
(1575). In the I and II Chapters, he gives a brief but exact account of the
institution of the Jesuit College, which was to serve as a Diocesan Seminary.
In the III Chapter the A. speaks of the steps taken by Bp. Cagliares for the
errection of the Seminary proper, of its opening and endowment by Bp. Coco
Palmiere in 1703 and of its further development under Bp. Alphera de Bussan,
who built the baroque-style Seminary of Mdina. In the IV Chapter, Canon Borg
deals with “a new page in the history of the Maltese Seminary”, when Bp.
Pace Forna undertook a radical reform, splitting that institution into 2
sections — the Major and the Minor Seminaries, reforming the curriculum of
studies, and obtaining from Rome the faculty of granting academical degrees
in Theology. The A. closes with the agreement between the Holy See and the
British Government concerning the application of the revenues of some benefits in the Government's gift towards the education of the clergy.

Canon Borg's book is but one of the two sections of his dissertation for the Academical Degree in Divinity. We hope that he will publish the other section consisting of a brief historical survey of Maltese Ecclesiastical benefits, followed by a historico-juridical study of the Indult granted, in 1521, by Pope Leo X, reserving the conferment of all ecclesiastical benefits in Malta and Gozo, excepting of course the bishopric, to clerics born of Maltese parents in the Maltese Islands.

Canon Borg's new publication is written in a scholarly manner and consequently deserves the attention of historians and is a must in our public and private libraries.

Mgr. A. BONNICI.


Much of the history of the Middle Ages in Malta is still shrouded in a cloud of obscurity. Every now and then, however, the curtain is lifted for a little while and a tiny glimpse is offered of the mediaeval scene.

Fr. Fsadni's booklet comes as a result of long years of preparation and of patient, often unrewarding research in various archives — monastic, Cathedral and public. This is testified by the impressive bibliography of manuscript and published sources appended to this 68-paged account of the early Dominicans in Malta and by the copious footnotes which enrich this work.

The publication under review draws largely on the manuscript account of the three Dominican Priories in Malta left by Fr. Francesco Maria Azzopardi, O.P. (1626-1682), to whose work the author devotes a scholarly and balanced study in the introduction to this book. Besides the actual text, there are additional notes on the Church of St. Mark at Rabat, originally bequeathed to the Dominicans in 1381, and on the Blackfriars Church and Priory of the Annunciation at Birgu. Various reproductions of paintings and of documents illustrate and add to the usefulness of this publication.

Fr. Fsadni's review covers the period 1450-1512. Within this limit, he has made the best possible use of his sources, enlarging upon and often giving a fresh interpretation of source material already utilised by previous writers, some of them fellow-Dominicans.

Reasoned arguments and logical deductions led Fr. Fsadni to conclude that the Dominicans came to Malta in or about 1450 A.D. There are no grounds to quarrel with this conclusion which, however, makes it most unlikely that Fr. Zurki, the founder of the first Priory, came to Malta in 1456 — as claimed by the Maltese historian Abela. Very wisely Fr. Fsadni points out that making this statement Abela did not disclose his source and that this date can only be accepted on his authority so long as it is not disproved.

The present work is bound to interest also the social historian. The priory was roofed over with timber or plastered reeds, and the windows were covered with cloth impregnated with wax. Like the priory, the church, which was roomy enough inside, was roofed over with timber, but it had no dome and the ceiling was rather low. The re-construction of the plan of the first priory
building, with its three dormitories and its cloister complete with refectory, hospice, kitchen, timber room, pantry, grain store, and animal sheds, with its green outlying fields and sweet scented fruit gardens provides a mediaeval picture of a well-organised industrious and peaceful monastic community that recalls similar ones in other countries. This peaceful life, was often abruptly shattered by the Turkish raids, when the Friars had to leave their church and priory behind, and seek refuge within the walls of Mdina carrying with them their most precious belongings and the treasured archives, which were always kept ready for such an emergency in a red sack. There were times of poverty and privation, too, e.g. in 1511, when the Friars could hardly obtain enough food for human sustenance.

Of interest to the student of the Maltese Language is the information that 16th and 16th century notaries used to explain the contents of deeds and contracts to their clients in Maltese (p. 61 — footnote 123). There is another note on the place — name Binguerad, mentioned in a diploma of King Frederick of Spain, which is transcribed in various ways in other documents i.e. Binguerad — Binguerret — Bensi-arad — Beniurret — Binuwwret (p. 72 — footnote 176). The family surnames of some of the early Dominicans also provide material for the study of local patronymics, e.g. de Barthalo, Pachi, Mule, Gaudixi, Xara, de Muscato, Fanzuni (Falsono), de Episcopo, Skembri, Tabuni.

Fr. Fsadni deserves every help and encouragement to carry on further researches in this field and give us other interesting publications on Maltese Monastic History.

