'I HAVE A STORY TO TELL YOU':
TERESA STRICKLAND COLT AND THE MALTA WAR RELIEF FUND

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On 10th June 1940, Italy declared war on Britain and France. Within hours, Malta was to receive the first of many Axis bombing raids that were to bring the population on the brink of despair. News of the blitz must have reached the United States quickly, for a week later a fund was set up to send aid to the besieged islanders. The instigator was Joseph E. Doublet who lived in New York, editor and owner of the *Maltese Journal*. The fund became known as The Malta War Relief Fund and operated under Federal Permit of the War Relief Control Board, under the auspices of The British War Relief Society, through which the funds reached the island. A committee, chaired by Robert Manduca, started operations by collecting funds from activities organised by the three Maltese Clubs of Metropolitan New York, the Maltese Union Club, the Maltese Association of Astoria, and the Maltese American Democratic Club. In October 1942, when the siege of Malta was by no means over, a delegation of members of the fund called on Teresa Strickland Colt and asked her to take on the chairmanship of the fund, an offer she immediately accepted. The scope of this article is to throw light on this woman's unselfish work, hitherto unexplored, to help her native island. The account that follows is the result of research undertaken on unpublished papers belonging to Teresa Strickland Colt, and recently donated to the library of the University of Malta by her son, Harris.

**Beginnings and Knights, Goats and Battleships**

Teresa (plate1), affectionately known as Terry, was born on 16 December 1903 to Charles Strickland and Ella Naudé. On 26 November 1927, she married an American, Harris Dunscombe Colt1. Teresa and Harris met in Malta while helping the British archaeologist Margaret Murray during her archaeological activity on Malta. Through Teresa's father, Charles, Harris was to establish a long-lasting friendship with Dr (later Sir) Themistocles Zammit, curator and subsequently director of the Valletta museum of archaeology. Charles was a good friend of Zammit and with him he shared a passion for Malta's ancient past that was instilled in him at a very tender age. Charles's, English father, Captain Walter Strickland, had been a founder member of the Society of Archaeology, History and Natural Sciences of Malta, set up in 1865 to preserve monuments and to encourage a taste for local archaeology and the natural sciences2. His mother Donna Louisa, herself an avid collector of antiquities, had helped the German archaeologist Albert Mayr with his researches in Malta.

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Charles's death in 1918, and that of his wife a few years later, meant that Teresa had to be given away in marriage by her uncle, the then Prime Minister of Malta Sir Gerald Strickland, the sixth Count della Catena, later Lord Strickland. The newspapers of the time describe the lavish wedding reception attended by 1500 guests, including Themistocles Zammit, held at Villa Bologna, Gerald Strickland's aristocratic home, (plate 2).

Following their marriage, the couple moved to the United States but spent most of their time in Europe. They returned to Malta on several occasions while on route to the Levant, where they took part in several archaeological expeditions. In 1930, Harris and Terry were in Palestine working at a site under the direction of one of the leading figures in Palestinian archaeology, Sir Flinders Petrie. Harris was to establish a name for himself in Near Eastern archaeology not only through his own excavations, but also through the foundation he set up in New York in the 1950s, the Colt Institute of Archaeology, which published several seminal monographs and excavation reports. While her husband was busy pursuing his archaeological career, Teresa signed a contract with the American publishers Doubleday for a children's book on Malta, entitled *Knights, Goats and Battleships*, a story about the rambles of a Maltese country boy Zeppu. The careful description of people and idyllic settings immediately suggests to a reader familiar with Maltese customs and landscape that the story is based on childhood memories which Teresa was recalling with nostalgia once she had left Malta. Mr Charles is none other than her own father, and the wine factory at Żebibeg is the *palazzo* that Teresa's family owned and used as a summer house, now still standing and visible from the Mosta-Mgarr road. With her lengthy description of the breakwater at Grand Harbour, which enthralled young Zeppu on his first visit to Valletta, she pays tribute to her uncle Gerald's achievements. The children's rambles inside Phoenician caves at Bingemma is a reminder of her father's interest in the archaeology of Żebibegh and its environs: we know that on 31 July 1916, Charles opened a group of tombs he found on his lands at Ta' l-Abhajta in Żebibegh in the presence of Themistocles Zammit, and at his expense allowed Zammit to examine and survey others at Hal Dragu in Bidnija. It is not improbable that Teresa was with them on both occasions.

'I well know all its moods' she was to write at the height of the war about her island. It is those moods that she conveys in her book. Malta's Malta is the carefree world of a contented child. Eyebrows are only raised once when Zeppu's father Saverio remarks that governors are far above poor country people, as if this was a reminder that not all was rosy in the British colony at the turn of the last century. Teresa signed the book using the name with which she was affectionately known to family and friends, Terry, and inscribed it to 'the youngest of the seven whom we still call "Sonny Bear"', her brother Gerald.

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**A drive for funds**

From October 1942 Teresa worked tirelessly to increase awareness about the plight of the Maltese islands during the war and to increase the fund's drive for raising money. By early 1943, she worked closely with the British War Relief Society (BRWS) to raise funds, and used first hand information about Malta for the cause; 'personal experiences are what do the trick' she wrote to a friend or relative in England in 1943, complaining that 'some of the Maltese here [New York] have given all their time and effort to Relief for Malta, but the middle class so to speak will not mix and there does not seem anyway of reaching them. They don't read their mail or throw it away, and practically all news has to be given out by word of mouth, not only to them, but to all the Maltese in the city'. When Philip Pullicino, the son of the then Attorney General in Malta, was passing through New York in January and February of that year on his way to British Honduras, where he held the post of secretary to the Governor, he was asked to lecture on the incessant pounding his native island was receiving. He spoke at gatherings and gave a coast to coast broadcast: 'the publicity was of the greatest aid' wrote Teresa, 'it was just what was needed and came just at the right time'.

In March 1943, the National War Fund in the United States was re-organized to amalgamate all war fundraising on a national basis, eliminating all individual fundraising by separate organizations both foreign and domestic. The BRWS became one of the approved agencies participating in the National War Fund, and the Malta War Relief Fund became a division of the BRWS. On 16 March 1943 Teresa wrote to the Governor, Field Marshal Viscount Gort, informing him of these changes, pointing out that the new organisational arrangement meant that the Malta War Relief Fund could be allocated funds over and above what the Maltese in America had hitherto been able to raise. In what was to be the beginning of a close understanding between Teresa and the Governor, she asked Gort for a statement regarding the specific needs of the people of Malta. Much to Teresa's delight, Gort replied in person stating that clothing and shoes were the greatest need 'as there are still approximately 30,000 people who are short of all forms of clothing' (Gort/Colt 23 April 1943); what was needed, he reiterated in a subsequent letter, were 'women's skirts and underclothes, men's coats and trousers and children's clothing of all sorts' (Gort/Colt 10 Dec. 1943). As a result of this correspondence, a clothing drive was immediately launched: 3,000 lbs of used clothes were collected and shipped to the island, while a ladies' sewing group was established at the BRWS headquarters to make layettes. Goods were sent directly to Malta when shipping conditions improved in the Mediterranean, rather than through Britain, which invariably caused unnecessary delays. By early 1944, other things were required.

It is known that Mabel Strickland, Teresa's cousin, compiled a list of necessities that included vitamins (Colt/Gort 7 Feb. 1944), while the secretary of the Malta Relief Fund in Malta, who was responsible to oversee the distribution of foreign
aid to poor homeless people, made a plea for kitchen utensils and crockery (Bonello/Colt 29 Feb. 1944). By this time, consumer goods rather than money were the main necessity of the islanders: as Governor Gort wrote to the Vice-President of the BWRS, 'they are very scarce and we have so far secured no adequate replacements so if any could be made available they would indeed be a blessing' (Gort/Grant 8 Mar. 1944). Despite the difficulties in obtaining cooking stoves and utensils of steel or aluminium, the Malta War Relief Fund purchased a quantity which were immediately shipped to the island. To Lieutenant Governor D. C. Campbell, Teresa wrote: 'I am glad we managed to secure some for the people of Malta who have done so much for the rest of the world that we feel they deserve some of the good things of life.' (Colt/Campbell 21 Nov. 1944)