J. CASSAR PULLICINO.


In this booklet in Maltese, Prof. Vella O.P. gives us a brief history of the Church of Annunciation at Vittoriosa, from its beginnings to the present day. The Author starts with the advent of the Friar Preachers in that city in 1528, and their installation in the original Lunzjata Church, of which he gives a short description gleaned from old manuscripts. Prof. Vella then speaks of the same church as modified and inaugurated in 1657. This church was greatly damaged by the explosion of a gun-powder magazine in 1806. In 1864, a new look was given to the Church. The Author gives us another description of the church. In the second part of his work, he deals with the original Priory, whose building started in 1546. It was destroyed in 1941, during the II World War. In the last part Prof. Vella treats of the temporary abode of the Friars, first in private premises, then in the Inquisitor’s Palace, of their sacrifices to perform their religious duties and pastoral work in those awful days. The Author closes his work with an account of the reconstruction of Church and Priory, which were inaugurated in 1930.

The text (pp. 4-42) is followed by 3 appendices (43-60).

Prof. Vella’s work presents us with plenty of information on events which happened hundreds of years ago, as well as with events which are still vivid
in our memory, whose record will serve as a reliable source for the future generations.

This publication is enriched with several illustrations and footnotes indicating the sources of information. We recommend it to the lovers of local History.


Prof. Fr. A. Vella published a second monograph in the series of the Royal University of Malta Historical Studies. As the A. himself admits in the preface, the work "does not cover ground untried by past and present historians", but surely it will captivate the interest of many readers with its clear and pleasant exposition.

Prof. Vella starts with the mission of Marshal Michael Boris Petrovitch Sverevstieff and other Russian high officials to Malta in 1697. The possibility of a treaty between Russia and the Order of Malta was then sounded. G. M. Perellos diplomatically showed appreciation of the visit, but did not commit himself. The A. speaks of Russian officers trained on the ships of the Order, of lands of the Polish Priory passing under Russian sway, of the Maltese harbour used by the Russian fleet during the Russo-Turkish War, and of the intrigues of the Russian Charge d'Affaires Marquis de Cavalcabo. G.M. De Rohan very likely hoped a momentary advantage from an alliance with the Czarina Catharine, but he feared the anger of the new Rulers of France. At this juncture the two Littas came to the fore with their "intrigues, conspiracies and forgeries". With the Convention of 1797, the Polish Priory was turned into a Russian Grand Priory, to be incorporated with the Anglo-Bavarian Langu. G.M. Hompesch showered great honours on Czar Paul I, among which was the title of Protector of the Order of St. John. This honour urged Napoleon to take possession of the Island, before it fell into the hands of the Czar. After the capture of Malta by the French, Hompesch was accused of treachery and the Russian Grand Priory elevated the Czar to the Grandmastership. This election was later declared null and void for several reasons.

Of all these vicissitudes the Author gives a clear description in his book, which all those interested in the History of Malta should not fail to obtain.

Mgr. A. Bonnici

ISTITUTO DI STUDI ROMANI

CONGRESSO INTERNAZIONALE PER IL LATINO

Dal 14 al 18 aprile del prossimo anno avrà luogo in Roma, indetto dall'Istituto di Studi Romani, sotto l'Alto Patronato del Presidente della Repubblica, un Congresso internazionale dedicato al latino.

Esso si ricollega alla serie dei Congressi, e alle iniziative varie e numerose per lo studio e l'uso del latino curato in passato dall'Istituto sul piano nazionale e internazionale (in particolare va ricordato qui il Convegno del 1942 per l'organizzazione di un "Centro nazionale didattico per il latino"), e al riaffaccio a quei precedenti raduni internazionali "per il latino vivo" che hanno avuto
Works Published by Members of the Society

Dr. P. Cassar, The Quest for "Brucella melitensis" in Man and in the Goat. A historical paper presented at the Congress on the eradication of Brucellosis held in Malta, between the 8th and 18th June 1964.


Dr. P. Cassar, Guide to the Exhibition Illustrating the History of Medicine in Malta, Malta 1964.

Dr. P. Cassar, St. Luke the Physician, in Cana, No. 03 (1964), p. 5.

Dr. P. Cassar, The Progress of Medicine in Malta during the British Connexion, in Times of Malta, 21st September 1964.

Dr. J. Galea, Fire at the Opera House. (See page 136).

Dr. V. Borg, Rev. Can, The Seminary of Malta and the Ecclesiastical Benefices of the Maltese Islands. (See page 140).

Dr. P. Cassar, Medical History of Malta. (See page 137).

Dr. J. Peretti, Les Aspects Linguistiques, Littéraires, Artistiques et Folkloriques de l'Italianità de Malte. (See page 190).

Mgr. A. Bonnici, St. John's Co-Cathedral, a handy guide with plans.

Mgr. Prof. Coleiro, Chev. E.R. Leopardi and Chev. J. Galea have carried a series of articles in the local papers The Sunday Times of Malta, The Times and Borga.

Rev. Fr. Fiorini published in the Osservatore Romano three articles on the Diocese of Gozo, the festivities of the first centenary of the Diocese of Gozo and on the celebrations of the 4th Centenary of the Siege of Malta respectively.

Chev. V. Bonello has published in "Il-Ponte" three studies on "Sbricciolature di Storia ed Arte.

Prof. A. Vella, O.P., Malta and the Czars, Malta 1965; Storja tal-Knisja tal-Lunajata, Malta 1965.