Propaganda for Malta

Teresa was resolute that the only way that the Malta War Relief Fund could secure the money to help the Maltese was through dissemination of information related to the troubles that the civilians on the besieged island were enduring, and the heroic stand they were taking against the Axis powers. In the space of two years she delivered twenty-five talks on Malta to various organizations and clubs on the East coast. Her audiences varied: from the American Association of the Knights of Malta to the Needle and Bobbin Club in New York. Her enthusiasm for Malta was conveyed with verve. She was interviewed for the radio on several occasions: to her interviewer for a radio in Trenton, New Jersey in November 1943 she said, 'I've been neglecting home, husband and child for two years now, preaching the gospel of clothes for Malta everywhere I could find one person to listen to me.' The donation to the Malta University library includes the draft scripts of her interviews and talks. There are also numerous letters of thanks that poured in after every talk. From these we learn of Teresa's lecturing abilities and of the interest that she managed to convey to and instil in her audiences, that essentially 'kept the flame alive' (Chairman's Report 1944), and that managed to turn some anti-British Americans 'into friends of Britain and the British Empire' (William Endicott/Grant 21 July 1944).

After a talk in Trenton, she was told that her audience of college students considered her as one of the best speakers they had had that year: 'You had something to say based on your own experience and knowledge and you did not deal in generalities as the commentators so frequently do', wrote the organiser; 'Since you please a very intelligent and critical young audience, you may consider yourself a success.' (Lawson Johnston/Colt 19 Nov. 1943).

Amongst Teresa's papers is a copy of a book by Helen Partridge How to Make a Speech and Enjoy it, which was published in 1944 as a result of an order placed by the National War Fund. Whether Teresa was behind this move, meant to provide guidance to fundraisers of the BWRS with their orations and speeches is not known. She herself does not seem to have needed much help and 'masterful' and 'entertaining' were epithets that described her lectures. On one occasion when Mabel Strickland was invited to travel to America on a lecturing tour and refused, Teresa told Gort that she was capable of doing the job herself, as I have already had a considerable amount of experience and I also know what the American public likes to hear' (Colt/Gort 2 May 1944). She knew well the history of the Maltese islands, often recalling with pride that she was the niece of the late Prime Minister of Malta, Lord Strickland, a cousin of Mabel Strickland, whose daily newspaper never ceased publication during the height of the war, and that her brother, Roger, was a member of the Council of Government. She invested heavily in slides and projection equipment, and sent several pleas to various people in Malta, including the Governor and her cousin Mabel, for up-to-date news that could be transmitted to her audiences, because she felt that the information relayed by the British Information Services in New York was often delayed and poor.

What was required for propaganda purposes, she thought, was a correct chronology of events in Malta (Colt/Gort 4 Feb. 1944). Once, the Governor replied, correcting her inflated estimation on the numbers of actual bombings and alerts, and sending her a selection of photographs 'which will, I trust, be of some help in giving the American public an idea of the damage sustained by Malta's towns and cities' (Gort/Colt 7 April 1944). Photographs and cuttings from the local daily The Times of Malta were sent to her by the secretary of the Malta Relief Fund in Malta, Maurice Bonello (Bonello/Colt 29 Feb. 1944) and by members of her family resident on the island. All of these, and more, Teresa used to advantage, 'as we must not let people forget Malta' she told Bonello (Colt/Bonello 16 June 1944). She collected them in a special album, also donated to the Malta University Library: newspaper clippings, photographs, letters to newspaper editors, postcards, pamphlets, articles from magazines - all stand as a vivid journal of the war from 1942 to 1945. In the album is also a copy of a singular contribution that appeared in Harper's Bazaar magazine in March 1944, where Teresa paid tribute to the role of Maltese women in the war.

Exhibitions and balls

The Malta War Relief Fund also organised various exhibitions, cocktail parties, dances, balls and gala nights to support the cause and raise money. In December 1942, just after Teresa had taken over the chairmanship of the fund, a booth was set up at Madison Square Garden for the Women's International Exposition of Arts and Crafts (plate 3). Although the fund had nothing to sell, the members collected representative Maltese articles, such as lace, old silver, pictures, postcards and photos of Malta from private owners. The articles were exhibited with the object of arousing the sympathy of visitors to the exposition. For the occasion, and on Teresa's initiative, the British Information Services printed a short pamphlet on the history of the island which was distributed to visitors at the booth. On 21 April 1944, Teresa was in charge of a Malta exhibit in the auditorium of Wanamaker's store, at a regional conference of the BWRS. Then, in 1945, she had her girls
represent Malta for the BWRS’s participation in a United Nations gathering. Dressed in picturesque Maltese dresses they ‘made a most attractive appearance and added immeasurably to the colourfulness of that interesting celebration’ (Grant/Colt 27 April 1945).

The first dance in aid of Malta was held on October 28, 1940 at the Irving Plaza in New York, and a cocktail party attended by stars of the stage was organized in February 1943. Amongst the donations to the University Library is an autographed photo of the Maltese film star Joseph Calleia who travelled from Hollywood to attend the first dance. It was the Annual Grand Ball for Malta, however, that became the most important event in the calendar of the Malta War Relief Fund, and through which substantial donations were collected. For the fifth ball in May 1944, it was Teresa’s wish to send one item as ‘a special gift from the Maltese of Greater New York to Malta’ (Colt/Gort 2 May 1944); she thought X-ray equipment or something similar would be useful, and a fitting final gesture. Campbell warmly welcomed the initiative, and asked the Chief Government Medical Officer in Malta, Professor Bernard, for his opinion. Bernard suggested that money would best be spent in purchasing a Condenser Ionisation Chamber for the measurement of X-ray dose (Campbell/Colt 5 Oct. 1944). The chamber was bought from the proceeds and shipped to Malta in 1945.

The Dobby’s in America

Gratitude for Teresa’s efforts was expressed in no half-measures during the period during which the Malta War Relief Fund was active. In closing one of his letters to her, Lord Gort wrote: ‘I want to tell you how much everyone in Malta, including myself, appreciate the warm-hearted generosity which the people of the United States of America extend to us.’ (Gort/Colt 23 April 1943) On two occasions in 1945, appreciation for Teresa’s work, her Committee’s, and gratitude to the American people were expressed in person. The first came from Lieutenant General Sir William Dobby, Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Malta between 1940-1942, and his wife Lady Dobby, who were hosted by the Malta War Relief Fund of the BWRS for their first American appearance. The second came from Captain Henry C. Cummi, Commissioner for Malta in Australia, who delivered in person a special message from the Government and people of Malta to the people of America for their aid to the island. This was read at the Malta Union Club of Astoria, and ‘everybody was deeply moved by the Captain’s speech’ (Colt/Campbell 7 April 1945).

It was the first visit, however, that Teresa treasured most, perhaps because it brought her and the audience gathered at the Henry Hudson Hotel in New York on January 22, 1945, as close to Malta’s wartime siege as one could possibly get (plate 4). In the report she drew up, Teresa spoke of how Sir William recreated the terrible solemnity of Malta’s situation on the day in June 1940, when Italy announced a state of war with Britain. She felt that the success of the visit, surmised from the number of letters of commendation she received, not least from Lady Dobby (Dobby/Colt 26 Jan. 1945), was ‘a testimony to the energy and enthusiasm with which the Maltese residents and their organizations lent their support and hard work to the project’. A cable of congratulations from His Majesty King George VI was read from the platform, as well as a letter of greetings from President Roosevelt’s wife. These cables, photos, and letters related to the visit of the Dobbies Teresa kept in another album, which has also been donated to the Malta University Library.

By July 1945, the Malta War Relief Fund was winding up its activities. It was Teresa’s wish, however, that further fundraising should be done by the Maltese of New York to help with reconstruction (Colt/Campbell 7 April 1945). In 1944 she had already written to Gort telling him of her intentions: ‘The small amount of money I have earned so far from speaking has been placed in a special private account for Malta Reconstruction.’ (Colt/Gort 5 May 1944) From the letters in the donation to the University Library, however, it is not clear how far Teresa’s intentions were pursued. The last pertinent letter in the collection is one written to Lieutenant Governor Campbell where Teresa states the amounts collected by the Fund for Malta relief: $275,154.35 of which over $17,000 were collected by the Maltese of Metropolitan New York through their own efforts. In the letter she also asks for assistance to be granted a visa to enter Malta, since she wanted to get first-hand information for a tour of lectures in the United States in the future, ‘which would help to keep interest in the Island alive over here’ (Colt/Campbell 12 July 1945).

For her valuable wartime services Teresa was awarded the King’s Medal for Service in the Cause of Freedom by His Majesty King George VI on July 14, 1946. Learning of the news, the Acting British Consul-General in New York sent his congratulations knowing that it ‘will be a source of immense satisfaction to your many friends’ (Gardener/Colt 15 July 1946). This was a fitting tribute to someone who had worked hard for a good cause, something she undoubtedly treasured. Her chairmanship had been impeccable, and her charismatic personality made her friends wherever she went. After the Dobbies’ visit to New York, the British Information Services wrote to congratulate her: ‘Your “master hand” was recognizable in all the details’ she was told (Juta/Colt 24 Jan. 1945). She would see to personal complaints and plights by the Maltese in New York, and took up several individual cases with the Governor. When cases with clothes were delayed in arriving in Malta, Teresa badgered Lord Gort for explanations, and only stopped when cables were received confirming receipt, and which she then read to her Committee. When rumours arose in America that some of the funds had been mismanaged in Malta she wrote to the Lieutenant Governor asking for clarification. He replied telling her that all the criticism was largely unfounded, explaining why (Campbell/Colt 4 May 1945). She delegated effectively and made sure the Funds’ committee members were thanked personally for their sterling work: ‘My Committee has done some splendid work’, she wrote to Lieutenant Governor Campbell, ‘Most of them have jobs of their own but they have given their time unsparingly to help Malta and I think that they deserve
a great deal of credit. I will compile a list of their names in the near future so that their friends in Malta may know who they are.' (Colt/Campbell 3 Oct. 1944)

Teresa Strickland Colt died of a heart attack in Rome on May 18, 1955. She is buried in a family vault in Rome. The collection donated to the Malta University Library stands as testimony to one person's life-long love for her native country which never wavered.

Acknowledgements

This article would not have seen the light of day if Harris Strickland Colt (Teresa's son) and his wife Margareta had not entrusted me with the donation of the family papers to the Malta University Library. This happened whilst I was studying another bequest to the same library concerning Teresa's husband's (H. Dunscombe Colt) archaeological activity in Malta. It has been a great pleasure to correspond with Harris and Margareta, and I would like to thank them wholeheartedly not only for their patience in answering many of my questions and for their guidance, but also for their wish to deposit the collection of papers in Malta. I would also like to thank Anne Strickland who brought the bundle of papers and the albums over from London, and Anthony Mangion, Director of Library Services at the University of Malta, who was only too glad to receive them, and for his constant support of my endeavours. My thanks also go to Roger and Adrian Strickland who helped me with my research by providing me with family snippets, and to Gerald, Charlotte and Aloisa de Trafford who were all too happy to share my excitements; for this I would like to thank them. Ann Monsarrat kindly read a draft of this article, improving the prose and the sense.

Plate 1 (left) Teresa Strickland Colt (Mrs H. Dunscombe Colt) (University of Malta archives)

Plate 2 (below) H. Dunscombe Colt and Teresa Strickland during their wedding reception at Villa Bologna, Malta, 26 November 1927. Roger Strickland, Teresa's brother, is standing on Harris's left. (University of Malta archives)
Plate 3 (above) Teresa Strickland Colt standing at the Malta booth, Women's International Exposition of Arts and Crafts, Madison Square Garden, New York, December 1942. (University of Malta archives)

Plate 4 (above) Teresa Strickland Colt flanked by Lord William Dobbie and Lady Dobbie at the Henry Hudson Hotel, 22 January 1945. They are accompanied by members of Teresa's committee of the Malta War Relief Fund and several Maltese girls dressed in traditional costumes. (University of Malta archives)